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Examiner Writer Sent Back to Seoul

Men Sent by Other Papers Didn't Know How to Get to the Firing Line

SEOUL, Korea, March 28. —A war is like a tea party—whoever gives it runs it, and the guests must smile and be polite, no matter how bored they may be. At present Japan is running the war, with Russia a lagging assistant, while the correspondents are trying to smile and be as polite as they can. They began to arrive in Japan early in January, and here, at the end of March, the majority of them are still in Japan. They are still in Japan because their kind hosts, the Japanese, have not yet given them permission to proceed to the front.

There are no signs that such permission will be given them anywhere in the near future, but they are an optimistic lot, these correspondents, and they still cherish the belief that they will arrive at the front in time for the finish. In the meantime they are wined and dined by their hosts and spend the rest of their time in receiving dispatches of the following nature from their papers: “Why no Tokyo news?” “What is the matter with the Tokyo service?” “Why no news from the front?”

Every little while—so I am given to understand—they get together and pass resolutions. Then they proceed in a body to one or another of the Japanese officials who are guiding their destinies, and a conversation like the following takes place:

Correspondents: “General So-and-So, we have held a meeting and decided that we must proceed immediately to the front.”

General So-and-So: “By the way, the Japanese newspaper men are getting up a dinner for you.”

Correspondents: “When may we proceed to the front?”

General So-and-So: “This dinner is six days off.”

Correspondents: “We have made up our minds, permission or no permission to leave Japan.”

General So-and-So: “You will all wear evening dress at the dinner.” Correspondents visibly angry.

General So-and-So: “And by the time the dinner takes place we will have news for you concerning your departure.”

Correspondents go away mollified and encouraged, and when six days are past and the dinner is dined, the thing is repeated and they find themselves lingering on in Tokyo for another dinner.

And at last, when even Asiatic indirection can no longer hold them, they are promised, definitely, that on a certain date they will receive their permits. The day arrives, the permits are received, but—the permits are the first of a string of permits. Attached to each permit is a slip which attests its worthlessness until further permits are obtained.

There is the matter of assignment, for instance. What good is a general permit to accompany the army when one lacks the assignment to a particular column of that army? A few more weeks and a few more dinners, and the assignments are obtained, and then—well, the correspondents are still in Tokyo, in possession of permits and assignments, and waiting for the permit of permits, the final permit, which will allow them to go to the front. And somewhere down dim and apparently interminable vistas of dinners the more hopeful of them believe that they catch the vague loom of the final permit.

It may be wondered why I, a war correspondent, am writing all this, not about war, but about war correspondents. The explanation is simple. There is no war, so far as I am concerned, to write about. Seoul has become a backwater. The little flurry of war it experienced has passed on into the north. And here I remain, assigned to the first column, an army which has been in Korea nearly two months, and which is even now fighting in the north, and which I may not join until the permit of permits, the final permit, is given me. In military parlance, I am in Seoul under instructions from the War Department and awaiting further instructions.

And there are others in Seoul in like predicament. While we are geographically nearer the seat of war than those in Tokyo, from the point of knowing what is taking place we are even farther away than the humblest citizens of the United States or Europe. We are in a backwater. We know nothing. We have no daily paper filled with telegrams from all the world, and when we do get a little war information it is already ancient history to the rest of the world.

It is true, we made a dash for the front—three of us. Luckily for us, we escaped from Japan before war was declared and in various ways arrived in Chemulpo—Dunn and McKenzie arriving in time for the naval fight, while I was still hammering up the west coast of Korea in a sampan. The rest of the correspondents, overpersuaded by their kind hosts, politely lingered and dined in Japan. That was two months ago. They are still dining.

When the first troops left Seoul to march north, Dunn, McKenzie, and I started out, leaving directions for our permits to follow us, and thereby hung the string by which the War Department had hold of us, and also by which the dining correspondents of Tokyo had hold of us.

Ignoring endless dissuasion from the army officers we encountered, we managed to make the first 180 miles to Ping Yang. There McKenzie was dissuaded, and Dunn and I headed valiantly northward for Anju, Wiju and the Yalu, only to be stopped and held at the village of Sunan.

And this is how it was: The dining correspondents at Tokyo said to their hosts: "Here we are. We have been very polite. These other men are at the front, three of them. They are very impolite, yet see how their impoliteness has been rewarded. You must recall them. If you do not recall them we, too, shall become impolite and dine no more."

Upon hearing this dire threat, the War Department pulled the string and ordered us back for our permits. But the chief spokesman for the dining correspondents, a canny man who missed his vocation when he failed to become a statesman, attempted a little coup all by himself. Loudest in demanding our recall, and at the very moment his voice was at its topmost pitch, he secretly dispatched a subordinate with orders to catch up with us and if possible to keep on going. Thus, in the game of war correspondence, he played to win either way.

Ordered back to Ping Yang, we met the subordinate just arriving; and the next order in the retrograde movement included him, and I loaned him a horse to ride the fifty miles down to the coast at Chinnampo. Here with the ice barely out of the harbor, the bay was filled with transports and troops were being rushed ashore. But we had no time to see; we were in full

retreat. The Japanese Consul, turning a deaf ear to the complaints of the captain, held a coasting steamer all afternoon and long after dark until he saw us safely on board and steaming out of the harbor, our backs to the seat of war and our faces heading southward to the backwaters of Chemulpo and Seoul.

And here we wait, while the war goes merrily on, wondering when the permit of permits is to arrive. We are less fortunate than our Tokyo brethren. There are no dinners here—only gorgeous uncertainty and a hotel proprietor who raises the rates every little while and calls it a war price.