

## Free Fallin'

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The Chinese Year of the Snake, 1989, left me with a string of indelible memories. But it wasn't the big events of those twelve calamitous months—the Exxon Valdez oil spill; the Tiananmen Square massacre; the fall of the Berlin Wall—that stood out. It was far more personal, and it all began in early August, when my plane swooped in for a landing at Yokota Air Force base. I was plugged into my Sony Walkman, listening to Tom Petty's new album, *Full Moon Fever*. But little did I know that the first song, "Free Fallin'", would become the soundtrack of my life in Japan for the next five months.

Not only was it the Year of the Snake; it was also the year of meteorological catastrophes. According to the Joint Typhoon Warning Center (JTWC), more than 32 tropical storms, including 20 typhoons, raged across the Western Pacific. More than 3,200 people were killed in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, Vietnam, Okinawa, and the Philippines. And one of the worst, Super Typhoon Gordon, packing 160 mile per hour winds, struck hard in mid-July on Luzon, home to Clark Air Force Base.

With the Cold War slowly ending, operations at the base had begun scaling back in the late 1980s. But that accelerated with Typhoon Gordon, and one of the consequences was the evacuation of hundreds of U.S. military personnel and their families to bases across the Pacific. And that included Yokota. Unfortunately, as a non-military GS-13 equivalent, I found myself caught up in a severe housing shortage.

For the fall term, I'd been assigned three classes—two at Yokota and one at the U.S. embassy in Tokyo. During my orientation, I'd lived in one of the Bachelor Officer Quarters (BOQs). Pretty comfortable digs. But when the orientation ended, the only places available were Visiting Officer Quarters (VOQs). During my first week of teaching, I shared a variety of rooms with lots of different people. One night it was a Navy officer who was being re-assigned to the Mediterranean. The next night, I found myself in a different room, with a different roommate—a civilian who worked in intelligence. When I asked what he did, he replied— somewhat jokingly— "If I told you, I'd have to kill you!"

Two days later, after my train ride back from the embassy, I walked in to yet a different room and discovered a guy with a thick Garibaldi beard and shoulder length hair sitting on his bed skimming through a magazine. He looked a little like Billy Gibbons, the guitarist from the Texas band, ZZ Top. In fact, he was a musician, from Texas, and played in a blues band that was touring U.S. bases in Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Guam. "It's kind of a weird gig," he said.

Those kinds of surprises went on for a couple more weeks until one day I learned there were no more VOQs available. There was simply no place for me to live. I felt out of balance, shlepping my bags from one class to another, loaded down with textbooks, lecture notes, stacks of ungraded papers, and most of my personal belongings. Fortunately, somebody at the Education Center managed to score me a room at the Hardy Barracks in the Roppongi district in downtown Tokyo. Despite the long trek back to Yokota, it was a relief to have a place of my own. The rooms were separated from one another by a shared bathroom, which were designed

for private use. The Hardy Barracks, built in 1935, were originally the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regimental Barracks of the Imperial Japanese Army. After World War II, the Hardy Barracks became the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Central Command Center and Billeting Office. In the early 1960s it was returned to Japan and was renamed the University of Tokyo Institute of Industrial Science. In 1964, a new Hardy Barracks transient billet was built. By the early 1980s, the so-called “New” Historic Hardy Barracks became a U.S. Army lodging billet.

Unfortunately, my time at the Hardy Barracks was short lived. Active-duty military personnel had reserved all the rooms, and sometime in mid-September, about halfway into the term, I was out of options: no VOQs, no BOQs, no Hardy Barracks. It was pretty depressing: grading papers on the train, writing lecture notes at the base library, stashing my clothes in a locker at the gym, I felt scattered, disorganized, detached, and like the refrain from Petty’s song, “Now I’m free fallin’/Yeah, I’m free fallin’”, it seemed like I’d fallen through the cracks with nowhere to go, nowhere to hang my hat.

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Fortunately, and despite everything else, my classes were going well that fall. I liked my students, especially the ones at the U.S. embassy, the MSGs—the Marine Security Guards. There were twelve in the class, highly motivated and full of colorful stories. Class met twice a week at night, and after I walked into the compound, I typically found a bunch of them waiting for me in the lounge, watching Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* with their Japanese girlfriends. Most of them had grown up in small Southern and Midwestern towns. But during their years in the Marines, they’d served at embassies around the world—Moscow, Buenos Aires, Kuala Lumpur—and met dozens of world leaders. One of them had amassed an impressive collection of wooden African tribal statues hand carved from ebony, olive, and Zebra wood.

During that fall term, the American ambassador, Michael Armacost, and the MSGs hosted parties for several dignitaries including Ronald Reagan, Dan Quail, and Caspar Weinberger. On several occasions the MSGs invited me to attend, but I always passed. Except for one time. That’s when they held a huge food fest for that year’s Sumo wrestling champions on the embassy roof. I couldn’t resist. And what a sight that was: Those enormous Japanese athletes dressed in seta sandals, split-toed tabi socks, colorful kimonos, formal hakataori sashes, and their long hair piled up in *chonmage*, their formal topknot coiffures.

I barely recognized the Marines—who’d always come to class in jeans, t-shirts, and gym shoes—wearing their most formal attire: dress blue jackets trimmed with red piping, white belts with gold buckles, white dress caps, and spit shine black shoes. Foodwise, it was a high protein feast of beef barbecue and sushi. A strange but unforgettable night.

Another memorable moment happened several weeks later in early December. When I arrived at the embassy, about half the class were in a waiting room dressed in full combat gear including their M-16s. They’d been called up for Operation Just Cause, the U.S. invasion of Panama that ultimately led to the surrender of Manuel Antonio Noriega, the country’s notorious drug dealer, money launderer, and de facto leader. There was a feeling of gloom in the class that night. But not from the Marines slated to fly off to Central America; they were psyched, ready for some real combat. What they were really trained to do. Rather, it was the group left behind at the embassy—the ones stuck with ceremonial duties and yet another night of English Comp 101. It was a bit of a struggle to get through the next couple of weeks.

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Following my orientation at Yokota in August, I was left with the impression that the folks working in the main office expected us to be independent and resourceful. They didn't suffer fools or tolerate whiners. Teaching in the Asian Division was clearly not the same as a stateside faculty position, so we needed to be a lot more flexible, especially because of our affiliation with the Department of Defense (DOD) and the countries we'd be working in. And that was understandable. Compared to some of the adversities that previous faculty members endured—especially in the early years during the Vietnam War—any difficulties we might encounter would seem pretty tame.

Nevertheless, after a month of dragging myself day after day from the Hardy Barracks to one VOQ after another, I was pretty miserable. In desperation I went to see Julian Jones, the Asian Division Director, and told him what I was going through. I was afraid he was going to tell me it was a problem I needed to figure out on my own. But I was wrong. He told me that in all the years he'd been with Maryland, he'd never seen this big of a housing crunch. He said he'd see what he could do. Later that day, he offered a temporary solution: a married couple who worked for the Division were heading off to Southeast Asia for a couple of weeks, and they offered me their house while they were gone. What a gift! I was elated.

The house was big—certainly by Japanese standards—with a lovely garden and lots of amenities like a full kitchen, sound system, TV, and comfortable furnishings. I even had a bicycle, which made trips to the train station really easy. It was a truly wonderful time, and I was able to get caught up on my work. Of course, those two weeks went by pretty fast. But once again, thanks to Jones, I lucked out. Another professor, who had a permanent BOQ at Yokota, was being sent to Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands in the South Pacific for a temporary teaching assignment (TDY). I was instructed to quietly pick up the key and move in. I soon learned that because of so many DOD “Catch 22s” it was best to keep quiet about my living arrangements. I did. (Years later, when Bill Clinton became president, I was well aware of the policies that prescribed his “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” solution to dealing with gays in the military.)

I lived in that BOQ for the rest of the fall term, right up until I was transferred to Camp Carroll in Waegwan, South Korea. It was a great way to end those two fall terms in Japan. I was even able to spend a few weeks with my 11-year-old son, who'd flown over from Ohio. And over the break, from mid-December to mid-January, I experienced a more joyful form of free falling. The two of us flew to Guam and spent a few terrific weeks parasailing, snorkeling the reef, kayaking the bay, and traveling around the island. More than 30 years later, I still have my son's base pass—his cute black and white photo, his measurements, (5'1”, 90 lbs.)—as a memento from that strange and wonderful period of my life.