



MEMORANDUM

To: National Officers, National Council of Administration, Department Commanders, Department Senior Vice and Junior Vice Commanders, Department Adjutants, and Past Commanders-in-Chief

From: Keith Harman, Commander-in-Chief *Keith E. Harman*

Date: June 7, 2018

Re: 2018 Trip Report to South Korea and Taiwan

Overview

I departed May 22 to visit U.S. service members and VFW comrades stationed or residing in the Republic of Korea, as well as our longtime friends on the Veterans Affairs Council in the Republic of China on Taiwan. I was accompanied by Bob Wallace, Assistant Adjutant General and Executive Director of the VFW Washington Office. We returned on May 30, 2018.

Visiting Korea was very interesting due to the uncertainty about whether a Summit between North Korea's Kim Jong Un and President Trump would take place, and if an agreement concerning denuclearization could be reached. (It was announced after we departed that the Summit would take place June 12.) Everyone we spoke with had concerns whether North Korea could be trusted, since past pledges never happened. The older South Korean generation would like to see reunification to unite the families. The younger generation, however, is concerned how reunification might impact their jobs, educational system and overall economy, which is the fourth largest in Asia and 11th largest worldwide. Meanwhile, the U.S. and South Korean militaries remain on alert, as they have for 65 years, ready to fight if necessary.

South Korea

Our first stop in South Korea was a visit to [Camp Humphreys](#) where we participated in a Memorial Day ceremony with Army Gen. Vincent Brooks, who wears three hats as the senior

American military officer on the peninsula. A life member of VFW Post 341 in Washington, D.C., General Brooks is the commander of United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command, and [U.S. Forces Korea](#). VFW presented a wreath during the ceremony.

Afterwards we were briefed by garrison commander Col. Scott Mueller on the ongoing relocation of soldiers and their units from Yongsan Garrison near Seoul to Camp Humphreys. The relocation is the result of a 2004 agreement to move the majority of U.S. forces out of North Korean artillery range — Seoul is roughly 25 miles away from the DMZ, whereas Camp Humphreys is 60. The South Korean government is paying 95 percent of the cost to relocate the troops and for new construction.

We then hosted a lunch for 20 soldiers and talked about the VFW and our many programs, especially Unmet Needs and the Help a Hero Scholarship. We also emphasized the need to file a VA claim when they transition out of the military, and our legislative work on Capitol Hill. I continue to be amazed that so many service members do not know about our work to create and expand programs for them, their



Lunch with the troops at Camp Humphreys.

families and our nation's veterans. The luncheon was very positive because of the good conversation and questions they had.

Next we visited the 51st Fighter Wing at [Osan Air Base](#) and were briefed by the deputy wing commander, Air Force Col. Cary Culbertson. We then toured the installation, its Morale, Welfare and Recreation facilities, an enlisted dormitory, and the USO. It was very apparent that this installation needed more military construction funding to enhance quality of life facilities for the airmen and families stationed there.

I then had the opportunity to fly a UH-60 Black Hawk simulator. The Black Hawk is the modern-day equivalent of the UH-1 Huey utility helicopter I served on in Vietnam as a crew chief and door gunner. I must admit my time in the simulator was an experience I will not forget. The simulator can change the weather and terrain, as well as incorporate a variety of inflight emergency scenarios. Every Black Hawk pilot must log simulator time as part of their monthly training requirements.

VFW Post 12147 then hosted us to a barbeque, where we had the opportunity to talk with comrades who were active duty military as well as military retirees and veterans, most of whom were Defense Department civilian employees. Mental health was a major concern.



With Army Gen. Vincent Brooks, the senior American military officer in South Korea and VFW life member.

We talked at length about the VFW Mental Health Awareness Program, the work our service officers provide to veterans and their families, and the relevance every member of our great organization can provide to others who have “walked the talk.”

The following day we were briefed by Army Col. Chad Carroll, Director of Public Affairs for U.S. Forces Korea and United Nations Command. The U.S. has approximately 28,000 troops stationed in South Korea (mostly soldiers and airmen), and joint training with South Korean forces is conducted somewhere on the peninsula virtually every day.



Flying a UH-60 Black Hawk simulator at Osan Air Base

Along with having the world’s 11th largest economy, South Korea is also a technology leader, and ranks 10th in global defense spending. Still, military readiness is a constant no matter what, because across the 2.5-mile-wide DMZ lies the world’s fourth largest standing army (1.1 million), and collectively, the world’s largest active, reserve and paramilitary force (9.5 million). North Korea’s military consists mostly of ground forces with aging equipment, but they are good at cyber-attacks, and have a demonstrated nuclear and ballistic missile capability. They also have the world’s largest special operations force, which is said to be equal in quality to our conventional forces. There is eternal hope that diplomacy will work, but South Koreans simply do not trust the North.

We next met with Aleisha Woodward, Minister-Counselor for Public Affairs, and other officials at the U.S. Embassy. The U.S. does not yet have a confirmed Ambassador to South Korea, but the former U.S. Pacific Command commander, now retired Adm. Harry Harris, has been nominated for the position and is awaiting Senate confirmation action. The Deputy Chief of Mission was away on business.

The economic sanctions the U.S. and our allies have placed on North Korea are working, and are a main reason for the North offering to meet. The North said they closed and destroyed their nuclear testing site, but there were no outside observers present, so everyone remains skeptical of the claim. Trust is key in such negotiations, so is independent verification.

We asked why the North is not repatriating the 200 sets of American Korean War remains they are said to have in their possession. We were told the issue is high on the negotiations priority list, but that the North has yet to respond. Of the 7,700 American servicemen missing and unaccounted-for on the Korean peninsula, an estimated 5,300 are reportedly in North Korea. Repatriating their remains would send a strong humanitarian message, yet for some unknown reason the North doesn’t seem to understand the significance of returning American war dead to their families.

Some South Koreans are concerned about the U.S. commitment to their country, and they pay attention to all the rhetoric that comes out of Washington. However, the relationship between our two countries remains very strong. Regarding North Korea, everyone hopes for peace, but as mentioned earlier, trust is key.

After lunch with VFW District 3 Senior Vice Commander Warren Maxson, we had the opportunity to place a VFW wreath at the Seoul National Cemetery, which was the first of only two national cemeteries that South Korea created exclusively for veterans of their Independence Movement, the Korean War and Vietnam War. South Korean soldiers took part in the ceremony by lining up as we walked to the Memorial and assisted in placing the wreath.

We then visited the Ministry of National Defense Agency for KIA Recovery and Identification. This facility is almost identical to our Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency identification labs in Hawaii and Nebraska, though much smaller. The South Koreans told us they had visited our Hawaii lab a number of times. Their mission is the same as DPAA's, which is to investigate, recover and identify remains of missing and unaccounted-for service members.

That evening we were hosted to dinner by the Korean Veterans Association, where we discussed veteran's benefits, their association makeup and funding, as well as North Korea.



Receiving an overview briefing at the DMZ with VFW District 3 Commander Ron Davis.



Peering across the DMZ into North Korea from the Mount Dora observatory.

On our last day we visited the Korean DMZ. We were not able to meet U.S. service members stationed in Panmunjom because of a meeting between the leaders of North and South Korea, but we did look out over the DMZ from the Mount Dora observatory, and tour one of the many tunnels that the North built to infiltrate the South. I was humbled. We have a large number of Korean War and Korean Service veterans in our great organization. Their service and sacrifice to protect South Korea and preserve the peace is not forgotten. That evening we met with members of VFW Post 8180 at their Post home to discuss local and national veterans' initiatives.



Presenting my Commander-in-Chief's medallion to Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen

Taiwan

On Sunday, May 27, we flew to Taipei, Taiwan, where we were hosted by the Veterans Affairs Council leadership. The following morning our first event was a meeting with Republic of China President Tsai Ing-wen, which was very productive as she, too, is very concerned about North Korea, as well as mainland China's construction of military installations in international waterways.

We then participated in a Memorial Day event where I had the opportunity to speak at the POW Wall in Taipei with some American as well as Taiwanese veterans. A small group, but a very fitting remembrance ceremony.

Next was a visit to the Taipei Veterans General Hospital, where we received a briefing on traditional Chinese medicine as well as the operation of the facility. Then we met with the leadership of the Veterans Affairs Council, where we received a detailed briefing on their organization, and then we

were hosted to dinner to continue discussing the long standing relationship between our two organizations, as well as North Korea and China concerns.

On May 29 we visited the former [Kinkaseki POW Camp](#) and received a detailed briefing from Michael Hurst, Director of the Memorial Society. The conditions these American and British soldiers endured were horrendous to say the least. We next visited the Banqiao Veterans Home, where we had the opportunity to meet a number of Taiwanese veterans who reside in the home.

We returned to CONUS the next day.

Closing Comments

As mentioned, North Korea cannot be trusted, and any agreement reached must have strong international verification language inserted before the agreement is signed. The agreement must also include language that will enable Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency teams to safely access recovery sites and return our fallen Americans home.

Visiting U.S. commands and servicemen and women stationed in Korea was very rewarding, and visiting during uncertain times was very educational. It gave us the opportunity to tell the VFW story and explain our many programs that benefit service members and their families who are



At a Veterans Hospital in Taipei listening to the benefits of combining traditional and modern medical practices.

literally stationed on the front lines. Our visit also conveyed to every service member we met that the VFW cares enough to visit them where they are stationed. That speaks volumes.

The Taiwanese have been friends of the VFW for decades, and learning how they care for their own veterans was very beneficial, since traditional medicine is being incorporated in Taiwan, but not by many in our own Department of Veterans Affairs.

A special thanks to Larry Lyons, Past Commander of the VFW Department of Pacific, for a job well done in assisting in the planning of our visit, and for his hospitality and friendship. I also want to thank the members of District 3 we had the opportunity to meet, and especially those who escorted us to all of the meetings and events we attended.

This was a very educational trip that I recommend for all future VFW Commanders-in-Chief.

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