

Walking Home One Night from Class in the Western Corridor

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In August 1981, my adventures teaching for the University of Maryland-Far East Division began. I still have a few of the folders with the old name of the University on them. Eventually, I had three “tours” in the newly named Asian Division, 1981-1984, 1987-1991, and 1992-1993. My first assignment was at Atsugi Naval Air Facility, Japan, and my last, in 1993, was at Camp Casey, South Korea. Like most Marylanders, I taught dozens of classes at dozens of bases in Japan, Korea, Okinawa, Guam, and Kwajalein. Also, like most Marylanders, I have many stories to tell.

Some of the best tales came during my last tour, from January 1992 to May 1993, when I was initially sent to the Western Corridor north of Seoul. I was the only Marylander in the area. I lived in a “mother-in-law” apartment off-base in the middle of a rice field. It was a nice place and even came with two dogs.

From January to July 1992, I taught American history at Camp Pelham, Camp Garry Owen, Camp Howze, and a few other tiny bases. The village outside Camp Pelham was small; it included numerous bars and brothels and little else. There were two American women on base, the woman who ran the recreation center and me. She and I rarely interacted because our schedules conflicted. As a result, the only people I talked to were the soldiers. I never saw another Marylander, unless there was the rare meeting at Yongsan or I went to Camp Casey and ran into a fellow Lecturer at the military bus terminal, PX, or Commissary. I learned to take the Korean buses between bases or the military bus if it fit my schedule. My class enrollments were relatively

small, but my students attended every class except when classes were pre-empted by military exercises in the Western Corridor. We had exam review sessions for every exam at the Enlisted Club over pizza and beer. Because of their perfect attendance, the soldier-students did well on their exams, and I saw continued improvement in their academic performance. Several of them went on to earn bachelor's degrees and one was accepted to Officer Training School, even without his degree.

I taught at Pelham two nights a week, and after class a Staff Sergeant friend always made me dinner in his barracks room, the only room with a stove in it. With several upper-level enlisted soldiers, we ate, played cards, and chatted. Then he would walk me home to my apartment in the rice fields. One night when I arrived at his room for dinner, the meal was already cooked, a rare occurrence. He said to me, "You need to eat quickly and go home. Go straight home." I was surprised at his serious tone. He said he could not walk me home, also a rare event. Walking home should not have been a problem as the village was safe, or so I thought.

When I left his barracks, I went directly to the main gate and the Korean and American guards said practically the same thing that my friend said: "Diana, go home, go straight home." Now, I was beginning to wonder what was going on. The guards wore side arms which was unusual, and I discovered that they knew my name. I said, "Okay" and started my five-minute walk up a dirt road.

About half way home, two seemingly tipsy Korean men walked towards me. I did not recognize them as men from the community, but we exchanged greetings and continued our journeys. Meeting the men was unusual as only the family who lived in the house I rented the apartment from and a very poor family who lived in a tarpaper

shack lived along that road. In the distance, I could see my house as the porch light was on. Another minute passed on my walk when suddenly from the right side of the road came the sounds of “military metal” and then complete silence. I hesitated briefly and then noticed the two dogs who lived at my house were as stiff as statues as they watched me come up the road. They did not run to greet me as they normally did. By this time, I was uncomfortable with the situation, although I did not understand precisely what was going on at that moment. I finally arrived at my door. I noticed that all the lights in the owner’s side of the house were turned off and the curtains were drawn shut. I pulled out my house key but could not get it in the lock. I felt like I was in an Alfred Hitchcock movie. Finally, I unlocked the two doors and remembered to take off my shoes before entering the kitchen. I stood in the dark for about five minutes and finally decided that if the noise I heard was from a North Korean recon unit they could capture me in a second if they wanted to do so. I turned on the lights, took my shower, and went to bed.

The next morning, I awoke early, dressed, and immediately went to the base to find out what had transpired the previous night. As soon as I arrived at the main gate, the guards (different ones from earlier), looked at me and said: “Oh, Diana, you’re okay. Please go to Sgt. D’s quarters. He will meet you there shortly.” I did as they instructed. My friend arrived about two minutes after I got to his room. It turned out that it was a North Korean recon group that I passed on my way home the night before. I asked him why I was told to leave the base and why I was unable to stay at the Visiting Officers’ Quarters or even on the couch at the Rec Center which had closed early that night. He told me that the North Koreans were aware of my presence and knew that I

returned to my apartment nightly, so for me to change the routine would tell them that their presence had been detected. That ended the explanation. I never heard another word about it.

Was the story my Sergeant friend told me true? I do not know, but I can say that the behavior of the men at Camp Pelham was extraordinarily kind and concerned about my welfare. During the night under discussion, I saw weapons displayed that I had never seen before and discovered that everyone knew my name. Today, this has become a story I have told many times and I can still see every second of the journey to my apartment. I must admit going home that night was a lot more interesting than what I experienced on other bases where I taught at the on-base Education Center and walked back to my BOQ without giving a thought to anything around me. Ultimately, this adventure was simply part of the Maryland experience and each Marylander has similar tales, I am sure. If nothing else, it taught me to pay attention to where I am and to learn the people from my community.