

This opinion piece by PCI Chair, Ambassador Kathleen Stephens, appeared in the on the Korea Joongang Daily on Sunday, June 14, 2020.

A letter from Troy

Kathleen Stephens

The author was U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea from 2008 to 2011. She is the president of the Korea Economic Institute of America located in Washington, D.C.

Dear Private Parker,

We are neighbors. I first learned of you a year ago while walking through the small cemetery next to my cabin on the shores of quiet Milnor Lake, near tiny, remote Troy, Montana. I spotted your modest gravestone, relating your life and your service, among the native alder shrub and shaded by towering ponderosa pine trees.

I'm only your part-time neighbor; I live most of the year in Washington, D.C. But I'm back in Montana now. Milnor Lake Cemetery is dotted with the graves of veterans from all of America's 20th century wars, and on most of them American flags had been placed to mark American Memorial Day in late May. But there was none on yours, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that unlike the others you did not live to return home, to join a veterans' organization, to reminisce about the past. Your young life ended in Korea almost 70 years ago. And so I write you, and about you, today.

Like you, I grew up in the vast American West. Like you, I went to Korea young, when I was 21 years old. But you were even younger, just 20 years old and you went not out of choice but of duty; conscription was still required of young American men. You were too young to have served in World War II, and you were probably only recently conscripted when North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950, and President Truman made the momentous decision — one he later described as the most important of his presidency — to defend the Republic of Korea.

And so you, a just-turned 20-year-old from the mountains of Montana, arrived with the 34th Infantry of the 24th Division in Korea on July 3, 1950. The first U.S. force in Korea after June 25, Task Force Smith, had just been routed. Your battalion, in Pyeongtaek, was attacked by North Korean forces on July 6. You held your position for five hours, and then fell back to Cheonan, South Chungcheong.

By July 12, you had retreated to Gongju, where your battalion defended 34 miles along the Geum River. There was division, dissent, confusion and casualties among your commanding officers. North Korean tanks and forces were surrounding you, and you had scarce defenses. Your unit suffered huge losses.

You fell back again, to defend Daejeon, along the Gapcheon River, and then to Gochang, North Jeolla, from where your unit moved east. By the beginning of August, the remaining survivors from your unit had retreated and regrouped at the Nakdong River, joining in establishing the "Busan Perimeter," defending it at further huge cost to military and civilian life, until the Incheon landing in September turned the tide of the war.

But you never made it to the Nakdong River. You were wounded and died near Gochang on July 30, 1950. Like so many Koreans and Americans, civilian and military, your life ended in those horrendous early days of a brutal war. Now I only have the inscriptions on your tombstone to instruct me on the last month of your life.

That is all I can piece together about your time in Korea. I have many questions. What were you thinking during that July of 1950, as you retreated ever so outward from one unsustainable position to another, outmanned, outgunned, disorganized, as you saw suffering, destruction and death all around you?

Why are you in a quiet grave at remote Milnor Lake, and not at Arlington National Cemetery, or some other fine military cemetery? Perhaps your mother was so heartbroken at losing you that she wanted you close, with a view of the mountains and the lake to comfort you, and where she could visit you. I can only speculate.

But I want to tell you that your sacrifice was not without meaning, and is not forgotten. I want to tell you that I went to Korea 25 years after you did, at a far easier time, and I had the chance to walk in the hills, along the rivers, and among the people of Cheonan, Gongju, Daejeon and Gochang. I can tell you that the Korean people I met then remembered the suffering, and also the sacrifice. They told me it had created a blood-forged relationship (hyeol-maeng gwangei, in Korean) between Koreans and Americans, that they were committed to building a Korea worthy of the terrible price in human suffering that had been paid for the survival of the Republic of Korea.

I witnessed Korea's rise in the decades since. I watched how Koreans, against all odds, built a thriving economy and a robust democracy. And I've seen the relationship between Korea and the United States grow ever broader, with our security and economic ties deepened by the vitality of our people-to-people ties and our shared values. I wish you could see yourself how Korea has become an exemplary global power, how Koreans have stood with the United States these 70 years, and how we remain friends and partners even, and I hope especially now, at a time of deep social and economic crisis in the world, at a time when we Americans must renew our own domestic struggle to live up to our values of equality, justice, and human rights.

Private Parker, I wish that you had survived that terrible July of 1950 in Korea, that you had returned to your family in Montana to live out your life, and that you were now my 90-year-old neighbor on Milnor Lake. We could watch the osprey flying over the water and soaring above the mountain peaks as we recall the past and consider the future.

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I grieve for your life ended too soon. Even when the armistice was signed in 1953, it was an unsatisfying, incomplete moment. There remains unfinished business on the Korean Peninsula, and in our own beloved America. But the rise of South Korea to its respected standing in the world today puts the lie to the post-Armistice notion that it was a "die for a tie." Instead, the words inscribed in the Korean Memorial in Washington, D.C., capture the shared gratitude of Americans and Koreans alike:

"Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met."

So, Private Parker, I have put flowers on your gravestone on this lovely June day, and hope that in 2020, Americans and Koreans can again work together with resolve and with wisdom to confront today's historic challenges, inspired and humbled by your sacrifice.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Stephens

Troy, Montana



 [A letter from Troy.](#)

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