Mission to Nagasaki
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A Navy Nurse's Account of Hospital
Ship Duty at this Japanese Port.

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The USS Haven arrived on its errand of mercy at Nagasaki, Japan, Island of Kyushu, on 11 September 1945. Its mission was to process and medically screen allied prisoners of war; to expedite hospitalization of those urgently in need of such care; to select for temporary hospital study or treatment those cases which required diagnostic study or supportive or corrective therapy before furtner evacuation by transport ship; and to screen out those who were free of infection or contagious disease and were well enough to be evacuated immediately by transport.

A "field hospital", consisting of the least damaged buildings in the area, was set up on the concrete quay alongside which the Haven was moored, and gangs of Japanese laborers were set to work clearing the area of rank filth and wreckage.

As the POWs arrived, by boats, trains, and ambulances, having been sought out and routed there by our Navy medical mission which had gone in ahead, the stretcher cases were divested of their clothing, given bed baths, and sprayed thoroughly with D.D.T., then routed directly to a designated bed on the hospital ship. Many of these stretcher cases were living skeletons, some having one or both legs missing. All the prisoners who could walk went down lines where general health data was obtained by the nurses and then they were examined and screened by the doctors. Of all the POWs, 64% were infested with body lice, 75% had lost 11 to 50 pounds in weight, and many had lost

80 to 100 pounds. Beri-beri was the most common disorder, and respiratory infections, chiefly T.B., were next. Dermatitis in various forms and other skin disorders were frequent. Dysentery, Ascariasis, and hookworm were common, and there were several cases of severe burn, some of which were due to the atom bomb.

The patients followed through on a set routine. There was an enclosed dressing area where clothes were discarded, next the delousing area where the patients were sprayed with D.D.T. by teams of corpsmen, then a medical screening area, where the patients were examined by medical officers. After that, the men were issued new clothing in another area, which they donned in a final dressing area before being given fresh doughnuts, ice cream, sandwiches, and coffee. Not having seen food such as this for 3½ years, the patients' real joy over it was pathetic to see. As a final stage of the immediate processing, they were directed to the hospital ship or to waiting transports, depending on their condition.

The dietary problem aboard the hospital ship was a big one. Food was the first and foremost thought in the minds of these men, and it was difficult to convince them that frequent small feedings of a high protien, high carbohydrate diet was indicated, rather than 3 huge meals a day. Nurses and corpsmen had to watch to see that the men did not come back for second and third helpings, or that they did not take six slices of bread at a time. Patients who had eaten excessively of the food dropped by planes at the camps after V-J Day developed edema. This was a result of impaired water balance, due to Vitamin B-1 deficiency, anemia and other causes, and the sudden increased amounts of food and salt led to quick and massive edema.

Most of these prisoners were Dutch, Australian, and British, with a small percentage of Americans. With the Dutch, we had great difficulty understanding each other, and had to resort to interpreters.

The Red Cross supplied the patients with convalescent kits consisting of candy, cigarettes, tooth paste, tooth brushes, soap and wash cloths, shaving cream, writing paper, socks, and bedroom slippers. They also supplied games and other things for the men's entertainment.

A few days later we were to have an opportunity to visit one of the prisoner of war camps at which the men had been held. We arrived there - Omuta - after a very trying all-night ride to cover a distance of 25 to 30 miles by water. By rail, however, we had to go north first and then retrace ourselves south, all together about 80 miles. The train was like a trolley car and stopped at every station. Even at night, the countryside was interesting, the houses and railroads all small--in conformity with the Japanese stature. The people peered at us curiously as we went through the stations.

A very nice club near the prison camp at which we stayed and which once belonged to the Baron Matsui family has been taken over as headquarters for the American military government. The Baron's family were mine owners and evidently had lived very well at the expense of the people. The military government control set up here over the scared and obsequious Japanese is strict and fair.

We spent a busy and informative as well as a heartbreaking day at the prison camp. The doctors who were prisoners had set up their own hospital, and, despite lack of medicine and equipment, had done an excellent

piece of work in the camp. They made their instruments and splints for skeletal traction from bicycle spokes stolen from Japanese bicycles. They used miners' clothes for operating room uniforms, and for sterilization, rising steam off of a stove. The officer in charge, Dr. Hewlitt, had had quite a number of operations, and once, for his protest over the bad conditions, he had been put into solitary confinement for a week. He thought this camp was the most brutal in Japan, but perhaps, after he had had a chance to review other camps, he may have decided that each one tried to out do the other in brutality.

Evidence of man's inhumanity to man was on every side. Atrocities were well authenticated. There had been five executions on the merest excuses, and 95% of the prisoners had been beaten in varying degrees with leather straps, bats, bamboo clubs--anything. Many of them had been made to kneel long hours on bamboo poles until circulation was cut off, and we have pictures of a boy who had lost both feet as a result of this. Another little "refinement of torture" was to strap our boys in winter, throw water on them, and allow it to freeze. Still another, among many of the other forms of sadism, was to tie the hands, neck, and feet of prisoners in stooped fashion for long hours.

To relate all the horrors of this camp would take more time and space than we have here, and by now all these atrocities will have become common knowledge anyway. To see these prisoners as they come out of the camps is hard to take. They are skeletons, mere shadows of what was once life in them. Many of them have lost all their fight--strange men moving in a strange world. However, it is also a never-ending miracle how much proper food, clothing and care do in a matter of days toward bringing back the normal desire for living in these patients. Next to their hunger for

food, they are so hungry for news of the States that it is pathetic. We've been deluged with questions about sports, the movies, home, from all sides. Just to be able to talk with someone from the States gives them a huge thrill.

Now that the tables are turned, these men who are able are assisting the military government. They are being severe with the Japanese, but fair. We went back to our hospital ship, so clean and serene in contrast to the debris of the country about, that all we could do was voice the fervent hope that civilization would not forget again.