

Robert L. Kasha, M.D.



**Memoirs of
a World War II
Army Surgeon**

A
Larksfield
Press
Large Print
Book

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World War II
Army Surgeon**

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Larksfield Press



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PROLOGUE

It's hard to believe it has been sixty years since I heeded my country's call and turned in my surgeon's greens for olive drab. I certified thousands of young men for service in the early years of that long-ago war. Later, I cared for thousands more. Ultimately, I found myself caring for the German soldiers who killed and wounded many of those same American boys. And when I left for America, those same enemies gave me a hand-carved set of pony bookends and a chess set out of respect and friendship. Simple gifts that I cherish to this day.

I was a healer who never fired a shot in anger. But, by a twist of fate, those same doctoring skills ultimately trapped me in a situation where I had to help hang an American soldier. But, I am getting ahead of myself. Better to start at the beginning....

A NEW ENGLANDER BY BIRTH AND SPEECH

I was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, as was my mother before me. Shortly after my birth, however, my family moved to Long Island where I lived until I came out to the Midwest to go to college. My mother was a very good mother and spoke very proper English with a pronounced New England accent. I think I still have part of that accent because I pronounce all my *T*s in words like “continental,” whereas many people slur over those consonants. And for years I used to say, “Give me a drink of ‘wah-ter,’” and that’s typical of Massachusetts and the New England area, too. I’ve gotten over that, but I must still accent my *T*s because everyone recognizes my voice even if I haven’t spoken with them in years. After I retired from medicine, I took Spanish classes at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas. My instructor’s name was Dr. Miguel Muñoz and he later moved to Los Angeles, California. Several years went by before I had occasion to telephone him. But, I had barely said “Miguel,” when he responded “Don Roberto! How good to hear your voice.”

My childhood was unremarkable except for the fact that I loved to read. My mother was adept at spelling and pronouncing, etc., and she taught me quite a bit before I even got into school. I read authors like Pushkin and Tolstoy—heavy stuff—before I went to grade school. My father had a whole library of Shakespeare’s plays. They were little books, only about three inches by two

inches. I read them all before I went to high school. I loved them. I don't think I really understood everything that was in them, but I just loved reading them.

I was a good student in high school. I made *As* almost all of the way through, and was elected to the *Arista*, the State High School Honor Society. The last semester of my senior year, my drawing teacher came to me and said, "Robert, I have checked your records and you have made nothing but *As* all the way through school. But, you took my course in drawing this semester, which you were required to take, and you really haven't passed it at all."

"I don't know how to draw an apple and I can't draw a flower for the life of me," I admitted.

"Well, that is part of drawing," she said. "But, I'm not going to hurt your record by giving you a failing grade in drawing. I am going to give you a *C*. It will take down your grade point average a trifle, but not very much."

As it turned out, that *C* made the difference between my being the class valedictorian or salutatorian. The girl who was named valedictorian also made straight *As* except in drawing. But, she could draw a little bit, so she got a *B* in the class.

I DECIDE TO BECOME A PHYSICIAN

When it came time for me to go to college, I had already decided to become a physician. I had an uncle who was a doctor, and I think that's what made me want to be a doctor. I liked him really well. He was my father's brother, but my father wasn't very interested in my becoming a doctor.

“It takes a long time to be a doctor and we are very poor people,” he told me.

“I know, but I’d work,” I said, And I did. I worked every summer beginning when I was ten years-old! I never had a summer vacation. I worked and put the money aside for college. My mother supported me completely because she wanted her son to be a doctor. So, it worked out well.

I decided I would try to go to a school like Columbia University, New York University, or Cornell. I tried out for the Cornell scholarships. They awarded a full scholarship to six people from the state of New York each year. My best friend was an excellent student—he taught me to play Bridge—and we did many scholastic-type things together. So, naturally we both took the Cornell scholarships exams together. To make a long story short, he came in sixth and I came in ninth. I told myself that wasn’t too bad when you considered the several hundred applicants who took the test. But, without the scholarship, Cornell was too expensive.

Columbia was too expensive, also, and so was New York University. Then I learned that some of the schools in the Midwest were cheaper. I had a second or third cousin who went to the University of Arkansas. He said everything was really cheap there.

“You can get a job and you’ll get just as good an education,” he told me. “Everyone makes fun of Arkansas, but the university is a good school.”

So I decided on the University of Arkansas.

I had an uncle who promised me a hundred dollars when I started out. The morning I was going to leave for Arkansas from Grand Central Station, I went to his house to get the promised money. But, he said, “Well, things have been real tough, and I just can’t give you that money right now. I’m sorry.” This was 1930 and the Stock Market had crashed just the year before. Today we call it the Great Depression, but we had no idea at the time it would go on so long or be so bad. Which is just as well, as I might have decided not to go to college.

As it was, I said, “Well, I guess I’ve got enough money to go and I’ve got my train ticket. I’ll just make the best of it.”

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

When I arrived at the University of Arkansas, it was very cold. I thought it was supposed to be like the tropics, and I had summer clothes on when I got there. It was about nineteen or twenty degrees Fahrenheit at Fayetteville that night. But I managed and I got along.

The first thing I did after I enrolled was to find a job. I immediately got a job making beds for thirty or forty male students and so I had a room. I got two meals a day, so that helped. Then I had other jobs. I collected shoe repairing, cleaning and pressing stuff, and laundry. I beat rugs. I mowed lawns. I tried any way I could to make a dollar.

The second year that I was in college, I got a real nice job waiting tables—I got three meals a day. That job didn’t last because the woman who ran the little restaurant in her home went

broke. Then I got another job in a similar place. This time I was a dishwasher. I washed the dishes in exchange for three meals a day—no money, just meals.

This woman used lye soap and my hands got all raw and had great big sores on them. I went to the doctor at the student clinic and he said, “You’ve got to keep your hands out of all kinds of water for three days.”

I told the lady who ran the place what the doctor had said and she said, “Well, as soon as your hands are better, you can start eating here again.”

I had no money. So, I went for three days without food and with only water to drink while my hands healed. By the end of the third day, I was very hungry and I was sitting on the steps of the main building looking very forlorn. One of the fellows happened to come by and saw me—the president of the student body—and I remember his name, Dean Morley. Dean came over and asked, “Kasha, what are you looking so sad about?”

I said, “I don’t know. I don’t feel too good.”

“What did you have for breakfast?” he asked. I told him that I hadn’t eaten breakfast.

“What did you have for supper last night?” I told him that I hadn’t eaten supper.

Then he said, “Let’s go down to the drug store and get a malt and some crackers.” When I told him that I didn’t have any money he said, “I didn’t ask you for money. I’m going to get you a malt and some crackers. Are you going to come or do I have to drag you?”

I agreed to go, and I drank two malts, and ate two packages of crackers. He was kind enough to pay my bill. Anyway, my hands healed up shortly after that and I got my job back.

The next year, I got a really good job driving a coal truck. Everyone heated their homes with coal in those days. I delivered coal from Fayetteville to Springdale, Arkansas. I started out at midnight and I got back about 6 o'clock in the morning. I didn't have to go to class until 7:30. I got paid cash money for that and some of the other jobs I had, but I was always short.

My mother worked in my father's store. She loved me and she would save up her money. She always wrote once a month and put the money she had saved in the envelope with her note. And do you know how much she could afford to send? Twenty-five cents! A quarter. That was my help and I appreciated it greatly because I knew it truly was a real sacrifice on her part. At one point, my mother had to have her gall bladder removed. When that happened, I quit school for one semester to take her place working in my dad's store. That's why it took me four-and-a-half years to graduate instead of four years.

Anyway, I worked and I managed to get by. When the warm weather came, people didn't need coal, so the truck was loaded with eggs. Each crate of eggs weighed fifty-five pounds. I loaded them on, went to Springdale, unloaded them, and then came back and got ready for school.

I also made money in the summers working for my father. He gave me one or two hundred dollars to have to get back into school and also to travel. Most of my traveling was hitchhiking.

One time I went home for Christmas. I hitchhiked up to near Buffalo, New York. It was cold and snowing and I was hungry and tired and had very little money. I went to a police station and asked if they had a cot that I could sleep on for the night. They said, “Well, we have some cots, but they’re in a cell. If you don’t mind being in a cell, we’ll let you sleep here tonight.” So, I spent the night in jail—it was the only time though. I’ve never, never been arrested—never did any criminal act in my entire life. The only thing I did wrong was I once stole something.

I came home one day—I think I was about five years old—with a big red apple in my hand. My mother asked, “Robbie, where did you get that apple?” I told her that I’d gotten it from the food stand down the block.

“Well, you didn’t have any money, how did you pay for it?” she asked.

I said, “Well, I didn’t pay for it. It was out there, and it looked so pretty that I just took it.”

“Get your coat on. We’re going back,” she said. She took me back there and I started to cry. She told me, “Here’s the apple. You give it back to that man and you tell him that you stole it from him.” And so I did. I cried and gave it back to him.

He said, “It’s alright, Sonny. You can have the apple.”

But, my mother said, “No, he cannot have it. He stole and he’ll know that he lost the apple because he stole. I don’t ever want him to steal again.”

So that was the only time that I stole or got in trouble. I never had any problems with the police or things like that.

Despite working, I did pretty well in high school. There was a freshman honor society, Phi Eta Sigma. I made all As, so I got into that society. I also got interested in sports. I had never been very good at sports because I studied all the time. Now, I played several sports.

One day, I saw someone playing tennis and I said, “Boy, that looks like a wonderful sport.” Someone told me that I’d have to buy a racquet, but I said, “Oh, I don’t have enough money to buy a tennis racquet.” Then, I found out I could borrow one from the gym, so I did.

Back in 1932, we played on clay courts. The courts were rolled and striped every morning. I picked tennis up very quickly and the next year, 1933, I was finally able to save up enough to buy a tennis racquet of my own.

(I still play tennis now at age eighty-seven. I play three times a week from 6:30 to 8 in the morning with a group of about twenty men. I’m the oldest one in the group by some ten or fifteen years. College students play with us sometimes. Once, we had a couple of young men who were on the high school tennis team playing in our group. So, we aren’t just lobbing the ball around. Some of those high school kids hit it to me as hard as they can. I’ll run and hit it back harder. That’s the way I’ve learned to do everything in life. If someone assaults you, assault him back. Win or lose, you are fighting and you aren’t just beaten down. That has been my motto all of my life, and it has always put me in good stead to do it that way.)

There wasn’t anything else unusual about my time at the

University of Arkansas. I went there from 1930 to 1934. Because of my good grades, I was accepted at both the University of Arkansas and St. Louis University School of Medicine in St. Louis, Missouri. I chose the latter and I went there from 1934 to 1938.

ST. LOUIS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Jesuit priests, who are very strict, ran the St. Louis University School of Medicine. They were all bookworms—they loved books and studies—and they were strict. We could not come to class wearing a sweater or just a shirt. We had to wear a coat and a tie if we had one. I had one tie to my name and I wore it all the way through. While in medical school, I had a job in a restaurant where I waited tables. I'd rush down there and wait tables for breakfast. I'd eat some breakfast in a hurry and then I'd run to the medical school. I'd get back to the restaurant in time to wait on tables during the lunch rush. Then I'd eat a quick lunch and go back to school. For that, I got three meals a day and three dollars a week. Between the running back and forth, eating regularly, and the pocket money, I was in pretty good shape. I also worked in the school library for several years, which was a pleasure. In my spare time, I had a second-hand typewriter and typed term papers and theses for other students.

I finished medical school in June of 1938 and took an internship at St. Louis City Hospital. We took a month on each service, such as medical, obstetrics, and surgery. We went to the Psychiatric Institute for one month and then we went to the

Tuberculosis Sanitarium for a month. When we had the month on surgery, we assisted a resident physician who was over us. Then at the end of the month, you got to do one operation yourself. I did a hernia. It went well and I was so proud I went down to the next floor, which was the surgical floor, to show off a little. There was a nurse there that I admired and knew by name, and she knew me. I said to her, "I want you to know, I just did my first surgery."

"What did you do? Open a boil?" She asked me. Oh, that took me down. I quit bragging a little after that.

It was a wonderful internship. When it was over, I decided that I wanted to be a surgeon. So, I talked to the faculty and started training in surgery as a resident.

As a resident, I was better paid than when I had been an intern. As an intern, I made ten dollars a month. Every two weeks we lined up with all the employees of the hospital to get our five dollars. As a resident in surgery, I think I made seventeen dollars a month, which was pretty good money in those days.

In the second year of my surgery residency, I married that nurse who had taken me down a peg or two. (We were married for twenty-five years. We had a son and a daughter, who was killed in an auto accident when she was twenty years-old. We divorced in 1968.)

When I was first married, I was taking surgical training. I went from St. Louis City Hospital and then took some work at Washington University in St. Louis. I was able to get a position at Jefferson Barracks as a doctor and a surgeon. I was doing surgery and being paid for it on a salary-type basis, not by surgery. One

night I received a call from a colonel, who was associated with our hospital at Jefferson Barracks. He told me his wife was having a lot of pain and asked if I would look at her. I told him to bring her to our dispensary. After examining her, I told him I thought she had appendicitis.

“Do you have to operate for that?” he asked. I told him that we should, because it might get better, but if it got worse the appendix would rupture. I did the surgery and his wife got along beautifully. She went home in three or four days and he was delighted—he and his wife were very close.

He didn't pay me for the surgery, but he was kind enough to give me a set of twelve beautiful cocktail glasses made of a kind of wood from Hawaii. They were a glossy orange and black. He said, “I am so grateful to you and I want you to have these.” (I still have them, by the way.)

PEARL HARBOR AND FORT ROBINSON

In October, 1940, I volunteered for the regular army because I could see that we were going to be involved in the war. They were already sinking our merchant ships carrying war goods to England. I had the same position as I had before as a surgeon at that same hospital, only now I was an officer, too.

On December seven, 1941 the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I remember the day very well. I had gone to the St. Louis Symphony to hear Vladimir Goldschmann conduct. I came out and there were the newspaper headlines screaming, “PEARL HARBOR ATTACKED.” I remember it vividly.

I was put in charge of the Selective Service induction station at Jefferson Barracks after we declared war on Germany and Japan. We took in thousands and thousands of young men who had to be examined. Before this, the station had been fairly small. I was given permission to hire additional doctors from the city to help us out. Many doctors wanted to be on this team because they got their names in the paper and it made them feel patriotic.

Consequently, I had some very fine specialists from various fields, such as psychiatry, orthopedics, and others. In fact, one of the people that I hired was Avery Rowlette. He was the head doctor for St. Louis City Hospital where I had done my internship. I was delighted to see him again—he was a fine man.

The fourteen doctors under my command each worked certain days a week. They did most of the examinations, while I reviewed their findings. I personally passed on over fifty-five thousand men during the several years I was at that induction station.

One time, Judy Garland was on a USO tour and came to sing for the troops at Jefferson Barracks. I got to talk to her and found her to be very demure, just a delightful person. We must have talked for 15 or 20 minutes before she sang for the troops. (I saw a movie with her in it recently. I was enthralled to hear her beautiful voice once more.) Later, she had an unhappy life, but when I met her she was a delightful young lady.

FORT ROBINSON, ARKANSAS

After the war was going on, the induction center slowed down. I was transferred to a hospital at Camp Robinson, Arkansas, in

North Little Rock. I did mostly orthopedic surgery there.

Sometime later in 1941, I broke my right arm playing baseball which was bad because I did most surgeries with my right arm. Fortunately, I could use my fingers, so I had the cast wrapped in sterile bandages and kept on going.

In 1943, I was transferred to the Army-Navy General Hospital, a very wonderful hospital in Hot Springs, Arkansas. We had some very interesting patients there. One was Harry Truman, who was chairman of the Truman Committee at the time and later became president. Another patient was Alvin Barkley, who was to become Truman's vice-president. A lot of the people who came to Army Navy General Hospital weren't really sick—they came to Hot Springs for the horse races. There was a wonderful horse track there.

OFF TO ENGLAND

After Hot Springs, my hospital unit was sent overseas. We went over on the *Queen Mary*. It was the first time I ever had fish for breakfast. We had eggs with kippers. It was a very delightful trip, but I got a little seasick. We were traveling along on this great ship full of troops and, suddenly, the ship made a hard turn. To the north. We didn't know what was happening, but they just kept going and it started getting colder. We heard later that one of the pocket battle ships, I believe it was the *Graf Spee*, was hunting us. But, the *Queen Mary* was the faster ship and we escaped by going north. However, I caught a cold or the flu from the cold.

We finally landed in Glasgow, Scotland, but we didn't stay

long. We were loaded on a train and we sped through the night to England with no lights. Everything was blacked out. My flu or whatever it was got worse. Two days after we landed, they put me in the hospital with a high fever of about one hundred three degrees. I was there for a week.

The thing that worried me most during my hospital stay was that the bedpans in England were square, compared to our oval shapes. Anyway, I got over my illness.

After that, we were stationed at a place called Saffron Walden. It was a lord's estate. On the estate was a Cedar of Lebanon tree, which was the biggest tree I have ever seen in my life. It spread out for half a block with poles holding up the branches. It was promoted as the biggest Cedar of Lebanon tree in the world and it was a beautiful thing. We stayed in that area for awhile, but we could take the fast English trains to town for the weekend.

Then I received orders to go to Hull, England. I asked what I was going to Hull for and was told that there were a lot of troops up in that area who needed some kind of medical facility to take care of them when they got sick and so forth. Hull was the most bombed city in all of England during World War II. All that was left that could be used as a hospital was a bombed-out church. When I first looked at it, the building was almost half open to the elements. I was advised that it was the best they had, so I arranged to create a hospital in that church.

It wasn't easy because we had to scrounge for equipment, paint, lumber, furniture, and hospital beds. We would go and talk to the top sergeants and ask, "Can you afford some lumber? Can

you afford some paint?” If they stalled, I told them I needed to know now, yes or no.

After our makeshift hospital was finally built, one doctor, one dentist, some nurses, and some enlisted men painted it . It wasn't very classy, but it held from ten to twenty beds. The Army made arrangements for the nurses, technicians, and hospital personnel to live in nearby barracks, so we didn't have to live in the hospital, too. There was a big article in the Hull newspaper about it. They thought it was very nice that there was now an American hospital. The town had a big celebration when we opened the hospital. It was a very nice affair with the staff as guests of honor.

We didn't have many patients. The really serious patients were sent to more roomy, better equipped hospitals. We did first-aid, took care of minor illnesses and so forth, which was kind of fun in a way after so many years of surgical responsibility.

After a few months of this, I got an invitation from the Lord Mayor of Hull. He wrote, “Dr. Kasha, we are proud of your little hospital that you built here and we'd like for you to come to lunch.” I told him that I would be honored to have lunch with the Lord Mayor. The day before the appointment, his assistant called me, and explained the proper etiquette. For example, I could shake hands with the Lord Mayor, but that was all. Likewise, the assistant coached me on what I should and should not say to the Lord Mayor.

After I got oriented, I had a delightful lunch that I will always remember. The Lord Mayor was very gracious, and he and I got along just fine. After that was over, there was a big write-up in the

Hull newspaper about me being invited to lunch.

About a week later, I got another call. This was from the Soroptimist Club. I was aware that the female club was very popular in the United States, but I didn't know they had Soroptimist Clubs in England. I called to find out what they wanted and they said they would like me to come for lunch and give a talk. I asked what subject they would like. They said, "You choose anything you want to talk about." I had a very nice lunch with some very nice ladies and everything went off smoothly.

D-DAY, JUNE 6, 1944

Later, I was returned to my unit, the 280th Station Hospital. I was needed for surgery, so the Army sent another doctor to Hull to take my place. At the 280th I was made the executive officer, although a doctor was not usually considered for that position. But I said, "Alright, I'll do the best I can."

Then, while the commanding officer of our hospital, Dr. Zelhoffer, was away, he was summoned to a very important meeting that defined the new markings on the American planes for D-Day. As executive officer, I went to the meeting in his place. So, there I was, with all these full colonels who were in charge of hospitals, and me only a captain at that time. At the meeting they told us that the Germans had captured many American planes, and they were using those planes with American markings so that they could get close to places and bomb them and such. Our instructors told us we were changing the markings on all of our planes. In addition to having numbers

or letters, wide bands and narrow bands would be painted on the wings. All the planes that were going to take part in D-Day were going to have these new bands on them. I was told not to tell anybody except my commanding officer until D-Day.

None of us knew when D-Day would be. So it came as a surprise to me one morning when a remarkable noise woke me up. I came out of my tent and looked around for the source of the sound. It was coming from up in the air, but it was so loud I didn't realize what it was until I looked up. What appeared to be thousands and thousands of planes were flying overhead on their way to France and they all had the new markings. It was just amazing to see how many planes we had—planes twelve at a time, twenty at a time. It was absolutely amazing to see them flying overhead. And all were in order and organized. It was a beautiful sight. I had never seen anything like it. I was thrilled and my adrenaline was pumping like mad.

Sometime after D-Day, we were alerted that our hospital unit was to go to France, so we got ready for the trip. Finally, our hospital unit with all the doctors, nurses, orderlies, and American personnel were put aboard the ship. The ship started across the English Channel toward France and we were all in a very gay mood because just getting to France was unique for most of us.

We were crossing the Channel, which was fairly calm that day, when suddenly we heard all kinds of ships' horns blowing, whistles shrieking, and bells ringing. We wondered what was going on. Then I saw everyone near the prow of the ship pointing. There was a very visible mine floating in the water. It had little

horns sticking out of it. The mine had to be avoided and the noises were to let everybody know that there might be other mines nearby. After that, we arrived safely in France.

LIFE IN THE MUD OF FRANCE

In France, it was cloudy. We landed near an apple orchard. There was one apple tree after another. We all picked and ate the apples. But when it came time to bed down, we didn't have any equipment. So, we all slept on the ground that night. I didn't take off my clothes, but I did remove my shoes because I was tired of wearing them. They were heavy shoes, kind of half boots. When I took them off, I fell right to sleep for I was exhausted. All of a sudden I felt rain on my face. The first thing I did was to turn my boots upside-down so it wouldn't rain in them. It rained, and rained, and rained, and we were in mud all the time. The mud just stuck to you and clung like a leech. If you stepped in some deep mud, you'd have trouble getting your feet out of it because it was so thick and gooey. Finally, our pup tents arrived and we put them up. The mud was so thick we couldn't walk from one tent to the other. We were just stuck there for a few nights until they put down planks so we could walk across from tent to tent. This went on for some time, maybe a month or so, and then we were moved to a hospital in Cherbourg.

SURGERY IN CHERBOURG

In Cherbourg, I was doing surgery again. I was in charge of the emergency room and the debarkation of patients that had to be

sent to the United States or to hospitals that were bigger than ours because they required more delicate operations, such as brain surgery. Cherbourg was very nice. It didn't have too much destruction. We were stationed at a hospital the Germans had built down below the ground in a basement to escape the bombing. They were very nice facilities and we were quite happy there.

While I was stationed in Cherbourg, a general called one morning and told me that very few of the German P.O.W. officers referred to me as "doctor." Instead, they always called me by my rank, which was captain. After that, I noticed that when I wore surgical scrubs the Germans didn't pay much attention to me. But when I came in with my captain's bars on, they would yell out, "Achtung!" and everyone who could stand at attention. Those who couldn't stand, sat straight up in bed with their heads erect and remained absolutely quiet. To put them at ease, I'd say, "Weiter Machen."

I enjoyed Cherbourg and sending thousands and thousands of wounded men home on ships. I would go down to the docks and see that they were loaded properly. We had German prisoners to carry them and they were very careful. We made sure of that. The German prisoners started working for us because they knew they had no choice. They got along well with us, and we didn't have any trouble with them. We sometimes had three or four ships ready to load to take men back to the states or to other areas. It was very interesting to see those long lines of prisoners carrying American wounded on the stretchers. But they were very careful

because one of them dropped one of the stretchers once and he was sorry that he did. There wasn't any shooting, but the guards made him feel terribly ashamed. The other prisoners made fun of him too.

I had three telephones, one to the ships, and one to headquarters near Cherbourg, and one to our own hospital. Often, I was using all three phones at once. It was a fascinating, but routine experience for me. I just loved doing lots of things at one time. I thoroughly enjoyed that part of it.

Another thing that I liked about Cherbourg was that I got to play Bridge every night. When we had nothing to do, I played with two French doctors and two American doctors. We would play Bridge one night speaking in French and the next night speaking in English, and we enjoyed it. We were murderous when it came to criticizing each other's accents. We were tough on them, and they were tough on us. Consequently, when I left France I could speak French without an American accent. Some of the French doctors who lived in Cherbourg invited me to their homes for dinner a couple of times. After we left, some wrote to me in French and I would write back letters in English. So we stayed friends with each other that way.

One day while I was at work, I heard a very loud noise. The windows didn't shake or anything, but it was a real loud noise. I could tell it wasn't from too far off. Shortly thereafter, some ambulances came in with people whose truck had run over a land mine. Several American soldiers were injured, but most of the victims were German prisoners. One prisoner came to me holding

something in his hand. When I asked him what he had, he showed me. It was his ear. He had a bandage over where his ear should have been, but he had his ear in his hand. I couldn't speak German, so I asked if he understood English and he said he did. I told him that I thought I could sew it back on. I did sew his ear back on and it stayed, thanks to the Lord. I've always told people that I can close a wound, but I have to wait for the Lord to heal it. And sometimes wounds don't heal. For instance, if a patient was an alcoholic and had poor healing powers. So I was very happy when the ear healed well.

In that same accident, one of our soldiers had the end of his finger chopped off with shrapnel and he brought that in to sew on. Just a word about sewing fingers back on: if the cutoff portion is past the distal joint—that's the farthest joint from the knuckle—you have a very good chance of a good result. But if it's behind there closer to the palm, then the blood supply or the nerve supply can be interfered with and you can't do it. But this was in the distal end of it and I got a good result on his finger. I was very fortunate. The Lord was on my side that time, too.

THE HANGING

While I was in Cherbourg, I got a call one morning from a two-star general. He said, "Captain, you've been recommended by your commanding officer as a man who can keep his mouth shut. I have something that I need your help in. We have an American soldier in prison here in Cherbourg and he has been sentenced to death for rape. I would like you to go down to the prison and see how his

health is.”

“What difference does it make if you’re going to hang him?” I asked.

“We have a rule in the army that we will not hang a sick person,” he replied.

I went to the prison and the soldier had a cold. I could see that his nose was running. I told him that I would come back to see him later, but that I couldn't tell him why I was there. He said, “Oh, I know why you’re here. They’re going to hang me and I have to be in good health before I can be hanged.”

“Well, that’s about right,” I told him. “But you have a cold and I will report it.” I got in touch with the commanding officer. He told me to go by and see him in a week to check whether his cold was better, which I did. The next week I called the general and told him that the prisoner seemed to be well.

The general said, “Well, I’ll set the date for the hanging and inform the relatives of the two girls that were raped, so that they can be present at the hanging if they wish to be.”

The day of the hanging, the general called me and then sent a Jeep that took me out to the farm where the two girls had been raped. The girls were good friends and their parents owned adjoining farms. The hanging was going to take place right between the two farms. About twenty of the girls’ family members and friends were there when I arrived. The scaffolding was already prepared with the rope and the trapdoor set. The commanding officer was the same two star general. He took command, and issued orders as to what was to be done.

The man to be hanged was brought up onto the scaffolding. The noose was put around his neck, and a blindfold was put over his eyes. He seemed to be calm enough. I thought he might be very weepy or emotional, but he wasn't. He was just very calm. The general looked about to see if everything was ready and then he pressed the button. The trap door opened and the man dropped through with the rope around his neck.

The general told me to go check the prisoner to see if he was dead. I went in underneath the scaffolding. I had my stethoscope with me. I checked his heart and it was still beating. I told the general that his heart was still beating. It had slowed considerably, but it was still beating.

“Wait five minutes and go back and check him again.”

One of the spectators asked in English, “What's wrong?” I told him that the man had not passed away as yet, the heart was still beating. I went back in five minutes as the general ordered and by that time the man was dead. When I pronounced him dead, then there was an audible, “Ah-h-h-h” from the crowd. They were glad it was over and that he had paid the penalty for his crimes. The general thanked me and then sent a Jeep to return me to my hospital unit.

That is the story of the hanging. It's the only one I ever witnessed. It was different because as a doctor I'd been trained all my life to save lives. While I didn't cause the soldier's death, I had to be present at it, and report that the prisoner had paid for his crime.

THE P.O.W. HOSPITAL

Not long after that, I was appointed commanding officer of a German Prisoner of War Hospital in Lison, France. We went through France so fast that we captured whole cities that contained hospital units full of German wounded because they didn't have time to move them. So I was placed in charge of one of these German P.O.W. hospitals. It was a fifteen hundred bed hospital all under tents, but it was clean and nice. The German prisoners were treated as well as ours. The only thing they didn't get that our personnel got was penicillin. Two English doctors discovered penicillin and at that time it was just very hard to get hold of it, but we did have it for our own soldiers. We already had been using sulpha drugs.

Being a surgeon, I was very anxious to continue my practice of surgery so I wouldn't become lazy or lose my skills. Each evening the German hospital commander would bring me the surgery schedule for the next day and I would choose the operations I wanted to perform. There were no other American doctors at this hospital. Just me and the German doctors. I didn't speak much German. Fortunately, quite a few of the German doctors spoke English and almost all of them spoke French. I was fluent in French and so anytime we couldn't conduct our conversation in German or English, then we'd use French. We managed to communicate pretty well. There was a certain friendliness and compatibility in being in the medical field. When they assisted me in surgery, they were very good. The older doctors were

excellent—comparable to our own American doctors. However, some of the newer ones who had been pushed through medical schools in two-and-one-half or three years were not quite so good. They had been rushed through school to help Hitler get more doctors in service.

A P.O.W. was assigned to me as a valet. He was half-English, half-German, and Jewish. He had been drafted into the German army late in the war, but had gotten himself captured as soon as he could. He hated the Nazis and was very loyal to me. He spoke very good English and kept me posted on things that were going on around the camp. One time he came to see me late at night.

“Captain Kasha,” he said, “there’s something going on in surgery. I think they’re cutting off the SS tattoos on some of the prisoners.”

I got in my jeep and drove over there, and that’s just what they were doing. The SS men all had a special tattoo on their upper arm, and the German surgeons were removing them so the men wouldn’t be held guilty of war crimes later on. I told the doctors that I’d gotten along very well with them as surgeons, but if they ever pulled another trick like that on me, they’d be sorry. I’d send them back to a prisoner of war camp where they could stand around all day long with the untrained prisoners. They assured me it would not and did not happen again.

Another time I was going by the surgical unit and I heard someone yelling with pain. So I walked into the unit. They were operating on a soldier. I stopped them and asked what they were doing. They were taking a little growth off of the patient’s neck

without any pain-killer. When I asked why he was yelling, they said that he was a coward because German soldiers didn't yell when they're hurt.

“Well, we Americans don't think that way,” I said. “We give all of our patients anesthetics whether they are strong or weak. You could have given this man a local anesthetic. To me it is criminal not to do so, but I'll just warn you that it is not to happen again.”

There was a small platoon of infantrymen who were stationed at our hospital unit to keep order. We had two prisoners that escaped. Both were caught and brought back. I asked one of them, “Did you think about where you were going? You could have been shot and killed because almost all of France now is in American hands. So your escape was for no good. Now, if you'll promise not to try to escape again, I will permit you to go back to your regular job.”

The first one said “OK,” but the second one was loathe to do it. So, I said, “Alright, then I'll send you back to the prisoner of war camp and you can talk German all day long. There are thousands and thousands of Germans all standing in a big circle, and you can stand there with them all day long.” When he thought about it, he got down on his knees and apologized.

“I made a mistake, he said. “Actually you have treated us very fairly.”

HITLER'S BIRTHDAY

On another occasion, my valet warned me that Hitler's birthday was coming up. He told me some of the Germans POWs planned

to take down the American flag and put up a Nazi flag.

I alerted the infantry. They said, “We’ll be ready for them. When are they planning to do it?” I told them that it would happen about midnight, “but you can surround the place an hour or two before that time.”

They did, and I was out there at midnight, too. All of a sudden, I could see someone trying to climb the flagpole, and the infantrymen put their spotlights on him. He was all alone climbing this pole with a flag in his hand, too—a Nazi flag. He was told in German to get down and put the flag on the ground. One of our infantrymen then confiscated the flag. The flagpole climber was led away and sent back to the German P.O.W. camp outside of the hospital.

I tried to be fair and just with these prisoners and they appreciated it. This earned me a certain respect among all of the prisoners who were there, and they showed that when I left.

Sometime after the Nazi flag incident, the war ended in Europe, and I received orders that I was to be returned home to the United States. I was delighted, and very happy. One day, my sergeant came in and told me that there was a German prisoner who wanted to talk to me.

“Well, I have something I made for you, and all my friends are very happy that I’m giving them to you,” he said. He gave me two beautiful, hand-carved pony bookends.

“How did you come by a knife? I asked him. “You’re not allowed to have a knife.”

“I was allowed to have it for two hours at a time, and I had to sign for it,” he explained. “I had to bring it back in two hours. They told me if I was late and didn’t bring it back in time, I’d never get to use it again.” The bookends were just beautiful. I packed them up and sent them back to the States.

I was also given a chess set and board. The chessboard was made out of alternating colored boards that made the squares. In between the boards were strips of metal off of American and German planes that had been shot down. The chessboard was beautiful and I still have it. It’s just a thing of beauty. The chessmen were made exactly like chessmen should look. We had the bishops, the knights, the rooks, the castles, the king, and the queen. Everything was hand-carved. The carvers were very talented and could use a knife as well as any good surgeon.

When my German doctor friends heard I was going home, they were happy for me. They said, “We heard that there was a chance that you’d be going back soon, because we already have peace in the European Theater of Operations. We’re going to have a little party for you if you don’t mind.”

I said, “Whatever you do, I will appreciate.”

On the day before I left, the German doctors escorted me to the outdoor theater we had for the entertainment of the German prisoners. We had about three thousand of them working in our hospital unit, so we provided entertainment for them by letting them produce plays, and so forth, put on in this open theater. We were able to get some used instruments from the Red Cross, so they had a band, too.

That day, all the prisoners that could fit in were in the amphitheatre—most of them were sitting in the grass—and they put on a play for me. It was beautifully done. It was an excellent play, and the acting was superb. The audience appreciated it very much and I did, too, because it was done in my honor. After the play was through, someone led the group singing a German song, and at the end, they just started singing, “Adi, adi, adi.” That’s German like “adieu” for good-bye. It was a very pleasant time for me, and I was also delighted to be going home at last. I had five-and-a-half years in the service, and I wanted to be back with my wife and be back on American soil. And so, it was a delightful day! 📖



Dr. Kasha's army
dog tags.
Author's collection.



Dr. Kasha (left), with a broken
arm in 1941.
Author's collection.



Surgical nurses.
Author's collection.

Gas mask training in
July 1940 at Camp
Robinson in
Missouri.
Author's collection.



A Liberator bomber
flying over Camp
Robinson on July 4, 1942.
Author's collection.



ENG. CHANNEL

The English Channel.

A grateful patient arranged for him to go diving on the bottom of the Channel in a hard hat diver's suit.

Author's collection.

Receipt from the Piccadilly Hotel in London. While he was staying there, a V-1 buzz bomb landed nearby, smashing windows and “scaring the holy _ _ _ _ out of me.”

Author's collection.

TELEGRAMS: "PICCADILLY, LONDON" TELEPHONE: REGENT 8000

| No. of VISITORS | No. of VISITORS | |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------|
| | ADULTS | CHILDREN |
| 1 | 1 | |

The Piccadilly Hotel
 REGENT STREET & PICCADILLY, LONDON, W.1

Mr. R. L. Kasher

March 1944 10 11

| | | |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|
| BREAKFASTS | | |
| LUNCHEONS | | 4 - |
| DINNERS | | |
| FLOOR RUNDRES, PROVISIONS, ETC. | | |
| WINES, ETC. | | |
| GRILL ROOM | | |
| RESTAURANT | | |
| DAILY TOTAL | 176 | 85 |
| BROUGHT FORWARD | | 176 |
| TOTAL | | 151 |
| DISCOUNT TO MEM. FOR | | 26 |
| LESS PROVISIONS | | 125 |
| LESS CASH PAID | | |
| CARRIED FORWARD | 176 | |

Received Payment
 £1-13-57
 Date 11 3 44
 L 31 JLB



Barrage balloons (upper center) over London in March of 1944.

Author's collection

E.M. Det. "A" 280
S.H. March 3, 1944
in England. Dr.
Kasha is kneeling at
the front row at the
right.

Author's collection

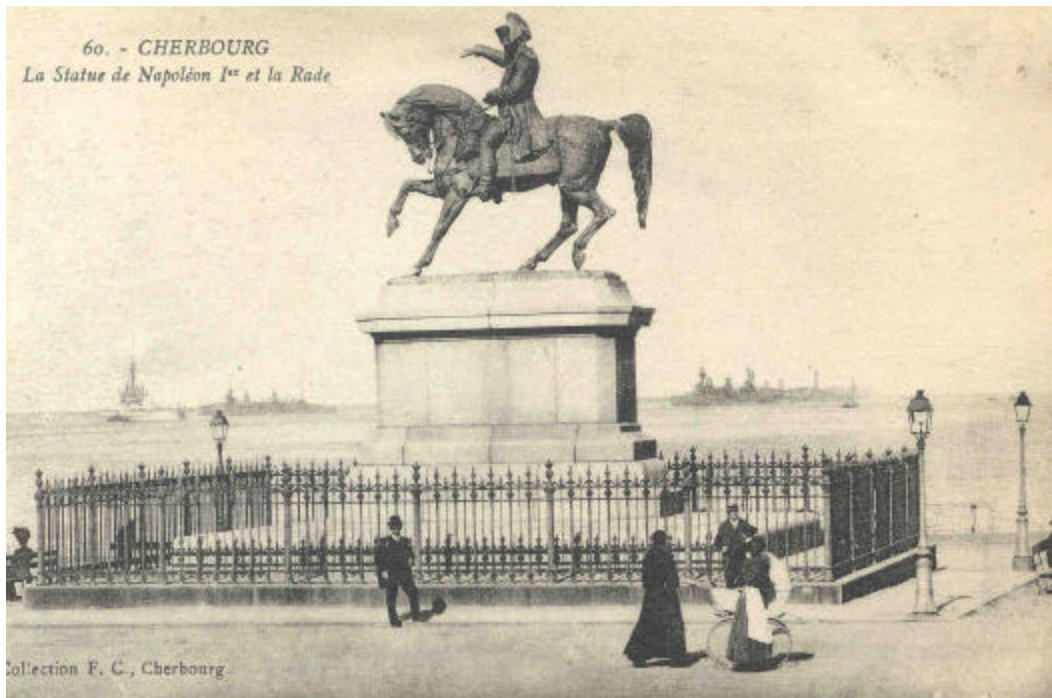




A patch from the uniform
of a Nazi prisoner.
Author's collection



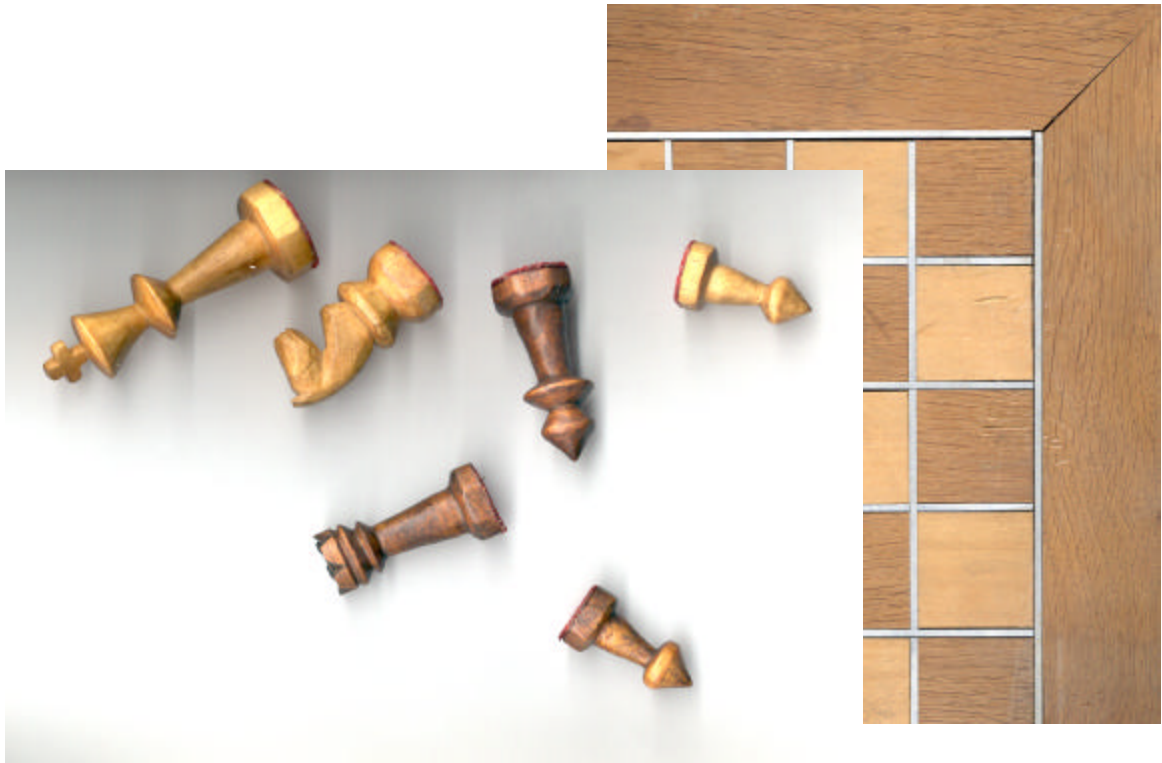
Officers and nurses at the hospital in Cherbourg, France, 1944.
Author's collection



A statue of Napoleon in Cherbourg, France.
Author's collection

A Christmas card from Paris he received while he was overseas.
Author's collection





The hand-carved chess set and pony bookends made for Dr. Kasha by German prisoners at the German P.O.W. hospital in Lison, France.

Author's collection



