Dear Ones at Home

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Kitty Wilson's War:
A MASH Nurse in Korea, 1950

Captain Catharine Hanger Wilson

Edited by Catherine Scruggs

Introduction and notes by Rand Careaga

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For my parents

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Tokyo, Japan

2 July, 1950

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I was ready to travel when Colonel Galloway (our chief nurse) returned from leave. She hit the ceiling when she found that I was going. I don't know how she did it, but she had my orders revoked. I was terribly disappointed and I'm afraid I put on an act. Her excuse was that I was the only woman in the group who had had previous combat service, and she felt that the other girls needed the experience. No one can hold a grudge against Colonel Galloway for long, so I dried my tears and started to plot. I know the Surgeon-General of the American forces in Korea, and if I can get in touch with him, he'll see that I get orders that can't be cancelled. That gentleman thinks I'm all right because I am a Virginian.

My things are packed and I mean to go to Korea!

Introduction

''Get up Kitty, this is War and you are in it!'' On June 25, 1950 the Republic of Korea, the southern half of that partitioned peninsula, was invaded by the armed forces of its northern counterpart. In Tokyo a week later, nurse anesthetist Lieutenant Catharine ''Kitty'' Wilson, an eight-year Army veteran of wartime actions in North Africa, Italy and the D-Day landings, learned that she was to be dispatched to Korea. These initial orders were briefly countermanded, to her indignation: ''I joined the Army Nurse Corps so that I could take care of soldiers, and if I am to spend my duty hours giving anesthetics to women and children at a time like this, I might as well come home and live in comfort,'' she wrote to her family from a placid berth in Occupied Japan. Three weeks later, after tugging on some strings and, presumably, having lodged an appeal to higher authority (''That gentleman thinks I'm all right because I am a Virginian''), Lt. Wilson was en route to the maelstrom.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, having made meals of the Third Reich and the Empire of Japan, American policymakers and public alike were initially disposed to regard the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as little more than an after-dinner mint. Within days of the invasion, the United States engineered a UN Security Council resolution authorizing international assistance, including armed force, to repel the aggression, and President Truman dispatched military assets to the scene. By month's end, the first Air Force bombs were falling on North Korea.

The ''Korean People's Army,'' or KPA, well-armed and well-trained, made short work of the South Korean troops, capturing Seoul three days into the war (the South Korean capital was to change hands four times before the eventual armistice). More alarmingly, in the first US engagement with the enemy at the Battle of Osan on July 5, an American task force, outnumbered and under-equipped, was mauled by North Korean armored and infantry divisions. For the rest of the summer the KPA pressed relentlessly forward, to the shock of American

commanders in the field and the bewilderment of the public on the home front. By September the multinational force—principally American, of course, but throughout the conflict the imprimatur of the United Nations was emphasized—found itself pinned to the country's southeast corner, the "Pusan Perimeter," amounting to barely an eighth of the country's area, with the increasingly confident foe pressing hard upon that salient.

In mid-September, the tide of battle turned. General MacArthur's staff engineered the amphibious landings at Inchon on the Korean west coast near Seoul, weakly defended well behind KPA lines, cutting off the foe's forces in the south from resupply. Thereafter the fortunes of war were to seesaw wildly over the next several months. The besieged UN armies, now reinforced and resupplied, broke out of the Pusan Perimeter, the North Koreans retreated in disarray, and MacArthur's troops raced over the prewar partition. By October the American-led forces had reached and occupied Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, and total victory, the unification of the Korean Peninsula under Western suzerainty, appeared to be within sight. Visions of ticker-tape parades must have danced in MacArthur's head. The People's Republic of China had other ideas.

These tumultuous months, from July 1950 to February 1951, made up Kitty Wilson's war.

Lieutenant Wilson served as a nurse anesthetist in a "Mobile Army Surgical Hospital," one of seven deployed during the war. As it happened, she was assigned to the unit designated "8055th," of particular note because one of the surgeons who served with the 8055th MASH was Dr. H.R. Hornberger Jr., who, under the *nom de plume* Richard Hooker, published in 1968 a fictional account of his experiences there as *MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors*. Two years later his novel was adapted for the screen and subsequently into a highly popular long-running television series, probably the principal reason that Korea is no longer referred to as "the forgotten war."

Did Dr. "Hooker" and Nurse Wilson ever work together? Alas, no: their stints in the 8055th did not overlap, the doctor reporting to the unit half a year after the nurse had returned to Japan. And as amusing as it might be to imagine that our author resembled the film's prig-

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Nurses of the 8055th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital

gish Major "Hot Lips" Houlihan, Captain Wilson's accounts of herself ("Soon I'll be immune to everything but men!") suggest that she wasn't anything like as officious and straitlaced as Sally Kellerman's character.

During the heady weeks between the Inchon landings and the Chinese intervention, as UN forces chased the KPA out of the south, romped past the 38th parallel and closed on the border with China, the 8055th was there, and Kitty shared something of that renewed confidence that American might and the justice of its cause would shortly prevail. A few days before the 8055th reached American-held Pyongyang in October she wrote "After that city, there won't be many others to occupy, unless we get designs on Manchuria." In the event, even though she and her unit briefly made it closer to the Yalu River, the UN forces were not destined to long remain north of the prewar line of demarcation. By the end of January 1951 Lieutenant—now Captain—Wilson had supped full with horrors ("The last twenty-four hours have been something that should never happen to anyone," she wrote of

Catherine Scruggs – personal collection

Kitty Wilson ca. 1920, and in 1978

the retreat from Pyongyang in December) and was ready to quit the theatre of operations. She'd already written home that "I shall not ask to leave Korea, but…I wouldn't turn down an offer."

Catharine Hanger Wilson was born on August 16, 1904, in Lyndhurst Virginia, remaining all her life a proud daughter of the Old Dominion. She received her medical training at the Chesapeake and Ohio Hospital in Clifton Forge, Virginia, and at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, subsequently studying anesthesiology at the University of Virginia Medical School, where she became a registered nurse anesthetist.

When the United States joined the other belligerents in the Second World War, Miss Wilson enlisted in the US Army, serving variously in North Africa, in the grueling Italian campaign, and on a hospital ship supporting the landings at Normandy in 1944. With the cessation of hostilities she was assigned to hospitals and medical centers around the world, the US Army having acquired a large global footprint in the

postwar period. At the time of the North Korean invasion in mid-1950, she was on the staff at Tokyo General Hospital where, as she relates in these pages, she fought to be included in the first planeload of medical personnel to be flown across the Korea Strait from Japan. Her experiences during the seven months following are vividly set forth in her letters home. Captain Wilson remained with the Army a full twenty years, leaving the colors in 1962 and serving for the next decade with the Department of Anesthesiology at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. She died on December 11, 1986 in Tallahassee, Florida, at eighty-two.

A fortnight before her deployment to the war zone, Lieutenant Wilson wrote "Long ago I learned that there is no glamour in combat duty, but having a part in patching up our boys is the most soul-satisfying experience I have ever had. My desire to be where the need is greatest and to use myself up in an effort to meet that need is just as keen as it was eight years ago." These accounts from the front are eloquent testimony that her tour of duty in the thick of combat provided ample opportunity for a dedicated military nurse to sate her soul—and to use herself up.

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A Note on Orthography

As cartographers and political geographers are aware, place names will vary over time according to the fortunes of war (Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City) or to fashions in transliteration (Peking/Beijing; Bombay/Mumbai). In the conventions that govern current usage, some Korean place names have altered, but in most instances not dramatically so. In maps on the pages that follow, the editors have maintained the nomenclatures that were in place when these letters were written. Accordingly, for Pusan (1950), read Busan; for Taejon, Daejon; for Taegu, Daegu; for Inchon, Incheon, for Chonju, Jeonju; for Kumchon, Gimcheon.

Lieutenant Wilson's letters home:

2 July – Tokyo

7 July – Tokyo

15 July – Tokyo

20 July – in transit

22 July – Itazuke

July: Deployment from Japan

A week after Kim Il Sung's "Korean People's Army" storms across the 38th parallel, a temporary dividing line between the two halves of the Korean peninsula occupied by the Soviet Union and the United States at the end of World War II, Lieutenant Catharine Hanger Wilson of the US Army Nurse Corps, then serving at a military hospital in Tokyo, receives orders to report for duty in Korea. These orders are almost immediately countermanded by her superior officer, but the indignant lieutenant sets about scheming and pulling strings to reverse that decision, and twenty days later finds herself airborne over the Korea Strait in what proves a harrowing flight, briefly testing her breezy assurance to the family that "I live a charmed life!"

Timeline

June 25: An initial force of 75,000 North Korean soldiers cross the 38th parallel with hostile intent. At the United nations the 15-member Security Council condemns the invasion. This, and the authorization two days later to repel the North militarily, would not have been possible had the Soviet Union been present to exercise its veto. The USSR's boycott of the Security Council since the previous January, a stance Stalin's government was shortly to reconsider, has entered diplomatic history as a notable "own goal."

June: 27-28 South Korean President Syngman Rhee flees Seoul; on the next day the capital falls to the "Korean People's Army." Sundry atrocities ensue.

June 30: American bombing of North Korea begins.

July 1: President Rhee, himself no slouch in the atrocity department, launches the "Bodo League Massacre," leaving between 60,000 and 200,000 real and imagined political opponents dead.

July 5: The Battle of Osan, the first major engagement between American and North Korean forces, ends in a rout, with US and South Korean troops obliged to stage a disorderly retreat with heavy casualties.

July 16-20: The Battle of Taejon is claimed as a "strategic victory" by the United States, notwithstanding the fall of this major city and the capture by the North of the US commanding general in the action. The Korean People's Army continues its southward advance.

July 23: Lieutenant Catharine Wilson arrives in Korea.

TOKYO

"This is War and you are in it!"

2 July 1950
Tokyo, Japan

Dear Ones at Home:

Before my alarm went off this morning, there was a knock on my door. It was the assistant chief nurse. She said, ''Get up Kitty, this is War and you are in it!'' I was one of fourteen nurses who received orders from Eighth Army Headquarters to pack all our personal belongings for storage and be ready to leave here at two o'clock this afternoon—destination Korea. I was ready to travel when Colonel Galloway (our chief nurse) returned from leave. She hit the ceiling when she found that I was going. I don't know how she did it, but she had my orders revoked. I was terribly disappointed and I'm afraid I put on an act. Her excuse was that I was the only woman in the group who had had previous combat service, and she felt that the other girls needed the experience. No one can hold a grudge against Colonel Galloway for long, so I dried my tears and started to plot. I know the Surgeon-General of the American forces in Korea, and if I can get in touch with him, he'll see that I get orders that can't be cancelled. That gentleman thinks I'm all right because I am a Virginian. My things are packed and I mean to go to Korea!

TOKYO

Long ago I learned that there is no glamour in combat duty

7 July 1950 • Tokyo, Japan: By now Colonel Dovell must know that I want to work for him in Korea. Little did I think when I left that depressing country that I'd resort to pulling strings to go back.

I joined the Army Nurse Corps so that I could take care of soldiers, and if I am to spend my duty hours giving anesthetics to women and

children at a time like this, I might as well come home and live in comfort. Long ago I learned that there is no glamour in combat duty, but having a part in patching up our boys is the most soul-satisfying experience I have ever had. My desire to be where the need is greatest and to use myself up in an effort to meet that need is just as keen as it was eight years ago. It is good to know that you all are blessing my endeavors.

TOKYO

You know that I live a charmed life!

15 July 1950 • Tokyo, Japan: No good news for me from the Front. I haven't had much time to think about it. The wounded are beginning to come in. Somewhere in Korea they have set up hospitals, because these boys have already been operated and are in good shape.

We are preparing for war here in Japan. Blackout curtains have been put up in all army installations, and air raid shelters are being established. This is probably just a precautionary measure, but it shows how the minds of our chiefs are functioning.

We're getting supplies ready for the expected influx of patients so the anesthetic department has always been in charge of its own blood bank, but now we are training corpsmen to draw blood, so that the anesthetists can be free to give anesthetics. The morale here is low during this period of waiting and uncertainty, but I've never felt finer and I'm just marking time until I receive orders.

Don't be anxious about me; you know that I live a charmed life!

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IN TRANSIT

I wonder how many of these boys I'll see in our hospital in Korea

20 July 1950 • On board a train in Japan: Well, I made it and I'm on my way! Bless all of Colonel Dovell's three hundred pounds of understanding. When I see him again he's going to get a big hug, though my arms couldn't reach half-way around him. I received my orders about eleven o'clock this morning. They specified that I was to fly to Korea "without delay." I had six hours to spare before I had to board the train, and since my belongings were packed for storage I didn't have to rush myself to death.

I had forgotten what a lot of field equipment one needs to carry into a combat zone, and my heart sank when it was delivered to me. There was a bedding roll containing a shelter-half, two blankets, a mosquito net and tent poles. There was a gas mask, a musette bag containing mess gear, a canteen cup on a pistol belt, and there was a ten pound steel helmet with liner. I recalled how much the nurses resembled a mule pack when we travelled in Europe, and I was determined that I would not carry that great load into Korea. Since I was traveling alone, and was my own boss, I dumped all that equipment into my bedding roll, that being the only issue which I was not expected to carry. Into my musette bag I put one change of underwear, my purse, a lipstick and a toothbrush. I may be caught short this trip, but I won't be top-heavy.

Dressed in trousers, a shirt, overseas cap and field shoes I met eight of my good friends at the Club for a farewell dinner, and from there to the train. It was a mighty gay leave-taking.

I am the only woman on this train. It is packed with American soldiers—all with guns. They are sleeping in every conceivable uncomfortable position and they look so very young and so very tired. I wonder how many of these boys I'll see in our hospital in Korea. It's almost midnight and I'm hot and dirty and smelly. I still have twenty hours to travel before I reach the air-strip from which I'll fly to Korea. I'm ashamed to sleep in my berth tonight while these boys are sleeping on the floor, but I want to be in good shape when I reach the other side of the brook.

Catherine Scruggs – personal collection

Lt. Wilson, center, in Japan prior to her deployment to the war zone

ITAZUKE

I knew well that if they ordered me to jump they'd have to push me off

22 July 1950 • Itazuke: It was raining at ten o'clock last night when the train reached this village of Itazuke.* The station master was a Japanese and couldn't understand a word I said. I was becoming a little uneasy when an Air Force officer came to my rescue. He called the air-strip and they said they'd send transportation for me. After a long wait a big truck drove up. The driver put my bedding roll on the truck and we took off in the dark.

When we arrived at Headquarters around midnight, the G.I. at the desk didn't know what to do with me. There were no women on the Post and no facilities for women. After much phoning around he sent

**During the Korean War Itazuke was the principal US Air Force base in the south of Japan. It was closed in 1972 and serves today as Fukuoka Airport, a commercial facility.*

me to the dispensary. There are eight patients in the dispensary, and my room is next to the ward. The only stick of furniture in this room is a hospital bed. The corpsman out-did himself last night to make me comfortable. He gave me a doctor's gown which served as a night-gown and robe, then directed me to the bathroom where there was a tin tub. The water was slightly muddy but it was hot. I had a delightful bath, but when I pulled the plug the water ran out on the floor. I had not been told that the tub was not connected. I just let the water run, and this morning the floor was dry.

My breakfast was served on a tray in my room and was quite good. It will probably be quite a long time before I have fresh eggs again. My "host" called a jeep for me after breakfast and I went to the air-strip to try my luck at hitching a ride to Korea. It was still raining and foggy, and the planes were grounded. I was told to "stick around." That meant sitting on the floor since there were no chairs. It was amusing though to watch the expression on the faces of the pilots when they discovered that there was a woman in their midst.

The fog lifted in the early afternoon and I was on the first plane that left the ground—the only passenger in a plane loaded with K rations. Lt. Crossman (the pilot) let me ride up in the nose of the plane where I could see out on all sides. It was an interesting trip until some greasy orange-colored fluid started to spray out of one of the pipes. I was sent back to the rear to ride with the K rations. In a few minutes one of the crew came back and unwound some strands from a rope to tie around the leaking pipe. It didn't work and when he returned, he made me put on my parachute and Mae West jacket. He told me that if they lost too much hydraulic fluid the landing gear wouldn't work, and that we had turned around and were on our way back to Japan.

It was mighty lonely back in the rear of that plane, and I found that my reaction to fear is—paralysis. During that endless hour I don't believe I could have moved, or uttered a sound. I knew well that if they ordered me to jump they'd have to push me off. Though my body was paralyzed, my mind was working over-time and, so help me, I couldn't think of anything which I had done through the years that called for regret; I did wish though that I might had had an opportunity to experience many things which I had missed!

When we came in over the air field there was much emergency equipment in view and at that time one of the crew came back to sit with me. Bless him! That Phil Crossman circled the field and landed the plane without a bump!

The reaction was worse than the fright, so I couldn't stand up and the crew had to help me off. I was terribly ashamed that I couldn't stop trembling, but the men congratulated me for staying put and keeping my mouth shut. Little did they know that I had no choice. I've been invited to the officers club tonight, and though I am drenched to the skin with that awful fluid, and have no change, I'm going. In the morning I'm taking off with the same pilot and I'll be in Korea long before you receive this letter.

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Lieutenant Wilson's letters home:

23 July – Taegu

26 July – Taegu

3 August – Taegu

3 August – Taegu

July-August: Arrival in Taegu, Korea

Following three weeks spent drumming her fingers in Japan, Lieutenant Wilson arrives in Korea, where she had previously served during the US postwar occupation ("Little did I think when I left that depressing country that I'd resort to pulling strings to go back"). The first month of the war has seen South Korean and American forces pushed relentlessly southward by the North's armies, ultimately withdrawing to the Pusan Perimeter, comprising barely an eighth of the land area formerly under South Korean control. Lt. Wilson joins the 8055th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital at Taegu, by then only a few miles from the fighting, and here she will remain until mid-August. "It seems that the battle front is getting closer all the time."

Timeline

July 23: Lieutenant Wilson reports for duty at the 8055th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital at Taegu, in Korea's southeast. She will work here for the next twenty-five days as the North Korean armies, carrying all before them, draw steadily closer.

July 26-29: In central South Korea retreating American troops kill 250-300 civilian refugees in the "No Gun Ri Massacre."

August 1: American, British and South Korean armies are forced east of the Natkong River in the southestern corner of the peninsula where, in the "Pusan Perimeter," they make a defensive last stand as the North Koreans approach within a dozen miles of Taegu at their closest advance.

August 2: The "Battle of the Notch." In their first notable victory of the war, US forces repel the KPA 6th Infantry Division's attempt to breach the perimeter, inflicting heavy casualties and forcing the enemy to withdraw. The massive influx of men and war matériel through the port of Pusan has begun to tell.

August 3: General Douglas MacArthur, commander-in-chief of all UN forces in Korea, visits the 8055th MASH. Lieutenant Wilson records the great man's "warm smile."

August 5-19: The KPA again attempts, with a considerably larger force, to overwhelm the defenders, and is driven off with substantial numbers of dead and injured on both sides. The 8055th does not want for patients.

TAEGU

The girls are using their helmets for many purposes, some of which we don't talk about

23 July 1950 • Taegu, Korea: This morning (Sunday) we took off from Itazuke bright and early. This time I came over on a plane loaded with ammunition, and again I was the only passenger. While flying through the clouds I was wearing earphones and I heard a beautiful voice singing "The Holy City." It was most impressive up there so close to heaven until the radio was suddenly switched to "command" and I could hear our bomber planes being directed to targets. A land of contrasts!

We landed in a mud hole near the town of Taegu. After a grateful farewell to the pilot I walked to the Headquarters tent and found that they had never heard of the 8055 Surgical Mobile Hospital. They gave me a jeep and a driver and told me to go out and hunt for the hospital but not to go too close to the front!

After we got started I found that the driver had been in Korea only two days and didn't know his way around as well as I did. We asked every thing we saw in uniform, but no one had heard of a hospital in that vicinity. Finally we had to stop for a convoy and a Korean boy came up and asked me in English if I was from America. He knew where my hospital was and said we were only about a mile from it. He said, "You must be very fatigue, and I thank you many time." When I reached the hospital I was surprised to find that we were set up in a brick building all covered with ivy.

The first person I saw as I entered the building was an anesthetist with whom I had worked at Tokyo General. I was so happy to see her, and she was happier to see me. She looked "very fatigue." Anesthetists always feel welcome wherever we go in the army because there are never enough of us. I found that the chief nurse and the operating room supervisor were also from Tokyo General, and I was most delighted to discover that our chief of Surgery is Jerry Blanchard. Jerry and I had worked together in Korea during the occupation and were assigned to the same hospital in Tokyo. If I had been consulted about it I couldn't have chosen a finer surgeon with whom to work.

When I was shown to my quarters I pretended an enthusiasm I didn't feel. This was mid-morning and six girls were sleeping on litters on the floor; we don't even have cots! In a six foot space I set up housekeeping. Being an old hand at living in tents I had brought a hammer and nails, and I soon had my equipment hanging in rows on the wall. A battered school desk serves nicely as a dressing table, and until I can find a box for a chair I'll sit on the floor.

There is no running water, so the girls are using their helmets for many purposes, some of which we don't talk about. All of the windows in our two rooms are covered with our mosquito nets, but the Army Research Department has not discovered anything that will discourage these Korean fleas. All night I rubbed flea powder into my aching flesh, but I believe they like the stuff. Between sleeping on hard floor and smelling the honey buckets and scratching the flea bites I had a rough night; but I'm not complaining. These girls have had three weeks in Korea and during that time they have retreated three times.

The Korean women wash our seersucker uniforms for us, using the floor for a washboard. When we give them soap they sell it on the black-market. If we send our clothes to the local laundry they come back smelling like dead fish, and we would have to wear a gas mask to stand the odor. The women hang our clothes on a line to dry. We take them from the line, fold them, put them under our blankets and sleep on them. That's all the ironing they get.

These people are having a much-needed break for a change. Yesterday they evacuated most of their patients and no new ones have come in. They must have been working very hard because the six nurses in my room have been sleeping all day; they don't even get up for meals. It is time for dinner and I'm not tired.

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TAEGU

Don't let anyone tell you that this is not a war!

26 July 1950 • Taegu: So much has happened during the last two days that I don't know where to begin… Don't let anyone tell you that this is not a war! We are working around the clock and our days and nights run together. We evacuate the patients within twenty-four hours after surgery, but still they come. There is no end to it. I've been so sleepy (as much from the ether fumes as the long hours) that several times I've caught myself nodding. That's a court martial offense, I believe!

I wish that all the gripers at home could have had lunch with me this day. I went into the mess hall and our tables had been pushed back to the edge of the walls, and in the center of the room there were about sixty patients lying on litters on the floor. There was no room in the hospital for them and it was raining; so the mess hall was the only shelter available. Most of these boys look like kids until they are wounded, and then they look like old men, with their unshaven faces blistered from the sun, sunken eyes, parched lips, clothes caked with mud and blood, and flies crawling over their bloody dressings and faces. The tragedy doesn't lie so much in their present misery as in the fact that many of them will be crippled for life. I couldn't eat my lunch today!

Our hospital is set up in a large school building that looks as though it must have been built about 12 A.D. It rattles and groans and sways with each footstep. I'd hate to be here during the winter. The windows are covered with torn rice paper and there are no heating facilities.

I have been told that there are four Surgical Mobile Hospitals now in Korea, but I don't believe I've told you what a Mobile Hospital is. It is really just a sixty-bed hospital on wheels that can be moved on very short notice. We are supposed to move forward as the Front advances, so that there will be surgical care available to our battle casualties with the least possible delay. So far we've moved in only one direction—backward!

Most of our equipment is packed in footlockers, and each department has its own lockers. When a patient reaches us from the battalion-aid

station he is carried from the ambulance by the litter-bearers to "pre-op" where he is seen by the registrar and a doctor. If he requires x-rays, that is his next move. Then he is returned to pre-op to be prepared for surgery. If there is time he has a bath and premedication, but many times, if there is internal bleeding, he is brought directly to surgery and operated immediately. After surgery he is returned to pre-op until he is fully reacted, and from there to "holding" from which place he is evacuated either by air or ship to Japan. If he is born under the right star he might even be evacuated to the United States. There is a tremendous amount of work involved in this routine.

Most of my days and many of my nights are spent in Surgery. We run two tables most of the time. Our big cases require two doctors, an instrument nurse, a corps man to circulate, and an anesthetist. The amputation and chest and abdominal perforated wounds are our heartaches and there are so very many of them.

There is a little sink in surgery and sometimes the water runs, but most often it doesn't. The work room and sterilizers are way down the hall and there is no running water there. We have large cans of water here and there. Besides our operating room tables and footlockers there are two field lamps and two anesthetic machines. That is our surgery.

The nurses' quarters on the second floor are partitioned off from the doctors quarters by "the iron curtain" in the shape of an army blanket. There is a two-seater (with square holes) outside the admitting office, for the nurses' pleasure. The men have a tent for the same purpose across the field, but I can't describe that to you.

We had a baby air raid one night this week. Just one incendiary bomb was dropped across the field. The girls scrambled out of bed, got dressed and ran downstairs. After that experience on the plane coming over, I know I'm far from brave, but I've slept through bigger and better air raids in Italy, and since we have no air raid shelters here, it's as safe upstairs as on the ground floor. Besides I had worked for eighteen hours and I decided I might just as well die from a bomb as from exhaustion. I didn't hear the girls come back to bed but the next morning I saw that several of them were sleeping in their clothes.

I just heard that General MacArthur is on his way to this hospital so I must hie me down to see that fine gentleman.

TAEGU

I would not trade jobs with anybody
in Korea or out of it

3 August 1950 • Taegu: We had a great many seriously wounded men in the hospital the day General MacArthur came, and the wards looked like an obstacle course. Blood and fluids were running into each patient's veins and drainage tubes were connected to suction bottles at most every patients' cot. The General stopped by each cot and spoke to every patient who was conscious. I believe that visit did as much for the boys as the blood which was running into their veins. I know that for hours after his warm smile I felt uplifted!

Eighth Army Headquarters are right around the corner from us and we like to feel that we are their pets. Colonel Dovell visited us this week. He even came up and looked over, the nurses' quarters and, I'm so glad he found that we were sleeping on the floor. He said that we would have cots, within a week. I barely had time to thank him for helping, me to get over here and he said that since he went to all that trouble he'd expect me to stay until the bitter end! General Walker visits us occasionally but we think that he disapproves of having nurses in a combat zone. President Sigmund [Syngman] Rhee* came into the hospital one day. I had attended a party in his home a year ago, so I introduced myself. He has aged so much in one year, and he can't talk without crying. So much for the VIP's.

I wish you could see us at meal time. We have a superb mess department and the food is excellent. Except for butter, milk and fresh vegetables, our food is as good as that we had in Japan. These cooks can do so much with so little. About five minutes before "chow" time we line up—doctors, nurses, enlisted men and stray guests—all in one line. The food is served from huge containers by the cooks. After our metal plates are filled we hunt a spot and sit down. We brush the flies

**His infamous North Korean opposite number Kim Il Sung is of course better-remembered today, but the brutal and despotic President Syngman Rhee (1875-1965) countenanced multiple massacres during his twelve-year reign. He was, however, as FDR is reported to have said of another gamy American client, "our son of a bitch."*

with one hand and eat with the other. After meals we line up again in front of three barrels of boiling water. We scrape the food which we haven't eaten into garbage pails. (I've seen Koreans eating from these pails). One barrel contains soapy water in which, with a bed-pan brush, we wash our mess gear after which we rinse them in the other two barrels containing clear water and hang them up in the sun and flies. Some of us dunk them again before the next meal.

As soon as night comes the convoys and tanks and ammunition trucks pass our hospital headed north. When the trucks full of soldiers go by they are as quiet as though they were a part of the equipment. Even though we can almost smell the gun powder we have no way of knowing what is going on at the Front or who is winning this war. Our patients bring us the only news we get and their world has been a foxhole. The next time I fight a war I'm going to leave my bedding roll behind and carry a radio. The "Stars and Stripes" reaches us after it is several days old, and if we depended on it for a warning, we'd be in the salt mines by now.

I hate to write about the boys who come in each day for surgery, but you have asked me to tell everything just as it happens. The staff nurses have a heart-breaking job trying to take care of such great numbers of patients with so little equipment. Of course most of the boys are on litters on the floor and it's a back-breaking job to work under such grave handicaps. However, the wards always look orderly and the patients clean and comfortable. Serving trays is no problem since the patients who enter our doors are too sick for food. It seems to me that these staff nurses do their best work under stress and they're under stress most of the time. Of course the incentive to keep going is terrific in combat duty since we are always dealing in life and death, and the difference may well be a matter of a few minutes.

I would not trade jobs with anybody in Korea or out of it. I dearly love to put these boys to sleep because while they're in my hands they are completely free from pain and thought. When I can manage it I shave the boys and wash their faces with alcohol while they are under anesthetics. Their faces are so parched and sore that I doubt that they could tolerate having them washed while conscious. I'm not a very good barber—the last one I shaved lost a portion of his Adam's Apple.

Somehow the war in Europe did not overwhelm me as this one is doing. Perhaps it is because I was in a General Hospital there and the patients had been through Field Hospitals before they reached us. Here we get them straight from the battle fields. We are only twelve miles from the frontlines here—closer than that in spots.

TAEGU

I wish now that I had given him that drink of water

9 August 1950 • Taegu: It seems that the battle front is getting closer all the time. Except for the boom of guns, the nights are quiet. The whole city is blacked out. We know the mountains around us are full of guerrillas—we can see their many signal flashes at night.

In the evenings around twilight the refugees start on their trek southward. Thousands of them must pass the checking point under our window every night. There both men and women are searched for fire arms and then go on their weary way. There are many more children than adults, and many of the women carry a baby on their backs as well as huge bundles on their heads. Most of the women are pregnant. Even the small boys and girls carry babies on their backs. The men don't carry much of anything but just try to look important and keep their families moving along. I have not been outside of, these walls in the two weeks I've been here, but those who have say that there are hordes of refugees around the railroad station hoping for transportation South. It is pitiful to see bent-over old women starting on a hundred-mile walk. According to our standards these people aren't losing much when they leave their homes, but those huts are all they have ever known. The only thing in their favor right now is that the weather is nice. We know that a large percentage of these travelers are Communists who go into the South with the refugees and organize bands there, so we're probably wasting our sympathy on many of them.

Last night we spent five hours operating on a twenty-year old boy who had eight bullet holes through his intestines. Part of his liver and stomach had been shot away. We gave him eight pints of blood on the

table, and when we put him to bed he was still in shock. When I went to see him this morning he asked me for a drink of water and it was hard to refuse him. Later today I saw them bring him out with a blanket over his head, put him on a truck and haul him away. I wish now that I had given him that drink of water.

Since it has gotten dark the artillery fire looks like a Japanese New Year celebration. I never worry about the enemy overtaking us since I have learned to know our commanding officer. His name is Ike Tender and he's quite an operator. I have the feeling that Colonel Tender knows as much as General Walker about the state of affairs in Korea, and he'll look after his own.

In the last month our group has operated upon approximately six hundred patients, given nine hundred pints of blood, and taken fifteen hundred x-rays. Quite a work-out for a sixty-bed hospital!

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Lieutenant Wilson's letters home:

17 August – Pusan

27 August – Pusan

4 September – Pusan

14 September – Pusan

August-September: Deep in the Perimeter

This period of the Korean War finds American martial prospects seemingly at their lowest ebb, although the coming months will see crises nearly as dire. The 8055th has restaged at Pusan, the country's major port, from which personnel may be evacuated at need, and arrives there on Kitty Wilson's forty-sixth birthday (''surely wasn't like the birthday that…I had planned a month ago in Tokyo''). The Korean People's Army is hammering at the front, aiming for total victory. However, American soldiers, weapons, equipment and supplies are pouring in through that same port, and planning for ''Operation Chromite,'' a daring amphibious landing well behind enemy lines, is underway. By mid-September the last desperate attempts to overwhelm the Perimeter end in a rout for the KPA as the resupplied and reinforced UN garrison bursts out of its corner of Korea.

Timeline

August 17: A potentially dangerous North Korean bridgehead across the Naktong River is destroyed by US Marines. On the same day, the 8055th MASH is withdrawn to the port city of Pusan, where Kitty Wilson will remain for most of the next month.

Sept. 1-15: ''The Great Naktong Offensive'': after having routed the defending UN forces and subdued seven-eighths of South Korea during the previous two months, the North determines to finish the job, and to this end mounts a massive offensive that has been described as ''one of the most brutal fights of the Korean War.'' Notwithstanding some tactical successes in the first days, the attack is ultimately repulsed and the Korean People's Army all but annihilated as a fighting force for the remainder of the war.

Sept. 14: ''Our doctors and enlisted men left yesterday for—we know not where.'' This presumably formed part of MacArthur's preparations for the following day's daring amphibious landings at Inchon, well behind enemy lines, and the pending counteroffensive breakout from the Pusan Perimeter.

PUSAN

When I put on a show of that sort I'd like the privilege of choosing my audience

17 August 1950 • Pusan: Yesterday surely wasn't like the birthday that Colonel Reiner and I had planned a month ago in Tokyo. We have the same birthday and had planned a dinner party at the officers club. I sent him word that he was invited to my party here but he would have to bring his own mess kit and K rations.

Before breakfast yesterday we were alerted to be ready to leave for Pusan in the early afternoon. We were ready at noon but didn't climb on our trucks until nine o'clock last night. At the station we waited again, and after we boarded the train we waited for three hours before we pulled out. The engine huffed and puffed for about ten minutes and came to a standstill. So help me, that starting and stopping kept up all night. In the meantime the fleas were having a hey-day. Every breed of flea known to man laid hold to our bodies. We opened aerosol bombs; we sprinkled our bodies with insect powder; we rubbed "Scat" and insect repellant on each other and on ourselves, but finally we gave in to the fleas and let them have their way with us. They wined and dined on American flesh and blood, and I venture to say they never had it so good.

Those were the most uncomfortable seats I ever sat upon. Wouldn't you think they would have a seat made from one nice wide hard board? No, they had to saw the boards into narrow strips, and when they nailed them together they left a most irritating space between them. Finally in desperation I retired to the filthy floor and slept under the seat. When I got awake we were standing still again. Colonel Tender went up front and awakened the engineer and we started the whole procedure over again. We reached Pusan at nine this morning, boarded trucks and went to another schoolhouse (this time a kindergarten school). Our desks and chairs are built for babies but we'll use them until we can find a man-sized schoolhouse.

The showers here are going to be a great luxury. There is a group of colored men on the Post who do nothing but operate portable showers.

Catherine Scruggs – personal collection

Kitty in a copter

The GI's come in trucks from miles around for showers. We had several showers in Taegu but the water was cold and the boys stared at us from the third floor windows. When I put on a show of that sort I'd like the privilege of choosing my audience.

There is a large Evacuation Hospital about two blocks up the street and there are a number of girls there whom I know. They have tablecloths and eat from trays up there and I'm going to visit them very soon.

Helena Browne sent me an air mattress from Chicago and it is my pride and joy. The next train trip I take I won't get pinched between the boards, and if I am pushed into the ocean I'll blow the thing up, load on a case of K rations, and paddle for San Francisco.

It is good to be away from the sound of guns but I keep wondering what's happening to the boys who are critically wounded up at the Front.

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PUSAN

Soon I'll be immune to everything but men!

27 August 1950 • Pusan: The patients have been coming in a steady stream this week and we're back on our old schedule of long hours. We worked until six o'clock this morning, our last case being a leg amputation, and everybody was tired and low in spirit. When we finished, one of the doctors looked around the operating room and said, "I haven't seen so much gore since hog-butchering time down on the farm." After working under tension for long hours a remark like that will send us off into near-hysteria, but if we didn't laugh in the face of tragedy we would never laugh at all in this country.

I stopped and spoke to a young kid this morning as I was going from duty. He was lying on a litter on the floor and part of his hand was gone. This boy was telling me how he had carried his wounded buddy down a steep hill and when he got him to safety he found that he (his buddy) was dead. The kid said to me, "Ma'am I wish somebody would tell us what we're fighting for. My buddy died without knowing and I've lost my hand and I still don't know!" How could I possibly answer a remark like that? My knowledge of the meaning of Communism is far too vague to attempt to put it into words, and I doubt that there are many people in America who really understand much about it. It does seem though, that when our men are drafted into the services they should be taught about all the "isms" that threaten our way of life. Certainly every man who is asked to fight for his country has the right to understand what he is fighting for. These boys have been given a gun and they have been taught to shoot to kill but they have not been given a reason for the sacrifices which they are making. Such a policy approaches Communism—as I understand it. Our American soldiers deserve a better deal than that.

When we get a breathing spell from taking care of our own boys we operate upon the wounded prisoners. They are bathed and deloused, and while we are working on them we forget that they are prisoners. I have found that when they go bad under anesthesia, I will work as

hard over them as I do when our own boys go into shock. But there is no feeling of warmth or sympathy or "brotherly love" in my heart for these prisoners. I think of them more animals, and while I do not hate them, I have no feeling for them at all. I very much fear that I will never receive a blessing for my contribution toward the comfort of our prisoners! This from one who realizes that we must have good will toward men before we can hope to attain Peace on Earth!

My immunization record was lost in the excitement of leaving Tokyo, so this week I have had to have shots for typhus, tetanus, cholera, Jap B,* and smallpox. Soon I'll be immune to everything but men!

This afternoon several of the doctors took me for a jeep ride around Pusan. Except for the terrible poverty, this city could be as beautiful as Nice, France. We drove out about ten miles to see a new airport which the American are building. It is a tremendous project, started only a few weeks ago. I saw construction equipment which I didn't know existed, and I saw ammunition dumps two miles long. There were thousands of tons of ammunition in those dumps. It is unbelievable that within a period of two months, we could have accumulated such huge stock piles of everything needed to fight a war—except men. Seeing all this preparation gives one both a sense of security and dread.

The ambulances are rolling in, so it's time for me to roll out.

PUSAN

I'm supporting several of the "broke" doctors--
It gives one certain privileges

4 September 1950 • Pusan: Here we go into September and I should be at home where the mountains will be in their glory very soon. How I do love autumn at home!

Things are surely happening up in the hills. So many wounded men are coming back through Pusan that one wonders who is left to do the fighting. When I went to work this morning patients were lined up on the floor on both sides of the halls and every available space was filled. These boys are only slightly wounded, and most of our work is evacuation.

**The reference is to "Japanese B Encephalitis," a mosquito-borne disease.*

The nurses had to double up yesterday so the doctors could move upstairs. Their floor space was needed for patients. Now we are so crowded that our quarters look like a rummage sale.

One morning this week around five o'clock while nine of the doctors were asleep with their guns close by, a Korean robbed all of them and got away with about a thousand dollars in cash, many fountain pens and a few watches. The last person to be robbed awoke, and the man ran and jumped across the fence. That is the last they saw of him. It seems impossible that a robber could have accomplished that trick, but the men had been working such long hours that they were exhausted. That particular night anybody could have lifted me from my cot to the floor and carried off my beloved air mattress. We keep our things packed and locked now, and it is most irritating to have to live out of a locked trunk. Because of the robbery I'm having the unique experience of supporting several of the "broke" doctors. It isn't a bad arrangement at all, and it gives one certain privileges.

So often in Taegu I wondered what had happened to the hordes of refugees who went South from there. Yesterday I found out. Colonies of them are living in pitifully improvised hovels outside Pusan. During our drive last week we saw them cooking their rice in tin cans down in the riverbed. You couldn't believe that the little children could survive the kind of life they have to live, but they are countless in number and seem to be healthy and happy. We stopped our jeep for a few minutes on the beach, and about fifty of them appeared out of nowhere. Each Korean child yells "hello" to all Americans. What will happen to these families in a few months? It gets so cold here.

The prospect of moving forward is most exciting--
the North Koreans are retreating for a change

14 September 1950 • Pusan: Our doctors and enlisted men left yesterday for—we know not where. They took everything the nurses own except a change of underwear, so we know that they have gone to prepare a place for us. The prospect of moving forward is most exciting

since it proves to us that the North Koreans are retreating for a change. There is new life in Pusan.

Until our men send for us, we've been farmed out to the Evacuation Hospital and they are most hospitable. Last night I slept on a hospital bed between sheets, and at dinner we had tablecloths and paper napkins. They have showers and real inside toilets too. Such luxury!

We're going to miss the wonderful mail service which we've had in Pusan. Do you know we've had an exchange of letters within ten days? The round trip is about thirty thousand miles.

You were wondering why our doctors carry revolvers. It did not take long to discover that the Communists have no regard for hospitals, ambulances, wounded men, or the medical personnel. The red crosses which were our protection in Europe have become targets in Korea. After a number of our medics at the Aid Stations were shot through the Red Cross patches which they wore on their sleeves, and when two of our ambulances containing wounded soldiers were knocked out, all red crosses have been prohibited. Our medics are not required to carry guns but they are advised to do so.

There is little to write about in Pusan which you don't hear on the radio. I hope in my next letter to have a great deal to report.

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Lieutenant Wilson's letters home:

20 September – Taegu

21 September – Taegu

28 September – Kumchon

1 October – Taejon

12 October – Kaesong

17 October – Kaesong

September-October: Heading North

News that the landings at weakly-defended Inchon have cut them off from reinforcements and supplies does not conduce to morale among the besieging KPA troops at the Pusan Perimeter, and these presently head for home at a brisk pace, pursued by UN and South Korean armies. Before the week is out, the 8055th has returned to Taegu; following the Eighth Army in its swift northward advance, Lieutenant Wilson is shocked by the devastation she sees in Kumchon and sickened, literally, by the evidence of enemy atrocities left behind by the retreating foe in Taejon. Her resolve begins to flag: "I believe I am going to ask to go back to Japan after all," she writes, in a transient period of faltering morale. Days later she has arrived at Kaesong, just south of the prewar boundary (today part of North Korea), and has recovered her nerve: "We are eager to have the honor of being the first MASH unit to cross that line."

Timeline

Sept. 15-19: 75,000 troops and over two hundred fifty naval vessels take part in the seaborne invasion of Inchon, weakly defended well to the rear of the war's front lines, where the KPA, exhausted, outgunned and outnumbered, is reeling from the failure of its latest attempt to capture Pusan and environs. The Inchon landings, by cutting off the North's supply lines, changes the entire course of the conflict. It will change again more than once.

Sept. 16: With superior equipment and a numerical advantage of 2:1 against a weary and demoralized adversary, UN forces emerge from their redoubt and launch themselves at the KPA, which fights fierce rearguard actions but nevertheless shows itself disposed to head home.

Sept. 20: The 8055th returns to Taegu: "Already the Front is far away," Lt. Wilson reports.

Sept. 25: Seoul is recaptured, not for the last time.

Sept. 30: The first South Korean forces advance past the 38th parallel, the former border between the two countries.

October 9: The US 8th Army moves north of the border. With the foe shattered, MacArthur aims to unite the warring halves of the country—on American terms.

October 12: Kitty at Kaesong: "We are only two miles south of the 38th Parallel, and of course we are eager to have the honor of being the first MASH unit to cross that line."

TAEGU

He sure thought he was on his way to Glory!

20 September 1950 • Taegu: Here we are—back "home" again. We have been here three days and in that period I've had only eleven hours of sleep. This has been worse than anything I could ever have imagined. We have obtained extra surgical equipment, and though we're running three tables constantly and operating only on the critically wounded who are too far gone to move, we'll never catch up. These boys are just shot to pieces.

My first patient yesterday died ten minutes after I started his anesthetic. His leg had been shot off at his hip, and he had a head injury and was bled out. There isn't time to think about the dead when we're working so hard to keep breath in the living. We are giving from eight to ten pints of blood to most of these patients during surgery. All our blood is flown over from Japan and blessings on the Blood Banks and the donors—whoever they may be!

Up until now we have had to process and sterilize all our intravenous tubing and Pentothal sets, but yesterday we taught a Korean girl how to do it. It was glorious to go into the work room tonight and find all our material sterilized and the room in order. If we can only persuade this little girl to go with us when we move she will save us hours of work. Keeping sterile supplies ahead is no small part of the nurses' work. I have heard them repeatedly sing the praises of the women at home who are giving so many hours to the making of dressings. That type of work is tedious and boring, but if the women who do the work could see the end results, they would realize that it is indeed a labor of love.

Believe it or not, we are set up in another schoolhouse! This one is a little more convenient, though there is no running water nor do we have showers. It's back to our helmets, but we're too tired to take showers anyway.

A new directive has reached us which states that the nurses in the Mobile Hospitals may return to Japan after three months of service here. Since I have been here only two months, I'll wait and see what another month has to offer before I start making plans.

Jerry Blanchard received his Majority today. The way that man has worked he should be wearing eagles. As chief of surgery he has had to make such grave decisions, and he's far too young to have to tackle this big chest and abdominal surgery. I believe Jerry is a born surgeon, but if this rat-race doesn't let up, he'll burn himself out.

The helicopters are a God-send in getting patients to us from the Front who are too ill to travel by ambulance. These "grasshoppers" have a plastic basket built on either side—shaped like a coffin. The patients are strapped in those things, and then a plastic lid is fastened on. One boy told me that he was unconscious when he was put in the basket, and when he regained consciousness he could see the stars and realized that he was moving through the air. He said he sure thought he was on his way to Glory!

TAEGU

I shall never be needed anywhere again in my life
as I am needed here

21 September 1950 • Taegu: Already the Front is far away. We can't hear the guns at all today. That means that we will be on the move soon since we are supposed to follow the Twenty-Fourth Division. Certainly we will have to take care of the patients we now have or transfer them to the new Evacuation Hospital which is setting up here before we leave.

I am not taking baths these days. They don't seem important any more. I even sleep in my clothes. Rest is the important thing and we don't get enough of it. When we think we can't move another muscle we look out in the hall and see the dozens of men who need us, so we have a cup of coffee, get our second wind, and start all over again. One look at the wounded GI's makes us realize that we have never really experienced weariness or discomfort.

We have needed head straps for our anesthetic masks, but we can't get them. It seems such a little thing, but trying to hold a mask on a patient's face and keep it air-tight for several hours is very tiring. This

afternoon during a nap I dreamed that I received a box of head straps from Colonel Phillips (chief nurse of the Army Nurse Corps in Washington). Crazy!

I am quite sure that I shall not request a transfer next month. This work satisfies everything in my nature, and I know that I shall never be needed anywhere again in my life as I am needed here. It is gratifying to feel that after a fashion, I am meeting that need.

I may not be writing you often during this push, but if you'll keep up with the news about the Twenty-Fourth Division, you'll know that the 8055 Mobile is close behind.

KUMCHON

I have never seen such destruction anywhere except in Cassino, Italy

28 September 1950 • Kumchon: We left Taegu yesterday in an eighteen vehicle convoy. There were ten ambulances and the nurses travelled in four of them. It always makes me sick to ride in a closed vehicle, so I rode up in front with the driver. The dust was so dense that we had to turn the lights on to keep from running into other vehicles. There were so many combat convoys on the road that we got separated from our own convoy and landed in Yongdong which is twenty-five miles beyond Kumchon. Colonel Tender came chasing us and we turned back and reached Kumchon after dark. Later we found that they were still fighting in Yongdong! We were all so saturated with dust, inside and out, and we had no lights or water. The cooks made us some coffee to thaw us out and it was heavenly with our cold K rations. As cold as I was I stripped off and had a cold bath in my helmet, blew up my mattress, put on a pair of patients' pajamas, wrapped a blanket around me and hit the cot. This building has been bombed and has no windows left, but today the men nailed blankets over the windows and found extra blankets for us so we should be warmer tonight.

Kumchon has been flattened to the ground. I have never seen such destruction anywhere except in Cassino, Italy. We are on the outskirts of the city and there is destruction clear out here. I saw thousands of

Korean homes which were nothing but debris. I do not believe I saw more than five untouched houses in the ninety miles we travelled yesterday. The first fifteen miles out of Taegu we could hardly get along the road for the refugees on their way back to their homes. Little did they know that they have no homes to return to. You couldn't believe the sights I saw along the way. Old men and women being pulled along in wheel barrows, some of them seemingly a hundred years of age. Others carrying their bundles and walking through those long miles of blinding dust. Little children and babies being carried, all of them on the move, reminding one of the story of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, the difference being that the Korean gods do not provide manna from heaven.

Here in Kumchon there are no Koreans. It is a ghost town. Every bridge in this country has been blown up by our bombs, and the engineers have already set down pontoon bridges for our temporary use. We saw many, many Russian tanks turned over by the roadside. Colonel Tender found lots of hospital supplies which the North Koreans had left behind in their retreat from Yongdong. He found American-made syringes and dressings packed in Russian boxes, also a Russian autoclave which we confiscated. There were many of our trucks filled with North Koreans wounded being taken to the prison hospital. When our men arrived here yesterday the grounds were full of wounded and dying prisoners, but they were all gone by the time we arrived. In digging a latrine for the nurses last night the men found three bodies. They built the latrine anyway but I won't go out there.

It is most interesting to follow the troops so closely. Yesterday we were dangerously close (by getting lost) and the firing was something to see and hear. How surprised the soldiers were to see women so close to their lines! They whistled and yelled and really came to life.

I'm writing by flashlight since we are here for only one more night. We are bound for Taejon and we are all so happy that our hospital is the nearest one to the Front.

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TAEJON

I could wish that an earthquake might suck this whole country into the ocean

1 October 1950 • Taejon: What I am about to tell you would not be permitted if this "police action" were labeled a war. There is no censorship, so we may write as we please.

I just returned from seeing the atrocities in Taejon. Seventeen hundred South Koreans, among which were about fifty of our own men who had their hands tied behind them with wire, were buried in trenches with their heads and shoulders sticking out of the earth. Then they were shot.

This was the most horrible sight I shall ever see. For five days those bodies have been lying in the sun and they are bloated and full of flies. The smell of death I shall not attempt to describe. The Korean women were digging through the bodies to find their relatives and how they could stand the awful stench is beyond my comprehension. I took one look and was acutely ill. Women were sitting all over the hill nursing their babies, and children were running around among the bodies. I went down to the foot of the hill to wait for my group, and the thing that struck me was the look on the faces of our G.I's as they passed by. I saw men stop to vomit and the perspiration was running from their faces. No one of those soldiers who saw that awful sight will surrender to the North Koreans. This massacre took place on the grounds of an American-built church, and the basement of the church is filled with bodies piled one upon the other. I have not the vocabulary to describe such horror.

I believe I am going to ask to go back to Japan after all. This war is going to last a long time, and I do not want to experience things that make me hard and bitter. Right now I hate Korea with its filth and its poverty and its tragedy. It's a terrible thing to say, but I could wish that an earthquake might suck this whole country into the ocean. Nothing less could purify it.

I am so sorry I saw the atrocities.

KAESONG

The boy answered that he guessed we'd better treat them right, or we'd be as bad as they were

12 October 1950 • Kaesong: It must have been more than a week since I've reported in, but we have been moving so fast that we have had no opportunity to mail letters, so this may be a scrambled account of our ramblings.

We sat in Taejon three days before we got the word to leave. We (the sixteen nurses) left by plane and were met at Kimpo airport by our ambulances. They drove us to the 4th Field Hospital at Ascom for lunch. They are set up on the grounds of the old 382nd Hospital where I worked last year. That building is bombed beyond recognition. One of the drivers took me up to Sparky's home where I had attended so many parties, and I found that the house had been turned into an office building. The wisteria seeds which I sent you last year came from that yard.

After a mighty fine lunch we drove by convoy sixteen miles north of Seoul where we spent the night in a bombed-out building. The next morning after a K ration breakfast, we drove all day and arrived at Kaesong before dark.

We are only two miles south of the 38th Parallel, and of course we are eager to have the honor of being the first MASH unit to cross that line. Right now we are ahead of the 24th Infantry. As we left the beat-up building yesterday, Colonel Tender left a sign "The Nurses of the 8055 Mobile Army Surgical Hospital welcome the 24th Division."

We are not permitted to leave these grounds for anything. The mountains are so close and there are snipers and land mines all around.

It is good to be able to take care of each day's admissions as they come in. We even operated on three prisoners last night and we never do that until our own boys are looked after.

Mail just does not reach us any more. Maybe it will catch up by the time the war is over—which should be soon at the rate we are traveling, unless the Reds decide to come down from Manchuria.

The flies are so bad these cold days that it is impossible for the night force to sleep during the day. They are probably the filthiest flies in the world. I doubt that there is one in this room that has not been nibbling on a dead Korean.

Three patients who had been captured by the enemy a few miles up the road were brought in yesterday. They were being guarded in a Korean hut when some American planes flew over. The guards shot five of the men and left these three wounded. Colonel Tender asked one of the boys what we should do with the ten North Korean prisoners whom we have here. The boy answered that he guessed we'd better treat them right, or we'd be as bad as they were. Quite a speech for an eighteen-year-old who may lose his eye! The doctors say that they have to watch our corps men all the time to keep them from pulling needles out of the veins of the prisoners and letting the blood run on the floor!

Nothing more has been said about our rotating to Japan.

KAESONG

I may permit myself an old lady's privilege of being properly shocked by the things I said and did during the Korean War!

17 October 1950 • Kaesong: It seems impossible that you could have received a letter from me in four days. It must have been jet propelled. We have had no mail for a month, but bags and bags came in today and I hit the jack-pot. I'm sure Dotty Turner has organized a "be kind to Kitty" project in Detroit.

I could never acknowledge all those letters, but they are mighty fine reading. I do thank you for sending copies of my letters to all my family and friends. I'm afraid that some of them have been sordid and gruesome, but I believe it would be a good thing if the people in the states could know what it is like over here. The newspapers are certainly playing it down for some reason.

Each individual here will have his own story to tell about this war when it's over. I'm telling mine when and as it happens, because from what I've already experienced, I'm quite sure I shall not want to talk about it when I come home. However I am pleased that you are saving my letters. Perhaps when I'm ninety I may read them and permit myself an old lady's privilege of being properly shocked by the things I said and did during the Korean War!

We have been issued sleeping bags, and they are the warmest things I've ever been to bed with! All the girls have had coughs. Maybe it's because we are always just a little cold.

Last night was most depressing. We had two leg amputations, one spinal-cord gun-shot wound, one man whose face was gone, and a gunshot wound of the femur. It makes one heart sick to work all night and accomplish so little for the boys. Many of them will recover, but—for what?

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Lieutenant Wilson's letters home:

21 October – Sinmac

24 October – Pyongyang

1 November – Pyongyang

14 November – Pyongyang

24 November – Pyongyang

3 December – Pyongyang

October-December: Crossing the Line

October 1950 sees the high-water mark of American triumphs in the Korean War. The Korean People's Army has all but ceased to exist as a fighting force. American-led armies storm north, sweeping all before them, with the intent and expectation of uniting the entire peninsula under the rule of the appalling Syngman Rhee. Twenty days into the month the North Korean capital is captured. Kitty Wilson and the 8055th arrive there a few days later for what proves only a five-week stay. The Lieutenant initially shares and savors the scent of victory: "After [Pyongyang], there won't be many others to occupy, unless we get designs on Manchuria." In the event, alas, Manchuria turns out on the contrary to entertains designs on Pyongyang. Within a fortnight she writes "we hear that our men are in trouble on the Manchurian border," and a month later the 8055th, along with the rest of the US-led forces, quits the embattled city as a massive "People's Volunteer Army" expeditionary force dispatched by China overwhelms the UN lines.

Timeline

October 10: The US 8th Army captures Wonsan, a strategically significant port on North Korea's east coast.

October 19: Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, is captured and occupied by American and South Korean troops.

October 23: The 8055th MASH arrives in Pyongyang.

October 25: Coalition forces, scenting victory, approach the Yalu River, North Korea's border with the PRC, ignoring repeated warnings from Mao's government. Two hundred thousand Chinese "volunteers" cross into the North to shore up its embattled ally, achieving a decisive victory in their first engagements and turning back the UN advance.

November 24: MacArthur's "Home by Christmas" offensive aims at driving China back across the Yalu. It does not go as planned.

December 3: The 8055th evacuates Pyongyang after a forty-day stay.

We expect to go to Pyongyang from here. After that, there won't be many others to occupy, unless we get designs on Manchuria

21 October 1950 • Sinmac: We are now fifty miles north of the 38th Parallel, and we were the first nurses to cross the line! It was rough riding over those mountain roads in trucks and it rained all the way. I was most surprised to find this country so sparsely populated. Probably farther north we will find more villages but, so far, there have been very few and the ones we saw have been demolished and were still burning as we came through.

Last night around midnight we finished in surgery, and I waded through the mud and rain to my tent—cold and tired and low in spirit. There was a letter on my cot from twenty-four of the doctors with whom I had worked in Europe. These men were having a reunion of the 36th General Hospital in Detroit, and Ivan Taylor (my boss in Anesthesia in Europe) read the group a letter I had written him soon after my arrival in Korea. I read their wonderful letter by flash-light and it made me weep. Some of those men are crazy, but I love them all. On the strength of their kind words I do believe that I can hold on here a while longer.

I received the head strap this morning and I howled when I saw it, because I know somebody stole it for me. In any case you will be blessed for it! I'm indebted to you all for so many things.

After we crossed the Parallel every civilian we saw was waving a South Korean flag. It took just one day for them to change their politics. All along the way there were North Korean soldiers trying to surrender but nobody pays any attention to them. They want to be taken in by our army for food and shelter but we don't want them as our prison camps are full. They can do us no harm since they have no fire arms.

I can't see that being Communistic has done anything for the North Koreans. They are just as poverty-stricken as those south of the Parallel. There is no evidence of industry of any sort—just the same old rice paddies and filth and smells.

We expect to go to Pyongyang from here. Since that city is the North Korean Capitol, we will probably find it in ruins. I hope the Air Force saves us a nice big schoolhouse! We have a patient who sat on the Capitol steps yesterday, so, for once, we got the news of the fall of the Capitol before you did. After that city, there won't be many others to occupy, unless we get designs on Manchuria.

There was a write-up about me this week in "The Stars and Stripes" which really burns me up. It states that I gave anesthetics at six tables simultaneously and was often overcome by the fumes of ether. I've never been overcome by anything less than a man, and during this war I've never given anesthetics to more than two patients at one time—and those occasions were rare indeed. We don't have but three tables, and we have an anesthetist for each table. Where the reporter got my name I'll never know, but I should receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for that performance.

These are our first civilian patients--
Bob Hope took pictures of them

24 October 1950 • Pyongyang: It took us six hours to make the trip from Sinmac yesterday. The roads were terrible. There were many dead Koreans on the streets as we came through the villages. These people make no effort to bury their dead; they just let them rot in the streets while they wave South Korean flags to the convoys all day long. There were dug-in tunnels throughout the villages and miles of trenches in the fields.

Colonel Tender had come up ahead of us and had picked out a University for this set-up. It is an immense two-story brick building and by far the nicest one we've occupied. Of course it has been stripped of wiring and plumbing but, since we carry our own generators, lights are no problem, and our little pot-bellied stoves do a right good job of heating these huge rooms. All of the nurses are in one room.

We went to work as soon as we arrived. Our present load of patients are paratroopers. They have been jumping ahead of the lines in an effort to save our boys who are prisoners. These patients are not badly wounded.

Yesterday I drove over to the airport with Colonel Tender to meet General Hume who is the Surgeon General in the Far East. As he and his body guards were getting into their jeeps, I asked him (General Hume) if I could go along, not knowing where he was going. He said, "Sure, hop in." It turned out that he was going on an inspection tour of the Prison Camp twenty miles out. That trip was an experience! There are seventeen thousand prisoners in the camp. The prison gates are guarded, but not locked, because of the fear of fire. There was a whole room full of cabbage and great barrels of soy beans. The prisoners sleep in a barny building on straw with no blankets. There are so many of them that they keep each other warm. There were about a dozen women prisoners who were "camp followers." General Hume and I had our pictures taken with those girls, and the way I was dressed I looked just like one of the "gals." The General said he'd send me that picture.

Today Bob Hope and Co. put on a show here. There are seven girls and thirty men in his group, and they are sleeping on two of the wards tonight. When the girls went over to the show tent this morning the men carried them to the ambulance! I have a feeling that they'll get their feet muddy before they leave this country. These entertainers are mighty good for the troops. The troops haven't seen a movie since they left Pusan.

On the ward with our patients we have two wounded North Korean females. A two-year-old girl whose arm was shot off, and a twelve-year-old pregnant girl. These are our first civilian patients. Bob Hope took pictures of them.

There is a very large air field right next to our hospital, and every plane that comes in flies straight over our building. At night the big head-lights on the planes look as though they are headed straight for our bedroom. They are coming and going every few minutes night and day. This I can sleep through!

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PYONGYANG

We hear that our men are in trouble
on the Manchurian border

1 November 1950 • Pyongyang: This week we have not been operating, but we hear that our men are in trouble on the Manchurian border. We are making the most of this lull while it lasts.

I went on a jeep-tour of Pyongyang today with one of the doctors. It is truly a beautiful city viewing it from the pagodas up on the hills. One marvels that we were able to capture the city with so little opposition since it is built on an almost natural fortress with a wide river on one side and high hills on the other three sides. Certainly the Reds expected to put up a fight here. All the hills are hulled out into caves, and enough ammunition was left behind to blow up New York.

As we rode along we saw an interesting looking section and went up to investigate. One of the houses had such an American look that we knocked on the door to see if we could find out who had lived there. A Doctor Moffett came to the door, and he turned out to be the son of the first Presbyterian missionary to come to Korea, (1891). Dr. Moffett was born in this house, but in 1940 all Americans were chased below the 38th Parallel, so today is the first time he has seen his birthplace for ten years. In June of this year all the missionaries had to leave Korea, so this young doctor joined the Navy to keep from being sent to the States. After the war he expects to rebuild his hospital here.

The Chief of the North Korean Communists, Kim Sung, had lived in this house since the Reds took over North Korea. He had built under the house an atom bomb shelter one hundred feet down. It is of steel and concrete. There are four rooms with lovely polished teakwood walls. There are fluorescent lights and running water, and it is air-conditioned! Though most of the furniture was gone, there was still a double bed, a davenport, and two iron safes. We found children's toys which were made in the U.S.A. Certainly that old boy expected us to use the atom bomb, and I expect many Russian big-wigs in this city were sleeping under the earth also.

I asked Dr. Moffett if he knew Colonel Reiner (a grand orthopedic surgeon with whom I worked in Tokyo) and it happened that he and Dr. Moffett were born the same day in adjoining houses, right on that compound here in Pyongyang. I don't know what it makes me, but we all three have the same birthday.

We took some pictures of the Reiner home, and I'll take them to him when I return to Tokyo. Colonel Reiner's father was a professor here for years and when the Japanese came they arrested him as a political spy. He was in prison for six months and when the Americans released him his health was so broken that he was sent to the States where he is teaching in the University of California. I'm sure you will be interested in all this, since we have heard the names of these Presbyterian missionaries all our lives.

This Mission has not been touched by bombs, and the campus is as beautiful as any I've been in the States except, of course, the University of Virginia!

Well, I fought to get over here and I will not fight to go back

14 November 1950 • Pyongyang: We are living on rumors again. Today I've heard that we are moving up front, that we are folding up and going to Japan, that we are to be absorbed by an Evacuation Hospital. Take your choice. ''I jus' sets easy.''

It's zero weather and we received our winter issue of clothing only yesterday. Though our wards are fairly comfortable and our quarters nice and warm, the mess hall is freezing. We eat our meals with our gloves on. Wonder how our boys are faring in this weather. We have had quite a few patients with frozen feet and there is just nothing to be done for them.

Replacements for the nurses have been coming in this week. I have been told that there are no replacements available for anesthetists. Well, I fought to get over here and I will not fight to go back.

I shall not be writing to you very often during this lull. When we are

not busy there is nothing to write and when we are busy I'm too weary to write. I'm feeling just fine.

PYONGYANG

We are told that the worst is yet to come, now that we have the Chinese to deal with

24 November 1950 • Pyongyang: However fine your Thanksgiving dinner might have been, you could not have appreciated it as we did ours. Except for one time when Colonel Tender stole a box of steaks for us (labeled for the VIPs), yesterday was the first time we have had fresh meat since our arrival here. Yesterday it was frozen turkey, sweet potatoes, peas, crab meat cocktail, cranberry jelly, raisin and pumpkin pie, nuts and coffee. Of course everyone ate too much—it was just so good. You should have seen the enlisted mens' plates! Such a fine meal it was.

We have six of the boys who were released on the Manchurian border by the Chinese. General Walker was here yesterday and he told us that the Chinese have asked Eighth Army to send planes up to pick up four hundred more prisoners. No one knows what this means since we have not asked for an exchange of prisoners. These boys who were released are in fine shape. They say that they were treated well and had plenty to eat. One of the boys traded his watch to a guard for some pancakes, and the next day a Chinese officer returned the watch. This is so different from the North Korean policy that it has us guessing.

Planes are being sent up for the four hundred prisoners today. All this is restricted news. In fact, Colonel Tender threw out some news correspondents yesterday who were trying to interview the returned prisoners. It is all right for me to tell you about it because it will be in the papers before you receive this.

Since the Chinese have come into the war the air strip here is something to behold. There are transports, cargo planes, jets, fighters, Marine planes and Chenault planes coming and going as fast as they can land and take off. This is the "Gasoline Airlift" which you must be reading about. Most of the pilots spend the night here when they change

shifts. We are doing little more than running a hotel now, since we are so near Headquarters and the air strip. Senator Pepper is coming in today. When I want to see how civilized people look and dress, I go to the air strip and watch the VIP's come in.

There are only three of us (nurses) who have not been replaced. Colonel Dovell keeps telling me that I'm not going, and he's the boss. It really doesn't matter too much; there is too much misery in Korea for me to put on an act because I can't leave. We are told that the worst is yet to come, now that we have the Chinese to deal with.

This time I am ready to retreat all the way to Japan

3 December 1950 • Pyongyang: What a run-around we are having! Four days ago we packed up and started North by convoy. Thirty miles out we were turned back by the patrols because Sunchon (the city we were bound for) had fallen. A field hospital had taken over our building the day we left so at four o'clock in the morning we started setting up in a shack of a cold building. Three hundred patients were brought in before we were ready to operate. We worked all day and until near midnight, when we were ordered to move back into the building which we occupied before we started north. When we arrived here the field hospital was moving out. We inherited their four hundred patients, set up our own equipment, and started to work. I am in a daze and can't be sure of time but I think that was yesterday. We have evacuated our patients, and are packing to go to Seoul tomorrow.

There is a reason for all this confusion, believe it or not. Since we are Mobile, we can move in two hours. The field and evacuation hospitals have so much equipment that it takes them longer to pack, so they always retreat before we do. One Mobile Hospital had to move so fast that they left their equipment and burned the building. We moved in the middle of the night so we could get across the river before the bridge was bombed. It was bombed as soon as we moved.

This is truly a nightmare. We are flying out critically wounded men without even dressing their wounds. I saw one patient on the floor with his eye down on his cheek. It is heart-breaking but there is no time for sentiment. When it is over, I just hope I won't remember.

Right now I have on two pairs of long wool socks, long wool underwear, wool trouser liners, wool trousers and shirt, and a pile jacket. When we travel I wear a wool lined overcoat and high Arctic overshoes. The operating rooms are so cold that we can see the steam roll up from the open abdomens.

The heavy artillery and tanks have gone south, and by tomorrow there will be only foot soldiers left in Pyongyang.

Last summer's war was child's play compared with this Chinese war. This time I am ready to retreat all the way to Japan.

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Captain Wilson's letters home:

4 December – ASCOM (Inchon)
8 December – Seoul
17 December – Seoul
21 December – Seoul
25 December – Seoul
3 January – Seoul
4 January – In transit
15 January – Taejon
20 January – Taejon
28 January – Chonju
1 February – Taegu

December-February: Run Away!

The tide of war takes another dramatic turn: the Korean People's Army, having been all but victorious during the initial two months of the conflict, is no longer anything like a formidable fighting force. UN armies conquer almost all of North Korea. The People's Republic of China takes exception to this and intervenes, pasting the UN's ears back. The 8055th escapes Pyongyang to a US Army depot outside Inchon, which will fall, along with Seoul, to the Chinese within another month. Following eight years of service, including wartime tours on three continents, Catharine Wilson receives her captain's bars (''they sure do something for an old gal!''). The outcome of the war—an eventual stalemate formalized thirty months later—is still unclear as Captain Wilson gratefully accepts orders to return to Japan in February: ''I feel as though I've been released from the salt mines.''

Timeline

December 4: The nurses of the 8055th arrive at ASCOM (US Army Service Command) outside of Inchon.

December 5: Pyongyang is recaptured by the Chinese.

December 5: Captain Catharine H. Wilson receives her well-earned promotion in Seoul. ''It took eight years for me to win those bars, and they sure do something for an old gal.''

December 5: General Walton Walker, commander of the US Eighth Army, is killed in a traffic accident near Seoul.

January 3: With Chinese forces closing on Seoul, American commanders order the evacuation of the city. The 8055th moves to Taejon and, after another fortnight, to Chonju.

January 4: Seoul falls to the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, changing hands for the third time since June. Inchon is abandoned by UN forces on the following day.

February 1: In Taegu once again, Captain Wilson receives the welcome orders releasing her from the theatre of operations, and prepares for her return to Japan.

We don't know where we go from here,
but right now I don't care

4 December 1950 • ASCOM: Thank God we are out of Pyongyang—and safe! The last twenty-four hours have been something that should never happen to anyone—especially a woman. Last night in Pyongyang I had just crawled into bed when I heard a plane go over. Then in about three minutes all outdoors was brighter than the sun; then came the most tremendous explosion you could imagine. Window glass blew across the room, and the building swayed like there was an earthquake. All the girls were asleep, but I can tell you they were out in the hall. (sleeping bags and all) before the rumbling stopped. We found that a bomb had been dropped on an ammunition dump about two miles from our hospital. I thought at first that it was an atom bomb, but immediately after the first blast, shells started exploding. There were four dumps about a block apart and every time the fire would spread to another dump there would be another terrible explosion that almost caved our walls in. We went to the roof to watch and when the heavy artillery shells would go off we could see the trailers go miles through the skies. When they came to earth invariably a fire would start until, by three in the morning, the whole city seemed to be burning. It was a frightening thing to see. We spent the night up on the roof, had breakfast in a windowless mess hall and beat it for the air strip while it was still dark and while the shells were still exploding.

We had to wait for our plane forty minutes and when we finally saw it winging toward us it looked like an Angel from Heaven. We had a very cold plane ride but a grateful and happy one.

There are over two hundred nurses here at the 4th Field Hospital in Ascom. Of course there isn't room for us, but the chief nurse, Major Jump, and her girls are so very nice to us. We have been given two days to rest and we need it.

We don't know where we go from here but right now I don't care. I'm just so thankful to be away from that Pyongyang inferno.

It took eight years for me to win those bars and they sure do something for an old gal

8 December 1950 • Seoul: CAPTAIN Catharine H. Wilson reporting! This is how it happened. The nurses have been in Ascom four days waiting for our men to find a place for us. As soon as we arrived here today Colonel Tender took me in his jeep and told me he had something to show me. We drove to Headquarters where Colonel Dovell was waiting for us. He was very solemn and I couldn't imagine what it was, all about until he had one of his officers read the order for my promotion. Colonel Dovell pinned my bars on my shoulders in person and I had the opportunity I've been waiting for to give him a hug. He called his staff in to congratulate me, and I kissed them all. I was the only woman among all those men and I felt like a girl again.

This promotion comes as a great surprise and it gives me the incentive I needed to start advancing or retreating again—whichever the case may be. It took eight years for me to win those bars and they sure do something for an old gal.

Colonel Tender told me that they were asking him at Headquarters today if I was still so elated, and that he had answered that he had never seen me when I was not elated. That is surely stretching a point, but he meant them for kind words. I know now, that I shall not ask to leave Korea, but I told Colonel Dovell that I wouldn't turn down an offer.

I might tell you that I am tired of drinking coffee from a quart canteen cup

17 December 1950 • Seoul: We are getting in many patients now with self-inflicted wounds. This always happens when the troops have time to think. Of course these men who shoot off their fingers and toes are unstable to begin with and should never have been accepted in the

army. They don't know why they are fighting and if anybody over here were wise enough to enlighten them they still would not understand. It was right embarrassing this week when the General came to award Purple Hearts, and could find only a few among the wounded who were eligible for them. This is just a bad time. We all know that our boys are superb.

We are quite comfortable here but wherever we go we have outside latrines. On these freezing days and nights it takes intestinal fortitude to visit those tents. It's an operation that goes something like this: You roll up the trouser leg so they won't drag in the mud, unbutton the overcoat, unfasten the belt, unbutton the trousers, pull them down and the shirttail up, unbutton the wool liner at the side, pull them down and the wool T shirt up, pull down the cotton panties, take a big breath, and sit down on the ice cold seat. By the time the preliminaries are taken care of, chances are that you've forgotten why you made the trip!

The clothes men wear are most impractical. Most every time I go around the operating table I catch my trousers in the litter handles. I've pulled off more buttons that way, and it's most embarrassing. It sure will be nice to get into female clothes again.

While I'm complaining, I might tell you that I am tired of drinking coffee from a quart canteen cup. When I come home, I'm going to have my coffee served in a beautiful fragile china cup and I'll have real cream in it. With that service I'd like a white damask napkin about a yard square, if you please.

SEOUL

After all, its only a Police Action!

21 December 1950 • Seoul: It is a strange truth—but I have the Christmas spirit! We are working steadily but we've managed to get a Christmas tree in our quarters. We blocked off one end of the quarters with sheets and put our footlockers around the walls with blankets on them for seats. We stacked up four of the footlockers in the middle of the floor for a table. We have taken the bright wrapping papers from

our few packages and put it around the base of the tree, and we have cut out stars from tin foil and pinned them on the walls and, ceiling. The electrician made us a string of lights which we covered with Christmas paper, and we made icicles from tin foil. Our Christmas cards are hanging on ropes—making a canopy from the center to the corners of the room. The tree is trimmed with everything from cotton balls to uniform insignia. I did not donate my silver bars! General Hume came in today to see the tree, and he couldn't get over how so much has been accomplished with so little. The spirit here is good.

It looks as though we are getting ready for another retreat. Headquarters will be moving south tomorrow, and the heavy machinery rumbles past our hospital night and day, South-bound. All supplies are being moved and we are told that it will be K rations for Christmas dinner.

Our men are blowing up ammunition right now, but since they blow small amounts at a time, we don't hear the awful explosions we heard in Pyongyang. We don't know how far south the Chinese have come, but we do know it's just a matter of time until we'll be in Pusan again.

The refugees who came back to their homes last fall will probably have to hit the road again soon. It will be murder if they have to move in this zero weather. It's too big a problem for me, after all, it's only a Police Action!

Merry Christmas, my dears, I'll be thinking of you.

SEOUL

He realized that we are a necessary nuisance

25 December 1950 • Seoul: Our mess sergeant drove forty miles and kept his truck in line twenty-six hours, so he could draw Christmas rations for us. We have the very best mess boys in the whole Far East. They served everything we had for Thanksgiving dinner, except more of it. It would gladden your heart to see the men go for that food.

We know that somewhere along the way there is mail for us. We have received practically no Christmas mail. It might be just as well,

since every pound counts when we are running. A train has been at our back door for a week, and a Hospital Ship is in the harbor four miles from here. If we had to, we could be out of here in an hour.

General Walker's death certainly dampened our Christmas spirit. We thought of him as the backbone of our army. It has been through his efforts that the hospitals have had top priority in the chain of evacuation. He has said many times that during this war no nurse would be captured, and even though he was completely opposed to having American women in Korea, he realized that we are a necessary nuisance. His aide and his driver are patients here.

SEOUL

The Front is too close for comfort

3 January 1951 • Seoul: This city is in almost as much of a state of confusion as Pyongyang the night we left there. The Chinese are only six miles north of Seoul, but they have to deal with what is left of the 24th Division before they reach us. We had to load our patients on the train which has been on the track for the last week, and now we are waiting for another train. It will be good to hear that whistle blow. The Front is too close for comfort.

IN TRANSIT

I have seen more misery on this trip
than I ever knew existed

4 January 1951 • On the train: We're only half way to Taejon, and we've been traveling eighteen hours. I wish I knew why we spend so many hours on the sidetracks. We've been told that there is a roadblock but we don't believe that. After we boarded the train last night, and while we were sidetracked, I watched the refugees for three hours before we pulled out. I have seen more misery on this trip than I ever knew existed. Thousands upon thousands of women and children

would huddle around a feeble little fire for a few minutes, then on their way south. It was so cold that we could see their breath steaming. All along the track it sounded like a huge herd of confused sheep. So many of the children were lost, or abandoned, and were crying for their mothers. Many of the mothers were calling and hunting for their lost children. It would have been impossible to keep a family together in that shoving mass of humanity.

All the people were wrapped in quilts, and they all looked alike—burdened down with great bundles on their heads, and babies on their backs. I saw one boy about six break away from his mother to warm his feet by the fire, but she dragged him away. He broke away again and grabbed a piece of burning wood to carry along. I'm sure many of the children froze to death last night. I saw several babies dead in the snow, and the people were walking over them. There was a look of bewildered despair on the faces of these people. Our train is so hot we can hardly breathe, and I can't stop thinking about what a fraction of this heat would mean to those miserable creatures.

Just before I got on the train yesterday one of the men brought me two huge boxes from Detroit—one from the Van Aukens and one from the Turners. I just didn't know what to do with them since I already had more than I could carry. Finally I persuaded a Korean boy to load them on the train for me. Well, after midnight I noticed that the boxes were from a deluxe food store so I decided to open them. No one was pretending to sleep, and I thought probably the food would divert our minds from the misery we had seen while sidetracked. We really had a feast. There were many kinds of crackers, breasts of chicken, smoked oysters, sardines, sliced smoked turkey, two hams, spreads, raspberry and strawberry jam, pralines, two fruit cakes, rum cakes and nuts. This food could never have tasted as good anywhere else, and there was such an abundance of it. I won't have anything except the baskets and the ribbon to carry off of the train. You couldn't believe that packages could come all those miles and look so beautiful. They were decorated with pinecones and huge bows of ribbon and cellophane. Those people in Detroit have certainly been thoughtful of me since I've been fighting wars.

TAEJON

These soft woolens and nylons make me feel like a woman again

15 January 1951 • Taejon: The cold weather has not killed the smell of death in this city. I think it will be here when Gabriel blows his horn! Taejon holds only sickening memories for me.

These periods of marking time are the most demoralizing hours we spend here. We don't know where our men, are, or what they are dreaming up for us. The only times I've seen our nurses dissatisfied have been while we're not busy. We've been geared to function at high speed, and now we're as restless as a race horse waiting for the take-off.

A patient passed through here last week with smallpox and since that time every American in Korea has been vaccinated.

Our Christmas mail caught up with us today, and there must have been a truck load of it. What a wonderful lot of loot I did collect. Every thing I received looks as though it came from Fifth Avenue. I'd forgotten how seedy I've become, and I can tell you these soft woolens and nylons make me feel like a woman again. The Caron perfume from my god-child is the only fragrance I've found that is high-powered enough to make one forget the stench of death and honey buckets. I'm indeed indebted to so many people that I won't know where to begin when I return to civilization.

I can send you only my love and my blessings on your birthday, Mother dear. You've had a busy eighty-two years to have been successful in keeping your nine off-springs out of jail and the poorhouse. After this demoralizing experience I'll need to be straightened out—so stick around awhile.

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TAEJON

If you should hear that the war is over, please let me know right away. We'll never find out as long as we are in Taejon

20 January 1951 • Taejon: If I should ever be punished for desertion I hope that the authorities will put me in solitary confinement. Just about now a nice quiet cell, would be a glorious experience.

This Post is being guarded and we are not allowed to leave it at any time without an armed escort. There is nothing to do and we're beginning to get into each others' hair. It's against the laws of nature for women to have only female companionship, and I for one have reached the saturation point. There are thirty of us in one room and oh, how cozy it is! I'm quite sure they are just as sick of me.

Colonel Tender came to see us yesterday, and he promised to send for us very soon. Those words were music to our ears.

If you should hear that the war is over, please let me know right away. We'll never find out as long as we are in Taejon.

CHONJU

There have been so few light moments, and seeing only tragedy day after day warps the soul

28 January 1951 • Chonju: No letters at a time like this. We moved to Chonju three days ago, and since that time I have not known my name. It's just like Taegu was when I first came over. We're doing only abdominal and chest cases but each case takes 3-5 hours and there are so many waiting—many of whom will die, because they are not enough of us to take care of them. One feels so very inadequate, but it is a joy to see how the gang measures up when the going gets rough.

It is not possible to store up rest. Those three weeks of inactivity only softened me up. After the first fourteen hours, I was groaning but one

gets renewed strength on a cup of coffee. One looks at the litters in the hall, and we know we can't stop. Our food is good right now, and that's a help when we are working hard.

Colonel Dovell told me that he is really trying to get relief for me so that I can get out here. I have not asked to leave but I do hope that I can. I have no desire to go North again. It isn't worth the price we are paying even if we win…not from the seat I'm sitting in. There have been so few light moments, and seeing only tragedy day after day warps the soul.

I'll write when I can but they will be notes while I am so weary.

I am going to try to forget there is a Korea

1 February 1951 • Taegu: This is the last letter I shall write from Korea as long as I live…I hope. I was on the train all day and night, arriving here at 5:00 a.m. I had to stop in Taegu to pick up my orders at the 8th Army Headquarters. They have not yet been published so I'll probably have to wait around a day or two before taking off for Japan. Col. Dovell is going to fly to Pusan tomorrow and he says that I can go with him. I'll probably do that because he is the boss here, and he will be able to get me a flight to Tokyo. If I go on my own, I'll have to be grounded several times as I was in coming over.

I slept last night (rather than this morning) in the same room with chief nurse about the Far East, Col. Mahoney. She is making her first visit to Korea, and before she finishes, she is going to get her shoes muddy. When I left my unit yesterday, they were living in a mud hole.

Was I glad to see my replacement! My relief arrived last night and I feel as though I've been released from the salt mines. It's good to be with Col. Mahoney. It gave me an opportunity to get lots of things off my chest. I could never see this much of her officially. She must be about fifty-five. I do like her so much.

I surely am looking forward to Tokyo. I am going to try to forget there is a Korea. It is the very worst thing that ever happened to me. On

the train last night I felt little feet, and when I investigated, there was a great big body louse. I tell you I had acute nausea. All of the soldiers are lousy, and I had been so careful. Of course, the hospital train must be full of them. There wasn't a thing I could do because I did not have extra clothes with me. As soon as I got here I scrubbed until I am raw, and I brushed my clothes with louse powder. Time will tell!! I did not get away too soon because I think I'd go crazy if I had LICE.

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Catherine Scruggs – personal collection

''I'd forgotten how seedy I've become, and I can tell you these soft woolens and nylons make me feel like a woman again.''

Epilogue

Her ''dear ones at home'' saved Kitty's dispatches from the war—handwritten, in all likelihood, given that a military nurse on the move would probably not have encumbered herself with a typewriter—and at some point in the years following her return to Virginia, these were transcribed by her sister. The manuscript was called ''Tender Care,'' but the editors have exercised their publishers' prerogative and swapped in the catchier title that the present volume bears.

Captain Wilson remained in the US Army for another eleven years following her departure from Korea in 1951, but was never again to serve in a war zone. Judging from the tone of her concluding letters, she had seen enough excitement there—as many a combat veteran will attest, it's the kind of excitement better savored at a remove in time or space—to last her for the rest of her long life.

As to excitement, Kitty Wilson's tour with the 8055th coincided with what were certainly the most dramatic six months of the conflict as the fortunes of war swung wildly between the belligerents. There remained major battles yet to come, including the final UN liberation of Seoul late that winter and the failed Chinese campaign to recapture the city the following month, but by summer the Korean War would settle into a prolonged, bloody stalemate near the original line of demarcation until the armistice agreement was finally signed in 1953 by the United States on behalf of the UN, by North Korea, and by the People's Republic of China. Interestingly, the obdurate South Korean leader Syngman Rhee, still clinging to his dream of presiding over a unified peninsula, refused to affix his or his country's name to the document, but he was scarcely in a position to pursue this objective on his own, and the big-power sponsors on both sides of this internecine struggle were unwilling for it to continue.

The war was over, or at least placed into cryogenic suspension. In three years of fighting, close to 200,000 South Korean soldiers had lost their lives, and the UN forces 40,000, nine tenths of these American.

Photographer uncredited – public domain; Creative Commons license

The Korean War Veterans' Memorial on the National Mall was completed in 1995. It was dedicated that year on July 27, the 42nd anniversary of the signing of the armistice.

Chinese and North Korean deaths are acknowledged by their respective governments as around 200,000 each, with US estimates of the butcher's bill being twice those sums—although, with the Pentagon's infamously inflated "body count" figures from the following decade's dustup in Vietnam still within living memory, a measure of skepticism may be warranted. Between two and three million civilian noncombatants, North and South, are believed to have perished.

Little had been accomplished; next to nothing resolved. The boundary between North and South Korea, the so-called "Demilitarized Zone" in place since 1953, while more ragged than the ruler-straight divide formerly obtaining at the 38th parallel, is not geographically far removed from that starting line. Small portions of territory were swapped between the contending sides by the end, with the South actually gaining about fifteen hundred square miles of devastated terrain, a not particularly meaningful outcome that has satisfied neither party. The border remains, seventy years later, a running sore on Asia's eastern flank.

In the States, the American public was disposed to put the late war, the early reverses of which had proved so mortifying and the conclusion so unsatisfyingly ambiguous, behind it, and even generations later the "police action" of 1950-53 remains overshadowed fore and aft by the titanic global struggle that preceded it and the prolonged, demoralizing and ultimately unsuccessful campaigns by four consecutive US administrations to thwart the reunification of Vietnam. While a monument on the National Mall to the veterans of the latter conflict was dedicated in 1982, the men and women who served in Korea would not be granted like recognition until Congress authorized the construction of a corresponding site in 1986. Ground was broken in 1992, and the Korean War Veterans' Memorial opened just three years later. It received an estimated four million visitors in 2022, the last year for which figures are readily available. Its proximity to the Lincoln Memorial has probably attracted the notice of tourists who might not otherwise have made a special trip.

That the war still lingers in popular consciousness today owes in no small part to director Robert Altman, whose film *M*A*S*H,* released beneath a major studio's radar in 1970, became a popular hit, and writer Larry Gelbart, who two years later adapted it into a decade-long television series. On the small screen the war was initially played for laughs, but as one account notes, the show became darker in tone during the latter years of its run, undergoing "a significant shift from being primarily a comedy with dramatic undertones to a drama with comedic overtones." This, in a sense, recapitulates Kitty Wilson's own shifting stance over the course of her months at war, from her gung-ho "My things are packed and I mean to go to Korea!" in July to "It isn't worth the price we are paying even if we win…not from the seat I'm sitting in" as her tour wound up at the end of January.

"I am going to try to forget there is a Korea. It is the very worst thing that ever happened to me." Exhausted and demoralized though Captain Wilson may have been at the end of her ordeal, it is clear from these letters that her professionalism, her dedication, the "tender care" she brought to bear upon the patients in her charge in conditions of appalling tension, privation and peril, never flagged.

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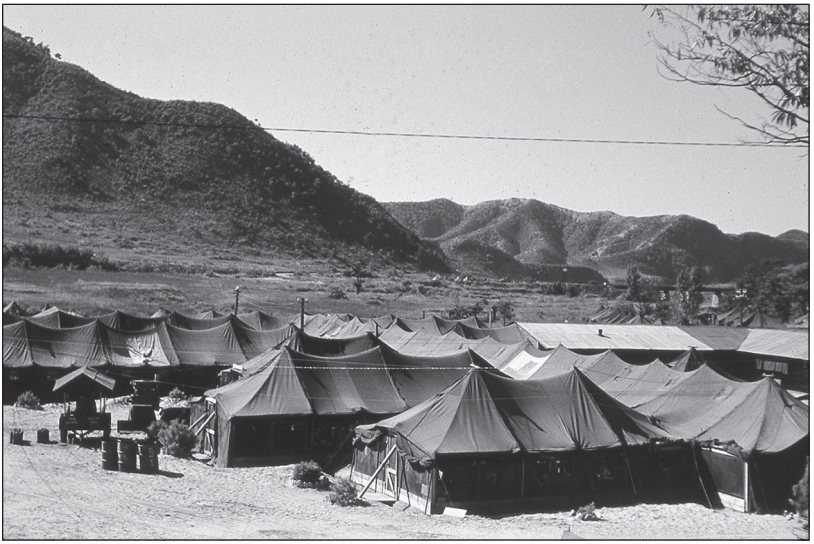
Appendix: An 8055th Photo Gallery

The photographs on following pages were digitized from Kodachrome slides taken by Richard W. Dorland (1929-2016), a pharmacist with the 8055th MASH, and will provide some flavor of working conditions at Uijeongbu, today a thriving metropolis but seventy years ago a small, much knocked-about village about twenty miles north of Seoul, where the 8055th was to spend much of the war once the frontline, following the frenetic advances and reverses of the early months of the conflict, settled into an extended, static war of attrition near the original line of demarcation.

By the time Private Dorland and Doctor "Hooker" made their arrivals on the scene during the latter months of 1951, the 8055th, though always poised to pick up and move at need, was not called upon to strike its tents at a moment's notice and pitch them tens or scores of miles away in response to the exigencies of a dynamic front, and the Dorland archives depict an established and stable, if spartan, medical complex. Kitty's war in 1950 was, as her letters home convey, a far more volatile experience, a far more "Mobile" MASH. It is scarcely to be wondered at that there was not a lot of time during that early phase of the conflict to pause and pose for the camera, but these later images convey in some measure the day-to-day life of a "Mobile Army Surgical Hospital" as it was to be depicted on the larger and smaller screens two decades later, with Malibu Canyon in Los Angeles County standing in, not unconvincingly, for the hilly terrain around Korea's Han River.

The slides have been scanned and curated by Mr. Garrett Allen, himself a photographer* of no mean gifts, who has been enormously helpful in this phase of the project, and to whom the editors extend their warmest thanks.

See more of his work at* **https://www.flickr.com/photos/garrettsphotos/albums.

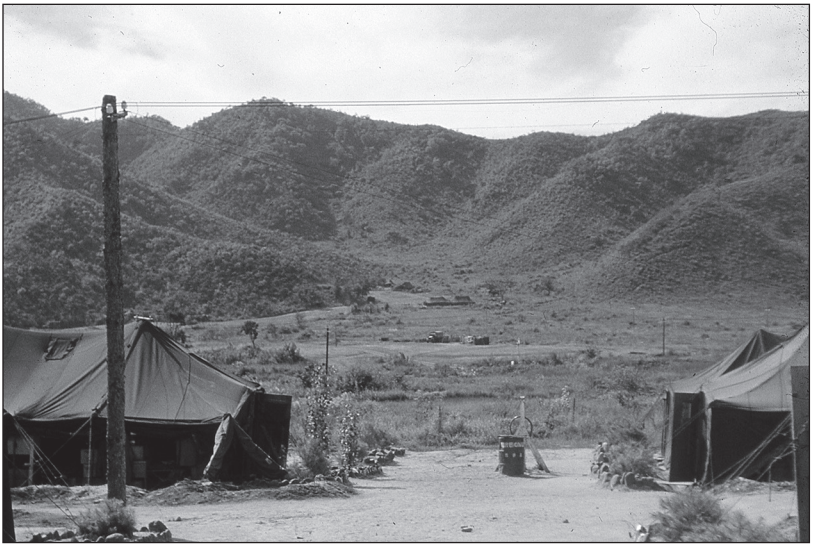


Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

By the middle of the conflict , with the tactical situation no longer as volatile as it had been during Kitty Wilson's tour, the 8055th MASH settled into semi-permanent quarters a few miles south of the 38th parallel, still within artillery range of the front line.

Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

Private Dorland takes a break from the MASH pharmacy to pose at the former bounadry.



Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

The hilly terrain and scrub vegetation surrounding Uijeongbu do indeed resemble the landscape of Southern California's Malibu Canyon, where both adaptations were filmed.

Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

The "mess hall," where MASH personnel could catch a bite between surgeries.

Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

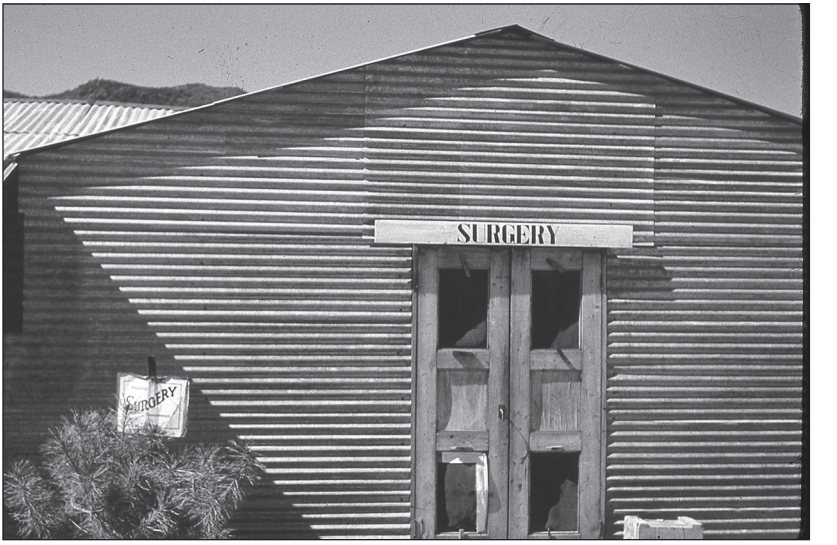
Military helicopters were first routinely used by US forces during the Korean War. The swift transport of wounded soldiers from the battlefield to a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital accounted for a high survival rate among casualties who might otherwise have perished.

Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

An ambulance and a couple of jeeps at ready. Sandbags surround the entrance to a bunker, a useful shelter should the foe have a mind to lob a couple of artillery rounds at the hospital.

Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

Washing an ambulance in the Han River. Between the dust without and the gore within, these vehicles required periodic sprucing up so as not to demoralize their passengers.



Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

While scarcely the Mayo Clinic, or even Walter Reed, the surgical facilities at Uijeongbu were housed in corrugated steel rather than in lumber and canvas, like the rest of the 8055th.

Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

Pharmacist Dorland in his office. The walls and ceiling are of canvas; the floor is dirt.

Richard Dorland – Garrett Allen Archive

Incoming: Fresh from a dustup with the "People's Volunteer Army," a US soldier is rushed to the care of the surgeons and nurses of the 8055th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital.

About the Editors

Catherine Scruggs – personal collection (ca. 1978)

Catherine Scruggs' parents intended to name her in tribute to her great-aunt Catharine Wilson (above left), but in all the excitement the second ''a'' was misplaced at the christening. She works in San Francisco for a national financial management firm and spends most of her alloted vacation days at Burning Man. A native and longtime resident of Oakland, she volunteers her time with a local animal shelter and is lately striving to master the banjo.

Rand Careaga, also an Oakland resident since Hector was a pup, is a retired art director. He counted Catherine's father, Kitty's nephew, his closest friend for fifteen years. Raymond Scruggs (1938-1995) was a scholar and a Southern gentleman in whom an intriguing admixture of beatnik and Bloomsbury obtained, and decades after his too-early death he remains greatly missed by all who knew him.