

Everybody wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die to get there.

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*1 / PANMUNJOM, KOREAN DMZ*

On an early fall day when Washington, Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing were in an uproar over the latest North Korean outrage, a U.S. Forces van propelled me and three other camera people past the scenic barbed wire and tank traps, fire bases and checkpoints of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Once again I contemplated the zone's howling misnomer, but the thought no longer triggered a smile. That's how old the border story was. I couldn't complain. My band had no gigs scheduled for the next few days. All I was thinking was, I'd earn my shooting fee from *AsiaIntel* and get back to my music. I could use the money.

The South Korean sitting next to me finished some shots, closed his window and turned to me. "Chilly today." He and the others worked for the Seoul bureaus of international news agencies. Hearing from U.S. Forces Korea about my scheduled visit, with several spare van seats just waiting to be filled, they'd decided to tag along and get some stock images. Agencies like to keep plenty of stock on hand so they'll be ready for spikes in client demand.

“Could use a little sun.” The leaden sky blocked most of the light. Only later did it occur to me that it must have filtered out any vibes warning that things were about to turn truly awful.

GIs in Korea called the DMZ simply “the Z.” A buffer strip two and a half miles wide with equal parts north and south of the Korean War ceasefire line, it snaked more than 150 miles across the waist of the Korean peninsula.

“Birds at three o’clock,” the only woman in the van announced in Korean from the seat behind me. She swiveled to take the shot of Manchurian cranes flying low over a field. Rare wildlife flourished in the Z, thanks to the scarcity of humans. I joined the others in recording the image, not because it thrilled me but just in case AsiaIntel might have a use for it.

We passed through a checkpoint to enter Camp Bonifas, the razor-wire-fenced home of a few South Korean and American soldiers. I’d been there enough times to remember it was 440 yards south of the line. Our van rolled to a stop. A fine mist dampened my face as we stepped out to enter the single-story lecture hall for the usual briefing on history and stats.

“Heck Davis,” I said, sticking my hand out to the crew-cut American public affairs officer who awaited us at the podium.

He lifted my mood by introducing himself as Major Player and then crinkling his eyes at my double take. “Frank Player is my name.” Somewhere along the line, he’d acquired the good-humored wisdom to accept and even enjoy the certainty that this conversation would come up again and again.

I obliged him. “I bet you pray to your sweet lord every night for quick promotion to light colonel.”

“Won’t help much in view of my dad’s sense of humor. The name on my birth certificate is Francis Scott Key Player.” The major glanced down at his notes and cleared his throat — his signal to cut the chatter and take a seat so he could get on with the show.

A South Korean enlisted man projected a series of grainy photos and maps onto the screen. Player quickly got to the grisly highlight of his spiel. “Here’s a photo of Northern soldiers using axes to hack Captain Arthur Bonifas and First Lieutenant Mark Barrett to death in 1976. American and ROK soldiers had gone out to trim a poplar tree because its branches blocked their view. The Northerners didn’t want it trimmed.”

ROK — he pronounced it rock — stood for Republic of Korea. That was the South’s official English name. The North went by Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK. You had to spell out those initials. Nobody pronounced it dip-rock or de-prick, although the country’s inhabitants were often called Norks.

The major recounted another fatal dust-up: the defection in 1984 of Vasily Yakovlevich Matuzok, a twenty-two-year-old Soviet citizen working as a diplomatic trainee at the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang. Matuzok was a member of a tour group at Panmunjom. He handed his camera to another tourist, asking to have his photo taken. Then he sprinted across the line, zigzagging to keep from

being shot by North Korean guards. Northerners in hot pursuit penetrated about a hundred and fifty yards into Southern territory. "One ROK soldier and three North Koreans were killed in a twenty-four-minute firefight."

It was a relief to get out of the lecture hall. Player led us into the Joint Security Area. The JSA occupied part of what had once been a farming community called Panmunjom — Plank Bridge Village. Negotiators meeting there had agreed on the 1953 armistice. The JSA's heart was a row of single-story, bright blue buildings that looked like temporary classrooms at an overflowing suburban school. The two sides' military representatives continued to meet there when they wanted to exchange insults and blow smoke in each other's faces. Every now and then they managed to iron out some problem, but in more than six decades they'd never gotten around to officially ending the war.

Each of the one-room buildings had two entrances, one in each side's territory. The border that had emerged from the contending armies' advances and retreats between 1950 and 1953 went down the middle of the conference tables. Negotiators could sit in their own territory and still face their adversaries.

If you thought of Panmunjom as a theme park, the theme was intimidation. Each side had erected sky-high flagpoles, giant flags and grandiose building facades.

An opening between two of the buildings gave me an opportunity to look toward the other side of the line at ground level. It appeared that my reporter

buddy Joe Hammond hadn't arrived yet. Joe was on the fourth day of a visit to North Korea. Because of Pyongyang's strong allergy to foreign news media, he'd gone in as a member of a group of ordinary sightseeing tourists. I'd timed my presence to coincide with his tour group's scheduled arrival at the northern side.

I envied Joe. I'd been in the North only once, to cover the New York Philharmonic concert in 2008. That visit had been even shorter than Joe's package tour. And instead of focusing mainly on the country and its people, my job had been to stick close to the American musicians. Still, even a brief taste had been enough to whet my interest in what was happening north of Panmunjom.

My current assignment to gather military-themed footage from the southern side of the Cold War border relic made plenty of sense from the editors' standpoint. It was one of those times when outsiders seriously wondered whether young ruler Kim Jong-un had gone full-scale, start-a-war bonkers.

The third-generation dictator disliked adult supervision and any hint of competition for power. He'd been on a roll since his headline-hogging liquidation of a mentor uncle in late 2013. His homicidal purges had peaked in early 2017 when his agents smeared VX nerve agent on his older half-brother's face in a Malaysian airport terminal.

He kept up a constant barrage of saber rattling that had leaders of countries concerned hyperventilating in helpless frustration. They needed to do *something*, but their advisors were unable to think of much of

anything that wouldn't make matters worse. Launch a preemptive military strike? Northern artillery would immediately wipe out the Southern capital, Seoul, home to millions. Schedule another round of diplomatic talks? What would be the point? The North had made clearer than ever that it wasn't about to give up its nuclear weapons. Instead, the country was warning the world that it was a force to be dealt with, making the point with serial threats and armed provocations. There'd been three major challenges within the previous two months alone.

Seventeen South Korean human-rights activists, preparing to launch balloons bearing leaflets and miniature radio receivers into Northern territory, had died when their fishing vessel exploded and sank. Even while denying that the cause was a Northern torpedo, Pyongyang's spokespersons had gloated that the puppet traitors deserved their fate.

A drone spewing out deadly sarin gas had penetrated an air-conditioning vent on the roof of the headquarters of a hawkish Tokyo newspaper known for demanding that Japan develop its own nuclear weapons arsenal as a deterrent. The attack clearly had been intended to terrorize any Japanese old enough to remember the Aum Shinrikyo cult's gassing of Tokyo subway passengers in 1995. Coincidentally the number killed had been precisely the same, a dozen. Another obvious goal had been to remind the world that North Korea's weapons of mass destruction were not confined to nukes. Pyongyang had denied launching the drone. At the same time its propaganda outlets had advised the newspaper's personnel to get

their affairs in order because their days were numbered.

And then — no doubt calculating that the just-launched U.S. invasion of Venezuela tied the American president's hands sufficiently that Pyongyang could get away with it — Kim had hatched an even more stunningly provocative stunt. He'd lobbed an unarmed intercontinental ballistic missile smack into the U.S. missile testing range at Kwajalein Atoll, known as "the world's largest catcher's mitt," in the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

The only casualties had been a pair of young, tanned American contractor personnel shown struggling in photos that flashed around the world. The man and woman, Speedo- and bikini-clad respectively, had miscalculated and drowned in an attempt to body surf on the turbulence as the missile sank into the Kwajalein lagoon.

Inside-the-Beltway pundits had commenced wringing their hands over that demonstration of the enemy's aim. Pyongyang's spokespersons, meanwhile, hadn't bothered to suppress smirks while claiming for the record that North Korea had innocently set out to orbit a satellite. It was purely "accidental" that the "rocket" had come down at a U.S. Army base and not at some other spot in the vast Pacific Ocean.

While the other camera people fanned out, I stationed myself near the entrance to an alley that ran between the two central Joint Security Area huts. The mist-dumping cloud had moved but the sky was still

gray. Through the alley I saw, about twenty yards away, the Panmungak, a wide but shallow observation building to which the North some years before had added an extra story as an additional symbol of national might.

Although my camera was set up to switch back and forth with the flick of a dial, my main assignment was to shoot video, not the stills that I'd taken for most of my news career and still preferred. Few people remember video as well as stills. Think Eddie Adams's South Vietnamese colonel executing Viet Cong suspect, or Malcolm Browne's burning monk. Black and white stills, especially, because you see them in the abstract, are the pictures that sear themselves into your brain. AsiaIntel, though, was an Internet-based news organization. Like many others using the same medium, the editors liked to post full-color moving pictures. I could handle that. I'd learned to make videos to promote my Tokyo band.

Preparing to drop my gear, I glanced at the forward guards. Maybe three yards in front of me, two ROK soldiers stood just inside the alley. They faced the North Korean side. Opposite them a Northern pair, instead of looking toward the South Koreans, faced each other. All the guards on both sides wore holstered pistols — Joint Security Area rules permitted only handguns. All the men were large and noticeably fit. All glowered. They'd been handpicked, I knew, for their menacing looks.

"Are they out on our account?" I asked the major, who stood a few feet away.

“I’m guessing there’s a tour group visiting their side. The Northern guards always come out for the tourists who ride down from Pyongyang, and of course the ROK guards follow suit.”

I set up my tripod.

“Ever since the Matuzok defection,” Player added, “it’s been the Norks’ drill for the two guards in front to stare toward each other like that.”

“I remembered that part. Peripheral vision. They can watch for any weirdness that might come down on either side of the line.”

“Right.”

As I fixed the camera to the tripod, a dozen or so non-Asians on the northern side entered my line of sight. Seeing Joe among them, I grinned at him. The Grand Korean People’s Touring Company had brought him to the border right on schedule. If I followed my impulse to wave, his hosts might press him to explain why a tourist was acquainted with a news cameraman. Anyhow, the major had given us the usual warning not to gesture — it would be “provocative.”

I started the camera rolling and focused on him. Joe didn’t grin back but peered intently in my direction from the broad steps coming down to ground level from the Panmungak.

Spotting some Asians in civvies, I took them to be the North Korean tour group leaders. Three men ranging from youngish to middle-aged wore dark suits, white shirts and tightly knotted neckties.

The woman with them was so interesting looking that I zoomed in for a closer look. I judged she was in

her thirties. She wore a conservative black dress — and a gold watch and necklace set with stones that glinted sufficiently even on that gloomy day to suggest they might be diamonds. But it wasn't just her getup and the fact she was pretty that made her so striking. The regal way she held herself bespoke a confidence I didn't detect in her colleagues. In her body language she was more like the big-hatted People's Army officer escorting the group, who gestured with command presence as he made his points.

Despite the chill in the air Joe wore no jacket, as usual. The bodybuilder's physique he liked to show off left no space for wrinkles to form in his green and white striped, short-sleeved shirt. Still, he didn't look himself. There was something wild in his eyes, something coiled and edgy about his posture as he walked down the building's steps toward the principal conference hut, the one to my left. He kept darting nervous looks from side to side, instead of predictably gazing ahead to take in the unfamiliar view of the border looking north to south. I kept my camera pointed at him. Our AsiaIntel editors liked footage that showed reporters expending shoe leather for on-the-scene reporting, as he was doing.

As I looked through the viewfinder of my camera from my vantage point about ten yards from him, I felt something was dead wrong with the picture. I couldn't detect even the slightest hint of the sardonic smart-ass I'd been horsing around with since our days as middle school kids in Mississippi.

Moving right up to the main conference hut, crouching as if to look into a window, Joe gritted his teeth; he seemed to focus intently on something. Only later did I guess that what he'd been watching was the east-facing North Korean guard's reflection in the window glass.

That guard turned to check on him. Joe turned at the same time. Still crouching, he bent forward and, legs churning now, rammed his head into the guard's belly, knocking the wind out of him. Without breaking stride he scooped up the North Korean — who was taller than Joe but not as broad — and used him as a battering ram to knock over the west-facing guard, who had started to reach for his pistol.

“What the fuck!” I kept my camera pointed at Joe and rolling, not about to miss a frame of the action.

Dropping the first guard atop the second one on the sand, Joe dashed toward me. With his right hand he yanked his passport from his shirt pocket and waved the document, shouting, “U.S. citizen! U.S. citizen!”

The two North Korean forward guards scrambled to their knees, drew their pistols and fired in Joe's direction. Their backup had joined the fray.

Joe had surprised them all sufficiently that he made it around the South Korean end of the hut and angled right. I swiveled to keep him in the picture. Glancing at me, he flashed his trademark wry grin. He passed between me and the hut, headed toward the rear area I'd just left, and shouted, “Sixty-seven twenty!”

At that point he should have been out of the Northern guards' sight, the hut sheltering him from their fire. It was against JSA rules for them to cross

the demarcation line in pursuit. Rules be damned, some were already over the line. Joe spotted them, zagged again and put on an extra burst of speed. The two South Korean forward guards, along with a backup patrolling behind them, pulled their own pistols and fired at the Northern guards. One Northerner went down. Another rounded the corner of the hut.

Joe crumpled and fell in front of me. Blood poured out of his back and a separate stream formed a pool under his chest. The bullet looked to have gone clean through his heart. I vocalized, loudly, my grief and outrage. "*Gaeseki ya!*" Sons of bitches! But my newsman's instinct kept me standing there, my camera following the continuing firefight. There wasn't a thing in the world I could do for my friend.

His left arm was splayed out so that the palm faced me. On it I saw three scrawled letters of the alphabet — looked like "CDs" was what he'd written.

Joe's "Keys to Success as a Foreign Correspondent," which he'd enjoyed enumerating to young wannabes, had numbered only two: "Always carry a pen, and never pass up an opportunity to take a leak." He was forever jotting notes, in his self-devised shorthand based on all-capital block letters, whether or not paper was handy.

I kept the camera rolling as reinforcements from both sides arrived on the scene. Two North Korean guards were down. A ROK loudspeaker spewed out an announcement in Korean, laced with so much static I could barely make out the message to Northerners: The border-crosser was dead. They

should end the confrontation now and avoid further casualties.

Major Player rounded up us news people and hustled us to the rear. In moments we could no longer see the demarcation line. The shooting had stopped; now there was only shouting. I guessed some macho types on the other side were spoiling to continue the fight. In any case, the shouting ceased as well. Cooler heads had prevailed.

Ashen faced, Major Player tried to usher us into the van. "We'll get you folks back to Seoul."

I was still in shock, but not to the extent I'd stand for that. I tried to keep my voice steady. "No way are we going anywhere without filing first, Major. This is big news — 'American killed running across Korean DMZ' — and we're the ones to break it." The wire people nodded and grunted agreement.

Player considered. "OK, come to my office." While using his Internet connection to transmit what we'd shot, we phoned our editors.

I spoke softly when talking about the victim by name, so the others wouldn't hear that exclusive information. In Hong Kong the AsiaIntel editor, Langan Meyer, typed a news flash as he questioned me. As he finished uploading it, he said he was dialing Joe's parents on another phone. He asked me to call the widow. He didn't want them to get the news first from the images that were about to appear on television sets everywhere. Before he ended our call I heard him speaking in a choked voice. "Colonel Hammond, this is Langan Meyer, editor of AsiaIntel, calling from Hong Kong. I'm afraid I have bad . . ."

I dialed Joe's home number in Tokyo. I was close to losing it as I gave the news to Evelyn.

Her end of the conversation was mostly sobs with only the occasional coherent phrase. "I had a bad feeling when he said he was going to that awful country and now . . ."

Bits of "Duncan and Brady," one of Joe's favorite songs, ran through my head: "Brady fell down on the barroom floor . . . Women all cryin' . . ."

When Evelyn caught her breath, I rang off with a promise to talk again later. The major had been on the phone, too. He stood up and announced that the dead man's passport identified him as an American citizen. The other three shot video of that announcement. Noticing that I hadn't done that, they eyed me with interest and asked Player for the name.

"Sorry but we have to withhold the name until next of kin have been informed."

One of the wire people, the woman, turned to me. "He yelled something at you. Did you know him?"

We four were competitors but I was also part of the story. Since I'd filed already and scored a scoop by being first to report Joe's identity, I couldn't begrudge the other three an impromptu press conference. I nodded. The Koreans pointed their cameras at me. Major Player grabbed a pencil and pad.

"He was Joseph Hammond, a staff reporter and editor for AsiaIntel specializing in financial stories. Next of kin have just now been notified."

"Seen that byline," said one of the Korean men. "Makes no sense — financial reporter runs across."

Why not just wait, go home after four-five days' sightseeing?"

Noticing the photographer's round, black-rimmed Harry Potter eyeglasses, I couldn't help thinking of the incongruity: We were talking not about a magical fantasy, set at Hogwarts, but about a real person who had died. I put that out of my mind and gave him a straight answer. "Beats me all to hell."

He tapped his temple with an index finger. "Any problem in the head? Suicide on his mind?"

"I knew him well and there was no sign whatsoever of anything like that."

"What'd he yell at you?"

" 'Sixty-seven twenty.' "

"Means what?"

"Maybe something from scripture. He knew a lot of verses."

I visualized editors at their wire agencies poring over desk Bibles, trying to figure out how the doomed man had sought scriptural solace with his final utterance.

They asked me for Joe's hometown and current base. The answers — Gulf Springs, Mississippi, and Tokyo, Japan — would have been the same if I'd been the one killed.

"Did he have a family?"

"A wife, no kids" — yet. Evelyn was five months pregnant. Joe wouldn't be around to watch his child grow up. "I've got no idea how this came to happen — and I'm sure you'd get the same answer if you asked his parents and wife, so I hope you won't intrude on their private grief. But I can tell you he

was one of the great reporters." I managed to keep my voice from breaking as I spoke but couldn't hide the tears.

The other newsies went to file updates. The major picked up the hand-piece of an ancient Bakelite phone that had no dialing mechanism and relayed to someone on the other end of the line what he'd heard from me.

When Player got off the phone I asked, "Can we talk with the post commander?"

"Commander's too busy. You can pose any questions for him to your escort, Mr. Cha, on the drive back to Seoul. I'll get back to you with the answers." He paused as a sympathetic expression replaced his officious one. "I'm sorry about your friend."

"I appreciate that."

The unavailability of the commander was OK with me. My task just now was to reclaim my van seat, pull out my laptop and write the obituary. Naturally I mentioned Joe's most notable series and the prize-winning book he'd based on it, *Burma Shave*, in which he'd laid out the details of vast, systematic corruption on the part of the Myanmar junta.

I told about a childhood spent on a series of Air Force bases, the last of which had been Mississippi's Keesler. I made note, since it was relevant to what he'd just done to the North Korean guards, that he'd won the state title of 150-pound high school wrestling champion. The final paragraph said that an evening of remembrance would be scheduled at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan.