



Cpl. Young Ho Kim (center) sits with his fellow KATUSAs during a training session at Yongsan Garrison in Seoul, South Korea. Kim said he had enjoyed learning from the style of leadership he has seen in the U.S. Army. “The U.S. Army tries harder to understand us person-to-person. They respect differences and the difficulty of being a Soldier,” Kim said. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

In Korea, NCOs Get Real Taste of Partnership through KATUSA Program

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

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One of the important lessons learned from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is the need to train and work in tandem with the in-country partners of the U.S. Army.

Nowhere has that important practice been as complete and as enduring as in South Korea. Since 1950, soldiers from the Republic of Korea’s army have served side-by-side with their U.S. counterparts. Though every Korean male must serve in the Korean military for at least 21 months, only about 3,600 Koreans earn the privilege to serve with the U.S. Army as a Korean Augmentation to the United States Army, or KATUSA.

These KATUSAs serve alongside U.S. Army Soldiers and are functionally part of the U.S. Army — from morning physical training, to tactical training, to the rest of the workday — said Staff Sgt. John Dills, community

relations NCO for Eighth U.S. Army at Yongsan Garrison in Seoul, South Korea.

“They work with you, they do PT with you,” Dills said. “They do everything, but they are a step aside. They are not down or up or below or above, but just a step aside you. Chain of command-wise, they fall under you, but they still fall under the Korean government. So it’s a unique partnership.”

Korean soldiers who apply to become KATUSAs must first pass a standardized English test. Of those who pass the test, a lottery is drawn from the qualified applicants. About 1 in 10 of the applicants are accepted to be a KATUSA, according to Eighth Army officials.

Cpl. Kyupin Jung, a KATUSA working with Eighth Army’s G-4 (Logistics), said he applied to become a KATUSA so he could learn more English and experience a



Sgt. Johnston Albert Jr. (right) and Cpl. Il Shin Kim, both Soldiers with A Detachment, 176th Financial Management Support Unit, 501st Special Troops Battalion, 501st Sustainment Brigade, demonstrate immediate lifesaving measures while U.S. and KATUSA Soldiers observe during sergeant's time training in October on Yongsan Garrison, South Korea. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

different culture. When done with his 21 months of service, Jung expects to finish his degree in mechanical engineering.

"In Korea, military service is mandatory," Jung said. "I looked at the options — the Korean army, navy, air force and marines — and I decided the KATUSA program would be good for me. I can study English and experience American culture, so I applied. It's hard to get into KATUSA, so I was lucky."

KATUSAs get about two months of training before they begin working alongside the U.S. Army, said Cpl. Young Ho Kim, a KATUSA serving as a translator for Eighth Army.

"We have about four weeks in ROK army basic training, then go to KTA, which stands for KATUSA Training Academy, and take about three weeks of American-style basic training," Kim said. "We learn about the military acronyms and the cultural differences between the U.S. Army and the ROK army. We have to memorize the ranks and insignias, because it's different than the ROK army side. Then we have to pass a PT test. Then we are ready to go."

The KATUSA program started in 1950 during the Korean War with a request from Gen. Douglas MacArthur to Republic of Korea President Syngman Rhee. In July 1950, Rhee put all ROK forces under U.S. command. Gen. MacArthur used the Korean soldiers to fill critical shortages. The liaison program has continued since then without a formal written agreement.

After the Korean War, the program continued with Korean soldiers spending about 18 months as part of the U.S. Army before returning to the ROK army to train others. But South Korea developed its own training centers, this practice ended, and KATUSAs now spend virtually their entire military service in the U.S. Army.

Eighth Army commander Lt. Gen. Bernard Chamoux in January told the Korea Times that the KATUSA program is critical to the success of the U.S. Army, and he has requested more KATUSA soldiers from Korea. KATUSA soldiers help out in areas where U.S. Army NCOs have less experience, said Sgt. Michael Falcon, an Early Warning Systems Patriot missile operator with D Battery, 6th Battalion, 52nd Air Defense Artillery Regiment, 35th Air Defense Artillery Brigade.

"They're excellent soldiers," Falcon said. "They work very hard. They're always smart, especially when it comes to Excel and PowerPoint. They're a great help with that stuff, they really are. They've been a pleasure to work with."

Because of their knowledge of English, KATUSA soldiers often fill the critical role of translator and intermediary between the U.S. and Korean forces, said Cpl. Taelim Kim, a KATUSA serving in Eighth Army's Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion command group.

"I feel the program is really important for the ROK side as well as the U.S. Army," Kim said. "For the U.S. Army to stay in Korea, the language is a real big issue. KATUSAs are the main key to easing those language problems. KATUSAs hold a critical role because they are the translators to the U.S. Army and also to the ROK side."

For U.S. Army NCOs and Soldiers serving for the first time in Korea, KATUSA soldiers can help ease the transition to a new culture, said Staff Sgt. William Sobczak, an intelligence sergeant for Eighth Army's G-2 (military intelligence).

"A lot of KATUSAs are highly educated, otherwise they wouldn't be KATUSAs. It's not just a stereotype," Sobczak said. "They are not all from well-to-do families, but they're all a cut above the rest of the conscripts in the Korean Army. Most of them speak English pretty well and are pretty friendly. They'll take Soldiers out and show them around. I've gone out shopping with KATUSAs; there's an exchange of cultures."

But that cultural exchange isn't always easy, Sobczak said. It's important for American NCOs serving in Korea to try to understand the differences without being judgmental, he said.

"I would tell Soldiers new to Korea to be as open minded as possible," Sobczak said. "There are a lot of cultural differences. When I was a private, I would walk in and see my KATUSA roommate washing his feet in the sink and say, 'What are you doing?' Or he'd walk around in his 'tighty-whities' underwear. There aren't a lot of boundaries and personal space [in Korean culture]. So you have to be open-minded and experience the culture as much as possible. The KATUSAs are a good way to facilitate jumping into the culture."

When working with KATUSAs, U.S. Army NCOs also should remember the long-term goals of the partnership and how their relationships could affect those goals, said Staff Sgt. Tommy Morales, a manpower NCO with Eighth Army.

"It's important for young NCOs to know that the KATUSAs are the future leaders of Korea. The relationships we build with them now can have positive effects for the long term because they're going to be politicians and working for the government," Morales said. "The way we treat them now can have lasting effects in the long run."

The military police force on Yongsan Garrison is a good example of how KATUSAs are seamlessly incorporated into the U.S. Army. Each two-person MP team is made up of one U.S. Soldier and one KATUSA. Cpl. Sang Hyun, a KATUSA serving as an MP, said serving eight-hour shifts with a U.S. Soldier allows for a lot of cultural exchange and gives him a chance to practice English. Hyun plans to complete his education in architectural engineering when he completes his 21-month term as a soldier.

There is a commonly held perception that KATUSA soldiers have it easy compared to soldiers serving in the ROK army. Hyun said that is not always the case.

"Many young soldiers become KATUSAs because they think it is easier than being a ROK army soldier. They should abandon that thought," Hyun said. "Being a KATUSA is also hard, it's just a different type of hard. ... We have two chains of command, the U.S. chain of command and the ROK chain of command, so we serve two masters. It can be hard."

Sgt. Yong Joo Park, a KATUSA who works in Eighth Army headquarters, said he sees the program as a blessing. It offers benefits and opportunities that he wouldn't find if he was serving in the ROK army. However, Park said he would like to see more communication between the sides than he sometimes witnesses.

"Maybe I'm greedy, but I still think there are improvements we can make to this program," Park said. "One of the big problems is KATUSA soldiers are timid in a way to speak with their U.S. Army NCOs. So, a lot of them begin to think they are being disadvantaged compared to the U.S. Soldiers. But they don't really say that out loud."

Park said he hopes to see classes and training for both sides to help ease misunderstandings. Both sides could understand the other better with some help, he said.

"That's important for the alliance to understand each other, rather than just thinking about ourselves and what we can get from the other side," Park said. "That's not an alliance; that's just trying to benefit from the other side. We have to try to benefit from each other. That's what this is for."

Command Sgt. Maj. Ray Devens, Eighth Army's command sergeant major, recently told the Korea Times that he has been amazed by what he has seen from the KATUSA program.

"There is no other country that allows its citizens — their children — to come to our Army and fall under our leadership," Devens said. "They help us a great deal and, the partnership we get between the KATUSAs and our Soldiers is a really key part. ... When we have aggressors that come toward us, they are the ones who are going to fight together."

While serving in the U.S. Army, KATUSAs play many roles in addition to the one they've been assigned. They serve as informal translators, help U.S. Soldiers understand Korean culture and help ensure the Korean-U.S. partnership continues to run smoothly. In the end, it is the KATUSAs who ensure the motto of the ROK-U.S. alliance — "Katchi Kapshida" or "Let's Go Together" — stays true. ■



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