

Next Stop: South Korea

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Getting There took a very long time

When I was 14 years old, living in Brooklyn, New York, one of my good friend's family had an exchange student from Japan staying with them. The first time I met this girl I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I was a teenager with raging hormones, and I was smitten. I think it was at that point in my young life I decided that sooner or later I was going to Japan to meet my lifetime partner.

When I was in the military six years later, I tried every means possible to get to Japan. I even volunteered to go to Korea because I thought I would be close enough to visit Japan on leave. It was just not meant to be. Unlike today's military in which service members have "wish lists" for assignments, that was not the way in the early 60's.

My stay in Japan upon joining the Asian Division before I went to Guam, had been short, less than a full week, and I wanted to get back if possible. So, when I was asked where I might want to go after Guam, I requested Misawa Airbase in Northern Japan for four reasons. It was in Japan. I was ready for a change of climate. I had seen photos of the beautiful ice sculptures they created there, and I wanted to experience them up close. And, the reason I wanted to go to Japan in the first place! I was told I was given the OK for the assignment to Misawa.

I waited patiently on Guam for orders sending me there. And I waited and waited. Finally, with only a day or so left before I was to leave Guam, I called Maryland Headquarters at Yokota. I don't recall the person I spoke with, but I told him that I was waiting for orders to my next assignment at Misawa Air Base. I was asked to hold. When he came back on the line he said, "That's a mistake, You are going to Korea." I replied, "That's a mistake, I'm going to Misawa." I was then told that I was needed in Korea and after two terms there, I could have my choice of any location in the Asian Division.

Resigned to my fate, I asked where I was going in Korea. He told me Kunsan Air Base. I had no idea where that was. I was calling from the education center office on Guam and I repeated the name Kunsan Air Base which caused two airmen sitting

close by to make loud guttural sounds. When I got off the phone, I asked what that was all about and they told me what a terrible place Kunsan was, isolated, and very cold in the winter. If I remember correctly, one of them called it “the armpit of Korea”. But I was up for another adventure and after a brief return to Yokota I was on my way to Korea. It was the middle of the summer.

Arrival and off to Gunsan (Kunsan)

As all faculty members arriving in Korea, I spent a few days in Seoul getting an orientation from Larry Hepinstall, area director at that time, being treated to a great Korean meal or two, and within a few days I was on a bus to Kunsan. I had a quick lesson at the big bus Terminal in Seoul. I learned that Koreans get a little “pushy” when approaching ticket counters and that one must be a bit aggressive and elbow one’s way to get a ticket. This knowledge served me well on numerous bus and train trips I was to make over the next few years.

While Kunsan was cold in the winter, it was also uncomfortably warm in the summer. After meeting the local field rep, and getting checked in to yet another BOQ, I was curious and headed “downtown” to Kunsan City (about four miles away), to walk around and check it out. After only a short walk in the heat I started looking for an air-conditioned place, any air-conditioned place, to cool off. Of all things, I found a Dunkin Donuts shop. There I spent the next two hours or so drinking coffee, eating too many donuts and talking with the young ladies working in the shop. I also learned a valuable language lesson. If someone asked you to meet at the “Copy shop”, they don’t mean the place where you go to have documents copied!

It did not take long for me to decide that I would be happy to remain in Korea as long as Maryland wanted to keep me there. I immediately liked the people, whom I found to be warmer and more open than the Japanese, the culture, the food, and OK, I admit it, the numerous attractive Korean women. I was also taken with the contrast between the old and the new, traditional Korean houses within eyesight of large modern apartment complexes.

Kunsan turned out to be a nice assignment. As a small somewhat secluded base, it was a close-knit community with the hub being the combined enlisted/officers club where many folks, military, contractors, Maryland faculty and field reps, went for the daily soup and sandwich lunch. I think it was about \$1.50.

And then there was the dark side. I knew it existed but had forgotten about it. American military installations around the world have always had “establishments”, bars and whatever, that were set up to provide companionship and other “services” for the service members stationed nearby. Just down the road from the base was “The Ville”, a community in and of itself that consisted of about 30 bars, a few restaurants, and “hooches”, tiny apartments where the working ladies lived. If I recall correctly, some of our sociology faculty members did some serious research on this phenomenon. Of course, they were ribbed about the “seriousness” of their research. In Korea and I suspect at other locations as well, the military tolerated the presence of the “Villes” but kept a close watch on these establishments with Air Force security patrols each night. On occasion, if things got out of hand, they would be declared “Off Limits” to service members.

I am sorry to report that I witnessed several “ugly” incidents involving military members, the ladies, and the people who ran these establishments. While I was able to make some allowances for the young soldiers, some who were probably away from home for the first time in an area that catered to their most basic needs, and to some degree understand that I was witnessing the practice of the oldest “profession”, the “Ugly American” seemed to be alive and well in Korea. Fortunately, today, given worldwide consciousness regarding human trafficking and exploitation of women, the American military now holds a different point of view and at least by regulation, military members are forbidden to avail themselves of the services provided by these women. However, I suspect it still exists but has gone underground.

A message for the Russians

There was a building on the base that had something interesting written on the roof, in Russian (see photo). While I can't be sure, I was told it was a message for the spy planes that we knew were flying over, to let them know we know they are checking on us.

Shortly before leaving Kunsan I acquired a car. One of contractors I had become friendly with was leaving the country and asked, or should I say begged, me to buy his old car. I did not really see a need for a car since public transportation would be readily available in most locations, but he made me the Godfather “offer I could

not refuse” and I bought his old, somewhat beat up Mazda 323 which my wife would later refer to as our sports car. With some clever repairs by Korean mechanics, we eventually drove that car all over South Korea.



Surprises in Yongsan

After a term at Kunsan I was assigned to teach in Yongsan, in Seoul. I had been told that Maryland rented a few apartments near the base and that faculty members would be given the opportunity to share one of these apartments if they were available. There was a vacancy at one of them and I accepted it. I was given the location of the apartment and told there was another faculty member that I would be sharing it with, a psychologist. Seasoned Maryland veterans might have taken it all in stride, but you can imagine my surprise when I knocked on the door and was greeted by an attractive young American woman. I asked if the Maryland instructor I was to share this apartment with was home. She introduced herself as Colleen Manning and told me she was the psychologist with whom I would be sharing this rather small apartment! OK, I was over forty, certainly not naïve and had shared a house in San Francisco with a mix of eight men and women back in 1969, but this caught me off guard. It was not the summer of love here! To boot, Colleen was married to a nice gentleman, a contractor who was working on Diego Garcia. We would eventually meet and become friends.

Maryland charged faculty rent at the current BOQ rates. There were two bedrooms, one very small, which I occupied and paid \$4.00 a day and the other, that Colleen occupied and paid \$6.00 a day. The location was great, a short walk to the main Gate of the base and right in the middle of the shopping area in Itaewon, the section of Seoul popular with foreigners. One of my favorite things to do there was to sit outside the apartment and watch the dozens of cute Korean children walk by. They would call out to me on the steps, “Hello Harabeo-ji” (Grandpa). What a great way to start a day. (see photo)



It was at this apartment at a Thanksgiving dinner that I met the woman I would marry 9 months later. Given the situation when we were married, we did not have any kind of traditional wedding ceremony. In fact, we were married by a clerk in a government office in Seoul. Our marriage certificate is signed by the mayor of Seoul. When we asked the clerk about a nice restaurant where we could have our “wedding lunch”, he suggested the employee cafeteria in the basement. I don’t think my wife has ever forgiven me for the fact that we had our wedding lunch in the basement of a government building at a cost of about \$3.00 for both of us! Maybe she has forgiven me since we recently celebrated our 34th Anniversary.

Classes at Yongsan were fairly large and were made up of a mix of American military members and dependents, civilian employees, and some Korean local nationals. In Korea, local nationals could take Maryland classes. Many of the Korean students at Yongsan were extremely sharp and usually wound up at the top of the class. Some already had an undergraduate degree from a Korean university and were taking Maryland business courses as prerequisites for MBA degrees they would be pursuing in the U.S.

While the Korean students could speak English quite well, it was not uncommon for instructors to allow them to have a Korean/English dictionary when taking exams. This led to what I thought was a funny incident. During a marketing exam, I noticed the Korean students were busy thumbing through their dictionaries, more than usual. I stopped the exam and asked what the problem was; did they need a word translated that was not in their dictionary? One student raised her hand and asked, "What does Chevrolet Camaro mean?" That was an oops for me. I had used that as one of the choices on a multiple-choice question. None of them knew what that was, and it was not listed in their dictionaries.

One other remarkably interesting situation came up while I was at Yongsan. Being the blabbermouth my wife says I am, (she is right) I had told the students in one of my classes that I was planning to marry a Korean woman sometime in the future. One of the young Korean women in the class took me aside after class that day and asked if she could meet this woman I was planning to marry, perhaps for lunch. She would not tell me why and I thought it was a rather strange request. I asked my wife to be what she thought. She was very curious and agreed to meet with her. We met for lunch and the student asked me to leave while she and Soonja talked for a while. She later explained to both of us that she wanted to be sure that I was not being taken in by one of the Korean bar girls who just wanted to marry an American to obtain U.S. citizenship. She gave me her seal of approval! Soonja and I both thought that this was strange but a very thoughtful gesture.

Invitation to a Korean high school for girls

From Yongsan I commuted to several nearby installations, primarily by bus. One of these was Camp Casey, the army base near Dongducheon. On one of my evening bus trips to Camp Casey, a well-dressed Korean man in his mid-30s sat down next to me and struck up a conversation. He was a science teacher at a girl's high school

in Dongducheon and asked me if I would like to visit the school. I jumped at the opportunity and we planned to meet at the bus station near the school one morning the following week. It turned out to be a very cold day. He took me to the school where we of course, removed our shoes and put on slippers at the front door. I was taken to the principal's office, a middle-aged Korean woman who spoke English. We had some coffee and then I was taken to an English class. The girls were all bundled up in their coats and I stood in the back of the room, fully dressed in my coat, scarf and gloves with cold feet, as the only heat in the room came from the Ondol charcoal heaters dispersed around the room. Although these were high school seniors, to me, they appeared to be much younger and less mature than their American counterparts. I was introduced and then the teacher continued with her English class, stopping from time to time to ask me about the spelling of a word or grammatical structure in a sentence.

After about 30 minutes she said it was my turn and asked if I were willing to come to the front of the room and answer some questions from the students. The questions were mostly about how things worked in American High schools and what students did during their school vacations. They were quite surprised to learn that many American high school students had part-time jobs after school and worked full time on long school vacations.

Then, one of the students who had a reasonable command of English asked me to sing a song for them. I was taken aback by this request and I told them I was a teacher, not a singer! I also asked their teacher if this was a common practice to which she replied that it was. One of the students shouted "Yesterday" which was echoed by a few of her classmates, referring to the Beatles hit song that was popular in Korea at that time. I summoned up a little courage and proceeded to do the best I could under the circumstances and rendered what I am sure was a sorry rendition of the song. When I was finished, I pointed to the girl who had asked me to sing and told her it was now her turn to sing. Without a moment's hesitation, she stood up and sang the theme from the film Love Story in almost perfect English!

When she finished one of the students said something in Korean which caused the rest of the class to cover their mouths and titter as young Korean women were wont to do. Obviously, there was a joke that I was not in on. I asked one of the other students who spoke decent English, what she had said, and the reply was

“She said you should kiss our teacher goodbye before you leave”. By this time, the teacher’s face had turned a bright red. I may have been blushing a bit myself. My reply was “OK, time to learn a new word in English, how to spell it, and to use it in a sentence. I went to the board and wrote out the following as I said it. “It would be very nice to kiss your teacher, but it would not be *appropriate*. Let’s learn the meaning of the word appropriate how to spell it and use it in a sentence.” That was my contribution to the day’s English lesson.

My science teacher friend came back to the room to rescue me. The English teacher thanked me, and the students all stood up and as is the custom and thanked me with a slight bow. My newfound friend took me back to the bus station where we talked a bit while I waited for a bus back to Yongsan. This experience provided me with one of the fondest memories of my time in Korea.

Our final assignment in Korea - Daegu

The assignment to Daegu, like most of the assignments travelling faculty were given, was to be for only two terms. We had a great ESO, a solid core of business students, and a beautiful apartment at a ridiculously low rent (see photo of our view); all of which prompted me to ask to remain there indefinitely. Because the demand was there and I taught a variety of business courses, The request was granted. I came off my annual travelling contract and became a logistically supported local faculty member. I took a pay cut of about 30 percent to do that. It was worth it.



I did some commuting from Daegu as well, to a base in Pusan called Hialeah Compound and to a small hilltop installation in Chang Dong outside of Daejon named Camp Ames where there was a relatively small American presence. Getting there required taking a taxi to the train station in Daegu (or driving to the train station and parking my car there), taking a train to Daejon and catching a bus or taxi up to the base. If I remember correctly, for reasons unknown to me, the class format was referred to as a “circuit rider”. We met only once a week from 6 PM to about 10:30 PM, a long class with two breaks. At the late hour when class ended, there was no bus to Daejon, and taxis were very scarce.

As it turned out, I had a young Korean woman in that class who came from a wealthy family. She arrived at class, driven by the family driver who would either wait for her or return to pick her up when class ended. As I said earlier in this comment, Korean students were allowed to register in Maryland classes but they had to have some kind of documentation indicating that they could speak English well enough to be in a course at an American university or, that they graduated from an American high school. She had graduated from high school in Los Angeles. Early in the course, her assignments indicated that she could barely write a coherent sentence in English and her speaking skills were also lacking. When I asked her how she managed to graduate from an American high school without the writing and speaking skills she told me that most of her friends were Korean and they did not speak much English. She also told me the school had students from a number of different countries and the teachers were not very demanding.

This was an example of what sometimes happened when eager field reps at small installations felt pressured to fill classes and would register students who should not have been in the classes. However, I was glad she was in the class and had decided to see it through to the end. Each night when her driver picked her up, he would drop me off at the Daejon Hotel where I would stay until the next morning rather than catch the last train to Daegu which did not depart until after midnight. Unfortunately, she did not do very well in the course and agreed to take more English classes before trying to take any more business courses.

Trips to Hialeah Compound in Pusan, required a taxi ride to the train station, a train ride to Pusan, and a taxi ride to the base. I only taught weekend classes or seminars and would return home on Sunday night or Monday morning. One term I taught a

small business management course. One of my students was a Lt. Colonel in the Korean Marines. He would often arrive late and would sometimes have to leave early. The major assignment in the course was a lengthy and detailed business plan for a small business the student might consider in the future. The Colonel, who had little knowledge of business, asked me if I could provide him with some examples of plans that had been submitted by students in prior classes. I gave him two plans to look at.

When he turned in “his” business plan it was almost an exact replica of one that I had given him, with a minor change here and there. Of course, I confronted him with this and in a very straight-forward manner he told me that his military responsibilities took up so much of his time that he could not do the necessary work. He then asked me outright if I could give him some consideration and just give him a C in the course. I was taken aback and while the words are surely not exact, I began by telling him that as a Marine Colonel he must understand what the word honor meant. He said of course he understood. I then told him that by asking me for a passing grade, he was asking me to flush *my* honor down the toilet. He lowered his head and told me that he understood and accepts whatever my decision is. In retrospect, I may have been a little out of line with my harsh comments. He was given the F he earned in the course. This did not stop him from presenting me with a nice brass plaque with the Korean Marine Corps emblem and a nicely written note thanking me and telling me that my wife and I were always welcome to visit at his home! I have carried that with me for the last thirty-four years! (See photos of the plaque and the accompanying letter).



To my professor!

Thank you very much for your
kindness. I had nice experien
about Small business firm. The
is marine corps emblem for
If you have a chance to visit
in Jin-hae City, would you
in touch with me? my tele
number is: home: [redacted]
office: [redacted]

Dear my teacher!

Have a good time with your
family in Korea.

I would have been willing to stay in Daegu for a long time but Soonja asked if we could transfer and see Europe. That was OK with me. Our request for a transfer to the ED was granted and we would soon be on our way to Europe.

Transferring to Europe

By this time, the old car was really getting on in age and showed it. There was some serious rust. The military in Korea required vehicles entering the bases to look presentable. To continue to drive on the bases I had put white duct tape over most of the rust spots (the car was white, and it blended in).

We left Daegu in July of 1987, just prior to the Summer Olympics. We had accumulated a few possessions; some furniture, a few appliances, TV, VCR, household items, and the car. When we left, we gave most of the furniture to Soonja's parents, and hired a truck and driver to take the goods to their home in Buan.



Fortunately for us and for our very nice landlord, a new Maryland faculty member, John Watterson, had just arrived in Daegu. We met and made a deal. He would take over the apartment, and purchase everything we did not want or could not take with us, including the car, for one set price. This package deal really simplified life for John and for us. We later learned that after about nine months, the military

police at Camp Henry in Daegu finally told John he could no longer drive the old rust bucket on the base.

Transferring to the European Division was like changing employers completely and we returned to our “home of record” in Miami before departing for Germany. At the time, we were authorized to ship home 1000 pounds at government expense, and we took advantage of that. We purchased many pieces of beautiful Korean pottery and had a few pieces of furniture we had gotten from our landlord in Daegu. This was all shipped to Miami along with many photos. Unfortunately, many photos were destroyed and some of the items were seriously damaged in Hurricane Andrew.

One more Cultural experience

There is one more experience that I must relay here. Soonja is from a large farming family in Buan (see photos of house and family). She and a few of her sisters were eventually moved to Seoul where they could attend better schools. When we met, her parents and younger siblings still lived in their traditional Korean house. On my first visit there I was to learn that they did not have indoor plumbing. The “facilities” were in a stall in an outbuilding. My first trip there gave me quite a surprise. I was standing there taking care of business when there was a very loud **mooooh** sound in a stall next to me. It scared me to whatever and caused a bit of a mess. Of course, the family cow was in that stall. Soonja really doesn't like me to tell this story. Photos below are of my new family and their house in Buan in 1986.





And so, It had taken me about 30 years after I met that young girl from Japan, and 25 years after my army tour, to finally get to Japan and Korea. It was well worth the wait as it set the pattern for the rest of my life.

Thanks again, Lois Mohr and Vida Bandis for giving me the opportunity to realize one of my dreams and to meet the woman I would be married to for a very long time.



Asian Division, 1985-1987 (Guam and Korea)

European Division, 1987-2013 (Germany, Spain, Belgium, Italy, United Arab Emirates)