

The Reality of MASH: a FAQ.

By Jacob Houck

Dedicated to the MASH fans that keep this show alive, and to the following people who suggested questions for this project: Dayna, Mike, Richard, Chris, Susan, Erin, Christine, David and Jason

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INTRODUCTION



It has been nearly thirty-five years since “Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen” brought a close to the MASH TV series (if you don’t count AfterMASH, which ran for two years after MASH ended), and sixty-four years since the end of the Korean War. Since then, the internet has exploded, allowing new avenues for information. With a quick Google search, anyone can read memoirs from the Korean War and discover the complete reality of the war their beloved show is based on. The Korean War was a hard and brutal war, which would have likely remained a footnote in history, had MASH not shown brought it to the spotlight.

Figure 1:
TV and
Real
MASH
Doctors –
Google
Images

This document seeks to summarize, inform, and entertain. This document is organized in the frequently asked questions (FAQ) format. There will be a question, then an answer following. The questions are divided based on broad categories to make this document easier to navigate.

Questions and Answers: Medical

This section is about purely medical questions about MASH.

Was Korean Hemorrhagic Fever real?

Very much so. When it became an epidemic during the war, all that was known about it was that the Japanese had suffered from it during World War II. Before General MacArthur's invasion of North Korea, the fever was rumored to be the Bubonic Plague. General MacArthur had a South Korean navy colonel who worked with the CIA abduct two patients that had the illness from a North Korean hospital. After studying the two patients, they found out it was not the Plague, and continued the invasion.

Due to the epidemic nature of the illness, in 1952, the 8228th MASH was created specifically for the treatment of the fever (Nieuwint). Despite never finding a cure or cause to the disease, the 8228th managed to lower mortality rate of the ill from 20% to 2%.

Did doctors perform any forbidden procedures?

Doctors at multiple MASHs performed arterial repairs, which were forbidden by the Army. In cases where the operation would help, the wounded person had an artery leading to an arm or leg that was injured. If the artery was not repaired or the limb amputated, gangrene would set in, putting the patient's life in great peril. The standard Army practice was to amputate. In several MASHs, doctors performed "vein grafting (removing a portion of a vein from elsewhere in the patient's body and inserting it into the injured artery) or anastomosis (removing the injured portion of the artery and suturing the artery end to end)," to repair save patients' limbs from amputation. All the doctors involved had a personal struggle over whether to go against the Army's rules, but as one doctor put it "failure to use vein grafting on soldiers who needed it violated the Hippocratic oath that we took when we became doctors. To amputate a limb when it did not pose an immediate threat to the life of the soldier bordered... on intentional malpractice" (Apel).

The doctors who performed arterial repairs at the 8076th started with North Korean prisoners, moved on to South Korean soldiers, American soldiers, and eventually on to United Nations troops, all under the radar as far as possible. Despite several encounters with upset commanders, they persisted. Eventually in 1952, the Army issued a new edict stating that MASH doctors were free to use any arterial repair methods the doctors deemed useful (Apel).

Questions and Answers: Life in a MASH

The document will now answer questions involving life in a MASH camp, such as food, activities, etc.

Did anyone have mental breakdowns?

One administrative officer tried repeatedly to go home, and eventually committed suicide with a pistol. One dentist drank so much that he had to leave the MASH on a litter. A Baptist chaplain had a breakdown and was sent home. Dr. Apel remembers one non-doctor officer who “could not get up in the morning and face the day. He would drink and get boisterous on occasion and punch walls, but most often he would sit down on the ground, back against a tree or a rock or a truck tire, and cry.” He was eventually sent home (Brown).

How often did OR sessions last 12 hours or longer?

Typically, every seven to ten days the MASH would be overwhelmed with patients, since that was the schedule the frontline fighting tended to take (Evans).

How long were OR sessions?

A three or four-day battle on the front would keep “the MASH on 24-hour duty,” as the surgeon would continue operating until there were no more wounded (Kirkland). During a push, there could be more than 100 patients waiting for surgery (Apel). Some of the worst sessions kept doctors and nurses in the OR tent for three days straight (Lair). As one doctor described the experience, a doctor could take a break, but “while you're napping there are men dying out there on litters waiting for you to get up from your nap.”

Did they really have to bug out all the time?

As an example of the movements a MASH took early in the war, we have the 8076th's records of how long they stayed in each location, for roughly the first 87 days of operation: two months, one week, two days, eight days, a week, eight days, two weeks and six days. In one of their later bug outs, the MASH had only finished setting up camp a few hours before they had to bug out again (History of the 8076th). During the third year of the war, peace talks had begun in earnest, and bug outs became far less common, as the frontlines stabilized for the most part (Kirkland).

Did doctors really make house calls at the front?

It was common for a battalion surgeon or an aid station to call for help when they were overwhelmed with wounded, and if available, a MASH surgeon would go by helicopter to help (Apel).

Was the food as bad as portrayed on the show?

Not quite. The MASH was supplied with Class A rations for the patients. But despite the higher quality rations, diners at the MASH still suffered the drudgery of eating the same

food every day. One doctor could not eat chicken for nearly two years after leaving Korea, as his MASH had chicken every day, except for between Thanksgiving and New Year's, when they had turkey every day (Brown).

Where did the enlisted men sleep?

Enlisted men slept in tents. One of the biggest changes the show film did to the camp was removing almost every housing tent from the camp. In the show the sleeping arrangements of the enlisted men, besides Klinger and Radar, are never shown. There were just more sleeping tents, such as the group of tents shown in in figure 2. These tents held at least 12 men each.



Sleeping Tents,
8076th: Figure 2:
Google Images

Did MASH personal have a secret hole in the nurses' tent?

At the 8076th, they did. As Dr. Apel recounts, "Several NCOs[non-commissioned officers, such as corporals and sergeants] of the 8076th saw an entrepreneurial opportunity lurking in the folds of the olive drab shower tent and capitalized on it," he continues, "Tickets were sold for the enlisted man's viewing pleasure. A dollar and a half bought thirty seconds worth of time at the window" (Apel). He also recounts the NCOs running the business had a three-tier ticket system based on the attractiveness of each nurse. They expanded their operation to selling tickets to soldiers on the front lines, who would travel to the MASH before shower time. The officers knew about the scheme, but ignored it. As far as Dr. Apel knows, no nurse ever discovered the plot. As Dr. Apel describes it,

The times were different and intentions were different. We have lost much of our innocence about all that. The same scheme was used in peep shows in county fairs, in grade B Hollywood films, and in many college fraternities around the country. Today we are much more sensitive about these things. The young men involved in that-those who lived through the war-are now five decades older and may fail to see the humor in the shower tent scheme (Apel).

Questions and Answers: Camp Logistics

In this section, I endeavor to answer questions related to the logistical aspect of the MASH: questions about tents, the number of doctors, etc.

Did a MASH have any real buildings, or was it made up entirely of tents?

Whenever possible during a bug out, a MASH would move into “[a]n old building, a schoolhouse, a convent, a hospital, a factory, any old building” to use as an OR. But the MASH might be entirely made of tents at their next location. As the war stabilized during peace talks, many MASHs had tin buildings built for pre-op, the OR, and post-op, as a MASH began to lose its need to mobility.

Did the OR ever get a cement floor?

Not by the MASH laying their own floor. Whenever possible during a bug out, a MASH would move into “[a]n old building, a schoolhouse, a convent, a hospital, a factory, any old building,” which might have a floor. But the standard OR was an olive drab tent with a dirt floor. If the MASH was in one place for any length of time during muddy weather, they would put a layer of bricks in over the dirt to keep the floor from turning into a swamp (Apel).

Were there any black surgeons in a MASH?

Spearchucker Jones was featured in the original book, movie, and the first season of the show, he was dropped from the series due to budget concerns and after “[e]xtensive research indicated[sp] there were no black surgeons in MASH units in Korea,” but as more information has surfaced about the Korean War, it has been proven that this was wrong (Gelbart).

In his war memoirs, Dr. Harold Secor, who was stationed at the 8055th MASH (the one the 4077 is based on) mentions Captain Miles, “a black doctor from Virginia,” and says “I told Captain Miles that if I ever needed surgery, I wanted him to do it. He was one of my friends and he was accepted as a good surgeon with no prejudice” (Secor).

Captain Alvin Blount, a black surgeon from North Carolina, became the Chief of Surgery at the 8225th MASH from 1951 to 1952 (Blount).

How many beds did a MASH have?

When the first MASHs were organized, they had sixty beds. Due to the high number of wounded coming to MASHs, the Army quickly raised the number of beds to 200.

How many nurses were stationed at a MASH?

At their founding, MASHs had twelve nurses, but moved to seventeen by the second year of the war (Apel).

Did the head nurse have her own tent?

No, all the nurses slept in one tent. At the 8076th, the nurses’ tent came to be called the Whispering Manor. As Dr. Apel recalls, “I do not recall the exact origin of that term, but it was an apt term because the ‘manor,’ it seemed, was always whispering about something” (Apel).

How many doctors were at a MASH? Were there just four as in the show?

There were four surgeons at a MASH, except for periods between one being rotated out and another arriving. However, there were twelve doctors. During an OR session, three or four surgeons would man a table, and three doctors would assist, along with any other free doctors. Even the unit's dentist would often assist.

In addition to the four surgeons, a MASH had the following doctors: a dentist, whose work consisted mostly of surgeries on fractured jaws, two anesthesiologists, one radiologist, three doctors who were not surgeons but assisted in surgeries, two interns (doctors-in-training), and three general duty doctors, who performed non-surgical work (Apel).

How many people total lived in a MASH?

Roughly 200 people lived there. This included the doctors, nurses, enlisted men, ambulance drivers, helicopter pilots and medics, and South Korean workers (Apel).

Were there any Officer's Clubs that allowed enlisted men entrance?

None recorded, but every MASH had an Officer's Club and an Enlisted Men's Club (History of the 8076th). The Enlisted Men's Club was not skimped on too badly, as one doctor was sent to Tokyo to buy and deliver a Pachinco pinball machine for the Enlisted Men's Club (Staff).

Were "enemy" patients segregated from US patients or were they allowed to recover in the ward alongside US soldiers as was the case in a couple of episodes?

They recovered alongside US and UN troops, as the MASH did not have any beds anywhere but in the main hospital. In the words of one surgeon, "[o]ne time a North Korean managed to keep a pistol hidden until he was in surgery. When he was in post op, I asked him what he [had] intended to do with the pistol. He said that he had planned to shoot the first officer he saw." Fortunately, the surgeon had been in the habit of turning his cap bill up, so his rank insignia was not showing during surgery (Brown).

When a Chinese clearing station (like a Chinese MASH), a captured Chinese nurse stayed at the MASH for around a month to help treat the Chinese patients ("History of the 8076th").

Did the UN troops work together as often as in the show?

When Norway decided to send a MASH to Korea, their doctors visited American MASHs to observe how they worked. The Norwegians copied the MASH, and created NORMASH (Norwegian MASH). NORMASH went on to work with great success (such as in figure 3) as did a South Korean MASH that was created towards the end of the war.



Figure 3: a nurse treats a patient in NORMASH – Google Images

Questions and Answers: Miscellaneous

This section holds questions that don't fit into another category, and don't have enough other questions similar to them to warrant their own category.

Did doctors really go on humanitarian missions like in “Rainbow Bridge?”

In April of 1953, the 8076th was involved in Operation Little Switch, the first large-scale prisoner exchange of the war. The 8076th was prepped and ready for treating all the medical problems of the 213 United Nations prisoners. Since none of the prisoners required surgery, the freed prisoners of war spent an average of forty minutes before being discharged (“History of the 8076th”).

Did anyone ever pull a prank like the Air Raid one from “Dear Sigmund?”

A dentist known as ‘Rice Patty’ liked to sleep in the back of an ambulance while the MASH was moving to a new location. During one bug out, a tank was closely following the ambulance he was sleeping on. A group of MASH doctors went to both sides of the ambulance, and began banging on it while shouting “Ambush!” ‘Rice Patty’ leaped out of the ambulance, only to be eye to eye with the main cannon of a M46 Patton tank, like the one in figure 4. After seeing the tank, the dentist “leaped to the ground, covered his head with both arms, and, as they say, hugged mother earth for all he was worth. Only when he recognized that the deafening noise was laughter rather than machine gun fire did he peek up to see what had happened” (Apel).



Figure 4: a menacing M46 Patton Tank - Wikipedia

Were Grape Nehi's a real soda/pop?



Figure 6:
Leggy Nehi ad
FlickLives.com

Yes, and you can still buy them online from Amazon, and in some stores in Tennessee (the author has found them in Gatlinburg). The Nehi name comes from the drink's logo, which featured a woman wearing a skirt that ends right at her knees, thus making her skirt "knee-high," as shown in figure 5. A later ad had a woman's disembodied leg next to the photo, which inspired the leg lamp from *A Christmas Story*, as shown in figure 6 (Glazer).



Figure 5: "knee-high"
advertisement
FlickLives.com

Was Klinger based on a real person?

Dr. Harold Secor mentions 12 gay men who lived in one tent at the 8055th, and says that one of them was "the queen of the bunch, who dressed as fancy as he could," who Dr. Secor believed was the inspiration for Klinger.

Cathy Drake, a nurse at the 8055th who spoke with the TV series' co-creator Gene Reynolds during Reynolds' pre-show research, also has a suggestion about Klinger's origin. She told Reynolds a story about a surgeon at the MASH who rarely talked to any of the other doctors or nurses, but showed up at the camp's Halloween party dressed in full drag, "including a slinky, sleeveless dress, platinum wig and makeup featuring a beauty mark à la Marilyn Monroe," as shown in figure 6.



Figure 7: Doctor in
drag
Google Images

Was there really a Seoul City Sue that belittling US troops?

Yes, though there may have been several women who played the role, the most famous Seoul City Sue was Anna Wallis Suh, shown in figure 7. She was born in Arkansas, and served as a Methodist missionary in Korea, where she met her Korean husband. After the North Koreans captured Seoul at the beginning of the war, she became a radio personality for Radio Seoul. It is not known whether she did this willingly. When Seoul was recaptured by Americans, she transferred to Radio Pyongyang, where she stayed till the end of the war. She was supposedly assassinated in 1969 by a South Korean agent. While on the air, she read the names of captured soldiers and various menacing messages to American troops (Staff Writers).



Figure 8:
Seoul City
Sue – Google
Images

Were hula hoops and Frisbees inspired by Korean children toys?

The company Wham-O (the creators of the modern hula hoop) were unable to patent the idea, since children had been playing with hoops in some form since at least Ancient Greek times. Brand name Hula Hoops were first produced in 1958, but hula hoops had become popular in Australia by the year before that. While it is unlikely hula hoops were directly inspired by Korean children, they were inspired by centuries of children from around the world ("History of the Hula Hoop").

The inspiration for Frisbees likely came from generations of people throwing plates and other objects, but the plastic Frisbee we know today was invented in 1948, though it was not sold in stores until 1964, so it was not inspired by Korean children (Bellis).

Did any MASH have strange encounters with UN troops like in "A Full Rich Day?"

One MASH had a Turkish patient come in still holding their scimitar. Understandable afraid of giving painkillers to an armed person, the nurses searched the MASH for a patient who could speak Turkish. A Lieutenant Colonel angrily tried to have get MPs or sedatives to use on the Turk without success. Finally, as best put by Dr. Apel, a corpsman named Valentino came to the rescue.

[I]n the height of his frustration, [the Lieutenant Colonel] shouted, "Doesn't anyone around here speak Turkish?"

Valentino popped up. "I do."

[The Lieutenant Colonel] whipped around on Valentino and ordered, "Well, talk Turkey to him."

Valentino smiled sheepishly and ventured toward the Turk. The tent became very quiet. Patients lying on cots raised themselves on one elbow

to watch. The nurses observed this with some trepidation. The Turk's eyes squinted as he surveyed Valentino. His hand eased down to the scimitar. The Turk's friend edged tensely closer to him. Valentino, now the center of attention, stopped short of the cot and faced the Turk as if to stare him down. After a moment, Valentino leaned slightly forward and snapped, "Gobble, gobble."

A Turkish speaker eventually arrived from headquarters, and the patient was disarmed and treated (Apel).

Did the MASH camps have all sorts of non-combat visitors?

Visiting diplomats, reporters, and generals were common, especially during lulls in the fighting. Most visitors of this sort were disliked, though one MASH surgeon noted two exceptions to this: Dr. Charles Mayo (the founder of the famous Mayo Clinic), who discussed delicate surgical matters with the doctors, and Father Francis Spellman, whose visit is best described in Dr. Apel's own words:

His pleasant demeanor and his humility halted the activity in the MASH: everyone, doctors, nurses, patients, and soldiers, dropped whatever they were doing to speak with the cardinal. I [was] not Catholic, but I greatly appreciated that visit. His mere presence boosted our morale because this man, welcome and comfortable in the highest of international political circles, came to the hot, muddy, reeking tents of MASH 8076 on a mission of compassion rather than self-promotion.

Did troops really spend time entertaining orphans nearby?

A Korean MASH worker named Choi took care of several orphans who came to live at 8076th. The 8076th also served as the drop off point for the surrounding units to send various gifts to an orphanage in Seoul, which MASH doctors visited on occasion (Apel).

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