

## My Time with UMUC/UMGC

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I joined UMUC's overseas program in the fall of 2015. This was an interesting time to be heading abroad, as it was the start of the 2016 election season. Since I teach history, government and some film classes, one of my first recollections before new faculty orientation was watching a GOP debate from Yokota Air Base in Japan.

As I travelled to teaching locations around Asia, I put my academic skills to use outside the classroom. On Okinawa, I walked some of the battlefields of the last major land campaign of World War II. I knew little of the Ryukyu kingdom prior to living on Okinawa. Teaching there helped me educate myself. This knowledge was later applied to several classes I taught on 20<sup>th</sup> century history. I was also able to revamp a couple of possible field study trips to enrich later Maryland classes. Finally, another historian (Michelle Fukuyama who also works in student services) and I combined our skills to co-write an article on the History of the Ryukyus (based on the field study work). It eventually became a chapter in a book on using travel to enrich the classroom.

My second assignment took me to Seoul and its environs. Imagine departing from a balmy 72 degrees on Okinawa and getting off the plane a few hours later to a brisk 20 in Seoul! It was quite a shift. Combined with the tensions of the area, this was a tour that I looked forward to but also felt some trepidation. I had agreed to teach anywhere in Asia, and now I was headed to Camp Bonifas, abutting the DMZ. I asked my then boss Andy Boone if anyone had ever taught up there, and he thought someone had but, it had been a long time previously. This special class was one I am proud of, and I was given a commemorative award by the base commander for my services.

One of the best aspects of the job was reaching the right place at the right time to augment my own education while teaching. I could visit places I read about in history texts. For example, I saw where Commodore Perry set foot in Japan in 1853 (leading to the 1854 treaty opening the country). I visited the Imperial Palace grounds in Tokyo as well as the Imperial Bunker and Imperial Academy at what is now Camp Zama. And walked the actual Hacksaw Ridge on Okinawa, seeing what Hollywood did right and what it did poorly. This visit took place during a staff tour with base historians and Green Berets from the detachment at Torii Station, which added another element to my understanding of the military history of the battle.

This year, 2020, marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Korean War. Being in the region might have offered some direct historical connections for my teaching had it not been for COVID. With restrictions placed on all travel,

however, my plans have been shelved. Still the shutdown has offered a variety of new connections. For example, I have written for various base publications, building relationships with the local public affairs officers to raise the image of UMGC. I have also been quoted in *Stars and Stripes* and interviewed for an article about WW I cartoons marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1918 armistice. I was quoted along with fellow historian Dave Harmon concerning our views of WW II on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its end. With the switch to Zoom teaching, I wrote an article on the challenges of the medium for *Stripes*.

Finally, I have started to collect items reflecting the pandemic: from challenge coins to unit patches altered to show masks, social distancing, and other quips on the virus. In all, the COVID meltdown has offered a unique perspective on the year.

Colleagues in the U.S. often ask how our students, active military personnel, stand up against their civilian peers Stateside. I have seen good students in all realms and poor students as well. For my military students here in Asia, I find that they have a little more drive, and I encourage them to take full advantage of it. I have taught in all manner of schools: public universities, private universities, proprietary schools, and community colleges, and I tell my students that if they were studying Stateside they would have at least 30 students in an intro history class, often many more. The size of our classes is comparable to graduate seminars. I ask students to pick my brain as they would not have this sort of access in typical undergraduate classes at home.

Within the military branches, you see the usual friendly rivalry and service comparisons. As a GENERAL rule, I find Air Force students to be the most capable in terms of education. The Army and Navy have some issues with skill levels, and their operational demands seem to make learning a bit more challenging. Marines are the most contradictory in my observations. They often come in with the lowest overall levels of educational “polish”. Hands down, however, I find them to be the most engaged in class. They are aware that they have been given an opportunity, and they seize it. Two of the best classes I have ever taught have been at Marine posts on Okinawa. One was a HIST 156 (US History to 1865) class taught as an intersession. The class had been pitched to me as a way to help the students as well as keep them out of trouble over the holidays. I had to bring in everything for class: computer, whiteboard, projector, and all materials as I was teaching in the squad bay at a Marine barracks on Futenma. The students were stellar, ably balancing their own work on helicopters with their class participation and homework.

The second class engaged a rotational unit at Camp Schwab. These Marines were from a “combat outfit” temporarily there for jungle training. Again, it was a small class, accelerated to accommodate their training schedule. I had a couple of first-time students in the class, and also a mid-career sergeant and his boss, a Master Gunnery Sergeant. The latter was very aware of his “lack” of education. Perhaps having one’s superior as a classmate was an added driver to the others. In any case, they all asked searching questions, wrote thoughtful answers on essay

exams, and did not waste their higher education opportunities. Again, they met the challenge and wanted to prove themselves.

Individual students have also remained in contact with me over my years in Asia. I am proud when one contacts me to simply say hello. Those who seek out my thoughts also make an impact on me. It lets me realize that I made a difference to them. I remind all my students on day one that I learn from them as much as they learn from me. One seemingly simple question may spark a different perspective towards a historical event. It all has impact.

I have been privileged to hold this faculty position. While it has not been easy, and there have been MANY sacrifices (my wife's career has effectively ended), this job has allowed us to see the world in a different light.