

Our Reluctant Man in Korea



Ken Donald

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From the Fletcher Memoirs (1950-51)

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For Jane

Explanatory Note

This second packet from my uncle's memoirs describes the unwilling part he played in the Korean War, which began in the summer of 1950. In his previous offering he participated in the Berlin airlift, and when it ended in 1949 it appears that instead of returning to his duties as a pilot with the RAF, he was forced to resume his role as an operative for the British Secret Intelligence Service.

During his earlier assignment he met the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin. He mixes with equally illustrious company in this, his latest adventure – namely, Clement Attlee, General Douglas MacArthur (Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Korea), President Harry S Truman, and Marshal Peng Te Huai (Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese Forces in Korea).

I have checked his memoirs against the historical record and provided additional notes.

K.D.

In and out quick

“I don’t know what Stalin does to British spies when they get caught, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t just offer his commiserations and wish them a safe trip home. He’s met me before, you know, or has that slipped your mind?” I asked, panic rising in the back of my throat.

“Don’t worry, you won’t have to go anywhere near him,” said Biggins, trying to reassure me.

“If that’s the case, then how am I supposed to find out about his meeting with this Korean chap?”

“You’re going to have to get close to this secretary who works at the Kremlin,” he explained, and he dropped a photograph of a most fetching piece on to the desk.

I examined the picture more closely. She was a stunner, no doubt about it, and all of a sudden the mission didn’t look quite so dangerous.

“How close?” I asked, trying to sound indifferent.

“That’ll depend on you. The prime minister needs to know what’s going on as soon as possible, so you won’t have long.”

Biggins was clearly trying to put the pressure on, but his warnings had the opposite effect. The less time I spent in harm’s way, the more I liked it. When it comes to the spy game, I’ve always been of the opinion that ‘in and out quick’ is the best policy. Mind you, I’ve found that the same goes for dangerous and beautiful females too, and on that thought I put on a brave face and sealed my fate.

“When do I go?”

* * *

If you’ve been fortunate enough to have read my previous memoirs, you’ll know that due to a misunderstanding with an irate farmer, I was coerced into working for Biggins and his band of spies in the Secret Intelligence Service.

I’d been unceremoniously shipped off to Berlin to stop the Soviets getting hold of our latest plans on how to build a hydrogen bomb and, in spite of my best efforts to be relieved of duty, I’d managed to retrieve the damn things and thwart the diabolical schemes of the evil Major Kutuzov.

If that weren’t enough, I’d also helped expose Lord Haversham as the traitor that he was *and* played my gallant part in delivering life-giving supplies to the good people of Berlin during the infamous airlift. Oh, and I’d seduced the beautiful double agent Louise Schoneberg (or Louise May, or whatever her name was) into the bargain.

In spite of being a bit of a Cato, Biggins was no doubt hoping that I’d be able to use the same talents I’d displayed in Germany with the Muscovite lovely smiling in the eight by ten on the desk. After all, he was the one calling the shots, so to speak, now that Haversham was languishing at His Majesty’s Pleasure - having narrowly escaped the hangman’s noose.

So there I was in '50, having barely escaped with my life in the Berlin debacle and facing the lion's den once more. But what was so damned important about this Korean gentleman that I should be risking my precious neck all over again, I hear you ask? Well, you can rest assured that I was asking myself the same question and I'll tell you as much as I knew back then, which wasn't a fat lot.

You see, Korea had been getting along quite happily all on its own until the Japanese had the bad taste to invade the place. Of course when the Japs were given a damn good thrashing by the Americans, the Soviets started taking a keen interest in their easterly neighbour.

So our Russian allies decided to conveniently declare war on Japan only a day before the Yanks dropped their atom bomb on Nagasaki - when all the fighting was over bar the shouting. They promptly marched through Manchuria and invaded Korea and that's when the halfwits in the American government finally woke up.

"Why don't we share Korea?" they suggested helpfully.

"OK," said the Russkies, rather obligingly. "Where shall we meet up?"

"How about the 38th Parallel - that's more or less through the middle of the country," came the answer.

And so, like umpteen times before, a straight line was drawn across a map and the rest of us have had to live with the consequences ever since.

Of course there was the small matter of how to run the country, and the American in charge, General Hodge, tried to get the ball rolling by using the swarm of Japanese administrators already there - but that didn't go down too well with the local populace, to say the least.

Eventually the Yanks found a suitable exile to manage the show by the name of Syngman Rhee. He immediately began a campaign to remove communism, which I'm sure pleased our American cousins no end, but they soon found out that Rhee equated *any* political opponent with communism and was arresting or killing his opponents all over the place.

In North Korea the Soviets were up to the same tricks as their American counterparts and Stalin promptly chose his own communist puppet, Kim Il Sung. Then, in '49, the Soviets and the Americans both pulled out to let the Koreans get on with things, and that would have been that, if it hadn't been for some disquieting developments elsewhere and certain gaffes of the highest order.

You see, the West had been rather pinning their hopes on Chiang Kai-Shek coming out on top in his war against the communists in China. In fact they'd banked on it to the tune of two billion dollars in military aid, but Mao Tse Tung had annoyingly beaten Chiang wholeheartedly and the loser had been forced to run off to Taiwan. As if that weren't enough, our so-called *Secret* Intelligence Service had been leaking information to the Soviets again, this time about America's apparent *lack* of atomic weapons.

So what does all this mean, I hear you ask? Aye well, you'll see soon enough, because it was then that Biggins sent your hapless hero to Moscow to find out what on earth was to be discussed at that fateful meeting in the Kremlin - a meeting between the Supreme Soviet

leader, Joseph Stalin, and one-time guerrilla fighter and now Chairman of the People's Assembly of North Korea, Kim Il Sung.

A handsome man in the mirror

Once I was safely ensconced in a typical hotel for the centre of Moscow with the usual amenities - that is to say, cold running water and no soap - I took the time to have a final look at the file containing the personal details of the beautiful secretary from the Kremlin – Natalia Yazov.

As you know, I speak Russian like a native and so it was only a matter of finding the right place and time for me to make the acquaintance of the fortunate lady. As luck would have it, she appeared to be a creature of habit and made a point of attending a well-known tea room every evening on her way home from work.

Once I'd made a quick phone call, I dressed in the expensive suit I'd brought along for the occasion in an effort to make a good impression - which wasn't difficult when you saw how the majority of the Muscovite males were attired. I took one last look in the mirror to see the damned handsome man in the reflection, before heading for the door to make my way to the aforementioned char-house.

I made sure I was at the drinking emporium before my Russian sweetheart arrived and I chose a table where I had a good vantage point of the entire room. Ten minutes later Miss Yazov duly arrived and took a seat by the window. The waitress had just taken her order when a large man blessed with thinning hair, glasses and bad teeth, made a beeline for the young lady's table.

"Mind if I s...sit down?" he asked, slurring his words as he fell into the chair opposite my adorable secretary.

Her new companion had clearly been helping himself to half of the city's supply of vodka and her discomfort grew, as he leered across the table and made a grab for her hand. She went to pull it away but he was surprisingly fast for the town drunk and his huge paw encircled her dainty wrist.

"Wassa matter - aren't I good enough to sit with the likes of you?" he asked threateningly.

She looked fit to scream and no doubt would have, if her gallant knight in shining armour hadn't arrived in the nick of time.

"Is this man causing a nuisance, miss?" I asked, giving her the most charming smile I could muster.

"Yes, he is," she replied, clearly relieved that help was at hand.

"In that case, sir, could I ask you to leave the young lady alone," I said, addressing Quasimodo.

"Mind ... hic ... your own business," he growled, and he got up from his chair, while one of his large fists came round to punch me in the face.

I caught his arm by the wrist, and in one smooth movement I brought it behind his back and guided him to the street outside. I shoved him roughly away with threats that he'd better not trouble the lady again, and returned to the tea room to thankful applause from the other diners. As I stood there, feeling like the hero of the hour, I thought I must thank Biggins for his choice of annoying drunk – he'd really come up trumps.

* * *

“Are you all right?” I asked my harassed young flower of the Communist Party.

“Yes, thank you. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come to help me when you did.”

“Well, I was glad to be of service,” I said, as humble as you like, and I gave her what I hoped was another winning smile before I made to return to my table.

“Please, won’t you join me – it’s the least I can do.”

I left a polite pause before accepting her offer and helped myself to the seat facing her.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you in here before,” she said, opening the batting.

“No, I’ve only just arrived in the city. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Pavel Ryzchkov,” I said, offering her my hand.

She reached across the table and I gently shook her dainty digits.

“I am Natalia – Natalia Yazov,” she replied, giving me a beautiful and welcoming smile.

I took the opportunity to appraise the goods, so to speak, and I was not disappointed. She had the slim figure so common in Europe in the post-war years, but everything was there and in good order from what I could see. She’d removed her obligatory thick Russian overcoat and was wearing a plain white blouse that highlighted her bouncers admirably.

Her hair was dark and cut so that it hung just above her shoulders. She had the pale skin of a typical Muscovite, but it was smooth and unblemished. Her features were thin and delicate - so unlike the stereotypical Russian women many Westerners had come to expect. Her lips were not full but they were beautifully formed and her eyes were a pale watery-blue. It was almost impossible not to lose yourself in their dreamy quality. Her next words broke in on my trance.

“What brings you to Moscow, Pavel?”

“I am a pilot and I have a few days off,” I explained.

In my experience, when you’re perpetrating a lie it’s usually advisable to stick as close to the truth as you can. Besides, I’d had no time to fabricate an elaborate cover story and it was a line of work which never failed to impress the ladies, as soon became evident.

“How exciting,” she said, “you must visit so many interesting places.”

“Oh, usually I only get to see the airfields. What line of work are you in?” I asked, quickly trying to change the subject.

“I am a secretary for a colonel in the Kremlin,” she explained.

“Really?” I said, trying to feign surprise. “The Kremlin? You must meet all sorts of important people.”

“Not really – only in passing.”

“What about Stalin?” I asked. “You must have met him.”

“I’ve seen him, of course, but we have very strict orders - he must never be approached unless he specifically asks to see you. Not that I would dare to speak to him,” she said, smiling nervously.

I thought it best not to press her any further just then, and we resorted to polite and social banter. It was no hardship because she was an easy-going and kind soul who laughed at my

witticisms, which is always satisfying. Eventually it was time to leave and I insisted on escorting her home. When she said she couldn't impose, I assured her I would feel remiss in my duty if I didn't ensure she was safe before we finally parted.

Twenty minutes later we arrived at one of the many drab apartment blocks which festooned the city, and I accompanied her up the grubby stairs to the third floor. As we reached the door to say our goodbyes, we heard the sound of footsteps echoing in the stairwell below us. Biggins' hired thug appeared right on time.

"This little lady is mine. Get out of my way," he growled, and he went to shove me aside.

He was none too gentle about it and I was briefly winded when I hit the wall behind me. I knew he had to make the whole confrontation look genuine, but even so. I must have a word with Biggins when I see him, I thought. He obviously hadn't explained the important fact that I wasn't to be harmed, damn him.

Anyway, I took my cue and manhandled the slob down the stairs with suitable threats that he'd better not show his ugly face again, or he'd get a fist in the face for his trouble.

After that it was plain sailing. My damsel in distress was so frightened that she pushed all propriety aside and invited me into her apartment for a drink until she was sure her new admirer had given up bothering her.

Well, one thing led to another and we were dancing the horizontal polka in no time. You might have heard tales of communist austerity, but I'm here to tell you that Russian women know the best way to keep warm in winter time.

It's all very well, I hear you say, but what about your mission for King and Country? Aye well, you'd be making the same mistake as the ignorant Biggins if you thought I gave a damn about their spying nonsense. I may not have been able to worm my way out of the assignment without losing face, but that didn't mean I couldn't just pop along to the land of the Bolsheviks and bide my time with a Soviet beauty until they forgot about their inane political shenanigans. Which was what I did, but somehow I managed to find out what Attlee and Biggins wanted to know without even trying.

You see, the silly Russian bint had gone nuts on me - and who's to blame her? Surrounded by vodka-sozzled old men as she was, whose idea of a good time was a quick fumble and let's tuck into the cabbage and potatoes, it was little wonder that a handsome and urbane man of good breeding felt like a breath of fresh air to the sex-starved little Ukrainian - which suited me just fine.

I can honestly say that by the week's end, when I was starting to become a little worse for wear after her ministrations, I'd completely forgotten about my ridiculous mission.

I'm sure my trip to Moscow would have been fruitless (at least where matters of state were concerned) if I hadn't happened to suggest I would be flying to the Far East. Total nonsense, of course, but I have to admit that whenever she chose to question me about my glamorous profession, I was running out of stories to tell. The thing is, when she heard this little nugget of news, she was all concern for the safety of her new dancing partner.

"Where in Asia are you going, Pavel? You're not flying anywhere near Korea, are you?" she asked, concern written over every inch of her face.

“Well, yes, as it happens,” I said, quickly realising that I might be on to something. “Why, is there something wrong?”

“I probably shouldn’t be telling you this,” she began, which always gets my heart pumping, “but there have been secret meetings with important people from Korea all week.”

“What of it?” I asked, trying to sound uninterested.

She paused, and you could almost see the cogs whirring around in her brain while she wrestled with the dilemma of whether or not she should be saying anything. Clearly she eventually decided that it wouldn’t hurt to pass on a few state secrets if it would help to protect the new love in her life.

“Well, it’s just a rumour, but I heard that the Koreans have come to ask for permission to start some sort of war,” she said calmly, as if she was passing on a cake recipe.

My mind was racing. This was an alarming piece of news and no mistake. Attlee and Biggins would be shocked to the core, and I’d be receiving a crown of laurel leaves for doing a sterling job when I finally got back to Blighty to pass on the news. I needed to know more, but I had to be careful. I didn’t want to appear too eager and arouse her suspicion. So I tried to sound as offhand as possible.

“My word, that sounds a bit worrying,” I said, hoping she’d realise that her lover’s precious safety was at stake. “Do you think there *will* be a war?”

“I don’t really know, but I heard Colonel Solovyev celebrating with some other senior officers only yesterday.”

My God, I thought, do you suppose the people in the Kremlin know they have someone working for them who shows as much discretion as the town crier? I stretched and yawned to emphasise my indifference.

“What were they celebrating?” I asked, helping myself to a glass of vodka and pouring another for my beautiful songbird.

“It was hard to tell, what with all the laughter and clinking of glasses. There was a lot of talk about the success of the Party in China, of course, and someone was asking about the atom bomb, but we know that the Americans have no more than a handful.”

Stone me, she was better informed than the prime minister - which wasn’t difficult when you thought about who he had working for him in our so-called intelligence department.

“But surely,” I asked, hoping to find out more, “no one wants to risk a war with the Americans?”

“That’s what I thought, but after what this Acheson man has said, everyone thinks they don’t care.”

I couldn’t believe it. I was as naked as Adam, ogling the finest pair of tits Moscow had to offer, and I was being more ably apprised of the international situation than if I’d been attending a Cabinet meeting.

I didn’t know it at the time but Dean Acheson, the US secretary of state, had made some sort of speech about US interests in the Far East and he’d carelessly forgotten to mention Korea at all. Why? Oh, probably because he’d been too involved in the situation in Europe to notice what was happening on the other side of the world. Hadn’t we all?

Anyway, the upshot was that the blithering idiot had given totally the wrong impression to our Soviet friends and it was clear, from what my little Natalia was saying, that Stalin was riding high on the success of the communists in China and wasn't to be put off by a few pesky atom bombs gathering dust in America.

Any fool could see what all this added up to. Stalin was going to give this Kim Il Sung chap the green light for invading South Korea - and who knew what the West would make of that?¹

The sooner I got this treasure-house of information back to my grateful prime minister the better. But first things first, I thought.

“Oh, that's enough talk about boring old politics, Natalia. Why don't you show me one of those dance moves that got my knees trembling? No, there's no need to get dressed.”

You're the man for the job

The next night, back in London, I was very pleased with myself - as well I might have been. I'd come through my little visit behind the Iron Curtain totally unscathed (always a sign of success as far as I'm concerned), and come away with a valuable piece of sought-after intelligence due to some tiring hard work on my part. Mind you, if I'd known what trouble it was going to cause me, I'd have kept mum and stayed in Moscow for a few more dancing lessons.

Biggins could barely contain himself when I told him what I'd learnt, and there was nothing for it but we must head straight to Number 10 for a hastily arranged meeting with Attlee himself. This being my second visit to the home of our prime minister, I was beginning to feel like an old hand, and this time I was determined not to let my nerves get the better of me.

If I handled things right, I could very well end up with a knighthood, I thought - which just goes to show how naïve I was back then. All the same, Attlee might not have been searching for the royal sword and instructing His Majesty to tap his worthy subject on the shoulders, but he was heaping on the praise thick and fast – the old flatterer.

"This is incredible news, Captain Fletcher. You mean Stalin may very well have given the go-ahead for Kim Il Sung to invade South Korea?" he asked, clearly astonished.

"I wasn't told that in so many words, sir. But from what I heard it all adds up."

"I understand the source of your information was, er ... a young lady who works at the Kremlin?" he asked, giving me that strange look he'd treated me to at our last meeting.

Although he wouldn't have admitted it to my face, he'd long-suspected my worthy talents which had proved so useful to England the year before.

"Yes, sir, but I'm sure she was telling the truth. She let it slip out during an unguarded moment, so to speak."

"I'm sure she did," he said, peering at me over his spectacles in that way of his – and suddenly the room felt uncomfortably hot.

He sat back, removed his glasses, and brought his hands up to his face to massage his tired eyes.

"What do you think about all this, Mr. Biggins?" he asked.

Biggins was on the edge of his seat, barely able to contain himself.

"I'm sure we're on to something, sir. I wouldn't put it past Stalin to initiate a war if he thought he could get away with it - especially if he hasn't got to risk Russian troops and he can let someone else do his fighting for him."

"Quite. Which rather suggests that this Kim Il Sung won't be let off his leash just yet, not with Soviet military advisers milling around near the front line," said Attlee, thinking out loud.

He started to light one of his ever-present cigarettes before he continued.

"Still, this is hardly a time for complacency. The Russians are getting far too friendly with the Koreans for my liking. The problem is, I can't raise my concerns with President Truman – not when they're based on unsubstantiated rumours. If we are to convince our

friends across the pond to come to the defence of South Korea, we need some eyes and ears on the ground so we can back up our suspicions with hard facts.”

He sucked hard on his cigarette until it glowed red and tapped his fingers on the desk, apparently lost in thought.

“Well, Mr. Biggins, I think we both know who would be the ideal man for the job, don’t we? And fortunately he’s sitting right here in this room,” said Attlee confidently.

For one blissful moment I hadn’t realised what he meant, and rather stupidly I’d assumed he was talking about Biggins. When it finally dawned on me that the reckless fool was referring to me, I tried to hide my growing alarm and quickly pointed out the flaw in his suggestion.

“But I’m afraid I don’t speak Korean, sir,” I protested.

“Unfortunately precious few of us do, I’m afraid. We’ll just have to hope that isn’t a problem. I’m sure we can arrange an interpreter, eh, Biggins? Besides, I understand you have a natural gift for languages. I’m sure you’ll be ordering breakfast like a native in no time,” said the smug maniac.

“Are you sure, sir? I’m happy to be of assistance, of course,” I said, lying my arse off, “but surely there are other operatives better qualified than me to carry out the task. Sir, what I mean is, I wouldn’t want to let you down on such an important mission.”

“Nonsense. You’ve proved your worth more than once. Besides, you are already privy to the sensitive information you have gleaned during your trip to Moscow. This way we don’t have to risk sharing our fears with any more people than we have to. I don’t have to tell you what the Soviets would think if we were spreading such rumours and they proved to be false - it could cause a diplomatic incident.”

Attlee blew a lungful of smoke up at the ceiling before continuing.

“No, you’re the man for the job, Captain Fletcher, I’ve no doubt about that. And you can rest assured that you have the gratitude of His Majesty’s Government. I’ll leave you to work out the details, Mr. Biggins, and I don’t have to remind you gentlemen how important this duty is. If war is raising its ugly head in Korea, we need to know about it and fast. Good luck, gentlemen.”

He picked up some papers from his desk and we took it as a sign that it was time for us to leave. As I stood up, I found my knees were shaking and threatening to desert me again.

“Are you all right, Captain?” asked the PM. “You’re looking a little pale. Still, a good dose of oriental sun might be just the ticket. Good day to you both and keep me informed of your progress.”

Water on my flames of desire

I'm used to it now, of course, but back then, when the hand of fate dealt me what seemed like a fatal blow, it took me a few days to recover. It was just as well that it was going to take me that long to get to the blasted place, being on the other side of the confounded planet. The only solace I took was that I was being sent to a town called Pusan, and a quick look at the map reassured me, if that was the word, that I was as far south as it was possible to get. Hopefully I would be well out of harm's way if the bullets started to fly.

It was already summer when I finally arrived, after a weary journey involving so many changes of plane that I'd lost count. When I finally landed in Korea, the first thing that hit me was the bloody stink, and I found myself gagging as soon as I stepped off the plane. But what do you expect when the peasants use human excrement to encourage the damn rice crop?

I was welcomed to the country by my interpreter – a Miss Lee Ji-min. I'd encountered more than my fair share of Asian beauties, of course, when I'd been part of the army of occupation in Japan - and very nice they were too. But I have to say that Ji-min put the rest of them in the shade. Not only did she have flawless skin and the epicanthic folds over the eyes I always found so appealing, but the rest of her assets got the heart racing too.

She had a pert little nose and full, exquisitely shaped lips that gave her an almost doll-like appearance. Her eyes were a pale green colour that betrayed a sharp intelligence, and when she approached she gave me one of those oriental smiles that you can never really be sure are genuine.

"Captain Fletcher?" she asked in almost perfect English.

"Yes, and you must be Ji-min," I said, holding out my hand. But she simply ignored it.

"Welcome to South Korea, Captain Fletcher," she responded, giving a little bow.

"Please, call me Tom," I said, impatient to get the niceties out of the way so I could start to appreciate this piece of good fortune.

"I have arranged for us to stay at a hotel nearby, Captain Fletcher," she said, refusing to drop the formalities.

When my eyes lit up at this exciting piece of news, she quickly poured water on my flames of desire by adding that she had booked separate rooms – the little spoil sport. Still, we'd see about that.

It wasn't a bad little place, as it turned out, and I found myself in a light and airy room overlooking the harbour. It certainly made a change from the squalid huts I'd been forced to share with dozens of other airmen in Germany. I'd barely had time to unpack, when there was a knock at the door and Ji-min appeared, ready to receive her new employer's orders. I decided to get business out of the way so that we could concentrate on the more important things in life.

"My government is worried that the North Koreans might be intending to invade your country, and they have sent me here to gather any evidence that could confirm this," I said, summing things up nicely.

“I have heard these rumours too,” she said. “Apparently large numbers of Russian tanks, guns and planes have been delivered to North Korea.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. If the North *was* getting ready to invade, I wanted to be well clear of the blasted place by then – after sampling the wonderful delights Pusan had to offer, of course. On that thought, I tried to get a look at Ji-min’s promising figure, but it was difficult to give a full appraisal, what with the loose-fitting linen dress she was wearing, tied at the waist with a large sash. I quickly averted my gaze when she turned away from the view of the harbour to face me.

“Is there any way that we could prove the Russians are arming the North?” I asked, not holding out much hope - but she surprised me with her answer.

“I am amused that your government is not aware of these developments,” she said accusingly. “A special protocol has already been signed between Moscow and Pyongyang, under which the Soviets have agreed to supply military assistance.”

My God, I thought, if that was true then what the hell was I doing in Korea? I started to get a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Agreements and signatures are one thing,” I said, defending my country’s honour, “actual guns and tanks are quite another.”

“But we have proof they are here already. I have seen photographs.”

It suddenly dawned on me that aside from being assigned to me as an interpreter, I had no real idea who this Lee Ji-min was. How the hell had she seen photographs of Russian weapons sent to their North Korean allies?

“Forgive me, Ji-min, but how did you get access to such photographs?” I asked.

“My father is a general in the Army Counter-Intelligence Corps,” she explained calmly.

“Do you think I might be able to see those photographs?”

“I’m sure that could be arranged, but we would have to travel to Seoul.”

Needless to say that prospect wasn’t very appealing. Seoul might well have been the capital city of South Korea, but it was dangerously close to the North. On the other hand, there wasn’t a war on just then and I assumed it would be safe enough. I decided the sooner I found out what was going on the better, and then I could forget all about any espionage nonsense and head for the safety of home.

“I tell you what, Ji-min. Let’s tootle up to Seoul tomorrow and take a dekko at those snaps.”

“I’m sorry, Captain, I do not know what you just said.”

“Ji-min, if you’re going to be my interpreter, we’ll need to get to know each other a little better.”

“How?” she asked innocently.

I sat back and, being the gentleman I am, I kept my unsavoury thoughts to myself.

Twiddling my thumbs

The problem was that Ji-min didn't care what was on my sordid little mind and she was having none of it. You see, your hero's boyish charm wasn't cutting the mustard with my prim Korean hostess, and I was given short shrift when I suggested that she might spend a pleasant evening with yours truly.

So I was left twiddling my thumbs and I drank a bottle of the local brew to aid slumber, only to be kept awake with stomach cramps which still hadn't abated when I made my toilet the following morning. Without putting too fine a point on it, my evacuation was so loud that I'm sure the boats in the harbour must have thought it was some kind of warning to shipping.

Unfortunate bowel movements aside, I managed to use my new-found clout as a member of the Secret Intelligence Service to arrange a flight to Seoul the next day. Ji-min was as aloof as ever, and I quickly gave up trying to engage her in polite conversation.

To top it all, we were left kicking our heels for two precious days before we were given access to the promised photographs. I say 'precious' because, unknown to me, Kim Il Sung was champing at the bit to get under starter's orders and Stalin was about to open the gate.

I actually had the damning pictures of the Russian T-34 tanks in my hot little hands when we suddenly heard news about the invasion from the North. It was nearly the end of June and Stalin had set the date so that his advisers were out of harm's way. The last thing he wanted was to have any of his little heroes captured and paraded in front of the press for the world to see.

On the pretext of responding to an armed incursion from the South, the North Korean People's Army attacked, following a dawn artillery barrage, and seven divisions were crossing the 38th parallel behind a line of the very same T-34 tanks I'd been sent to find out about by the PM.

The news that hordes of communists were racing down the country in my direction was alarming, as you can imagine. I eventually managed to get access to a telephone and, after thirty frustrating minutes, I got through to Biggins in London.

"Don't worry," said the blithering idiot pathetically. "They've already held a special session of the UN Security Council, and because of the Soviet boycott there'll be no problem getting the go-ahead to provide military aid to South Korea."

"A fat lot of good that's going to do me, Biggins. The Red buggers are heading straight for Seoul as we speak. "

"Believe me, Fletcher, the Americans mean business. Our sources tell us they're putting MacArthur at the helm. If anyone can teach these North Koreans a lesson, he can," Biggins assured me confidently from his comfortable office thousands of miles away.

"Forgive me if I don't share your faith in the American Army, Biggins. MacArthur's living the high life in Japan and his men are just lazing the days away."

"No, Fletcher, you're wrong. MacArthur's on his way to Seoul to see Syngman Rhee so that he can view the situation for himself."

“Well, I can save him a trip. Tell the good general that the South Koreans are running away as fast as their little legs will carry them.”

“You can tell him yourself. The PM wants you to stay on in Seoul and find out what the Americans intend to do,” said Biggins, as calmly as you like.

“Biggins, why don’t you...”

Fortunately for my witless colleague in London, our poor telephone connection finally gave up the ghost and he didn’t have to follow my suggestion.

* * *

I got back on the phone and tried to argue my way out of the lunatic idea, of course, but Attlee had sealed my fate once again. There was nothing for it but to await the arrival of MacArthur, the legendary war hero, and pray that I wasn’t still in the way when the communists turned their attention to the South Korean capital.

Fortunately the North Koreans weren’t exactly hammering on the gates of the city just then, and everything seemed peaceful enough. I found out later that this was because the citizens of Seoul simply hadn’t been told of the impending disaster about to unfold.

I had no need of my Korean interpreter (for all the good she’d been), so the next day I headed for the schoolhouse where MacArthur was meeting Syngman Rhee. I was just in time to see the tall and haughty figure leave his hastily arranged meeting, looking for all the world like the epitome of a great military commander, smoking his trademark corncob pipe.

He exuded a confidence and vigour that belied the fact that by then the old war hero was seventy years of age. It’s often the way for men who sail through life believing that rules are made for lesser mortals.

After the war, President Truman had rewarded the general by giving him the recently conquered Japan to play with, and one of his first acts had been to pardon the Japanese. This was when our men, many of whom were no more than walking skeletons, were only just being released from the prisoner-of-war camps that festooned the country.

And now here he was, looking as unconcerned and self-assured as a gent on a walk around his country estate. This was all the more surprising when we learnt that a communist fighter had just had a go at his Constellation when it had delivered the old general to Korea. He was surrounded by his entourage of senior toadies and I had to push myself forward so that I could fire my urgent question.

“What’s the situation, General?” I called out, struggling to be heard above the noisy clamour filling the hallway.

“The general hasn’t got time for any questions,” said a self-important colonel, wearing a uniform that looked as if it had just come straight from his tailor.

“No, hold on, Colonel. Who said that?” asked MacArthur, scanning the hall.

“I did, sir,” I admitted.

“You’re British, aren’t you? What on earth are you doing here?” asked the general.

“I’m here on orders from the Prime Minister of Great Britain, General,” I explained, hoping my reference to Attlee would get results, and it seemed to work.

“Well, boy, you can tell Mr. Attlee from me that the South Koreans are in one hell of a hole but we’ll dig them out, don’t you worry.”

And with that he and his hangers-on pushed their way through the waiting crowd to get back to the plane that would whisk them off to Tokyo before the fighting started.

That was my mission safely accomplished and, as I prepared to leave the doomed city, all would have been well if the blasted North Koreans hadn’t chosen that moment to make an appearance - together with their new T-34 tanks. To make matters worse, Rhee’s rabble didn’t seem to have the wherewithal to stop them.

In that regard, to slow the communist advance the South Koreans decided to destroy the Hangang Bridge over the mighty Han River, and I had the misfortune to witness their handiwork.

You see, shortly after calling for the defence of Seoul to the death, Rhee had hopped on a train with all of his government toadies and buggered off south. It was then that the South Korean Army decided to blow up the bridge and promptly ordered thousands of pounds of TNT to be packed on to the delicate piece of engineering.

The problem was that they neglected to inform the happily ignorant citizens of Seoul. My hotel room happened to overlook the doomed structure and, as I packed in preparation to leave with all possible dispatch, the order was given that very afternoon to blow up the bridge without warning. What I saw defied belief. The air was filled with a deafening roar and the bridge collapsed, together with the host of refugees crossing it at the time. I learned later that over a thousand civilians were killed on that doomed structure.

There was also the little matter of the retreat of the South Korean Fifth Division. The loss of the bridge meant they had no way of escaping the North Korean onslaught. Still, Rhee caught his train on time and MacArthur was safely back home enjoying the delights of Tokyo.²

Of course there was still one person in Seoul who didn’t belong, and that was a young, dashing Royal Air Force captain by the name of Fletcher. I intended to remedy that oversight as quickly as possible, but any thoughts I’d had of hopping on the next plane back to Tokyo were soon blighted when I learned that the airfield at Kimpo was in the process of being overrun by communist troops.

I was just starting to wonder what the hell I was going to do, when I was brought out of my funk by the sound of hammering on my door. I answered it, to find my little angel of mercy, Ji-min.

“We need to get out of the city,” she said, stating the bloody obvious.

“Do you have any suggestions?” I asked, not holding out much hope.

“I have arranged for us to go with the last of the American soldiers to evacuate the city. A sergeant is waiting in his jeep for us now,” she explained casually, and my spirits soared.

“You’re a bloody marvel, Ji-min,” I cried, and I took her face in my hands to give her a big kiss on the lips.

She took a step back, her face expressionless.

“This is not the time to take liberties,” she warned. “Please follow me.”

As I walked down the corridor, I was drawn to the way her pert little bottom wiggled as she raced to the head of the stairs. I uttered my thoughts to an empty corridor.

“I’m going to sample the delights of the Far East – even if it’s the last thing I do.”

Bug-out fever

Fortunately the river was low enough for the Americans to have constructed a temporary pontoon bridge, and they could get what remained of their vehicles and men out of Seoul. It wasn't long before I realised that most of the Yanks were as eager to get away from the blasted place as I was. You see, the average GI hadn't a clue what he was doing there, and what soon became known as 'bug-out fever' was threatening to shatter any chance the United States had of holding on to Korea.

When we approached areas where the United Nations' finest had been caught napping, I saw equipment lying on the ground where it had been abandoned by the retreating troops. I even spotted a pair of boots and socks, together with a fully loaded rifle. Not the sort of thing to inspire a coward like me, especially when he's hoping to get a battalion of die-hards protecting his rear as he makes a hasty exit. At this rate I was going to be hard-pressed to catch up with my fellow bullet-dodgers, I thought.

Luckily one thing saved me - and the United States Forces in Korea, come to that. As it turned out, Kim Il Sung decided his gallant troops needed a week to regroup while they prepared for the next thrust against the retreating enemy. It wasn't much of a respite, but it was just enough for those of us who had been inadvertently caught short to make good our escape.

So all would have been fine and dandy, if it hadn't turned out that my cold little Korean maiden wasn't quite so frosty after all.

We'd stopped for the night at a town called Chonan, and we found a nice little farmer's dwelling that had clearly been deserted in rather a hurry. There were blankets on the bed and even firewood had been collected to ward off the chill of the summer evenings. I managed to scrounge some coffee and tinned rations from our American friends, so we could spend quite a comfortable night, considering the circumstances.

You might be forgiven for wondering why your reluctant hero was willing to languish dangerously close to an advancing horde of bloodthirsty communists. In my defence, I'd been reliably informed by our escort that a unit with the grandiose title of 'Task Force Smith' had been deployed to halt the North Korean advance. Little did I know that they were going to be about as much use as a vicar in a brothel warning love-starved sailors not to have pre-marital relations.

But why take the chance, I hear you ask? Well, if you've ever been tempted by an Asian beauty who turns out to be as randy as a rabbit, you'll know the answer.

After sampling the delights of 'Nutty Home-Grown Corn' from a can, we helped ourselves to several bottles of cheap American beer while I lit a fire. I'd volunteered to sleep on the floor, having finally given up trying to melt my Asian ice cube, and I was just passing my pretty interpreter another beverage, when Ji-min shocked my delicate soul.

"I think you would be far more comfortable sharing the bed with me, Captain Fletcher," she said, slurring her words.

No doubt her inebriated state rather influenced her change of heart, and I'm sure a man of good breeding who had been brought up as a Christian would have declined. But having

been orphaned as a young lad, I had no such encumbrances, and I wasn't about to turn down a fine piece of tumble - even if I *was* sitting in the middle of a war zone.

"Well, if you insist," I responded gallantly.

* * *

"You are an exceedingly proficient lover," professed Ji-min the following morning, when I eventually stirred from my well-earned rest.

I've been woken from my slumber in far less agreeable circumstances, but I have to confess I was more than a little nonplussed. I'm not saying I wasn't gratified to receive such high praise with regards to my prowess in the bedroom, but when it was imparted with the passion of a person reading a train timetable, I found myself rather at a loss for words.

"I'm glad I could be of service," seemed to be the most appropriate response.

"I hope we can repeat our union again."

That was enough for me. I was like a bull at a gate suddenly given access to the herd, and for the next few days we couldn't keep our hands to ourselves. I don't know if it was Ji-min's unexpected change of heart and metamorphosis from vestal virgin to nymphomaniac, or the sense of relief I'd felt at having come through danger unharmed, but we were satisfying our passions in that farmer's little shack for the next four days. It may not have been a grand domicile, but I have a greater fondness for that little hovel than the sumptuous room I was once blessed with at Balmoral. (But that's another story).

The problem was that while I was enjoying the finer things that Korea had to offer, the communists were hell-bent on spoiling everybody's fun. As I said, the unfortunate GIs thrown into the firing line were ill-equipped to deal with the Red menace, now resuming its lust for glory.

I believe it was the third or fourth morning when, after a particularly strenuous bout with my Korean sweetheart, I was disturbed from my siesta by the sound of an almighty argument taking place nearby. I hastily donned my shirt and trousers, which were holding up none too well, and went to find out what the blasted racket was all about.

I was greeted by the sight of a group of American officers having a right set to. One of them was a big man who looked about fifty or thereabouts and he was standing in front of a jeep, castigating his men something awful.

"What are you doing here?" he asked the officers, who were all looking at the ground rather sheepishly. "Who gave you orders to withdraw?"

"We tried stopping them with mortars and machine-guns, General, but they've got tanks. They were closing in and we'd have been cut off. Those damn T-34s aren't far behind us right now. What were we supposed to do?"

This unexpected bit of news put me right off my breakfast, I can tell you, but I was bound to see what else they had to say if I was to decide what to do next.

"As far as I can see, you've offered no significant resistance to the enemy. There's nothing for it, you'll have to dig in and make a stand right here."

By gum, even yesterday's breakfast was threatening to make an appearance now.

“You’re relieved of your command, Colonel. I’ve replaced you with an experienced officer who knows what he’s doing,” said the general, climbing into his jeep.

And with that he saluted and signalled that his driver should make his way back to headquarters. His jeep had barely pulled away, when we heard the unmistakable sound of tanks approaching.

We all turned to see the new threat advancing towards us. Through the morning mist I started to count the steel behemoths and gave up when I ran out of fingers. The officers ran to a row of houses behind a sewage ditch, and on instinct I joined them.

“Who the hell are you?” asked one of the men, none too tactfully.

“I’m English,” I said, hoping that explained everything.

The officer was about to say something, when mortar rounds started falling close by. The tanks continued to roll down towards us, and as far as I could tell the Yanks had no way of stopping them. The T-34s came to the end of the road and started firing.

“Let’s pull back to that street over there,” said one of the men, pointing to a collection of houses that seemed to offer some protection.

It sounded like more than a reasonable idea to me and we withdrew, just as the wall behind us was destroyed by a tank shell.

“Who’s that guy?” cried the man next to me.

We looked to where he was pointing and we saw an officer taking aim at the leading tank with a bazooka.

“Look at his insignia. That must be the new CO who’s replaced you, Colonel.”

“He must be mad,” exclaimed my demoted friend, and it was a sentiment with which I could’ve heartily agreed.

As if to confirm our joint analysis of the situation, the tank turned and fired, achieving a direct hit on the new commanding officer. Where he’d been standing only moments before, there was now just an empty crater and a rising cloud of dust and debris - the colonel having been sent *ad patres*. So much for the joys of promotion, I thought.³

It was only then that I suddenly remembered my Korean beloved, who for all I knew was still sleeping blissfully in our little love-nest. But by that time the tanks were between our position and my darling Ji-min. Whether or not I would have stood before the encroaching armour, instructing them to hold fast while I rescued my damsel in distress, I never found out. Before I knew what was happening I was being shoved along by the officers, as GIs poured down the street, shouting that the orders were to evacuate.

I couldn’t believe it. In the space of a dozen minutes I’d gone from happily dozing in bed with the delightful Ji-min for company, to the living nightmare of a full-scale battle.

As we made our way to the eastern edge of the town and crossed a paddy field, heavy artillery fire was raining down and I could hear people screaming all around me. I saw one unlucky GI blown to pieces right in front of me, but there was nothing for it but to run as fast as my legs would allow and hope that the next shell didn’t choose to land on top of me.

Thankfully we reached a line of jeeps and other vehicles at the end of a roadway and I hopped aboard one of the trucks.

“Hey, fella, did I hear you tell the colonel you were a limey?” asked one of the GIs, and I nodded.

“What in the hell are you doing in this mess?” he asked. “The Brits ain’t supposed to be here yet.”

“I’m a sort of advance party,” I explained.

“Well, you’re damn-well advanced now,” said the wag, as another shell exploded dangerously close to our vehicle.

If I’d thought I was safely out of harm’s way, now that I’d enlisted with the American Army, I was sadly mistaken. The North Koreans chased us all the way to the Kum River. At least now my American friends would be able to halt the onslaught, I thought, but the T-34s had no difficulty crossing the waterway because it was so low.

I could see that the two pitiful regiments I’d come to for salvation were going to be encircled in no time, so I collared one of the officers and asked for a lift back to their headquarters at Taejon. I got out just in time, and we soon had the news that the soldiers we’d left behind were having to fight their way out every step of the way.

As soon as I arrived, I asked to see the senior officer. I wanted to get the hell out of the Godforsaken country as quickly as possible, and I realised that I’d have to seek out the top brass and hope I could convince them of the urgent need to get me back to Japan, *toute suite*.

“General Dean’s two blocks up that way,” explained the officer who I’d sought out at the makeshift HQ.

He was indicating the part of the city from where we’d just come, which didn’t bode well, but there was nothing for it but to head back, and I cautiously made my way through the streets packed with refugees and South Korean soldiers heading in the other direction.

Eventually I spotted the general and I was shocked to discover that he was the same man I’d seen in Chonan, berating his men. He was running around all over the place, directing teams of men with bazookas. They appeared to be having more success than the unlucky officer I’d seen blown to pieces earlier that day and several of the T-34s were lying in pieces, but I still couldn’t believe my eyes. This was the man in charge of the division defending Taejon? What the hell was he doing risking his life in the field, when he should have been running things in safety back at base like a sensible commander?

I quickly decided there was no way I was going to get into another shooting match with tanks, so I resolved that I’d have to find another way of organising my travel arrangements. I’m glad I did, because a few hours later the North Koreans broke through and our gallant general was taken prisoner.⁴

As I raced back the way I’d come, it was clear that panic was gripping the remnants of the defending force. When I finally reached the centre of town there was even a road block set up to halt any would-be deserters. I remember running along one street to find myself surrounded by black soldiers, all fleeing in the same direction.

“Where are we going?” I asked one of my fellow deserters, as I joined the exodus.

“We?” asked my new companion in astonishment. “You must be lost - this is a black regiment.”

“Do you mind if I join you?” I asked.

“I suppose not. It looks like white folks can run away from the fight just as fast as black folks.”

It was then that I remembered the Americans still segregated their units.

Eventually I managed to get to an American position that still seemed to be maintaining some sort of order and I stood there, catching my breath, as I tried to decide what to do next. I was startled to see a herd of refugees shuffling towards us and I was just starting to breathe a sigh of relief at the appearance of the harmless crowd, when I saw them being shoved aside to reveal North Korean infantry sheltering amongst them.

The communist soldiers charged forward in a human wave and the Americans opened up with their mounted machine-guns. The noise was deafening, as the sound of the weapons echoed off the walls of the buildings, and the attackers and refugees were slaughtered where they stood. Some of the North Koreans still managed to get to the American lines, but they were mown down at point-blank range.

Hiding behind refugees wasn't the only rule of war broken with monotonous regularity. The communists thought nothing of dressing in civilian clothes or pretending to surrender, only to open fire on the unsuspecting Americans as they tried to take them in. The Campbells at Glencoe would have got on with the North Koreans like a house on fire.

After all I'd witnessed, I believe that I found myself in some sort of terrible trance. I left the American position, not really knowing where I was going, and I simply headed in what I hoped was a southerly direction. Whether I was planning on walking all the way to Pusan, I can't say. I'd had my first taste of a real war and it had sickened me to the core.

I was awoken from my daze by the sound of a horn and a screeching of tyres when a jeep nearly ran me over. The driver was forced to break hard and stopped just short of a burnt-out building.

“Why don't you watch where the hell you're going?” asked the driver, clearly concerned for my safety and wellbeing.

“Where are you headed, Corporal?” I asked, hoping I might have found my way out of the place.

“It's none of your damn business. Anyway, who are you - a journalist or something?”

“Yes, I'm with the London Times,” I said, deciding a little subterfuge was easier than explaining why I was really there. Besides, right then I wasn't sure I knew myself. “Could you kind fellows give me a lift?”

“Forget it, pal,” said the driver, getting ready to reverse his jeep back on to the road.

“Hey, hold on Jake. The only excuse we've got for heading south is Mike here,” said one of his passengers, pointing to a man with a wounded leg in the back of the jeep. “A God-damn officer is bound to wonder what we're doing and make us go back to the front. Maybe we can use this limey to help us get all the way to Pusan?”

I liked the sound of that and I took my cue before the driver had time to argue.

“I'd be much obliged, chaps,” I said, climbing into the rear of the jeep next to the unlucky Mike - who looked perfectly fit for duty if I was any judge. “Don't you worry - any

nonsense from the brass and I'll explain you were given orders to escort me out of harm's way."

I doubted very much whether I'd have been able to pull that one off, but it seemed to satisfy them, and in no time we were heading out of town.

"You chaps have had a hell of a time," I said, trying to make friends with my rescue party, but it almost backfired.

"You ain't gonna write about us in your paper, are you?" asked Jake, scowling.

"Good God, no," I said, realising my gaffe.

"I don't mind telling you what's going on," said the passenger who'd stuck up for me. "God's truth, we were willing to fight - even though we haven't got a damn clue what this cockamamie war is all about. But then we saw what these damn gooks do to our guys when they take them prisoner. Well, they can keep Korea for all I care."

"What had they done?" I asked.

"Tied their hands behind their backs with barbed wire, shot 'em in the head, and left 'em to rot on the roadside - that's what they done," explained Jake.

"They ain't takin' me prisoner," insisted Mike, clutching his leg. "They were startin' to flank us and I thought: I've had enough o' this shit."

Eloquently put, I thought, and I could see his point. The last thing these chaps wanted was to be cut off from the rest of their army - especially with their North Korean adversaries waiting in the wings to give them a warm welcome when they raised the white flag.

Miraculously we made it all the way to the Naktong River and what became known as the Pusan Perimeter. It was here that the Americans would either have to stop the communist advance or pull out of Korea altogether - there was simply nowhere else to go.

Fancy meeting you here

The Nakdong River created a natural obstacle, being almost half a mile wide in some places, and this was where General Walton ‘Bulldog’ Walker and his Eighth Army were going to make a stand. The problem was that the waterway was losing its defensive value because it was falling to its lowest summer level. Naturally such mundane matters as battlefield terrain wouldn’t have concerned me a jot under normal circumstances, but in this case Kim Il Sung and his Asian horde were preparing to mount one of their suicidal attacks - and I was in their way.

I heard the alarming news that the North Koreans were planning to work their way over the mountains and cut off the road south, so I was begging a lift back to Puson before things got out of hand.

Once I was safely back at the harbour, it was clear that the quiet confidence I’d sensed on my arrival was rapidly giving way to a new feeling of impending chaos. Replacements were disembarking down the gangplanks at the quayside, only to be greeted by the disturbing sight of casualties being loaded on board for the return trip.

The street markets were becoming overwhelmed by endless streams of refugees and military convoys. Enterprising prostitutes were plying their wares in front of the new arrivals and you could almost see the indecision on the faces of the younger men. No doubt the green virgins were tempted, after witnessing the results of battle being delivered home on their stretchers.

Aside from the fact that I was eager to get shot of the war-torn place, I wasn’t tempted. By the looks of them, the Korean lovelies would have been so riddled, you’d have needed a physician in attendance.

Before the eighteen-year-olds could take the plunge and become the next cases for the penicillin being unloaded at the dockside, a sergeant was bawling in their ears and offering them a cheery welcome to Korea.

“This ain’t no police action, no matter what Truman says. This is a God-damn war. Get that into your heads right now. You could get killed just like that,” he said, clicking his fingers and doing his own bit to raise morale.

“Sergeant, we were told we’d be getting a few months training,” piped up one of the braver souls.

“Training?” yelled the sergeant. “See those crates over there? They’re full of weapons. Open them up, grab your guns and get in line. The trucks will take you to the front. That’s your God-damn training, boy.”

It was then that I left the happy scene to seek out the hotel I’d vacated a couple of weeks before, pleased that I wasn’t one of the unfortunate pieces of cannon-fodder being unloaded on to the water-front. I headed for my refuge to place a call through to Biggins back in London, deciding that the sooner I could get out of the place the better. Unfortunately I needed the nod from the gormless idiot before I could arrange a passage back to Tokyo and a blessed flight home.

So imagine my alarm when, as I entered the foyer, I was greeted by the sight of the oaf himself standing before me.

“Fancy meeting you here,” said the clod, giving me a friendly wave.

You might think me a trifle uncharitable, but I’d been there before, remember. Whenever Mr. H Biggins decided to appear unannounced it usually spelt trouble, and the hairs rising on the back of my neck were telling me that here was more of the same.

“You’re a bit late, Biggins, if you’ve come to help me find out what the North Koreans are up to. They’ve already invaded the place if you haven’t heard.”

“I can see I’ve caught you at a bad time,” said the cheery buffoon, grinning inanely.

“Not at all,” I said, keen to get the conversation on the right track as quickly as possible. “I was about to call you. The blasted communists are right behind me and we need to get on the next ship or plane out of here. So if you wouldn’t mind popping along to arrange a couple of tickets, we can...”

“There’s no need,” he said, interrupting me. “Our assignment here isn’t finished, I’m afraid.”

“The hell it isn’t,” I said, demonstrating my usual enthusiasm for government work. “The PM wanted me to find out how dangerous the situation is in Korea. Well, you can tell him from me it’s *bloody* dangerous. The communists have invaded and they’re in the process of giving the Yanks a good hiding. In fact I’ll tell him myself. Now come on and let’s get those bloody tickets before every last one of us is pushed into the sea by these ruddy gooks.”

“Come and get a drink and calm down,” he said, leading me to the bar - but I pulled away.

“I don’t want to calm down, Biggins. Just tell me what the hell you’re doing here.”

“OK if that’s what you want. I was just trying to break the news to you gently. The PM has been asked by the Americans to send British forces to help them out, but before he commits himself he wants a report on how things are going on at the Pusan Perimeter.”

“Can’t he just ask the Yanks?” I cried in desperation, knowing what was coming next.

“He won’t have to. I’ve told him we’ll send our *own* report.”

“What...?” I began, but then I found myself at a loss for words.

“Yes, that’s right, Fletcher. We’re off to the front.”

Puffing on a corncob pipe

How I haven't killed the brainless nincompoop in all our years together, I'll never know. Perhaps it was the realisation that if I *did* throttle the life out of him, there would have been no one to arrange for yours truly to get safely back home. Whatever my reasoning, Biggins survived to see another dawn, and before I knew what was happening we were boarding a train and making our way back to the American defensive positions I'd only recently left behind.

We were decked out in American Army uniforms, but from somewhere Biggins had managed to get hold of insignia identifying us as British soldiers. As we were taken forward I was disconcerted to see GIs heading the other way without weapons. The American soldiers who accompanied us were complaining that they hadn't even had time to zero their rifles, and when we disembarked we were amazed to find ourselves greeted by General Walker himself.

"What the hell are you doing?" he screamed at the recruits who were filling their water bottles. "I want your asses forward now."

The men scuttled off and I was about to do the same when Walker suddenly spotted us.

"Who the hell are you two?" he yelled.

"We're British officers, sir. We are here as observers," explained Biggins, taken aback.

"Observers? What the hell do I need observers for? Tell your prime minister we're in a fighting war and we need troops. God-damn observers," said Walker, shaking his head as he walked away.

"Doesn't that answer your question, Biggins?" I asked. "The Yanks need help, so let's get back to Blighty and tell Attlee to send every man he can spare."

"We've got to see things for ourselves," he insisted annoyingly, and we didn't have to wait long.

We were escorted to a hill where some GIs were digging in, and I was relieved to find that things were relatively quiet. I looked around and everyone appeared fairly relaxed, but then a sergeant shattered the illusion.

"The North Koreans only attack at night. Our planes keep them pinned down in the day."

A cow started running across into no-man's-land and you could hear the tinkling of the bells hanging around its neck. The sergeant spun round, pointing his rifle at the sound, and for a moment I thought he was going to put a bullet into the beast's head. Seeing our confusion he began to explain.

"I can't stand those damn bells," he said. "The gooks use them to mask their movements up the hill. God-damn cowbells!"

And with that he spat a wad of the tobacco he'd been chewing at our feet, before wiping his face with the back of his sleeve.

Patient files of Korean porters trudged up the steep slope, their backs bent as they tried to support their A-frames laden with ammunition.

"I don't know what we'd have done without these litter bearers," opined our sergeant. "Some of the guys do nothing but complain about them, but I reckon they'll help us win this

God-damn war. Isn't that right, Soo-jin?" he cried out to the nearest porter, and he gave the poor Korean what he imagined was a playful kick up the arse.

Unfortunately the hapless ROK soldier was caught off-balance and crashed to the ground, dropping his precious cargo. The sergeant just laughed, but from the look of blind hatred on the Korean's face, I don't think he got the joke. Mind you, the fact that my American friend had just called the porter by a girl's name probably didn't help.

The cheery news about the night attacks that our sergeant had been kind enough to share with us was confirmed all too soon, as the sun set behind the hill to the west. The firing started almost immediately and I was careful to hunker down in our home-made trench, while the gallant Yanks held the fort. The roof of our ditch was covered in corrugated iron, and bullets began to ricochet off it alarmingly.

"What happens if you think you're going to be overrun?" asked Biggins, and I remember thinking he'd picked one hell of a time to ask.

"We phone back to HQ," explained the sergeant. "That's if the damn gooks haven't cut our lines. General Walker's got his fire brigades in reserve to plug the gap."

Apparently the general's strategy was to have elite forces positioned all along the Pusan Perimeter, ready to stop the North Koreans whenever they succeeded in breaking through the American lines. Not that I was in the mood for discussing the finer details of military strategy just then, what with bullets whizzing only a few feet above my precious head. I was just starting to inwardly curse Biggins for putting me in the line of fire once again, when he did something that was to save my skin, however unintentionally.

"Let's have a look at the situation," said the moron confidently, and to my astonishment he climbed out of the trench to see if he could spot the enemy.

You'd have thought an ex-sniper would have known better - and you'd be right. As a reward for his curiosity he was shot in the leg and he fell back into the trench, clutching his wound. I was just starting to think it served him right, when a medic clambered in and turned him over to reveal that the bullet had travelled up his body and come out of his back. It looked touch and go whether or not he was going to make it.

"This man will need surgery," exclaimed the medic, stating the blindingly obvious.

You can be sure I was on hand to volunteer as a stretcher bearer, and as we jolted along an endless track down the hill, Biggins was making a tremendous row - the ungrateful bastard. The important thing, of course, was that we were leaving the sound of battle well behind us - and not a moment too soon as far as I was concerned.

With mounting relief, I saw a helicopter arrive to whisk my wounded comrade to a medical unit and I insisted on tagging along. After we had landed we were directed to a tent where we were met by a blood-spattered surgeon. The ham-fisted croaker said he'd do the best he could, which didn't exactly inspire me with confidence, and it was at that point that a Holy Joe decided to put his confounded oar in and offered to read Biggins the last rites. Not exactly the sort of thing to perk you up, I'm sure you'll agree.

As it turned out, the sawbones was as good as his word and Biggins recovered sufficiently to be taken to Tokyo. A British hospital ship bore the unlucky Biggins to Japan, and you can be sure that his concerned colleague insisted on accompanying him.

I couldn't believe my luck. I'd escaped the war-torn country, and all I had to do was bide my time in the Land of the Rising Sun before I headed on home. Unfortunately there was a tall figure, puffing on a corncob pipe and waiting in the wings of the Japanese stage to spoil my plans.

Femme de chambre

Japan was like a breath of fresh air after my unpleasant sojourn in Korea. I might have had to forgo the wonderful charms of Ji-min, but I felt sure that Tokyo offered similar diversions. Happily I was soon proved right.

When we arrived at the hospital, Biggins was barely conscious. The quacks had pumped him full of drugs, so I couldn't exactly persuade him to make my travel arrangements. Apparently a sizeable portion of his intestines had vacated his body to see the light of day, but incredibly the doctors assured me he would make a full recovery.

I decided that in his weakened condition he would have little need for the wad of money taking up room in his wallet, so I liberated the pelf and booked a room in Tokyo's finest hotel. And very nice it was too.

You see, occupation by the Americans appeared to be making the Japanese as rich as Croesus. While the victorious folks back in Blighty were rationed and living in austerity, the defeated Japanese were having a high old time and driving around in new British cars which nobody back home could afford. A fine state of affairs, you'll allow.

As luck would have it, Biggins had enough money left over to furnish me with a new suit. But before donning my expensive attire, I stood under the rose in the shower for nearly an hour, determined to wash the dust of Korea off me for good.

Dinner (courtesy of Biggins, naturally) was served by an absolutely tip-top Japanese waitress, wearing a tight-fitting black number with a white starch-fronted apron. She was all smiles and nods and, armed with the little bit of Japanese I'd picked up during my time serving with the army of occupation, I soon had her chatting away between courses.

As I lit a well-earned cigar and took another sip of champagne (Biggins did carry an inordinate amount of cash around with him), I remember thinking - it's not a bad life. All of a sudden I couldn't see why I'd been so steamed up to get out of the country.

"When do you finish work?" I asked my pretty attendant by way of conversation. She gave me a friendly smile before answering.

"Not until the morning - I also work as a chambermaid," she replied, and she gave me a respectful nod.

"Well, in that case, would you happen to know where a chap might find some good beer and dancing on offer?" I asked.

I was worried that she might send me to some Tom and Jerry Shop to keep me on my best behaviour, but not a bit of it. She directed me to a lively beer hall, which was just the place for a war-weary soul looking for distractions to settle his fevered brow.

Breathable air had been replaced with the haze of pungent and acrid cigar smoke, and the noise of the troops who packed the establishment was enough to make your ears bleed. A small band played in the corner, but they might as well have been miming because you couldn't hear a blind note they were playing.

Of much more interest were the pretty girls in low cut blouses and short flared skirts, serving beer to the thirsty soldiers as quickly as their slim and shapely legs would carry them. Cameramen were wandering from table to table and taking pictures of the servicemen

with their eager waitresses, urging the naïve squaddies to pay a small fortune for the blurry snaps.

“You want dance?” asked a tasty little number in her best English, fluttering her eyelashes at me.

“What exactly would we be dancing to?” I asked, pointing to the soundless five-piece orchestra.

“You speak Japanese?” she asked, clearly taken aback.

“A little,” I explained. “Anyway, why don’t we forget the dancing and try something more interesting,” I suggested, and I grabbed her tightly round the waist before planting a kiss on her lips.

“Hey, slow down Yankee boy,” she squealed, but I was gratified to see that she was still smiling, and a drunken hand came up and rested on my chest.

“I’m not American,” I explained, “I’m English.”

“It’s all the same to me, as long as you can show a nice Japanese girl a good time.”

“If you’re after a good time, you’ll find we’re not the same at all. An English gentleman will beat a Yank hands down every time,” I assured her confidently.

“You have plenty cash to show girl a good time?” she asked, reverting to one of her stock English phrases.

“Naturally,” I said, pulling out the thick wad of lucre that must have represented Biggins’ life savings.

I was thrilled to see her eyes light up and in no time we were heading back to my hotel. We stumbled into the dark room and I scrambled for the light switch with my right hand while my left deftly grabbed handfuls of pert Japanese buttock. As the room became bathed in the soft tones of the bedside lamp, my giggling waitress let out a scream. I quickly turned to see what had been the cause of her sudden alarm.

I’m pleased to say that she hadn’t been startled by some waiting assassin, but by the sight of my charming *femme de chambre* from earlier in the evening, lying naked in my bed and patiently awaiting the return of your correspondent. I freely admit I was stuck for words for those first few moments, as I wondered what comprised the training regimen of female Japanese members of staff serving at table.

You might be forgiven for thinking that such an awkward situation threatened to put an end to the evening’s proceedings, but I’m glad to say that I possessed sufficient charm, *and cash*, to facilitate a compromise. I persuaded both of my new companions to stay on for the entire evening - and what a time was had by one and all. I felt like the Baptes of Cotytto.

Do you know, I do believe that Tokyo might be my favourite city in the world. As I sit here in my twilight years with a simple smile on my face, it does hold such fond memories.

Rest and recuperation

What should have been one of the most idyllic nights of my life was rather spoilt when, early the next morning, I was informed that someone was waiting in the lobby to see me. Having provided their own unique brand of waitress service, my friendly duo had wisely disappeared into the night before they met the wrath of the hotel manager – the little spoilsport. I was secretly relieved that I wasn't going to have to prove my worth in any sort of morning mischief because I was in a rather weakened condition, as you will no doubt appreciate.

So I left whoever had decided to intrude on my well-earned convalescence kicking their heels while I showered, shaved and completed all the other necessities that are a prerequisite if a gentleman is to face the stresses and strains of a new day. My visitor was in a foul mood when I finally ambled down the stairs to greet him - after I'd taken a leisurely breakfast in my room. First things first I always say.

"Where have you been, Fletcher?" yelled the tall, grey-haired figure – and he was looking fit to burst.

"Who the devil are you?" I asked none too tactfully.

Mind you, I was sure it was no reason for my intruder to start yelling at me as if I was a dog who'd just relieved himself on the best Parker Knoll.

"I am Parkhurst, Deputy Assistant Secretary to the British ambassador," he said haughtily, as if he were the King of Yvetot.

"I'm very pleased for you," I said, never one to be overawed by self-important office wallahs.

"Well, of all the impertinent..." he began, and he went so red in the face he looked in danger of having a coronary.

"Look," I said, just as candidly, "I don't care if you're the ambassador himself. I've just come back from a war zone on a mission for the prime minister and I'm in Tokyo for complete rest and recuperation. So if you'll excuse me."

And with that I got up to leave.

"At His Majesty's expense, no doubt," he replied, stopping me before I'd reached the door.

"What do you mean by that, confound you?" I asked, momentarily at a loss.

"According to Mr. Biggins, his mission was incomplete when he was abandoned in a hospital by his fellow operative. And what's more, the thieving cad had the gall to relieve his sick friend of his expedition funds. He told me of your fondness for the high-life, so locating you presented little difficulty."

He waved a hand to indicate the opulent luxury of the hotel foyer. The shock of his revelation must have shown on my face, and he couldn't hide his satisfaction at my obvious discomfort.

"I see I have your attention, Captain Fletcher. Loathed as I am to drag you from your sabbatical," said the wag, "I'm afraid I have to inform you that I'm here to deliver your latest orders from no less a person than the prime minister himself."

“I do hope you will forgive my bad manners, Mr. Parkhurst. I must be a little out of sorts, having just returned from the heat of battle.”

He still had a face like thunder, but he'd calmed down sufficiently to insist we adjourn to my room so that we could discuss matters in private. I tried to dissuade him, knowing that the maid would not have had an opportunity to complete her duties, but he wouldn't be moved. He was right behind me as we passed through the door, and he immediately noticed the starched apron suspended from the bedpost and the crumpled sheets in a rather desperate condition.

“I'm terribly sorry to interrupt your 'rest and recuperation', Captain Fletcher,” he said, eyeing all the carnage wrought by the previous night's activities.

I hastily attempted to put things in order and we settled in the two comfortable armchairs in the corner of the room.

“You clearly enjoy living well - especially when someone else is paying the bill,” he added, taking a look around at the well-appointed surroundings.

“I thought it advisable to be on hand in case Mr. Biggins needed me, and I'm afraid this was all I could find,” I said, waving a hand dismissively at the king-size bed.

“Quite,” he said, sounding unconvinced. “Be that as it may, we have rather more pressing business to discuss.”

I sat back, waiting to see what terrible duty was about to land on my poor shoulders yet again. I stared at Parkhurst while he recovered some papers from the ever-present briefcase these government lackeys always carry with them. He reminded me of Anthony Eden, our future leader, who was going to be another in a long line of individuals determined to put me in harm's way.

“As you are now aware, the situation in Korea has deteriorated quite markedly,” said the master of understatement. “Your initial assignment, vis-à-vis a direct assessment of American success in the Korean theatre of operations, is now redundant.”

Why these government bods can't get to the point without boring everybody to death is beyond me. Eventually he explained why he'd been sent to locate me, and I soon found myself wishing I'd taken my amiable waitresses and booked into a back street lodging where HMG could never have found me. As it was, I was forced to listen to the pencil pusher drone on.

“The prime minister has decided to honour his United Nations commitments and send in British troops – although only a token force at this juncture. However, at present this is not the PM's main concern. There is another issue which he would like addressed, specifically with regard to the rumours that are coming out of Washington.”

“What rumours are those?” I asked, trying to hurry things along.

“It appears that the new commander-in-chief is planning an amphibious landing assault on North Korea's coastline in an effort to shorten the war. Apparently he is acting against the advice of his senior officers.”

“Well, that's their problem, isn't it?” I said, unable to see what all the fuss was about. But Parkhurst just gave me another one of his stern looks.

“It will be the problem of the entire West if MacArthur gets his way and fails,” he said, putting me in my place.

“But MacArthur’s one of the world’s finest strategists, isn’t he? Surely he wouldn’t do anything that didn’t make sound military sense?” I insisted.

“The trouble is that MacArthur is a law unto himself. HMG is concerned that Truman has no control over him. The president may well be too anxious to avoid confronting the general and his supporters. The American Army could face a military disaster on a scale it hasn’t experienced since Pearl Harbour.”

“Well, what can we do about it? The Yanks aren’t exactly keen to take advice from us at the best of times.”

“Quite correct, Captain, but at the very least the prime minister wishes to be informed about current American thinking. To that end, he has arranged for you to attend the strategy meeting at the Dai Ichi.”

“The Dai Whaty?” I asked, completely confused.

“Dai Ichi was an insurance building in a former life and is now the residence of the general. The place is crammed with members of his staff. But why he needs them God only knows, since he makes every decision himself.”

“But why does the PM want *me* to go there? Surely there are people at the embassy far better suited to the task.”

“I’m sure you’re correct,” said the prig infuriatingly. “However, the PM did not want to make a formal request for a British representative at the talks, and he felt that a junior officer like yourself might fit the bill. MacArthur is far more likely to accept the presence of a military man, no matter how inexperienced.”

Parkhurst sniffed and looked down his nose at me. My initial dislike of the embassy flunky was growing with every minute I spent in his foul company, and I looked for a suitable riposte to put him in his place.

“Well, I’m sure the PM knows what he’s doing. It makes much more sense to send an officer of His Majesty’s Forces, rather than some office boy who doesn’t know his arse from his elbow.”

As I showed him to the door, it was a pleasure to see the veins in his head threaten to burst and discharge their contents.

Pull the plug and the fan will stop

The very next day I was delivered to the inner sanctum where MacArthur and his generals were to decide if an amphibious landing was on the cards. I found myself on the sixth floor of the insurance office-cum-palace, endeavouring to melt into the background while the man himself argued his case in front of America's foremost commanders in the Far East. Stratemeyer was there with Radford, Collins and Sherman. There was also Shepherd, the Fleet Marine Commander, and Struble and Doyle from the US Navy were in attendance.

"As you know, gentlemen, I propose that we land at Inchon and shorten the war at a stroke," said MacArthur, stating his intentions with his usual self-confidence.

"To mount an amphibious landing we'll have to withdraw the Marine Brigade from Pusan," warned Collins.

"The Pusan Perimeter will hold," insisted MacArthur flatly.

"If you feel a landing is the answer, General, then why not choose Kunsan," suggested Sherman, who thought it offered a far safer prospect.

"Kunsan is so close to the besieged Pusan Perimeter that to make a landing there would be meaningless," said MacArthur dismissively.

"What do you hope to achieve by such a landing?" asked Rear-Admiral Doyle tactfully.

"It will be like an electric fan," explained MacArthur. "You go to the wall and pull the plug out and the fan will stop. When we get well ashore at Inchon, the North Koreans will have no choice but to pull out or surrender."

"But Inchon has a thirty-two foot tidal range – one of the greatest in the world," protested the rear-admiral. "There are only three possible dates when the tides will be high enough for our big landing to get inshore. Our forces will have three hours at most before the coast becomes a quagmire of mud."

"There's a mighty fierce current on the approach channel," said Admiral Struble, wading in. "Even before we think of assaulting Inchon, we'll have to take the island of Wolmi-do. We'll be showing our hand at least ten hours before the main landing force goes ashore. We'll lose any chance of tactical surprise at the seawall."

General Collins, or 'Lightning Joe' as he was known to his men, chose that moment to state his own reservations.

"We won't have enough hardware to get all our equipment ashore, Douglas. Besides, look at these hills," he said, indicating the map in the corner of the room. "They're as steep as hell and overlooking the beachhead. The enemy will be able to pour devastating fire right down on top of us. To make matters worse, because of the damn tides we'll have to land in the evening, leaving us only a couple of hours of daylight to secure a perimeter."

He was shaking his head as if the more he gave voice to his concerns, the more he thought the whole idea was crazy. He took the cigar from his mouth and pointed it at MacArthur as if to emphasise his last point.

"It's even the typhoon season, for Christ's sake!"

MacArthur just stood there, listening to their arguments without showing any emotion as he puffed away on his corncob pipe.

“What do you think, Captain Fletcher?” he asked, surprising everyone in the room, not least the quaking figure skulking in the background.

The heads of everyone in the room turned to see who the general was addressing. As I looked at their faces I could almost read their thoughts. What was this young English officer doing there? A sentiment I could well have sympathised with just then. Knowing nothing about naval logistics, I searched for inspiration as I returned the enquiring stare of the tall, imposing figure filling the room with smoke.

“Well, sir, if anyone can pull off such a formidable task, you can,” I said, hoping that flattery would save me from any questions about tide tables.

MacArthur continued to suck on his blasted pipe as he gazed at the wall behind me, apparently lost in thought. The generals and admirals were giving me disapproving looks, but they turned away when MacArthur finally spoke.

“We must succeed, gentlemen. The very arguments you have made as to the impracticalities involved will tend to ensure the element of surprise - and thus success. The enemy commander will reason that no one would be so brash as to make such an attempt. I can almost hear the second hand of destiny. We must act now or we will die.”

It was then that MacArthur’s voice fell away to a whisper.

“We shall land at Inchon and I shall crush them.”

After all the reasoned arguments I’d heard from men who clearly knew their business, I couldn’t help thinking that MacArthur had lost his marbles. It was then, as the supreme commander returned to his chair, that Doyle stood up - and I swear it looked as if he was about to cry.

“General, the navy will get you to Inchon,” he declared emotionally.

Whether or not my ill-advised sycophancy had gone to MacArthur’s head, I’ve never been sure. I believe his mind was already made up, and although Shepherd and Sherman made one last attempt to persuade him to abandon the idea, he continued to make his plans.

Apparently the chiefs-of-staff back in Washington insisted on getting a written sanction from the president for the operation - not something they usually did. It just highlighted the fact that they weren’t eager to be saddled with the responsibility for the disaster when it all went tits up.

But do you know what was the most incredible thing about the whole saga? It was that the North Koreans never got wind of the plans. Over the next few weeks I heard everyone from generals right on down to the army grave diggers discussing the forthcoming assault. The intelligence gathering of the North Koreans must have been as hopeless as our own because, in spite of being one of the worst-kept secrets of the war, miraculously not *one* word leaked to Pyongyang.

Still, I’d done my part and I could forget all about it - or so I thought. Biggins had recovered sufficiently for me to pay him a visit, and he was sitting up in bed eating fruit.

“Do you enjoy getting shot?” I yelled through the open door.

“What the...” he cried, nearly spitting pips all over his Times crossword.

“Take it easy, Biggins, don’t let me spoil your banquet. Besides, you ought to be used to bullet wounds by now,” I said, worried that my attempt to surprise him might have backfired and finished him off for good.

“That’s easy for you to say. This was a lot worse than Berlin. The doctors say I’ll be laid up for a few weeks this time,” he explained.

“Do you want me to stay in Tokyo until you’re ready to head on home?” I asked, remembering the nocturnal entertainment provided by my brace of waitresses from the other evening.

“I’m not going back to Britain and neither are you,” said Biggins, spoiling my good mood.

“Why on earth not? There’s nothing more we can do here. The Yanks aren’t going anywhere and MacArthur thinks he’s back in Iwo Jima. Attlee is right - the general’s a law unto himself. He’s dead set on attacking Inchon.”

“The PM has been informed about the American plans. He’s already authorised one of our frigates to land a raiding party at Kunson as a deception.”

“Well, good luck to one and all. They hardly need our help, surely,” I said, suddenly finding myself wishing Biggins’ recovery hadn’t been quite so speedy.

“There’s not much I can do, more’s the pity,” he said, God help him.

“Well, that’s that then,” I said, turning to leave before I was roped into another perilous assignment - but I was too late.

“Whereas *you’re* fit and well. It just so happens that the PM would like a British observer to report back on the landing at Inchon, and as luck would have it MacArthur’s agreed - provided *you’re* the one who tags along. You must have made quite an impression on him. He seems to have taken a shine to you.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Me ... go to Inchon? You can’t be serious,” I cried, my heart pounding at such a pace, I felt like collapsing on the vacant hospital bed next to Biggins and screaming for the nurse.

“It’ll be a fascinating experience. Just imagine – you’ll be seeing first-hand what a great general like MacArthur can do,” said the blithering fool.

“I’ve already seen him at work, Biggins. He thinks he knows better than everybody else and he can beat the North Koreans single-handed. Put that in your report to the PM and let’s go home,” I said, appealing to his sense of reason.

Of course he hadn’t any, as his next words confirmed.

“It’ll be fun, Fletcher - a nice little cruise, a quick swipe at the communists, and then home for tea and buns.”

Right up the middle

I was faced with the fact that I had no choice in the matter. My 'nice little cruise' began as I boarded one of the two hundred and sixty ships which left Yokohama in September. They were old World War Two vessels which had been transferred to the Japanese merchant service and were now recalled for the task at hand, together with their Japanese crew. Consequently the rotten sieve stank of fish, which did nothing to ease the queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach as we headed out into the open sea.

We were crammed in like sardines on the rusty barges, without a blessed creature comfort to make our voyage a pleasant one. To make matters worse, Typhoon Kezia was threatening to smash us to pieces and, as we were thrown about by ferocious winds, I was violently sick all over the deck. Not that anyone noticed because most of the Yanks were busy decorating the ship with the contents of their stomachs too.

When there was finally nothing left for my poor insides to expel into the void, I joined a couple of Marines who were playing cards below decks. I needed something to take my mind from the imminent danger waiting to greet me, so I tried to enter into the spirit of the game. But blow me if a strap holding a tank in place didn't snap, and the steel monstrosity nearly crushed us to death before we'd even reached the battlefield.

What was the supreme commander doing all this time, I hear you ask? Well, he'd been nicely tucked away in his cabin on the Mount McKinley throughout the entire voyage, and it was only when we clambered down into the landing craft, while the thunderous noise of the naval bombardment sounded all around us, that he finally poked his nose out for his first sniff of the sea air. He spotted me across the water from the bridge of his ship and gave me a cheery wave, blast him. I could've happily punched him right in the middle of his bloody sunglasses and made him choke on his pipe.

We landed on the island of Wolmi-do and I could have almost wept with relief. We swept ashore as easy as you like, greeted only by a pathetic little roadblock on the causeway, which two Marine tanks smashed through as if it wasn't there. The entire position was secured in less than an hour, save for a handful of defenders who declined our kind invitation to surrender. So, to save time, our bulldozers simply buried them in the caves where they'd taken refuge.

I soon learned that the confidence I'd felt had been a trifle optimistic, when the tide swept back to reveal miles of dull, flat mud between the invasion fleet and the shore. We were effectively cut off, and I found myself silently willing the enemy to stay away. Some of the Marines wanted to continue their advance, the bloodthirsty fools, but luckily wiser heads prevailed and they were refused permission. They contented themselves by firing mortars at anything that moved.

As soon as the tide was in, a few boats arrived to drop off more equipment. I made the mistake of hitching a ride back to the invasion fleet, explaining that, as an observer, I'd seen enough. I say 'mistake' because the boat took me to the Mount McKinley, and who should seek me out before my feet had touched the deck, but the supreme commander himself.

“You’re just in time, Captain. You nearly missed all the fun. Now you’ll be able to tell Mr. Attlee how the US Army deals with these communists. Hey, you men,” cried MacArthur to a bunch of Marines boarding a landing craft. “Make room for a gentleman from the RAF.”

Before I could protest against this horrible turn of events, I was being jostled into the boat and heading towards the beaches at Inchon. Mind you, the smoke was so thick from the recent bombardment dished out by the American Navy, we could have been anywhere.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” I asked a sullen chap seated next to me.

“How the hell should I know? Two weeks ago I was driving a bus in New York,” he replied.

I’d heard stories about the D-Day landings, of course, when men were killed as soon as the doors to their landing crafts opened. So I made sure I was nicely tucked away at the rear of the boat, and fortunately the only fighting I could hear was some distance away. You could hardly see in front of your face, what with the smoke and drizzle, and we struggled ashore with our wet clothes weighing us down.

I looked back to see some larger craft spewing out a stream of trucks, tanks and all manner of equipment before the light began to fade. For the second time in so many days, I found myself waiting apprehensively for a counter-attack that never came. The landing had been a success with just twenty killed among a total of less than two hundred casualties. I say ‘just’, of course, with the arrogance of someone who wasn’t amongst them.

Amazingly, considering the battering the Yanks had dished out over the previous two days and nights, there were a number of civilians still alive. They shambled about with blank expressions on their faces and whenever they spotted one of us in uniform, they would put their hands up in a gesture of surrender and say: “Sank you.”

My time at Inchon has become something of a blur over time. I remember that the next morning the Marines were in a hell of a hurry to get going and push on east to Seoul. I’d been handed a rifle and a couple of grenades, in spite of my protestations that I was there merely as an observer, but I was careful to make sure that any fighting was well ahead of me before I continued forward.

I’m pleased to say that the Americans took the large airfield at Kimpo and the entire south bank of the Han River without me witnessing so much as a scuffle. It’s just a matter of looking like you’re marching forward, while being careful you don’t make any significant progress until the party’s over.

I have to say that the American Marines were cut from the same cloth as our home-grown variety. Military tactics and outflanking the enemy seemed to be an alien concept to the bloodthirsty crew. Their motto said it all: ‘Hey diddle diddle, right up the middle.’

Anyway, while the brave warriors were losing men left, right and centre in their eagerness to take Seoul by the supreme commander’s deadline, your correspondent was in Yongdungpo with a bunch of similar-minded GIs occupying a brewery. As I sat there, taking my fill of the local tippie with my new American friends, we watched a Corsair fly overhead. Even in my drunken stupor, I was shocked when it was hit and flew into the

ground. Well, I thought, I may be in the RAF, but there's a lot to be said for staying on the ground at times like this.

The buildings around me started to spin, and I began to wonder if it might be advisable to close the bar. My thoughts were interrupted when we were suddenly surrounded by a swarm of Korean children. One of them started tugging on my leg, and I was just about to tell him to bugger off, when he began to shout:

"North Korean, North Korean," and he pointed to a pile of rubble at the other end of the courtyard.

It was then that I remembered the grenades hanging from my shirt. Trying to focus through a drunken haze, I took one, pulled the pin, and lobbed it in the direction the little waifs had indicated. There was a satisfying explosion and the bodies of two communist soldiers flew up into the air and landed about twenty feet away. I returned to my bottle of indifferent Korean beer and took another healthy sip.

"This war lark's a piece of cake," I slurred.

They died of lead poisoning

Alcohol-fuelled bravado aside, there were still plenty of hairy and downright strange moments ahead of me. Not long after my unofficial tour of the brewery, a shell burst overhead and I dived into the nearest foxhole, only to be shoved out by an American soldier.

“This hole is occupied, you damn limey!” screamed the friendly soul, before he instructed me to perform an act on myself which I’m sure is physically impossible.

As I scurried away in search of another place to hide, I cursed him all the way. Mind you, I had the satisfaction a few days later of learning that he’d blown his stupid fat head off while cleaning his pistol. It is at times like that I could almost believe there *is* a God.

After my scare I followed three other sensible chaps to a cave, looking for a safe place to rest and sleep off the after-effects of the Korean beer - a foul brew which I soon realised was probably as dangerous as the damn communists. As it happened, there were two North Korean stragglers who’d had the same idea and our corporal told his men to escort the new prisoners to the rear. We’d only just begun to settle down for our well-earned rest, when my fellow braves returned unexpectedly *sans* Koreans.

“Prisoners are too much of a bother right now,” explained our comrade.

“What happened to them?” asked the corporal naively.

“They died of lead poisoning,” said the comedian, tapping his sidearm.

I don’t know what shocked me more – the fact that they’d dispatched the unlucky communists so brutally, or their total indifference. I’ve said it before – war’s an odd thing and it does strange things to people. For all I knew, my new executioner-friend may well have been a bus driver like his fellow countryman I’d met the day before, usually in the habit of helping old ladies across the road. Now here he was in Korea, killing unarmed men in cold blood as calmly as if he was dropping off a fare.

Yet this was merely a trifle compared to the carnage the army was meting out to Seoul at the behest of their commanders in the name of liberation. It seemed to me at the time that all the civilian casualties and wholesale destruction could have been avoided simply by enveloping the city, rather than mounting an all-out assault.

The slightest resistance was met with a deluge of destruction which virtually blotted out the whole area. Mind you, I wasn’t complaining. As you know, I’m the last one to take any chances where my personal safety is concerned, and if the Yanks thought that bombs and shells should be employed to save their men’s lives, who was I to disagree?

When we eventually entered Seoul I couldn’t believe I was in the same city I’d visited only a few short months before. There was barely a building that wasn’t damaged in one way or another and dead civilians littered nearly every street we walked along. I had one particularly harrowing experience when we entered a jail compound, only to find the place strewn with headless bodies, together with the sword that had obviously been used to perform the amateur surgery.

I turned away from the dantesque nightmare and joined a group of American soldiers clustered around a trench. My attempt to avoid the sight of the recent decapitations was now replaced with the ghastly picture of a ditch filled to the brim with dead Koreans. There must

have been hundreds of the poor wretches in that Barathrum of a hole, and not just men and women, but children too - no one had been spared. I was at a loss to know what was worse, the vision of the brutal carnage itself, or the stench that wafted up from the dreadful scene.

“That’s the way these people treat each other,” said the officer next to me, summing things up nicely before spitting on the ground.

On the 25th it was announced that Seoul had been liberated, just as MacArthur had planned, but you can take it from me that I still heard Marines fighting outside the government building a couple of days later. I wandered south to the banks of the Han River and saw a huge body of men working feverishly to construct a pontoon bridge, similar to the one I’d crossed months before.

“Aren’t you a little late building this now?” I asked a lieutenant by way of conversation.

“It’s not for us – this is for our beloved supreme commander so he can land at Kimpo and be chauffeured into Seoul without getting his feet wet,” he said, clearly not happy with the job he’d been given.

“Why the hell is MacArthur coming to Seoul?” I asked. “The fighting is all over.”

“You hit the nail on the head there, buddy. The general’s got to have his little ceremony in front of his photographers – just so he can rub his victory in the noses of all those who said it couldn’t be done.”

“Well, he did it, didn’t he?” I said, just for devilment.

“Yeah, with American blood. And do you know what? When our guys put up the Stars and Stripes, they were ordered to take it down and replace it with that blue shit,” he said, pointing to a small United Nations flag resting on the front of a jeep.

I was to remain in Seoul for the next few days, but I missed MacArthur’s speech about a job well done, I’m pleased to say. He flew home to Tokyo, flushed with a sense of achievement and confident that he had fulfilled his destiny. The war was won and the Americans had been victorious yet again. All that was left was to finish off the few communists that remained and everybody would be home for Christmas.

There was only one little problem with all this optimistic talk of a quick end to the war. The Chinese dragon was watching and waiting in the wings, sharpening its claws.

Home for Christmas

I believe that if we'd called it a day right then and been satisfied that South Korea had returned to its rightful owner (well, Syngman Rhee), then MacArthur would have been correct and we *would* have been home for turkey and stuffing. Moreover, the commander could have ended his career the way he'd have wanted - with the taste of victory on his lips.

Of course the leaders of the West, and MacArthur in particular, had other ideas. You see, the problem was that although Kim Il Sung and his communist army had been beaten, they hadn't been punished. If the North Koreans were simply allowed to retreat back to the 38th Parallel, then all that effort and sacrifice would have seemed for nothing.

By now the Soviets were back on the Security Council at the United Nations, sticking their oar in and calling for America and her allies to pull out. They didn't even recognise the conflict as a war because, they said, it was between two parts of the same country.

Needless to say MacArthur didn't have time for such political niceties and he explained that his aim was not just to repel Kim Il Sung, but to destroy his army. When pressed, he admitted that to do so would more than likely involve the occupation of North Korea.

I knew nothing about all this at the time, of course, and I wouldn't have cared anyway. All that mattered to me was getting out of the stricken country for good. If I'd only known, things were about to get a whole lot worse.

I was playing poker with a couple of eighteen-year-old Marines who should have known better, and I was counting my winnings and wondering if I had enough to charter a flight back to London, when a sergeant in a jeep suddenly pulled up.

"Are you Captain Fletcher?" he asked, a cigarette smouldering in his mouth.

"Yes, Sergeant," I replied a little nervously, unsure as to what he wanted.

"You're needed back at the British consulate," he explained, ash falling down his shirt front.

"Why?"

"How the hell should I know, buddy, I'm just the God-damn messenger. Nobody tells me nothing."

So I climbed into the jeep and was nearly thrown clear when my driver spun it around and headed off. Once I reached the consulate (which was remarkably intact, considering the pounding the Yanks had given the place) I was led up the stairs to a small office - and who should be sitting there but Mr. Henry Biggins.

"Shouldn't you be in hospital?" I asked, shocked to see the idiot upright.

"I discharged myself and came here to see you," he said, as if that explained everything.

"I'm very touched by your concern for my wellbeing but I'm fine, thank you very much, and I'll be even better when we sort out our passage home."

"That's not why I'm here."

"Biggins, I wish you'd spit it out," I said, not in the mood for any cryptic exchanges.

"I got you here to receive a telephone call," he explained, pointing to the phone on the desk.

“Well, you can tell whoever’s stupid enough to call me in the middle of a war to bugger off,” I said angrily.

Just then the phone rang and Biggins looked at me as if to say: “Tell him yourself”. So I grabbed the receiver and yelled down the mouthpiece.

“Yes, who the hell is this?”

When I recognised the voice at the other end of the line, I swear I stood to attention without even realising it. Biggins was sitting back, smirking like a man who was holding four aces.

“Yes ... yes, sir, it *is* Captain Fletcher. Forgive me...” I began, but the prime minister stopped me dead.

“We haven’t time for that, Captain. I need to speak to you on a rather urgent matter.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, inwardly cursing Biggins.

I was squirming at the thought of my terrible blunder, but Attlee clearly had more important things on his mind.

“There are rumours that the Americans might invade North Korea. If that is true, I may be forced to commit troops to this new endeavour.”

“Yes, sir, how can I help?” I asked, toadying for all I was worth.

“I need to know MacArthur’s frame of mind from an impartial observer. I can’t ask our American friends for a considered appraisal because they are somewhat in awe of the general. What is your opinion of him, Captain Fletcher?”

“He’s certainly very confident of success and he strikes me as the sort of man who doesn’t do anything by halves,” I said tactfully.

“That is my assessment also. Do you think he could lead a United Nations force to victory?” asked Attlee.

I thought carefully before I answered, unsure whether I should voice my own misgivings or not. Oh, what the hell, I thought, he’d asked me, so I told him straight out.

“Yes, sir, I think he’s got the gooks ... er ... the North Koreans on the run, but what if anybody else gets involved?” I asked.

“Like who, Captain?”

“Well, Korea is awfully close to China, sir. How would we like it if the Chinese came marching up to Calais?” I asked, hoping I hadn’t spoken out of line, but I heard him laugh and I smiled with relief - which had the added benefit of wiping the self-satisfied grin off Biggins’ face.

“I see your point, Captain. Our American allies feel that it is the Russians we must be wary of, but the Soviets are making no moves to help the North Koreans at the moment, apart from providing military equipment, of course. Thank you for your help, Captain Fletcher. Your slant on the situation has been most valuable.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, feeling very happy with myself, but then he dropped his terrible bombshell.

“This is a very fluid situation, Captain. I need a good intelligence man in the field to keep me informed of new developments.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Biggins is fully recovered. I am sure...”

“Yes, Mr. Biggins is more than up to the task and it speaks highly of your sense of loyalty that you should think of your friend instead of seeking out this important opportunity for yourself. Nevertheless, it is *you* who has proven himself more than capable on numerous occasions. Therefore I have arranged for you to join the Gloucester Regiment.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, trying not to let the words stick in my throat.

The phone went dead, and it was impossible to bring it back to life because I’d pulled it from the wall and thrown it clear across the room.

Leave without saying goodbye

As usual I was turning the air blue with my oaths and cursing Attlee and Biggins and anyone else I could think of for my extended stay in Korea. I consoled myself with the thought that it was only September and the Gloucesters weren't due to arrive in the country until the following month. With any luck, I thought, the whole thing could be over by the time my ridiculous assignment was underway.

It looked as though I was right, for once, when the South Koreans crossed the 38th Parallel into North Korea before the end of the month. A couple of weeks later the Americans were doing the same and they encountered stiff resistance - but this time I wasn't with them, I'm happy to say. To my immense relief the North Koreans eventually fled in full retreat and it looked as if the war was finally over.

That's not to say the Yanks weren't having their fair share of casualties, including one chap who pulled the pin on a grenade as a joke, before promptly dropping it and blowing himself into a million pieces.

There were other cock-ups, of course, some of which were rather less tragic - and one incident I found particularly amusing. The hapless Marines landing at Wonsan had been so delayed by mines that by the time they came ashore, not only had the South Koreans beaten them to it but so had Bob Hope, who was putting on a concert for the troops. Still, I rather doubt they missed much.

Naturally I had my own entertainment planned back in Seoul. The war-torn capital was gradually returning to some kind of normality and although it might not have been in Tokyo's league, I felt sure I'd be able to find a young Korean lady willing to show her appreciation to a member of the army of liberation.

I headed to one of the few dens sufficiently stocked to cater for a mass of thirsty troops, and before I'd even made it to the bar I was tapped on the shoulder by a Korean beauty.

"Do you always leave without saying goodbye?"

Now *there* was a voice I wouldn't forget in a hurry. It belonged to Lee Ji-min, who had been showing me how hospitable the country could be before we'd been so rudely interrupted.

"My God, Ji-min, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"I don't know what that means," she said in her usual deadpan way.

"It means I've missed you."

"But why did you leave me?" she asked, and I swear her beautiful green eyes were threatening to fill with tears.

"I didn't have much choice in the matter. I'm afraid the North Koreans rather got between us," I explained, hoping she'd believe my story - which was sort of true, in a way.

"Then you are not displeased with me?" she asked timidly, looking at the ground.

"Of course not, you silly thing," I said, as I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a kiss.

She wiped a tear from her eye and started giggling, which was something I'd never seen her do before, and somehow it was getting me all hot under the collar. I decided to waste no time.

"Say, Ji-min, is there somewhere we can be together and catch up on old times?" I asked, deciding it was no time to stand on ceremony.

"My family fled when the communists came, but our home is undamaged. Why don't we go there?"

So we did - and I had all sorts of questions lurking at the back of my mind. Not least of which was how she had ended up in Seoul? And more to the point - was our meeting just a coincidence? But I've always been the sort to take one thing at a time. You see, curiosity about her recent history wasn't my highest priority just then.

When we finally arrived at the Lee family estate, it was heart-warming to see that she was of the same mind, and we got down to the first order of business in no time. And what a business it was. She entered into the spirit of the thing with an enthusiasm I couldn't help but admire. Many of my brother officers claimed they found the Koreans to be a dour and surly bunch, but I'm here to tell you that Ji-min's idea of entertainment knocked the socks off an English tea party any day.

Unfortunately my warm welcome back to Korea wasn't to last.

Chinese voices

As wonderful as my reunion with Ji-min was, I couldn't stop thinking about the prospect of having to spend time with the Gloucestershire Regiment – not least because it was odds on it wasn't on its way to Korea for a sightseeing tour. My only hope was that MacArthur and his Eighth Army would polish off the North Koreans well before the British Regiment set foot on dry land.

Indeed, the Yanks seemed to be doing their best to answer my prayers and they were driving north in their rush to victory. I even remember witnessing the astonishing sight of an American officer riding his jeep to the front, sitting on a huge cowboy saddle.

I decided that all I had to do was lie low and wait for the whole shooting match to die down. One crumb of comfort I clung on to was the fact that I'd not been told how I was to meet up with my British Regiment. Besides, they hadn't even landed in Pusan. I calculated that it would take them *days* to get up to Seoul, and if I took my sweet time locating them (always a haphazard affair in a war zone), the North Koreans would almost certainly have been licked by the time I was on the scene.

All this went through my mind as I turned from the window of Ji-min's home, where I had been happy watching the Americans leave to finish the job they'd started. Feeling quite elated, I decided to seek out my Korean beauty for a rematch.

The room was eerily quiet and she was nowhere to be seen. I don't know exactly what made the hairs of my neck stand up on end, but it was a sure sign that in the back of my mind I knew something was up.

I moved over to the bed and reached under the pillow for my revolver, which I was in the habit of keeping on hand for just such an occasion. And blow me, the damn thing wasn't there. Now I *knew* something was wrong and I was racing for the door faster than a virgin looking for his honeymoon suite.

I'd barely made it to the next room when someone grabbed me from behind and an arm was reaching around my neck, trying to pull me to the ground. The problem for my assailant was that he appeared to be what my aunt would have called 'a short-arse' - and I took advantage of my height to fall backwards and crush my strangler against the wall. I heard a satisfying groan as thirteen stone of bone and muscle careered into him, forcing him to loosen his grip long enough for me to continue my escape.

Another man who I took to be Korean was lunging at me, but I'd picked up enough momentum to swat him aside as I made for the door which led on to the street and freedom. It opened before I reached the threshold and who should be standing in my way, but my little temptress – Lee Ji-min.

"Ji-min!" I screamed. "Quick, we've got to get out of here!"

Instead of running away as I'd expected, she simply stood there and smiled, forcing me to grind to a halt. I couldn't make out what the hell she thought she was doing, and I was just about to give her a swift kick in the shins to get her moving, when, with incredible speed, her knee sprang up to make contact with my family jewels.

I've known varying degrees of pain in my time, having been tortured by the best of them, but that moment must rate up there as one of the most agonising experiences of my life. I'd been totally unprepared, you see, and in that unguarded moment the sadistic bitch had been presented with free access to my manhood, catching the meat and two veg a right blinder.

Something struck me on the back of the head and it was with some relief that I fell into blissful unconsciousness.

I awoke to find that the burning pain had thankfully receded and my hands reached down to daintily check if all was in order. I was pleased to find that everything was intact and while I might not have been first in line at the knocking shop just then, I was sure I could deliver the goods if nature was given sufficient time to restore my faculties.

It was only then that I turned my attention to my head. It was aching damnably and it had a lump protruding from the back, courtesy of my kidnappers.

Once I was sure that everything was in working order, I began to wonder about exactly where I was. From the way I was being jostled to and fro, I quickly surmised that I was on the move. I seemed to be lying in some sort of cart, cocooned in a thick wooden frame, and a sharp pain shot through my head whenever my new transportation hit an obstruction.

I shuffled across to where I could see a shaft of light shining between the boards and, as I squinted through the gap, I was flooded with mounting excitement when I heard American voices. I called out but my cries couldn't be heard above the noise of the cart. Not that the Yanks would have noticed, because they seemed hell-bent on running away. More worrying, perhaps, was the fact that none of them appeared to be carrying their weapons, and they were looking over their shoulders as if they were being chased.

It was then that I heard the sound of bugles in the distance and men speaking in a language I hadn't heard in Korea before. My God, those are Chinese voices, I thought, and they seemed to be coming from everywhere.

My worst fears were soon confirmed as the chaotic retreat of the American soldiers was replaced by the orderly advance of a new type of soldier. They wore thick padded clothing which made them look like little Michelin men, and their heads were topped by peak caps, each one decorated by a red star. There was no doubt about it, the Chinese had entered the Korean War - and they seemed to be winning hands down from what I could see.

It was a blessed relief when the cart eventually came to an abrupt halt, and moments later I could hear someone sliding back a bolt on a small door close to my feet. Hands grabbed me by the ankles and I was unceremoniously dragged from the cart and thrown on to the ground. Not that my legs would have supported me just then because I felt as weak as a kitten, and the sudden exposure to bright sunlight sent a blinding pain careering through my head. Before I could even focus on my surroundings, someone was screaming in my ear in broken English.

"Why you invade Korea? We resist American murderers. We not just sit and let bandits come to our border. We not surrender. You drop atom bombs and kill a million people - no matter. Without sacrifice, how we save China?"

I'm sure he had a point, but it was hardly the time for a political speech, I thought. Besides, he was a damn poor host - I hadn't even been offered a cup of tea.

“Water,” I croaked, and I received a kick to the ribs for my trouble, *ab irato*.

“Let him be,” ordered a beautiful female voice, which I immediately recognised as belonging to Ji-min. It sounded so lovely, in spite of the fact that the last time I’d heard it she’d been doing her level best to take away my manhood.

“He is enemy,” complained the politician.

“He is also valuable,” explained Ji-min, “Remember that Marshal Peng wishes to talk with him. He will not be pleased if you have killed our prisoner before he arrives.”

Fortunately that seemed to strike a chord with the sadistic brute and he spat on the ground as he walked off in disgust. Ji-min raised my head so that I could sip water from the cup she put to my lips.

“Thank you,” I said hoarsely, trying to gain as much sympathy as I could from my angel of mercy. But I might as well have saved my breath for all the good it did.

“I am only helping you because we need you alive,” she said flatly.

You could have fooled me, I thought, as the unpleasant ache in my groin returned when I tried to sit up.

“Do not even think of trying to escape. There is nowhere for you to go and we would shoot you dead before you got more than a few yards,” she warned, and I presumed that our delightful love affair had run its course.

“Don’t worry, Ji-min. I’m hardly likely to run away when I don’t even know where I am,” I assured her, as I tried to rub some life back into my aching limbs.

I meant it too. Fleeing clearly wasn’t an option, unless I had no other choice, but I took comfort from the fact that they’d said they needed me alive, even though I couldn’t fathom why. Who on earth this Marshal Peng was and why he desperately wanted to speak with me was a mystery, but for the moment I decided to play along until I discovered how the land lay.

“You are in North Korea,” said Ji-min, who appeared quite happy to enlighten me. “As you are no doubt aware, a force of Chinese volunteers has crossed the Yalu River and driven the Americans back from their country’s border.”

“Just ‘volunteers’?” I asked sceptically.

“No, that is a simple fiction,” she admitted graciously. “The designation was chosen to avoid all-out war with the United States. In spite of the rhetoric of my comrade, the Chinese do not wish to invite massive American retaliation against the mainland.”

“But, Ji-min,” I protested, “what’s all this got to do with you? You’re South Korean, aren’t you?”

“That is correct, but I am also a communist. The West has no right to impose its will on my country.”

“I quite agree,” I replied, happy to say anything to get me out of the mess I was in. “I was going to advise the prime minister that we should have nothing to do with the war.”

“It appears that Mr. Attlee does not agree,” she quipped. “British troops are already here. However, this is all history. I volunteered to be your interpreter because I wanted to influence you, but the time for that has passed. You deserted me when you no longer had any need for me. It is only to be expected from a Western foreigner. You do not respect

women, no matter how strong or intelligent they might be. They are just objects for your desire.”

“No, honestly, Ji-min...” I began, but she raised her hand to silence me.

“It is no matter,” she interrupted. “Here, take these and clean yourself up. Marshal Peng will be here soon.”

She placed a large bowl of water on the cart, together with a cloth. Next to it she added a small bowl of rice, but in spite of my weakened condition I found it difficult to force it down. Judging by how far we had come, I must have been lying unconscious in the cart for at least a day, and I explained that I had to relieve myself. She called over her charming companion, and he passed me a tiny shovel and pointed to a tree. He watched me the whole time, which was more than a little off-putting, I can tell you.

I resisted the temptation to flick the results of my long-awaited bowel movement straight at his ugly face, and returned to my sumptuous bathroom to clean myself as best I could. As I finished, I noticed a sudden commotion in the distance, and moments later several Chinese officers were walking towards me. At their centre was a man who exuded authority, in spite of his modest and crumpled uniform.

He stopped abruptly and simply stood there, eyeing me most disconcertingly. He wore the obligatory cap with its red star, and I noticed that one of his eyebrows appeared to be somewhat thicker than the other, which gave him an almost comical appearance. His upper lip was pulled in as if he was bored and completely resigned to whatever fate might deal him. Thankfully he finally spoke.

“I am very pleased to meet you, Captain Fletcher,” he said in perfect English. He saluted and I reciprocated automatically, while I tried to hide my astonishment. “I am Marshal Peng Te Huai of the Chinese People’s Volunteers.”

“I am pleased to meet you, sir,” I replied warily.

“You are an officer in the Royal Air Force, I believe,” said Peng. “As an airman, perhaps you could give me your assessment of American and British air power in Korea.”

Well, this chap certainly doesn’t believe in social chitchat, I thought. There was no explanation or apology for kidnapping a British officer and taking him behind enemy lines, I noticed, but I’ve always found it advisable to show willing and be as co-operative as possible when your back’s against the wall.

“The Americans certainly control the skies,” I said, carefully leaving the British out of the equation, “but I doubt it will do them any good in a place like Korea.”

“Why do you say that, Captain?” he asked, clearly interested.

“Bombing the enemy in a flat desert is one thing,” I explained, confident that I wasn’t giving away any state secrets, “but finding your target in these mountains is quite another.”

“Ha, is it not as I said, General?” said Peng, turning to one of his officers. “A will to win is sure to compensate for any shortcomings of equipment. The imperialists will be shown to be paper tigers.”

“Perhaps, Captain, you could describe the morale of the American and British troops?” he asked.

So much for name, rank and serial number, I thought. Apparently the Chinese hadn't heard of the Geneva Convention. The situation was getting a little sticky now. Not that I was worried about letting the side down. I would have handed over the crown jewels if it meant I could've got a ticket back to Tokyo. As I noticed Peng watching me intently, I decided an honest and offhand bearing would serve best.

"Well, I can't speak for the Americans, sir, but I can tell you that the British won't give up without a fight. They might be wondering why they're here, but this is the only war they've got. They'll not let your men walk all over them – it's a matter of pride, you see," and I tried to stand up straight and give him my true-blue stare.

He seemed to frown at this news, and after a few seconds he touched me on the shoulder and steered me away from the cart.

"Come, Captain, let us talk for a while," he said, and his entourage began to follow. He turned to address them.

"Captain Fletcher and I need to discuss matters in private. You gentlemen will remain here."

Two resolute-looking soldiers who I took to be bodyguards seemed to be put out by this new turn of events, but they stood their ground while Peng led me away. When we had reached a spot where he felt we could speak out of earshot, he abruptly stopped and took a few steps back to face me once again.

"Captain, I would like to explain something to you, if I may. We, the people of China, have been fighting all of our lives. We have fought off Japanese invaders and we have defeated Chiang Kai Shek and his Nationalists, in spite of their support from the Americans. Do you know, Captain, that I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I have seen my family over the last few years?"

"Yes, I know, war is a frightful business, to be sure. It's just a pity we can't all just..." I started to say, toady-like, but he ignored me and continued with his one-sided discourse.

"This war is just an extension of our fight for survival. I do not believe the West is as committed to the cause as us. Why, only yesterday, when I had barely crossed the Yalu Bridge, I witnessed a young American fall to his knees and beg for mercy. I felt sorry for him. He clearly did not want to fight."

"Quite shocking, I'm sure. Still, what do you expect from these reservists, eh? Now, your professional soldier..." I began, but I was wasting my breath and he didn't even seem to realise I'd been talking when he spoke again.

"My men are a different breed, Captain. They can walk and run for miles, carrying all they possess. The Red Army's two legs are better than four wheels," he explained calmly, as if he was Rabsheka.

"I dare say, but..."

"I have omitted perhaps the most important reason why your soldiers will not be able to stop the glorious Chinese Army. Remember, we have millions of troops with which to overwhelm you. Consider that fact, Captain, the next time you are hiding in a trench with a handful of your comrades."

Even in my terrified condition I picked up on this one crumb of hope that had been dropped in my lap. 'The next time', he had said. Was that just a figure of speech or did he intend to release me? The temptation to cry out like my American cousin and plead to be spared was almost too much to bear, but somehow I found the courage to put a spanner in the works.

"Don't forget, sir, the Americans have the atom bomb and they've shown they're not afraid to use it. They could have no choice if they're faced with utter defeat. The good people back home might not take too kindly to losing precious American lives when they have the wherewithal to destroy your cities."

For the first time this seemed to stop his train of thought and he nodded silently, considering what he would say next.

"I have heard this argument before, of course, from men in my own country. I do not agree, however. The bombing of Japan was a different prospect entirely. The Japanese were aggressors who had attacked American soil, albeit in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The world would not look as favourably on a nation prepared to kill millions of innocent civilians in a war fought because of differing ideologies."

The smug Chinaman had an answer for everything and I was at a loss as to what to say next. I decided to admit defeat.

"Well, if you're sure you can win, then why tell me?"

"Ah, at last we get to the nub of the matter," said Peng, and for the first time his face broke into a smile before he asked his next question, taking me by surprise into the bargain.

"I believe you have met General MacArthur, the supreme commander."

"Yes, sir," I replied, deciding that lying now would have been dangerous. He must have noticed the look of surprise on my face because he went on to explain.

"If you are wondering how I know this fact, Captain, we have our own sources."

I bet he did, I thought, recalling my pillow-talk with Ji-min, and I was glad that I hadn't been stupid enough to try and deceive him. I decided not to say anything and let him continue.

"We are not sure what General MacArthur will do next. Captain Fletcher, would you say that the general is the sort of man who would accept defeat?"

At last we were getting to the bottom of things, I thought. It was MacArthur they were afraid of. They were well aware of his reputation and they couldn't be sure what his next move would be. Well, if anyone could play on someone else's fears for devilment it was me. Besides, I had a strange feeling that showing this confident Chinaman what he was up against might go some way to getting me out of my predicament. So I ploughed in like a good'n.

"General MacArthur does not know the meaning of defeat. He will do whatever it takes to win the war - and you can take that to the bank."

"I take it you believe he will attack our country?" he asked.

"That is exactly what I mean, sir. You see, to him the atom bomb is simply another weapon."

This seemed to touch him on the raw and he gave a murmur before rubbing his chin thoughtfully. For a minute I thought I might have overplayed my hand. But he pressed on, concern written all over his face.

“But surely President Truman will have the final say, and he is answerable to the American people,” he said, as if he was trying to convince himself as much as anyone else.

Luckily I had another nail to hammer into his coffin.

“I’m not so sure, sir. MacArthur is a legend in his country. It may be that Truman will be too frightened to stop him. If America lost the war, then the president would have to take the blame for overruling his supreme commander.”

I could see I was hitting home, and Peng turned away to look at his officers waiting patiently in the wings. It was several long minutes before he faced me to issue his next shock.

“Miss Lee tells me you have the ear of your prime minister,” he said, clearly full of surprises.

“That is correct, sir,” I said, thinking it couldn’t do any harm to let him know I was on speaking terms with the high and mighty. At the very least it might make him think twice about having me ill-used.

“Do you think, knowing now what you do of our determination to defend our communist brothers, you could persuade Mr. Attlee to speak with President Truman?” he asked.

“What would be the nature of their discussion?” I asked, knowing full well what was coming next but making him spell it out.

“Mr. Attlee, armed with information provided by advisers like you, could explain to the president that my country is determined to win, and that for the sake of world peace it would be advisable to keep General MacArthur on a short leash.”

So there it was – a naked threat in all but name. No doubt this zealot and his army *were* willing to fight to the bitter end, but they didn’t want a full-scale war any more than the rest of us. They were sure that the American government didn’t have the stomach to start World War Three, but MacArthur was an unknown quantity and they wanted some reassurance that Truman wasn’t going to let things get out of hand.

Well, I thought, if there was one man who could help them out, it was Captain Thomas Fletcher - especially if it meant he would get out of their oriental clutches.

“I know that the prime minister has grave reservations about the use of atomic weapons and he certainly has no more confidence in General MacArthur’s intentions than you do yourself. Indeed, he sent me to Tokyo to witness the general’s state of mind for myself.”

I could see that this was news to him by the startled look in his eyes, but I didn’t mind letting slip details of my secret mission if it meant the Chinese commander would let me go.

“What did you report?” asked Peng, clearly interested.

“I was about to contact London and advise the prime minister to set up a meeting with Truman, as you yourself have suggested, but unfortunately I didn’t get the chance,” I explained, pointing to Ji-min and her little band of kidnappers skulking in the distance.

I do enjoy lying in a good cause, and what better reason can there be than saving your own skin. I’d tried to offer Peng exactly what he wanted and now it was just a matter of

seeing whether or not he had taken the bait. At first it looked as though I had underestimated my Chinese interrogator.

“You have been most co-operative, Captain - perhaps a little *too* co-operative.”

I frowned because it seemed to be the right thing to do. My nerves were on edge and I began to wonder if he was going to have me locked up - or worse. So it was a great relief when his next words appeared to confirm that I’d read the situation correctly.

“However, I think that you have been honest with me – at least for the most part,” said the wily commander. “I believe I have convinced you of our intentions, and I am choosing to trust that you will convince your prime minister of our determination to fight to the bitter end.”

“If I may say, sir, you have made a very wise decision,” I said, trying to sound confident.

“My decision is based on pragmatism as much as anything else. Diplomatic relations between our two countries are somewhat strained, as you can imagine, and this may be the only way to contact Mr. Attlee and be sure he receives our intended message. Miss Lee will arrange for your safe return to the American Army. She is quite resourceful, as you are no doubt aware.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied, not daring to push my luck any further.

“Remember, Captain,” he said, as he turned to walk back to his loyal throng, “I have my own sources of information in South Korea. If you do not do as we have agreed, I will hear of it.”

“I won’t let you down, sir,” I said in an effort to reassure him.

“No, I’m sure you won’t. In the unlikely event that you do, please recollect that you were brought here against your will.”

He paused, as if to add weight to his next words.

“We can easily do the same again.”

He walked away, leaving me to search for the chap with the spade and toilet paper.

The Death Ride

I was left kicking my heels for several weeks as a guest of my Chinese hosts, with devil a distraction to bless myself. I quickly ruled out any assignation with the beautiful Ji-min. You see, no matter how much I disliked working for His Majesty's Intelligence department, I had no desire to exchange my occupation of government spy for that of a eunuch.

Eventually I was delivered to an American division on the front line at Kunu-ri, and mighty surprised they were to see me too. They were busy tucking into Thanksgiving dinner of all things, when I asked a dumbstruck corporal for an audience with the head man.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the general, when I was finally presented to him.

"I'm with British Intelligence, General, and I need to get to Seoul as quickly as possible," I explained.

"Don't we all?" he quipped, and when I asked what he meant by that, I didn't like what I heard.

"Our perimeter is shrinking by the day and we're going to have to run the road south whatever is in our way."

"What do you mean 'in your way'?" I asked. "South is behind the front lines, isn't it?"

"Where have you been, boy? The Chinese have been circling around us every chance they get. We're probably cut off from the rest of the army as it is."

Talk about out of the frying pan and into the fire. I found myself cursing Ji-min and her little gang of kidnappers. They'd gotten me half way to the Chinese border easily enough - surely they could have delivered me safely back to Seoul. Because of their bungling I was back in the heat of battle with the prospect of getting my head shot off.

A few days later I was joining a large convoy driving south from Kunu-ri. When I heard the radio operator say that British soldiers were waiting for us at the other end of the pass, I gave a huge sigh of relief. And that was when all hell broke loose and a hail of mortar and machine-gun fire rained down on us.

I watched helplessly as trucks keeled over and caught fire, while anyone who tried to make a run for it was mown down before they got more than a few yards. I was sharing a jeep with a couple of GIs, and they screamed at me to help a wounded man lying in the dirt. I had no choice but to run the gauntlet of enemy gunfire and collect my casualty. As I slung his inert body over my shoulder, I felt a bullet thud into my human cargo and he groaned.

I threw the unlucky GI on to the back of the jeep and screamed at the driver to get going. We slewed all over the place, as he tried to make us as difficult a target as possible. It was then that the true nightmare really began, and I found myself an unwilling participant in what became known to all the survivors of the 2nd Division as the 'death ride', along a valley like the very Caudine Forks itself.

We drove through *six miles* of enemy fire and smashed our way through blazing vehicles, as they were shot to pieces ahead of us. I quickly realised we were the lucky ones, when I saw infantrymen being slaughtered where they stood. To me it seemed as if a dreadful paralysis had overcome the whole command. I saw men sitting motionless, incapable of even rousing themselves to return fire. It was as if they were simply waiting to die.

I calculated that we still had a mile to go, when I spied a group of men trying hopelessly to push a wrecked vehicle off the road. Suddenly our driver screamed and the jeep swerved violently, throwing all of us into the dirt. Mercifully a cluster of boulders nestled at the foot of the pass and I threw myself behind them, as bullets ricocheted all around me.

I cowered there for what must have been an hour and when I looked up, I was shocked to see that nightfall was on its way. Yet mortars still fell from the sky, destroying whatever was in their path.

No doubt I would have stayed in my hiding place all night, if I hadn't heard the unmistakable sound of hand-to-hand fighting getting nearer with every passing second. So I poked my head tentatively above the rocks for a quick reconnoitre.

Even in the darkness I could see that chaos was reigning all around me. As far as I could tell, there was only one group of American soldiers mounting a cohesive defence, led by a colonel standing next to a burnt-out vehicle. I decided my only hope was to join them, so I sprang from the cover of my rocky home and ran in their direction before I had a chance to change my mind.

The colonel looked across to see who the idiot was charging straight at him and, once he'd satisfied himself I wasn't Chinese, he threw me a machine-gun. That weapon was to save my life. And since it's down to the colonel I'm here today, I'll say God bless you, sir, for a job well done.

"Every man for himself," came the order, and I joined a larger group of twenty or so as they ran along the pass. Someone spotted a cluster of corn stacks and suggested everyone should hide there. I'd no wish to get pinned down all over again, so I decided to climb my way out of the gorge on my own. And thank God that I did. As I forced my fatigued body up the steep slope, I looked back in time to see a swarm of Chinese infantrymen in their quilted jackets surrounding the hiding place of my American comrades.

I searched for a trail which was sufficiently flat for me to negotiate in the dark and headed south, parallel to the road below. Twice I saw someone wearing a cap with a red badge and I simply fired as I ran, sending them tumbling down to the foot of the hill. I must have kept running for nearly thirty minutes without stopping, which was some going in my weakened condition, but eventually the track petered out.

I looked down towards the road and I was relieved to see that American vehicles and troops appeared to be making their way unhindered, so I risked making my way down to join them. Any gunfire seemed to be far behind us now and I was just beginning to believe the nightmare was finally over, when one more tragedy was to unfold before my eyes.

An American soldier running alongside me hadn't realised that he'd eventually reached safety. When he saw what he thought was another Chinese soldier blocking his path, he lifted his rifle up to fire.

"No!" I screamed, recognising the uniform of a British soldier - but I was too late. My fellow countryman, who had been waving his hand in greeting, fell down dead before the echo of my warning had receded into the hills.

I looked across at the American who had inadvertently slain the British officer, and found him crouching on the ground. Tears were rolling down his cheeks and no doubt he was

wondering what he was doing in a mountain pass on the other side of the world while everyone was trying to kill one another.

I kept on walking until I was certain I was safe and then my legs buckled beneath me. For a few brief moments I had one of the strangest feelings of my life. I was filled with relief that I had survived once again but then, seeing what was left of some unlucky person's skull lying in the dirt, I remembered the words of my Latin master who always liked to start each lesson on a cheery note.

Memento mori – remember you must die.

You've killed my mate

It's wonderful how a horde of Chinese fanatics hot on your heels can focus the mind, and I pushed all classical musings aside and got to my feet. We trudged on through the darkness, frightened to make a noise in case we brought our pursuers down on top of us, and eventually we passed a field hospital. But if we'd thought that our medical needs would be catered to, we were very much mistaken. Our doctors were unable to administer aid because they were sitting in a jeep with their brains blown out.

Occasionally we heard gunfire close by but we plodded on regardless. Some men continued without so much as a pair of socks to protect their tootsies – with the result that their feet were lacerated and bleeding.

When daylight came, the disorder in the withdrawal soon became apparent. Men had abandoned all their heavy equipment, and when a jeep pulled up to the column and cooks alighted bearing hot food, most of the men had to eat from their helmets because they'd thrown away their mess kits in their eagerness to get away. As I looked around at the unfolding chaos, I decided that the Yanks were going to *have* to use the atom bomb if they were to have any chance of winning the war.

I saw the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders marching south in fine style, with pipers leading the way, but even they looked as tired and hungry as the Americans. One annoyingly cheerful soul shouted to me as he marched briskly past.

“You'd better get a move on – the next man down the road will be Joseph Stalin!”

He gave me a hell of a fright, bringing back all those terrible memories of my meeting with the Russian tyrant back in Moscow.

I wasn't the only one whose nerves were taking a battering. One unfortunate chap who'd been handed a tin of beans by the cooks, suddenly ran into a paddy field and held it aloft as if it was a grenade.

“Don't come any nearer!” he screamed, and when a sergeant tried to approach him, he lobbed the tin at the poor man's head.

I knew the game was really up when we passed a group of soldiers setting fire to their tank, and a pillar of flames and smoke rose up into the sky.

“Why are you destroying your tank?” I asked innocently.

“It's busted. We could fix it if we had the part, but we don't. Our orders are not to let our vehicles fall into enemy hands.”

He looked up at the column of fire rising from his beloved vehicle and there were tears threatening to well up in his eyes.

“Five lousy bucks that part cost. Five bucks,” he repeated, as if he couldn't believe it.

But perhaps the worst thing I experienced on that long march south was the sight of an American, screaming in agony at the roadside. I'd heard the desperate cries of wounded before, but when we turned to see what terrible fate had been dealt to this latest victim of war, we were greeted with the ghastly sight of a man on fire, covered in burning phosphorous.

“Shoot me,” he was screaming in desperation.

Whether or not his fellow soldiers obliged I never discovered. Being no Peony, I marched quickly by - desperate to escape the sound of those tormented screams. After that I simply walked on mechanically in a kind of daze, as I tried to eradicate the horror of what I had just witnessed from my mind and quash the feelings of guilt that I'd done nothing to help.

British and American soldiers were eventually all mixed together and I joined a pair of my fellow countrymen as they attempted to ford an icy stream. Suddenly a shot rang out from behind a hill, and one of my fellow travellers fell down at our feet. We stared at our dead comrade and before we had time to react, we heard American voices.

"Who's there?" shouted a GI, peering over the lip of the hill.

I remember thinking it was a bit late to be asking that now. I was about to announce that we were friends and to ask him if he would be so kind as to stop shooting at us, when the private standing next to me yelled back.

"Here, Yank, you've bloody killed my mate!"

We dragged the body from the stream and that was when I noticed my new friend had no boots and was standing there in his socks.

"You'd better hang those up to dry," I suggested - and he did, before they promptly froze as hard as rock.

As he tried to hammer his hosiery back into shape, I took the opportunity to sit down and catch my breath. It was then that a soldier, who I took to be South Korean, suddenly appeared and stood looking down at me with ill-concealed curiosity.

"Bugger off," I suggested, reaching for a cigarette from my shirt pocket - and he did.

"Hey, pal," said one of the Americans, when they finally emerged from their hiding place.

"What?" I asked, hardly having the energy to speak.

"You know that Korean you just told to bugger off?" he asked.

"Yes, what about him?"

"He was Chinese."

It's like hauling frozen meat

It was only then, with immediate danger past, that I started feeling the cold in earnest. Men with thermometers warned me that the temperature was dropping as low as twenty degrees below at night, and I could well have believed it. My hands were so numb that even a simple chore like checking my weapon seemed to take forever. I was even thinking more slowly, although that probably had a lot to do with the fact that I hadn't slept for two days. Whenever I tried to speak, I discovered that my jaw hurt.

A kind soul gave me a sleeping bag, and the temptation to get into it and drift off into oblivion was almost overwhelming. I soon thought better of it when I heard stories of men, nicely cocooned in their portable bed linen, being bayoneted to death before they could reach for their weapon. So I forced myself to keep going and eventually I managed to reach a command tent where I hoped I'd be able to arrange a ride as far away from the front as I could get. I saw a major talking to a radio operator and I went over to ask if I could see the commanding officer.

"I'm the commanding officer, as far as there is one," he explained. "The general's ... um ... indisposed," and he pointed through a flap in the tent to a field a few yards away.

To my astonishment there was a man standing all alone, decked out in a general's uniform and sobbing quietly to himself. I looked back at the major questioningly.

"He just froze. The general's a nice guy but he's too damned old for this shit," opined the major sympathetically. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm with British Intelligence. I was supposed to meet up with the Gloucester Regiment but I find myself with important information which I must deliver to my chief in Seoul," I explained, hoping that I would be able to pick up a flight back to Tokyo before the Chinese overran the airfield at Kimpo.

"Seoul? Not a chance, pal. Tell you what though - one of my men is heading for Pyongyang to pick up some more ammo. Last I heard, the Gloucesters were in that area somewhere. You can hitch a ride with him - if he hasn't already left."

At least Pyongyang was in the right direction, and after a few false starts I found my taxi driver preparing to set off south in his battered truck. It appeared to be roadworthy, which was all that mattered to me just then, and it was a relief to sit in the cabin and escape the biting wind. I looked up as planes flew overhead, ready to drop their deadly cargo of Napalm on the pursuing soldiers from the Celestial Empire, and for the first time in days I felt I could relax. So I fell asleep as soon as the truck pulled away, but I was awoken by the sound of something sliding in the back.

"I thought you were on an ammunition run, Sergeant. What are you carrying?" I asked innocently.

"Dead bodies," he replied, very matter-of-fact. "Don't worry," he assured me, "they ain't likely to stink in this weather. It's just like hauling frozen meat."

Needless to say I found it rather difficult to drop off after that. Every time my eyes started to close, I was brought back to reality by the sound of cadavers trying to join us in

the cabin. I decided to make conversation in an attempt to keep from thinking about our lifeless passengers.

“Are you just picking up ammunition?” I asked.

“This time, sure,” said the sergeant. “Last trip they filled the truck with contraceptives.”

“You’re joking,” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, I know. What the hell do the guys back at the supply depot think we’re *doing* to the Chinese?”

The first time I killed anybody

A few miles outside Pyongyang we came across a Bedford truck that had broken down on the roadside, and a couple of British soldiers flagged us down.

“Can you give us a tow?” asked one of the men.

“I’m afraid it’s not up to me, you’ll have to ask the sergeant here,” I explained.

“Here, hold on,” he said. “You’re English, aren’t you?”

“I was the last time I looked,” I replied.

“Look, we ain’t got no time for a God-damn reunion. I’m in a God-damn hurry. The rope is in the back,” said my American driver impatiently, as he pointed to the rear of the truck.

The British duo quickly headed to the back of the lorry and opened the doors.

“Jesus,” cried out one of them, obviously having discovered our grisly cargo. “What’s your hurry, mate? These chaps aren’t getting any sicker.”

We roared off into the darkness at a suicidal speed, and when I looked in the mirror I could see the Bedford truck swaying dangerously from side to side. For some reason my sergeant was driving like a man possessed.

We sped past an abandoned tank, missing it by inches, and how we made it across a narrow bridge without ripping the sides of our vehicle clean off, I’ll never know. We hurtled at a breakneck pace down a hill on top of a ravine, and as I looked at the sixty-foot chasm that fell away on my side of the truck, I felt sweat pouring down the nape of my neck, in spite of the cold.

Out of nowhere a dark shadow suddenly appeared from the cliffs and the sergeant slammed on his brakes, but he was going too fast and we hit it head on. He leapt from his cabin and punched the windscreen.

“Damn it, it’s some old dame,” he explained, cursing.

We all got out and walked over to where the inert body of a woman was lying in the road. She was as old and emaciated as a catamaran, and it soon became clear that if *we* hadn’t come along and killed her, starvation would have done the job for us.

“The God-damn bitch!” yelled my sergeant, spitting on the ground. “How the hell was I supposed to see that old dame coming out of nowhere?” he protested.

He held out his hands, appealing to us. We didn’t know what to say and he brought his fists up to his face, covering it from view.

“Forget it. It wasn’t your fault. Let’s wrap her in a blanket and get her out of sight,” I said, trying to bring him out of his funk.

We found a hollow in the road and silently laid her body in the shadows from where she had emerged before her life had been taken from her. As we walked back to the truck the sergeant whispered under his breath.

“That’s the first time I ever killed anybody.”

“You’ll get used to it, mate,” said one of our hitch-hikers reassuringly.

* * *

Eventually we pulled into a battalion assembly area, and it was only then I realised that, by a quirk of fate, I'd ended up with the Gloucester Regiment after all. So I waved my Yankee sergeant farewell and secretly wished good luck to any pedestrians foolish enough to get in his way.

Spotting a small band of British troops camped around a fire, I quickly joined them to stave off the onset of hypothermia. They'd ignited a tyre which they'd doused in petrol, and I can still remember the surreal vision of the drawn, unshaven faces flickering in the firelight. We stood there in silence, bathing in the warmth of the fire, in spite of the oily stench which belched from the burning rubber.

"Where would I find your CO?" I asked, and they turned to see who'd spoken - as if they'd noticed me for the first time.

"If he has any sense he's in Tokyo," offered one wag helpfully, and the others laughed weakly.

"Major Hurst's in the tent over there," said another, pointing to a grubby tarpaulin supported by a few wooden poles.

I walked over, leaving my new friends to their thoughts.

"I didn't think you'd find us," said the major, once I'd introduced myself. "Things have been a little chaotic around here, as you can imagine."

"You've been expecting me then, I gather."

"We got word of your impending arrival a little over a week ago, but like I said, we never thought you'd turn up."

"Believe me, neither did I," I said, suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of exhaustion.

It was then that the major gave me his wonderful surprise, and when I heard the news, somehow my tiredness was a distant memory.

"You've just received new orders, Captain. Apparently you're wanted in Washington."

I stood there open-mouthed, and no doubt the cigarette I'd been smoking would have fallen to the ground, if it hadn't frozen to my bottom lip like some sort of strange growth.

"Washington? In America?" I asked, unable to believe what I was hearing.

"I take it this is a surprise to you," said the major, mastering the art of understatement.

"You could say that. Thank you, Major," I said, turning to leave the tent.

No doubt I should have remained to find out my travel arrangements there and then, but I thought it advisable to be alone for a moment.

If there was one sight I didn't want to inflict on my military colleagues, it was that of a grown man crying.

Americans don't like to lose

I'd never been more eager to board a plane in my life. When it was realised that I'd been summoned to Washington at the behest of the prime minister himself, it was all go with a vengeance. I was flown from Pyongyang directly to Tokyo, and after a brief stop I was on my way to Hawaii and then Los Angeles for my connecting flight to the American capital. Not that I remember much of the journey because I slept nearly all the way.

It was on the last leg that I finally joined the land of the living - and having emerged from the constant threat of danger unscathed, I was feeling on top of the world. I flirted with the pretty stewardess and even when I discovered that I had to be at the British embassy that very night, it still didn't spoil my good mood. She asked if she could join me, but regrettably I had to decline her offer. I doubted very much whether the PM would have taken too kindly to me arriving at the top-level talks with a bit of skirt.

And top-level talks they were. As if being in the presence of the prime minister wasn't daunting enough, I was soon to be face-to-face with the most powerful man in the world - President Harry S Truman. Dean Acheson, Truman's secretary of state was to be there, along with General George Marshall. Field Marshal Sir William Slim had come along for the ride, as well as the British ambassador himself, Sir Oliver Franks.

Yes, I might have been relieved to have escaped bombs and bullets, not to mention American drivers with a death-wish and freezing weather fit to turn your balls blue, but the thought of spending time in such illustrious company had me quaking in my boots. Mind you, mixing with the great and the good had its compensations. I was met at the airport by an embassy flunky in an official car and driven straight to our Georgian edifice in the heart of the city.

When I arrived I was given the full VIP treatment and my own bedroom suite. Lavish wasn't the word. It was larger than the billet I'd been blessed with in Germany during the airlift - and then I'd had to share it with a dozen snoring pilots who hadn't washed for a week. There was even a silver tea service waiting in the corner for my attention. My mind found it almost impossible to take in, and I couldn't believe I was still on the same planet. One minute I'd been freezing to death, surrounded by blood and mayhem, and the next I was living like royalty.

I couldn't help wonder why on earth I was there, but as I helped myself to one of the fine cigars sitting in a silver box next to the enormous bed, I decided that the answer to *that* particular question could wait. Unfortunately my moment of pure bliss was cut short by the sound of a sharp knock on the door. I stood up to attention, unsure what dignitary lurked without.

"Come in," I said, peering anxiously at the door.

It slowly creaked open, adding to the suspense, only to reveal Mr. H Biggins.

"I see you're roughing it again, Fletcher," he said, no doubt pleased with what he thought passed for a sense of humour.

"Oh, it's you, Biggins. For a minute there I thought it was somebody important."

“Yes, I’m very well, thank you for asking,” he replied cheerily, and by the look of him he’d been enjoying the hospitality of the embassy a sight longer than I had.

“It’s good to see the communists can’t keep a good man down,” I replied, trying to think of something nice to say.

“I could say the same to you. We thought we’d lost you there for a while. Where on earth did you disappear to?”

I told him how Ji-min was working for the communists and about my meeting with Marshal Peng of the Chinese People’s Army.

“Jesus,” was his analytical summary of my unplanned jaunt to North Korea. “What did he want with you?”

“Ji-min told him I had the ear of the prime minister, I suppose. We’re not exactly on friendly terms with the Chinese at the moment, and I think he thought it was the only way to get his message to the PM.”

“Well, he went to a lot of trouble, so he must have thought it was worth it. What did he have to say?” he asked, as he sat in one of the suite’s comfortable armchairs and helped himself to a cognac uninvited.

“He said they’re going to beat us hands down and he doesn’t believe the Americans have the guts to finish the fight.”

“He was bound to say that, wasn’t he? I mean, we could have worked that out for ourselves without him grabbing one of our people to act as a messenger boy.”

I ignored the insult and told him what the Chinese were really worried about.

“The problem is MacArthur. They know he’s not the sort of commander who will compromise and they’re concerned about what he’ll do next. They think he might even use the atom bomb.”

“That’s not up to him. Only the president can authorise its use,” said Biggins confidently.

“Peng thinks that MacArthur’s a loose cannon and that President Truman has no control over him.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? The general’s already talking about bombing targets over the border in China and I think Truman’s afraid of him. He’s the hero of the hour - the legendary general of World War Two who taught the Japs a lesson for attacking Pearl Harbour. How would it look if Truman just got rid of him? There are a hell of a lot of American voters who wouldn’t take kindly to that.”

“I say, Fletcher, you’ve got a point,” said Biggins magnanimously. “You’re going to have to tell the PM about this.”

“I suppose you’re right. Where is he, by the way?”

“He’s at the White House meeting with Truman and his chiefs-of-staff right now. They’re dining here later so that they can continue the discussions into the night. We’ll have to arrange for you to see him before the talks resume. He wants you in the meeting, you know.”

“Oh, Christ, have I got to?”

“You should take it as a complement. The PM hasn’t forgotten how you foiled Haversham’s plan to pass on our nuclear secrets to the Soviets. You helped him save face in front of the Americans and he’s hoping you’ll do the same again.”

“I’m not with you, Biggins.”

“Attlee doesn’t want to confront the Chinese because we have too much to lose, what with our trade interests in the East. Besides, he doesn’t want the focus to be taken away from Europe, where the Russians are still making a nuisance of themselves. The last thing anybody needs is for this war in Korea to drag on. He’s counting on you to help him persuade the Yanks not to get carried away.”

“You’re forgetting one thing, Henry.”

“What’s that?”

“The Chinese are winning the war.”

“So?”

“So, the Americans don’t like to lose.”

A schoolboy on Christmas morning

“This is a remarkable piece of news, Captain Fletcher,” said Attlee, sucking thoughtfully on his pipe. “We were convinced that Chairman Mao Tse Tung would have placed his associate, Lin Piao, in command of the invading army. Well, well - Marshal Peng’s been given the honour, eh? I’ve heard of him, of course. From what I understand, he is not the sort to be overawed by American military hardware.”

“That would be my assessment too, sir,” I said, pleased with Attlee’s reaction to my latest revelation.

“Do you think the Chinese have the wherewithal to defeat our forces?” he asked, staring at me across his desk.

“Marshal Peng certainly believes so, sir.”

“Yes, but what is your assessment of the situation, Captain? This is why I’ve had you brought here. I need first-hand information on the military situation in Korea,” said Attlee testily.

“Well, sir,” I said, quickly trying to recover from my blunder, “the Americans were racing south as fast as they could the last time I looked. When I joined our chaps we tried to muster an organised withdrawal, but as you know we only represent a small fraction of the overall force.”

I hoped a casual mention of my bravery in the field would have helped to make up for my earlier slip-up, but Attlee continued, apparently oblivious to the mortal danger I’d faced for King and Country.

“This confirms what I’m hearing from my chiefs-of-staff. We may very well have to give up Korea.”

Just then an aide knocked on the door and entered the room.

“The American delegation has arrived, Prime Minister.”

“Good God, is it that time already?” said Attlee irritably. “Captain Fletcher, I would like you to attend the meeting. I may need to pick your brains, as it were, and if the Americans say anything that doesn’t fit in with what you have witnessed on the ground, I would like to know.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, and we were guided to a large reception room that had been set aside for the occasion.

It was decked out in the style of a great hall in a French chateau, and there was a gigantic chandelier suspended from the ceiling. A long table with comfortable leather chairs was reserved for those that counted, while the rest of us contented ourselves with wooden back-breakers in the darker recesses of the room.

Never having seen him in the flesh before, my eyes were drawn to the figure of the man calling the shots. Harry S Truman wore an immaculately tailored, grey double-breasted suit, with a handkerchief perfectly placed in his breast pocket and shoes so highly polished, they reflected the glare from the chandelier above. His short greying hair was brushed back so that not a strand was out of place and his glasses gave him the appearance of an amiable post office clerk when he smiled. I found it difficult to believe that this was the same man

who'd ordered the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, condemning thousands of civilians to death.

"Has MacArthur been ordered to withdraw?" asked Field Marshal Slim at the outset, clearly not intending to stand on ceremony.

"He has not," replied General Marshall indignantly. "General MacArthur is aware that the security of his command is his first consideration."

"If I may?" interjected Attlee. "How far is the United States willing to go in guaranteeing that security?"

"I will answer that," said the president, making a dismissive gesture to the general. "I think I know what you are referring to, Prime Minister, so let me say this. The United States is not actively considering the employment of nuclear weapons in Asia."

"Thank you for your clarity in this matter, Mr. President. I'm sure I speak for all the allies when I say this is welcome news. No one has any wish to see this conflict escalate any further than it already has."

And with that, Attlee sat back as if that was the end of the matter. It was then that Acheson decided to put in his pennyworth.

"The central moving factor in this situation is not China but Russia," he said, staring intently at the prime minister. "The Russians must have given their support before the Chinese intervened."

Well, that was rich, I thought, coming from the man who'd failed to realise Korea was in danger in the first place. I hadn't been in Washington five minutes and even *I* knew that half of the country's senators were demanding Acheson's resignation for creating the whole mess. Of course the prime minister had to tread on eggshells and keep his thoughts to himself – or so I thought. It was then, to my utter astonishment, that Attlee turned to look around the room as if he was searching for someone. With mounting horror I realised he was looking in my direction.

"Captain Fletcher, would you be kind enough to share with us the gist of your meeting with the Chinese commander."

I stood up with my legs threatening to give way and everyone in the room turned to face me, including the leader of the Free World, President Truman. I cleared my throat and prayed that I could hold my voice steady.

"Yes, sir," I began, and I had time to see Acheson scowling at me, clearly wondering what I was doing there. "Marshal Peng intimated that China feels its national security is threatened and that the communists will continue to fight, whatever the cost."

"Young man, are you telling everyone in this room that you met with the commander of the Chinese forces in person?" asked Acheson in disbelief.

"I can assure you that what Captain Fletcher claims is true. He has carried out clandestine work of a similar nature in the European theatre," said Attlee, leaping to my defence. (An excellent chap - when he wasn't busy sending me into mortal danger).

"You're very fortunate to have such resourceful people working for you," said the president, heaping more well-deserved praise on my shoulders - and I couldn't help but notice Acheson sniff contemptuously. "Captain, please continue."

“Well, sir, Marshal Peng said he is concerned that General MacArthur will attack mainland China and initiate a larger war between the two major powers.”

“Perhaps Marshal Peng does not realise it, but we have already been at war with China from the moment its forces invaded Korea and attacked the American Army,” said General Marshall indignantly.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen – Captain Fletcher is simply the messenger. It is for us to decide what to do as a result of this new information. Your contribution has been most helpful. Thank you, Captain,” said the president, and I was relieved to discover that this was my cue to sit down.

The meeting went on into the early hours and Attlee continued to press his point that all-out war with China had to be avoided at all costs. He also explained that if Britain was to keep supporting the United States, it would need increased access to America’s stockpile of vital metals and materials - the wily old devil.

When it was all over I was like a schoolboy on Christmas morning, relishing the thought of a peaceful night in my lavish accommodation. If I’d only known, there was another present waiting for me under the yuletide tree.

I entered my room to find the table lamps already exuding a warm glow across the bed. However, electrical illumination was not my main preoccupation just then because wrapped in the sheets, naked as Lady Godiva herself, was my curvaceous stewardess.

Lapsus memoriae

I've had some pleasant surprises in my life, but I have to say that the impromptu visit of my licentious hostess has to rate with the best of them – she was just what the doctor ordered. Her long dark hair was accompanied by a blindingly white smile, together with breasts that required a generous portion of bed-linen to keep them from popping out. And then there were her sparkling big blue eyes that said: 'Come and get me, if you dare.' The only thing that was missing was her name, which I'd carelessly forgotten after the evening's excitement – *lapsus memoriae*, so to speak.

"How on earth did you get in here?" I asked, unable to conceal my amazement.

"Now, is that any way to welcome me?" she purred, pouting her full red lips and beckoning me over for a kiss.

Naturally I was across the room and obliging my guest before the door had finished swinging shut behind me, and I have to say it was well worth the trip. She was gnawing away and making a meal of me, totally oblivious to the fact that the sheet was no longer succeeding in its task of covering her modesty.

"One of the security officers at the embassy let me in," she explained. "He'd do anything for me."

"I can see why," I replied, looking down at her quivering assets.

"You British men are so cheeky," she gushed, playfully pushing me away, and it was suddenly clear to me that my little gate-crasher was blind drunk.

"We're not the only ones, are we?" I said, and I pulled the sheet back to reveal the plethora of tempting flesh.

"Slow down, lover-boy – a lady likes to be wooed, you know."

That's rich, I thought, considering the circumstances, but she had her own ideas about how the formalities should progress.

"Whisper my name in my ear with that adorable British accent," she demanded.

Bugger, that's torn it, I thought, and my mind worked overtime as I tried to recall her moniker. I attempted to be methodical and started going through the alphabet, which ain't easy when your admirer is rubbing her bare foot up and down your thigh and gaining altitude every second.

"Elizabeth!" I yelled, relieved at finding her appellation so quickly - and I thanked my lucky stars it hadn't been Zelda.

She gave me a strange look and I tried to cover my slip by drawing her to me and doing as instructed.

"Lizzie," I whispered, "I'm so glad you came."

"Oh, that's enough wooing," she exclaimed, and she was tearing at my shirt, sending buttons flying all over the shop.

We were both entering into the proceedings with gusto in no time and she was being damn noisy about it. I was just wondering how I could ask the strumpet to moderate the decibel level without insulting her, when there was a sharp knock at the door.

"Who is it?" I inquired through gritted teeth.

“It is Woodbridge, sir,” said the voice, and mercifully he didn’t enter without an invitation but continued to shout through the closed door.

“I am the ambassador’s secretary. I’m sorry to trouble you, sir, but I’m afraid it’s quite urgent. The president is about to leave and he would like to see you before he departs - if that is convenient.”

Is he trying to be funny, I thought, assuming he must have heard my guest’s squeals echoing down the corridor.

For an instant I wondered if it would be bad form to tell him to clear off, but what can you do when the president asks you to drop by?

“Tell ... tell him I’ll be there right away!” I screamed, and the disappointed look on my guest’s face told me the president had just lost one voter for sure.

I'm sorry, Mr. President

I was a man of mixed emotions, as you can imagine. On the one hand I was mortified at having to bring my recreational pursuits to a premature conclusion, but on the other I couldn't help wonder what on earth the President of the United States could possibly want with a young captain in the RAF.

My curiosity reached fever pitch when I was escorted to the ambassador's study and I discovered that I was to meet Truman alone. He was all smiles and apologised for bothering me at such a late hour. Naturally I told him I was happy to oblige, like a good little toady, but secretly I cursed the fact that my pretty stewardess was no doubt vacating our love-nest as we spoke.

"Considering the late hour, let me get right to the point, Captain," said Truman, sitting at ease in a leather chair.

"You will recall I told your prime minister that the United States has no intention of using the atom bomb," he said, raising his eyebrows as if he expected an answer.

"Yes, Mr. President."

"In strict truthfulness I might have added: not at this time."

I couldn't help but show my surprise and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Truman clearly felt he ought to explain further.

"This is between you and I, you understand. I am telling you this in the strictest confidence because I require your help with another matter."

"Certainly, Mr. President," I said, as a feeling of unease made an appearance deep within my bowels.

"Do not misunderstand me, Captain. I had no intention of deceiving your prime minister. I have no desire to use nuclear weapons if it can possibly be avoided. However, I would be remiss in my duties as president if I didn't put certain contingency plans in place."

He stood up and walked over to a large globe situated next to an imposing marble fireplace. He spun it idly and brought it to a stop so that his hand rested on the Korean peninsular.

"The United States might well face the prospect that it could lose this war with the communists. Therefore I am going to instruct the armed forces to be prepared for the prompt use of the atomic bomb, if and when I deem it necessary. I will endeavour to remain in step with the British, of course, but I will agree to nothing that restricts my freedom of action."

It all sounded like political double-talk to me, but I nodded like a good little sycophant, hoping he'd get to what it all had to do with me before I had conniptions.

"I will not allow the armed forces to endure punishment at the hands of the communists if it can be prevented by the use of American technology. General MacArthur has furnished me with a list of retaliation targets in North Korea and China, requiring twenty-six atomic bombs in all. The use of such weapons had the desired effect against the Japanese and I can see no reason why they might not fulfil a similar function in this conflict."

"Dear God," would have been my response, if my throat hadn't suddenly become as dry as a vulture's crotch.

Truman clearly meant business and he didn't seem to be concerned that he might start World War Three. It was an alarming piece of news, and I couldn't understand why he was telling me, of all people. Unfortunately I was about to find out.⁵

"Obviously diplomatic relations with China are practically non-existent, and consequently it is somewhat difficult to assess the intentions of our enemy. That is why the substance of your meeting with Marshal Peng has been such a revelation and we are greatly indebted to you for your endeavours."

"You're very kind, Mr. President," I said, pleased with the complement, but afraid of where this was all leading.

"I feel it is essential that the Chinese are made aware of our determination to support our friends in South Korea. I regret to say that we misjudged the strength of nationalist feeling in China when we sent our troops into the North."

This was something new to me – a politician admitting he'd made a mistake. But he had another surprise in store.

"Consequently the administration is now willing to consider a peace proposal based upon restoring the pre-war status of Korea, divided at the 38th Parallel."

Truman sat back to see how I took the news and my face must have betrayed my scepticism.

"Is there something bothering you, Captain? Please, feel free to express any reservations you might have."

"Well, sir, as you recall, Marshal Peng stated that he was concerned about General MacArthur's intentions. In that regard, do you think the general will agree to such a compromise?"

For the first time in our meeting the president's amiable smile deserted him, and he leant forward in his chair before he made his forceful pronouncement.

"You can tell Marshal Peng that General MacArthur is an officer in the United States Army and he takes his orders directly from the president."

At first I thought I hadn't heard him correctly. 'I' could tell him? What on earth did he mean by that? I thought it advisable to set him straight there and then, president or not.

"I'm sorry, Mr. President, but I doubt very much whether the paths of Marshal Peng and I will ever cross again."

It was then that the amiable leader of the most powerful nation on earth dropped his bombshell - and my bowels threatened to do the same.

"On the contrary, I have spoken with your prime minister and he has kindly agreed to make your services available to me. You will be returning to Korea immediately and we will arrange for a meeting between you and the Chinese commander-in-chief."

I sat there stunned and when I swallowed, I could feel a lump in the back of my throat - which was always a sure sign that I wanted to blub. Go back to Korea? Back to that hell-hole and leave all this wonderful luxury behind - not to mention my new-found temptress from the skies? It was all too much to bear.

"I can see you are overcome by this latest development, Captain Fletcher," said the president, as observant as ever. "It is a signal honour for a young man to be entrusted with

such an important task, but one which I am confident, with your undoubted talents, you will be able to execute faithfully.”

“Naturally, Mr. President, I’m eager to offer any assistance I can,” I said, lying through my teeth, “but I doubt if the circumstances could be arranged whereby I would be able to meet with Marshal Peng for a second time.”

“It will not be easy, I grant you,” he said grudgingly, “but Mr. Attlee assures me that you and your associate have worked miracles before.”

I was about to protest, but Truman suddenly got up from his seat and I rose automatically. He took my hand and shook it warmly for a second time.

“Once again, I would like to thank you for your help in this matter and I wish you every success in your new mission. Good day, Captain.”

As I left the room and cursed presidents and prime ministers alike, one thought suddenly came to the fore.

Just how far was it from Washington to the Mexican border?

* * *

I didn’t get the chance to wear a sombrero and drink tequila with a senorita on my arm, because Woodbridge was patiently waiting in the wings with my travel arrangements. He delivered the unwelcome news that a driver had been arranged to take me to the airport first thing in the morning.

So I returned to my room, mouthing oaths all the way and turning the corridors blue, only to find that the ambassador’s secretary hadn’t been the only one waiting for my rendezvous with the president to come to an end. My charming stewardess had decided to remain ensconced in my bed, clearly eager for another bout.

Usually such a pleasant surprise would have had me dancing for joy and slapping my thighs in anticipation, but what with the prospect of a return to the bloody battlefield on the horizon, I wasn’t exactly receptive to another overture in the bedroom department.

She was wearing one of my shirts and her milkers threatened to come out of hiding as she walked towards me. She wrapped one of her long shapely legs around my thigh as she put her arms about my neck and drew me towards her. She was still tipsy on Old Mother’s Ruin and looked in danger of falling over so, like a gentleman, I steadied her swaying nakedness by placing both hands firmly on her buttocks.

“I hope we’re not going to be interrupted this time,” she whispered, giving my ear a nibble.

Of all the luck. There I was, living in the lap of luxury with an American beauty at my beck and call, and I was going to have to leave it all behind to face guns and bullets and God knew what else in some freezing hole in far-off Asia - it just wasn’t fair.

My temptress took hold of my tie and dragged me to the bed before bending over to fluff the pillows, revealing her splendid round bottom. She looked at me over her shoulder with a wanton look in her eye.

“Well?” she asked, bringing her little finger to her lips, trying to look innocent and failing miserably.

Bugger it, I thought, if I’m going to pop my clogs, I might as well go out with a bang.

Into the lion's jaws

How I didn't cry all the way to Korea, I'll never know. To make matters worse, my stewardess on the flight to the west coast was a right heifer. If I'd been a religious man, I dare say I would've sworn that God had a decidedly misplaced and wicked sense of humour. Mercifully the rest of the journey was mostly a blur. When I wasn't cursing the bad luck that had thrown me once more into the lion's jaws, I was trying to catch up on my much needed beauty sleep.

In Tokyo I received the disquieting news that the communist advance was so rapid that it was no longer safe to fly into Seoul and we would have to land near Taejon, further south. That suited me just fine. The more distance I could put between me and the Chinese menace the better.

Biggins had joined me for the trip and he was eager to apprise me of his plans to get my message from the president to Marshal Peng. When I asked how the war was progressing, he had nothing to offer but bad news.

"Some of the British battalions managed to recover lost ground, but now a general withdrawal has been ordered south of the Han. The speed with which these bloody Chinese are coming has taken everyone by surprise."

He started to go through the itinerary for my winter holiday in Korea. He'd actually toyed with the idea of having me parachuted behind enemy lines with a handful of our Korean agents, but he had the good grace to concede that such a proposition was fraught with danger. The vast majority of agents they'd sent thus far had either come back dead or had never been heard of again. I was mildly surprised to find Biggins suddenly concerned for my safety, as this wasn't his usual style at all, but I soon discovered the reason for his new-found caution.

"It's vital we get this message to Marshal Peng. It could change the very outcome of the war. We can't risk losing this opportunity through you breaking a leg falling out of the sky or being killed before you get to him."

His concern was touching and I was just about to tell him where he could stick his blasted message, when he began to lay out his other brilliant idea.

"I've decided that our best hope is to try and contact Lee Ji-min, the communist agent who betrayed you in the first place," he said, back to playing free and easy with my life.

"She's tucked away safely in North Korea, isn't she?" I asked.

"That's what we thought, but as luck would have it we've discovered through our American allies that she's been using her ... charms, shall we say, to try and lure unsuspecting American soldiers over to the communist cause."

"My God, Biggins, you can't be serious. I know she's a proper little Helen of Troy, but even the greenest of GIs can't be desperate enough to fall for that."

"You'd be surprised. Half of these men don't even know what they're doing in Korea. Combine that with the fact that they're seeing their friends being slaughtered left, right and centre, and they may very well accept the invitation of a pretty oriental girl to live out the

war as a prisoner. Word is already getting around that the Chinese aren't killing their captives out of hand, unlike the Koreans. They really believe they can convert us, you see."

"So what do you expect me to do, if she's busy flashing her tits to sex-starved Yanks in the name of communism?"

"We've arranged for you to join an American regiment near the town where she was last spotted," he explained, ignoring my reservations about the whole idea.

"It's mighty kind of you to go to all this trouble, Biggins. I suppose you'll be wishing me luck when you send me back into the fray?"

"Don't worry, Fletcher. I'm coming with you to make sure everything goes smoothly."

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way, Biggins, but that doesn't exactly fill me with confidence."

"What do you mean?" he asked, clearly hurt by the insult.

"The last time you joined me at the front, a doctor had to spend most of the day pulling a bullet out of your arse."

Welcome back to the Korean War

The situation in Korea was so confused that when we got to the Han River, expecting to meet up with the Americans, we were greeted by a British major who'd been given the task of blowing up a bridge.

"I haven't seen anyone of that description, I'm afraid," said the major in answer to our enquiries about Ji-min.

"Excuse me," he added, as he made his way to a train packed with refugees that had decided to make a halt just south of the river.

"Hey, you can't stop here, we're about to blow up the bridge!" he yelled to the driver.

By way of reply the gormless locomotive-jockey just stared back at him, in the same impassive way that all Koreans seemed to.

The major shrugged his shoulders and quickly walked down the bank to fire the charges. We watched as an almighty explosion sent the spans of the bridge crashing into the frozen river, spraying us with dirty water and shards of ice.

It was then that scores of refugees leapt from the train and charged towards us. It was a terrifying sight and we all braced ourselves, half-expecting to be torn to shreds by a furious mob. As they went to grab us I pulled back, ready to shoot them where they stood, but they just grasped us by the hands. They simply wanted to thank us and with the bridge now out of commission, they finally felt safe from the pursuing communist army. They'd only hung around to make sure we'd done the job properly.

Since the American who'd delivered us in his jeep had smartly buggered off, there was nothing for it but to head south with everyone else. So we tried to hitch a ride on a tank, but I noticed there was something not quite right. Apart from the fact that it had the word 'DEATH' painted in neat white letters on its side, the passengers looked none too lively. As we got nearer we discovered that it was literally covered with frozen corpses.

"Welcome back to the Korean War," said Biggins, slapping me on the back. "Well, we'd better press on – we've got a mission to complete."

I trudged on half-heartedly in his wake and the thunder of distant mortar fire covered the sound of me telling him where he could stick his bloody mission.

The day had taken on a completely surreal quality. I think it was the fact that in such a short space of time I'd experienced life at completely opposite ends of the spectrum. One minute I'd been lording it with the high and mighty of Washington, and the next I was in the thick of the action. It was then that the absurdity of it all struck me like never before. Men in expensive double-breasted suits were sitting down to sumptuous four-course dinners, calmly discussing the fate of people living and dying in squalor half a world away.

My sense of the ridiculous wasn't helped any by the sight that greeted me as we rested and looked back across the frozen Han River towards Seoul. A haggard woman calmly walked across the frozen expanse and began to hack a hole in the ice with the heel of her wooden clog. She had a child bound to her back with a filthy sash, and two small children, blue with cold, stood by her side watching the proceedings as they wailed continuously.

My curiosity got the better of me and I began to wonder what she was up to, but nothing could have prepared me for what happened next. She untied the sash, grabbed the baby by the armpits, and slowly lowered it into the water. There was no sound. One minute the baby was there, and the next it was gone - presumably dragged away by the current beneath the ice. Without showing any emotion, the old woman simply walked away, followed by her sobbing brood.

“Jesus, Fletcher, did you see that?” screamed Biggins, no longer full of the joys of spring.

“Yes, I saw it,” I replied, reaching for a cigarette.

After all, what else was there to say?

* * *

For want of a better idea, Biggins used his clout to collar a jeep and we headed to Suwan railway station. You see, my witless colleague had decided that by doing so, we would be able to hop on a train as soon as we found out where Ji-min was tucked away. It was a miserable hole and the stink of rubbish piled up to window-height mixed with the stench of urine. Needless to say personal hygiene wasn't high on the list of priorities for the swarm of refugees fleeing for their lives.

Great swathes of them were clinging to the train sitting at the platform and the carriages were barely visible. Poor wretches swung on foot-boards or hung from bars - and a few braver souls clung to the engine, only to be unceremoniously kicked off by the engineer and his firemen.

Eventually we managed to seek out the transport officer and he told us not to worry because military trains had priority. Apparently the monstrosity in the station had been there for a couple of days.

“You mean they've been crammed together for all this time?” I asked incredulously.

“They wouldn't be in such a God-awful hurry if they knew what was waiting for them,” he explained. “Most of these gooks won't make it through the first tunnel, and those that do will freeze to death. We had to knock them off with poles the last time.”

As enthralling as the workings of the Korean transport system might have been, it did nothing to solve our immediate problem – that is to say, finding the elusive Lee Ji-min. So we took up a captain's offer to bed down in his billet, and I was happy to see that his men were well dug in, with a nice open field of fire in case the Chinese army decided to pay an unexpected visit.

“If you need to leave the camp, make sure you go out the way you came in - the rest is mined,” he explained, and safe in the knowledge that we were in good hands, we settled down for the night.

I was out like a light after the day's excitement, but we were rudely awoken in the early hours by someone shouting at the edge of the camp.

“Oh, my giddy Aunt, look at those bloody idiots. Watch out - mines!”

We left our tent to see what all the fuss was about, and we quickly spotted a group of hapless refugees walking slap-bang into the middle of the minefield.

“Corporal, for Christ’s sake give them a burst.”

The corporal carefully sighted his gun and shot a spray of bullets in the path of an old man in white robes walking slowly towards us. As the bullets kicked up dust around his ankles, he slipped and fell. Gradually he recovered enough to get up and he tried to stumble back the way he had come. Suddenly there was a shattering explosion and the refugees threw themselves to the ground.

When the fragments of earth and dust finally settled, all that remained of the old man was a shapeless bloody mess.

“Pity he didn’t understand English,” offered the corporal helpfully.

Biggins and I looked across at the angry captain, hearing his next words with disbelieving ears as he made his pronouncement on the whole affair.

“What a waste of a bloody good mine.”

A tortured soul

Aside from helping us to continue our degrees at the University of Life, infanticide and the accidental obliteration of old men did nothing to help us in our quest to find Ji-mim, and I was hoping that Biggins would give up our search as a bad job. He probably would have, if a big lance corporal called Arthur hadn't poked his nose into our tent to inform us that some chaps out on patrol had met with a woman matching her description.

We caught up with them a few hours later as they were entering a village. It consisted of twenty or so huts, surrounded by hills on all sides.

"Sergeant, we'd like to ask you a few questions, if you wouldn't mind," said Biggins to the leader of the patrol as he tried to direct his men.

"Look, mate," said the hard-pressed sergeant, "I don't know who you are but I'm rather busy, in case you haven't noticed."

"This is vitally important," insisted Biggins with all the tact of a sledgehammer. "We're here on an important assignment for the prime minister."

"Well, give him my best," said the sergeant, who refused to be overawed by Biggins and his unsubtle name-dropping. "I've got to secure this village and make sure there aren't any Chinese troops waiting to send us six feet under. So I don't care if you were sent here by the Lord Almighty himself – if you want to ask me anything you'll have to wait."

As it turned out, the village was as quiet and peaceful as rural Kent on a Sunday morning. Nothing stirred as we followed the sergeant and his men while they searched the buildings. We viewed our surroundings, but there was nothing to see but broken pottery and crumbling stone walls.

The few villagers we came across simply grimaced or looked at us with vacant smiles, as if they didn't care what was happening around them. Curiosity got the better of me and I went to poke my head through the door of one of the huts. It was stuck, but the wood was rotting away and it swung open after I gave it a firm shove.

It's strange, but when I look back at the horrors I've had the misfortune to witness over the years, it's not the bloodshed that wakes me up in a cold sweat. No, it's the insanity that war inevitably gives birth to that disturbs my slumber - like the old woman who'd thrown her baby into the frozen river as if it was so much baggage.

So it is with some regret that I succumbed to the temptation of learning the contents of that hut. At first sight the room had appeared empty, but when my eyes finally became accustomed to the gloom I saw a woman, crouched down and sitting in the corner on the floor. She was only young and she wore a kimono that once must have been bright and colourful, but was now nothing but a dirty rag.

I dare say that such a sight would not have troubled me unduly, considering the mayhem that was continuing all around us, but she was clutching a dead naked child to her chest. The limbs of the poor mite were a putrid blue in colour - and horrifying as the vision was, it was the look on the young girl's face that I will never erase from my memory, no matter how hard I might try.

In spite of her youth, her eyes had sunken into the depths of her sockets, partly masked by matted lumps of hair which hung from her forehead. I had picked up a smattering of Korean during my time in the country, and I could tell that the sounds from her lips were the ravings of a tortured soul.

She did nothing to signify that she was aware of my presence, in spite of the fact that her eyes were set on mine. It was as if her very humanity had deserted her. If you have ever looked into the eyes of a wild animal left to rot in a cage, then that might go some way to describe what I saw that day.

There is a line that marks the sane from the insane – from those who still have the wherewithal to face the tragedies that the world is so fond of throwing at us, and those who are completely lost. In that dark hut thousands of miles from home, I saw a poor defenceless girl who had crossed that line because of the deeds of other men.

When I close my eyes and see that apparition, as clearly as if I'd taken a photograph and committed it to memory, I know with utter certainty the true and irrevocable cost of war.

As I left the village I noticed the gruesome sight of dead and burned bodies, their faces contorted in pain. Amid the carnage I spied a grisly wooden image, like Eloah himself, which stood in the centre of the village - carved to ward off evil spirits, no doubt. If that was its purpose then, in part, it had succeeded – for there it stood totally unscathed, surveying the slaughter all around it.

The meat grinder

Nearly 60,000 refugees died during the first winter of the campaign, they say. And from what I saw I could well have believed it. The endless death and destruction was getting into my soul and I needed an antidote for my *own* sanity. I found it as we made our way back to camp and came across a wide stream where a bridge had been destroyed.

A hulking Turkish soldier was busy fording the stream, carrying a refugee on his back. As soon as he had taken one grateful traveller to the far bank he was back again, like St Christopher himself, offering his services to the next willing applicant. The long line of refugees were laughing and cheering and patting the helpful Turk on his broad back, even while the sound of ominous explosions rang out a short distance away.

The Turk's fine example must have shaken us out of our funk, because some of the patrol handed over their rations to the starving locals lining the road. After what I'd seen that day I'd lost my appetite anyway, so Biggins and I rummaged in our packs for what little we had left and threw it to a grateful band of peasants.

Once back at camp, Biggins wasted no time interrogating the unlucky sergeant. We described Ji-min to him and he was convinced that he'd seen her heading for a village on the other side of a nearby hill. By a fortunate coincidence, he and his men had orders to head in that direction the following morning.

So we resigned ourselves to another night under canvas and it was then that the heavens opened. An English shower is one thing, but this was something else. It was as if we were being struck by lead pellets, and it came down hour after hour, creating swelling puddles so that unless you were lucky enough to be raised off the ground, you were soaked right through.

It was with some relief that we packed our sodden belongings at first light and followed the rest of the brigade to their next encampment. Unfortunately the terrain was so difficult to cross that we didn't get to the hill until nightfall. By the time the sergeant pointed out the village in the distance where the elusive Ji-min was supposedly hiding, it was too risky to attempt reaching it until the morning.

Once again we were forced to share another uncomfortable night with our hardy chaps from the Gloucesters and we had to help with the digging of trenches in the sodden ground.

"What's so special about this hill?" I asked one of the privates – a man called Harry, if memory serves.

"The next hill is crawling with Chinese," he said in a strong Black Country accent. "We're just getting ready for the meat grinder."

"The what?"

"First we begin with the long range artillery from ten miles away and smash the hill with high explosives. Then we use the lighter guns at closer range. After that, it's the turn of the tanks - and just for good measure, we send in aircraft to saturate the whole bloody place with napalm and rockets. That's the meat grinder."

"Is that when you go in?" I asked, admiring their style - but there was more.

“Not bloody likely. We stay nice and safe in our foxholes and fire our rifles and machine-guns and mortars all morning. Of course you’ll be long gone by then,” he said enviously.

“Surely there’s no one left alive after that,” I insisted.

“You’d be bloody surprised,” said Harry, who’d been through it all before. “There are swarms of the buggers. One time I walked up to a foxhole full of Chinese playing dead, and one of the bastards turned his gun on me. If I’d been a bit slower about letting him have it, I wouldn’t be here talking to you now. I’m not going to make the same mistake twice. Next time I’ll lob a bloody grenade in first just to make sure.”

“What if you haven’t got a grenade?” I asked, just for devilment.

“Then I’ll throw an empty beer can. They won’t know the difference and if one of them moves, I’ll shoot the bugger right between the eyes.”

I carried on digging, eager to make my trench as deep as possible. And I counted my blessings, safe in the knowledge that I’d be long gone before the real fighting began. An artillery shell flew overhead as if to punctuate my last thought.

I decided I’d be packed and ready at first light and if Biggins overslept ... well, he’d just have to catch up with me.

* * *

In my eagerness to be away the first chance we got, sleep only came in fits and starts. I was jolted awake by the sound of gunfire and I was up and clutching my machine-gun in seconds.

“Don’t worry, sir,” said Harry, pointing to a hill over to the west. “It looks like the poor Yanks are getting it this time.”

The sounds of battle raged for nearly an hour and it didn’t seem to be getting any closer, although it was no less terrifying for that. Eventually the firing diminished and we breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Well, it sounds like the Yanks have seen them off,” said my new friend, while I strained my ears, alerted to a rustling noise in the shrubs below us.

“Shh,” I hissed, and Harry was about to tell me to calm down when he heard it too.

We struggled to see in the early morning light and it quickly dawned on us that what was left of the Chinese force was making its way through the valley, totally oblivious to the fact that they were heading right across our path. Harry alerted the others, and when the Chinese force was within range, the whole of the company opened up with everything they’d got.

I’m not one to enjoy slaughter for its own sake, but I decided that for every one of the enemy I killed, it would mean one less alive to kill *me*. Besides, with everyone doing their level best to kill every Chinaman in sight, it would’ve been bad manners not to lend a hand.

Some of the chaps clearly had the bloodlust on them and the wilder spirits actually stood up, hallooing as they emptied their weapons into the mass of retreating soldiers. As for me, caution has always been my byword and I nestled safely in my trench and picked off my targets with tidy bursts of fire.

I don't expect it made a difference to the result in the end. Not one of us received so much as a scratch, while the poor Chinese devils coated the valley floor with their dead. There might have been one or two fortunate souls who escaped the withering fire, but I very much doubt it.

If I'd been desperate to leave before, I was like a bull at the gate after that. Biggins and I grabbed our gear and went to say our goodbyes to the sergeant, who proceeded to give us the worst news I could have hoped to hear just then.

"Somehow the Chinese have got to our rear," he said with infuriating calmness.

"What are we going to do? We've got to get to Anyang!" I yelled, hoping that the mention of our preposterous mission would mask my fear.

"We'll get you there, don't you worry," he said, as if he was arranging for an alternative connection at the local railway station. "We're going to move on to the next hill and shift what's left of the Chinese positions. You'll have to come with us, but just stay at the rear and leave the dirty work to us."

That went without saying, of course, but I had another idea.

"Why don't we wait here?" I asked, panic causing me to forget about the Chinese threat behind us.

"I wouldn't recommend it," he said, "You see, I've just ordered our gunners to blow the living crap out of this hill."

Let's go together

So there was our choice, stated in plain terms. We could stay where we were and get blown to smithereens, or we could follow our heroes while they took the next worthless hill.

A wonderful array of options, you'll allow, but we had no choice but to take the lesser of two evils. So we abandoned the safety of our foxholes to make our way down the valley and up the other side, while I silently prayed that our guns and bombers had already finished off the enemy.

When we were halfway up the hill, I was happy to see that our artillery pieces were still pounding away at the rocks and bushes above us. Surely to God, I thought, nothing can survive an onslaught like that.

As if to prove me wrong, grenades started landing amongst the men leading the charge, and we heard the horrifying sound of machine-guns sweeping our position. I was on the ground before the first grenade hit home and I headed for cover behind a sturdy rock.

The three soldiers who were at the head of our platoon didn't get up again and we presumed they were dead. Another soldier joined me behind the rock and instead of cowering on the ground and lying doggo like a sensible chap, he turned and prepared to fire at our attackers.

A machine-gun burst smashed into his rifle and he dropped it, cursing, to reveal that he'd lost a couple of his fingers. I'll say this for the tough bugger, he gave hardly so much as a yelp, and I passed him my handkerchief to tie over the wound. It was then that our commanding officer decided to join us.

"It's that bastard in the slit trench on the crest of the hill that's causing the bloody problem. Get over to the right and swing round to catch the buggers unawares!" he screamed.

For an awful minute I thought he was talking to me, but I soon realised he was yelling to another company over to the right of our position. They'd barely acknowledged his order, when the unlucky major took a round in his arm and fell to the ground.

"Damn, the bloody thing's useless," he cried, clutching his limp appendage to stop the blood oozing out.

It was only then that I realised I hadn't seen what had happened to Biggins in all the commotion. I was just resigning myself to the fact that I'd have to satisfy my curiosity some other time, when who should arrive but the man himself, carrying a stretcher.

"Where did you spring from?" I asked, totally confused.

"The stretcher-bearer twisted his ankle, so I've sort of volunteered," he explained, while he and a medic helped the major on to the canvas.

They were off down the hill before I had a chance to question him any further. I was secretly cursing him for having found a way out of the whole mess. But I soon changed my tune when I realised that those angels of mercy were expected to head back into the fray time and again.

I marvelled at the courage of men who willingly faced a barrage of bullets to rescue their fallen comrades. The worst of it was they couldn't even shoot back – they just had to trust to luck. For my money they were the unsung heroes of the day.

By now the air was humming with the sound of bullets flying in every direction. We ventured to peer out from the side of the rock and watched as two of our men wriggled over the ground on their bellies to the foot of the ridge. The man at the front stood up to throw a grenade into the enemy's trench, but he was shot at point-blank range and killed instantly.

The grenade fell from his grasp and exploded, but miraculously his friend was unharmed. Unfortunately his charmed life wasn't to last and when he stood up with his own grenade for a second attempt, he went the same way as his partner and crumpled on to the dirt.

"Here, take this," said my fingerless friend, passing me a grenade. "I'll be right behind you."

Before I could tell him what to do with his bloody grenade, he was shoving me forward and we crawled up the slope on our stomachs, just as our unlucky heroes had done moments before.

I was cursing the digitally challenged lunatic and toying with the idea of heading straight back to the security of my blessed rock, but we'd been spotted by then and bullets were thudding into the dirt behind us.

"Let's go together," said my young Montgomery. "One ... two ... three!"

He stood up to lob his explosive cargo into the enemy, while I clung firmly to the ground as if it was my nanny's apron.

As a result of his bravery, the hero met his Maker in a similar fashion to his compatriots and he fell back into the shrubbery, as dead as the lifeless fingers that had deserted him only moments before.

So there I was with nowhere to hide and the enemy practically breathing down my neck. I could almost feel them waiting for me to get up and make my presence known before they turned me into worm food. As it turned out, two things saved me – my vanity and my fondness for cricket.

I do like to look my best in case some promising female company drops by, which can even happen in a war-torn country like Korea, as you know. To that end, along with my handkerchief (which I'd just wasted on my dead comrade-in-arms), I carried a small mirror.

I took it from my pocket and lay on my back, carefully holding my beauty kit so that I had an uninterrupted view of the offending trench in relative safety.

With trembling fingers I reached for the grenade my friend had so thoughtfully provided and pulled the pin. This was where my hours of practice in front of the wicket really paid off. I calculated the trajectory and angle of elevation as best I could (without access to logarithmic tables, I might add), and threw the projectile in the fervent hope that I was accurate enough to hit the trench first time. You see, tossing the grenade not only gave away my position, but it was the only one I had.

Fortunately my throw would have made the games master proud and I scored a direct hit. As the dust settled I heard cheering amongst our troops. With the immediate threat removed,

the new commanding officer immediately had his men singling out every foxhole they could find to wipe out the enemy.

For what it was worth, we'd taken the hill.

A gargantuan fairy godmother

The commanding officer had assured me I'd be receiving a medal for my timely assistance in overcoming the enemy. Clearly nobody had seen me being practically manhandled to the front by my fingerless corporal. Not that I gave a damn – I was just glad to come out of the whole nightmare in one piece.

My ill-deserved reputation for heroics did provide one practical benefit to help us in our predicament, however. You see, when Biggins and I had recovered enough to head for the main road, the commanding officer was so grateful for our help that he provided us not only with a jeep, but a driver to go along with it.

And what a driver he turned out to be. His name was Private Burrows and he was gigantic – like some sort of Malambruno. He was all bone and muscle, with a booming voice to match, and when he took the driver's seat he caused the jeep to lean over alarmingly.

If we were in any doubt as to his towering strength, we had a taste of it on our journey to Anyang, where our communist beauty was supposedly loitering. A carrier that had been involved in an accident was resting on its side, and a large group of soldiers were trying to right it without success. Gulliver pulled the jeep to a stop and got out to offer a hand. The grateful men stepped back, every one of them flushed red in the face from their exertions. They looked on with some amusement as our jolly giant leant against the carrier with his broad shoulder. What we saw next left everyone staring open-mouthed with disbelief.

Without any effort he simply gave the carrier a gentle shove and it fell back on to its wheels with an almighty thud. He brushed his hands to remove any excess dust and waved the stunned crew goodbye before he stepped into the jeep, causing Biggins to grab hold of the side to stop himself from tipping out.

When we eventually arrived at Anyang, it was a larger place than I had expected. It had a railway station and even a handful of factories, but the majority of the place had been destroyed.

The first thing that struck you on entering the town was the endless number of children who infested the place. They were orphans or offspring who had been abandoned by their parents. (Not an uncommon occurrence in Korea.) Surviving any way they could, the bantlings roamed around in large groups.

The majority were boys and the few girls amongst them were so wasted away from lack of food, they barely looked any different from their male counterparts. There must have been youngsters of almost every age roaming the streets, some barely old enough to walk.

As far as I could tell they slept among the ruined buildings, but how they survived the cold was beyond me. Their clothes were little more than rags and they ran barefoot over the freezing, muddy ground.

When I first laid eyes on the ailing and emaciated bodies, the one thing that stood out above all else was the sight of their faces. I found myself staring, unable to believe that

the visages belonged to children. Without exception they were all scarred, giving them the appearance of old men. We were so transfixed by the onslaught of Tages-like youth, that we hadn't even noticed Burrows' response to their cries for help.

"Chop-chop," they shouted in their high, shrill voices as they surrounded the jeep.

Burrows reached for a box of goodies he'd stowed under the seat, clearly knowing what to expect. Although many of the children had obviously seen him before and eagerly reached out with their hands for the welcome surprise, some of the younger waifs just stood there in awe, as King Kong towered above them.

We were quickly surrounded as children swarmed around the jeep from all directions. Since Biggins and I had nothing to offer, we were at somewhat of a loss as to what to do next, but thankfully a truck suddenly appeared and the little mites deserted us, screaming as they ran towards the new arrival.

"Some of the drivers on the main supply route know about the children here and make regular stops, even though they're not supposed to," explained Burrows. "If we don't look out for the little blighters, who else will?"

He seemed to live according to that aristocrat's epitaph: 'What we Gave we Have'. He was an incongruous sight, like some sort of gargantuan fairy godmother. I was just starting to think how even the toughest sons-of-bitches can be as soft as butter, when he disturbed my deliberations.

"If we're staying the night, you'd better keep any valuables safely tucked away. The thieving little bastards are likely to sneak up while you're asleep and take the lot."

Our uninvited visitor

Since Ji-min hadn't rushed into my arms to catch up on old times, we decided to follow our driver's advice and seek out some suitable lodgings. Biggins discovered a deserted set of offices in one of the factories and while it was hardly the Savoy, it sure beat the hell out of tents and mud-filled foxholes.

When we'd finished amusing ourselves with a pack of cards that Burrows had thoughtfully brought along, we settled down for the night and it wasn't long before his warnings about midnight bandits were realised.

Biggins had set down a bottle of rice wine and our tea caddy in the corner of the office, and I woke up to the sound of tinware clattering to the floor. I was just in time to see an outstretched hand pull back through a broken window and I sprang to the door to catch a glimpse of our uninvited visitor.

Biggins was at my side and we saw a small Korean boy climb through a hole in the wall and run across the adjoining field, darting nervous glances in our direction. He headed for a small house in the distance and went inside, slamming the door behind him. I was prepared to leave it at that, but then we noticed that the little half-pint had run off with our supply of tea.

"I can't survive without a decent cuppa in the morning," insisted Biggins.

Burrows was still dead to the world, so the two of us headed to our little thief's hideaway. When we opened the door we found a room furnished with a table covered in empty ration tins, and the lad was adding our tea to his collection.

All of a sudden we heard a female voice coming from the other room and whoever it belonged to was heading our way. She gave a gasp as she entered and the look of surprise on her face must have competed with our own because there, standing in the doorway, was the communist double agent herself - Lee Ji-min.

* * *

Once I'd got over the shock of suddenly finding my favourite Korean beauty in such unexpected circumstances, I realised I was strangely torn by this new turn of events.

On the one hand there was the delight of seeing someone with whom I'd shared such pleasant memories (kicks to the gonads aside), and on the other there was my disappointment that Biggins now had the means to carry out his ludicrous plan.

"Thomas, what are you doing here?" she asked predictably.

"Do you know this woman?" asked Biggins with all the astuteness you'd expect from the head of our intelligence department.

"Mr. Biggins, allow me to introduce you to Miss Lee Ji-min, the double-crossing kidnapper I was telling you about," I said, and his eyes lit up.

"We've been looking for you, Miss Lee," he explained, getting straight to the point.

"By chasing starving children?" she asked, pointing to the young boy.

“I doubt whether he’ll be able to satisfy his appetite by eating tea leaves,” I opined, and I was pleased to see that I brought a smile to her face.

“Don’t you take anything seriously, Thomas?” she asked.

The boy ran to her and she embraced him, stroking his matted hair.

“I took Marshal Peng seriously. That’s why I passed on his message to the president in person,” I said, hoping to get her attention.

“The President of the United States?” she asked, clearly not believing me.

“Look, why don’t we discuss this in private?” I said.

I was hoping to get Biggins out of earshot so I could convince her that any thought of getting me up north to Marshal Peng was hopeless. But my gormless partner wasn’t wasting any time.

“He’s telling the truth, Miss Lee, and it is vital that he meets with Marshal Peng as soon as possible.”

Inwardly I was cursing Biggins and I couldn’t help but notice that he wasn’t including himself in the nice little jaunt behind enemy lines. As it happened I needn’t have worried - as became clear presently.

“I do not have time for those games anymore. I have more important work to do here. These children need me.”

“How can you help all of these little terrors?” I asked. “There are so many of them.”

“I do what I can. Some of your soldiers have been very kind and they bring supplies of food, but I need to find more. Without my help these children will die.”

“Very commendable, Miss Lee,” said Biggins, never knowing when to give something up as a bad job, “but you must realise that what we have to tell Marshal Peng might put an end to this war once and for all. Think of how many more children’s lives could be saved.”

“I am afraid that I cannot act according to such abstract ideas,” said Ji-min with her usual formality. “By doing what I can here and now, I can make a difference.”

“What about the communist cause?” I asked, unable to believe how her priorities had suddenly changed.

“Deciding to fight for a cause is one thing,” she explained, “but when you see the results of conflict for yourself, such high-minded ideals as communism and democracy soon lose any meaning. North Korea or South – these are my people.”

Biggins kept trying to persuade her to co-operate, bless him, but she wouldn’t budge and he finally conceded that there was nothing for it but to return to our luxurious accommodation and get some sleep. As a parting shot, he asked Ji-min to stay nearby.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she insisted. “I will never abandon the children while they still need me.”

This seemed to satisfy him and we made our way to the door to leave. Ji-min said something to the young boy and he left the house through a back door before she called after me.

“Could I speak with you for a moment, Thomas?”

Biggins gave me an inquisitive look and I shrugged, telling him I'd meet him back at our makeshift camp.

"What do you want, Ji-min?" I asked, unable to hide my curiosity.

"The answer to that question is very simple, Thomas. Although the fate of the children is my primary concern, I still have a woman's needs. It is you that I want," she said, and she held out her arms expectantly.

Once I'd overcome my astonishment at her forwardness, I made my decision. What the hell, I thought – war may be hell, but it might as well have its compensations.

Enfants terrible

I was as happy as a sand boy whiling away my time with the gorgeous Ji-min - and I'm pleased to report that she treated a certain part of my anatomy a lot more kindly than she'd done the last time we'd met. However, as wonderful as our reunion was, she had me working for my supper. She was so determined her precious band of waifs were protected from starvation that she had me running around like a blue-arsed fly, scrounging supplies off anyone who'd listen. And that exercise, let me tell you, provided a greater insight into the various guises of human nature than any psychology class.

One the one hand, there were those amazing saints who couldn't do enough to help – like my very own Ji-min, for example. Some of the chaps would bring in supplies and go without food after a hard day's march. Others would risk censure from their superiors or even a court-martial to make sure the little *enfants terrible* didn't drop dead in the streets. I witnessed one particular angel of mercy walk into town after a ten mile hike, carrying a back-breaking sack of food which he promptly helped Ji-min distribute to the eager children before collapsing exhausted on the ground.

And then there are those who wouldn't piss on a burning orphanage to put out a fire. Do you know, I saw a gaggle of South Korean soldiers, straining under the weight of their newly acquired American rations, as they kicked their way through swathes of their desperate youth without so much as a passing glance?

Who am I to judge, you say, when I was only assisting in the feeding of the five thousand so I could have my wicked way with the adorable Ji-min. You may well be right, but even I balk at the sight of some sour-faced fatso tucking into a tin of ham, only to give a weak and stumbling eight-year-old a swift kick for having the temerity to reach out for a morsel. The children might have been helping themselves uninvited, but when you're starving, high morals ain't exactly your top priority. Hunger is a bad counsellor, as it were.

Idle musing about morality and ethics aside, I'd have been happy to carry on assisting my Mother Teresa until the end of the war, but once it was clear that she wasn't going to facilitate my meeting with Marshal Peng, Biggins wanted to be away.

He took me aside to explain that we were off to the Eighth Army Headquarters near Pusan to see General Walker, who'd done such a sterling job keeping the North Koreans at bay while MacArthur organised his war-changing assault at Inchon. To my consternation, Biggins was still considering the possibility of having me parachuted into the North and he wanted to ask the commander for the necessary resources.

Needless to say I was in a foul mood all the way. Not only had I been forced to leave my nice little encampment, where I had ready access to Ji-min's wonderful attentions, but he was intent on risking my life for his ridiculous mission. My nerves weren't helped any when I learned that nine out of ten of our Korean agents didn't make it back.

Fortunately Biggins didn't get a chance to put his case because tragedy was about to strike. When we finally caught up with him, Walker was out and about visiting his forward positions. If we'd been a few minutes earlier, Biggins might have had his way,

but, as it turned out, we only had time to see a South Korean truck pull across the road and collide with the general's jeep.

Later we saw the commander being whisked away to hospital with head injuries, but he never made it and died on the way. It was a shame for the general, of course, but on the bright side it resulted in the scuppering of Biggins' terrible plans.⁶

Apart from saving me from certain death, General Walker's demise was to have another profound effect on the future of the war. You see, his replacement was General Matthew Ridgway, and I don't think I exaggerate when I say he could well have saved us all from World War Three. Somehow Ridgway turned the fortunes of the American Army around and transformed a defeated, demoralised force into a disciplined and determined one.

In light of what Truman had told me about the American contingency plans for the use of nuclear weapons, I ask you - what do you think would have happened if Ridgway hadn't taken over when he did? The Americans could well have lost the war and been forced out of Korea. The question is – would the administration have just stood by and accepted defeat? Somehow I doubt it.

Anyway, Biggins was in a fine state of alarm, having watched his last chance to complete his mission fall by the wayside, and I was trying to hide my relief when he made another one of his shocking announcements.

"We don't need the general. We can go straight to the CIA station in Pusan."

"But we're just a couple of Brits. The CIA won't get involved in our problem without the proper authority," I said, trying to extinguish his enthusiasm before it took hold.

"You're forgetting – save for God Almighty, we've got the highest authority you could ever hope for."

"What do you mean?"

"We've got Harry S Truman!"

If I were sane

Eventually we managed to catch up with the local CIA chap - a big ex-FBI man whose name escapes me. As I'd predicted, when we explained we needed to see Marshal Peng in North Korea, we were treated to a barrage of four-letter expletives that would have made a navvy blush.

"My associate has been asked to meet with Marshal Peng by the President of the United States," said Biggins, hoping to impress his American counterpart.

"Oh, yeah? And I was asked to come to Korea by the Pope," said our CIA man sceptically.

"I assure you we're telling you the truth. Why would we make up such a thing? You've seen my identification, haven't you?" insisted Biggins.

"Look, if you're with British Intelligence, why would this guy be getting his orders from the president?" he asked, pointing at me.

I kept quiet and secretly hoped that the CIA spook would win the argument.

"You explain it to him, Captain," said Biggins, drawing me in.

"I was in Washington as an adviser to our prime minister and the president asked me to meet with Marshal Peng - unofficially, so to speak," I explained, and the CIA man couldn't hide his irritation.

"Look, just suppose for one minute that what you say is true - what the hell do you expect me to do about it? I don't even know where this Marshal Peng hangs out."

"But I'm sure you could find out if you had to. I can't stress to you enough - this matter is of vital importance to both our countries. If we are to find a way of ending this conflict, Captain Fletcher *has* to meet with Marshal Peng," cried Biggins, exasperated.

"Hold on," said the Yankee snoop. "Did you say this guy's name is Fletcher?"

"Yes - Captain Fletcher," I said, intrigued by his reaction to my name.

"Well, I'll be. I've been looking for you. Maybe you're both kosher after all. There are some awfully important folks back in Washington who want to know what you've been up to, Captain."

"We've been trying to make contact with a Korean woman who initiated the first meeting with Marshal Peng, but she won't help us. That's why we're here," explained Biggins.

"Wait here a minute," said our American spy, and he left us kicking our heels in his office for the next hour.

Whatever he did or whoever he spoke to clearly had the desired effect because, when he returned, he couldn't have been more helpful.

"It seems I misjudged you guys," he admitted magnanimously. "Tell me what you need and I'll see what I can do."

"First of all we need to locate and contact Marshal Peng so that we can arrange a meeting," said Biggins.

“I’ll do what I can. We’ve been training Koreans to land in enemy-held territory, but it’s so crowded up there with troops and police that most of our guys get caught before long,” explained the CIA man, not helping my delicate nerves any.

He told us we’d have to wait in Pusan for a couple of days while he tried to see what he could find out. Biggins was impatient, of course, but the Yank could have taken a month of Sundays for all I cared.

I hadn’t slept in a comfortable bed since my trip to Washington, so I sought out my little hotel overlooking the harbour and, after a shower and a hot meal, I was almost starting to feel human again. I even persuaded Biggins to try out a few of the more promising bars, where we spotted a couple of likely Korean lovelies. But, what with the thought of the impending adventure he had planned for me, my heart wasn’t in it, and I simply spent the night getting as drunk as a brewer’s fart.

Mr. CIA was as good as his word, and two days later we were in his office for a second time. He’d clearly been a busy boy and somebody higher up must have given him a swift kick up his behind because he couldn’t do enough for us.

“We’ve found Marshal Peng – he’s in Pyongyang. One of our guys managed to pass the word that our Captain Fletcher here needs to meet with him.”

“The tricky thing is, how do we arrange the meeting?” asked Biggins, thinking out loud, but the CIA man could barely contain his excitement.

“It’s all arranged,” he announced, surprising Biggins and almost giving me a case of what felt like the Rangoon runs. “I don’t know how Marshal Peng did it, but he got a message through to General Ridgway, indicating that he’s willing to grant you an audience.”

“But Pyongyang’s at the other end of the country,” I complained, not believing what I was hearing.

“No sweat,” said the cocky spy. “We’ll fly you in.”

“But the North Koreans have Russian MIGs, don’t they? They’ll shoot us down before we get anywhere near Pyongyang!” I yelled, not caring what he thought.

I didn’t like the idea one bit. The MIGs were powered by Rolls-Royce engines which, to the horror of our allies, Attlee had flogged off to the Soviets. The problem was that we didn’t have anything to match the pride of the Soviet Air Force.

“Marshal Peng has promised you safe passage,” said the American, as if that settled the matter.⁷

I returned to my comfortable room overlooking the harbour to pack a few essentials before our trip to the airfield and, as I sat looking out across the water while I punished a large glass of brandy, I tried to recall how far it was to Japan.

Idly I wondered how long it would take me to swim to my gorgeous waitresses in the Land of the Rising Sun, but since I’d left my rubber-ring at home, I decided to board the plane that would deliver me once more to the sword of Damocles. I suppressed my fear by chatting to the American crew, who looked no happier at the prospect of landing in North Korea than I did.

“I know a couple of cracking waitresses in Tokyo who’d be really pleased to see us if you fancied changing the flight plan,” I ventured.

The young captain paused as he prepared to start the engines and he gave me a thoughtful look.

“That would be the sensible and sane thing to do,” he admitted.

“Well, why don’t you?” I asked, only half in jest.

“Hell, Captain, if I were sane, would I be in Korea?”

I could see his point.

These dangerous times

I found myself in a Dakota, which would have been a nice home from home after my time in Berlin, if I hadn't had other things on my mind. Biggins had insisted on coming along, fool that he was. But whether he'd done so in order to capture some of the glory if my mission was successful, or if he was just there to make certain I went through with it, I was never quite sure.

I was too busy waiting for the flak that would shoot us down to care. Although the crew took the sensible precaution of heading out to sea and working their way up the coast, I knew that the final part of our journey, as we approached Pyongyang, would be the tricky bit.

By some miracle we landed at our destination in one piece a few hours later and there was even a car waiting, ready to whisk Biggins and I off to see Peng - or so we hoped. The crew were ordered to stay aboard and they were only too happy to oblige - with their hands nervously hovering over the controls, ready for a quick getaway, if I was any judge.

We were joined in the car by two serious-looking North Korean soldiers, and a truck with a dozen or so Chinese troops followed on behind. When we arrived at a rather impressive administration building, we were searched for concealed weapons and two armed Chinese soldiers led us to a large, sparsely furnished room.

Instead of the firing squad that my tortured mind had feared, Marshal Peng sat comfortably at a desk, flanked by two more guards. He didn't bother getting up to shake us warmly by the hand, but indicated that we should sit on the two chairs provided, and he treated us to a thin smile. I looked around to see if a strong drink was in the offing, but it was a forlorn hope.

"It is good to see you again, Captain Fletcher, especially as you clearly went to so much trouble to arrange this meeting. However, I do not believe I have had the pleasure," he said, looking across at Biggins.

"Marshal Peng, may I present Mr. Biggins from the British Foreign Office."

"Come, come," replied Peng. "Since we have gone to such exhaustive lengths to facilitate this reunion, I think that we should be completely honest with one another. I am well aware that you both work for the Secret Intelligence Service and are here under the auspices of the CIA."

"As you wish, sir," I replied, and Biggins gave me a concerned glance.

"I take it you were able to persuade your prime minister of my country's determination to protect our interests in Korea," said Peng, not wasting any more time with social niceties.

"Not only that, Marshal Peng, but I was also fortunate enough to speak with President Truman," I boasted.

"Indeed?" he said, evidently impressed and surprised by this latest revelation. "Were you at this meeting, Mr. Biggins?"

“No, I’m afraid I wasn’t,” said Biggins, clearly embarrassed, and Peng stared at him - no doubt wondering why the gormless idiot was there at all.

I would have enjoyed his discomfort if I’d had the time and leisure, but Peng chose to waste no time and got to the heart of the matter.

“What was the president’s response when you relayed the substance of our previous meeting?”

“He admitted that he and his government had underestimated the strength of feeling in China,” I said warily.

“Quite so. However, I am sure that this is now something of which he can be in no doubt,” he said smugly, treating us to an inscrutable smile.

I hesitated, wondering how he might take what I was about to say next.

“Nevertheless, Marshal Peng, the president went on to explain that he has certain contingency plans in place – plans that will be set in motion if the United States faces defeat in the Korean peninsular.”

“I see. And what would be the nature of these ... contingency plans?”

I coughed to clear my throat, and I suddenly became all too aware of the armed men all around us. There we were, deep in the heart of enemy territory, with only the assurance of the man seated opposite that we would be allowed to leave unmolested, and I was about to threaten him and his beloved country. I steeled myself and prepared to receive his reaction.

“Sir, I regret to inform you that the president has ordered his forces to be prepared for the possible use of nuclear weapons.”

I paused, waiting for the angry response I felt sure was bound to follow, but he simply sat there as if I’d just informed him of tomorrow’s weather forecast. If anything, his smile appeared to broaden before he spoke.

“And did the president see fit to share with you exactly *where* he might use such weapons?”

“He offered no specifics, Marshal Peng, but he did not rule out the possibility of dropping bombs on Chinese cities.”

I waited, holding my breath. Surely to God, I thought, if he’s human he’s got to show some sort of emotion.

“I see. Tell me, Captain, did you believe the president when he told you this?” he asked, and I was sure that I detected a look of disquiet as he stared back at me.

“I did, sir.”

“Are you sure that these are not just idle threats to placate General MacArthur?” he asked, still clearly worried about the intentions of the old World War Two hero.

“I doubt that, Marshal Peng. In fact the president was adamant that if the general does not see fit to fall in line with the policy of the United States government, he will be forced to face the consequences.”

“I take it that you mean he would be removed from his post.”

“That is exactly what I mean,” I replied, and even Biggins gave a quiet gasp at this latest revelation.

“But forgive me, Captain, you appear to contradict yourself,” said Peng, clearly taken aback by this sudden show of strength by Truman. “You suggest that the president is inclined to use these terrible weapons against the people of China if his country faces defeat. Yet, at the same time, he is willing to sacrifice General MacArthur, who has made it abundantly clear that he is intent on winning the war and has advocated the use of these very same weapons.”

Having got Peng’s attention, it was now time to test the water and see how disposed the Chinese Army would be to Truman’s new proposal for putting an end to the war.

“That is correct, sir. However, General MacArthur has made it clear that he wishes to defeat North Korea and unite the country. I think the important point is, what would the president and the American people accept as a satisfactory conclusion to the war.”

“And what would that be, Captain?”

“President Truman has indicated to me that he would now be content to restore the status quo at the 38th Parallel.”

“No doubt he would,” replied Peng, cynically, but I could tell he was considering this new proposal even as we spoke.

A few weeks before it had looked as though the Chinese were going to win, but now General Ridgway was slowly turning the tide against them. For the first time Peng appeared at a loss for words and for a few moments he looked down thoughtfully at his empty desk.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” he said finally, looking at me and ignoring Biggins, much to his chagrin.

“You have been very forthright, particularly considering your present circumstances,” he said rather menacingly.

“Thank you, Marshal Peng,” said Biggins, no doubt trying to appear useful.

“I will consider carefully what you have told me, but naturally I will have to discuss these matters further with the chairman. However, I need detain you no longer. Thank you, gentlemen.”

We stood up to leave, and if the pretence of a dignified exit hadn’t dictated otherwise, I would have been off as fast as a bride’s nightie. However, Marshal Peng had one last thought to share with us before we departed.

“In these dangerous times, gentlemen, I feel it incumbent on me to wish you a safe flight. Take great care on your journey, won’t you?”

I was at a loss as to how to reply, which was probably just as well - my mouth was suddenly too dry to speak.

Can you fly, sir?

I couldn't get away quickly enough, and when we smiled and thanked our Korean escort, they simply scowled back, waiting for us to get into the car before they slowly shuffled into their seats.

The driver headed back to the airfield at a snail's pace, in marked contrast to the way we'd arrived, when he'd been hot-footing it like someone with white line fever. I'd also noticed that we'd lost our Chinese escort and, as we inched along the busy roads, there seemed to be sour-faced Koreans everywhere, curiously peering into our car and no doubt wondering who we were. One or two braver souls even ventured to hammer the rear window with their fists and I surreptitiously made sure that our doors were locked.

After what seemed like an eternity we finally arrived at the airfield, but when we approached the Dakota I didn't like what I saw. The crew were standing a few feet away from the aircraft and a North Korean soldier was talking to them excitedly, while another held them at gunpoint.

"Thank God you're here, sir," said the co-pilot as we got out of the car. "I haven't got a clue what this damn gook is getting all fired up about."

"What's going on here? We have been promised safe conduct by Marshal Peng," said Biggins officiously, no doubt assuming that our Korean trouble-makers spoke perfect English. He wasn't far off as it happened.

"We no take orders from Marshal Peng. We take orders from our glorious leader, Kim Il Sung."

"Quite right, too," I said in an effort to placate them, "but we have been given an important message from Marshal Peng to pass on to our superiors. It may well bring an end to the war."

"We bring end to the war when we kill every last one of you and send American scum back where they came from," said our Korean antagonist, who no doubt had missed his calling in the diplomatic corps.

I could tell he was just venting his anger, and I believe that if we'd rolled with the punches and nodded our heads like good little toadies, we'd have gotten out of there unhindered. Unfortunately we didn't get the chance because our captain decided to take umbrage at the Korean's comments.

"Watch your mouth, you damn gook!" he yelled, doing his bit to improve international relations.

Although the captain must have stood at least a foot taller than our new Korean friend, I felt sure that the diminutive communist was going to take a swipe at him. But he didn't get the chance because, to our horror, his partner-in-crime took aim with his rifle and shot the captain in the chest.

"You bastard!" screamed the co-pilot.

He rushed towards the Korean, who promptly shot our hero through the head.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot," cried the navigator, his arms raised so high, they threatened to come out of their sockets.

A sentiment I was more than happy to agree with and I followed suit. But Biggins, in his usual gung-ho style, made a lunge for our would-be executioner. The rifle fired, shooting the Korean's comrade in the neck, and the unlucky guard brought his hands up to his throat as he fell to the ground.

Biggins continued to spar with his wrestling partner, and I dare say we'd have been free to make our escape, if it hadn't been for the fact that the two Koreans in our car had come back to rejoin the party.

"Quick, get in the plane!" I yelled, running towards the door of the Dakota, and our navigator obediently followed behind.

Biggins backed away with his arms around his victim's throat, as he tried to use the hapless soldier as a hostage. If that was his intention he failed miserably, because the Korean's comrades simply took out their revolvers and started firing.

Fortunately for Biggins his human shield took the full force of the bullets, and my broad and witless friend had to support the lifeless corpse until he was able to dive through the open door.

Thankfully the dead captain had possessed the foresight to leave the engines running, or I doubt whether we would've been able to get the plane moving before our pursuers had pulled the door off its hinges. Even so it was touch and go. Before Biggins had a chance to close the hatch, I dashed to the pilot's seat and pushed the throttles forward for all I was worth.

Clearly our friendly Koreans hadn't decided to simply stand back and wave goodbye, because the sound of bullets could be heard ricocheting off the fuselage. We were already facing into the wind so I didn't have to turn the Dakota around, and soon we were out of range of our welcoming committee.

"Can you fly, sir?" asked our navigator.

"I hope so, or we'll be taxiing all the way back to Pusan!" I yelled, pulling back on the control column as soon as we'd gathered enough speed.

I had the flaps and gear up as soon as we'd left the ground, intent on gaining as much height as we could before anyone else decided to take a pot shot at us.

"Captain Fletcher is a pilot with the RAF," explained Biggins, still gasping for breath after his recent exertions.

"It's a miracle there are any pilots left, what with the way you take the bull by the horns," I complained, thinking about the navigator's poor colleagues lying dead on the runway.

"They'd have killed us all if they'd had the chance. I had to do something," he said in his defence. "What's the plan?"

"I'll head out to sea ... uh oh, hold on."

"What's the matter?" asked the navigator.

"We're losing fuel. I reckon the way the needles are dropping, the tanks must have been punctured."

"What are you going to do?" asked Biggins.

“Change of plan. I’m heading due south and I’m going to gain as much height as we can before the fuel runs out.”

As luck would have it, by the time we’d levelled off the leak appeared to have stopped, but we still didn’t have enough precious kerosene to get back to Pusan. So I leaned the mixture as best I could and we managed to cruise for forty minutes or so before one of the engines started to splutter.

“Are we out of enemy territory yet?” I asked the navigator.

“Maybe, but I doubt it. If only we’d had enough fuel to last us a while longer.”

“I’ll do what I can. It’s amazing how far these birds can go without engines if you treat them right.”

Part of my reasoning for flying so high had been to give us as much of a breathing-space as possible when the tanks finally ran dry. A lot of people don’t realise it, but if you keep the wings clean and maintain the right angle of attack as you descend, you can travel for miles before you have to land.

“Ok, we’re a glider now,” I said, as the final engine eventually gave up the ghost.

The months I’d spent ferrying supplies back and forth to Berlin had paid off, and I managed to coax the Dakota into a gentle glide earthwards for another twenty minutes before we had to start looking for somewhere to land.

“How about over there?” yelled the navigator, spotting a likely flat spot nestling between a range of hills.

“It’ll have to do,” I said, and I levelled the wings.

“Bloody hell, there’s a battle royal going on down there!” screamed Biggins, spotting a full-blown argy-bargy in progress.

“Well, it’s too late to do anything about it now,” I said, suddenly conscious of the eerie silence, save for the wind whistling across the wings.

A quick glance down told me we were flying above Chinese and North Korean troops and our chaps were right at the other end of the valley. So I held off from putting in any flaps or dropping the undercarriage until the last minute to give us a few extra precious seconds. Seeing the valley floor rising to meet us, I dropped the wheels and we sank on to the dirt seconds later.

The impact almost jolted me from my seat, but I managed to hold on and looked up in time to see one of our propellers decapitate a Chinese soldier who hadn’t heard us coming in to land. The ground was more uneven than it had looked from the air, and I didn’t dare touch the brakes for fear of sending us cartwheeling all over the place. Gradually we started to lose speed, and mercifully we were approaching British troops fighting a rearguard action.

“Quick, let’s get out of here before the Chinese catch up with us,” I cried, as the Dakota slowly inched to a stop.

I opened the door and jumped to the ground to be greeted by the sight of a British corporal with his mouth wide open in disbelief.

“Bloody hell, who ordered the taxi?” cried one of his more droll companions.

The three of us were running for the safety of our lines for all we were worth and we didn't stop until we got to the foot of the hills. We stood there, bent double as we gasped for breath.

"Who the hell are you lot?" yelled a British sergeant, no doubt attempting to offer us a friendly welcome.

It was almost another minute before any of us had sufficient breath to oblige him with an answer.

"Captain Fletcher, at your service. Permission to land?" I asked.

A third musketeer

As superb and skilful as my textbook landing was, even if I do say so myself, it looked as though I'd saved the three of us from a potentially fatal plane crash, only to be cut down in our prime by a hail of Chinese bullets. You see, the Red devils were advancing full tilt in our direction and, as one, we threw ourselves into a concealed trench. The Tommy who was resident raked the valley with a murderous barrage of bullets from his Bren gun, sweeping back and forth across the plain.

A young soldier who looked like he belonged in the schoolroom was filling magazines as fast as he could, and I noticed his hands were shaking so badly, he dropped ammunition all over the shop.

"I only joined the company a couple of days ago," he yelled, endeavouring to be heard above the noise of the firing and, as if to portend that he might be home again sooner than he expected, a bullet embedded itself in the back of the trench a couple of inches from his head. He *was* back in Blighty less than a week later, as it happened – in a box.

"You've killed 'em all, Sarge!" yelled the young lad, but the sergeant kept firing as if he daren't stop.

We looked across the valley floor to see hundreds of Chinese soldiers dead or dying, some screaming out in agony. I was running up the hill as soon as I was sure we weren't going to be shot in the back, and when they saw what I was about, Biggins and our new friend from the Dakota followed on behind.

Night was falling but I was heartened by the sight of our heavy machine-guns well dug in at every turn. If I'd known what was to come, I wouldn't have been so easily mollified. I headed for what looked like a nice safe spot in the heart of the company and, unable to run any further, we found another likely looking trench. Waves of drowsiness threatened to send me under, but none of us dared risk putting our heads down until we knew we were out of danger.

"Oh, my God!" screamed the navigator who, until then, had been used to viewing the action from at least a few hundred feet up.

We looked to where he was pointing and the Chinese were charging up the slope like a swarm of locusts. There were hundreds of the suicidal maniacs throwing themselves on to the relentless fire. Even as I watched I couldn't credit what made men throw their lives away in such a futile gesture.

Eventually, after an hour of bloody slaughter, one or two of the Chinese soldiers were almost getting through by sheer weight of numbers. As the light of dawn began to illuminate the hillside, the order came down to withdraw - and that's when the panic I'd been feeling really set in.

I'd realised that fear had been getting the better of me when the first rays of sunshine crested the hills on the other side of the valley. I could have sworn we'd only been on that nightmare of a hill for an hour or two at most - *tempus fugit*, no doubt. It was a sure sign that the funk had got hold of me good and proper.

Unfortunately the news went from bad to worse. Our only means of retreat lay across a patch of open country and the Chinese had managed to work their way around so that they had it covered by machine-guns. Thank God that this time I hadn't been one of the first heading for home, because the few souls who'd tried their luck were mown down on the spot.

Suddenly I noticed the company commander at my side, armed with a pistol and a handful of grenades. Oh God, I thought, I know these bloody officers - he'll be ordering us to clear a path before you know it. I was ready to tell him we were nothing to do with his blasted mob, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

Our heroic leader headed off into no-man's-land under covering fire and calmly threw one of his grenades, thereby eliminating the Chinese gun position. We were cheering and hallooing to beat the band, and our brave officer was heading back for a hero's welcome, when he was promptly killed by a sniper's bullet.

Some thoughtful soul fired a mortar in the direction from which the offending gunshot had come, and without any preamble the whole company started to make its way across the clearing. For once, Biggins' recklessness appeared to have deserted him and he stayed in the middle of the pack alongside yours truly and our navigator, who had decided to follow us around like a third musketeer.

Thankfully the Chinese horde must have given up and we made it all the way to the valley on the other side of the hill without another shot being fired. We were amazed to find ourselves on a main road and Biggins spotted a Bedford truck pulled up on the opposite side.

"Follow me," he ordered, and before we knew what was happening he was flashing his identity card at the driver sitting in the cabin.

"I'm with Military Intelligence. It's vital we get to Seoul as soon as possible, so I'm afraid we're going to have to commandeer this vehicle," he said in his best public school accent, but the driver wasn't impressed.

"You ain't commandeering nothing, mate. I've got orders to pick up ammo and rations, so you can bloody well walk."

I could see that Biggins was about to have apoplexy, so I intervened.

"Corporal, you'll have a job picking up anything with that puncture on the back wheel. I tell you what - we'll help to fix it if you give us a lift."

"Oh blimey, not another bloody flat - we're on to the last spare," said the corporal, getting out of the truck to have a look.

Biggins, like an idiot, was about to join him, but I silently beckoned the gormless fool into the truck and the navigator followed on behind, while I sat in the driver's seat and quickly started the engine.

"Here, what the hell do you think you're doing?" yelled the corporal, running alongside and making a grab for my door as we pulled away.

"Mind your fingers," I warned, as I gave his digits a good whack with a helmet that had been lying on the dashboard.

As we left the helpful corporal nursing his bruised bell ringers, I put the pedal to the floor and rounded the next bend until we were soon out of sight.

“Here, guys,” asked our navigator, “won’t we get into trouble?”

“Don’t worry, my lad,” I said, trying to put his mind at rest, “we work for Clement Attlee and Harry S Truman.”

Even Biggins couldn’t suppress a smile at that, and the navigator looked at us as if we’d gone mad. I’m sure he felt his next question had some merit.

“Hey, are you *sure* you two guys work for British Intelligence?”

* * *

Remembering what the corporal had said about multiple punctures, I nursed the Bedford over the rough ground. It seemed to be plain sailing for the first few miles or so, until we rounded the next bend where a large carrier had overturned and lay burning in a gully at the side of the road. As I carefully inched past, flames licked against our truck.

I was just about to congratulate myself for making it through, when a band of Chinese soldiers suddenly ran into the road, having emerged from a crevice in the rock face behind the carrier. They started firing at us while Biggins found a machine-gun lying on the floor of the truck and loosed off a few rounds in their direction. The explosions reverberated around the cabin, nearly deafening us in the process.

I found myself pushing against the steering wheel and mentally willing the Bedford over the rough track. It sounded like every rivet was about to pop and the truck threatened to disintegrate all around us. To this day I still don’t know how we made it through without any of us catching a bullet, but suddenly we’d run the gauntlet of fire and rounded the next bend.

The windscreen was shattered and when I saw that a vicious round had actually splintered the steering wheel, I nearly had palpitations.

Unfortunately we had something else to worry about because a stray bullet must have hit the engine and it died, spewing out a column of steam to show how poorly it was. We could hear Chinese voices getting closer, so I brought the truck to a halt and we climbed out and headed straight for a hollow at the side of the road.

Three Chinamen in their padded jackets appeared around the corner, guns at the ready, and Biggins took aim at the leader of the trio and went to fire. His gun jammed, and before we knew what was happening we were looking down the barrels of three Burp guns. When I’d finally come to terms with the fact that we were captives of the communist fanatics, I turned to face our navigator.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Ellis, sir. George Ellis.”

“Well, George, I hope you like rice.”

One mortal danger after another

I was half-expecting to end up with a bullet through the head, so imagine my surprise when the leader bowed politely and spoke to us in formal English.

“You are prisoners of the Chinese Communist Forces. You will be well fed. Please do not try to escape or we will be forced to shoot you.”

We were all smiles and nods as we were directed to get out of our hole and told to walk back up the road the way we’d come. As we trudged along, I found myself growing more despondent with every step. To have come so close to freedom, only to be captured at the eleventh hour – it was almost too much to bear.

As I was cursing my bad luck and busy feeling sorry for myself, I suddenly became aware of something glinting in the sunlight far above us. As I looked skywards, I could detect a sound I’d heard many times before during my time in Japan. It was the unmistakable whine of American Mustangs and they were coming in to attack.

“Take cover!” I yelled, and the three of us had barely made it to the tree-line at the side of the road before two canisters of napalm dropped from the wings of the leading aircraft, sending a white-hot wave of fire surging in every direction.

I could hear the branches of the trees crackling around us, but we’d come off lightly because when we turned back to see what had happened to our Chinese captors, we witnessed the horrific sight of them running around in utter confusion, screaming as flames covered them from head to toe.

The stench of burning flesh was almost unbearable, and we watched with horrified fascination as the blackened figures stumbled, emitting terrible sizzling sounds as if their flesh was being cooked in boiling fat.

“Let’s get out of here!” I screamed, and we ran towards a cluster of trees further up the hill.

From somewhere a bullet whizzed past my left ear, but eventually everything became quiet and we crouched behind some dry scrub. For the next few hours we cautiously made our way through mountain paths, and whenever we came to an open space we would wait patiently for ten minutes or so to make sure the coast was clear. Satisfied, we’d dart across to the next line of bushes and go through the whole process again.

Everything went according to plan at first until, in the late afternoon, we came across a narrow gorge. On the crest of the hill stood a group of Chinese soldiers chatting and laughing amongst themselves. As we’d done many times before, we sat there waiting and trembling from lack of food and water. But this time it was clear that our troublesome band of communists weren’t going anywhere. It was starting to get dark and we heard shots ringing out to our rear.

“There’s nothing for it – we’re going to have to risk going through. Perhaps they’ll mistake us for Koreans,” said Biggins optimistically.

“I doubt it, but you’re right – we’ve got no choice. At least we can try and look as harmless as possible. Walk along in single-file and pretend you’re wounded,” I suggested.

So we headed into the defile. I affected a limp, while Biggins fashioned a sling by ripping his shirt, and George held his hand to his head, as if he was nursing an injury.

We must have got three-quarters of the way across without them noticing us and, with my heart in my mouth, I began to hope that we might actually make it all the way to the sanctuary of the undergrowth. Suddenly a Chinese voice rang out, shouting something none of us could understand. We just groaned in reply and tried to shuffle along even more pathetically. I risked a glance up at our nosey Chinaman and he stood there, scowling in our direction.

“For goodness sake, let’s get out of here,” cried George, and he went to run for cover.

“Don’t, you’ll give the game away,” hissed Biggins, and he managed to hold him back.

Those few minutes, as we limped our way to the relative safety of the trees, were some of the longest I’ve ever had to endure in my life. Every second we were waiting for the inevitable bullets to come raining down on us. Yet somehow, inch by precious inch, we eventually made it without a single shot being fired. Even today, if you ask me, I can’t explain how we did it - but it’s true. You’ll just have to take my word for it.

As nightfall approached, we were just beginning to resign ourselves to the fact that we’d have to spend another night out in the open, when we heard the rumble of what sounded like armoured vehicles in the valley below. We worked our way cautiously down the hill, and to our blessed relief we saw that they were centurion tanks in the process of falling back, as their twenty-pounders fired into the pursuing Chinese forces.

“Boy, I’m hitching me a ride,” exclaimed our eager navigator, and with that he sprinted to the nearest tank and jumped on to its back, behind the gun-turret.

“Come back, you idiot!” I yelled, realising that the communists had cut off the only line of retreat.

Chinese soldiers were charging down the slopes, but at first it looked as if the machine-guns of the tanks were holding them at bay. Scores of the enemy were mown down as they descended, but still they came.

Chinese mortar bombs rained down, throwing up dirt everywhere, and, in an effort to avoid the relentless onslaught, some of the tanks swerved off the road and got stuck in the soft mud. One unfortunate soldier (from which side was anybody’s guess), found himself crushed by a tank’s tracks like an insignificant insect, trodden underfoot.

For a few precious seconds we dared to believe that our new friend was going to make it. But our hopes were rudely shattered when merciless machine-gun fire raked across every tank still in motion. We heard him cry out and clutch feebly to the side of the turret, before sliding helplessly on to the road, leaving a thick trail of blood in his wake.

“George!” screamed Biggins, falling to his knees.

I noticed that the vast majority of our soldiers were heading across open country to the hills in the east and, barring one or two unlucky souls, they appeared to be getting away unhindered.

“That’s our way out!” I yelled, and we ran to catch up with our retreating troops.

As I fled past one of the few remaining tanks on the move, I suddenly noticed that the man sitting astride the turret was Chinese. It was too late to do anything about it and he took aim with his rifle. All I could do was to keep running and wait for the inevitable bullet in my back as I made my way across the open paddy field. There was an almighty crack and I looked over my shoulder to see the tank bursting through a wooden shack, sending my Chinese assassin flying to the ground - with the result that his shot missed me by inches.

It's strange, but when you find yourself relentlessly facing one mortal danger after another, you eventually give up daring to hope you'll ever make it to safety again. That's how it was as we marched methodically across the swamped fields to the mountains beyond, and I only slowly became aware of the heavy guns being put in place to cover our withdrawal.

I have a vague recollection of bullets spewing out continuously and buckets of water being poured on to barrels to stop the guns from seizing. Incredibly, I looked back to see a chaplain and a doctor heading out in the opposite direction to tend to the wounded and await the arrival of the Chinese. I remember thinking it was lucky the poor souls weren't relying on Captain Fletcher to dish out any Herefordshire kindness, because they'd have had a long wait.

After what was probably the longest day of my life, we eventually heard the sounds of battle recede and the relative peace and calm of Brigade Headquarters stretched out before us.

Without even knowing it we'd landed in the middle of one of the fiercest battles of the Korean War, where the Gloucesters had done their level best to make a stand against an overwhelming Chinese force.

The day's events had even put a dent in Biggins' usual lust for blood and glory and, before we collapsed into oblivion, he turned to me and echoed my sentiments exactly.

"Are we really still alive or am I dreaming?"⁸

* * *

It wasn't until we got back to Seoul and I'd convinced myself that we *had* made it out in one piece, that I actually began to question what we'd achieved. We'd got to see Marshal Peng, of course, and even passed on the president's warning, for what it was worth. But the good marshal hadn't offered us anything to take home to mother.

I'm convinced he intended for us to make it home safely, but he'd simply had no further use for us. That was why we had no Chinese escort back to the airfield and why we were left to fend for ourselves against the North Koreans.

"Of course it was worth it," insisted Biggins in answer to my protestations. "We've got the measure of this Marshal Peng now. He might not have been cowed by Truman's threats, but did you see that look of doubt in his eyes when you said the Americans were willing to restore the status quo?"

"I suppose so," I conceded.

“Of course you did – it was as plain as the nose on his face. He hadn’t counted on that, I’m sure of it. He was full of national fervour, ready to defend China and North Korea to the last, but now he can see an alternative.”

“I still don’t see how it makes any difference, Henry.”

“Of course it does, don’t you see? Now I can tell the prime minister we’ve got to make it abundantly clear to the Chinese we’re only interested in restoring South Korea to Syngman Rhee and his government.”

He was adamant that his efforts hadn’t all been in vain, but I’m sure he was trying to convince himself as much as anyone else. Heaven forbid that he would ever admit he was as useless as a eunuch in an orgy.

“Syngman Rhee and his bunch of thugs are no better than the communists,” I said, just to stir things up.

“You might be right, but that’s not our concern. We’re here to help the PM and the allies work out the best way to bring an end to this mess.”

I must have been tired because even Biggins was starting to make sense, so I decided to approach the more pressing issue of when I was getting a ticket back to Tokyo.

“I’m telephoning the PM, but I expect he’ll want us to be on hand until everything’s resolved,” he said, offering me a cigarette in an effort to placate me.

“I expect he will,” I replied wearily.

Biggins got up to find a telephone, but before he left me to twiddle my thumbs in the office we’d commandeered, I called after him.

“Biggins,” I said, stopping him at the door. “Is the prime minister a religious man?”

“I’m not sure. Why?” he asked.

“Tell him God says I can’t fight the Chinese any more.”

“Don’t worry,” said Biggins, smiling, “if the Good Lord doesn’t want you here, I’m sure he will have told the prime minister himself.”

Lovers are lunatics

I might have given you the impression, after our run-in with the Chinese near the Imjin River, that our oriental friends were set to sweep all before them and unite the whole of Korea under a communist utopia. But nothing could have been further from the truth, and they were now facing a well-organised and well-equipped United Nations force determined to hold on to the South.

You'd have thought that after a year of senseless fighting back and forth from one end of the country to the other, the leaders of the world would have called it a day and restored the old border at the 38th Parallel. Aye well, that's exactly what would have happened if the world were a sensible and sane place - which it ain't.

If someone had told me back then that the whole sorry business was going to drag on for another two years, with all the shameful waste of life that followed, I wouldn't have believed you. Or, as is more likely, I might well have swooned at the prospect that I was to play any part in it. But I'm ashamed to say that this time I had nobody to blame but myself.

I was heartily sick of fighting for a regime which happily executed all and sundry and thought nothing of machine-gunning swathes of helpless refugees. Syngman Rhee had even said in public that he didn't want the British *there* any more. It was a fine way to show his gratitude, especially when his troops were bloody useless and ran off the first chance they got.

Their officers were no better and were as light-fingered as Fagin – with the result that they used their soldiers' wages to line their own pockets.

As you know, I'm not exactly a man of high moral standing, but even I was getting thoroughly sick of seeing Korean villagers being beaten to death for the slightest of crimes. And I looked on in disbelief as our Korean allies actually *laughed* at the plight of their colleagues when they were blown up by Russian shells.

My incredulity at man's inhumanity to man aside, I was mighty relieved that I'd escaped from the clutches of the Chinese and wasn't forced to face two years of incarceration at the hands of our communist enemy.

You have to remember that some of our chaps had only just emerged from several years of captivity at the hands of the Germans or the Japanese, and now here they were, expected to endure more of the same. I even heard of one chap, returning home after spending years in a cross-bar hotel in North Korea, being told off by his mater for getting captured a second time. That's just what you want to hear after going through a living nightmare – a nice welcome home to be sure. All of which brings me to the unwilling part I was to play in the life of one of those very same prisoners of war.

Once the details of our meeting with Marshal Peng had been delivered, the powers-that-be appeared to forget about us. And with no orders to hop on a plane back to Japan, Biggins and I were reduced to being office lackeys with the rather mundane job of intelligence gathering.

Mind you, that suited me just fine. The last thing I wanted was to end up back in the field, and our job simply consisted of sifting through any pieces of information that came from the few agents we had in North Korea. The paucity of ready info wasn't helped any by the unwillingness of our friends in the CIA to share what little they knew with their British counterparts.

Anyway, the point is that on one particular day, Biggins walked in to say that he'd just heard a piece of news that might be of interest to me because it concerned my Korean beauty, Ji-min.

"Your girlfriend has just popped out of the woodwork," he explained out of the blue.

"What do you mean?" I asked, thinking I'd seen the last of my Asian temptress.

"The resourceful mare got in touch with the Americans to try and arrange a deal."

"She was holed up with those thieving little mites in Anyang the last time we looked, wasn't she? What sort of deal could she possibly have to make?" I asked, totally confused.

"She's desperate to get her little charges out of Anyang to Pusan, where she believes she'll be able to get hold of the supplies she needs to keep them fed."

"How does she aim to get to Pusan?"

"She wants us to fly her there."

"She what?" I said, hardly able to believe what I was hearing, but there was more to come.

"Rather, to be more accurate, she wants *you* to fly her there."

"Eh?" I cried, coughing on my cigarette and sending a column of ash across the room to land on Biggins' jacket.

"Calm yourself, Fletcher, *I'm* not asking you to go, for goodness sake," said Biggins, doing his best to brush the grey debris off his sleeve without rubbing it in.

"You still haven't explained what she's offering in exchange for helping her."

"As you'd expect she's being rather vague about that. She's hinting that she knows all about the intentions of the Chinese and what their strategy is going to be."

"Well, she would say that, wouldn't she," I said sceptically. "But why does she want *me* to be her taxi driver?"

"Who knows? Perhaps it's just because you're both acquainted. Better the devil you know, as they say," he said, no doubt intending to flatter me.

I decided to put him straight.

"It's more likely that she can't get enough of Captain Fletcher - and who's to blame her?"

"Look, Tom, I know you. You can't resist a pretty face," said Biggins, and I could tell he was getting ready to give me some more of his confounded advice, so I stopped him before he got on his high horse.

"Never you mind who I can and can't resist, Biggins. I'm not going to fly off and help our Korean damsel in distress at the drop of a hat. Besides, the Yanks aren't likely to lend us a plane just on the off-chance that Ji-min really does know what the communists are up to."

“Not that it matters, because clearly you’re not interested, but we’ve got a squadron of Sunderland flying boats based in Korea. I’m sure I could arrange for you to borrow one.”

Alarm bells started ringing, especially knowing Biggins like I did. I was determined that he wasn’t going to get away with his pathetic attempt to coerce me into some half-arsed assignment, so I tried to stop him in his tracks.

“It’s all academic, anyway, since I’m not going.”

“No, of course, I quite understand. Why would you want to spend a *whole day* flying to Pusan, just to spend the next few *months* with the most beautiful woman in Korea?”

I paused, digesting what he’d just said and I decided it was true - lovers *are* lunatics.

“Biggins, where exactly are these Sunderlands?”

My female Judas

What on earth were you thinking, I hear you ask, volunteering for duty when at long last you were tucked away nice and safe? Well, I take the point, and I must confess that my yearnings for the loving caresses of my Korean temptress had a lot to do with my decision to go along with the whole idea.

Usually I'm as wary as a thief with his hands in the silver when Biggins starts to finagle me into going along with a plan, but as far as I could tell there was no danger to signify - quite the opposite in fact. Anyang was actually south of Seoul, and Pusan was as far away from all the fighting as you could get.

Then there was the prospect of a happy reunion with the gorgeous Ji-min, once we'd got her bunch of sprogs nicely out of the way. Add to that the fact that I was bored witless in our stuffy office, shuffling papers from one end of a desk to the other, and perhaps you'll be a trifle more understanding of my decision.

Anyway, the upshot was that two days later you find your gallant hero waiting at Inchon harbour for the delivery of one Sunderland flying boat, courtesy of the Royal Air Force. Twenty minutes after the crew had helped to re-familiarise me with the controls of their plane, a truck screeched to a halt and deposited my human cargo at the harbour wall.

I did my best to offer Ji-min a warm welcome by giving her a kiss on the lips, but she was as coy as a virgin in a convent, declaring that it was neither the time nor the place for such monkey business. I consoled myself with the thought that there would be plenty of time to get reacquainted once we were in Pusan, and I took up my place in the cockpit.

The crew were elated at the news that I was happy to fly down to Pusan myself. They were eager to be off, in search of a suitable venue where they could enjoy their unexpected leave.

As soon as Ji-min had her charges safely strapped down to avoid unnecessary injuries, I had the power up and we left the choppy waters for a nice little jaunt along the coast. She joined me in the cockpit and flicked back her shiny black hair with a shake of her head. She looked across and gave me one of her seductive half-smiles before she spoke.

"I'm afraid there's been a tiny change of plan, Thomas," she said cryptically, and I looked over to find that a loaded revolver had magically appeared in her hand.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I asked, unwilling to believe what I was seeing.

"I'd have thought that was obvious," said Ji-min smugly. "I'm commandeering the plane."

"But what ... I mean, why?"

"Perhaps you've forgotten where my sympathies lie. It is clear that the Americans do not intend to relinquish their hold over South Korea, no matter how just the communist cause might be."

"What's that got to do with you stealing a plane?" I asked, as confused as ever.

"I belong with my comrades in the North, but I could not leave my children to fend for themselves," she explained.

The terrible truth of what my little traitoress had planned was suddenly dawning on me, and I found my bowels churning over at the thought.

“Turn the plane on a new heading. Our destination is the Taedong River, north of Pyongyang.”

My worst fears had been realised. She was sending us back into the heart of communist territory. I decided I had to knock some sense into her and fast.

“Look, Ji-min, having an ideology is all very well, but you’ve got to think of what would be best for the children. Pusan’s your home.”

“You’re wasting time - turn the plane around.”

“But surely you wouldn’t shoot me – not after all we’ve been through.”

“I would not count on that,” she said, pointing the revolver straight at my head.

“Ji-min,” I cried in desperation, “if you kill me, then who will fly the plane?”

“I’m sure you can land with a bullet in your leg, but if you still refuse to co-operate I will move on to other ... more interesting parts of your anatomy.”

And with those chilling words she let her aim fall down below my waist.

Looking across at her beautiful face, now adorned with a thin, cruel smile, I had little doubt that she meant it. And the very thought that I might end up in the Salmacis fountain, where all those who bathed were rendered effeminate, caused the bile to rise up in my throat.

“North it is,” I said, quickly turning the plane around.

We flew on for a short while in silence and we were soon approaching the front line, where our armies were maintaining their uneasy stalemate.

“It’s too dangerous to fly overland,” I insisted, “so I’m going to head out to sea and follow the shoreline. OK?”

She nodded and my mind was working overtime, trying to figure a way out of the whole mess. I briefly toyed with the idea of pretending we had engine trouble and landing the plane in the sea so that I could take my own chances and swim for it, but we were soon too far away from friendly waters and I decided against it.

I even contemplated throwing the plane around with a few wild manoeuvres so that I could make a grab for her gun while she was disorientated, but the clever bitch had strapped herself into the co-pilot’s seat and she had her finger firmly on the trigger. She carefully reached down to her bag and removed a map which she threw into my lap.

“X marks the spot,” she said, and I looked down at the chart on which a part of the Taedong River was marked in red.

There was nothing more to be said, so we flew on in silence.

“Isn’t that the way to Pyongyang?” she asked, as we approached the Taedong estuary.

“Yes, but I’m not heading inland until we absolutely have to,” I explained.

“OK, but no tricks.”

I just nodded, having already resigned myself to the fact that I would have to take her to where she wanted to go. I decided that my best chance was to try and overpower her once we’d landed. Then I’d throw my female Judas and her bunch of waifs off the plane and head south to safety double-quick.

I soon saw that she'd chosen the landing site well, as we approached a relatively straight and benign stretch of the river. Although hills rose up on either side, there was still plenty of room to manoeuvre. I brought the plane down smoothly on the water and Ji-min unbuckled her belt and told me to head for a jetty sticking out from the far bank.

I decided that now was the time to put my plan into action. Just to the left of the jetty I'd noticed a large log floating on the surface of the water, and I took advantage of the fact that Ji-min was no longer safely strapped in and headed straight for it. I braced myself as we hit the floating tree trunk and Ji-min went hurtling forward, causing her revolver to crash to the floor.

I was unstrapped and making a grab for the weapon in seconds, but she was faster than she looked and her hand got to it at the same time. I lashed out and my elbow caught her with a sharp blow to her face. I had the pistol in my hand before she'd recovered and I turned to see blood flowing freely from her bottom lip. Not the nicest way to treat a lady, I agree, but since she'd been willing to decorate the cockpit with my string and nuggets, I thought it was poetic justice in a way.

However, any sense of triumph I might have felt was short-lived because I was suddenly aware of a commotion on the jetty. I looked out to see half a dozen North Korean soldiers running towards us.

I shoved Ji-min to the floor and slid the cockpit window to one side. The soldiers knelt down a few feet away from the plane and took aim.

"Hey, don't shoot – we've got children on board!" I yelled, hoping my warnings would make them think twice before opening fire, but I couldn't have been more wrong and they began to send rounds into the fuselage.

"Bugger off!" I yelled, and I fired a shot for the hell of it.

Incredibly it hit home and the leader clutched his chest and proceeded to crash into the muddy water. Unfortunately it only served to re-double the efforts of his comrades, and bullets thudded into the plane thick and fast.

"Stop shooting!" I yelled in my best Korean, shoving my would-be kidnapper forward so that they could see her.

It soon became clear that I was wasting my time when a bullet tore into her shoulder and sent us crashing to the floor of the plane.

With Ji-min's dead weight on top of me, I couldn't even make it back to the pilot's seat. Before I could recover, the soldiers were opening the door and entering the plane. They pulled my human shield off me and dumped her unceremoniously in the back with the children, who'd remained remarkably calm and unperturbed by the whole incident.

They dragged me bodily along the floor of the plane, bruising my back, and when they threw me on to the jetty I yelled out in pain, only to be smashed across the head with the butt of a rifle.

Blood started to pour into my right eye, but I was still able to see Ji-min standing by the door of the plane, pointing indignantly at one of the soldiers as she clutched her wounded shoulder.

“You promised us a safe haven if I brought you the plane and its pilot!” she screamed at one of the soldiers.

“Bring the children to shore,” he said, ignoring her protestations and making no effort to tend to her wound.

She helped the bewildered gaggle of strays on to the jetty and told them to head for the river bank. As she followed the last of them ashore, she stopped to look down at me lying prostrate on the floor, watched over by one of my assailants.

“I am sorry, Thomas, but it was the only way I could think of getting here. I may have been mistaken to trust these people,” she said, looking across at one of the soldiers as he roughly shoved the children towards his waiting companions.

“Well, when it comes to trusting people we all make mistakes,” I said pointedly.

“Nevertheless you used me to try and save your own skin. Therefore I now consider that we are even,” she explained in that formal way she had.

Somehow it got my blood pumping and made me want to grab hold of her loveliness, even then.

“Goodbye, Thomas,” she said, walking away as if she had nothing to do with the mess I was in.

If I’d had the time, I dare say I’d have been cursing my decision to fall in with her plans - especially when I’d been safely ensconced in my little office in South Korea. All of a sudden, it didn’t seem so boring and dull after all.

All that remained was to find out what my new hosts had in store for me, and I clung on to the one positive thought I could salvage from the whole terrible experience. If they’d wanted to kill me out of hand they’d had ample opportunity already, and it was then that my curiosity was satisfied.

“You are now a prisoner of the People of North Korea,” said my guard, kicking me in the ribs in case his point had lost some of its subtlety in translation.

“How you feel now?” he asked, gloating, and when I answered, his face frowned in confusion.

“Oh, about the same as the last time.”

Geneva Convention, my ass

You'd be forgiven for thinking that with my offhand manner I was taking my sudden captivity lightly, but you'd be dead wrong. You see, having had access to the very latest intelligence coming in from all over the country, I'd heard more than my fair share of horror stories, I can tell you.

For instance, during our advance into North Korea, the West had been appalled at the discovery of a hundred dead American prisoners, massacred by the retreating communists. They'd been dumped like so much rubbish into a convenient railway tunnel. There'd been complaints, of course, by foreign secretaries to officials in Peking, but what could you do? Such futile gestures were about as much use as crying 'hold your horses' to Genghis Khan, and we soon found out that the North Koreans were a law unto themselves.

So naturally I'd been mortified that my captors weren't Chinese. At least the Chinks wanted to try and convert you with their incessant brainwashing, whereas the North Koreans had a reputation for inflicting suffering for its own sake. I'd chatted on a number of occasions with chaps who'd been captured by the Japanese in World War Two and they all agreed – by far the worst guards for their cruelty and ill-treatment of prisoners were the Koreans.

Not that our chaps behaved like Snow White. Shooting communist prisoners when it was too much trouble to keep them alive was more common than we would've liked to admit. Once I even saw an American tie two naked captives to the bonnet of his jeep while he drove them around for the fun of it. And it wasn't only soldiers who suffered the wrath of the nervous western allies.

"Geneva Convention, my ass," said one particularly forthright American I'd met on my travels. "We killed a hell of a lot of civilians. Hell, I even killed an old dame once because she didn't look right. I wasn't taking no chances."

Anyway, now it was my turn to be at the mercy of a gaggle of Korean captors, and I silently prayed for a miracle to come to my rescue. I looked around, desperately searching for someone to come to my aid, but it looked odds on that there wasn't a St Veronica on the horizon.

I must have walked for two hours before they allowed me to rest. I spent my time trying to look for landmarks so that in the unlikely event I managed to escape, I could make it back to the plane – supposing it was still there.

I think I was at my lowest ebb and I dare say that if I'd had the energy, I'd have cried myself silly. My feelings of despair weren't helped any when I looked up at a ridge and was confronted by a group of children laughing and pointing at me.

One vicious scallywag actually threw a rock. It barely missed my head and the guard smiled, inviting the young lad to try again. Fortunately they obviously don't play cricket in Korea and the cross-eyed little idiot never scored a hit all the time we were there.

We marched on for another four hours until we arrived at a camp in a rather pretty valley overlooked by three forested hills. I was eventually led to the central compound, where I was greeted by a number of my fellow prisoners of war.

“Where on earth did you spring from, sir?” asked a private called Ward, as he eyed my civvies.

“I’m a pilot and I was making a delivery when the gooks pounced on me,” I explained, deciding that it was best not to give too much away until I knew what was what.

“Are you a civilian then, sir?” he asked, confused.

“Sort of,” I said cryptically. “Is that all there is to stop us walking out of here?” I asked, pointing to the single strand of wire encircling the camp.

“Where could we go?” he asked in reply to my question. “We’re a hundred miles from the front line. They’d find us before we got over the next hill.”

I found myself speculating about how long I could remain undetected if I ran for it. It had taken me six hours to get here, I thought. What if I could find my way back? What if my plane was still there? What if...?

No doubt it was the frantic dreaming of a desperate man, but I knew that to face the probable truth that I was a prisoner of war for the foreseeable future would have been too much to bear. In fact I’d been in such a funk, that it was only then I realised the camp was run by the Chinese and not Koreans.

The reality struck home when I was relieved of my clothes and kitted out with the obligatory quilted suit and cap. It was all part of their strategy to remove any feeling of identity you might have so they could break you down. Perversely I took some comfort from this new development – if they want to convert you, they aren’t likely to kill you.

As it turned out I was the most popular boy in the playground that first day. You see, when my guards and I had stopped to rest on the final hill, I’d noticed a certain species of local flora that presented itself at the edge of the forest. Undoing my shirt, I’d stuffed copious quantities of the marijuana into my loose-fitting clothes, and miraculously the guards hadn’t spotted me. I felt like the man in that book by De Quincey.

I’d decided I needed something to calm my frayed nerves - and the evil weed looked like just the ticket. It helped me get through that long and terrible night, but my stash was destined to soon run dry because some of my fellow inmates were helping themselves to my free samples with gusto.

As you know, I’m more of a brandy and buxom beauty kind of man. But since they weren’t available, I’d taken what Mother Nature had to offer and it’s as well that I did, because it led to me making the welcome acquaintance of one Sidney Johnson.

Sidney was a black American captain and he was one of the smartest and strongest men I’ve ever met in my life. He was a religious man, which ain’t my style, but he seemed to have the ability to take whatever hardship life decided to throw at him and let it pass him by with nothing more than a philosophical shrug.

This was at a time when many of his fellow Americans had got what the British called the ‘give-upitis’. Some had gone so far as to starve themselves to death, rather than eat the food the Chinese offered them.

"I tried to explain to him," said Sidney, recalling a conversation he'd had with a white American private who was wasting away as a result of his refusal to eat. "You don't eat, you don't shit. You don't shit ... you die."

"Do you think they could ever break you?" I asked, wanting to know his secret for staying so level-headed.

"They keep tryin'," he explained. "You're a Negro they keep sayin' – why fight for a country that don't respect you? And I keep tellin' them, I ain't a Negro – I'm an American."

I looked around at the terrible state of his fellow prisoners, some covered in lice or suffering from debilitating diseases, and I took an extra long draw on my cigarette to help calm my nerves.

"But how do you cope day after day, faced with all this?" I asked, waving a hand across the hut.

"Every mornin' I jus' ask myself: what worthwhile thing are you gonna do today? Take last week, for example. Some of the men have dysentery and their clothes was stinkin' so bad they had no dignity left. Well, sir, I washed those rags. I ain't sayin' I liked doin' it, but it was worth doin'. I made a difference."

We spent a few minutes staring into empty space in silence before I asked my next question.

"What did you do in the army?"

"I was in the motor pool. If it's broke, I can fix it - you know what I mean? How 'bout you?"

"I'm a pilot," I said, deciding the less said about my ridiculous clandestine activities the better. "How good are you at fixing planes?"

"Why," he said, chuckling to himself, "you got one hidin' around here someplace?"

"Not here – it's about a six hour walk away."

"Are you serious?" he asked, giving me an old-fashioned look.

"That's how I got here, but it's bound to be gone by now."

"Don't count on it – there ain't no Chinese pilots round here."

"It doesn't make any difference anyway. There's no way I could get to it, even if it was still there," I said despondently.

"Hey, brother, don't give up so easy."

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly coming out of my funk - and he leaned forward to whisper his next words.

"I'm on the wood detail."

"What's that?"

"I volunteer to collect the firewood from up yonder," he explained, pointing to the hill in the distance.

"They trust you?" I asked incredulously.

"Some. A guard goes up too, but he don't keep an eye on me every second. They don't expect us to run. There ain't nowhere to run *to* - unless you happen to have a plane lyin' around, that is."

For the first time since my arrival I dared to hope that I might have a way out, instead of having to face God-knew how long incarcerated in the middle of nowhere. Sidney's next words confirmed that he'd read my mind.

"I may just need an extra pair of hands collectin' all that wood. Yes, sir, I do believe I will."

Here's one white man who'll fly with you

You can imagine how much sleep I got that night, but I decided I was more frightened of facing the prospect of years as a POW than getting caught trying to escape - which shows you what a state I was in.

Fortunately my new friend Sidney was as good as his word, and the following morning we were making our way up the hill to collect our daily ration of timber. Our guard was a little wary of me at first, being the new boy, but I simply tried to look out of place and followed Sidney like a loyal lapdog, waiting for instructions.

Thankfully our Chinese overlord appeared to eventually lose interest. Just to make sure, Sidney had brought some of the marijuana we had left over and he showed it to him, pretending we'd just found it. The Chinaman's eyes lit up when he saw our offering and he indicated we should get back to work while he began to fashion his own makeshift cigarette.

We made our way carefully through the forest, increasing the distance between ourselves and our guard, inch by inch. It was caution wasted because our overseer must have been rather partial to the local sedative and he paid us no notice whatsoever.

As soon as we thought it was safe, we were running as fast as we dared through the heavy undergrowth. I found myself doubting whether I could find my way back to the plane and so I used a system called 'biased dead-reckoning'. All you have to do, if you know the general direction, is to always err to one side each time you change direction. I erred to the left, and after six long and arduous hours we finally reached what I hoped was the river.

Of course we didn't find the plane sitting there waiting to greet us – that would have been too much to expect. But because I'd 'erred' to the left, I figured we just had to turn right and follow the river until we came to the jetty.

After another hour of hard walking we still hadn't found the plane, and I was beginning to think we might have gone the wrong way after all.

"Maybe it's jus' round the next bend," said Sidney, ever the optimist.

We plodded along until the next stretch of water came into view, and to my astonishment there was the jetty. What's more, the Sunderland was still tied up to it - but that was as far as our luck went. Two Korean soldiers were sitting on the wings, ripping parts out of the engines and throwing them into a wooden crate.

"I'd say we've got a few pounds on those little guys," said Sidney, who was about the same height as me and would have been as muscular too, if he hadn't been on a Chinese diet for the past few months.

"Taking them unawares, that's the problem," I cautioned, suddenly losing what little confidence I'd had.

"I guess we'll have to wait until they come back down on to the jetty if we're gonna catch 'em by surprise. Then we can sneak up on them underwater," said Sidney.

We must have waited nearly an hour before the Koreans began to lug the crate down to the pier, and Sidney lowered himself into the water.

Reluctantly I joined him and we swam up to our victims on their blind side. Fortunately they were so engrossed in their mechanical vandalism that they were totally unaware of our approach.

As we drew nearer, Sidney pointed, indicating he was going to take the chap nearest to the river bank. A quick nod was all it took for us both to pounce on our respective prey. I reached for the Korean's ankle and pulled his foot out from under him. He crashed down on to the boards, splitting his head open, and before he had time to recover I was rolling him into the water and using my weight to hold him under.

Sidney had tried to do the same with his own quarry, but the Korean had managed to pull away. The communist reached for his rifle, but my new friend was all over him and he clubbed away with his fists, sending the weapon crashing to the wooden floor.

In his panic my drowning casualty of war was clawing at my quilted jacket, desperate to pull himself up, but I kept a firm hold until he stopped struggling and his body went limp. I climbed on to the jetty, picked up the rifle and smashed the other Korean over the head with the butt.

Sidney and I sat there, catching our breath, but my new partner was soon earning his daily bread, helping himself to the contents of the crate and reassembling the engines of the Sunderland.

"Damn it," he exclaimed, after an hour of working on the dismantled plane.

"What's wrong?"

"There's a God-damn part missin'. I'm a mechanical genius, but even I can't fix it without all the parts."

Just then we started to hear men shouting in the woods that stretched back from the river – and they were getting closer.

"The chap who drowned might have had the part in his hand," I suggested, and I plunged into the water, but a few moments later I came up gasping for air.

"No luck," I groaned.

"Here, let me try!" yelled Sidney, diving down to the river bottom.

It must have been over a minute before he reappeared, and the whole time I was listening nervously to the approaching voices.

"Got it!" he yelled, as he emerged from the river and bounded over to the plane to fit the part.

"Get in and get her goin'."

I didn't need telling twice. I got into the cockpit and tried to start the engine on his signal. He joined me and sat in the co-pilot's seat, crossing his fingers while the batteries did their best to turn the engines over. For a dreadful moment it looked as though they weren't going to co-operate but then, to our immense relief, they spluttered into life.

A bullet-hole appeared in the windshield above my head, and I looked out to see three of our Chinese guards emerge from the forest.

I pushed the throttles forward so hard, I'm surprised they didn't come off in my hand, but the Sunderland surged across the water and it rose into the air.

We looked at each other, hardly daring to believe that we'd actually made it. Sidney burst out laughing until tears were rolling down his face.

"We make a hell of a team, Tom, don't we?" said Sidney, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. "You know, back home I ain't always welcome to share a plane with white folks."

"Well, I'll tell you this, Sidney. Here's one white man who'll fly with you anytime."

The Forgotten War

When the news of our unexpected landing at Inchon got out, Sidney was feted as the lion of the hour, being the only POW to have escaped from so far behind enemy lines. As for me, there were no such laurels - not that I cared. I was just happy and relieved to be out of North Korea in one piece.

My self-imposed mission had been an out and out failure, of course. I'd been duped by the scheming and infuriatingly desirable Ji-min, and the intelligence coup that Biggins had been hoping for turned out to be nothing but hot air. I'd escaped from the clutches of the communists by the skin of my teeth and I vowed then and there that if the ridiculous war went on for much longer, I wasn't going to have any part in it.

It *was* to go on for longer, of course, and what followed was probably the most shameful part of the whole business. The dividing line between North and South Korea was pretty well drawn up by the end of '51, but it would take the idiots at the negotiating table two long years to finally come to some sort of agreement.

Naturally that didn't stop both sides from throwing away the lives of their young men. With the peace talks underway, you'd have thought that our leaders would have played it safe. But there was always some trigger-happy commander waiting in the wings, looking for fame and glory and happy to take their men into the fray - and all for the sake of a lousy hill. It was also a time of countless acts of bravery, and one chap even received the VC for charging a ridge single-handed.⁹

As for the Chinese, they spent much of their time in the honeycomb of tunnels they'd created to avoid the relentless dropping of bombs and artillery shells, courtesy of the West. It's easy to forget that they too were a long way from their native land, sitting in the dark without even a photograph to remind them of home - cameras being so rare.

For the men themselves it was the sort of fighting that was more frustrating than anything else. Nothing was achieved and no end was in sight. That's probably what accounted for the fact that many of the fatalities were caused by accidents. Unintentional gunshot wounds; truck collisions; bar room brawls; a misstep on an unmarked minefield - so it was that for every man killed in battle, another was to leave the land of the living because of a dumb mistake.

Then there were the tragic cases of soldiers killed or wounded a few weeks or even *days* before their long-awaited demob. And of course there were the wives and loved ones who would receive notification of the death of their nearest and dearest, only to hear a few days later that the armistice had been signed.

"I shall go to Korea," declared Eisenhower as part of his bid to get into the White House. And two weeks later he was President of the United States.

He came and he went and not much changed. I expect the negotiations would still be going on today if Dulles, the new secretary of state, hadn't started making noises about bombing north of the Yalu all over again. The difference this time was that the Yanks had been testing their new nuclear weapons which could be fired like artillery shells.

“We face an enemy whom we cannot hope to impress by words, however eloquent, but only by deeds,” said Eisenhower, and he seemed to be right.

Whether or not the Americans would have carried out their threat is open to question, but it looked as though the communists believed Eisenhower, even if no one else did.

When, only months before, the Red Cross had urged both sides to exchange their sick and wounded prisoners, the Russians and the Chinese had told them to bugger off. Now the communists were suddenly all for it, and they even said it should pave the way for an exchange of *all* prisoners.

‘Operation Big Switch’ commenced on 5th August 1953, and the true horror of life as a prisoner of war soon became all too apparent. Not that the people back home took any notice. Soldiers returned expecting a hero’s welcome, only to find their neighbours wondering where the hell they’d been, or discovering that their wives had decided to move on and make ‘other arrangements’.

So was it all worth it, I hear you ask? Well, speaking now from the safety of old age, overlooking a Caribbean sunset, I’ll say yes – and no.

How do you put a price on a man’s life, anyway? I know I put an exorbitant figure on mine. But if I were a statesman I’d say the American Army went into the war a pretty poor one and came out stronger. The only problem was that they emerged thinking that with their superior firepower and equipment they could defeat a ‘backward’ Asian army. But of course they were sadly mistaken - which they and your humble hero were to find out to their cost in Vietnam several years later.

The Chinese, for their part, had thought they could beat a weak and demoralised American army with ease, but soon learned differently. Mao blamed everyone else, naturally, and even purged my friend Marshal Peng. But for the first time Korea raised doubts about the competence of the communist leaders in China. The Orientals also took something else from Korea – they vowed never again to face an American army on its own terms.

What was I doing, I hear you ask, while the powers-on-high did their level best to let the war drag on for ever? I was well out of it, I’m happy to say, and deservedly so - what with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune having done their level best to finish me off.

Biggins and I had resumed our work back in Seoul, gathering totally worthless pieces of intelligence, but eventually he succumbed to my constant badgering and we continued our work in the Tokyo office, where I could resume my extra-curricular activities with my usual gusto. And what a happy time it was, the details of which I would have been happy to share with you, if time and decorum had allowed.

The only fly in the ointment was that the Frogs were having the devil of a time trying to cling on to their precious little colony in Indochina. Naturally Biggins and his cloak-and-dagger mob had nothing better to do than rope yours truly into the proceedings. Still, that’s another story which one day I’ll set down – if I have sufficient brandy to settle my nerves when the ghastly memories come flooding back. But I digress. So, if you will allow, let me return to my Korean tale.

‘The Forgotten War’ they call it, but I venture to say that this claim is made with its usual European bias. I’ve been back in my later years, and the good people of Seoul have not forgotten what we soldiers from the West did for them. It is hard to believe that the South Korea of today is the same country of all those years ago. Capitalism has worked its magic and the country enjoys a prosperity that their fellow countrymen in the communist North can only dream of. Forgotten by who, that is the question.

I close my eyes and I can see them still. Biggins with his gormless face when he realised he’d been wounded, yet again; General MacArthur with his corncob pipe, believing with absolute certainty the rightness of his cause; Truman, sitting in the British embassy impeccably dressed, as he sent me into the melee without a second thought; Marshal Peng, convinced he had victory in his grasp and using your correspondent to tell the president that the Chinese meant business; George, our friendly American navigator who so nearly made it to freedom before his life was cruelly cut short; Sidney, who took everything in his stride and showed his fellow Americans how to stand up to their Chinese captors; and my own dear Ji-min, with her impeccable manners, who I find it difficult to dislike - in spite of what she put me through.

They are all there as clear as day - players on a stage that is no more. Yes, the Korean War is long gone. Long gone, but not forgotten – certainly not by me.

[This is where the second packet of papers from my uncle’s memoirs ends.]

Notes

1. Kim Il Sung visited Moscow in April 1950. According to Krushchev, the North Korean leader was successful in persuading Stalin that he could achieve a quick and easy victory because of widespread communist support in the South. Apparently Mao Tse Tung believed that the United States would not intervene because it was an internal matter which the Korean people would decide for themselves.

(*'Krushchev Remembers'*, The Nikita Krushchev Memoirs).

2. General MacArthur visited Seoul on 29th June 1950. Two communist Yaks had flown over and attacked the airfield only moments before MacArthur's plane landed.

(*'The Generals: MacArthur'*, Tyockelson & Mansfield).

3. The officer who Fletcher witnessed being killed after a direct hit by a tank may have been Colonel Martin, the new Commanding Officer of the 34th Infantry.

(Recorded by PFC Robert Harper of the 34th Infantry's Headquarter Company. *'The Korean War, an Oral History: Pusan to Chosin'*, Donald Knox).

4. General Dean personally led a small team of men, stalking a tank through the streets for more than an hour. Subsequently he remained a fugitive in the hills for a month before he was captured. He was the most senior American officer to be taken prisoner by the communists in the Korean War.

(*'General Dean's Story'*, William F Dean).

5. A meeting took place at the British embassy in Washington between Prime Minister Clement Attlee and President Harry S Truman on 7th December 1950. During the meeting the British insisted that all-out war must be avoided at all costs and the Americans agreed. However, sources close to the president have revealed that he did not inform the British of the true extent of America's nuclear contingency plan.

(*'Years of Trial and Hope'*, Harry S. Truman. The Acheson Papers from *'The wrong War'*, Rosemary Foot).

6. Walker will be remembered for his dogged determination, and it is largely down to this that the Pusan Perimeter held against the communist onslaught. Walker was involved in a collision while driving to his headquarters on 23rd December 1950 and he died from his injuries.

(*'General Walton H Walker: Forgotten Hero – the Man Who Saved Korea'*, Charles M Province).

7. Fletcher appears to have had trouble remembering the name of the CIA agent he and Biggins contacted. It could have been the head of the CIA station in Korea at the time, Al Haney, an ex-FBI man who had spent many years in South America.

(*'The Korean War'*, Max Hastings).

8. It appears that Fletcher and his two companions found themselves in the middle of the infamous Imjin battle. The Gloucesters and the destruction of Lieutenant Colonel Carne's battalion received a lot of publicity over the coming years.

(*'Now Thrive the Armourers'*, Robert Holmes).

9. Fletcher appears to be making reference to Private William Speakman of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, who was awarded the Victoria Cross in November 1951 for charging a ridge occupied by Chinese troops and attacking them with grenades. He continued his attack after returning for more ammunition and was wounded twice.

(*'Beyond the Legend: Bill Speakman V.C.'*, Derek Hunt).



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