



Col. Tommy Mize (left) of Eighth Army recognizes Sgt. Vainuupo Avegalio with a coin for his work starting No Battle Buddies Left Behind. Avegalio started the group to help Soldiers avoid trouble during their time serving in Korea. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

# Group Works to Steer Soldiers Away from Trouble in Korea

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

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**W**hen a group of junior NCOs saw the bad situations Soldiers were getting themselves into during nights out in Korea, they decided they needed to come up with a solution.

What they saw was that age-old story of Soldiers going out for a good time, but overdoing it to the point where fights, curfew violations and other problems would result. And often, when those Soldiers needed a little help, there was no one there for them.

Out of that problem came No Battle Buddies Left Behind, a group that began at Camp Walker in Daegu, South Korea, but quickly expanded to Yongsan Garrison in Seoul and has now spread to Hawaii, Alaska and even Germany.

The group is different than regular courtesy patrols in that it is made up of volunteers in civilian clothes. Their only mission is to get Soldiers back on post safely.

The NCO who started the first chapter was Sgt. Vainuupo Avegalio, microwave communications system team chief for 169th Signal Company, 36th Signal

Battalion, Eighth U.S. Army. Avegalio said he had the idea after two of his Soldiers were able to stop a potential sexual assault in downtown Daegu and then help a female Soldier get a taxi and back safely to post. He then realized more Soldiers could use help.

“We started off with just five members,” Avegalio said. “We started walking about the downtown Daegu area — the really popular party spots for the Soldiers. We started with just a simple question, ‘Hey, are you all right?’ If we saw them leaning or sleeping on a table, we’d wake them up and say, ‘Hey, are you all right? You think it’s time to go home?’ If they said yes, then we’d help them get home.

“Most of the funds to pay for taxis come from the volunteers’ pockets,” Avegalio said. “They are taking their own cash, their own money, because they believe that what they are doing is an awesome thing. They are ensuring we don’t leave a battle buddy behind. None of them have a doubt in their mind that they are doing something great.”

It surprises some volunteers just how appreciative Soldiers who have over-imbibed are to get a helping hand.

“For the most part, they don’t even realize they need help until someone asks them,” Avegalio said. “Then, because someone asks them, they say, ‘Yeah,’ and they are appreciative of it.”

Sgt. Robert Lawniczak, barracks manager for 19th Personnel Company, 501st Special Troops Battalion, Eighth Army, started a chapter of No Battle Buddies Left Behind at Yongsan Garrison in Seoul after reading about Avegalio’s group on Facebook. The Itaewon area of Seoul is notorious for Soldiers getting into trouble. But now they have a group looking to defuse problems before they escalate.

“The feedback we are receiving is that service members and civilians appreciate us being out there to help protect them and not try to ‘bust’ them,” Lawniczak said. “We have seen a big change with service members helping and correcting others before we get to them. Some have even helped us out in some situations to talk to a person who was out of control, and they helped to get them to act right, or get them back to base. We have also helped some of the main hangout-spot owners by letting them know our intent of making sure that the people who come into the establishment are not causing any issues with their behavior. This has definitely improved the relations between the Korean establishment owners and the United States military.”

Volunteering with the group also gives young NCOs and Soldiers a chance to go out and see a bit of Korean culture while doing good — and without the worry of getting into trouble, said Sgt. 1st Class Jeffrey

Waldrop, headquarters platoon sergeant for the 169th Signal Company.

“The young Soldiers who are under the legal drinking age often don’t go out on the weekend and see some of the Korean and Daegu culture,” Waldrop said. “They stay in their rooms and play video games. This gives them a chance to get with a group that’s going downtown, and who aren’t going to drink. It gets them off post to see some culture.”

As a more-senior NCO, Waldrop said he has seen how volunteering with No Battle Buddies Left Behind can sometimes have a more positive effect than the usual courtesy patrols.

“I’ve had weekends before where I was mandated to be on Senior Leader’s Presence, and I had to go out in my uniform with the first sergeant and sergeant major and walk through,” Waldrop said. “They see that kind of group coming from a block away. They are like, ‘Get down! Here comes the courtesy patrol, senior leader’s patrol.’ I change into civilian clothes and go out the very next night with this group, and it’s a totally different thing. It’s like we’re their peers, and they want us out there.”

The group offers a way for NCOs and Soldiers to do something they can be proud of on the weekend, instead of just playing video games or drinking, Avegalio said.

“In your time here in Korea, don’t just follow the crowd,” Avegalio said. “Do something worthwhile. Do something great. You can look back at your time here in Korea and be proud.” ■

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