

Running *with the* Pack



There's a pride gained by running with the pack. What they do is challenging, but they're up to the demand. There's a sense that there's nothing they can't tackle, as long as they do it together.

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr. ✪ photos by Master Sgt. Val Gempis

Like a knotted tree that has withstood the effects of time and war, Kunsan Air Base in South Korea has character. More importantly, it revels in that uniqueness.

It's nothing for the wing commander to greet newcomers while wearing a gas mask and chem gear during a local exercise as they step off the Patriot Express for the first time, sleepy and easily confused.

It's also nothing for members to participate in an annual off-base festival that pays tribute to mud.

And it's one of the few bases where the wing commander isn't necessarily addressed by rank and

Security forces troops at the "Kun" train hard to prepare for any contingencies in Korea. Here, they attack enemy positions under the cover of smoke. Kunsan Air Base holds regular base defense exercises to keep its people and equipment in top shape.



Headhunter allies

On the walls of the 80th Fighter Squadron and its supporting maintenance unit is a black and white picture of a fierce looking little man with an ox-sized ring through his nose and ear decor that can be seen from 50 paces, which is about the distance one would want to be from this island warrior.

The man is a New Guinea headhunter and the reason the 80th Fighter Squadron nicknamed itself the "Headhunters."

The battle of the Coral Sea and the fight at Guadalcanal in 1942 ended the Japanese drive across the southwest Pacific, but Japanese troops still controlled the northern half of New Guinea. Before Gen. Douglas MacArthur could begin his drive to liberate the Philippines, he had to defeat the enemy forces in New Guinea. General MacArthur's first priority was to destroy the enemy's air strength until the United States commanded the skies over New Guinea, which would allow land and amphibious forces to advance under the constant protection of Allied fighters and bombers.

According to squadron history, on July 20, 1942, the 80th and 41st fighter squadrons deployed to Port Moresby, New Guinea, and replaced the badly mauled 35th and 36th squadrons.



80th Fighter Squadron patch

Squadron lore has it that during their time there, New Guinean headhunter tribes, who fiercely hated the Japanese, helped rescue downed pilots. Since they shared a common enemy, the headhunter villages that surrounded the base also loosely provided another level of perimeter defense for the 80th.

It's a photo of one of those headhunter allies that adorns the maintenance squadron hallway. That same likeness also was captured by Yale Saffro, a P-39 crew chief and former Walt Disney artist who designed the 80th's symbol the squadron uses to this day. It's his rendition of America's headhunter allies.

— Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.

last name. Instead, he's often referred to as "Wolf." His call sign suits him since he's the alpha leader of a unit known as the Wolf Pack, the 8th Fighter Wing.

He and the rest of the pack don't hide behind half-truths. They'll tell you straight-up that Kunsan can be a lonely tour of duty that requires airmen to leave behind family and friends for a year. That's not easy. But people are bound by their mission. There's a pride gained by running with the pack. What they do is challenging, but they're up to the demand. There's a sense that there's nothing they can't tackle, as long as they do it together.

Running with the big dogs

Kunsan's mission is simple and straightforward: Defend the base, accept follow-on forces and take the fight north. It's easy to climb on board and get with the program. New members are expected to run with the big dogs only days after arrival.

"When people get here, we spin them up quickly," said Chief Master Sgt. Eric Johnson, the wing's command chief master sergeant. "Everyone knows our role in Korea. We're training for war. They have to learn quickly because it's their lives at stake."

Time and again the mission and seriousness of their jobs are emphasized. The Wolf speaks to newcomers only minutes after their arrival. He briefs them on South Korean history — its Japanese and Soviet Union rule, the splitting of Korea at the 38th parallel, and the danger they face today.

"We're 100 miles from the DMZ," the Wolf barked at the fresh new faces. "North Korea has the fourth largest army in the world, so the training you do today may save your life tomorrow."

It's short, to the point and sobering. However, it's not all mission, mission, mission. The newest members of the pack will also get a chance to better themselves, according to the Wolf.





“Our creed here is to do something to make the Wolf Pack better, do something to make yourself better, and take care of each other,” the Wolf said.

Airman Adam Carter traveled to Kunsan with eyes wide open. His first assignment after technical school, Kunsan is not unlike his hometown of Island, Ky., with its 345 residents and one gas station.

Airman Carter visits temples and parks to uncover the secrets of his host nation. “I love Korea and its culture,” said the 20-year-old security forces member. “Keeping your honor is important here. Without honor, you’re nothing.”

The base makes a special effort to help young airmen get out of the dorms and explore. Airman Carter “SCAMs” tours to get them cheaper. SCAM is the name for the “special consideration for airman” program, which provides airmen a discount on tours and off-duty activities.

In addition, Airman Carter has his sights set on mastering martial arts and attending the Air Force

U.S. military troops join Koreans to get down and dirty inside a mud pit during the Boryeong Mud Festival near Kunsan. A favorite event attended by airmen stationed in South Korea, the annual festival includes mudsliding, mud wrestling and dodge ball in a mud pit.

Academy. He’s figured all this out in the year and a half he’s been in the Air Force. “My dad is proud and the happiest I’ve seen him since I was a kid.”

Getting down and dirty

An annual must-see event is the Boryeong Mud Festival. At this beachside resort village north of Kunsan, where visitors select their own live seafood and cook it Korean-style on a barbecue, people from around the peninsula gather to celebrate mud. Airmen mingle with South Koreans to enjoy a relaxing mud bath, mud massage, mud facial, or compete in mud volleyball or mudsliding contests. The mud, known for its restorative qualities, can be found only at Daecheon Beach along an 8-mile tidal flat next to the water’s edge in the city of Boryeong. The

mud is especially rich in germanium and is touted to help stimulate circulation, slow the aging process and ease the pain of arthritis. The gooey stuff is so popular that local villagers sell it.

In addition to Kunsan's unique tours, another Kunsan enticement is the chance for follow-on assignments.

Although Staff Sgt. Aaron Naegle didn't volunteer for Kunsan, he did get his follow-on wish to be assigned to Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D. The "load toad," as the munitions loaders like to call themselves, even grew to enjoy his time with the pack.

"I ended up liking this assignment more than I thought I would," he said midway through his tour.

Strangely, it's a feeling that permeates the base. For instance, Staff Sgt. Shirley Levy, a food services craftsman, is on her second tour at Kunsan. Even

though she likes the stability to attend college and the increased work responsibility, she can still only rank Kunsan as "almost a nice place."

No matter how much airmen like the mission, the people and the improvements, "Kunsan is a place you hate to love," the Wolf noted.

The enemy's just a tour away

Love it or hate it, the proximity of the enemy places Kunsan's mission in the forefront. What amazed Senior Airman Jeremy

Chaddock was his ability to tour the DMZ, the demilitarized zone on the 38th parallel. "It's different to be able to walk right up to the enemy," said the F-16 maintainer. The stability of the Kunsan tour — no Air and Space Expeditionary Force commitment — also allows Airman Chaddock to enroll in college without worrying about deployments. Kunsan is the place people deploy *to*.

The base's entire focus is on its two F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter squadrons, the 80th [See "Headhunter Allies," Page 4] and the 35th, which operate 24 hours a day. Like wolves, they defend their territory fiercely.

Capt. Jared Johnson, the 80th Fighter Squadron chief of standards and evaluations and an F-16 pilot, said the wing flies close air support missions near the DMZ. "We show our presence for deterrence. We do it mainly for practice, not for monitoring purposes."

Pilots conduct most air-to-air training over the Yellow Sea, west of Kunsan. Air-to-ground training is done in the northeast portion of the Korean peninsula. Sometimes they train with their South Korean counterparts. "Even if there's a language barrier, a smile goes a million miles," he said.

Senior Airman Dan Healy greets newly arrived civil engineer members by holding a doll dressed in chemical warfare ensemble. Although Kunsan is known for tough base exercises, it has one of the most important missions in the Air Force.





Helping break down that language barrier and providing the continuity needed for a base with a near 100 percent turnover rate, more than 450 host nation employees provide vital stability through the continuity and corporate knowledge they bring to the base.

"Civilians hold this base together," the Wolf said. "Some civilians have been here 30 or 40 years. Their work ethic is tremendous. They are dedicated to the Wolf Pack mission, and they provide critical continuity."

The Kunsan community, active and civilian, is a close-knit society of about 3,000 people. "When you walk around, people know you," said Chief Master Sgt. Brian Riddle, an 8th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron superintendent. He said the most difficult aspect of his job is keeping people happy while deployed away from family and loved ones for a year. However, finding ways to keep himself happy isn't a problem.

"I begged to come here," Chief Riddle said. "And now that I'm here, I've been told by many that I'm

Staff Sgt. Aaron Naegle (from left), Staff Sgt. Daniel Carrasquillo and Senior Airman Shane Steele transport an AIM-9 missile to an F-16 Fighting Falcon during training. Maintainers said being stationed so close to North Korea gives them a better understanding of how vital their jobs are to the success of Kunsan's mission.

just too happy. Being unhappy is a choice, and I choose to be happy."

Unfortunately, rumors have a way of undermining that happiness before people set foot on Korean soil, according to Chief Johnson.

"Before coming here, people think Kunsan will be a horrible assignment," the chief said. "But every Thursday, when we say goodbye to people, they all say how much they enjoyed the assignment here. They say it was the most rewarding thing they've ever done."

And when members of the pack leave, "They take the Wolf Pack spirit with them," said the Wolf, Col. Robin Rand. 🌟