CHAPTER TWENTY

JAPAN

When I awoke in my eider down bag, I thought I had died and gone to hell. I have never been so hot. They had stoked up the fire and the floor was too hot to touch. It seemed to ease my pain, however.

I hobbled around Hagaru with a cane. Everywhere there were marines looking like mountain men eating Tootsie Rolls. They had stocked up on Tootsie Rolls for a long stay, and now that we weren't hanging around they had to get rid of them.

I was ashamed of some of the things I'd said on the road when trying to get some of the guys to their feet. I attempted to apologize to some of them and they said they were grateful that someone did it--otherwise they would have frozen. I wanted to apologize to the two guys whose lunch I had interrupted at Toktong Pass, but never got the chance, as they avoided me like the plague. I later read where one of them was awarded the Navy Cross for heroism further down the road.

Everyone at Hagaru heard about the rescue of the survivors of the Seventh Army Division disaster east of the Chosin. It had been really rugged up there. They had been surrounded for five days. Then they tried to break out against overwhelming odds. They had gotten within five miles from Hagaru when they finally disintegrated into small bands. Lieutenant Colonel Olin Beall, C. O. of our First Motor Transport Battalion, took trucks, jeeps, and sleds out to retrieve them. They found miserable specimens wandering in the mountains and on the reservoir ice, some in shock. Many of these could have been killed by the Chinese, but they actually helped them get back. Less than 400 soldiers fit for duty made it to Hagaru. About 1,000 survived out of 2,500 men. Beall's men saw truckloads of wounded, over 300 men, left behind when the force had disintegrated, now all frozen dead.

My whole lower body was black and blue, and I hurt so much I stopped at the aid station to see if they had a corset belt like I had worn in the States. The doctor took one look at me and said, "Captain, there's no way you can walk to Hamhung. You'd just be a burden. There's a plane loading now. Get on it!"

I reported to the C. P. and Colonel Taplett paid me a great compliment, and we wished each other luck. Several guys gave

me envelopes of money to deliver to their Japanese wives and families in Japan. Mixed marrieages were not legal in those days, so there were no allotments for them. I didn't have time to get any of my personal gear, had only my billfold and notebook.

I caught a jeep out to the airstrip. God knows how the engineers had chewed that strip from the frozen earth. I got on a C-47. We had a bumpy, painful takeoff and were shot at with small arms fire until we were out of range.

The plane was very cold and we sat on aluminum buckets. It was kind of unreal, hard to comprehend all that we'd been through. Captain Barber was aboard and we talked the whole trip. I thought of Wade's swords and Lyn's oriental spoons. In the storm of events I'd lost track of that Q. M. trailer, and my sleeping bag, with the spoons in the lining, had been used for some wounded man along the way.

In a matter of two or three hours we were in Tokyo and a different world. No one was shooting at anyone. I couldn't walk at all. With the help of two corpsmen, I was taken to a big modern hospital, given a bath and hot chow. The frostbite victims were warned not to get in a hot shower, which is the first thing they did. The frostbitten parts all sloughed off and looked horrible. My feet were calloused and a bit frostbitten. They peeled pretty bad but caused little discomfort.

Japan
December 7, 1950

My Darling Carm,

This is just a line to let you know I'm O. K. I was evacuated from Korea. Couldn't walk. Am pretty much O. K. now. Don't know what will happen now.

Honey, I love--love you, darling, and miss you with all my heart and soul.

Don't write until I get an address again. Kiss the kids for me. I'll write you later.

Love as ever
Ron

The hospital was jammed to overflowing and it was two days before anyone came to see me, because there were so many worse off than I. One of my roommates was a captain with his arm in a cast, with the elbow rigid and bent. In the morning a pretty nurse came around, and he placed his upright cast under the sheets and said to the nurse, "There's something under here that bothers me. Will you check it out?" A seasoned nurse would've said, nosiree, buster. She pulled back the sheets and took a look.

"It's only your cast," she said. "I can't see anything else."

He said, "Oh, damn, I was afraid that's all it was." She caught on then and he got a sharp slap in the kisser.

I wanted to see Carm and the kids again so badly I could've cried. An American civilian came around, taking messages to a ham radio operator who was contacting hams in the States. I gave him Carm's Iowa address and the message that I was alive and well.

Carm and her folks had been following the Chosin disaster every day in the Des Moines Register and on radio. The whole family was worried sick. They knew I had been up by the reservoir because I'd kept Carm informed in my letters. Agonizing days passed wondering if I'd survived. One day Carm walked down the lane to the mailbox (she watched for the mailman every day) and had a letter from someone in Nebraska. He explained that he was a ham radio operator and that an operator in Japan had contacted him with a message to give her. Her husband was all right and in Japan.

Carm ran up the lane, waving the letter, crying and shouting to her dad in the barnyard.

A couple of days after I'd been in the hospital, my fingers were still stiff and numb and I was shaky as a leaf. A Navy doctor came around with two lieutenants to see me. He questioned me

while a nurse took notes on a clipboard. When he had finished, he pulled back the sheets and poked around my back and said, "Captain, I'm afraid you'll never walk right unless we operate on that back."

I said, "Well, if that's what it takes, that's what I want."

They left and in about an hour the two lieutenants were back. They strongly advised me not to have an operation, in a round-about way. I gathered they had none too high an opinion of the doctor. Now I was in the soup.

The following morning the doctor was back and said surgery was scheduled for the next morning. I told him I had decided not to have the operation. He was furious. He called me several things from his naval vocabulary and stalked off.

The next morning I received orders to a casual company near Kyoto for reassignment.

I went to Otsu, a small city outside of Kyoto, in an ambulance.

I was billeted in a fairly nice building, only it was cold, as all buildings seemed to be in Japan. I was given a nice room, blonde maple furniture, good bed. It had belonged to the Army.

We had Japanese room boys who did everything short of buttoning your drawers. Mine was quite a character, studying to be a monk. He spent most of his time admiring Carm's picture on the table. He didn't speak much English but I got him to say, "beautiful wife" and "son" and "daughter." He was paid the magnificent sum of five dollars per month. He said it was enough for him but complained that it wasn't enough to keep a woman. I always supplemented his income. While I was there, he must have brought a dozen girls around and introduced each of them as his "true ruv."

The company doctor examined me briefly and said they were going to give me therapy treatments. I figured I'd go back over after that. I couldn't lift my feet above the floor very far and the pain didn't let up.

The doctor sent a Japanese woman around to give me the treatments. She was a buck-tooth little biddy and very strong. She about killed me, twisting my legs and punching my spine. I finally refused to let her touch me and told them to stop sending her, as I couldn't make her understand that it hurt too much.

I got so I could shuffle around. I found that the C.O. of the casual company was an old friend of mine. I stopped by his

office every day to bat the breeze and get the latest dope, especially on my status.

I would stroll over to the movies most evenings with Chief Warrant Officer "Gunner" Ward, a guy of about my caliber who lived next room to me. Afterwards, we would stop at the snack bar on the way back and have a milkshake and a cheeseburger, topped off with a cup of coffee. Then there was the nightly pinochle game in someone's room.

Ward and I would ride into Otsu and shop like old hens. My pay records had been lost in Korea, but I got emergency pay. Good merchandise was dirt cheap. I bought gifts for the kids and Carm's folks and a beautiful set of silver for Carm and packed it all in my foot locker. Good thing I didn't have any clothes. I also got Carm's photograph painted on canvas by one of those Japanese artists. Although her hair was obviously dark brunette on the photo, the artist painted her blonde. I tried to explain it to him but he didn't comprehend, and the Japanese stereotype of American women prevailed. I wanted to buy about a gallon of cultured pearls. My room boy said not to do it. He said the dealer would sell them to me and turn me in to customs for the reward. You could take

only something like $500 worth of stuff out of the country.

It was getting to be like Old Home Week around there. A goodly part of my outfit was drifting in day by day. Some days my room was like a regular club, with as high as a dozen guys there at a time. Many of them were hit and evacuated before me and wanted to catch up on events after they left and asked about their particular buddies. Most of them mentioned my weight loss.

Everyone said this Korea thing was the most messed up, stupidest thing we had ever been mixed up in. We were more than a little bitter about the stupid political and military blunders that had put us in that situation up north. And not Marine Corps blunders, either. I question whether we should have invaded North Korea, but if you're going to do it, do it right. General Smith had urged the U. N. Command early in November to let us hold the Wosan-Hamhung area through the winter, build up our forces and then push to the Yalu in the spring. Instead, they strung us out, undermanned, until we got cut off and went through hell.

A guy came up with a joke that made us roar and summed up our feelings. A marine asked his C. O. how to tell the difference between a South Korean and a North Korean. The C. O. said to just

walk up to him and say, "To hell with Joe Stalin" and then watch the expression on his face. Well, a few days later, the C. O. was walking down the road and he saw the marine and a North Korean soldier lying in the ditch, both beaten up badly. He asked the marine what happened. "Well," the marine said, "I walked up to this guy and said, 'To hell with Joe Stalin' and he said, 'To hell with Harry Truman,' and while we were shaking hands, a truck hit us."

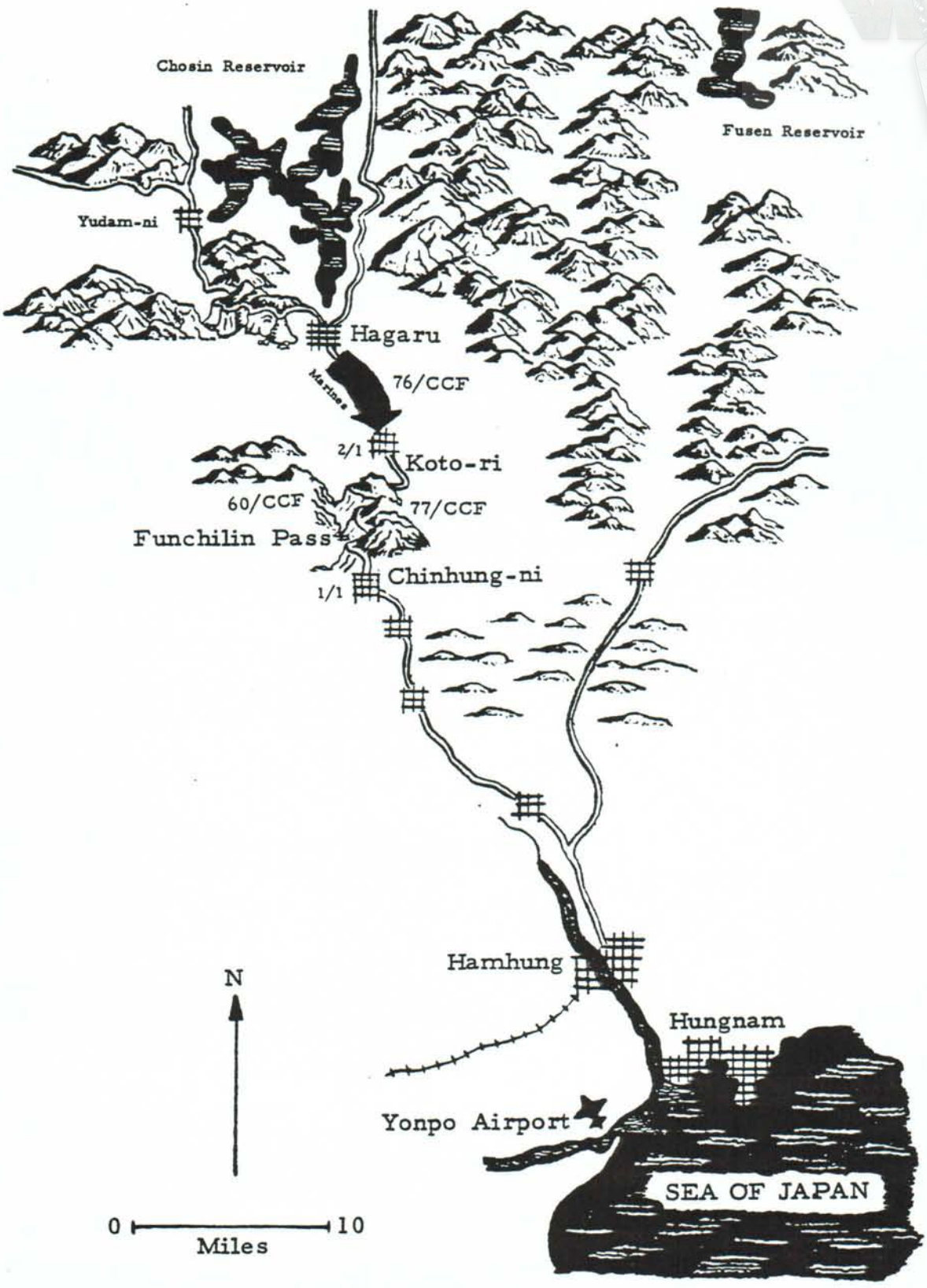
(At the time we said we would have been better off with Tom Dewey, but after watching how Nixon and the Republicans conducted their half of the Vietnam War, I know now nothing would have been different).

One of the guys told me what had happened to my two men who had been captured by the Chinese outside of Hagaru. A few days later, they had been released after a brainwashing attempt. It kind of worked on the one guy and the other threatened to kill him. The one guy said that at one session a Chinese officer gave him breakfast and asked what he had for breakfast in the States. He replied, "Oh, usually two eggs, coffee and toast."

The Chinese snorted, "Huh, that's nothing, one time I had three eggs."

The marines had broken out of Hagaru on December 6. We anxiously followed the reports as they drifted in, along with the rest of the western world. We had made daily headlines everywhere since the first night at Yudam-ni. The Fifth was the last to leave Hagaru, besides demolition crews. All day and night our Second Battalion, in the rearguard action, fought off unimaginable suicide charges on a hill east of the village. At least eight hundred Chinese were slaughtered. Meanwhile, the Seventh plowed through Chinese all the way to Koto-ri. Ten thousand men and a thousand vehicles pushed to Koto-ri in two days. Over a hundred of our men were killed and over five hundred wounded.

Next they had to tackle Funchilin Pass, the eight miles of narrow, twisting road on a shelf over a deep chasm. The Chinese had demolished a bridge across a gap, threatening loss of all vehicles and heavy equipment, but the Air Force dropped prefabricated bridge sections into Koto-ri, and engineers spanned the gap. The First Battalion of the First Marines came up from Chinhung-ni and captured the commanding terrain at a horseshoe bend, the key feature, in a blinding night snowstorm. A section of the bridge collapsed and the treadways had to be respaced to allow jeeps and trucks to pass, precariously, like crossing over planks. While


Chosin Reservoir
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Yudam-ni
Hagaru
Marines
76/CCF
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Koto-ri
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waiting to cross, some tanks and crews were cut off at the rear by a Chinese ambush. In the melee a marine fell into the gorge and was left for dead. But he had landed on a ledge and when he regained consciousness, he climbed back up to the road and made it to Chinhung-ni with the thousands of North Korean refugees who were tagging along behind the marines. Seventy-five men died in the fight to Chinhung-ni and over 250 were wounded.

It was all downhill from Chinhung-ni. Just before midnight on December 11, the last units made it to Hamhung. On December 15 the First Marine Division sailed out of Hangnam for South Korea.

Twenty-thousand marines had come out of there through seven to twelve divisions of the Chinese Army, possibly 100,000 soldiers whose mission was to exterminate us. Instead, we had crippled them. Both American and Chinese records indicate that 25,000 of them died. It was months before any of those Chinese units returned to action in Korea. But they had driven us out of North Korea by sheer numbers and bravery and dedication I couldn't help but admire.

Some of the Japanese followed the reports with zest. I found the Japanese military spirit was far from dead. Their police force

was the sharpest, most military, best uniformed outfit I had seen since Sea School. My room had low windows all around. The night watchman, dressed in rags and an Army helmet, but ramrod straight, would stand outside my window every morning. When I awoke, he would snap to attention, give a snappy salute, and go about his business. Many Japanese ex-soldiers were eager to serve in Korea. Some even stowed away on ships. One said to me, "Ah, just give us the stuff and we'll be on the Yalu River in a month."

We had all Japanese cooks and messmen and they were good. One time a marine hunter brought in two wild boars for them to cook. I thought it was very tasty but had to keep my eyes from the two bloody, hairy heads with apples in their mouths that were placed on the table for decoration. On Samoa I hadn't been able to eat raw fish. Well, I ate raw fish in Japan but they had a delicious sauce to dip it in.

One day I visited the C. O.'s office and he said, "Look, old buddy, we've got to do something with you. What do you want to do?"

I said, "I want to go home or back to my old outfit."

He said, "You have about as much business going back to Korea as a feather in hell and about the same chance." He typed out my orders to Naval Hospital, San Francisco. There was a long wait for the orders to be approved.

The Yanks lost no time in falling into their old habits of hiring the orientals to do the menial chores. Servicemen stationed in Japan lived in a sort of nauseating luxury. They hired servants and housekeepers for next to nothing. Whiskey and women were the two cheapest commodities. Everyone who wasn't shacked up with a Navy or Army nurse, or some absentee's wife, had a Japanese girl for twenty dollars per month, and they stayed with their families. Venereal disease was rampant. Their Japanese women were subservient, meeting them every time at the door, taking off their shoes, rubbing their feet, etc. Of course, the Japanese custom of family bathing was a big hit with the boys.

The black market was flourishing on the base. We could get cigarettes for five or six cents a pack. Guys would go out the gate looking as fat as Santa Claus and no one ever stopped them. They sold over in town for a dollar or more a pack. I heard one officer had tried to stop it and had been found dead in an alley.

There was a corpsman that seemed overly anxious for my welfare. He became a nuisance. I knew he wasn't interested in me but in something he wanted. I finally told him I needed nothing and, if something was bugging him, to get it off his chest. He said he had heard a rumor that I would soon be the new C. O. He had a racket going in penicillin, selling it to the Japanese. I asked him how much he was getting for it and he said five to eight dollars a syrette. There were fifty syrettes in a small box. I asked him how much he was getting away with. He said there was no limit, as we had plenty. The poor Japanese were bad off medically. V. D., tuberculosis and other diseases were widespread and there was little medicine to treat them. But I have a thing about this rip-off ethic. I told him that I had no inkling of the C. O. deal, but if it were so, the first thing I wanted him to do when I took over was put in for a transfer. He never bothered me again.

With the help of my room boy, I got the money envelopes delivered to the Japanese wives of my buddies I'd left at Hagaru. When we made a delivery personally, we were always asked in for a meal or refreshments, and the room boy said it would be an insult to refuse. The Japanese wives and their families were very nice, gracious people. I met one old Japanese man who had a tremendous

garden. He was in it from sunup to sundown. When he wasn't working in it, he would relax by sitting in it, digging up the dirt with his hands, picking out the stones, dropping them in a bucket and spreading them over a stone walkway. That's the first time I ever saw anyone work the soil with his bare hands.

Not long before Christmas, Gunner Ward and I went into Kyoto to shop around. There were oodles of decorated trees up all over. I guess they grow everywhere in Japan. Kyoto was a big city. All the shops were small and compact, about the size of a normal living room in the States. You could see everything in the store without moving more than a few steps. Each store specialized in just one line of goods. The craftsmanship was superb, hammered silver and such. It broke my heart not to have Carm, the master shopper, along on a shopping tour. Before we left the city, the afternoon rush hour began. There were few autos and bicycles. I'll never forget the sound of thousands of Japanese people wearing wooden sandals walking home from work. It's just one of those sounds you never forget.

On Christmas Eve the last transports left Hangnam with the final load of X Corps troops and equipment. Over 100,000 military personnel had been evacuated by 109 ships, along with

17,500 vehicles, 350,000 tons of equipment and 91,000 North Korean refugees. It was all done amazingly in two weeks, with no interference from the Chinese. As the last ships pulled away, tons of explosives were blown, and the beach went up in clouds. The Chosin Reservoir Campaign was over.

Christmas came and I was lonely all day for my family, but I had received the best present possible. My orders had just been approved and I was going home. I went to the last movie and played the last pinochle game with the boys, packed up, and on the twenty-seventh took an overnight train ride to Yokahama.

There I boarded a naval transport, the U.S.S. Mitchell. You always get a ship when you're in a hurry and a plane when you're not.