

A Friend in Deed

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TODAY, like all previous days, promised to be the same as we bounced along a Korean road in our jeep. Stifling heat, swirling clouds of powder-fine dust from the primitive Korean roads, and oppressive humidity kept the ever-present stench of death cloaked around us until breathing became a revolting effort. The smell of death walked with us, rode with us, and threatened to contaminate our food at every bite. Our stomachs cringed, and our lungs protested vigorously at the repeated onslaughts of these foes to health and well-being. We hacked repeatedly until our throats were raw, and our speech sounded like the protests of a flock of crows chased from a cornfield. We felt miserable, and the bouncing contortions of our jeep added to our miseries as we continued northward on our mission.

As we jolted onward over the gutted, dusty Korean road, the countryside appeared forbidding and strange. Even our army jeep looked strange. The top had been taken off and the windshield lay flat on the hood. A 32-calibre machine gun had its tripod bolted to the hood with wing bolts, to facilitate quick removal. A BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) had been laid across the back seat for instant use. A box of hand grenades had been placed on the floor of the jeep, open and the contents ready to use. But we appeared even more strange. Although we were dressed in the usual GI garb, the resemblance to men, beyond that point, was difficult to perceive. Our faces were black with grime, and only an occasional streak, where the sweat had washed a slash of dirt away, revealed that somewhere under those exteriors of filth were once-white faces of men. The silence of the foursome was broken only occasionally—the effort of talking was too difficult, and each of us seemed lost in his own quiet thoughts.

Suddenly, as we careened around a sharp curve, our eyes and thoughts were focused upon a barbed wire roadblock. A dust-swirling stop, a hurried conversation with two Korean soldiers who were guarding the roadblock, and we were on our way northward again with the barbed wire entanglement and friendly forces falling quickly behind. We were on our own now; we were the first troops to cross the 38th Parallel on the east side of the Korean peninsula. From here onward, we proceeded slowly and cautiously—slowly because we must record road data, bridge data, and other necessary bits of information; cautiously because we knew not what might be in store for our small, four-man reconnaissance team. As we drove and recorded, and stopped and checked our position, we became more

confident that this trip would, like all the others, be uneventful and routine. Ahead of us, a one-mile stretch of road disappeared into a small village.

As we entered this village, it appeared to be no different from the usual Korean town. The houses had standard mud walls and grass-thatched roofs. The dirt streets were gutted by the wheels of heavy ox-carts. Here and there, large pools of stagnant, foul-smelling water provided perfect sanctuary for the malaria-bearing mosquitoes. However, there was one thing which seemed strange and out of order—the absence of Koreans going about their daily chores. Strange it seemed, because a war could not prevent most Koreans from continuing their eternal struggle to wrest a livelihood out of their rice fields and small shops. The conspicuous absence of Koreans caused us to stop just inside the village limits and dismount from the jeep. We backed our jeep against a thatched hut, in order to protect it as much as possible, and turned our machine gun to cover the road leading through the village. Then three of us went ahead to reconnoiter the houses and terrain ahead. The silence was deafening. Suddenly a North Korean male came running from behind a hut farther up the street, yelling and waving his arms as he ran. We stopped and waited while the figure, dressed in a white toga, continued to run toward us. Still we waited as he came running as fast as his feeble old legs would carry him. His garment, having become unfastened because of his unusually long steps, swirled behind him and threatened to trip him as he ran. His stringy white beard fluttered, and his yelling made it bob up and down in unison with his running. When he was only fifteen or twenty yards away, a shot rang out. The old Korean stumbled, recovered himself, stumbled again, and fell headlong on his face. From up the street, several soldiers came running, shouting and firing their rifles as they ran. Our BAR gunner permitted the soldiers to come a little closer. Quickly he took aim from his position on the ground and fired a long burst. Half the group of soldiers spun around and fell to the ground, and the remaining few scattered to find sanctuary behind some of the mud huts. The beneficent old Korean lay where he had fallen; his snow-white toga was now splattered with blood and dust. His once white beard still fluttered like a small banner of victory—but he was dead. He had given his life to warn four men of an impending ambush, and, in turn, he had been ambushed by his own people.

Our mission completed by this incident, we went back to our vehicle, amid a few hurried shots from our would-be ambushers, and began the trip back to our own forces. Few words were said aloud, but I'm sure each of us said a prayer for the humble old Korean who had given his life in order to protect ours.