

The UMUC Assignment That Finally Made Me Feel That I Was Halfway Round the World: Kunsan, South Korea

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When I arrived in Japan in September, 1972 after five years of intense graduate study at Ohio University, I had never been west of the Mississippi River. I could hardly contain my excitement as I strode into the UMUC offices in Fuchu, Tokyo to meet the Director of the Far East Division, Joseph Mabbett, and the rest of UMUC staff. I was surprised when Dr. Mabbett awarded me what he called "a plum assignment": three English courses to be taught right at Fuchu Air Station. I would not have to travel again for two full months. I enjoyed teaching the classes and spent most of my free time absorbing Japanese culture and exploring the delights of Japan's famed capital city. After a few weeks, however, metropolitan Tokyo began to remind me of New York City. In many ways the glittering Ginza was similar to the bright lights of Times Square. The Viet Nam War that still dominated the news seemed worlds away. Somehow, deep down, I felt that I had not yet really experienced the mysteries of what was then called "The Far East" on the other side of the world.

That feeling changed abruptly eight weeks later. My Term Two assignment could not have been more different from the one I had just completed. For November-December I was assigned to a remote military base in eastern South Korea on the Yellow Sea less than a day's drive from the demilitarized zone at the 38th parallel. It was Kunsan Air Force Base, home of the 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing, adjacent to the small town of Gunsan (yes, with a "G"). Kunsan AFB was loaded with F-4 Phantom Jet fighter-bombers, large air-rescue helicopters, dozens of high caliber anti-aircraft guns all pointed north, and even several camouflaged nuclear storage dumps. The entire coastline to the east of the base, I later learned, was mined. As a change of pace from the grimness of all the military hardware, I was duly amused when I first saw this sign just outside the front door of base headquarters:

KUNSAN BASE OPERATIONS THE RIVIERA OF KOREA ELEVATION: 32 FEET

I was the only UMUC lecturer assigned to Kunsan AFB that term. After a briefing at the Education Center, I was told that I would be housed in a two-bedroom hooch complete with a housekeeper whose main job, it seemed, was to see to it that I and my roommate were comfortable. My roommate was an F-4 fighter pilot named Gary who, I eventually found out, had several kills in dogfights over Hanoi. Gary was on R&R at Kunsan and didn't say much. Most of the time he was sullen, brooding, and neat to the point of being fastidious. Frankly, he gave me the creeps. We slowly got to know each other, however, and the initial tension eased. We usually had breakfast together in the hooch. Neither of us could help but notice that our faithful housekeeper who was always hovering about nearby often had nothing to do. To make things easier, every so often during breakfast when the housekeeper wasn't looking one of us would spill some cereal on the kitchen floor. We grinned broadly as we watched her happily clean up each spill.

One morning when I had just returned to the hooch after a long jog, Gary asked me what I had been doing. I said that I was jogging. I'll never forget his retort: He said, "Bruce, to me jogging is like practicing bleeding."

My English 101 classes were routine, but there was one student named Whitt whom I will always remember. He was an Air Force major from Alabama who joined the military right out of high school. Whitt was an attentive student who never missed a class and eventually earned a gentleman's "C." More importantly Whitt wanted to be my friend. He had been on Kunsan AFB for quite a while and knew his way around both the Base and the adjacent town. After the second week of classes he offered to give me a tour of the area in his jeep. I jumped at the chance. The first thing we did was to carefully drive down a bumpy dirt road along the coast. Whitt took pleasure in pointing out the endless rows of minefields clearly visible between the road and the Yellow Sea.

The following weekend we explored the town of Gunsan. It was absolutely primitive compared to the high-tech urban sprawl of greater Tokyo. Many of the streets were unpaved and some had traces of raw sewage. We passed at least half a dozen oxcarts hauling huge mounds of freshly harvested cabbage on their way to the local kimchi factory. The Kunsan Officer's Club, which welcomed UMUC lecturers, always had kimchi on the menu. South Korean Kimchi came with varying degrees of spices. Many liked it mild, but some liked it hot.

Early in December a heavy snow began to fall. One evening amid the snowflakes Whitt told me that he had a surprise. He drove me to a small village a few miles outside the base. This strange place featured row after row of tiny houses constructed mainly of plywood and corrugated tin. To enter the village, we had to pass through an arch that read, WELCOME TO OKKU SILVER TOWN. I soon discovered that the population of SILVER TOWN consisted almost entirely of prostitutes and their handlers. It had been built mainly for the entertainment of Kunsan Air Force Base personnel. Every weekend, caravans of cars, motorcycles and bicycles made their way to SILVER TOWN. Suffice it to say that more than once Whitt and I were part of one of those caravans.

For the next four years following my term at Kunsan, I taught on many remote bases in Thailand, Taiwan, Okinawa, and Turkey. Between terms and during Christmas breaks I took side trips to dozens of world-famous destinations that I had wanted to visit all my life. These included Egypt where I was in awe of the massiveness of the great pyramids at Giza, to India where I marvelled at the delicate beauty of the Taj Mahal, and to Nepal where I trekked in the foothills of the Himalayas. All of these Asian memories and many more have lasted a lifetime, but I will always have a special place in my heart for my winter term in Kunsan where I finally felt that I had made it to the other side of the world. Furthermore, to this day I cannot pass a Korean restaurant without ordering kimchi (medium hot).