

Be Prepared To Run

By Lucas Hoffman

Recent events in Korea look to re-open old wounds. The victory of preserving South Korean freedom has demanded 60 years of vigilance; the resolve of which is currently being tested under the highest tension. In July 2010, I arrived in Korea only a few months after the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan, which killed 46 South Korean seamen. Now the world's attention again focuses on the two Koreas, and events which lead us back to 'the brink of war.' In this case, time has changed things very little.

I found it eerie as we proceeded north along the Han River, towards the DMZ, that the banks were fortified with continuous and unending lengths of barbed wire, interspersed with guard towers. My naïve American thinking led to the supposition that maybe this was some military training ground...perhaps a high security prison...maybe even some weird idea of a wildlife preserve. After about 10 minutes I realized the obvious: these were defenses and fortifications against an invasion from North Korea.

The Demilitarized Zone is no historical park or quaint tourist destination; rather, it is the frontline of a still-brooding conflict. When I visited the Joint Security Area at Panmunjom, our military guides told us to be prepared to run for our buses if something were to 'happen.' The military



The American contingent at the War Memorial opening ceremony with the Republic of Korea's Minister of Patriots and Veterans Affairs Yang Kim

The 2010 Peace Camp For Youth travels to South Korea

would then cover our retreat and get us to safety. Those words were a bit shocking at the time that I heard them. And it wasn't that I didn't believe them; I think it was hard for me to wrap my head around the reality of the situation that is Korea.

I definitely was not oblivious to the signs; I like to think I am a pretty bright guy, but the thought of a modern battle-

field being on the outskirts of a major city was totally foreign to me. You wouldn't know it from being in Seoul, because it is just as bustling and diverted by commerce and entertainment as New York or Chicago; yet Seoul is only 30 miles south of what is effectively a war zone.

Now, I am no stranger to living near a border; Toledo is right on the Ohio border



A small multinational contingent at Gyeongbokgung Palace displays the "We are Peacemaker" fist (Lucas Hoffman in middle row, 2nd from left)



The Military Historical Tours group outside the War Memorial Building on the pavilion where they met Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates



The American group with Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates outside the War Memorial (Lucas Hoffman is third from right in the front row)

has life in abundance, and the people are beautiful.

Seoul itself contains 10 million inhabitants. Incheon has what many consider the world's finest airport, and the city of Busan is building what will become the world's third tallest building. As the descendants of those who fought for the South Koreans' existence, we were treated with great honor and were given many gifts. On your behalf we accepted the deepest of gratitude from the Republic's officials in government and the people we met on our travels.

Should you return to Korea yourself, as a veteran of the war, you would be received as a king, or a lost son now returned. If I could make any request of Korean War veterans, I would ask that you please look into returning to Korea one last time, so you may see with your own eyes what your blood, sweat and tears, shed so long ago, have produced in the world. You will not be disappointed. Rather, I think you will find a great peace will come to dwell in your own heart.

We have very generous friends in the Korean people. Not only were there 41 Americans, but there were 127 other young men and women from 16 other

with Michigan, but the closest thing we have to war is a Saturday football game in late November. A real war with real guns is kind of hard for a 20-year-old civilian American to grasp. At least it was for me.

Looking back now, and looking at the news of today, I do understand the urgency of, "Be prepared to run." Those words gave us all a bit of a chill and definitely caused us to stop and think about what we had gotten ourselves into. My first thought was, "Wow, this really is serious, isn't it?" It was. And it still is.

Back in late July of this past summer 2010, I was privileged to take a unique trip; the like of which I will probably never be able to do again. The Korean people, through the Republic of Korea's government, afforded me and 40 other

young Americans a nearly all-expenses-paid trip to visit Korea to learn what our grandfathers helped accomplish—and what has since become of their struggle.

What has become is something quite amazing. Today, South Korea is an international power in manufacturing, research and technology. The South Koreans take great pride in having gone from an aid recipient to a donor country that can now lend assistance to others in need. Their cities are massive and bright, the country

Lucas Hoffman in the U.S. area of the UN Cemetery in Busan



Lucas Hoffman (lower right) with some of his newly made friends from America, New Zealand, and Belgium in the back of their bus

United Nations countries that aided South Korea in the war. Each one of us, wherever we were from in the world, had the distinction of their grandfather having served in the Korean War. It was an interesting little point of commonality among us that fostered a growing sense of camaraderie.

Even to this day, when I think of the friends I made in Korea, I will take a minute to remember that my grandfather and their grandfathers were in the same place, fighting the same war. I find that to be uniquely special. Our grandfathers may have never known each other, yet it is because of them that we made the friends we did. For that, too, I am grateful.

Making new friends and interacting with so many people of different nationalities was by far my favorite aspect of the entire journey. I am just a guy from Toledo, Ohio, which is not a very large or particularly noteworthy city on the global stage. And the only foreign country I had ever been to was Canada, which doesn't really count for me because I have been there so many times and it is very much like the United States geographically and culturally.

Flying across the world and interacting with people from at least 17 different countries was quite an immersive experience. I will admit that I was apprehensive at first. I assumed, even hoped, that this event would just be me and seven other Americans, learning about the Korean War. I couldn't have been more wrong. Ultimately, I was very happy to be so incorrect.

The diversity of people, the different



Lucas Hoffman and his grandfather, Laurence Kish

flavors of nationality and accent, the expressions and jokes that were hard to understand across cultures...they all served to make my time in Korea much more enjoyable. It was a truly international event. Countries that sent grandchildren were: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Columbia, Ethiopia, France, India, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and South Korea. We all stayed at the same hotel on the south side of Seoul. It really felt like some sort of UN conference—with one difference: we all got along much better than the UN does.

It was called “Peace Camp for Youth”

(PCFY), and it was peace, not war, that was emphasized. Our motto for the duration of the event was, “We are Peacemakers,” accompanied by the gesture of a raised fist, meaning that, as individuals, we held the power of peace in the world.

On our first full day, we were given tours of the War Memorial in Seoul, which serves as the central remembrance to the war and to Korean conflict over the years. The Memorial is also a gigantic museum with a large number of exhibits, life size dioramas and genuine artifacts ranging from small hand-held weapons to very big intercontinental ones. A complete B-52 had to be the largest piece in the collection.

Naturally, to include such oversized items, the building itself was quite sizable; enough so to accommodate tanks and small aircraft, though the larger aircraft and vehicles were in an outdoor pavilion. One piece of artwork in particular at the Memorial caught my eye: a collection of dog tags constructed in the form of a falling teardrop and wrapped in barbed wire. The black thorns of the barbed wire really contrasted the shimmering beauty of the tear; coating the humanity of war with the callous hardness of death. It served fittingly as a bittersweet tribute to the young men whose lives were ended before their time in Korea.

We were scheduled to attend proceedings at the National Cemetery after visiting the War Memorial, but all of the Americans were told that we would remain behind so we could meet Secretary



PCFY members have fun in Seoul



PCFY members exhibit a bit of spirit at gathering



A couple of PCFY Teams at the DMZ with North Korean Pavilion in background



Young ladies from PCFY tour at World Cup Stadium

of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. They happened to be in Seoul on a diplomatic tour of the East. We waited for some time in a wide square outside the War Memorial with a large contingent of U.S. and ROK soldiers in dress uniforms and their respective military bands. After making a circuit of the square, Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Gates came over to our group and said a few words and took some pictures. I was fortunate to be standing in the front row, only third to the right of Mrs. Clinton.

Back at our hotel, we attended a number of Peace Seminars. We learned quite a bit about the subjects of peace and reunification as they relate to North and South Korea. These meetings brought firsthand insight to the situation in Korea and the prospects for a lasting peace between the North and South. It was our privilege to have several Koreans from high academic and political circles present us with their expert knowledge and analysis on the subject.

I am very certain that I speak for everyone at PCFY when I say that our most compelling speaker was a man who defected to South Korea from North Korea. Unfortunately, I do not have his name. Otherwise, I would credit him, but this man offered a unique perspective that we were all very curious about: what is North Korea like and why do people try to get away?

His account of the persistent Korean conflict was summed up in a story of personal revelation that put him in great dan-

ger. Speaking through a translator, our North Korean defector relayed his experiences to a very captivated audience. He and a couple of his friends wrote for a newspaper at their university in North Korea. In time, they grew dissatisfied with the government and its limits on their freedom of speech, which showed through in their publications.

One friend was arrested and executed for his sentiments. So, our speaker and another friend decided to flee the country (which is illegal). They planned to escape to South Korea via China. While in the midst of their escape, they were found out and his friend was captured. The friend was taken back to North Korea and subsequently killed. Our speaker barely made it out himself, and was the only one alive to tell of it.

Besides telling of his own life, our speaker told us much of North Korea as it is today: their practices, laws, what life is like for the people and how the government views South Korea and the rest of the world. He told us that he is but one of the hundreds of thousands who have fled North Korea and that there are about 20,000 former North Koreans living in South Korea today.

A couple interesting facts he gave us about North Korea were that hairstyle and dress are monitored by the police and that the handicapped are not allowed to live in Pyongyang, the capital. The subways in Pyongyang are 100 meters below ground and double as bomb shelters. There are only three churches in North Korea, which

are really 'show' churches; meaning they do not actually practice religion. The participants, and even the reverends, are ordered to attend, much like a call for jury duty.

He gave us many more examples which were tremendously interesting, so I took very detailed notes. However, the rest would be far too much to recount here.

When the time came for questions from the audience, I offered one: "What advice would you have for a country that is on the road to socialism?" He responded by saying, "Good luck in trying, because it does not work in the end." He went on to explain that the system of governance which socializes industries and increasingly regulates individual choices will also very quickly take away a person's desire to be better. He said that socialism and statist regimes, like North Korea, seek to force people to deny their human nature. When the government isn't there to enforce the laws, selfishness and greed show up even stronger than before.

Appropriately, after hearing this defector speak, we set off on our own trip northward to the Demilitarized Zone and Panmunjom. The DMZ is a buffer area between North and South Korea that was established on July 27, 1953 to be governed by international law. It is a strip of land stretching 248 kilometers (150 miles) from the Sea of Japan in the east to the Yellow Sea in the west, dividing the peninsula in two. The DMZ is 4 kilometers (2.4 miles) thick, with the North and

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South each maintaining the 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) closest to their national borders.

Looking out from the hilltops that our buses traveled on, I could see into North Korea. The clouds seemed to hang a little lower over there, and be a little darker; the ominous look was not lost on any of us. The long lines of mountainous terrain and dark valleys continued to rise and fall into the distance, much like the pictures my grandfather, MSgt. Larry Kish (40th Inf. Div., 223rd Inf. Reg.), a member of Chapter 131, Northwest Ohio, had shown me.

It was pretty easy to imagine myself in his shoes; commanding a mortar company on some far off ridge in the “Punchbowl,” under constant threat from North Korean and Chinese soldiers...maybe sharing some of my American chocolate with a South Korean comrade, or putting beer in my helmet to shave with because there just wasn’t enough water.

Soon, our transports passed the checkpoints and we were officially in the DMZ. Once we arrived at the Joint Security Area (JSA) in Panmunjom, we got out of the buses and passed silently in single file through a large, modern building called the Freedom House. We exited through glass doors at the rear and came outside to descending concrete steps and a paved road stretching from right to left in front of us.

Standing across the road were three long, blue buildings. They didn’t look like much, but as I stood before them I realized I was standing in history, and this place was a seamless fusion of past and present. Farther beyond the blue buildings was a larger concrete structure with a wide flight of stairs and dimly overhung windows, called Panmungak, North Korea’s main building in the JSA. In the quietness I know we all felt a distinctly tense presence. The surrounding buildings, though devoid of visible life, made one feel as though you were being watched. And I am quite sure we were.

North Korea always maintains a guard standing outside the door to Panmungak, in all weather and at all times of day. Unfortunately, for the curious among us, that guard was the only North Korean we

saw on our trip.

Understandably, there were a number of rules we were required to follow while in the Demilitarized Zone, and in the JSA particularly. A dress code stipulated that no blue jeans or tee-shirts were allowed, because the North Koreans would take pictures and use them as propaganda displaying Western-capitalist decadence. No open toed shoes, sandals or flip-flops were allowed either, so that we might have something reliable to run in, should we need to make a quick getaway. Pictures would only be allowed in certain areas and behind lines marked on the ground. Any pointing or sudden gestures were also prohibited.

Our U.S. military escort took us in groups of 30 across the road into the middle blue building, called the MAC Conference Room. There were two intimidating South Korean soldiers guarding the interior of the building. You may recognize these distinctive guards by their dark sunglasses, green helmets and fists clenched in a modified Tae Kwon Do stance. Four more stood guard outside the buildings.

Within was a large wooden table where North and South Korea conduct diplomatic negotiations. Apparently, when it was first used an argument ensued over who got to sit at which end of the table. When I passed the center of the room, I crossed over officially into North Korean territory. Entering North Korea in the MAC room is the only safe way to do so in the DMZ. It was very cool to be allowed in such a historical place and to be able to move around so freely, although we couldn’t do just anything.

We were told that we might take pictures with the guards while inside, but not to touch or get too close, as they were on duty and would react forcibly to any advances. As a precaution, one of the guards inside stood in front of the door that led outside and to the North Korean side. We were told that when a routine check on the door’s lock is made it must be done with two guards. One soldier will check the lock and the other will push on the door to keep it closed. In the past, the North Koreans tried to abduct a guard by pushing the door open and dragging him

through. The attempt was unsuccessful, but resulted in additional precautions.

After we re-boarded the buses, our tour resumed as we continued the circuit around Panmunjom. We were told a number of stories and given highlights in the 57-year history of the JSA. Rounding a corner, we came upon a clearing through some trees and saw the Bridge of No Return where the “Little Switch” and “Big Switch” prisoner exchanges took place. After the Axe Murder Incident (1976), in which two US Army officers were killed in an attack by North Koreans, international law demanded strict enforcement of the demarcations for the bridge. Its usage was soon ended when North Korea built its own bridge.

We also stopped at an observatory to view the only two villages in the DMZ, one North Korean and one South Korean, separated by only 1.4 miles. In the 1980s South Korea built a 323-ft-tall flagpole in its village. North Korea was then compelled to construct an even taller pole at 525 feet, which was at that time the world’s tallest. North Korea’s massive flag weighs nearly 600 lbs. Even though South Korea’s flag is of similar size, it weighs a mere 287 lbs.

After leaving the DMZ and returning to Seoul, calmness returned and we all relaxed a bit. That night we were afforded a short time out on the town to eat dinner, explore and visit some. After our excursion in the Shopping District, our buses dropped us off for a trek up to Seoul Tower. Known as the most beautiful tower in Asia, Seoul Tower is 776 feet tall and situated on a hill overlooking the city. The view at night was spectacular, with the combination of the Tower’s changing lights and the expanse of Seoul all lit up underneath it.

We were also privileged to travel in the countryside away from the city on a couple days. One of those outings included a day-long trip south to visit the United Nations Cemetery in Busan (formerly spelled Pusan). As many of you may know, Busan is at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula and is some distance (200 miles) from Seoul. To get there and back to Seoul in one day we took KTX high speed rail, which makes the trip in

slightly over two hours.

Twenty-three-hundred men from 11 different countries are interred in the UN Cemetery, as are some unknown Allied soldiers and non-belligerents. After an introduction in the chapel and wreath laying ceremony beneath the UN flag, we were allowed to move about the grounds and pay our individual respects with a single white rose given to each of us. I placed mine in the American section after saying a quiet prayer.

In wandering the grounds I found that the cemetery was a good deal larger than it appeared from the entrance. In the lower region was a reflecting pool surrounded by a tall black wall, very reminiscent of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. The names of those who died fighting in the war are engraved up and down the wall, with the Americans being listed state by state.

The next morning, in Seoul, we participated in what was called a bicycle ride for peace at Yeouido Han Riverside Park. We each had a balloon in the form of a white dove tied to the handlebars of our bikes which we released, in unison, into the air. Our ride around the bike path then commenced. Afterwards, we took a short cruise on the Han River. On the way to our next stop we toured the soccer stadium that hosted the 2002 FIFA World Cup.

That next planned event was a few hours at Seoul's Sang'am Digital Media City, which showcases Korea's cutting edge technological industry. Then came my favorite part of the day, and easily in my top three favorites of my entire time in Korea: a performance of the stage show called Fanta-stick. I would describe it as a mix of comedy-theater and the show many people know as Stomp. The program was visually stunning and absolutely hilarious. It included beautiful music, which was a tasteful combination of traditional Korean and modern music.

We spent one night away from our hotel in Seoul. That was at the Cheonan National Youth Center. Its mission is the training of Korean youth in leadership, network building and hosting international youth interchange activities; a perfect fit for Peace Camp for Youth. Its rural setting was a quiet and restful break from the speed and sounds of Seoul. We were able to learn traditional Korean cultural practices there,

including mask making and dance.

My choice of free time activity at the Youth Center was soccer. But it was unlike any game of soccer I had ever played before, or likely will again. Since our Peace Camp was a regular international event, I got to play soccer with about 50 guys from all over the world. Since soccer is unofficially the world's sport, I just thought it was the coolest thing to be able to play some 'football' with other guys from England, Columbia, Ethiopia, Turkey, Canada, Korea, Belgium, France and others.

Our last full day saw us return to Seoul for one more outing and the closing ceremonies later that night. In the afternoon we visited the historic Gyeongbokgung Palace and the National Folk Museum of Korea. The Palace, built in 1395, was destroyed by a fire in the early 1500s, but was later restored in the early 1900s. The Palace itself was only one of many buildings within the outer walls. The structures were beautifully ornate and drew heavily from what most Westerners would call Chinese or Japanese architecture.

Later that evening we had dinner and the Peace Camp for Youth closing ceremonies. The food was first class: steak, wine and gourmet dessert. Several dignitaries attended this formal event, including a representative from the South Korean government and the Defense Minister of New Zealand. Speeches were given and many thanks were exchanged. Recently made memories were lived again as video of our time was put up on screens for us to watch.

After dinner came what was easily my favorite part of my experience in Korea. We were ushered into forming a large circle around the room which broke and began making a line to shake hands. The line was such that after the last person in the line shook your hand you followed the line and were able to shake the hands of all those with whom you had not yet done so. In this manner, each one of us 170 or so participants could personally meet each other.

The concept itself was the embodiment of what the Peace Camp was about. It was tremendously moving to see the gratitude and pleasure everyone had in sharing each other's company: how people from different cultures and all corners of the Earth

could be united in peace and common purpose. Shaking hands with each of those people was my greatest pleasure and honor. While fun, it was also consciously bittersweet to know that most of us would be departing in the morning and our short time together would end. But not before we partied a little bit.

During this time, different cultural performances took place, including dances and skits put together by each country's participants. The members of my bus group, with whom I rode for the duration of the trip, also put on a skit. Many people brought small gifts from their countries to share; I received many presents from places and friends around the world.

The government of the Republic of Korea was especially generous. Four volumes of Korean history books were left in our hotel rooms in addition to a gift bag with a number of useful items inside. We were also provided with a wonderful memorandum DVD with video of our time in Korea and over a thousand pictures taken by photographers.

My memories of Korea and the friends I made there remain quite vivid, even without pictures or videos. And, with everything considered, it would be easy for me to describe each moment to you, in great detail. But I think what I have said covers all that would be meaningful to another person.

Much of what I remember about my time in Korea is personal; that is, it is probably significant or entertaining only to me. I am sure that for those of you who were in Korea fighting, or aiding the fight, there are some events you just can't forget either. Time just cannot dim some memories, be they good or bad.

My grandfather has shared much with me of his experiences in the Korean War. In that, I am fortunate, because I know that not every veteran is quite open to sharing. I can hear the stories and imagine places, think what it must have sounded like, but I cannot experience it in my mind as he has in the flesh. That doesn't stop me from trying, though.

Going to Korea provided me with an experience that, in my family, only my grandfather and I share. It is something that I cherish and will hold special all my

life. I am honored, beyond what I can describe, to be a part of his legacy, and likewise a small part of yours, too.

I think it is my duty to carry on your memories and make sure that they do not die with your generation or my own. Being a student of history at the University of Toledo, I have both a professional and personal interest in what you have done. And I want to share that interest with others during my lifetime, especially my children when I have them.

I feel the way I do because I am grateful for your sacrifice. I recognize it was a sacrifice to be away from your wife, your girlfriend, your children, your parents, your home and your own warm bed, knowing your life was in danger at all moments of day and night. It is no ordinary job to be a soldier, far from home and living closer to death than most people ever will.

Some good friends went to Korea with you, but did not come back; others who did return have become good friends. I, too, made many of my own good friends in Korea and some I talk to pretty regularly, even though they are far away or in other countries. I look upon them as my own "war" buddies, people with whom I share distinct and special memories. I know there is that sense among you and your comrades from Korea, because an experience like war does that to you.

Peace Camp for Youth was an experience I will never forget. It was certainly unique, an experience I never expected to have. I know we all want another conflict like that of the 1950s to be averted and peace again to cover the Korean peninsula. We hope and pray that the two separate countries may again be joined as one, under freedom and democratic government by the people, not communism or dictatorships.

I owe my thanks to the Republic of Korea and the generosity of their people. A program like this is evidence of how grateful they still are, after 60 years, for their freedom and all it has allowed them to accomplish. Without the Republic's sponsorship and organization of this event, I would probably never have gone to Korea in my life

nor gained such a respect for the Korean people and their culture. I very much hope they continue to see the value in Peace Camp for Youth and I look forward to its continued success. "Kamsamnida."

Thanks also to my friends from Peace Camp 2010. Everyone was spectacular and made my time in Korea so much more fun. We are all different in some way, by nationality or personality, but the differences made for a great time and I am so glad to have known, and know, all of you. Thank you also to Bill McCulloch from Military Historical Tours for his guidance and great help in getting me safely to Korea and back again. I would definitely encourage any grandchildren of Korean War veterans to think about applying to go to Peace Camp for Youth. It is an opportunity you only get once in a lifetime.

Lastly, I thank you Korean War veterans again. Thanks especially to my grandfather, Larry Kish, who has given me a legacy of family and country. Whether you are a veteran or one who carries the torch for them, I owe you my most sincere thanks for the preservation of freedom and liberty around the globe and here at home. To all other grandfathers of Korea, World War II, Vietnam and all veterans of foreign wars: thank

you. I promise to keep your story alive, to uphold our nation and live in a manner worthy of your honor.

Maybe you didn't even really know why you were there, fighting for a bunch of people you had never seen before. I can tell you one thing – they are mighty glad you fought for them, and damned proud of you.

Again, if I may ask one thing of you, it is that you look into returning to Korea once more. If you are able to, it would be, I believe, the best form of closure to an event that has defined your life for the past 60 years. There are numerous groups in existence for this type of return trip, even one similarly sponsored by the Korean government. I would highly recommend considering it - when you are ready. (And for the record, Korean Air has to be the best in the world, so you are in for a treat going there and coming back.) May the Lord bless and keep you, and our great country.

With deepest gratitude and admiration,

Lucas S. Hoffman, Toledo, Ohio, grandson of Laurence Kish, 40th Infantry Division, 223rd Infantry Regiment, K Company, 44 Birkhead Pl., Toledo, OH 43608-2321, 419-241-9446. Punchbowl & Heartbreak Ridge; August 2, 1952 –



PCFY students posing for final picture and saying goodbye at Farewell Banquet