



MASH: An Army Surgeon in Korea

By Otto F. Apel M.D., Pat Apel

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When North Korean forces invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, Otto Apel was a surgical resident living in Cleveland, Ohio, with his wife and three young children. A year later he was chief surgeon of the 8076th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital constantly near the front lines in Korea. Immediately upon arriving in camp, Apel performed 80 hours of surgery. His feet swelled so badly that he had to cut his boots off, and he saw more surgical cases in those three and a half days than he would have in a year back in Cleveland. There were also the lighter moments. When a Korean came to stay at the 8076th, word of her beauty spread so rapidly that they needed MPs just to direct traffic. Apel also recalls a North Korean aviator, nicknamed "Bedcheck Charlie," who would drop a phony grenade from an open-cockpit biplane, a story later filmed for the television series. He also tells of the day the tent surrounding the women's shower was "accidentally" blown off by a passing helicopter. In addition to his own story, Apel details the operating conditions, workload, and patient care at the MASH units while revealing the remarkable advances made in emergency medical care. MASH units were the first hospitals designed for operations close to the front lines, and from this particularly difficult vantage, their medical staffs were responsible for innovations in the use of antibiotics and blood plasma and in arterial repair. On film and television, MASH doctors and nurses have been portrayed as irreverent and having little patience with standard military procedures. In this powerful memoir, Apel reveals just how realistic these portrayals were.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

The popular television series M*A*S*H owes its historical accuracy in part to Apel, chief surgeon of the 8076th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in 1951 and consultant on the show. Here Apel (with son Pat) expands on the themes common to the television episodes and familiar to viewers: the severe working conditions, the irreverence hospital staff often had for army protocol, and the insufficiency of necessary supplies. Apel outlines the historical and political forces that created these conditions and, ironically, the considerable advances in emergency medical care made during the Korean War. Although his work is heavily autobiographical, Apel draws from primary and secondary Korean War literature to provide statistics and documentation. Personal photos appear throughout the text. Well written and researched, this book provides entertainment as well as historical value and is appropriate for both public and academic settings. Andy Wickens, Univ. of Illinois, Lib. of the Health Sciences, Chicago
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From [Booklist](#)

The 1951 doctors' draft took Otto Apel out of surgical residency and sent him to Korea. He felt obligated to serve but now deplors his lack of military training before being placed at the battlefield. In contrast to his preparation was that of the other subject of his account, the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH), developed to meet the special needs of the Korean War. Aided by his son, Apel writes in particular about the formation and daily activities of the 8076th MASH, to which he was assigned. He began operating the moment he reached the unit, stationed near the 38th parallel, and learned military surgery from the muddy or dusty ground up. Improvisation was essential every day, as was teamwork among the surgeons, nurses, and support staff, who, Apel shows, provided exemplary care for the wounded soldiers. The great difference between the MASH on TV and the MASH at the battlefield, Apel and his colleagues later felt, was that the latter had casualties. *William Beatty*

Review

"The reader is spared nothing, and at times I shared with the authors an understanding of the emotional effect medical work in a war zone can cause." *BMJ*

"The great difference between the MASH on TV and the MASH on the battlefield, Apel and his colleagues later felt, was that the latter had casualties" *Booklist review*

"A superb book. . . . Reading this fine nonfiction account of an army surgeon in the Korean War will make you wish you had been there treating casualties. It did me!" *Journal of the American Medical Association*

"Well written and researched, this book provides entertainment as well as historical value." *Library Journal*

"Most readers will find Apel's memoirs fascinating, horrifying, humorous, and heartbreaking." *Library Lane*

"One of the most readable memoirs that I have come across. A real contribution to the history of the Korean War." *Mac Coffman*

"This memoir is about war, but it addresses a different aspect of war: the struggle of men and women in the U.S. Army who were called upon to expend their efforts and their lives preserving human life during this vicious combat." *McCormick (SC) Messenger*

"His descriptions are full of detail, often vivid, regularly most critical of the US Medical Corps."? *Medicine, Conflict, and Survival*

"The authors have skillfully blended the surgeon's personal experiences into the bigger picture of military medicine, providing the reader with an informative and interesting account of the MASH and its impact during the Korean War."? *Military*

"Exposes the true nature of the Korean conflict from a medical perspective. . . . An excellent account of the history of MASH units and how they operated in Korea."? *Navy Medicine*

"Apel shows the true side of the Army hospitals."? *Ohio Today*

"The book is a wonderful paean to all our men and women who served in Korea."? *Ohioana Quarterly*

"Provides a close look at the way a MASH functioned. . . . The Apels have produced a well written and useful book."? *Southern Historian*

Users Review

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