

Korea: A Change for the Better

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I began teaching for UMUC Term 5 in 1990. I taught English and American Government in Kunsan, South Korea that term and then for Terms 1 and 2. At Christmas, I went back to America to visit. I wound in the hospital for almost a week with pneumonia. While cleaning out some old papers last year, I found the hospital release form from that stay. The doctor had written "Patient insists on travelling to Seattle on Tuesday and then on to Korea to teach. Have strongly advised him against it." But I went. And more importantly, I'm still here to tell the tale. And the tale herein told is some backstory on how the Field Representative Coordinator position was instituted in Korea in 1991.

I taught at Camp Page for Terms 3 and 4. When I arrived by bus, the sign in front of the base was a base affront to the sensibilities of any respectable English teacher. It read, "Camp Page. Soldier's of Action." Rarely has an English instructor felt so needed.

The first night I was there, I went to the mess hall and the sergeant in charge didn't want to serve me because I wasn't a service member. Begrudgingly, he said he would serve me that night, but would have to check the regulations to see if I could eat there in the future. When I went back the next night, he produced a piece of paper which was dated that day and signed by a senior officer that said civilians were not allowed to be served in the mess hall. I would be on my own for the next four months to forage for food. The reader will not be surprised to learn that Camp Page was not famous for its cuisine.

I may have been needed, but I didn't feel very wanted.

I lived in a Quonset hut those four months. It had a bed and blanket and a refrigerator and a comfortable chair to read in, as well as a small table where I could grade papers. I remember I was moving a bit slowly at first, but I didn't mention the pneumonia to any of the students until the end of the semester when I told one student I had become friendly with about it. He replied, "We

were worried about you at first. You just sat in front of the class the whole time and talked in a low voice. But after about two weeks you started walking around and bumping into things. So, then we figured you were OK.” I guess that sums up my condition at the time.

I taught Monday to Thursday at Page, and on Friday afternoon I would take a bus to Wonju, a couple of hours away, to teach class for 2 & ½ hours at Camp Long. Then I would spend the night in a hotel in town and teach the second part of the class for 2 & ½ hours on Saturday morning. I had to stay in a hotel because the field rep there said there were no accommodations for me on any base. The one time I spoke her, she wasn't very concerned about helping me get a place. This was before email, and I had to call a few times to get her on the phone. I learned later that her penchant for not being around much was a big part of the reason she got fired.

My routine was to take a taxi from the base to the bus terminal in Chuncheon to buy a bus ticket to Wonju. It was winter, so the windows were always closed and the heat was always high, so the bus was always suffused with the aroma generated by a few dozen people who had recently eaten Kimchi, supplemented by the passengers eating salted dry fish on a stick. The aroma was --- well, unmistakably Korean. In Wonju I would check into the hotel first and then go to a small camp (I think it was Camp Eagle) and eat small PRE cooked and PRE wrapped burgers. I capitalize “pre” because it was obvious they had been cooked and wrapped a loooong time before. Like maybe just after the Incheon landing. From there I would take a bus to Camp Long to teach. I did this for the first three weeks of the term, and it all went well.

But Week Four was different. It was the Lunar New Year, which is a major three-day holiday in Korea. This was the third day, a Friday easing into the weekend. I had left early because I was told there would be a good deal of traffic. What I didn't factor in was all the snow on the mountain between Chuncheon and Wonju. As we came to a complete stop, I looked outside the window and could see cars trying to pass each other and getting stuck sideways in the snow. Traffic lanes disappeared. Order disappeared. Silent chaos outside the window. Everything came to a standstill and it stood still so long that inside the bus “suffused” morphed into “suffocating,” two words which share a common Latin

root not only with each other but also with the word suffer, and ergo insufferable. And insufferable it was.

When we finally got off the mountain and into town, I went straight to the hotel and was told they were “fully booked.” I tried to remind the people behind the desk that I was the charming American who had come the previous few weeks whom they seemed to like so much. They weren’t charmed. Or sympathetic. I left not knowing where I was going to stay.

By then it was dark. And cold. It was eight degrees. Fahrenheit, not Celsius. And I was running late and didn’t have enough time to stop for the Incheon burgers. I needed to take a bus straight to Camp Long to teach. I knew there was a hot dog stand on a hill close to the building where I taught. I hoped it was open. It was. I got a hot dog and a coffee that was piping hot and filled to the brim of a styrofoam cup that didn’t have a lid on it. Standing there with the hot dog in my right hand and the hot coffee in my left, I was shaking so much from the cold that the coffee spilled onto my left sneaker, and then seeped down the lace holes to burn my foot. It reeaally hurt. I dumped out half the coffee before I burned any other part parts, and then ate the hot dog and limped to class.

Naturally, I told the students what had happened. I was thinking as I did that Ralph Millis had told me when he interviewed me less than a year before when I was hired back at College Park that students are often a Maryland instructor’s best resource. I hoped he was right, and he was. During the break, a student told me that his friend was on some sort of duty that night in charge of a building on Camp Eagle, and he could probably get me a room to sleep in. There were no cellphones then for the student to call his friend, so he took me there after class, and his friend agreed to let me stay. As he took me to the room, he told me it wasn’t a great room. He got that right. It was a storage room in the basement with a cot and an army blanket. It wasn’t very warm, so I slept with my clothes on under the scratchy blanket. I didn’t have an alarm clock, so I hoped I would wake up in time to get to class. Luckily, I did.

The next week, the new Director of the Asian Division, Dr. Paula Harbecke, was scheduled to come to Seoul, and I made an appointment to see her. After my Saturday class, I went to Seoul and met her on Monday before taking the bus back to Camp Page. I told her about my adventures of the week before, and she was

not happy about it. In fact, I think she was more upset than I was. For me, it was old news and I could joke about it, but she took it very seriously. I liked her immediately. I got the impression that she cared about the people who worked for her, and she was going to do what was right by them.

A few days later, I found that I was right. I was notified by someone from Yongsan that I would have accommodations for the rest of the term on one of the bases in Wonju. It turns out that I should have had them all along, but the field rep didn't do her job. After that this little fiasco, she didn't have job. I'm a little unclear now exactly what the accommodations were. I think --- but I may be confusing it with the accommodations I had on a different occasion in Kwangju --- it was the place where I stayed which was a large, but rundown (which was OK with me) BOQ. I had to agree that when I left in the morning, I would wrap the key and a five-dollar bill in a napkin and leave it outside the door. Right in the hall. I thought this was a kind of nutty way to do it, but that is what the person in charge of the place wanted, so I did what I was told. There was never a problem.

Not long after that, Dr. Harbecke created the position of Field Rep Coordinator in Korea to oversee the field reps and to avoid the type of logistical problems that I, and I'm sure other faculty, experienced. It was an institutional change well worth instituting. The first person to hold the position was John Hutchinson. I only met John once. It was the end of Term 4 and I was moving to Osan. John drove Dr. Ed Davis, the new co-Area Director for Korea (Barbara Mintz was the other one), up to Camp Page so he could meet with the ESO. Ed's plan was to have John drive me to Osan, a few hours away, and he would take the take the train back to Yongsan. That's what we did.

It was a beautiful spring day and John drove me and all of my boxes throughout afternoon along scenic roads that he knew well. He was very knowledgeable about Korea. I knew right away he was a great choice for this newly created position right, and that in the future faculty members would be better off because of him. In 2003, UMUC instituted the Presidential Award for exemplary service to the university, and John was the first recipient from the Asian Division. I was in Okinawa at the time, and when I heard the news, I smiled and remembered that spring day more than ten years before when we drove through the beautiful Korean countryside.

I've read travel articles in which the author describes the place in question as being a "study in contrast." That's a trite phrase. (And part of the reason I don't read many travel articles.) Everyplace is a study in contrast. But I must admit that Korea back then was a blend of contrasts. Brutally cold winters and magnificent springs. A college instructor wrapping a key and a five-dollar bill in a napkin before he went to teach a class. The occasionally ditzy field rep who didn't do her job or the little napoleon (SIC) who wouldn't let you eat in "his" facility (that happened to me on other occasions too), contrasted by the people who made it work and made it worthwhile. People like John and Paula and Ed and the students who worried about you when you didn't look well in class and who would get you a storage room in a basement to sleep in when it was eight degrees outside.