



Korean War POW and Corpsman Billy Penn Repeatedly Defied Death and Imprisonment Only to Eventually Return Home to Say:

I Still Wonder, "Why Me?"

By B. Rivers Penn

In 1953 Billy Penn was a 20-year-old Navy hospital corpsman third class assigned to the Fifth Marine Regiment in Korea. His graphic and violent autobiographical account of battle, captivity and survival was written at the suggestion of close Marine Corps associates. Writes Penn: "Maybe it is something I should have done long ago."

My tour of duty as a hospital corpsman with the Fleet Marine Force started off on a rather ominous date: Friday, 13 Feb. 1953. That's when 50 of us sent from Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, Calif., arrived on the war-torn Korean Peninsula, and I became a member of Company H, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines.

When our plane sat down in Seoul, we didn't see much as we were trucked through the darkness to a rest area we later found to be north of the South Korean capital and approximately three miles behind our main line of resistance (MLR). Each of us promptly was issued a 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ -pound M1 rifle. I found one clip of ammunition and took it with me.

Our welcome to combat happened on the way to the MLR. The noise of our truck's engine and rattle of men and equipment in the truck bed was interrupted with the distinct sound of mortar fire, which was becoming uncomfortably close. The driver, starting to really worry, told us to get out of the truck and get away.

I sprinted about 100 yards or so before noticing the mortar shells had stopped falling and people were calling to me. I finally made out the driver's voice telling me not to move. It seems that I had run into the middle of a minefield. I had become the subject of a dicey military problem, and it would take the engineers to get me. I remember thinking that I was really starting off in good fashion.

I was eventually escorted safely from the minefield and to my unit. Our main jobs for the first few weeks were patrols along the MLR where lots of artillery shells, theirs and ours, were going off day and night.

Word came down that our company was moving up to replace another Marine rifle company that had run a day-

light raid up to the top of a hill called Ungok. There was no doubt that the Marine unit had been in a terrible fight, and scuttlebutt had it that they had suffered 90 percent casualties.

That night our company went out to pick up their equipment. The next night we went farther up the hill and got as far as a Chinese machine-gun bunker. We also conducted two night patrols.

Being the only corpsman, I had the honor of being on each night's patrol. Both went badly.

On one patrol, we were ambushed. I was trying to drag a badly wounded Marine to safety when we saw some Chinese moving toward us. There was nothing I

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could do except lay quietly with the wounded Marine in a ditch for a long time until the Chinese passed by.

After the Chinese left, I heard Private First Class Roscoe Woodard calling for me. He had come back for us. Thank God for "Woody"!

Woody and I had become friends and had long talks. He was from Lucedale, Miss. I was from McComb, Miss. We talked about home, families and the Marine Corps.

Woody already had a couple of Purple Hearts. Once he was in the hospital for three months and elected to stay in Korea rather than to go Stateside. I didn't understand why.

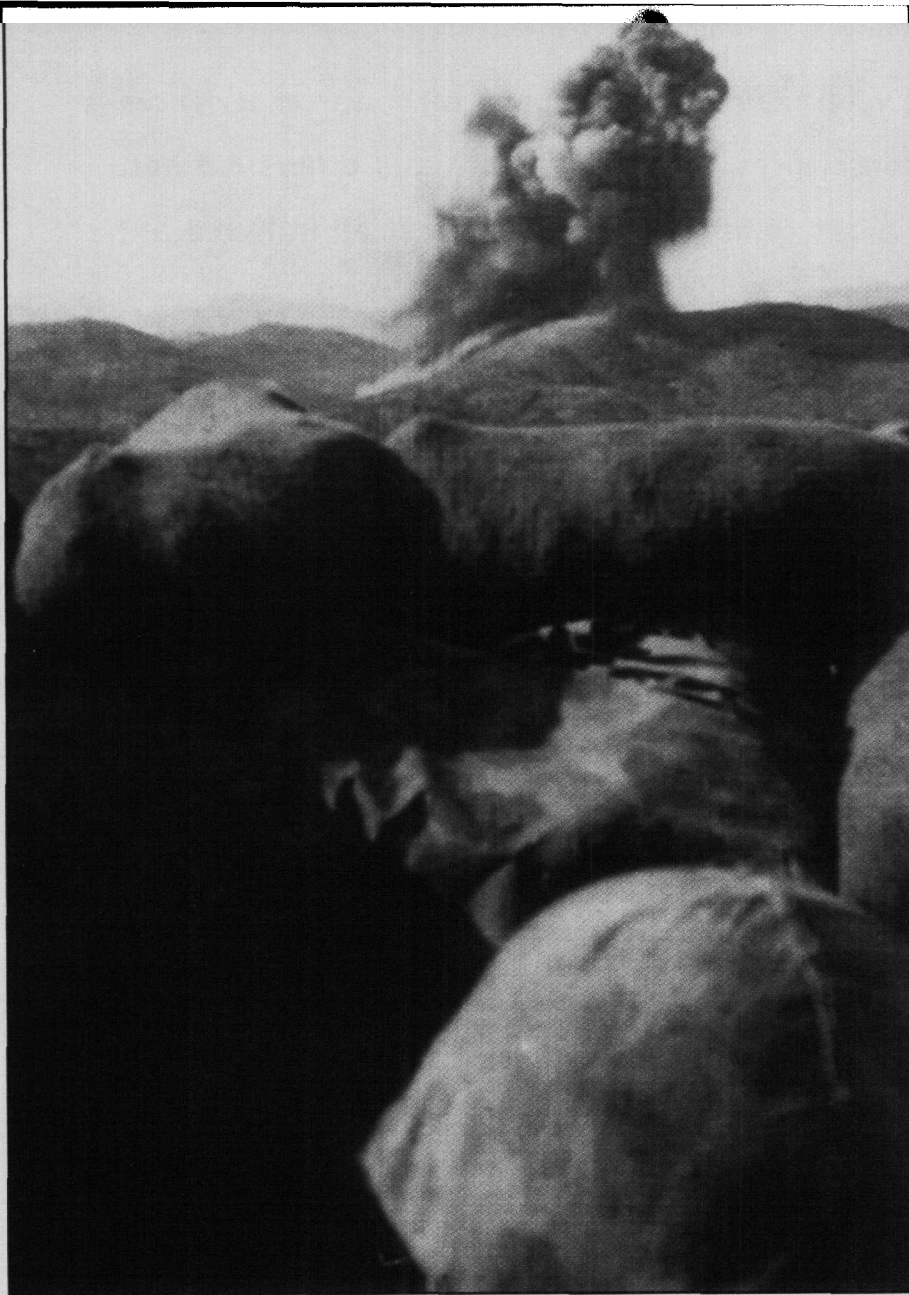
One afternoon we got word that a corpsman was needed at Outpost Vegas. I volunteered to go. We had three outposts between the Chinese and us: Reno, Vegas and Carson. They were named after Nevada cities because it was a gamble to be out there. I knew that Woody was already out there as a machine-gunner. As I was on my way out, a lot of incoming mortar rounds and big stuff were hitting very close—too close for comfort.

When I got into the trenches on Vegas, the incoming was coming heavier. When the artillery really intensified, I made for the protection of the command bunker. I was inside the bunker when I heard someone outside call, "Corpsman!"

I was out once again. I noticed the Chinese were all over Vegas like ants, and I was busy taking care of a wounded Marine in a trench when two Chinese jumped on me.

The first soldier jumped into the trench, screaming loudly, and charged with his rifle. I dropped the Marine and my medical bag, reached for my .45-caliber pistol, but couldn't get it out of the holster. The soldier was almost on top of me when I pulled my Ka-Bar knife. I was able to get inside the thrust of his rifle and bayonet and buried the fighting knife in the man's solar plexus. I did not attempt to recover the knife.

Another of them stuck his bayonet through my left leg above the ankle. It was not only painful, but also I couldn't



COURTESY OF JIM LARKIN

Air strikes on Ungok, shown here, took place about three weeks before the battles for outposts Reno, Vegas and Carson. The air strikes were followed by a large raid on Ungok to take prisoners and gather information about the suspected large troop buildup of communist forces near the outposts.

hand combat. I saw Woody standing outside his machine-gun bunker, swinging his M2 carbine like a baseball bat. I had pulled 13 wounded Marines into the bunker when another Chinese jumped me as I tried to get one more injured Marine back to the command bunker. I beat that one unconscious with a rock.

When I started back out of the command bunker, a rifle butt hit me hard on my helmet. Reflexively, I raised my .45. When it went off, it was at the tip of the Chinese soldier's nose. I'll never forget his expression as the .45-cal. went off or the feeling I had seeing what power the .45 had at point-blank range.

Seeing the Chinese everywhere, I backed into the command bunker. Just as I squatted behind a 12-inch-by-12-inch support beam, a satchel charge flew in through the opening. All I remember is a big flash of white light. I had put all my eggs in one basket, and they had blown the basket up.

I don't know how long I was buried. It had been dusk when the fighting started and dark, I think, when the Chinese dug me out. I was blinded at the time and could make out only blurs of light. Although I could feel arms and legs, I could not move. All around I could not hear anyone moving or crying out. When they did get me out of what was left of the bunker, it was obvious that "they" were the Chinese.

The Chinese put a bandage or blindfold around my eyes, and they started pushing and shoving me. I could hear lots of artillery still going off all around, and they hurriedly herded us approximately 300 yards and into a tunnel. It was then I realized the Chinese had probably dug their way up through our wire. They had accomplished quite a feat of engineering. The tunnel was about 4 feet tall and 3 feet wide and probably 1,000 yards in length. I was tripping over bodies, and I don't know if they were Chinese or American. When we came out, we were in a large trench. As I was sitting there resting, I could feel tank tracks. That was a big trench!

They stuck me in a truck with other wounded Marines or GIs. We took a bumpy ride quite a ways up country with several stops. At one place with several huts, we spent two to three days. There

move, nor could the Chinese soldier get his bayonet out.

I saw his finger on his rifle trigger and heard it click. We had been taught that if you ever had a bayonet in somebody and you couldn't get it out, fire the rifle, and the recoil would help force it out. I figured the Chinese had been taught the same and that I was about to lose a foot. He started working the bolt of his rifle. I drew my .45-cal. pistol and shot him in the head. The bullet moved him about three feet down the trench.

The Chinese were still running through their artillery explosions. I was able to remove the bayonet from my leg and started pulling the wounded Marine into the command bunker. Bullets and shrapnel were whizzing dangerously close from every direction. First, a piece of shrapnel flew into my left knee only slightly wounding me. Then I took a shot in my right shoulder from a burp gun. It

was a through-and-through wound, and I didn't really realize I'd been hit until later when I saw how much blood I had lost.

What got my attention was a Chinese bayonet being thrust into my right lower back. It glanced off my flak jacket and barely scratched my skin, but it scared the devil out of me. I turned my elbow and caught the attacker in the throat. He fell. I jumped on him. I kept hitting him to ensure that he would not move after I got up.

The Chinese were everywhere. I picked up an entrenching tool and started swinging. I hit one in the neck and thought I had decapitated him. I had this flashback of home and wringing a chicken's neck.

Dead Chinese were everywhere. Our gunners had done a job on their first wave. But behind them came more waves. Soon everyone was in hand-to-

I believe the reason many veterans never talk about their war experiences is that many have guilty consciences. They came home, and others did not.

I owe a piece of my heart to all the men who left it all in Korea.

was no food or water, and it was cold as it could be. One Marine, PFC Sammy Armstrong, probably 18 years old, had a terrible wound on his arm. One night I felt his arm, and it seemed that he was really bleeding. When I checked him closer, I could smell gangrene. When I tried to rouse the guards, they hit me, but they did take Sammy off.

As our journey continued, we walked for a day and came across a wounded soldier from West Virginia. He could not walk; I could not see. Together we made a good pair. I carried him on my back, and he told me where to walk. We came to an abandoned gold mine up in the mountains where another prisoner, who happened to be an American Indian, gave me a bath and washed my clothes in a stream.

When we had contact with our captors, my presence confused the Chinese. I was in Marine clothes with Navy insignia on my shirt. I think they thought that I was a forward observer for artillery or the big ships that were sitting out there shelling. Consequently, I was placed in isolation for a long time.

My domain was a hole in the ground no more than 5 feet long and 4 feet deep with several boards covering the opening. It turned out to be the camp's head. I was crammed in there, wearing only a T-shirt, utility pants and no shoes or socks. It was so cold that my feet, toes and fingers were black. Fortunately, I didn't lose any toes, fingers, my nose or ears. However, even today, when my feet get cold, everything tingles and hurts.

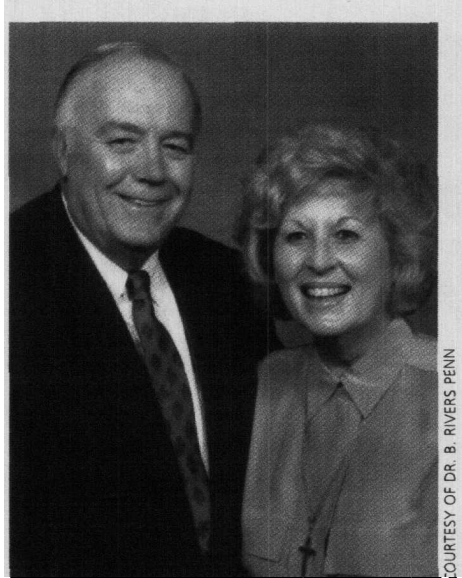
Name, rank and serial number didn't seem to impress them. They would hit our ankles with rifle butts. Our ankles swelled so much we could not walk. Apparently, the Chinese had never heard of the Geneva Convention. After a few rifle butts to the head and body, I told them I was from Mississippi, had a mother, father and two brothers.

They then accused me of germ warfare. I said I didn't know what on earth they were talking about.

They responded by keeping me awake for four days and continued kicking and hitting me with rifles. I learned to fake unconsciousness after the first rifle butt to my head or ribs.

My daily ration consisted of a very small handful of rice.

Then I advanced to a more sophisticated form of torture. I had 15 to 16 straight days of firing squads. They'd line up, aim their weapons at me and go through the Chinese equivalent of "ready, aim, fire." Then there would be the click of firing pins striking an empty chamber. At that time I was hoping that they would kill me. Even fake firing squads take a lot out of you. Occasionally, to get my attention, they'd send a live round close to my head.



Dr. B. Rivers Penn and his wife, Nancy, currently live in Baton Rouge, La. He is still proud of his fourragere that he received from his service with 5th Marines and holds on to the memory of his fellow Marines, corpsmen and POWs who did not return from Korea.

There was a young, badly wounded Marine in our camp, who had a tattoo of the American flag over his right deltoid muscle. There was a tear in his shirt over the tattoo, and he would unveil his flag to everyone. It was a beautiful sight, and we even said the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag. The Chinese would beat us every time they caught us looking at the flag. Finally, they brought him to face a firing squad with me. His hands were tied behind him, and he was forced to his knees. The Chinese then put a gun to the base of his skull. He was less than three feet away from me when they shot him. God rest his soul.

We also had an interrogator, a Chinese who had graduated from the University

of Illinois, or Chicago, and who had a master's in sociology. Wow! We named him "Blood on Hands" because he kept reminding us we had "Chinese blood" on our hands. He informed us that we Americans had killed 5,000 Chinese (it was our first indication that we had done well). He kept trying to get me to sign papers saying that I was involved in germ warfare, inform him of our battle strength and so forth; plus, he wanted me to tell him which division we were from. Once again, I think they thought I was a forward observer.

Once after facing another firing squad, I was brought before Blood on Hands, who told me the International Red Cross had informed him that my mother, father and brother were killed in a car wreck. I was wondering how the IRC knew where I was. I asked Blood on Hands about my sister. He said that she also was killed.

By that time, I was pretty mad. I informed him that he was lying—I had no sister. He hit me and called the guards. They held me down and with pliers pulled the fingernail from my right ring finger. The fingernail never grew back. It is a daily reminder to me of my captivity.

On what I suppose was Easter, they gave all of us a dyed egg. Later, we learned from one of the cooks, an Australian, that Soviet communist leader Joseph V. Stalin had died. We were hoping it would be like the old Wild West. If the Indian chief were killed, the Indians would stop fighting. We were happy in a quiet way.

Physically, I wasn't too bad off—I had lost my right eye, I took a burp gun bullet in my right shoulder, and both eardrums were ruptured. I had shrapnel in my left knee and a wounded left ankle. The satchel charge left me partially blinded in the left eye. It could have been a lot worse. Finally, the sight in my left eye had returned. By the grace of God, I had kept a tube of ophthalmic ointment in my top pocket. I kept putting the ointment in my right eye. The wounds on my leg, knee and shoulder were healing. Our Australian cook not only kept us informed, but he supplied me with boiled water. I kept pouring it on my wounds to remove the exudates. (Thank God for the 23rd Psalm in my Bible. My mother had

given me one with a steel-case cover, inscribed with "May this keep you safe from harm.")

One day, they loaded us on a truck, and we headed out. We noticed it was extremely quiet. There were no bombing runs by allied planes or artillery explosions. We noticed the morning sun was on our left, which meant we were headed south. As we went farther we also noticed there were no other sounds of war. Were we really headed south?

We arrived in Kaesong just above the 38th parallel line of demarcation and were held in an old Buddhist temple damaged by artillery and full of bullet holes. There we met other prisoners of war and were given clean bandages, Chinese clothing and tennis shoes, none of which fit.

The Chinese said we were part of Operation Little Switch, an exchange of sick and wounded POWs. Peace talks at nearby Panmunjom were going on. I was at Kaesong for three or four days before my name was called. In the meantime, the communists tried to soften us up a little. We saw a Korean opera one day, a Chinese opera the next day: a real culture shock.

When we could, we'd exchange our experiences and stories between other POWs. Most were very dumbfounded and depressed, and there was not much talking. Most had very hollow-looking faces. Then I saw Sammy Armstrong again. I was glad he made it, but also noticed that he had lost his arm—he was so young. Of course, I was an old man of 20 years myself.

My name was finally called. I clambered onto a truck and headed for Panmunjom. We all cheered and cried as we passed the first Americans in uniform and were taken to Freedom Village.

The first American nurse I saw was a lieutenant in the Army. I can't remember her name, but, boy, was she beautiful. She removed the bandage over my right eye, and she almost passed out. I realized then that my eye must have been pretty bad. A lot of pictures were taken. I ran into a corpsman, Bobby, from Tennessee. I can't remember his last name, but we were in Corps school together. He told me about the high casualties he had taken on Reno, Vegas and Carson. Woody and most others had been killed, and they had already conducted a memorial service for me.

I was released on 25 April 1953. From that day until now, I still wonder, "Why me?"

Three weeks after returning home, I

was back at work in the naval hospital in Pensacola, Fla. I had three surgeries on my right eye and a lot of "sandpapering" done on my face, trying to remove some of the superficial shrapnel. Even today, sometimes while shaving, I'll tear up a razor blade when it hits the shrapnel.

None of the prisoners talked about their experiences then. My family never did. They had been told not to bring it up and maybe I would forget it. Until now I have discussed this with only two others, both combat men. I have all the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, especially nightmares; I still have some every night. It's worse around February because 49 years ago my tour of duty in North Korea started.

I did, however, begin talking to my oldest son just the other day. He was so thankful. I believe the reason many veterans never talk about their war experiences is that many have guilty consciences. They came home, and others did not. I owe a piece of my heart to all the men who left it all in Korea. They are, not were, but are a great group of men who should not be forgotten. The Korean police action has been called a forgotten war. It's time for remembrance and respect.

God is good and has a sense of humor. I promised myself I would never again eat rice and would never treat a Chinese patient. So what happened after earning my bachelor of science at Louisiana State University, medical school in Mississippi and completing my internship and residency as an obstetrician/gynecologist? I moved to Louisiana, where they serve rice with everything. And, during my first year of practice, I delivered 10 Chinese babies.

My experience with the Marine Corps makes me very proud—proud to wear the "pogey rope" fourragere that France presented the 5th Marines in World War I.

I have answered a lot of letters from people all over the country asking if I knew anything about their sons, husbands or brothers who were still listed as missing in action at the time of my return home. I pray for them all and hold them in my heart.

Editor's note: Billy Penn eventually had four surgeries, radiation treatment and a corneal transplant to his right eye. Today, he gives talks to service organizations, Boy Scouts and high school students. Dr. B. Rivers Penn retired from his medical practice in 1998 and lives in Baton Rouge, La., with his wife. He has six children and nine grandchildren.



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