



# News Release

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Contact:  
Christopher Wills  
O: 217-558-8970  
C: 217-299-9259

*Editors: To help commemorate Memorial Day, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum offers this op-ed piece by one of our historians. Dr. DePue is also available for interviews.*

## **A Memorial Day memory of American soldiers' kindness to a little girl**

By Dr. Mark DePue, Director of Oral History  
Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

The sight of a squad of soldiers brought terror to people's hearts during World War II, a veteran once told the historian Stephen Ambrose, author of "Band of Brothers" and a score of other books. Whether the squad was German, Russian or Japanese, it meant rape, pillage, destruction and senseless killing, he said.

But there was an exception: "A squad of GIs, a sight that brought the biggest smiles you ever saw to people's lips, and joy to their hearts. ... GIs meant candy, cigarettes, C-rations, and freedom. America had sent the best of her young men around the world, not to conquer but to liberate; not to terrorize, but to help."

The cynics among us might scorn that sentiment today, but not Maija Devine, who saw her first GIs as a young Korean girl of eight during the Korean War.

Maija had fled Seoul with her mother in December 1950 shortly before the Chinese occupied the city. The two ended up in Masan, near the port city of Pusan, two among tens of thousands of refugees struggling to survive.

Maija fondly remembers the day when she and her mother, returning from a well with buckets of water, saw a trainload of American troops stopped on the tracks. Scores of Korean children were swarming around the train. "G.I., G.I., give me chocolate, give me chocolate," they chanted, with several of the soldiers happily obliging.

Maija and her mother hung back about twenty feet, waiting for an opportunity to cross the tracks.

“I could see a soldier take his hat off,” she recalled in a recent interview, “and he was passing that around. Soldiers were putting some things in it. And then he came to the steps, and he seemed to be motioning to me.”



Not knowing what the young G.I. meant, Maija and her mother stayed put.

“Finally, he just came down those steps, and walked to me. I was wearing a sweater, and two pockets were there, and he just poured all these candies from his hat into my pockets. Here’s hundred of other kids going, ‘Give me, give me chocolate and gum.’ And he just passed them all and came and put these things in my pocket. It was the weirdest thing, why he would do that. But I was happy. And that’s the first time I tasted American chocolates. ... Oh man, it was really, really, really delicious.”

When Maija asked her mother why the soldier would do that, why he would single her out for this special gift, her mother could only speculate. Perhaps, she explained, it was because Maija was wearing a beautiful hand-knitted sweater of red and green “and that’s a Christmas color to Americans.” Perhaps the sweater “reminded him of his daughter that he left at home. Maybe ...I reminded him of his baby sister ... And besides, I was not begging.”

Soon, Maija’s mother reciprocated the gift and began filling the soldiers’ water bottles as they waited for the train to head north, toward the war and a very uncertain future. In return, she received cigarettes, an item prized by Korean adults almost as much as the children cherished American chocolates.

That tiny gesture by an unknown American soldier left a powerful impression on Maija. “I’m going to America,” she thought to herself then, “where all these candies came from. I know where these came from. I’m going there.”

Years later, as a graduate student, she got her chance to go to the United States, majoring in English literature at St. Louis University. By 1968 she was back in South Korea teaching at Sodo Women's College, and while there, she met a tall, humor-loving young Peace Corps volunteer from Illinois named Michael Devine. The two were soon married, and eventually returned to the United States. She was proud, in 1975, to become an American citizen.

Reflecting on her first encounter with American soldiers and on one soldier's unexpected act of kindness in a country torn asunder by war, Maija summed up her feelings this way. "Without their intervention in the Korean War, [South Koreans today] feel they would have been just wiped out, totally."



"And so they see U.N. and American soldiers as their saviors, they saved their lives, and they saved their country – even if it's only half a country."

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*Mark DePue is the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Maija Devine recently published an autobiographical novel, "The Voices of Heaven." You can listen to her entire story, and those of many veterans, at [www.oralhistory.illinois.gov](http://www.oralhistory.illinois.gov).*