

Getting Out of Dodge

Dennis Gwynn
February 2024

In the numerous well written personal accounts written here, with one exception, scant attention has been given to the perilous and explosive political situation of the 1994 Koreans.

It was September 1993 when one student explained that he was in a position to know that the North Koreans were thought to have two or three atomic bombs and that they made Scud missiles.

Although I loved my work there was no pressing need to stay. I had no need for my salary. I considered the situation for two days and resigned effective as soon as a replacement could be found to teach Geology and Biology. I departed Korea with my new wife Kwang that December. When our airplane landed at Yokota my relief was immense. I'm willing to risk bombs and bullets but not nukes.

I principally worked on Osan Air Base, home to the command-and-control bunker built into the ground with thick nuclear bomb resistant walls. It was called the "tree house" for comic book trees painted on the exposed side of the bunker. I lived and worked protected by 9-inch-thick hollow block walls about 1000 feet from what presumably would be ground zero. I did not paint trees my walls to disguise my apartment.

Our only information was rumors. We heard that the state department workers were told to be packed and ready on 10-hour notice to depart Korea. We were told nothing. So much for our anticipated well-being. The government takes care of its own, starting at the top. The USA Ambassador made arrangements to move his family to safety out of Korea. Maryland administration was safe in Japan.

Fatalistic, Maryland did almost nothing but truly there was little that could be done. We heard that Caucasians were not being assigned north of Seoul, but Seoul is not far from the border. Anyone in Chusok traffic knows that movement can be impossible. Traffic was even worse when the nation, when the nation's air raid sirens accidentally sounded at the wrong time. Roads including the Suwon freeway runway would be totally useless. The only escape was to get out of Dodge early.

In the 1950's Osan airbase housed Mace cruise missiles with nuclear warheads. They were fueled, armed and ready to hit North Korea. They were inaccurate but hitting right on target was not a problem for an atomic warhead. The orders were to fire their cruise missiles and to head south with great expediency.

In the 50's, roads were dirt and in wet weather vehicles would bog down in mud. In any decade, they would be jammed with a sea of Koreans fleeing south. Some of the bridges would collapse from the weight of tanks others were demolished to slow the invading North Korean army. Walking was the only reliable travel. Escape would be slow at best. Other than having roads with less mud, it was no different in the 1990's. Koreans would panic, and Korean bridges still fell down.

In the 1960's some missiles in Okinawa were hidden in nicely disguised tubes about 50 feet long and 30 feet across aimed at China. Those I was in had no massive blast doors but the slot for the launch rail remained in the floor. The concrete tube had no salvage value and remained when I saw them. In Korea, the missiles were out in the open and in the 1960's they were aimed north.

"During the Cuban crisis in 1962 it was believed that war with the USSR and China Russia was imminent, so servicemen vied to be the one to push the button sending those Mace nuclear missiles to China."*

In the early 1980's, a few miles east of Korea's Osan air base, big red chubby missiles aimed west toward Koni range on their hilltop launch rails were visible. There was a derelict bar district at the base of the ridge and when I returned months later looking for new places for Maryland to teach, the Missiles and rails were gone. Too bulky to be capable of intercepting targets. They appeared to be the same kind of missiles that were on Okinawa except that these were in the open without protection, were painted bright red and looked much shorter. The old missiles were now target drones. That explained why they appeared fat and short, the front section contained guidance and the nuclear warhead. It appeared that much of the fuel tank was also removed so that an errant target missile would never cross the east China Sea reaching China to start a war.

Change was in the air; we no longer saw China as an enemy. In Canton a man told me, "We are your friends." It was thought by some that China, if unprovoked, would not have joined the USSR in war against us if we attacked Russia in 1962. You can see how "itchy trigger fingers" by our missile troops in Okinawa and Korea would have been disastrous.

I left Korea in December 1993. In March 1994 a student wrote that Patriot missiles had been installed on Suwon Airbase. They were a dozen miles north of Osan in position to protect what was at Osan Airbase. My student had given a timely warning.

The most authoritative history of the crisis is the book, *A Moment of Crisis: Jimmy Carter, the Power of a Peacemaker, and North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions* written by Marion Creekmore, Jr. in 2006. Material quoted from Creekmore is indented and italicized below. The rest is from my memory.

In April 1994, North Korea began removing plutonium fuel rods from their old Soviet era reactors without UN supervision. Refueling their reactors would give them the chance to divert plutonium to their military stockpile.

Washington faced a crisis. Clinton's advisers thought that North Korea had enough plutonium for a "handful" of 10-kiloton bombs. If the defueling proceeded, Kim IL Sung could quickly double his nuclear stockpile. When the threat of economic sanctions did nothing to stop the refueling, Clinton asked his generals to urgently review plans for invading North Korea. Four-hundred-thousand troops would be deployed.

Kim stated that deployment of more US troops would be enough reason to attack South Korea. US officials worried that Kim would launch a preemptive attack on South Korea. In late April and May the US quietly deployed more combat troops to South Korea. Attack helicopters and Patriot missile batteries we sent also.

A friend wrote it was good that I left as that Patriot missiles had been installed at Suwon. It was serious.

Clinton sent Billy Graham as an envoy to North Korea but, {predictably, it did not help}. He considered sending Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, but they were rejected by North Korea. As Clinton had no way to negotiate with Kim, he settled on sending Jimmy Carter to North Korea.

David Brinkley and Don Oberdorfer both saw that Seoul was in a war emergency condition. Emergency supplies were scarce, the Koreans had bought nearly all of the candles, rice and ramen. They were doing what they could to build bomb shelters. Bathtubs were full of stored water. The Korean stock market fell 25% in two days.

Maryland stayed, some were ignorant of the danger or fatalists, others were simply too poor to leave. The image of desperate Koreans fleeing Seoul over the demolished Han river bridge was burned into my memory.**

South Korean President Kim Young Sam asked Carter to give Kim IL Sung his letter proposing bilateral talks.

Creekmore found that the first dinner meeting did not go well and described how Carter proposed a toast to nuclear inspections and the North Korean foreign minister reacted with a hostile toast.

According to Creekmore, it looked so bad after the meeting that Carter felt that only personal intervention by Clinton would work. Fortunately, there was a river cruise for Jimmy Carter, Kim IL Sung and their wives. Kim was agreeable saying that he was unaware that UN inspection personnel had been excluded from the refueling process, but they could return. When Carter offered new light water reactors (that produced no plutonium) in exchange for his old soviet reactors (Which produced lots of plutonium) Kim happily agreed. It helped that Mrs. Kim endorsed Carter's terms. Kim's aides tried to renege on Kim's verbal agreements as the agreement was being put in writing, but they were overcome.

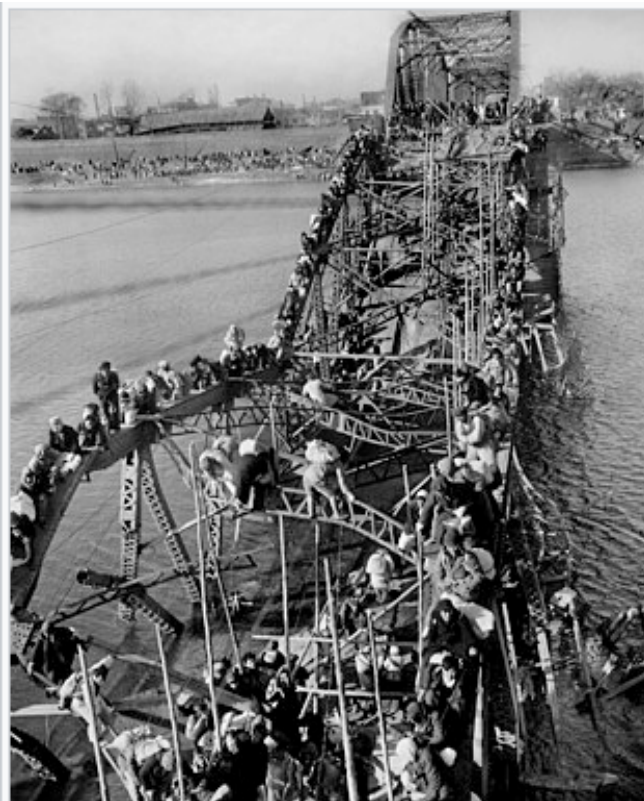
Creekmore concluded that Carter may have been the only one who could accomplish the mission, but Clinton and his staff were quite unhappy that Carter had acted on his own and was the man of the hour before international television cameras.

Clinton was not grateful, his associates were not grateful, they did not even want to meet afterward with Carter in Washington DC.

War would have been a tragic mistake, bad for both Koreas, bad for the USA and lethal for Maryland people in Korea. The agreement was a win for everyone except for Bill Clinton who, deservedly, was not in the limelight. War had been avoided.

*First-hand accounts of missile troops in Korea and Okinawa, were published on their squadron websites. They are, as far as I can tell, no longer available.

**Frantic South Koreans fleeing Seoul over demolished Han river bridge.



Flight of Refugees Across Wrecked Bridge in Korea, Pulitzer Prize-winning photo by Associated Press photographer Max Desfor