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The memoirs of Robert Eugene Sandroni provide a rare look into a forgotten aspect of the Korean War, the prisoner of war camps. “My account, based on letters written from Korea, reflects my impressions as a young physician assigned to the United Nations Prisoner of War Camp on Koje Island, south of Pusan, between 1951 and 1953.” Sandroni’s words tell the story of “beggars island,” a place of mishandled problems, ignorant management, and frequent violence. This paper will explore several different aspects of Lieutenant Sandroni’s time in Korea including his trip to Korea, a physical description of the Korean landscape and culture, the problems facing the management of the prisoner of war camps, and the different jobs of a medical officer in the camps.

Korean War Conflict

Ever since the end of World War Two Korea had been split in two due to the Potsdam Conference: the communist North Korea and the anti-communist South Korea. Tension continued to run high throughout the Cold War period as the communist North Korea was backed by Russia and the anti-communist South Korea was supported by the United States. Tensions continued to escalate as both the North and South tried to re-unite the country under one government. Then on the 25th of June 1950 the tension was released and fighting broke out at the border as the North Korean Army invaded South Korea. However, it was never properly established who attacked whom in the early hours of the war. Initially the North Koreans had the advantage as they continued to push southward into South Korea,

almost completely decimating the South Korean Army in the first week of the war. It was clear help was needed if the South Koreans were to stand a chance. Then with the support of the

United Nations, the United States and other allied forces were able to help the South Korean Army counterattack and push the North Koreans back into North Korea. After further advances by the South Koreans, the Chinese forces intervened on behalf of the North Korean Army. Now after a year of fighting and intervention on behalf of both sides, the war had reached a stalemate. Peace negotiations started as early as July 10th, 1951 even though fighting continued well into 1953. The reason for the start of peace negotiations was the obvious stalemate that had been reached along the 38th parallel. Little territory was exchanged after July of 1951 as both sides tried to recapture all of their previous territory to avoid any loss during the negotiations. Finally after three years of back -and-forth fighting, a cease-fire was agreed to by both sides on July 27th, 1953 and a demilitarized zone was setup around the 38th parallel (Knightley 336). Ironically this was the original boundary between both countries.

Robert Eugene Sandroni M.D.

Robert Sandroni lived a normal middle-to-upper class life by many people's standards. He grew up in mid-town Manhattan, went to college, then medical school, got married, and became a father. As he wrote in his memoirs, "Then came the Korean War. As with so many of my physician classmates of the class of '49, the future was suddenly on hold. I was to experience a very different world far from the sidewalks of New York" (3). Just like every citizen, at the age of 18 Sandroni registered for the draft. Originally he was classified as 4-F which deemed him not acceptable for military service due to his poor eyesight. However, after he completed medical school he was re-classified. Medical doctors, according to Sandroni, were given the choice of "volunteering as 1st Lieutenants in the Medical Corps, or risking being drafted as a privates in the

Army" (3). Like many Americans Sandroni did not pay much attention to the "Forgotten War" (Korean War) at its beginning. There was little coverage of the war and what coverage people did get portrayed the conflict as a civil war that lacked any importance to the American people. "The events half a world away became quite personal" as Sandroni received his first notification from First Army Headquarters on May 21st, 1951. The letter read:

> "Dear Lt. Sandroni, your name has been submitted to the Adjutant General Dept. of the Army, Wash. D.C. as a part of the July quota of Priority Medical Officers to be called to active duty from this Army area" (4).

Two days later his son Stephen was born healthy to his wife who suffered minor complications of her own, but quickly recovered. Later that summer after finishing his year-long internship at St. Vincent's Hospital he was sent to Fort Jay, Governor's Island, New York for physical examination. From there he was sent to the Medical Field Service School at Fort Sam Houston, Texas to receive his field medical training before departing for active duty on September 8th, 1951. While on active duty he was appointed Commanding Officer of the 545th and 546th General Dispensaries, and the Assistant Staff Surgeon at United Nations Command Prisoner of War Camp No.1, Koje-Do, Korea. After two years of active duty he was relieved on July 15th, 1953 and received both the Korean Service Medal and the United Nations Service Medal, but his five year Army appointment did not expire until November 30th, 1955.

The Trip to Korea

The trip to Korea was going to prove to be a long one, one that took close to a week to finish. In October of 1951 Sandroni along with close to four-hundred other young doctors were to be shuttled to the Far East, South Korea to be exact. They would board a Flying Tiger Line plane

at Travis Airforce Base for their 40-hour flight to Tokyo, Japan. Stops were made at Wake Island and Honolulu to briefly eat and refuel the planes. The trip was long and boring, so they passed copies of Mickey Spillane detective adventures around to help "break up the monotony, and keep our minds off what we left behind and what might lie ahead" (10).

After arriving in Tokyo in the early morning they continued their trip by bus to Camp Drake. It is from this point in their trip onward that they would experience the squalor that much of Japan and Korea lived in at the time. Sandroni describes Japan as having a "pungent, pervasive, but not unpleasant odor. " He also notes that between most of the homes, that "looked worse than our poorest tenements," sat a small vegetable garden, but the large appetizing vegetables were "fertilized with human waste and [were] not fit to eat unless carefully prepared" (10). This coincides with the description given of Japan in General MacArthur's Address to Congress in April 1951, "Their prewar standard of life, pitifully low, is infinitely lower now in the devastation left in war's wake" (MacArthur). However, he notes that once out of the city of Tokyo, the view became quite pleasant "rice paddies and fields of tea plants occupied every bit of land, all neat and green" (11). They continued through the farmland, down through a crowded industrial section, and then into some beautiful mountains before they arrived in Sasebo, in southern Japan. He then left Sasebo on the Kuogo Maru, a rather nice ship. "An Army band on the dock was playing 'I'll be Seeing You in All the Old Familiar Places', not a very good choice if they were expecting to cheer us up" (11). The sun was setting at the time and most of the men just went to bed on their straw mats. "[They] would be in Korea in 12 hours" (11).

They arrived early that morning in the port of Pusan, Korea. "The port of Pusan was dirtier, more crowded, and smellier than anything I had seen in Japan" Sandroni stated (12). They

then hoped a train for three hours and arrived in Taegu, Korea where they would receive their Korean duty orders in the morning. “We were not yet accustomed to the dirt and smells”, stated Sandroni (12). Later he would be assigned to “beggars island”—Koje-do, Korea.

Korean Landscape and Culture

The Korean landscape was one that was dominated by ridges and valleys. Mountains in the shape of volcanoes could be seen dotting the landscape from ridges above the valleys. The valleys held small villages, thatched roof houses dotted the valley floor below while the sides of the ridges contained most of the rice paddies. When traveling further from the POW camp around the edge of the island Sandroni noted there were many small beaches. Little children laughed and shouted from their houses, wood framed with mud walls and straw for a roof. All of this took place while their mother was probably at the nearest creek, slapping their clothes with a stick.

They got to see the rice paddies in their many stages of cultivation. First the paddies were plowed in the ancient method using a wooden plow and oxen. The paddies were then flooded selectively using a “series of ingenious dykes” (16). Finally the seedlings were planted by hand in long rows, and once the seedlings reached a certain height they were transplanted to a different paddy. Lastly the rice is harvested and separated from the stalks, and the stalks are used in making brooms, mats, etc.

The Korean culture and its people resembled the land. Most of the adults dressed in their native costume. The women wore very high-waisted, long, loose skirts with a blouse and bright colored sash that made them “look pregnant” (12). The men wore white pantaloons and a blouse with a loosely tied robe. “It was a place the world had missed in the rush of modern

development" (15).

Koje-Do: A General Layout from a Military Perspective

The island of Koje-do rests roughly two hours by ship from Pusan, Southern Korea's largest port city. According to Lieutenant Sandroni, "the island perimeter was about 35 miles" and the island contained "several small villages and few roads" (22). In between high ridges on the island, valleys—originally the home of rice paddies—became the camps of more than 150,000 Chinese and North Korean prisoners of war. In the valleys were "four enclosures, each with about 7 compounds, housing 4,000-6,000 prisoners" (22). The enclosures and compounds were fenced in by barbed wire. The

Canadian Encyclopedia verifies Sandroni's statistical account indicating that "huge compounds [contained] as many as 6,000 men." It goes on to say that the "160,000 North Korean and Chinese prisoners were inadequately controlled." At the outset, "tents were.. .used to house the PW but by August 1951 construction of adobe type buildings was started" (22). Lt. Sandroni indicates that 400 of these 110x20 foot buildings were completed in several months and another 1100 started. Still, he admits, "overcrowding remained a problem" (23).

To supply water to the camp, the army constructed "eight dams.. .with 25 million gallons capacity, and 1,200,000 gallon daily output, plus four others with 250,000 gallons capacity.. .another dam was built later, with 100,000,000 gallon storage." (23). Sewage systems were constructed with five miles of main lines and 23 miles of secondary lines.

Problems Facing the Camp

The management faced many problems at Koje-do. How do we stop insurrection? What

is the best way to feed the prisoners? How do we keep them healthy? Clean? Lieutenant Robert Eugene Sandroni addresses many of these issues in his memoir.

Food

There were a number of food issues: sanitation deficiencies were reported every month because of cultural eating habits that "create[d] garbage, encourage[d] rats, and spread infection" (the prisoners would take large cans of food into their living quarters and all dip from a common container); there was "no means of refrigeration in the compounds;" prisoners made moonshine; empty soy oil containers were used to "send messages back to the mainland, when the containers were returned for refilling" (31). Apart from these issues, the army had to deal with the enormous (and obvious) task of feeding more than 150,000 prisoners of war. To do this, each compound was equipped with a kitchen, which Sandroni describes as "a stone building with about 20 big metal bowls or kettles, like huge woks, at each end" (32). The diet prepared for the prisoners included rice, vegetables, wheat, barley, bean mash, pepper mash, and soup. On occasion meat, dried fish, and chili con carne were available.

Medical Issues and Sanitation

Sandroni describes several medical problems. One incident involving Chinese prisoners of war called for "630,000 Sulfa tablets, an equal number of bicarbonate pills, and thousands of tubes of Aureomycin ointment" to treat an outbreak of Trachoma (34). A 2/ ton truck was needed to bring the supplies in from the dock. Another incident on June 10, 1952, found Sandroni dealing with combat wounds:

> We were soon surrounded by bandages, clothing and paper. Politics were temporarily forgotten as we tried to keep up. This Korean doctor was also the

> interpreter when needed. Most of the wounds were from bayonet stabs in the buttocks. They were not deep or destructive like wounds from grenades or mortars might have been. Burns were the most tedious to dress. These probably occurred as the infantry moved in behind the tanks, using flame throwers (34).

Other diseases the medical staff had to deal with included diarrhea, lice, typhus, and respiratory disease (particularly tuberculosis).

One of Sandroni's medical experiences involving respiratory infectious disease revealed an interesting fact about the army. When a research group arrived to do chest x-rays on some prisoners, they discovered "it was difficult, if not impossible to follow individual patients by x-ray, since there was no way to be sure we had the same person on recall. At one time a PW might identify himself as Kim Bok Soo. The next time he might be Soo Bok Kim" (36). Prisoners interacted with each other in the hospital, so they came in under different names to prolong their visits. To be safe, the army commanded that no x-ray investigation be conducted. In doing this the army made a clear statement: their "primary mission on Koje was to maintain security" (36).

The officers at Koje-do also fought other "battles." They were underequipped, undersupplied, understaffed, and forced to deal with constant sanitation problems. The prisoners sabotaged the sewer lines which were often clogged from partially digested rice and barley. Other attempts to solve the sewage issue by incineration or fertilization failed because of the overwhelming amount of waste.

"Beggars Island "

This was the nickname given to the island of Koje-do because "the soldiers being sent there were at the bottom of the ladder in education and training, or had been incapable of service elsewhere in the Far East Command" (39). After quoting author Max Hastings'

comments on the education of the officers on Koje-do, Sandroni observes:

> In some instances our guards could not read or write, or do basic arithmetic. Many of the POW could, and so were able to alter records, pass messages and hoard food supplies. Some of my own men did not know who their leaders were, beyond the First Sergeant. They could not name the president (40).

This lack of education evinced itself in the abundance of venereal disease in the soldiers.

Sandroni writes about his dealings with this situation:

> I was assigned the responsibility for Venereal diseases control for US troops, in addition to my main duties. I was informed that this Command had the highest VD rate in the Army. It was imperative that an educational program be developed, quite a challenge considering the level of
> education of the troops sent to Koje. Control methods had to be developed, records kept and regular reports submitted.. .Gonorrhea and chancroid were the major venereal diseases we saw, but there was concern about syphilis and lymphogranuloma. Our efforts were partially successful because the rate did drop (40).

What a Medical Officer Did in Koje-do

> "A U.S. Medical Officer had responsibility for 6 or 7 compounds, or 30,000 POW" (26).

Lieutenant Sandroni had outpatient responsibility for about 50,000. He and other medical officers carefully examined the seriously ill to ensure that hospitalization was necessary. The four enclosure surgeons, Sandroni being one of them, also served U.S. and UN personnel, "providing sick call and night coverage" (26). Eventually, Sandroni became responsible for all the enclosures. However, all medical officers attending to the compounds had similar routines. They "made rounds regularly, inside the compounds" (26). They treated disease, watched out for unsanitary habits and reported out of the ordinary observations to their commanding officers. Sandroni's experiences reflect the typical duties of a medical officer serving in Koje-do.

The Capture of General Dodd and Insurrection

In May 1952, General Dodd, the island commander, was taken into captivity while responding to

complaints from N. Korean prisoners. The gates of the compound opened just as a group of prisoners were heading out to work. As soon as the gates were open, the prisoners rushed the general and brought him into the center of their compound. The PW "allowed his personal bed to be delivered to the compound, and even his daily dose of milk" (43). They compiled, however, a list of "grossly untrue accusations about their treatment, and another list of unreasonable demands. The Command was to sign these documents, admitting their truth, and satisfying the demands before the General would be released" (43). Although General Dodd was eventually released, General Colson, acting commander in the absence of Dodd, was criticized for signing the document. Sandroni offers his opinion on the criticism of Colson in a diary entry recorded just days after the incident, "I guess I'll never know all the details but I believe it may have taken more courage to sign, rather than use force in a situation where there was not the best preparation, or the best troops and equipment" (43).

The capture of General Dodd was not the only case of violence on the island. When the prisoners in Compound 85 incited some resistance the new commander, General Boatner, removed the men in the enclosures to new compounds. The prisoners in Compound 76 resisted. General Boatner sent in tanks and infantrymen. After the action played out, Sandroni noted that 30 prisoners had been killed and by his estimation more than 300 had been injured. In another incident recorded by a newspaper clip kept by Sandroni, 32 prisoners were injured when they attacked UN personnel. In still another account, prisoners rioted and "drove their guards from the enclosure. Before the guards could be sent back.. .the Communists dragged one suspected renegade to the fence, pulled out his tongue, cut it off with tin shears, then beat him to death" (44). Violence occurred most between the prisoners. More than 30 prisoners were "murdered by their fellows, and the beatings [were] innumerable" (44).

Coming Home

The following is the report Robert Eugene Sandroni M.D. wrote on the day he finished active duty and left Korea at the port of Pusan:

March 15, 1953-

It's amazing how kind the darkness is to a dirty, crowded city like Pusan. From our bus all I can see are the lights behind the rice paper windows, and in front of little street vendor stands. The city never sleeps. The shadowy figures of Korean men, women, and children are moving about the streets or lounging in doorways. The poverty and squalor are all hidden, and the odor is shut out of the bus.

The lights of Pusan have faded into the distance. Korea is back there in the darkness. Now I believe I'm on my way home. The band played 'So Long It's Been Good to Know Ya' as we left the pier (56).

He completed the rest of his two years of active duty at the 127th Army Hospital at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, New York. The period of service interrupted the last of his residency training. So, when he was officially released from the military he sought to pick up where he left of and finish his residency. There were no available positions at local hospitals so he took a job working for the newly opened Veterans Hospital in Albany, New York. "The Korean War had changed the direction of our lives" (56).

Lieutenant Sandroni's account provides a unique glance into an overlooked aspect of the war, the prisoner of war camps. What we find is a revealing tale of mismanaged problems that a disorganized army struggled to deal with. From disease and unsanitary conditions to riots and hostage situations, the uneducated officers at Koje-do faced issues that only a first-hand account can bring to life. Sandroni's memoir survives as an enthralling tale and an important insight into life in a prisoner of war camp.

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