

Paengnyong-Do Revisited: A GI returns after 58 years.

By Wally Barnett

As I recall it took 10 days in December 1951, for the WWII USS General M. C. Meigs to transport 5000 of us from San Francisco bay to Yokohama, Japan. A few days later, in January, some of us found ourselves on the island of Paengnyong-do in Korea. I was a 20-year-old A1c at the time.

On September 20, 2010, it took only 10 hours for Korean Air to fly my wife, Joyce, and I from Seattle to Incheon on a Boeing 777-200. After two nights in Incheon, the fast boat took about five hours to arrive at Yonggippo Port on this 31 sq. mi. island located 140 miles northwest of Incheon and ten miles off the coast of North Korea. The Sagot Beach natural airfield is now a national monument and no longer an airfield. The changes to Paengnyong-do (spelling has been officially changed to Baengnyeong-do, but still pronounced Peng-yang-do) are truly amazing. We were treated as honored guests because we were the only Caucasians on the island and, to their recollection, I was the only GI to have returned to PY-do. Please correct me if I'm wrong. Now we know what it's like to be a minority of two in a sea of some 6000 Koreans.

On the fast boat to PY-do a young man from the island sat beside me. I showed him 30 old Paengnyong-do photos from 1952 that I'd brought with me. He was so fascinated by these "historical" old photos that he propped each one up on his lap and took a photo of the photo. He had a great camera. He then disappeared and returned with a younger co-worker of his who had once attended Santa Barbara Community College in California for a year and who was quite fluent in English. They invited us to visit the county government offices the next day, helped us with our luggage, and delivered us to our hotel. The next day we met the deputy mayor of the Island, Kim Dae Sik, and he copied all of the old photos for an historical story he was going to write for the island newspaper.

Nothing is the same except the view from the top of the mountain where the 608 AC&W detachment 3 used to be located. From dirt roads and mud-walled houses with thatched roofs, the island now boasts modern paved roads and highways with curbs, gutters, streetlights; and sports fields. Yonggippo has a new pier where the fast boat arrives twice a day, weather permitting. The village of Chinchon-ni, at the base of our mountain, has grown into a small city with electricity, modern buildings, churches, hospitals, hotels, schools, and lots of retail stores, and including a county government administration building, because the island is now officially part of what they call the Incheon Metropolitan City. Tree planting efforts have changed the island from drab to green.

This unit of government is what has completely modernized the infrastructure of this island. It impresses us as a 100-year leap in 58 years. In addition to the modern roads and highways they have modernized the fishing ports, and built a dam at the far end of Sagot Beach natural airfield to keep the seawater out of what used to be enormous tide-flats covering the interior of the island. Four fifths of the old tide-flats have been converted to agricultural use and the remaining one-fifth is now a freshwater lake used for irrigation of the new croplands.

Another huge leap forward is the modernization of the island's defenses. About the third day we were fortunate to meet Colonel Kim, commander-in-chief of the ROK marines

defense forces on PY-do. He told us the island population is now about 6,000 and that roughly half of the population are ROK marines. The other half is comprised of farmers, fishermen, and townspeople. The entire coastline is dotted with lookout towers on almost every hilltop and the secluded beaches are defended with anti-landing craft spikes at the low tide water line and chain-link fences topped with razor wire on the rises above the beaches. The most popular beaches are open to the public. One day we were driving along and encountered four huge ROK army tanks out on field maneuvers firing their cannon at some imaginary foe in the distance. The roar was tremendous and quite scary.

All Korean males are subject to two years of military service when they reach the age of 19. They're no longer the short guys that we might remember. Now they're all about 6' tall or more, and their discipline and neat uniforms are second to none. Every shirt looks freshly pressed, every sleeve has three sharp pleats from collar to cuff, and every cap is perfectly positioned. We were greatly impressed. After our meeting, Colonel Kim assigned two uniformed lieutenants to escort us around the island the next day. They spoke pretty fair English. 99% of the islanders do not know more than a word or two. I had purchased a Berlitz Travelers Phrase Book, a Korean/English dictionary, and a book on Korean culture before we departed, so we were as prepared as we could be.

As they drove us around we came upon a man with a dozen gas cylinders in the back of his truck filling 10-foot long cylindrical plastic balloons. To the bottoms he attached small packages. We watched as the man dispatched them into the prevailing westerly winds. The lieutenants informed us that the man was sending correspondence, gifts, and money from people on the island to their friends and relatives in North Korea. They said the balloons, if found, were always delivered to the people intended, unless they were found and confiscated by the authorities. North Korea is still very much a closed society.

To book a hotel or rent a car was amazingly simple. We chose a hotel two blocks up the hill in the heart of Chinchon-ni (now spelled Jinchon), met the manager and she handed us a key. No registration. When we informed her that we would like to rent a car the next day, a new Hyundai Avanti appeared at our doorstep promptly at 9 am and we were handed the keys. No registration whatsoever. All we had to do was settle our accounts on our last day on the island. Yes, VISA is accepted everywhere.

Food was a bit of a problem. We found an "American" restaurant on the outskirts of Jinchon doing business as the "Don Quixote". The owner, who soon became our best friend on the island, was kind enough to make us breakfasts with four scrambled eggs for the two of us. Korean restaurants do not use a breakfast menu. The dinner menu is used all day. His menu included four kinds of pizza, some pork specialties, and several kinds of spaghetti. We ate breakfast and dinner at the Don Quixote every day because we had tired of Korean food during two days in Incheon. No offense – just a cultural difference.

After a week of exploring the island in our Hyundai, Joyce decided to read, rest, and relax, so I was off on my own. I soon discovered a place called Kondol Beach. On the rise above the beach were two or three modest buildings one of which was serving some Korean food. This peaceful location had outdoor tables, chairs, and multi-colored beach umbrellas. It was here that I sampled some island specialties including cooked crab, octopus, and kimchi. It was here that I also discovered Soju, a favorite Korean beverage with an alcoholic content of about 20%. It was stronger than wine but not as strong as

vodka. A 16 oz. bottle of Soju produced by Jinro sells for 1300 won (\$1.12) in grocery stores or 3000 won (\$2.58) at all eating establishments whether on the island or in Incheon.

I had the 30 old photos from 1952 with me. All I had to do was show them to some old guys and we were soon conversing as best we could, and nipping on the Soju. The weather was still beautiful and we could see a fast boat in the distance as it departed Yonggipo pier heading south-east to Incheon, about 140 miles away. It was a great way to spend an afternoon on Baengnyeong-do. We spent many days exploring other small towns.

Joyce had acquired a bruise that required attention so one day we went to the hospital in Incheon. Lack of a common language was a severe handicap but we saw the doctor, got the necessary treatment that included an x-ray, and paid the bill, which came to 29,922 Korean Won or \$25.73. Again, VISA was accepted.

On two Sundays we went to mass at the Catholic Church up on the hill by the hospital. Street shoes are not worn in churches or private homes. Rubber sandals are provided. For some reason unknown to us, two-thirds of the women sat in front on the left side of the aisle while one-third sat on the right, and they all wore fancy little white silk scarves on their heads. The men were scattered around in the back where we were. But what impressed us the most was everyone singing in perfect unison. Their words rang clear as a bell even though we understood only the "Amen". Koreans love to sing and they do it very well. We were impressed.

After mass on the second Sunday, one of the deacons invited us to dinner at his home on Tuesday evening. Instead of sitting on the floor and eating at low tables Korean style, he had borrowed tables and chairs from the church, invited all of his extended family (about twelve) and, as we found out later, had even hired a translator from the mainland. Korean food was served along with red wine and Soju. It was a fun evening as the deacon showed off his foreign "dignitaries" and we soaked up more Korean culture.

Life on Baengnyeong-do is rather laid back, somewhat like a small town in the mid-west many years ago. Despite being politically attached to the big city of Incheon it still maintains a rural atmosphere. Crime is next to non-existent and people don't even bother to lock their doors. One day I carelessly left my wallet on a ticket counter in Incheon. When I came back ten minutes later it was still there completely intact. No one had even touched it.

We have developed an even greater respect for these people as a result of this trip. They say you can't go back, but we're very glad we did. To see such remarkable progress in such a short period of time is greatly rewarding. We've seen a lot of the world, but our return to Baengnyeong-do will always be my favorite memory. Even Joyce enjoyed it a lot more than she thought she would.

This was especially written for a web site called "The Korean War Project" hoping it will reach all of the old air force guys who have ever served on Paengnyong-do, but we hope that others will find it interesting as a human-interest story.