

A Few Snippets of My Maryland Days

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Marylanders have many memories—some about travel, some about students, some about living arrangements. Sometimes those memories are only a snippet of an event, but they often say a lot in a few words. As I mentioned in my memoir of North Koreans in my backyard across from Camp Pelham in 1992, I have served with Maryland for three “tours.” I offer to you here a snippet from each of those tours. I remember them fondly and can still visualize them as if they happened yesterday.

During Term 2, 1981, at Atsugi Naval Air Facility, Japan, I taught a class of about twenty students ranging from sailors to wives of sailors to officers’ children. I do not remember their names, but one of them was an 18-year-old male student who was an officer’s son. He brought M&Ms to every class. I never paid attention to his usual habit as I figured that as class met from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. he was merely hungry. Suddenly, one day, he dumped all the M&Ms on the Captain’s conference table that we had been privileged to use for our class, and separated out all the green M&Ms. I could not help but stop my lecture and ask him why he was segregating the green ones. He simply said that they “tasted funny.” Everyone in class laughed and he gave the unwanted candy to those willing to take a chance on the green M&Ms. The class ended in December and he and his family moved to a base in Italy. Several months later I received a message from someone who had been in the class telling me that the young man had been killed in a car accident near Rome. I remember him every time I eat green M&Ms.

During Term 3, 1988, at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, in addition to teaching U.S. history, I taught a great class listed as EDUC 108 University Study Skills. The name of the course varied with the year and the base, but it proved to be a truly terrific class for those who had little experience in university level classes or needed a refresher of their study skills. My last assignment in the course was for each student to give a five-minute presentation about anything they wanted to talk about. The talk needed a thesis statement and evidence to support their presentation. One of the last presentations was by a woman who had been in the U.S. Air Force for over twenty years and was getting ready to retire. She told the class about her time in bootcamp two decades previously. She was animated and gave wonderful examples of support for her thesis, such as explaining that her drill sergeant at bootcamp made the recruits fold their t-shirts into six-inch squares. She concluded by saying that the regimented nature of bootcamp days helped her succeed throughout her Air Force years. At the end of her presentation, I asked her why the t-shirts had to be in six-inch squares. I found that incredibly amusing and I could not stop laughing. Others laughed as well because they either felt empathy for her or they were laughing at my naivete. She readily answered my question, giggling as she did so, explaining that the purpose of bootcamp was to teach recruits to listen without questioning their superiors as the military needed its members to react immediately when told to do X or Y. I had never thought of that as I figured that the t-shirts should just be folded neatly and that would be good enough. Her explanation made sense and she taught me a great lesson that day.

During Term 4, 1992, at Camp Pelham, South Korea, as I was teaching the first half of the U.S. history series, a student came in late. He was a tall, gentle man, who

always had something nice to say to everyone. He was married to a local Korean woman who ran a brothel in town and was at least ten or twelve years older than he was. On the night in question, he slipped quietly into class with an M16 on his shoulder, sat down, and laid the rifle on the floor with the barrel pointed towards me. He quickly opened his notebook and started to take notes. Everyone in the class just stared at him. I had never been that close to an M16 before and was not thrilled with it being pointed at me even though it was on the floor. I did not say a word about it and continued with my lecture. At the break, the entire class of about twelve soldiers, surrounded him, and berated him for bringing the rifle into the room. He was stunned by their response, but got up, took the M16, and left the room leaving his notebook behind. In about ten minutes he came back to class, sat down, and continued to take notes, just as if nothing had occurred moments before. He had not brought the weapon to class to threaten me. His only concern was that he was late for class. He apologized to me at the end of the evening. I can still see the rifle lying on the classroom floor. We were stationed only a few kilometers from the DMZ, so bringing the rifle to class made sense in some respects.

Teaching for the University of Maryland—Asian Division offered all sorts of wonderful opportunities to lecturers. We could experience Korean, Japanese, or Chamorro (Guamanian) cultures and meet people from around the world. Sometimes, though, the experiences in our classes proved to be the most enlightening and longest lasting.