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August--2020

Asian Division – Jan 1985 – July 1987 – Guam, Korea

European Division – Aug 1987 – July 2013 – Germany, Italy, Spain,
Belgium, UAE

My Introduction to UMGC (Then The University of Maryland) and my First
Teaching Assignment

**FACULTY FOR ASIA
AND EUROPE**
The University of Maryland
University College has open-
ings for several business
and management faculty be-
ginning in January 1985.
Teaching assignments will
be on U S military bases on
Guam and in Europe. Mini-
mum requirements: M B A.,
one year of recent college
teaching experience, and
U S citizenship. Frequent
travel and the cost of
schooling make these posi-
tions difficult for those with
children. Send resume to Dr.
Lois A. Mohr, Overseas Pro-
grams, College Park, MD
20742. AA/EEO.

In October of 1984 I was living in the New Haven, Connecticut area, and working as an independent marketing consultant/trainer primarily for credit unions and credit union personnel. One evening I was reading my Wall Street Journal and came across an intriguing classified advertisement (see above) I always read the classifieds out of curiosity checking on what kind of interesting opportunities might be available. I was vaguely familiar with The University of Maryland overseas programs via a brief mention by one

of my graduate school professors and I knew that one of my classmates, Gerry Bagley, was teaching somewhere in Europe for The University of Maryland

I decided to call rather than send a resume and wait for a response. I was put on the phone with Lois Mohr. While she may not remember the details of the conversation and I do not remember the exact words, wise guy as I was and probably still am, I opened with something along the lines of “Hello, my name is Aaron Gewirtz and I am calling in reference to the ad you placed in the Wall Street Journal for business faculty to teach on Guam and in Europe. Europe sounds good.” Lois responded with “Guam has to sound better since we don’t have any openings in Europe right now”. We spoke for a short while and within a day or two I sent a resume, and in early November I was in College Park (not Adelphi back then) for interviews. I spoke with Lois, a faculty member who had recently returned from teaching in Europe, and with Vida Bandis.

One question Vida Bandis asked me was, “why do you want this job?” Once again, the wise guy in me answered with, “obviously not for the money since you don’t pay very much.”. I don’t remember her exact response or the rest of our interview, but the conversation must have gone well. I was hired.

I notified the few clients I was doing work for at the time that I would be leaving the country for an indefinite period, closed out my consulting practice, took care of my affairs in Connecticut and a few days before Christmas, drove to Miami where I signed my car over to my sister and left behind a few of my more valuable belongings On January 3, 1985 I boarded a plane at Miami International Airport headed for Tokyo. I was off on an adventure, the duration of which was uncertain although, I thought it would be about two years.

Although I was 44 years old, my international travel had been limited to a trip to Canada with my parents at age eight; three days in Havana pre-Castro (a high school graduation present from my brother-in-law twelve years my senior), and a trip to the Bahamas in 1982 to do some marketing

workshops at a trade association conference. In fact, when I was hired by UMUC, I didn't even have a valid passport and had to scramble to get one prior to driving to Miami.

When I arrived in Tokyo, I had four suitcases, one of which was filled with textbooks and course materials I had gathered for my first UMUC teaching assignment (I always overprepared) on Guam. I had my "orders" in my hands along with a set of instructions covering how I would get to Fussa, Japan, the home of Yokota Air Base, The University of Maryland Asian Division Headquarters. I was told I would be met by a University of Maryland representative at a place called T- CAT (Tokyo City Air Terminal), where I thought I would eventually land. My flight landed at 3 PM at Narita Airport in Tokyo, the country's major international airport.

After clearing customs and gathering my luggage I walked through the door into the main terminal area expecting to be greeted by someone holding a sign with my name on it. There were dozens of greeters holding signs, but none with my name on it or identifying The University of Maryland. My "greeter" must be late. I thought it best not to stray from the meeting/greeting area and I sat patiently waiting for someone who would take me to where I needed to be. An hour and a half later I knew I was on my own and had to find my way to something called "the billeting office" at Yokota Air Base where there was supposed to be a room waiting for me. I had no idea what a billeting office was.

I pushed my luggage cart out into the center of the terminal looking for a big "I", an information booth and eventually found one. I asked where T-CAT was, and a nice English-speaking Japanese woman informed me that it was about 15 miles away and I could take a train or a bus to get there. That did not seem like a good idea with my four heavy bags, a total lack of familiarity with the Japanese language beyond "Kon'nichiwa" and "domo arigato", hello and thank you, and, the thought that the person who was coming to meet me would think I missed my flight and would be long gone by time I arrived at T-CAT.

I began to wander around the terminal thinking that eventually I would find an American service member who would be able to help me get to Yokota Air Base. At the time I had no idea it was about 75 miles away. As I walked toward the exit to ground transportation, lo and behold, a small sign sat next to a telephone on a little podium. The sign said, "Direct line to Yokota Air Base Billeting". What a relief! Since I had a reservation for that night, I thought I would call and plead for help.

I must have looked like a lost puppy and as I was about to pick up the phone, a young Air Force Captain in uniform came to my rescue. "You look lost". He asked who I was and what I was doing in Tokyo. When I told him, I was a newly minted University of Maryland instructor, he asked if I had travel orders which I quickly pulled out and showed to him. He explained that my orders would take me all the way to billeting at Yokota Air Base and to just go outside and take a taxi. I asked how far, and he said about 75 miles. I said that had to be a hell of a taxi fare and he told me not to worry, "Just sign a voucher and the government will pay for it." He told me he was going to the exact same place and if his family weren't with him, we could share a cab ride. He was extremely helpful and took me outside, put me in a taxi and I was safely on my way to Yokota. At least I thought I was.

The driver did not speak any English and I repeated my destination, Yokota Air base, and he nodded and said "OK, Yokota, Yokota". From time to time he seemed to be looking down at something on the seat next to him. I looked over the seat back and saw that he was looking at a map! I kept repeating the words Yokota Air base and while I don't remember very well, I suspect I was speaking louder and louder each time I said it, like we Americans are notorious for doing when talking to someone who does not speak our language...like they are deaf!

I have not been back to Japan since the late 80's but I seem to remember at the time that all vestiges of the English language disappeared from the road signs once we were more than two miles from the airport and there I was travelling along at what seemed to be excessive speeds, in a strange

country, not able to speak the language, and hoping that I really was on my way to my destination.

With little choice, I sat back, put myself in the driver's hands and took in the scenery in the fading daylight. We did get there, entering the gate to Yokota Air Base at about 6 PM. A few minutes later I was standing outside the billeting office with my suitcases along with about 30 other people, most of them in uniform, all trying to check in and get their rooms.

The taxi driver had been very nice, helped me with my luggage but I turned around for just a moment and when I turned back to give him a tip. He was gone. I thought surely a 75-mile taxi ride deserved a nice tip particularly since I felt great relief at being there and the government was paying the taxi fare. I had learned from my dad who had driven a taxi in New York City that an appropriate tip for a ride that long would be at least 10 dollars.

That was my welcome to the no tipping custom in Japan and more significantly, to The University of Maryland later to be known as UMUC and eventually as UMGC. Little did I know that I was embarking on an adventure that would last almost 29 years, take me to about 50 different installations in about 10 countries in Asia and Europe, and give me the opportunity to visit dozens of additional countries as well.

Much of my orientation at Yokota remains a blur. Because it was mid-year, there were only a couple of other new faculty so "orientation" was no big thing. I do remember eating great food in restaurants in the little town of Fussa, and a trip to Tokyo where I was able to purchase a fairly sophisticated camera which I was sure I would need to record my upcoming adventure. A week later I boarded a flight to my first assignment as had been promised, on the island of Guam.

I was met by one of the field reps who took me to where I would be housed in a nice room in a BOQ on NAVCAMS, the naval communication station on the island, and handed me the keys to a small Mazda automobile that was to be mine for the duration of my stay on the island. Some of our colleagues who have been to Guam may remember that the university provided each faculty member with a car (unfortunately it was not air

conditioned) to get from base to base and for personal use. It was promoted as a “benefit”, compensation for the fact that being on Guam, a U.S. territory, one had to pay income tax on the earnings. The truth be told, vehicles had to be provided to short-term faculty because there was no realistic public transportation. Driving on the island required one to learn something very quickly. The roads were all paved at least in part, with ground up shells that made them very slippery after a rain, a relatively frequent midday occurrence.

I was scheduled to teach two courses: one at the Naval Station at one end of the island and one at Anderson Air Base all the way at the other end. Unfortunately or, fortunately, depending upon how one looked at it, one of them did not go, something I was to learn later was not an uncommon occurrence, and I found myself meeting a class two nights a week from 4:30 to 6:45, teaching a course I had taught numerous times before at one of my prior teaching positions.

Perhaps I should not make this confession here but, how good can it get? Here I was, living on a balmy tropical island in the Pacific in a BOQ (a term I was not familiar with until I joined the university), paying \$4.00 a day but only for five days a week. There was no charge for the weekends because the “maid” did not clean on Saturday or Sunday. I put maid in quotation marks because my “maid” was a Guamanian man, a Chamorro, who had served in the U.S. Marines. Since I was often “home” when he came to clean, we quickly became friends. About midway through my stay on the island, I was invited to his cousin’s wedding, a massive affair where everyone in his village attended and I was treated like an honored guest.

To top it all off, because one course did not go, I was only “working” about 15 hours a week. I guess I should also mention that my room in the BOQ was on top of a small Officers Club. I was befriended by a young Navy Ensign who, on my first Friday night, introduced me to the club’s happy hour where drinks were incredibly cheap and the free bar snacks were substantial enough to constitute a full meal.

The ample free time I had allowed me to complete something that was on my “bucket list”. I was able to earn my SCUBA certification and do a considerable amount of diving during the six months I was on the island. I also had time to do some fishing and explore “The Boonies”, as the jungle

areas were referred to, to visit some of the historical battle sites on the island, and spend time relaxing on Tarague, a beautiful beach on Anderson Air base. Night life wasn't bad either with some great bands performing in the lounges at the tourist hotels that seemed to cater to Japanese tourists. I was told that Guam was a favored vacation spot for the Japanese, like Hawaii was for the Americans.

And all of this came with a paycheck? I think I really understood what Joe Arden was talking about on the Maryland Public Television video when he said, "I thought I should have been paying Maryland rather than Maryland paying me."

Although the BOQ was occupied primarily by mid-grade naval officers, a few civilians like me, along with the base chaplain, all of whom should have been seen as clean living straight-up people, we were still subject to occasional room inspections for drugs. The first time they came, they had a ridiculously small dog with them, and I joked about its size and capability. After the dog sniffed his way around on the floor, the handler lifted him up and put him on the shelf in the closet explaining that this small dog was used to do drug checks on submarines in port. Small as he was, he could get into the nooks and crannies on the subs.

Prior to joining Maryland, I had four years of teaching experience at a couple of stateside universities. I had taught some classes on Eglin Air Base in Florida when I was a faculty member at the University of West Florida 12 years earlier, so I was not a stranger to the "Military Student". However, Once again, I was impressed with their enthusiasm and dedication to the pursuit of their education. Small world that the UMGC program is, a couple of the students I had on Guam I would later see again at locations in Europe. The students on Guam helped make my job very pleasant and provided me with a lot of good information about living and working on the island. For example, what to do in the event of an earthquake.

Many who read this know that Guam is located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, is subject to numerous seismic tremors, and an occasional earthquake of some substance. . In fact, I was told that the tremors occur every day, most below the level at which they can be felt. I was not aware of this and one day as I walked into the classroom, I was caught by surprise by a

tremor that we could feel. I said to the students, "OK, you folks live here, what is the protocol? What do we do?" The reply, "Just wait a minute or two and it will stop shaking and we can continue with the class".

Although I described the "lights out" incident on the Maryland Public Television video, it is worth repeating here. On Guam, on occasion, the power would be lost. Sometimes it looked like the entire island had gone black! The explanation given was that snakes got into the big transformers and shorted them out. One night at a class being held in a Navy warehouse, the lights went out just as we were about to begin. I managed to locate the OD (officer of the day for the uninitiated) and asked if there were some flashlights somewhere in the warehouse that we could borrow. We found some big lights, stood them up on the desks, and held our class! Improvise, improvise.

Thus, my introduction to teaching for The University of Maryland was both hectic, and fantastic. I took lots of pictures on Guam, including many underwater shots, some of which I would have loved to share with you. Unfortunately, I eventually left them with my sister in Miami and they were all lost or destroyed in Hurricane Andrew.