

God Saved My Life in Korea

By PVT ROBERT L. SHARPE as told to BILL CURRIE

This is the fully documented first-person story of what happened to a boy from North Carolina who was taken prisoner by the Reds—a record of savagery almost without parallel in our times. (1951)

What happened to me while I was a prisoner of the North Koreans is no different from what happened to hundreds of others. Only I was spared to come back and tell about it. There has been a lot written about massacres and atrocities committed by the North Koreans. But, I doubt that the whole horror of what it was really like has ever been recounted, or ever will be. As a matter of fact, in the time that I was a prisoner we experienced things for which there are no adequate words.

We landed in Korea on last Fourth of July for what we were told was to be a "police action." As we understood it at first, the South Korean army was to do the fighting and we were to do the mopping up behind. But the "police-action" business got to be a bum joke to us.

In two weeks our whole battalion was torn apart, most of our men killed or wounded, and I was a prisoner in the hands of

the communists.

As a medical corpsman, I arrived in Korea with little equipment and of course I was unarmed. But we heard of the massacre of the medico in the first battalion of the Twenty-fourth Regiment of the 24th Division, so before we went into action we were issued an M-1 rifle and plenty of medical supplies.

Men were so scarce that we medics threw away our arm bands, painted over the crosses on our helmets and helped fight —carrying ammunition, moving equipment and doing everything else that had to be done.

I was in G Company, second battalion, 19th Regiment, 24th Division. We had lost about a third of our men when we went on a volunteer mission to draw fire away from the surrounded first battalion. Our action enabled the first to fight back and rejoin the regiment. The rest of our battalion was in reserve

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and moved up to the line on the same day that we were coming back with the rescued first battalion.

But, because things were getting so hot, we were put off the trucks for the rear, and sent back into the line.

At that time we were sent along the bank of the Kum River. We didn't have an automatic weapon on our flanks, and we would have been wiped out if the North Koreans had tried to cross.

But they didn't, and after one day they pulled us out and we started moving back. Our combat action had been sudden and tragic. The shock of violent death and suffering was too much, even in those early days,

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for some of us. Some of our men cracked up and were just crying shells of themselves before we reached our rest area five miles south of Taejon.

We were scheduled for a four-day rest. But, the North Koreans smashed across the Kum and after only two days we were sent back to the front to try to stop them.

Morale was low and some of the men were drinking tank fluid. Others stole morphine from medical kits to bolster their nerves.

Captain Bartz, our company commander, told us before we went in that the folks back home were counting on us and that we couldn't fail. When he got through, we were ready to fight to the last man. That's just about what happened.

Captain Bartz and my platoon leader, Lieutenant. Charles M. Matlock, of the Bronx, New York City, were the bravest men I ever saw. They had iron guts and knew how to make a man fight.

That we were fighting for the folks back home weighed heavily on our minds.



At Pyongyang, where Red Korean guards had amused themselves by tossing grenades among the prisoners. Pvt Sharpe is helped aboard the transport plane which took him to Japan for hospitalization.

The battle was fierce and bloody. In the confusion of fighting against heavy odds, our communications fell apart—even between the platoons of our company.

Communists were swarming all over the place and Captain Bartz ordered the company to fall back. But, the runner didn't get to our platoon, so the rest

of the company withdrew and left us surrounded—no way to get out.

We finally got a message to abandon our position and it was every man for himself. We had to leave many of the wounded behind. I can still hear them screaming.

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I attended to all I could. But it wasn't much use, because the North Koreans came right along and bayoneted the wounded as they lay on the ground.

I found out the first day in battle that they had no mercy for the wounded. We had lots of casualties then, and when we were ordered back, one of our medics stayed with the wounded. Since he wouldn't leave, our chaplain wouldn't leave either.

The medic got his—a bayonet through the neck—as he was trying to help a wounded man. The chaplain was bayoneted while he was on his knees praying beside a dying man.

Lieutenant Matlock led what was left of us into the hills. We thought we might circle back south and rejoin the American lines. It was a good twenty-five miles back to the American lines, and rough going because we were walking through rice paddies where the mud was sometimes knee-deep.

I think probably there were fifteen of us left. We kept going until we came to a ravine, where the communists in the

rocks above us opened fire.

It was murder. The fire came from all directions. Men fell and their shrieks could be heard even above the gunfire.

I went face down in the mud and lay still, pretending that I was dead. The shooting finally stopped, and the Koreans came down to see if any of us were left. To make sure, they ran their bayonets through some, they kicked others, and they bashed others with the butts of their rifles.

But they didn't do anything to me. I was covered with blood anyhow, because I had been working on the wounded. My arms were soaked to the elbows. I had bent my head to listen for heartbeats in wounded men until my hair was matted with blood and it was dried on my face.

They figured I was dead, I guess, because they sat me up and pulled my belt off. Then another Korean unlaced my boots and left me barefooted. I never had another pair of shoes—except some grass slippers, which I stole—until I was liberated. I walked nearly 400 miles without my boots.

The M-1 rifle which I had taken

into battle was too clumsy with all my medical equipment, so I had swapped it for a carbine. But that was too much, too, so just the day before I had traded off the carbine for a .45 pistol. When the shooting started in the ravine, I junked the pistol and the aid kit. Luckily, the North Koreans didn't find either.

It was horrible lying there in the mud with all my buddies dead or dying around me. I buried my face in the mud and lay there a couple of hours until the sun went down. I kept quiet until just before day, but then I crawled over to where I could get the pistol and the aid kit.

I checked around to see if anybody else was alive. I found only three others. We drank some of the scummy rice-paddy water and got farther back into the hills to hide.

We didn't have anything to eat, so we tried grass, but that made us sick. We had to have food, and we decided to move at night, hoping to get back to the American lines. But I never could get the others to leave.

During the four days we hid out, we read the Bible a lot and

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prayed much of the time. I always believed in God, and I believed that He could do anything. I believed that He could and would save us. We prayed hard and felt better because of it. God was our only hope, and we tried to lay all our burdens on Him.

But we had trouble among ourselves. One of the fellows cried and carried on so that we were afraid he would give our position away. For a while we considered shooting him because we knew if he kept on we would be discovered. I'm glad, of course, that we didn't have to do it. We looked after him, and he got a little better, but we had to watch him every minute.

On the fourth day I was so hungry I didn't care if I got killed. The others wouldn't go, so I walked down alone. I went along a road and came on a farmer in a rice paddy, and asked him about some food. I think I just about scared him to death. He didn't want to have anything to do with me. But finally he agreed to give me something to eat, and took me to his little shanty at the moun-

tainside.

He and his wife gave me some mush—it was delicious to me. I got full, then kind of sick, and I was feeling mighty bad.

The farmer kept urging me to go. I didn't want to get him in any trouble, so I headed back for the hills. But just as I got outside about two squads of North Koreans came running up, screaming and jumping up and down. They were in civilian clothes, but they had bayonets fixed, and they had hand grenades hanging all over them.

I had read about what the North Koreans did to prisoners; I jerked my pistol from the holster and put it up to my temple. I intended to commit suicide. But, I just couldn't pull the trigger to kill myself. So, I dropped down on both knees and waited for them to bayonet me. But, it didn't come. They danced around me and whooped like Indians. Then one jerked me to my feet, slapped me across the mouth and asked if I understood Japanese. I told him I did, a little.

So, right off the bat, he asked me what I thought of General MacArthur. I thought I had better play along, so I said I did-

n't like the general He asked about President Truman, and I said the same thing. Then, he asked about Henry Wallace, and again I said I didn't like him. It was a mistake, because I got cuffed around for that. But they didn't hurt me much. I became a prisoner.

While they walked me into Taejon, I thought about all the fellows who had been killed, and whose last words had been gasped out to me.

Battlefield deaths aren't so dramatic as you see in the movies. Most of the time the fellows say something easy, like: "Well, I guess I didn't dodge that one," or "Get one for me, will you, doc?" I had a lot of 'em die in my arms, and I thought about them—I'm still thinking about them.

And I was thinking that for a guy who had been eighteen years old only a little over a month, I was getting near the end of a pretty short string myself.

One fellow I went to on the field had a bad chest wound. He was going; I could tell. But, he kept pawing at his chest, thrashing around and crying, so

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I opened up his clothes. He had a big picture of a girl under his clothes next to his skin.

She was a pretty girl, and the bullet that killed him had gone right through her chest too. I took the picture and rolled it up and put it in my kit. I was going to try to find her if I got back, to tell her about him, but the North Koreans took the picture away from me.

As a matter of fact, they took everything I had. My shoes were already gone, and so was my belt. But, they took my watch and my wallet, even my underwear. I slipped most of my money into my mouth. I'm glad I did, because later I was able to buy a cigarette butt for ten dollars. Another fellow paid \$200 for a half-slice of bread.

They marched me through the streets of Taejon and showed me a whole arsenal of captured American weapons. Then they took me to a command post, where I was questioned. Not just the intelligence officer questioned me, all the soldiers did, and civilians too.

What they wanted to know most was where they could find

Gen. Bill Dean. Of course, I didn't know, but they thought I did. They had the general's helmet liner with the two stars painted on it, and they had the silver stare from his jacket too.

But they didn't have the general. From that, we figured that General Dean threw away his insignia to keep from being identified and kept on fighting with the men until the end.

They kept me around a couple of days, and then they sent me to a POW camp in Taejon.

There were about seventy Americans there, about twenty-five of them wounded. They had had no medical attention, and there were no doctors or aid men in the prison until I arrived. There was nothing to work with, but I ripped up uniforms and made bandages and did the best I could to help the guys out a little. We didn't get much to eat— three rice balls a day. What we got was pretty hard to get down, and even harder to hold. The guards were rough, but their treatment seemed like Sunday school compared to what we got later.

During the five days I stayed there a lot of the men died, but their dying was easy beside the

deaths of a lot of those who had to go later. It hurt me awful. I wanted to cry and hide myself, but I couldn't. I couldn't let down for a minute. My nerves, while still controllable, were almost to the breaking point.

While we were there, I met Pvt. Edward Slayden, of Quincy, Illinois. We became good friends and we swore never to leave each other. That promise cost me several chances to escape, for Slayden was later wounded. But, I knew that had the situation been reversed he would not have left me.

After five days, we were told that we were being shipped to Seoul by train, where we would be placed aboard airplanes bound for the United States. I knew it wasn't true, but some of the men believed it. I tried to encourage it, because it meant hope. That's one way the communists have of breaking a man. They beat you, starve you and have you just about ready to die. Then they put out something hopeful. They pat you on the back, and then they drop the bottom out, and you're more hopeless than ever.

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The train never showed up, so we started out to walk to Seoul. Between fifty and sixty men were able to walk; the rest were left behind. We moved at night, because the American planes were active against troops in the daytime, and while the guards were happy to have us strafed, they didn't take to it themselves. We walked only about ten miles when we were picked up in trucks and carried to Chochiwon. We got there in the morning. But by this time I had lost track of what day it was.

They placed us in one of the few buildings left standing. Every day American planes came over and strafed. It was terrifying, and many of our men lost their minds as the bullets kicked up about us. We all tried to burrow into the concrete floor of the building. Some of the men tore the flesh from their hands trying to scratch their way to safety. But, miraculously, our building was never hit.

The march had hardly begun, but already death was everywhere. Rations had been cut to one rice ball a day. It was about

the size of a golf ball, and just about as good to eat. Once somebody brought in some green peaches. Oh, they were good, but they turned the insides of our men wrong side out. Dysentery hit and the men were mighty sick, passing blood nearly all the time.

We were filthy and the place stank horribly. We were also crawling with lice, and though I must have picked a million off my own body, for every one I picked off there were a hundred I missed.

It was all bad, but the dysentery was the worst part. One man had several feet of his entrails on the outside of him, and he lived for a while with his insides tied to his leg so they wouldn't swing when he walked.

We left Chochiwon on foot, and walked the roundabout route to Chonan in about four days. It was a forced march all the way.

We had almost nothing to eat. The wounded and sick were left to die alongside the road— if they escaped being shot or bayoneted. The guards beat us, too, only not too much. They knew we had to walk. Too much beating meant we would-

n't be able to. The dysentery got worse all the time, of course, but they kept us marching.

The names of many of the men on the death march I remember very well, but most of them are still classified as missing in action. I have had lots of letters and visitors wanting information since I got back to the States. But, I still think it wise not to circulate those names.

When we left Chonan, we all were getting much weaker. Sickness was getting worse. We walked about twenty miles.

Then just outside of Suwon they loaded us aboard a train and moved us to Suwon. There we stayed for two days, and of about sixty who had started from Taejon, I doubt if forty survived. Finally we got to Seoul, the South Korean capital.

At Seoul we were joined by more than 300 other prisoners who had been sent back from all parts of the front. Among them was Capt. Williem Locke, who had married a girl from my home town, High Point, North Carolina. I talked with Captain Locke as much as we dared. I could have escaped with him

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later on the march but for my promise to Slayden.

The death march started winding its way northward from Seoul almost at once. The destination was Pyongyang, the North Korea's capital. It was a peculiar route which we followed, carrying us many miles out of the way. There were 386 who left Seoul, but fewer than 100 ever reached Pyongyang.

In a couple of days we were mighty hungry. After a while you get used to being hungry and it isn't so bad, but when you're just beginning to starve it's the toughest.

What made it really hard was marching through the farmlands where there was good food in the fields and apples and other fruit on the trees. They wouldn't let us have any. American planes strafed us daily and killed a lot of our men, but they didn't know they were doing it—and for those of us that lived, it helped a lot. When the planes came to strafe our column, the guards would run.

That gave us a chance to steal food from the fields and eat it while they were rounding us up

again. I remember once I stole two pumpkins and ate them raw—I don't believe it took me more than five minutes.

The guards fired over our heads a good deal to keep us in line. But by then most of them had lost any fear of death itself. We were more afraid of living another day like that.

The planes were terrible. The guards always cried, "Hongo" when the planes came over. "Hongo" means "get down." The guards followed their own orders better than we did.

During our breaks, which came only when the guards got too tired to go on, those of us who were able tried to bury our dead.

Most of the men who died went during the breaks. It seemed that a fellow could keep going as long as he was moving, but once he sat down his will couldn't keep him alive. We made little crosses out of sticks; and said prayers over the graves. But the Koreans would laugh at us and kick the crosses down. God! How I hated their guts!

We finally got so it was almost too much effort to hit the dirt when the planes came over.

We just stood in the middle of the road and waved. After a while the pilots figured out that we were American prisoners and didn't shoot, but it took a lot of lives before they recognized us. At Sariwon, on the way to Pyongyang, some of the sick were loaded into oxcarts because they couldn't walk any more.

As I walked along I had plenty of time to think. I thought and prayed mostly about my mother and father and three kid brothers back home in High Point.

I thought some, too, about our chances. I always remembered the Korean officer in Seoul who asked me what I thought of General MacArthur.

By that time I was fed up with them, so I told him the general was just fine. He spit right between my eyes for that. I'll never forget it or him.

About fifty miles before we got to Pyongyang, Ed Slayden slipped into a field for some food. The guards shot him and he was badly wounded. But he made it back to the column and I practically carried him the last fifty miles. That sounds like

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quite a job, and it was, but not a bit more miraculous than our escape in the end. The Koreans did everything they could to have us killed without actually doing it themselves.

Still, we managed to stay alive. It was no accident. There is only One Power big enough for that. I still know that God alone brought us through. God gave me strength to walk and half-carry Ed, and kept Ed alive even after he spit up blood with every breath.

Even after we got to Pyongyang, the Koreans tried ways of killing us. They starved us, beat us and they threw hand grenades into the building where we were quartered. We threw them out again before they could explode. They took our Bibles and tore them up. But we kept on praying, and they kept on laughing.

Though weaker every day, I was still in much better shape than most of the men. Being younger and in good shape when it all started, I was able to stand the march better than the, older fellows. Those of us who could, tried to bury the dead, but it was a hard job. Those North

Koreans still kicked the crosses off the graves almost as soon as we put them up, but we put them up anyhow. We finally tried to find a bottle of some kind for every man who died. In the bottle we put his name and serial number, so, if the graves-registration men ever find them, they'll know who they are.

It is a little hard for me to remember just when we left Pyongyang, but one day we were told we were being moved to a permanent camp near the Manchurian border. Few of us could have walked any distance at all. Without mercy, the North Koreans beat the sick ones to get them on their feet, and clubbed them with the butts of their rifles—Russian rifles.

They loaded us aboard a train. It was getting cold then, and we had nothing but our fatigue clothes. Nobody had any real shoes and the grass slippers which some of us had stolen were not much help, so everybody had foot trouble. The train was made up of coal cars. It was night, and pouring down rain. We had a new set of guards—a bunch of South Koreans who had been "converted "

—and they were just as mean as the North Koreans had been. They beat us and kicked us around. The surest way to get a lick was to show fear. You had a better chance if you could look 'em in the eye. Sometimes I could, sometimes I couldn't.

One of the guards was a pretty good guy—we called him John. He was American-educated, and he would have nothing to do with beating any of the prisoners. He even tried to slip us food. He was later shot because he wouldn't beat us or help shoot us in the massacre which was to follow.

They took us off the train in the morning. We walked to a ravine, where we sat down and rested all day. That night they put us back on the train, and then they made us get off again. This sounds like a simple order. But to some of our men, getting on and off a train was a great effort. The next day they put us back on the train and started shifting around again. When we got back on the train the third time we were in a regular passenger car—they picked it up after bumping into a deserted train which had

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been left standing idle on the tracks.

The shifting forward and back continued—I don't think we moved over twenty-five miles in two nights. On the third day I left Ed Slayden in the rear of the car and crawled under the seats to the forward part to talk with Allen J. Gifford, from New Jersey. Allen was an old friend, my roommate in Japan before we went to Korea. We had a reunion as prisoners.

We talked for quite a while about old times in Japan and about the march. We talked about how hard it was to walk by the fields and orchards full of crops and fruit without being allowed to eat. We shared broken hearts over having seen pilots in planes who were within hollering distance of us, and yet couldn't help us.

Suddenly we went into a tunnel which ran through a mountain. The train stopped. We paid little attention—we had been stopping and starting for three days. The guards said something about food. That brought me up from under the seats in a burry. They said we were going to near-by farmhouses to

eat.

Not taking a chance on missing food, I was the fourth man in line off that train. Some of our fellows had little bowls or pieces of cups they had picked up, no they brought them along. They marched us along the railroad track out of the tunnel the some way we had gone in. We walked through the brush to a little ravine. There they let us sit down. Those who had little dishes were cleaning them out and getting ready to eat. Then I heard a rifle bolt slide home and, a minute later, a shot.

The guy next to me pitched over on his face. He was dead. I screamed something in the way of warning, and hit the ground. Then all hell broke loose. They opened up on us with rifles, machine guns, burp guns and everything else that would shoot. The men were screaming and begging for mercy, and calling on God to spare their lives. But the Koreans kept on shooting. They raked the ground up and down with fire, cutting the screaming men to pieces.

I was on the ground almost at the first shot. Another fellow piled on top of me. He saved my life at the cost of his. They

shot him all to pieces and his blood ran all over me. It was warm and sickening. I wanted to jump up and cry, but I kept still. The shooting continued. It seemed a very long time. In reality it was all over in about fifteen minutes.

I had been hit in the right arm and the right leg, and I was losing a good deal of blood. But I lay still. The Koreans then made the rounds of the bodies. They stuck some with bayonets, and they broke the heads of others with their rifle butts.

I could see the detail coming toward me. But they didn't hit me in the head—only in the chest. Though I had the print of the rifle butt for several weeks, there was nothing serious done to me then.

I was praying. Not out loud, but praying anyhow. I prayed that it would come quickly, that I would be dead without any more suffering. It hurt me more than I can ever tell, to think about those poor, helpless men, who had walked and suffered all those miles, only to be shot down without a chance. I can hardly bear to think of it now.

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Gifford was lying beside me. He was moaning that he was dying. I whispered for him to be quiet. He, too, lived through it all. He cried, "Don't leave me," over and over again. I tried to reassure him in whispers.

Finally, all the Koreans left but one. Then he, too, left, and we were alone among all the bodies of our friends. It was the second time for me, but the fact that I had been through something like it before didn't make it any easier.

We waited quite a while, and then we found that there were four able to walk. Some of the others were alive, but we had to leave them behind because we were too weak ourselves to carry anyone along. It hurts me yet to think of leaving those fellow's. But we had to try to save ourselves then.

We made for the hills, but we couldn't go far. I ripped out a piece of my fatigue jacket and made a tourniquet for my arm. I managed to stop the bleeding in both my wounds. But was so weak that I fell down, and it started again. Then I couldn't stop it, and I got weaker and weaker.

When the sun came up I was spitting up blood, and I was sure that I couldn't live through the day. We were all just about dead. I prayed hard most all day, for myself and for the folks back home.

About four o'clock that afternoon we heard voices and people walking around, and we thought the Koreans had us again. The folks we heard were shouting for us to come on out—that we were free, and saved.

But we had been lied to and tricked too many times. We were afraid to answer at all for a while. Then when they kept calling, I yelled down, "Who is Betty Grable's husband?" Somebody hollered back, "Harry James."

I was pretty well convinced that the folks we heard were Ameri-



In the hospital at Tokyo, Sharpe began to put back on some of the sixty-four pounds he'd lost between the time his outfit first landed in Korea and the day he was liberated.

cans. But we were still cautious. I got up on my feet, feeling pretty dizzy, and hollered, "If you guys are Americans, come up here!"

We didn't have long to wait. In just a few seconds a big sergeant came up the path. I ran, fell, crawled to him, and dropped into his arms. Yes, I even kissed him. My prayers had been answered.

We were taken to an aid station where our wounds were tended, and then evacuated to Japan. After a term in the hospital there, I was flown to the

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United States, and I spent a short time in a hospital on the Pacific coast. When I landed in Korea I weighed 162. When I was liberated I weighed 98. I'm back up to 140 now, and feeling fine. I hope to make the Regular Army my career. But the entire muscle in my right arm is gone, and my right leg will never be exactly normal again. So I may not be fit for military duty, but I hope to be.

As I said before, we prayed a lot in Korea. But I had been taught to pray all my life, so it was nothing new to me. The fact that our prayers were answered, while wonderful, was no great surprise. God brought us out of there, and I want to tell the world that I know He did it.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pvt. Robert L. Sharpe, who has done so very much living in his eighteen years, gave up a promising baseball career when he enlisted in the United States Army. He was best known in his home town, High Point, North Carolina, for having pitched a no-hit, no-run game in the Red Shield League, sponsored by the Salvation Army and civic clubs of High Point. He also pitched for his high-school team and played basketball. Private Sharpe enlisted on July 27, 1949, after his sophomore year in high school, and he was sent to Japan in February, 1950. His father, mother and three younger brothers—one only eighteen months old—live in High Point. Robert aspires to be a professional soldier. Despite his experiences, he says he does not think the atom bomb should be used on the North Koreans.