

# DMZ:

## Symbol of a Shaky Peace

A few friends and I had been on a bus since 2 a.m. from Gwangju in order to make the 7 a.m. call time at Seoul's Camp Kim for the USO DMZ Tour. Arriving there on a chilly December morning at the crack of dawn perhaps made us a little more wired than usual. As the day unfolded, despite our lack of sleep we somehow propelled through a busy day of hiking and sightseeing within visibility of North Korea. Our every move was being monitored by the North and South; the tension in the air was palpable. Visiting the DMZ was not a typical tourist attraction, but a fascinating glimpse into a lasting relic of the Cold War and our reclusive neighbors to the North.

The DMZ, or Demilitarized Zone, separating North Korea from South Korea was created in 1953 at the end of the Korean War through the Armistice of July 27, 1953. Running at the 38th parallel, the area represents

a buffer between North and South that is 155 miles (248km) long and 2.5 miles (4km) wide. The 38th parallel divided the peninsula in half and reflects the former U.S. and Soviet zones on either side. Today it is one of the most tensely militarized borders in the world. The Military Demarcation Line (MDL) illustrates the exact point at which both military fronts stopped fighting and agreed to the Armistice; however, since a peace treaty was never signed, both sides technically continue to be at war. While soldiers (American, South Korean and North Korean) on both sides may patrol the DMZ per the Armistice through the UN Command (UNC), crossing the MDL is out of the question and could result in severe aggression from either side if not respected.

U.S. Officer Juarez, our guide and official military escort for the USO DMZ tour, brought us to Camp Bonifas, the base camp for the UN Command Security Force Joint



South Korean soldiers stand watch in front of Conference Row Military Armistice Commission buildings.



Left: U.S. Officer Juarez forcefully issues instructions on how to act at Conference Row. Right: Guards at the pagoda in the Joint Security Area

Security Area (JSA). Just having a military escort seemed to heighten the uneasiness we felt as we entered the heavily guarded JSA. As we continued to be briefed on how to behave while at Conference Row, we walked through Freedom House, a building erected by South Korea to host family reunions among members separated by the Korean War and the ensuing split on the peninsula. Unfortunately, we were told no such reunions had actually taken place since it opened in the 1990s due to a lack of cooperation from the North.

"No hand gestures; no waving; no sign language; no pointing! [while standing in front of the JSA facing the North Korean side]," we were warned by Officer Juarez. While standing in front of Conference Row at JSA facing the Military Demarcation Line, we were as close as we could get to North Korea without causing an international incident or having a very elusive entry visa.

As we walked through Freedom House with a surprisingly ostentatious chandelier in the otherwise drab concrete building, we noticed discreetly placed South Korean soldiers dressed in green suits watching us at short range. We walked outside and saw Conference Row – a row of low blue houses serving as the location of the Military Armistice Commission Buildings. These buildings play host to meetings essential to maintaining the 1953 Armistice Agreement.

Facing us just beyond the ubiquitous UN flags and Conference Row houses was Pamun-gak, North Korea's counterpart to the South's Freedom House across the street. North Korea was straight ahead, its lone soldier guarding the entrance. We were told our every move was still being monitored and the 'no gesturing' directive was taken seriously even if one casually raised his/her hand to ask a question.

"Why are some soldiers standing with their legs shoulder-width apart, some with their backs to us, others facing us?" I asked as I waved my hand discreetly, the way you hail a cab Korean style, with palms down. Officer Juarez responded they were South Korean soldiers looking out for our safety from both sides as we stood there. Other soldiers in camouflage moved about watching us, watching them. The air was still. Our apprehension was building.

Officer Juarez went on to mention that as the North watches us, they make gestures hoping to provoke us such as slashing throat gestures and using their middle fingers. Fortunately, we were not brought to the area where this was visible, but just knowing this occurred made some want to reciprocate. This was quickly quashed by Officer Juarez's forceful tone reiterating the initial instruction from earlier that day.

We later walked outside to the pagoda adjacent to the Freedom House, where we were told about various



A colorful DMZ welcome sign is at odds with the military tension of the DMZ.

attempts at defection from North to South. We saw an enormous North Korean flag waving in the distance – one of the biggest on Earth, according to Officer Juarez. The flag was yet another reminder of our close proximity to the cloistered North.

We headed back to the base camp to buy souvenirs. Replicas of North Korean won and authentic bottles of wine as well as military gear seemed most popular. Later, we went to the 3rd Tunnel by bus and left our military escort behind.

Then, we watched an informative film on the discovery of the tunnels leading from the North to the South. We learned that while only four tunnels have been discovered since 1974, experts suspect that up to ten exist that were designed by the North to launch sneak attacks on Seoul. Eventually, we headed down the 3rd Tunnel with hard hats and without cameras.

While the North maintained the tunnels were built as coal mines and even painted the walls black to further justify themselves, geologists argue this implausibility given the topology of the rock bed and the direction the original rock blasts were made. Hearing this and other facts drives the message home that this was no ordinary tourist spot. The DMZ statues and playful figurines outside the entrance belie the unsettling nature of the information we gained.

Finally, we made it to the Dora Observatory where we could see Kijong-dong or Propaganda Village, the

façade of a city designed by North Korea to show it as a prosperous country. Propaganda literally is blasted from speakers around the town extolling the virtues of the North to the folks in neighboring Taesong-dong six to twelve hours a night. Through binoculars you could see the desolation of Kijong-dong and wonder what was really going on behind the scenes.

Across the way, we could see Freedom village or Taesong-dong, where Koreans who have ancestral roots there have stayed to maintain their homes under certain conditions. The only legal inhabitants of the area receive tax breaks and other benefits that encourage them to stay despite living in the heart of an age-old war zone.

On our way back to Seoul, we learned of the nature preserve that is being maintained on the grounds of the DMZ despite the immeasurable number of landmines and constant military patrols. Many endangered species are apparently thriving there due to protection from industrial pollution normally found in densely populated areas. Even DMZ Water is ironically sold in the South, marketing the sense of peace this natural haven evokes. While this illustrates how barriers are being eradicated, will it ever really lead to a genuine peace on the peninsula? One can only wonder. Even without North Korea in sight, the gravity of an uneasy peace was very alive.

*Words and photos by Alva French*