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Laughter Of The Innocents

Fifty years ago, a Royal Navy landing party in the Korean war came across a group of starving orphans. Recently Saga reunited two of the children with some of those who saved their lives. Roy Johnstone reports

It was no ordinary bow. It was the ultimate of bows – a bow so deep that their foreheads touched the floor. And it brought a huge lump to the throats of those for whom the gesture was intended, even though they were men battle-hardened by the horrors of war.

It was a bow that said "Thank you for coming to the aid of my country in its time of need". But that's not all it conveyed. It was also a heartfelt tribute to a handful of former Royal Navy sailors for almost certainly saving their lives.

Fifty years have passed since the start of the Korean war on June 25 1950 – the first conflict fought under the flag of the United Nations. And as in all confrontations, none suffered more than the innocents – among them the twosome who, shortly before this issue of *Saga* went to press, showed their gratitude to their rescuers in such spectacular and emotional fashion.

Just occasionally in war, amid the hate, the killing, the misery and the hopelessness, man shows a quite different side of his character – a profound almost instinctive love for his fellow beings, often triggered by the sight of intense suffering. And none

more so than when the victims are children.

This is one such story. And *Saga* is proud to mark an otherwise tragic period of history by recalling an incident to do rather with the preservation of life and, half a century later for the first time, bringing together some of those involved from opposite sides of the world.

The event in question happened nearly six months after communist North Korea precipitated hostilities by attacking South Korean positions south of the 38th Parallel. By then the South Korean forces had been joined by UN troops, while the invaders had been reinforced by the Chinese. And it was proving the coldest winter for nearly 20 years.

So much so that some of the crew of the British cruiser, HMS *Ceylon*, recollect that near the shore the sea was frozen over and that they were forever chipping thick ice off guns and stairways. Temperatures plummeted to minus 20 and below.

The ship, which earlier had landed the first British troops at Pusan in the south-east, had pounded enemy positions and carried out night-time blockade patrols, was employed mainly off the west



Kwang-Il Park and Soon-Ok Chang with three of their HMS Ceylon heroes – Joe Denham (centre), Brian Cunningham (left) and Frank Hawkes

coast, securing control of the numerous islands that it had previously bombarded. Now, in the run-up to the festive season, a landing party was sent ashore to nearby Paeng-Young Do. For the official record, the platoon was searching for North Korean

guerrillas. In fact, the real reason was to bring back a... Christmas tree.

What the men eventually found left many moist-eyed. Close to a graveyard, they came across a lonely, ramshackle hut and, to their dismay on peering inside,

discovered 20 or so children huddling together in an almost vain attempt to keep warm. In one corner a solitary paraffin stove was alight but making little impression against the fearful, penetrating cold.

The youngsters, ranging

from infants to 13-year-olds in the care of three adults, were shabbily dressed, grubby and pitifully thin. Two were quite clearly ill and, unhappily, destined not to survive their ordeal. There was scarcely any food, mealtimes consisting of little more than >

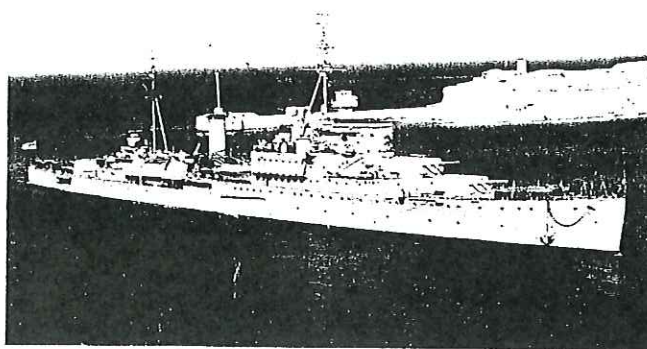
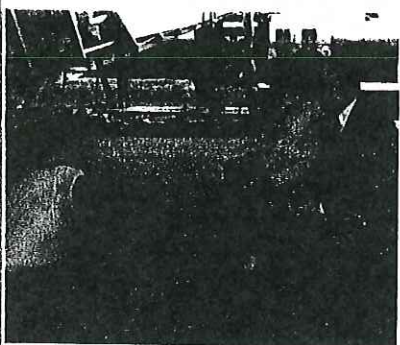
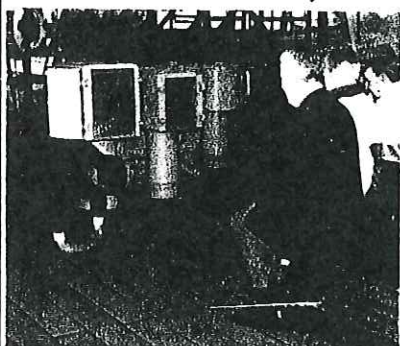
< a single tablespoonful of rice and vegetables per child.

The sailors lost no time. They immediately sent word back to the *Ceylon* whereupon the ship's chaplain broadcast an appeal over the vessel's public address for gifts of shirts, coats and woollens. Within an hour, his bunk was overflowing.

Soon after that, the items were taken to the island along with dozens of boxes of food. The children could scarcely believe their eyes, still less contain their excitement. You would have thought they had been given the freedom of GAP – rather than adult hand-me-down sweaters and the like that reached down to their ankles and, in some cases, trailed in their wake like a bride's train.

But most of all, they craved hugs. And there was no shortage of those. Brawny seamen, even in war, can be big softies at heart – all of which became even more apparent when, from under their oilskins, they brought out their own parcels and proceeded to hand round chocolate and toys that they had bought in Japan for their own children.

Kwang-Il and Soon-Ok making their deep bows of gratitude on the stern deck of HMS Belfast. Above: the Navy's sister cruiser, HMS Ceylon



They also took it in turns to chop down dozens of trees and saw them into logs so the orphanage would have fuel for the rest of the winter.

How hard had life been before the Royal Navy's chance encounter? Unimaginably awful, according to the two former waifs, one now in her mid-fifties, the other in his early sixties. They had been traced through the joint efforts of the Korean Veterans Association and Brian Cunningham, who served on the *Ceylon* during the war and, three years ago, volunteered to initiate enquiries on behalf of the cruiser's reunion organisation. *Saga Magazine* recently invited them to Britain to link up with members of the original landing party for the first time since 1950 – and the reunion took place on HMS Belfast, Britain's sole surviving naval vessel from the Korean campaign and now a floating museum in the shadow of London's Tower Bridge.

Kwang-Il Park, married with two grown-up daughters and living in Inchon City (scene of the American amphibious landings in September 1950 and its later re-capture by the US Eighth Army in February 1951), was 13 at the time. He remembers most the starvation and intense cold. "There was no floor covering in the hut – just bare boards – and only a few folding camp beds, each shared by two children top to tail. The one small paraffin stove might as well not have been there for the amount of heat it gave off, and all we had to cover us at night was a light blanket so we slept in

our clothes."

It was about as cold inside as out and so wretched were the conditions that Kwang-Il absconded three times. "It was out of sheer desperation," he declares. "I did it simply to find something to eat. I dug up radishes from the fields and took whatever else I could find which actually wasn't very much."

That he ran away more than once demonstrates just how desperate he was. On the subsequent occasions, he knew precisely what was in store – a severe beating until he bled. "The thrashings were formidable and feared," he says. "But the hunger was even more terrible."

He also had a younger brother to look after – Kwang-Soo, six years his junior. And from the tragic moment that they were orphaned in their native North Korea, they pledged to stick together. They did so – but only by an outside slice of luck.

They were found by the Americans but, it turned out, they were interested in looking after the welfare merely of the younger boy. Kwang-Il was waved on his way. The lads' pleadings fell on deaf ears and Kwang-Soo, clinging to his brother, began to sob his heart out.

In fact, the boy was determined not to be parted. The soldiers, on the other hand, thought that the children were saying their farewells – hardly surprisingly because, to a Western ear, the sound of a Korean child crying sounds very much like the words: "I go... I go... I go..."

Caught up in the emotion of the situation the Americans, clearly affected

by what the youngster appeared to be wailing, could not help but relent as their resolve gave way. Hearts melted, the rule book was cast to the wind and the brothers were allowed to remain together. A few days later they were at the Jah-You ("Freedom") orphanage.

Later, though, riven by hunger, Kwang-Il was rueing the Americans' intervention. He wasn't over-happy when the British Navy first put in an appearance, either. As he explains: It sounds foolish now but the older children like me ruled the roost. Inevitably the sailors made a huge fuss of the younger ones and our noses were pushed out of joint."

Soon-Ok, being among the prettiest (this, according to Kwang-Il) and, at 4½, one of the youngest, was an instant hit and cuddled to bits as, one by one, the Brits reached out for her.

Both still remember the toys that they ended up with – Soon-Ok (stunningly pretty and so gracious to this day) received a doll, Kwang-Il a gun ("Exactly what I wanted").

What the landing party wasn't to know was that, as soon as it was called away after a couple of days and the last photos were taken, most of the boxes of food and the toys were put in store. This was not as cruel as it might seem, the orphanage deciding that the provisions should be eked out for the rest of the winter and the rest of the clothing and playthings set aside for other occasions. Not that the children saw it that way. As Kwang-Il ruefully reflects: "We cried our eyes out..."

Like Kwang-Il with his gun, Soon-Ok and her doll were inseparable. Which was just as well for if any child dared to swap their toy for food outside the orphanage the punishment, they were informed, would be merciless. The generosity that had been shown was not to be abused.

Soon-Ok found her way to Jah-You after losing her father when a babe in arms

and then her mother who had succumbed to malnutrition. She was looked after by her grandfather briefly until he, too, died. Because he was so young at the time, he cannot recall very much of her early years. She does remember, though, climbing on to the roof of the hut and watching the warplanes overhead, convinced that one of them would bring her mother back.

One of the first in the landing party to spy the orphanage, Joe Denham – a 68-year-old Geordie now of Syston near Leicester, who was assigned to HMS *Ceylon's* forward armament turret – says that the first thought in the men's minds was that it might be a lure and that they could be walking into an ambush. "Looking back," he goes on, "it was a relief that he place was genuine. Unlike the Americans, who had much more efficient automatic weapons, we had only single shot Lee Enfield rifles. Also they had fur jackets which were a lot warmer than the greatcoats many of our lads had, I can tell you."

The first glimpse he had of the children "really tugged at the heartstrings". He continues: "They were in a very bad state and the two or three adults looking after them didn't look so good,

either. After that, all of us were only too eager to do everything we could."

As for the toys, he declares, "given that they came from Japan, many would be collectors' items today with values to match."

Frank Hawkes, too, could hardly believe that he was meeting up again with two of the children he had first encountered in very different circumstances half a century ago. "It's great to see them now in such fine health," he says.

A former locomotive fireman on the Southern Railway, Frank, 70, who hails from Strood, Kent, was a stoker on the *Ceylon* and, like Joe, has fond memories of playing with the orphans. "I've always liked kids," he says, "and, because of their plight, one's heart went out to them. They were excited and happy just to see somebody. They were all in rags, followed us around everywhere and were crying out to be loved and taken notice of."

"I can remember winding up some of the clockwork toys – and the delight on their faces had to be seen to be believed. But in all

Soon-Ok (front) and Kwang-Soo are ringed in this 1950 photograph taken at the Jah-You orphanage



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< honesty. I think it gave us more pleasure to be with them."

Frank was also one of those who felled and chopped the firewood. "The task helped to keep us warm," he adds, "and goodness knows there couldn't have been a more worthwhile cause."

Brian Cunningham, 69, was not among those picked at random for the landing parties. Nonetheless, he recalls that the discovery of the children had a huge effect on the ship. "Everyone was so keen to do what they could including the captain, Lloyd Davies," he says. "And the chaplain was magnificent."

A Yorkshireman who has since settled in Inverness, Brian has spent three years in an attempt to trace some of the orphans. His first efforts - letters to two Korean newspapers - proved unproductive. Undeterred, he wrote several more and his persistence paid off. An officer of the Korean Veterans Association in the capital, Seoul, made enquiries on Brian's behalf and discovered, remarkably, that Shin-Young Hur, the pastor's wife who founded and ran the orphanage, was still alive.

Not long afterwards the whereabouts of the Park brothers and Soon-Ok came to light - and *Saga Magazine* did the rest...

At the recent London reunion, Brian spoke for each of the HMS *Ceylon* trio when he said that he never dreamed that they would meet any of the orphans again. He went on: "It was a very touching moment for the three of us."

They were particularly happy to learn that all the children, except for the two who were ill, survived - and that Soon-Ok Chang and Kwang-Il are married with families... and that Kwang-Soo Park is now a successful businessman. It hasn't been all plain sailing for Soon-Ok, though. At the age of 12, she was traced by an auntie following a television appeal but it quickly became clear

that all the relative was interested in was using her as cheap domestic servant denying her the chance even of a basic education. As a result, Soon-Ok returned to the orphanage and subsequently made it to a junior high school in between toiling in the Jah-You rice paddy fields, looking after the other children and helping in the laundry and the kitchen.

Just before she married in 1973, she went back to the orphanage once more and, in her own way, mirrored the British sailors' gesture of 50 years before. As a "thank you" to the institution for taking care of her, she presented every orphan there with a gift. Today, living in Taejon, she works as a part-time cook to help pay for a university education for her daughter, the youngest of her three children.

Interestingly, given that even after a truce lasting almost half a century, North and South Korea remain bitter enemies, Kwang-Il (a North Korean) and Soon-Ok (a South Korean) each wed partners from the other side of the 38th Parallel that divides the two countries.

In the meantime, if Joe Denham and Frank Hawkes and any of the others in that landing party of 50 years ago have any doubts about what their actions achieved, the deep bows by Soon-Ok and Kwang-Il on the stern deck of HMS *Belfast* should dispel them. That's for sure.

● For both Soon-Ok and Kwang-Il, the trip to Britain was the first time that either had set foot outside Korea. During their short stay, they were taken to see the main sights in London and the south-east. Although so far the Millennium Dome at Greenwich has not proved popular with the Brits themselves, Kwang-Il had no hesitation in putting it at the top of his list. Soon-Ok, on the other hand, gave her vote to Leeds Castle near Maidstone, Kent.

● Warmest thanks to Mrs Chunghee Cha and Mrs Kyung-Mee Beaton for their interpreting services.

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