Osan, Korea

1979

In 1979 I was working as an environmental engineer for the Navy on Guam. My wife and I had sent our son to spend the summer with his cousins at my brother’s house in San Antonio, Texas. I heard about an R&R (a recreational flight) flight from Andersen AFB on Guam to Osan Air Base near Seŏul in the northwest sector of South Korea. Since our son was still out of the house, we decided to go. We would leave on Thursday morning and return Sunday morning on an Air Force KC-135 aerial tanker.

We packed light but took heavy jackets since the plane would be doing training refueling along the way and would be depressurized and without heat in the cabin. We drove up to Andersen on the north end of the island before daylight and left the car with some friends on base. They drove us to flight operations where we signed in and waited for the plane to load. There were ten others waiting for the plane. We paid for box lunches and were ready to go. There were about twenty passenger seats in the front half of the plane. After we were seated we were briefed on the flight and safety regulations. The engines roared to life and we away we went.

The ride was tolerable for about two hours as we flew north towards southern Japan. Then the plane was depressurized for the first refueling operation. I went back to watch over the boom operator’s shoulder. A pair of F4 Phantoms was flying in formation close below and behind us. One of the Phantoms crept up on us as the boomer talked him into position to hook up on the nozzle on the end of a long boom. He clicked into position and the boomer delivered a token load of 500 pounds of jet fuel. The Phantom disconnected and backed off disappearing into the night. The second Phantom followed the same procedure. A few minutes later the same two planes repeated this practice maneuver. About a half hour later another flight of phantoms appeared and went through the same procedure.

We flew north across the western Pacific Ocean into the East China Sea north of Okinawa. We turned to the northwest and flew west of Kyūshū then through the Korea Strait and across Korea to Osan about sunrise. We off loaded near base operations and were told to be back early Sunday morning for the return flight. Base transportation took all of us and dropped us at the Osan Hotel in downtown Osan. We passed the large camouflaged concrete block house and the machine gun pits guarding the main gate along the way.

The room at the hotel was about 10X12 feet or 3X4 meters. I asked for a full size bed and got a single bed. This was the Korean equivalent: for instance a king size bed is a double queen. This resulted in lots of mistakes in buying brass beds and the sheets and quilts to fit them. The bath was tiny but Western style. We were on the fourth floor overlooking houses and gardens and across town. It was interesting to see the neighbors start the day peeing on the beans in the garden. This was a city planner’s nightmare with homes, businesses, high rise hotels, garden plots, live stock intermingled.

I looked at the construction of a new building across from the hotel. It was to be four stories with concrete block walls and a concrete slab floor. First thing to notice was the use of bamboo for the scaffolding tied together with some kind of twine. Through the scaffolding ran a switchback of 2X10 planks that served as a path for wheelbarrows of concrete and other materials being delivered to the upper floors. I did not see any steel reinforcing rods and was curious as to how the floor would be poured a couple cubic feet at a time. In Hong Kong a few years later they were still using bamboo scaffolds for buildings up to 20 floors, but safety nets had been hung every four floors. Roof mounted cranes had replaced the wheel borrows delivering material and large buckets of concrete.

The hotel manager took my wife and I and a couple of other guests out for a Korean dinner. We traversed several alley sized streets to his *hanok* or house. In the dining room everyone sat on the floor around a brazier that cooked *kalbi* – thin marinated sliced beef served with “Korean sauce”. There was also *kimchi* and *japchae* and roasted garlic pods served with a spicy sauce. Ob beer was available during the meal but they found a Coke for my wife. Following the meal we were served hot tea with roasted soy beans and fresh fruit. I thought everything was good and consumed a quantity of the roasted garlic pods. The next morning my wife complained that my dragon breathe could peel the wall paper.

*Kimchi* or *kimchee* is the national dish of Korea. It is made by brining and fermenting cabbage, radish, ginger, cucumber and, since the 1590’s, chili peppers with shrimp or fish sauce. It has a strong persistent odor that caused many US troops returning from the Korean War to burn their uniforms. Korea spent millions on research to sterilize and deodorize kimchi so it could be taken to outer space for the first Korean astronaut. *Kimchi*  is both highly seasonal and regional. Summer or *yeolmu kimchi* is usually radish and cucumber. Autumn or *baechu kimchi* is mostly cabbage and salt. Winter or *kimjang kimchi* is made from a variety of vegetables and more fish and ferments longer.

On Friday we went shopping in downtown Osan and found a lot of clothing and cheap tennis shoes. We bought several pairs of tennis shoes for our son to change into as he grew. He grew so fast that in the next couple years he skipped a couple shoe sizes. .

We stopped for lunch at a Korean pizza place. I have eaten many pizzas in many places and think they served probably the worst pizza I ever had. Lots of garlic, a really spicy sauce and no meat. Heartburn city.

My wife went back to the room with heartburn while I looked around some more. Cheap sporting goods like ski jackets and running shoes. I looked closely at some of the shoes and found they were seconds or factory rejects with misaligned soles, smeared glue and other structural or cosmetic booboos. These were rejects of major brands made in Korea and sold locally. They were priced based on the severity of the defect.

I stopped in a two table tea shop for ginseng tea served with roasted soy beans and headed back to the hotel. My wife was not feeling well. She took some Tums and decided on no supper. I went out to a local hole in the wall restaurant recommended by the hotel for a big bowl of *chompong*.

The night time temperature was in the 90’s and so was the humidity. Not a leaf stirred. There was a slight smell of kimchee fermenting from kimchee pots buried in the neighborhood gardens. Summer and fall kimchi fermented fast in 3-4 weeks.

We managed to survive the night on the tiny mattress. After an American breakfast in the hotel, we decided to go into Seŏul. The hotel clerk gave directions to the bus station and changed a few dollars into the local *won*. And we were off to see the world of Seŏul.

The bus route wound through the hills and along the Ob River into an increasingly urbanized area. The river was low and the river bed was what looked like chert cobbles. After the bus, we took a taxi to the *Dongdaemun* cloth market one of several such markets in Seŏul. The streets were from single lane to six or more lanes in each direction with busses, cars, trucks, push carts, pedicabs, wheel borrows and animal drawn wagons mixing and mingling with pedestrians with loads of produce on their back.

This was one of three large cloth markets. It was about a square mile of shops selling cloth in any kind or quantity imaginable. This was surrounded by tailor shops many of them specializing in military uniforms.

We stopped for burgers then took another taxi to the *Gyeongbokgung* palace and gardens. This palace was built in 1395. Called the north palace (northern most) it is/was the largest of the five imperial palaces. It was destroyed by Japan in the 1590s and not rebuilt until 1868. The Japanese destroyed part of it in WWII and constructed the Japanese Administrative Building on the site. Much of the palace has been restored and houses the National Museum. We visited the museum and garden for a couple hours before returning to the bus station for the trip back to Osan.

We stopped at a shop selling Korean art and antiques. The owner said traditional antiques were not legal to export. He also explained that the so-called Korean antiques were classed as pre- or post-Japanese since the Japanese had removed most of the cultural items during their occupation. He did have an interesting variety of celadon and other replicas which we did not buy. I did purchase some pre-WWII primitive farm kitchen stoneware.

Sunday morning we took a taxi out to the base about sun up. We had just arrived on base when the base was closed down while a SR-71 Blackbird dropped out of the dark sky and taxied directly into one of the hangers. I thought this plane was supposed to be black but this one looked brownish.

After breakfast at the operations snack bar we sat around for a couple hours until the flight was called. Near noon, we loaded up and boogied into a clear sky. Following a couple more refueling operations along the way we landed at Andersen AFB shortly after sunset. I hitched a ride with the sky cops (base security police) to pick up our car, and we were home an hour later.

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