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Essay #2

South Korea

After twenty hours of being crammed on a plane we finally landed at the Incheon International Airport. If I'm being honest, I never wanted to come to South Korea. *Great, I'm going to get front row seats to WWII.* 2016 wasn't the greatest in terms of the U.S. / North Korea relationship and I just knew it was my luck for something to kick off during the end of my contract. After being at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for almost four years all I wanted to do was finish the last stretch and move on. I nearly decked, or refused, the fifteen month overseas assignment at first; everyone is technically allowed to deck orders one time. However the reality is when someone does this they usually just get sent the same orders a few weeks later, and there's no decking them the second time around. Figuring this would be the case for me, I decided that process would be too much of a headache and I might as well just go.

The first thing I noticed stepping off the plane was the airport security, these guys were all walking around in combat uniforms holding military grade sub-machine guns. *Yep, looks like they are ready for it to kick off too.* It was fairly easy to navigate my way around, a lot of signs and directions were in english. Soon I was outside with a handful of other soldiers, all waiting for a bus to take us to the heart of Seoul to in-process. Luckily for me this was where I was going to be stationed, Yongsan, in the center of the thriving city.

The bus ride there was only a couple hours long. I sat by a right side window, near the back. Something about being in new territory makes the sky seem bluer and the trees greener. The sun was bright and a few wispy clouds drifted overhead. There isn't much rural scenery from the Incheon airport to Yongsan, but I did get a glimpse of some forested mountains in the distance. Mostly I marvelled at the buildings and all the businesses we passed, I liked to try and

imagine what each building was even though I couldn't read the signs. When we passed a group of residences I noticed that almost all the houses had mini rice farms, and various other looking crops, in place of traditional grass yards. The closer we got to Yongsan, the more frequent english signs and advertisements popped up. Eventually almost a quarter of everything had an english translation.

As we rolled past the front gates of Yongsan it was like entering a smaller town within the metropolis. Imagine a foreign military base replacing New York City's Central Park, that's what it felt like as you could see the skyscrapers towering over all around the walls of the base. After a few days of in-processing, I was ultimately assigned to be an RTO, radio and telephone operator, inside the PMO, provost marshal's office. The army loves acronyms, basically I was a dispatcher in the military police station. I learned that one of the best parts about being stationed here was the people I was able to meet. We worked hand in hand with South Korean soldiers, the ones who could speak English fell directly in our unit, they are known as Katusa's. I learned a lot from Katusa's, they are also great for chauffeuring you around the city.

One day I asked a Katusa who I worked closely with, "Aren't you guys a little scared of living here? I mean, you can practically see North Korea from Seoul Tower and if there would be a target, it definitely would be here."

The Katusa laughed, "We don't worry about it, they wouldn't do anything, we feel sorry for North Koreans. I think the U.S is a much more dangerous place, aren't you scared you get shot anytime, it's scary everyone has guns over there."

Guns were not common in South Korea, except for in airports I guess, even the regular police didn't have guns. When they would respond to things they would send groups of ten or twenty unarmed cops to handle any given situation.

"I never really thought about that, but I guess you're right, everywhere has some shit going on," I replied.

Nothing major ever happened on Yongsan, most calls were for your typical fights, domestics, and drunk and disorderly reports. Although there was one time an mp, military policeman, tackled a knife wielding madman at one of the gates. Thankfully no one ended up hurt, a lot of guys would have shot the knife-wielder instead of risking getting close, but that would have likely stirred up an international mess. The mp ended up getting a fairly prestigious reward for the incident.

Seoul and Yongsan were known throughout the peninsula, at least amongst the military, as being the party spot. The nightlife right outside Yongsan, specifically a district called Itaewon (E-tay-wan), was infamous. The streets were always busy and all along sidewalks were restaurants and cuisine spots from all around the world. There were plenty of thrift shops, markets, and street performers. At night the bars and clubs would come alive, the mixture of neon lights and digital billboards made for quite the spectacle. While prostitution is technically illegal in South Korea, the cops keep a blind eye and everyone knew about “Hooker Hill”, two of the most popular bars amongst soldiers were at the top of hooker hill.

As you made the ascension you had to pass four or five brothels, each with a few half naked propositioner’s trying to snag you along the way, “Hey, hey you, you, come here, come with me, come, come,” they would say while tugging on your arm. Of course the army forbade participation. And no, I never went with them but it wasn’t uncommon for drunk soldiers to try and sneak away with them from time to time. The army also forbade getting tattoos while in the country, however that didn’t stop me getting a chest piece of a famous Korean general over a backdrop of turtle ships commencing in naval warfare. With it is a quote that translates to something to the effect - (in battle) those willing to die shall live, and those who only will to live shall die. It was a famous quote from the Korean general, Yi Sun-sin, who won a battle that is the naval equivalent to the three hundred spartans during the Battle of Thermopylae. Anyways, while Itaewon offers a plethora of other fun and legal things to do, my favorite experience in Seoul was the Bukhansan Mountain.

To get to the mountain you had to first make a mile or so hike through dense woods before coming across the first steps leading skywards. When I got there I took my time walking up the rugged steps. All around was a sight to see, the trees, the bridges crossing trickling streams, the views of the distant city. At the top of one set of steps awaited a peaceful temple. I marveled at the Korean architecture, the smooth stone carvings alongside elegant woodwork, stained dark and red. Monks hike the mountain daily to meditate here and I was told to not disturb anyone inside. I quietly took a peek and listened to the soft hum emanating from the quaint structure. Outside was a wondrous foliage of green and faded orange. After taking in the moment, I continued along the path.

From atop the mountain you can look out at the vast ocean of humanity that stretches in all directions. Within the bustling metropolis, Bukhansan is a serenity. Stillness in the heart of a beating city. Nature's monument amongst the world of man. Covered in shades of green and orange, the rock sleeps beneath gray skies.

The air is fresher when surrounded by trees and rock as opposed to fish markets and industrial traffic jams. Everyone talks about the nightlife of Itaewon or Gangnam but if you're ever in Seoul, South Korea, Bukhansan is where you want to be. The mountain is littered with hiking trails and beautiful temples. The landscape is simply breathtaking as you ascend to the top. Once there you can walk along an ancient wall stretching across the ridge and gaze out at the sprouting city.

There's something spiritual about this place. The breeze feels majestic as it lightly brushes past autumn trees. The autumn trees look magical as they gently shake free red and yellow leaves, dancing through the air. The smell of pine and fresh rain made the air a mystic taste. Streams flowing through jagged rock echoed light sounds throughout the mountainside. The architecture of scattered structures was breathtaking. The ancient monuments and temples are still used today to connect spiritually with our outside world. There is an overall vibe that is unexplainable when on the mountain.

Leaves crunched with every step during the descent. I savored the sound as I reluctantly made my way down. My little get-a-way was coming to an end. Soon it will be back to busy

streets and flashing lights, even worse, I'll have to go back to work. Nature was a nice change of scenery after going months with being trapped in the city. It's almost hard to believe how easily the mountain can get lost in the mess of skyscrapers. No matter how far or how tall we build, nothing will compare to the grace of nature. I thought about that mountain a lot when it was time to return back home to the states.

When it was time to leave South Korea I chuckled at the thought that I didn't want to come at first. Now I dream about the day when I will be able to go back. To experience the lights, sounds, nature, and food once again. I nearly forgot to mention the amazing food. Cheese stuffed cutlets, pork or chicken, was always my favorite. Kimchi is almost served with every meal and it didn't take long for me to acquire the taste for it. Korean BBQ is also delicious, in those types of restaurants you are given little slices of meat that you cook on a stove that is in the middle of the table. After you cook the meat you wrap it in a leafy vegetable, maybe with some rice and seasoning, and enjoy.

The South Koreans I had the honor of meeting were some of the nicest and most respectful people I have ever met. Many of the Katusas I worked with I consider to be close friends and still remain in contact every once in awhile. From my experience, I would say that the people of South Korea are far less judgemental and jaded as those of American culture. I have to say, after experiencing another country for fifteen months, it changed my perspective about the U.S. and the world in general. Now I want to travel to as many countries as I can. South Korea influenced my decision to become an English major as I could see myself wanting to teach in foreign countries even though writing is more of my passion. South Korea introduced me to the wonderful wonders of travel. It will be a place I will never forget, and it is a place I very well do wish to return one day. As I was reluctant to initially make the trip to the peninsula I was even more reluctant to go back to the states. The plane ride back was bittersweet, I was finally finished with the army and was about to start the next chapters of my life, but I was also leaving a place that became so near and dear to my heart. South Korea will always be important to me.