

Duty



7 on the DMZ

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

THE closer travelers come to the border with communist North Korea, the more heavily fortified the area becomes.

Concertina wire runs for miles along the Han River, alongside the southbound shoulders of so-called “Freedom Highway,” which runs about 25 miles from Seoul to the border with North Korea. The highway passes miles of lime-green rice

paddies and Republic of Korea army guard towers, some of them painted in olive-drab camouflage patterns.

In contrast to the eerie reminders that an oppressed world is very close by, miles of purple and white wildflowers and orange marigolds form a sea of color in the highway’s median, providing an occasional diversion from armed guards and razor-sharp wire.

Nearing Camp Bonifas, home of

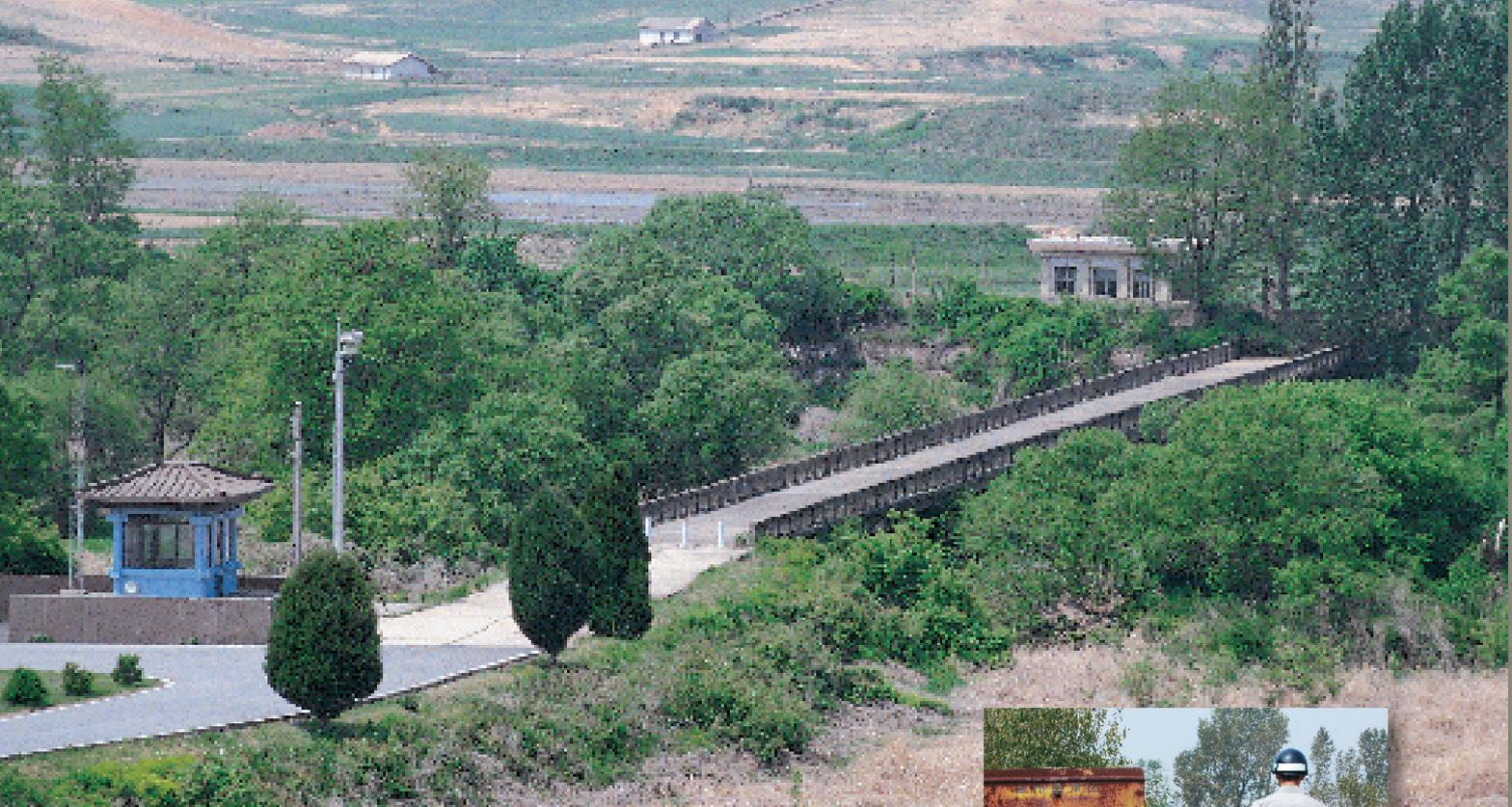
the United Nations Command Security Battalion, Joint Security Area at Panmunjom, or UNCSB-JSA, fighting positions dot the grassy hills. False concrete overpasses, and bridges, the latter outfitted with expandable steel barriers and spike-topped drums, are part of an otherwise tranquil landscape.

Camp Bonifas — named for CPT Arthur G. Bonifas, the JSA officer killed in the infamous “Ax Murder

▶ Republic of Korea army Lt. Yongbin Lee scans the border between his country and North Korea from Guardpost Ouellette. The post is located on the heavily fortified edge of the demilitarized zone.

▶ MAJ José Devarona, the U.S. executive officer of the United Nations Command Security Battalion, looks toward the North Korean visitor center (the tall gray building at center) at the Joint Security Area.





Incident” in 1976 (see box on page 23) — is located just 400 meters south of the southern boundary of the Demilitarized Zone, the “most heavily armed border in the world,” according to U.S. military officials.

Before entering the JSA tour, visitors must sign a statement acknowledging that they understand “the ROK is not responsible for incidents that might occur, which could result in

injury or death. You will be entering a hostile area.”

Seventy percent of North Korea’s estimated 1.2-million active-duty ground troops are in offensive positions along the DMZ, Army officials said.

By comparison, the ROK army has about 40 percent of its 650,000-man force on the DMZ, manning more than 100 guard posts along the 151-mile-



 A sentry (above) stands guard at the ROK end of the “Bridge of No Return,” (main photo) which links North and South Korea.



long Military Demarcation Line.

The UNCSB-JSA, which is responsible for only a small portion of the DMZ, mans Observation Post Ouellette, 25 meters from the MDL. From there, the UNCSB-JSA observers can see 27 kilometers into North Korea, said UNCSB-JSA battalion executive officer MAJ Jose Devarona. “We have a platoon-size security force at this location 24/7.”

The UNCSB-JSA is composed of some 610 ROK soldiers — “the best of the ROK army,” Devarona said. Seventy-five percent of the ROK

 A ROK soldier scans the border from a lookout tower. Eighth U.S. Army officials estimate that some 70 percent of North Korea’s army is stationed along the DMZ.

soldiers at the JSA have two years of college. Eighty percent of them possess black belts in tae kwon do and have met the highest physical-fitness standards.

A quick-reaction force of ROK soldiers, located a short distance away, is always ready to provide reinforcements within minutes.

Forty-one U.S. Soldiers compose the headquarters that supports the battalion, Devarona said. The battalion is led by a U.S. lieutenant colonel and sergeant major, and the others serve as security guards and tour escorts, and perform administrative, communications and logistics functions.

“For every 45-person tour group, we send one person to perform the security role,” Devarona said. “We also provide security for the residents of Taesong-dong, also known as ‘Freedom Village.’”

The only authorized village in the U.N. Command portion of the DMZ, it is one of the most fertile areas in Korea for growing rice and ginseng, Devarona said. Located less than a mile southwest of the JSA, its inhabitants must be either original inhabitants or direct descendants of the villagers who were residing there when the 1953 armistice was signed.

Roughly 250 people live in the village. While the men are exempt from mandatory military service in the ROK, they’re required to spend 240 nights in the village annually and live under curfew to retain their exempt status.

Since 1953, North and South Korea officials have met in the JSA at Panmunjom to resolve military, economic and political problems. Red Cross representatives, Olympic officials, economic advisors and military negotiators have convened meetings at the site in attempts to keep the peace and reunite the peninsula, Devarona said.

It’s here, too, that U.S. and ROK

officials repatriate the remains of service members from the Korean War, and release each other’s citizens. In 1968, the North Koreans released the crew of the USS *Pueblo*, and in 1970, 39 South Korean passengers of a hijacked Korean Airlines jet.

In 1953 prisoners of war from both sides chose whether or not to return to their places of origin when they crossed the “Bridge of No Return,” located in the JSA.

Changing Roles

Several years ago, the U.S. military had a larger contingent on the DMZ; ROK soldiers composed 60 percent of the JSA battalion, U.S. Soldiers 40 percent.

As part of the Army’s transformation, “the ROK army is gradually assuming a larger part of the mission,” Devarona said. “Today, all my companies are made up of ROK soldiers, and we have a combined ROK and U.S. battalion staff. Eventually, the JSA mission will be an all-ROK army mission.” 



 Forty-one U.S. Soldiers compose the Security Battalion’s headquarters. Here, SSG Mark Fletcher checks the weapons inventory in the unit arms room.

Operation Paul Bunyan

THE heinous ax murders on the Demilitarized Zone in Korea occurred on Aug. 18, 1976, when a United Nations Joint Security Area work force tried to trim a tree that stood between two guard posts in the JSA.

The tree posed a security problem because it blocked the JSA Soldiers’ views of critical areas near the “Bridge of No Return.”

As the work force prepared to cut down the tree, North Korean reinforcements arrived on the scene. Suddenly they numbered 30 soldiers to the JSA’s 10.

At one point, Lt. Pok Chol of the North Korean Peoples Army removed his watch and wrapped it in a handkerchief as a sign to kill the Americans, said Wayne Kirkbride, who was the adjutant to the personnel officer for the 2nd Infantry Division stationed at the DMZ at the time and who authored a book about the incident called “Operation Paul Bunyan: Story of a Grizzly Murder.”

The commander of the JSA and one of his most experienced officers were hacked to death with the axes they’d brought to cut down the tree.

The next day officials moved tanks into position near the DMZ and infantrymen moved forward to a staging area in the JSA, according to Kirkbride.

U.S. engineers cut down the tree, under protection of Korean special-forces soldiers and infantrymen. — Heike Hasenauer