



Katie Harris and Some Poignant Memories of the Red Cross in Chakulia

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Editor's Note: In 1943 Katharine Harris had received her diploma from Curtis School of Music. She had been appointed Artist-in-Residence at Duke University and was offered a job as head of the music department at Baylor University. Both of her brothers had been drafted so Katie felt she must serve as well and joined the Red Cross. (Both of her brothers received medical deferments.) She wound up in Chakulia. She served in Chakulia from the time before the 40th arrived until after the Group had shipped out. She has some real memories of the period when the 40th occupied Chakulia and has graciously agreed to write down some of these so that they may become a part of our MEMORIES.

Katharine Hogendorp
Baltimore, MD

I was one of those Red Cross gals, stationed in Chakulia. My sidekick was Pat MacDonald from Greensburg, Pennsylvania. We had a hard time adjusting to those steaming, hot bashas and the heavy mosquito netting attached to our bunks. One night we decided to pull our beds outside. At five or six in the morning we were suddenly awakened by the sound of marching boots. The soldiers in those boots were part of the Corps of Engineers who sweated through the construction of those long runways.

I wonder if any of you were stationed in Chakulia when Gogo arrived as a replacement? She was the daughter of the famous Italian designer, Madame Schiaparelli. Gogo was exceptionally pretty and well endowed by nature. All she had to do to raise the morale of the G.I.s was to walk across the floor of the Red Cross Club.

Those early days before you all arrived were rough in a different kind of way. Rations were poor--mostly Spam and K-rations. Dysentery and other tropical diseases were rampant. Most of us were not quite sure what we were supposed to do. A "trial and error" situation existed. When you all arrived things improved. We even were issued a beer ration. Remember how some of you took the cans up with you in your planes, hoping to cool them off? Didn't work too well. The natives showed us how to cool a can by wrapping it in wet straw and hanging it on the branch of a eucalyptus tree to catch a breeze, if there were one.

I wonder if any of you were at Chakulia when we featured the "Fire eater" in one of our shows? He was Private Thomas Dever of Oregon. Before an awe-struck audience, and with the relish of a good ole pie a la mode, he swallowed tacks, anna coins, and marbles. These were merely appetizers. For his main course he chose part of a Victrola record, an electric light bulb, and double-edged razor blades. Private Dever topped off his meal by literally swallowing fire which blazed forth from his mouth. Several guys lit cigarettes from the flame. With the satisfied expression that follows a

Thanksgiving dinner, he raised his shirt and patted his stomach. And you know what? It rattled! We learned that doctors back home took x-rays and saw all that stuff. I remember he ended his show by saying for \$1,000 and a discharge from the Army, he would uncover the mystery of his act and how he could "stomach it."

Private Dever, if you're still around, I salute you! I haven't seen a better or more convincing show. How's your stomach holding up?

Another show you may remember was to take place on Christmas night--1944, I think--in our open-air amphitheater. On two old upright pianos, Ellen (Red Cross) and I planned a surprise. We knew how much you boys preferred boogie woogie to classical music. We started out with thunderous chords and runs from a Greig concerto, planning to switch to boogie after a few bars. Just as we were about to switch, the "alert" sounded, and darkness took over. Someone recognized my voice in the slit trench and said, "Gee, Katie, can't you play anything but that dumb classical stuff?"

Say, do you ever find yourself knocking your shoe or boot against the bed? Then it helped get rid of the scorpions and snakes.

The show that stands out above all others was the performance of Andre Kostelanetz, his orchestra and his wife, the famous Lily Pons.

Unfortunately, they arrived on the day of the accident, an explosion of the planes of the 44th. The performance had to be held over until the following night. What a thrill for me to have this lovely lady as a roommate! The following afternoon, Mr. Kostelanetz appeared at the Red Cross Club and said, "Lily has a dry throat. She needs pineapple juice in order to sing tonight." There wasn't a chance our shelves held such a delicacy. I contacted Colonel Blanchard who called around and finally located a small can in Calcutta. A plane flew to Calcutta, arriving back at the base just an hour before the performance. Good thing the taxpayers back home didn't know the cost of that little can! It was well worth it. Her beautiful voice soared to the heavens, and you guys yelled and screamed for more.

It was heartbreaking when the 40th was ordered to the Mariannas, and Colonel Blanchard told us Washington had turned down his request to have us go along. Among other things, I was going to miss my choir which had grown to 40 voices. At our final get-together, I read them this corny poem as my "farewell."

My Choir

To the choir of India and tenors too,
This parting is sad and makes me blue.
I remember the day not long ago,
Before the choir had started to grow,
We found a quartet that didn't sound bad,
At least those who sang seemed happy and glad.
So we ventured forth and got a few more.
Most were good-some few were poor.

We had started in fun and never thought
The day would come when we'd be sought.
But I've heard a C.O. often repeat,
This choir of ours just can't be beat.
I heard a conductor of world renown
Say it was hard to beat that kind of sound.
It was rare and not on many occasions
Our songs suffered serious abrasions.

But the thing I like the most of all
Is something I'll always like to recall.
Your spirit is high, your fellowship fine.
And I say this sincerely-it's not just a line.
It's guys like you that make it fun
For us to work in this goddamn sun.

I was sent to the Red Cross Club in Darjeeling, as it turned out, just a few months before the war ended. Our club up there took care of the forces from Burma, mostly Stillwell's troops. What a rugged existence those guys had--supplies held up, diseases, floods, etc.--while building the Ledo Road. I remember being told what a tough guy "Vinegar Joe" was. He told the base hospital if any of his men were patients, to send them back to work as soon as they could stand up.

Allan Saunders, a British Wing Commander and a national hero who had just performed an extraordinary feat, arrived in Darjeeling. If any of you were prisoners in Rangoon, you may have shook his hand.

An outstanding pilot with the RAF, he often came to the club to tell the G.I.s about his experiences, especially this one. It seems he was on a reconnaissance mission over Rangoon when he noticed the enormous Japanese airfield, Mingaladon, was completely empty. He circled several times and decided to land. Apparently, all of the Japs had fled. It took him several days by foot and by cart to get to Rangoon where he opened the doors to the prison, releasing 1,400 British and American prisoners. Back at his base, Allan Saunders was listed "Missing in Action."

He was scheduled to go on another important mission. Before he left he gave me a token of friendship, a 35-carat topaz set in a 24-carat gold ring. Once more he was listed "Missing in Action." But this time luck was not with him.

The MPs made regular trips through the lower Himalayas to check on smoke signals being sent over the Hump. One day in a deserted area, they saw a small animal, barely able to walk. They picked it up and brought it to our club. I remember holding it in one hand. She turned out to be a dog with some jackal in her. The boys soldered a Red Cross pin on her collar, and she became our mascot. We named her "Cheenie" (sugar in Hindustani). I taught her some tricks in the native language. Even some of the natives came to watch her perform. What a contribution she made! Her act was the most popular of any of our activities.

The great news of the end of the war reached us, but my heart sank at the thought of leaving my beloved little four-footed friend, Cheenie. Several British officers offered to take her. Since I was the first one to receive orders for the return trip home, I was the first to be honored at a farewell party. Among the numerous guests was a young, attractive commander of one of our destroyers. I recognized this as a distinct possibility and went to work to persuade him to bring Cheenie home. It took a bit of doing, but he finally consented. Since I was leaving the next day and the destroyer not until ten days later, the logistics of getting her to the ship were formidable. They involved a number of persons, making sure she got all her shots, transferring her from one person to another along the route to Calcutta, and finally to a particular spot on the Hoogly River at midnight on a certain date. Sounds like a nightmare, doesn't it? Well, it worked! Five months after my return to Baltimore, a call came from a pet shop in New York. Apparently, Cheenie was allowed off the ship just to be walked, but she never got back on!

It was a happy day for me when I picked up this poor, little mangy animal who had been at sea for several months. She entertained the troops on the train from New York to Baltimore and was given a steak by the headwaiter. (I had to pay for my lousy cheese sandwich.)

I will sign off now. If you don't remember me, maybe you remember the B-29 "Katie," named for me. Ned Baugh was the pilot. Salaam, Sahibs.



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