

Kathleen Hall: Dr. Bethune's Angel

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GENERAL "Vinegar" Joe Stilwell was the top U.S. military man in China during World War II. He once stated that North China, where Japanese forces numbering about two million were held up for eight years, was the pivotal theater in the Pacific War. I am sure he was right, and that this fact played a major part in saving Australia and my country, New Zealand, from invasion by the Japanese.

It was the Communist 8th Route Army, led by Mao Zedong, which bore the brunt of the fighting from its base in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Area. This is the Wutai Mountain Area, where the provinces of Hebei, Shanxi, and the former province of Chahar met.

Mao appointed a Canadian, Dr. Norman Bethune, to be in charge of medical services. Bethune had to start virtually from scratch at a time when the region was totally surrounded by the Japanese. He learned that a New Zealand missionary nurse, along with two Chinese nurses, was running a tiny cottage hospital in "no-man's land" on the edge of Japanese-held territory. He decided to ask for her help.

That night Bethune wrote in his diary, "I have met an angel...Kathleen Hall, of the Anglican Church Mission here...She will go to Peking, buy up medical supplies, and bring them back to her mission...for us! If she isn't an angel, what does the word mean?"

During the event, Kathleen made numerous trips to Beijing and brought back great quantities of supplies, first by train to Baoding and Dingzhou, and then by mule trains into the mountains. She personally took them through Japanese checkpoints, the main one being at the Dingzhou City Gate. In addition, she worked day and night, tending to wounded guerrillas in her little hospital or on the battlefield itself.

Eventually, she was arrested by the Japanese, who burned her hospital down. As she was nominally a neutral citizen, they deported her, putting her on a ship bound for New Zealand, but she disembarked at Hongkong and sought out her friend, Soong Ching Ling (later to become the founder of China Today).

At that time Soong was directing the China Defense League, which was funneling supplies from all over the world to areas in Free China where they could best be used. They were experiencing great difficulties in getting supplies into the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Area.

Soong arranged for Kathleen to enlist in the Chinese Red Cross and to join a supply column heading for Jin-Cha-Ji. Because the Japanese now occupied virtually all of the eastern Chinese coast, it was necessary to travel by ship to Haiphong in Vietnam and then long distances through the Chinese interior before reaching the headquarters of Commander-in-Chief Zhu De. By this time Dr. Bethune had died, and Kathleen, who was very ill herself with beriberi, was repatriated to New Zealand.

In 1987, I had the privilege of working with Rewi Alley when the Shandan Bailie School was reopened. This is the successor to the famous school he had established to train technical workers during the anti-Japanese war. He told me the story of Kathleen Hall and urged me to write about her. He said, "If she had been a man, she would have been famous."

But the Chinese never forget their friends, and certainly Kathleen Hall had not been forgotten. In 1989, Dr. Guo Qinglan (Kotnis) offered to take me to the places where she and Hall had worked together 50 years before. She told me that on her trips, Kathleen not only took supplies, but also nurses, students, and others who wanted to work in the liberated areas. Guo Qinglan herself was one of them. She was later to marry the famous Indian doctor, Kotnis, who had followed Dr. Bethune and who was also to die in action.

In the village of Songjiazhuang, I found that Kathleen's hospital had become the village school, with the name "HE MING QING XIAO XUE" proudly emblazoned on the gate after all those years. (He Ming Qing was Kathleen's Chinese name.) I met many veterans, men and women, who, with tears in their eyes, told me about Kathleen. I put their stories into her biography, which was later published in English and Chinese.

Last year was the centennial of Kathleen's birth, and the people of Baoding prefecture planned commemorative ceremonies at Kathleen's graveside in Quyang and at Songjiazhuang, where a statue was to be unveiled. I was invited to lead a delegation from New Zealand to take part.

On the morning of October 5, several thousand local people were already gathered around her tomb when we arrived in the beautiful Cemetery of Revolutionary Martyrs in Quyang. There were also groups from Beijing, including the New Zealand Ambassador to China, Chris Elder.

A delightful group of local schoolchildren recited an elegy about Kathleen, which had been specially composed for the occasion. Many speakers paid tribute to her, including the Anglican Bishop of Auckland, representing the church which had supported Kathleen's work in China. The New Zealanders sang songs in English and Maori. Kathleen's tomb was bedecked with beautiful flowers.

During the war, there had been numerous Japanese offensives, and at times they occupied Quyang, which is the capital of the county. At these times, the county government fell back to the village of Songjiazhuang in the mountains, the same village where Kathleen had established her cottage hospital in 1935.

Now the local people had decided to set up a statue there. In Quyang County there are great deposits of beautiful white marble, and marble carving has been a tradition for thousands of years. Master carvers set to work with their students and executed a beautiful statue of He Ming Qing, which shows her with medical kit and torch and a wolf-dog beside her.

The dog was well-remembered by the old people. It had been a gift from General Nie Rongzhen and was always at her side as she strode over the mountains, be it day or night, to the places where soldiers and guerrilla fighters lay wounded.

At the base of the statue was the tribute that had been written by General Nie when he was 90 years old, by this time an honored marshal of the P.L.A.

"To heal the wounded and rescue the dying
She worked with selfless dedication.
Her deeds in support of the War of Resistance
Will go down in the annals of history."

The visitors were greeted by village drum and cymbal bands, together with bright-eyed children waving flowers, who lined a long pathway of several hundred meters leading to the new village school that still carries the name of He Ming Qing.

There were thousands of people who had gathered from near and far, but in the front were many old veterans who remembered Kathleen well. Through interpreters, they told their stories to New Zealanders and also to the Baoding TV crew who were there to record the event for Chinese television.

One of the most moving accounts was Dr. Wang Zengshou. He had been a village boy in Songjiazhuang when Kathleen came. He was fascinated by what she was doing and was inspired to become a doctor himself. Wang joined the 8th Route Army and later became a heart specialist and Vice President of Hebei

Hospital at Shijiazhuang. He said that Kathleen was really the first of the famous "barefoot doctors," who later became so famous throughout China and the world.

Another story that warmed our hearts was that of Lu Jinxia. She told us that the two nurses who worked with Kathleen in her cottage hospital were Lu Zhongyu and Zhen Shuling, and they were her mother and father. They had married and Kathleen had acted as the matchmaker! All through her childhood she had heard stories about Miss Hall.

Then, to a crescendo of firecrackers and the applause of the admiring spectators, the deputy magistrate of Quyang County and the New Zealand ambassador together drew the bright red veil away from the statue.

It would have been the last thing this brave but very modest woman could have imagined when she labored in a remote village 60 years ago, but everyone agreed that it is a most fitting tribute and serves today to advance the strong friendship between the peoples of China and New Zealand. All who knew her agreed that Kathleen would have been very, very happy about that.

After the ceremony, villagers and visitors mingled together in a very joyful experience. It would have continued for a long time, but unfortunately the weather became uncooperative. There were unbridged rivers to cross, which threatened to rise, so we had to leave early.

Our travel arrangements were handled by the Baoding Tourism Bureau, which had arranged an excellent variety of experiences combining village and rural life with historic spots in a region that has been at the center of Chinese civilization for thousands of years. In addition, we had the unique opportunity of making a pilgrimage to many places where Dr. Bethune and Kathleen Hall "served the people," and of meeting with many veterans who remembered them very well.

I know that many people from Canada and New Zealand as well as other foreigners would love to travel as we did. Ma Baoru, deputy director of the Baoding Tourism Bureau, has promised that they will make regular, short tours available. To mark the 60th anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, when Japan unleashed its aggression on North China, the bureau will offer special tours to Baoding, where Norman Bethune and Kathleen Hall worked.