

Revisit Korea: A Calling

By Jamie Wiedhahn

It has been my privilege for almost a decade to coordinate the Re-visit Korea Program for the Korean War Veterans Association (KWVA) sponsored by the Ministry of Patriots & Veterans Affairs.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) Government has been inviting Veterans from all 21 United Nations Countries who in 1952 sent combat and support troops to aid South Korea in repulsing a communist invasion to return. Chairman Cap Chong Chi of the United Nations Korean War Allies Association in 1975 advised his young democratic government that in keeping with Korean customs they must show their appreciation to these heroes. The ROK provides for six nights and five days, touring in Seoul. The veterans and their families stay in 5-star VIP accommodations including an elaborate banquet hosted by their President or representing Ministers replete with prominent Korean civilian & military leaders. U.S. Forces Korea is always



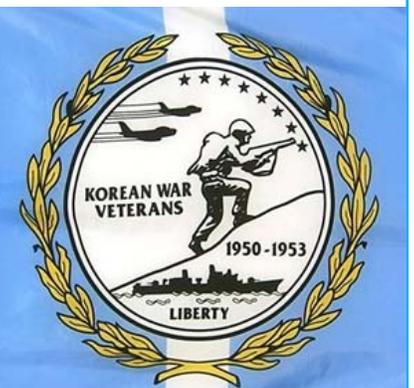
The author in Korea



represented often by their 4-Star commander now General Vincent Brooks, USA. At the banquet, the Ambassador for Peace Medal is awarded to the veterans who served “In, over or around the Korean Peninsula from 1950-1954” plus now defense veterans of the Cold War.

The official program itinerary consist of a visit to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), an introduction to Korean culture, windshield touring around Seoul, Royal Palace tour and depending on the time of year there is usually another special event. For the June tour it is the 25 June 1950 Commemoration of the Korean War with the invasion of ROK by North Korean forces. July is the 27 July 1953 Armistice events with all 21 united nations countries in attendance September & October vary with the anniversary of the Incheon landing

dates or attendance at one of the ROK military service anniversaries.

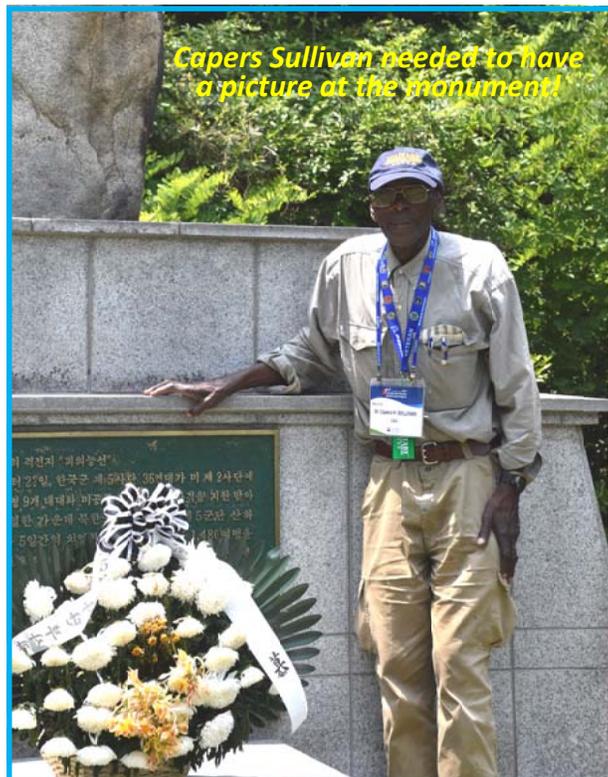




I became involved as Military Historical Tours (MHT) organizes four-five trips a year for upwards of 300+ Veterans and their families for the American Korean War Veterans Association (KWVA.) In my role as MHT's Korea Revisit Coordinator, I spend a tremendous amount of time on the phone with these heroes. One thing became very clear early on and that is like all Veterans they want to see where they fought and where stationed during the war. Very few of them remember Seoul other than a city of rubble destroyed in the

fighting. They want to go into the countryside onto the hills and the bases where they were. Answering this call about six years ago, I organized an optional Foxhole Tour, back to the battlefields east of Seoul; or as we refer to it today the "Pre-tour." Folks attending the revisit can add this extra program. It precedes the main revisit tour allowing the Veterans to spend two full days touring the mountains above the 38th parallel in what was North Korea prior to the war.

All I kept hearing from the veterans were Iconic names like the "Punchbowl" which is a geographical feature that looks like a huge bowl high in the Mountains where many a battle occurred in 1951-53 near Choerwon, Kumwha, Chuncheon. The next request were for the battlegrounds of "Heartbreak Ridge", the "Iron Triangle", "Old Baldy" and "Pork Chop Hill." In the last few years, I have been receiving the same requests from soldiers, sailors and airman who have served further south. This June's tour was successful in that we continued to bring men back to where they served during the war. Capers Sullivan, 88 of Greenville, South Carolina who served with the 3rd & the 45th Infantry Divisions was having trouble walking until he saw the memorial marker atop "Heartbreak Ridge." He set out up nearly 50 stairs to see the memorial and get his picture taken with it. Again without concern for his own safety he was going to the top of that hill one more time for the boys.



For those who served down south of Seoul we are now proud to be offering the "Freedom's Frontier" starting with a Bullet Train to Pusan (Busan today) for a visit to the serene United Nations Memorial Cemetery Hall and Museum. Followed by a trip out to Geoje-do Island, home of the tumultuous POW camps during the war. Next day, we visit the port city of Durtayon, home of the ROK Navy including a visit to the home of Syng-man Ree plus step onto a historic "turtle" warship. We visit Pohang, home of the elite ROK Marines. During our trip across the Korean Peninsula, we will make a stop off at the entertaining Samsung Smart City and caped off the trip with an unexpected visit to the 8th USAF Fighter Wing based at Kunsan Air Force Base that was named K-8 during the war but more on that later.

About a year and a half ago, I received a call from a Mr. Roy Compton who wanted to attend a 2017 Revisit “as long as it goes to Pusan, I am going to extend my trip and go back to the base I flew 50 missions from in 1952.” I had to respond, “No problem sir I can make that happen” as I have been wanting to put a trip together of Southern Korea for some time. With Mr. Compton locked in, I needed more people to make it affordable as travel in Korea is no longer cheap. Fast forward nine months later, I am talking to Mr. Morse about tour options and he mentions he was in the Air Force and would like to visit Kimpo Airfield, the former main Seoul Airport. Finally, in talking with the Thomas family of four they told me their father was also down south in the Air Force. I had my group. With the help of my good friend in Seoul, Retired Army LtCol Steve Tharp, and my ROK Tour Company we created a new itinerary with the last day being a Chip-yong-ni Battlefield talk that Steve was nice enough to give to the group.



Dick Morse is thanked for saving ROK at the banquet with wife Carmaine!

June’s pre-tour went off without a hitch and we are doing a meet and greet in the hotel the first day of the main revisit tour. Mr. Compton stands up and begins to tell us how he was a WWII POW in a German Stalag. He tells us that during WWII, he was a Navigator in a B-17 on a bomb raid over Hungary when the pilot hit the alarm bell for initiating bail out procedures because they were taking flack impacts and he thought the airplane was disintegrating. On further evaluation by the pilots, it was determined it was still salvageable but the rest of the crew had parachuted into Nazi-occupied Hungary. He survived his fall from the sky only to be severely concussed by a German rifle butt to his head upon capture. He was held captive for 6 months in an Officers POW Camp leading up to the end of the war. He entered the camp at a wiry 110 pounds and came out at just 70 with his teeth falling out from malnutrition. His recovery was so protracted that while being treated he remained on active duty transitioning from the US Army Air Corps to the new US Air Force (USAF.) He was still on active duty when the Korean War broke out in 1950. In 1952, went back to war in Korea and flew another 52 missions in B-26 Invaders with the 3rd Bomb Wing from Kunsan then Gunsan AFB that was originally built during the Japanese occupation in 1938. He reiterated that he would like to get back there. I knew he was 92 but he had not mentioned his WWII service to nor listed it in any of the Veteran service history forms! I suppose he did not find it necessary because this trip involved the Korean War.



**Roy Compton
WWII POW &
Korean War
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Left: Jim Armstrong was with the 8th Bomb Squadron at K-8 during the war!

Immediately I wrote Steve who knows how things get done in Korea on the chances of making an post tour itinerary modification to get onto the current Kunsan still an active USAF base. He advised me we would need high-level authorization and the best bet was to have my Boss at MHT, Col Warren Wiedhahn USMC(Ret), the President/CEO of MHT a KWVA National Officer and Pusan, Inchon and Chosin Veteran to write to General Brooks, USFK's Commander and final arbitrator that there was a WWII POW who wanted to visit his old base at Kunsan. Well, 18 e-mails and a week later, we made a dream come true for Mr. Compton and his wife. We were allowed onto the Kunsan Air Force Base that housed the 8th Fighter Wing, the "Wolf Pack" now flying F-16C/D Falcons. The old K-8 fighter base is now manned by 1,200 USAF personal that can swell to 10,000 in the event of war. The Wolf Pack is ready to fight tonight and take the fight north. "Push It Up" the motto of the 35th Fighter Squadron, was part of the theme of readiness I heard throughout our tour around the base. The USAF treated the Veterans as returning heroes on the same scale as the Koreans had done all the previous week and I only wish more of the Revisit Veterans could have experienced the hospitality of the "Wolf Pack."



Roy & Nathalie Compton at the DMZ with the North Korea Pavilion above the treaty buildings

I returned to the USA on a positive vibe having returned some 20 Veterans to the battlefields East of Seoul, running another flawless Korea Revisit for 55 Americans that the ROK was excited to honor and now a new post tour.

Korea Revisit Clockwise: The Veterans march on for the Wreath Laying Ceremony; Moe Hansen shares a powerful moment at the KIA Wall; Bill Whicher salutes at ceremony to honor the returnees; Cpl Jim Gillis can still get into his Blues and is greeted as a hero!

