



## WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS



# A KOREA EXPERIENCE

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The U.S. Army has Soldiers deployed to approximately 120 different locations worldwide. We are a forward deployed force sent to promote and ensure U.S. political, economic, and security interests. As part of our continuing presence in these foreign lands, it has become one of our goals to “win the hearts and minds” of the people of the host nation. In today’s political environment, where Americans are no longer welcomed with open arms in many parts of the world, this goal is imperative. It is imperative not only to ensure the safety of our Soldiers, but to assist us in accomplishing our national goals as well as ensuring support for our continued presence, both domestically and abroad.

But, how do we go about “winning the hearts and minds?” What follows are ideas and observations based on experience while serving as the commander of the United Nations Command Security Battalion – Joint Security Area (UNCSB-JSA) located in Panmunjom, Republic of Korea (ROK). This unique battalion was comprised of 600 Soldiers, 60 percent of which were ROK officers and Soldiers. The UNCSB-JSA was the only U.S. tactical unit that executed operations inside the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). These included security operations inside the DMZ and administering the civil affairs for the Korean village of Tae Song Dong (TSD). This small farming village is the only South Korean village located inside the DMZ. The villagers lived, worked, and played within a “stone’s throw” of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) and were constantly under the observation of armed North Korea combat outposts.

The leaders and Soldiers of the UNCSB-JSA monitored and controlled virtually every aspect of the villagers’ lives. This included maintaining order and discipline, holding mayoral elections, determining residency eligibility, controlling access to the village, serving as a conduit to the United

Nations Command (UNC) for approval for construction or village improvements, and approval for expansion of farming areas within the DMZ. Most importantly, the battalion provided around the clock security for the villagers and guest workers, both inside the village as well as in the farming areas – many of which bordered right along the MDL. In order to accomplish these missions, it was imperative that the leaders and Soldiers of the UNCSB-JSA gain the willing cooperation of the villagers.

Additionally, since the battalion was a “combined” unit, consisting of both American and Korean officers and Soldiers, it was imperative that we created the environment that facilitated the formation of a cohesive and effective team. This was complicated since we were dealing with components of two completely different military cultures and national characters.

In order to do this, it was our belief that there were five key components to “winning the hearts and minds” of the Koreans that we worked with and were responsible for:



Heike Hasenauer

*Major Jose Devarona (front right), the battalion executive officer for the U.N. Command Security Battalion, glances toward the tall building in the background, which is the North Korean side of Panmunjom — the site where many discussions have been held with North Korean officials in the past.*

- Understanding and respecting the culture;
- Building a foundation of trust, confidence and mutual respect;
- Developing personal relationships;
- Attending social and cultural events; and
- Working to improve their quality of life.

### IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECTING THE CULTURE

In John Peddie's book *The Roman War Machine*, he describes how Roman generals made it a matter of policy to establish good relations with the native people of the occupied territories that made up the Roman Empire. To the Romans, the exercise of good public relations aimed at gaining the friendship and support of local inhabitants was not only wise, but a military necessity. Roman armies, compared with the populations of their conquered territories, were small in size, and the number of legionnaires required maintaining security and numerical superiority would have been considerable and wasteful. The Romans desired to turn over responsibility for law and order to the people of the conquered territories as soon as possible. He writes how Augustus, during the war with the Germans, found a tree laden with fruit located inside his marching camp. The day after the withdrawal of the army, the local populace found the tree and fruit undisturbed. Although this example is simplistic, it may give an indication of how the Romans managed to maintain a vast empire for almost 2,000 years. To the Romans, it was all about respect. Respect for the culture, respect for the customs, respect for the traditions, respect for the religion, respect for the property, and respect for the people of the lands that the legions were garrisoned in.

Although the United States does not maintain an "empire" in the traditional sense, we do have units and Soldiers deployed all over the world, providing security, stability, and ensuring U.S. interests are maintained. Just as the Romans recognized, in order to effectively accomplish this we first must gain the respect of the people of the host nation. The



Courtesy photos

*U.S. and ROK Soldiers assigned to the United Nations Command Security Battalion-Joint Security Area patrol an area of the Tae Song Dong village.*

first step in earning this respect is for our Soldiers to learn, understand, and then respect as much about the nation, its culture, customs, and traditions as possible.

The term "ugly American" is familiar to anyone who has traveled overseas. It is very easy for Americans, especially military personnel, to think of ourselves as superior to people of other nations — superior intellectually, morally, culturally, professionally, physically, etc. Although we may feel superior in any or all of these areas, we should never convey or demonstrate this to our hosts. We must recognize that people from all nations take great pride in their country, its history, customs and traditions. We must acknowledge and recognize this! Treat the people of the host country with dignity and respect and embrace the differences and nuances of their culture, customs, and traditions.

Some countries, Korea for example, have an incredibly diverse and rich history, unique culture, and traditions that are over a thousand years old. But from a practical sense, how do we go about understanding and respecting the culture of our host nation? It first starts with education. Our leaders and Soldiers must become knowledgeable about the host nation; its people, religion, customs, traditions, history, etc.

This education process was fully integrated into the training program at the UNCSB-JSA. Even though U.S. forces had been a fixture in the ROK since the Korean War, we were amazed how little ROK Soldiers knew about America and its people. The same, even more so, could be said for U.S. Soldiers who served in the UNCSB-JSA. For the most part, they were completely ignorant of the nuances of Korean society and even why the U.S. Army was in Korea. A technique that we used to mitigate this lack of knowledge and understanding was twice each year we gave a "U.S. – Korea" presentation to all Soldiers in the battalion, both Korean and American. This half-day presentation covered major aspects of life in both countries to include history, government, leaders, customs, sports, religion, entertainment, music, etc. In a combined forum, we briefed the American perspective to the ROK Soldiers and the Korean perspective to the U.S. Soldiers. The intent was to give the Soldiers and leaders a broad understanding of our two nations and their people, highlighting the similarities and differences of the two. With it came a greater understanding of the basis of each side's actions, beliefs, and why we acted in the manner that we did.

Additionally, six days a week, senior leaders of the battalion gathered each

morning for an operational update. This update covered the day's upcoming activities, patrols, visitors, training, and intelligence summary. Before we began, the battalion S2 (U.S. officer) and S3 Air (ROK officer) presented significant news highlights and items of interest from both the U.S. and the ROK. This always generated discussion and served to further educate both Americans and Koreans about our two nations and gain a better understanding of each other.

Learning and understanding the culture, customs and traditions of Korea was only a starting point. It was important for us to not only respect these, but we attempted to apply them in day-to-day activities as well. Some examples that were a part of our experience included taking our shoes or boots off prior to entering a person's home, sitting on the floor and eating meals from a table approximately one foot high, eating with chop sticks, socializing prior to conducting business, greeting Koreans in their native language, and respecting the ROK soldiers as they sang their national anthem each morning during PT formation. These are just several examples; there were many more.

These examples may seem trivial to Americans and our serious, professional business-oriented culture, but they were very important to the Koreans and assisted us in earning their trust, confidence, and respect.

### **TRUST, CONFIDENCE AND RESPECT**

The intent of honoring and respecting the Korean culture, traditions, and customs was to build a foundation of trust, confidence, and respect between the Soldiers and leaders of the UNCSB-JSA and the Korean people. The more trust, confidence and respect that we developed at all levels, the easier it became for us to gain the cooperation, assistance, and support of the Koreans, especially the villagers of TSD and the ROK Soldiers of the battalion.

This garnered many practical benefits to the battalion. These included increased and more productive dialogue, better intelligence (especially from ROK governmental organizations), willing cooperation for initiatives, support for quality of life improvements and security issues, better treatment of U.S. Soldiers, improved relations between ROK and U.S. Soldiers, and increased cooperation by members of the local populace concerning training activities and operations in and along the DMZ.

Most importantly, gaining the trust, confidence, and respect of our Korean hosts showed America, its Army, and its people in the best light possible. The Korean soldiers that were selected to serve in the UNCSB-JSA were some of the best and brightest young men in the ROK. Upon completion of their military service, they returned to Korean society attending universities, with many going on to become leaders in business, government, and the military. Their impression of Americans and the United States was shaped by their experience serving in the UNCSB-JSA. We did our best to ensure that this impression was a positive one — showing Americans as intelligent, respectful, open-minded, and compassionate individuals.



### **DEVELOPING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

As mentioned earlier, Americans (especially military personnel) generally believe in and display a more business-oriented (i.e. less personal) approach to our affairs than do many other nationalities. Establishing a personal relationship with those that we work with or do business with is often considered unimportant or unnecessary. This was not our belief and experience in the UNCSB-JSA. Establishing close, personal and professional relationships between individuals was a key component to effective operations, especially when dealing with people from two different nationalities.

Every effort was made to create conditions that promoted and fostered the ability to build personal and professional relationships between the U.S. and ROK Soldiers, and our Soldiers and the TSD villagers. In the battalion, there was no such thing as a Korean-only or U.S.-only event. All functions and activities were "combined," designed to bring Americans and Koreans together. ROK Soldiers were encouraged (and many did) to bring U.S. Soldiers home with them while on pass to show them their country and give them a taste of the "real Korea." American Soldiers were likewise encouraged to take ROK Soldiers to the Yongsan U.S. Army Base in Seoul. Soldiers, leaders, and units were paired up with counterparts for all social and morale building activities. Teams were integrated for athletic competitions and all training and operations included a mix of Koreans and Americans. Every effort was made to form habitual relationships between individuals and units in anticipation that this would lead to enhanced personal and professional associations. Although maintaining national integrity in many of these activities would have been easier (especially given the language barrier), the creation of personal and professional bonds between individuals was an integral part of building trust, confidence, and respect for each other and successfully operating in a combined environment.

### **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EVENTS**

Social and cultural activities are a part of every society in the world. These were a big part of life in Korea, the village of Tae Song Dong, and with the ROK Soldiers in the UNCSB-JSA. These included national and local celebrations, dinners, weddings, funerals, parties, barbecues, school events, sporting events, and religious events. When invited, we made every effort to attend these events. On the rare occasion when we did not receive an invitation, we made it known that we were interested in attending and actively sought an invitation. Once again, this showed the Koreans that we were interested in their culture and wanted to learn more about them personally.

Attending social and cultural events were viewed as an opportunity. They were an opportunity to get to know the Koreans on a more personal level and, more importantly, for them to get to know us. Social events provided a venue for Americans and Koreans to interact in a relaxed atmosphere, facilitating relationship building and cultural understanding. Leaders and

Soldiers of the battalion were encouraged to participate in as many social or cultural events as they could make time for. When we attended these events, we ate what the Koreans ate and in the manner that was their custom, drank what they drank, participated in the games and sporting events, met and talked with members of the community — especially wives and children, and did our very best to respect the customs and traditions that were a part of these events.

This allowed the Koreans to see a personal side of American Soldiers and view us as respectful, considerate, and open-minded. These events became so important to our philosophy of gaining the trust and respect of the TSD villagers that all village cultural and social events were annotated on the battalion training calendar and became command-directed events for many of the leaders of the battalion. Although sometimes there was “mumbling and grumbling” prior to going to many of these events, I cannot think of a Soldier who did not feel that their time in Korea was enriched by these experiences.

Keeping this same intent, we always invited the Koreans to traditional American events and functions hosted by the battalion. These included 4th of July celebrations, Thanksgiving and Christmas meals in the dining facility, unit organizational days, athletic and sport competitions, unit barbecues, Oktoberfest parties, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, and coffees and social events hosted by the American wives. When possible, we assigned escorts or sponsors to the Koreans which facilitated getting to know our Soldiers. We found that the Koreans were fascinated by these events, our customs and traditions, and for the most part, thoroughly enjoyed them.

An example of how small gestures can go a long way toward building a positive image occurred during my second year in the battalion. The ROK leaders and families hosted a formal dinner for the senior American leaders and families as part of their annual Chusok celebration. This is probably the most important Korean celebration, on par with our Thanksgiving, where Koreans come together with their entire extended family to honor their ancestors. The Koreans went to great



*American leaders and families wore traditional Korean dress to a 2003 Chusok celebration.*

lengths and expense to make this dinner special for the Americans. They prepared wonderful traditional Korean dishes and treated the entire evening as if they were with “family.” The battalion S3 and I, along with our wives, wore traditional Korean dress (Hanbok) to the dinner. The Koreans were amazed and delighted that we were willing to wear the traditional dress. This gesture enhanced our relationship with the Koreans as word and pictures spread throughout the battalion of the respect we had shown this important cultural event.

#### **ENHANCING QUALITY OF LIFE**

One of the most effective tools for building trust between the Koreans (ROK Soldiers and TSD villagers) and the battalion was demonstrating our commitment to improving their quality of life.

Given the isolated location of the battalion (400 meters south of the DMZ), complete absence of local, off-camp recreational activities, and extended operational requirements (Soldiers received only one four-day pass per month), quality of life for the Soldiers was of prime importance to the battalion leadership. Considering that most of the ROK Soldiers were operating and living in an unfamiliar

environment (on a U.S. Army installation), special attention was given to improving their quality of life. These included providing Korean food in the dining facility, purchasing Korean movies and showing them on our battalion movie channel, improving living conditions at our operational sites in the DMZ, providing each platoon their own barbecue, purchasing Korean newspapers for distribution, etc. All of these were fairly simple initiatives, but they had an enormous impact on building respect and trust in the leadership of the battalion.

Although security of Tae Song Dong and the villagers was our number one priority and dominated our decision making, any issue concerning the village was always considered in the context of how it would impact on the villagers’ quality of life. Our goal was not just to sustain the village, but do everything in our power to improve the village and enhance the villagers’ quality of life. This included all facets of village life such as modernization, beautification, streamlining of many administrative requirements, enhancing business opportunities, implementing school improvements, enhancing available religious services, increasing recreational opportunities, promoting village exposure, and tempering disruptive security requirements.

As the relationship between the villagers and the leaders of the UNCSB-JSA matured and a sense of mutual trust permeated both, the villagers became comfortable enough to raise issues that they had previously withheld. We discovered that the villagers had a number of ideas to improve life in the village. They apparently had made some of these ideas and requests known for years but had never seen any visible action on the part of the UNC leadership to address them. This resulted in a corresponding loss of trust in the UNC leadership.

An example of this and how we turned it around to our advantage occurred during one of our quarterly town council meetings. The villagers had been seeking approval to establish cell-phone coverage inside the village and adjacent DMZ farming area. This required construction of a cell-phone antenna station within the village,

something that required UNC approval. To the villagers, this was a significant quality of life as well as a prestige issue, since the village touted itself as a model of modern South Korean life and was designed to be a showcase village in the eyes of North Korean leaders and tourists. From the villager's perspective, each time they raised this issue, it appeared that nothing was ever done to move the issue forward and gain approval, and their request was consistently denied.

When they made the request known, we discovered that there was no valid reason to deny the request. It made too much sense. It enhanced the villagers' quality of life and had the added benefit of assisting the battalion in providing security to the villagers. We now had an alternate form of effective communication, in lieu of land-line and secure radio, within the DMZ. Within two months of making the request, we gained UNC approval, the tower was constructed, and the villagers had cell phone coverage. Immediately, there was enhanced respect and trust in the leadership of the battalion. We demonstrated, in a tangible way, that we were willing to take action to back up our stated goal of enhancing the quality of life of the villagers.

I can not overstate how effective being truly concerned for the TSD villagers and ROK soldiers' welfare and quality of life was in building a foundation of trust between the Americans and Koreans. Once again, this dynamic provided some very tangible benefits to the battalion. Whenever we asked for support or concessions from the villagers on certain issues, they were more inclined to agree and support our requests. This was extremely important during the high OPTEMPO planting and harvest seasons when we had to ask their cooperation to schedule and coordinate farming efforts, ensuring that we could provide sufficient armed security escorts whenever a villager



*The author (at right) poses for a photo with the mayor of Tae Song Dong village. Although security of Tae Song Dong and the villagers was the UNCSB-JSA's number one priority and dominated decision making, any issue concerning the village was always considered in the context of how it would impact on the villagers' quality of life.*

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or worker went into the fields. This was initially met with resistance, but once we gained the trust and confidence of the villagers, they came to support the effort wholeheartedly.

### **WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS IS HERE TO STAY**

No one can accurately predict what the future holds for the U.S. Army, but it seems clear that the Army will be involved in stability, support, and security operations throughout the world for the foreseeable future. As long as the United States has political, economic or security interests in a particular country or region, and other governmental organizations continue to display an inability to respond or influence as they were intended to (i.e. State Department), the U.S. Army will remain at the forefront of promoting American interests overseas. As long as this dynamic remains, our long-term success will undoubtedly be predicated not so much on our military prowess, but on our ability to gain and retain the willing support of the people of our host nations. To accomplish this, it seems clear that commanders, leaders and Soldiers must actively seek ways in which to "win the hearts and minds" of the populace. This will require deliberate planning, conscious execution, and must be made an integral part of any deployment operation. Isolating ourselves in our base camps and limiting our contact with the local populace will only breed mistrust and fail to capitalize on our greatest strength — the American character and ideal as demonstrated by our Soldiers. The people of other nations must see and be exposed to this. Leaders must look for opportunities to make contact with and build personal relationships with members of the host nation. It is only through the creation of interpersonal relationships that we can we establish a foundation of mutual trust, respect, and confidence. Once established, there is no limit to what can be accomplished by people from two nationalities working together toward a common goal.

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