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Small U.S. Army post in Korea trains Soldiers of two nations

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Dobongsan Mountain towers above the northern Seoul, South Korea, suburb of Dobong-gu.

Tucked away at the bottom of the mountain is Camp Jackson, a small Army post with a large mission.

As hikers from around the world stream out of the Dobongsan stop of the Korean subway, geared up to test their mettle on the mountain, just feet away U.S. and Korean Non-Commissioned Officers train future military leaders from both countries.

Camp Jackson, though small in acreage, is home to both the Eighth Army Wightman NCO Academy, the only NCO Academy on the Korean peninsula, and the KATUSA Training Academy.

KATUSA (Korean Augmentation to the United States Army) soldiers are Korean enlisted soldiers who serve in Eighth Army units alongside U.S. Soldiers. All Korean males between 18 and 35 are required to serve in a Korean military branch. Most serve from 21 to 24 months. KATUSA soldiers are chosen from these draftees in a lottery. They are allowed into the lottery based on their ability to speak English.

Command Sgt. Maj. Mario O. Terenas, commandant of the NCO Academy and the KATUSA Training Academy, said the KATUSA soldiers are critical to the success of the U.S. mission in South Korea.

“KATUSAs help with language and culture,” he said. “They are a force multiplier because they are integrated everywhere. Every squad has KATUSAs; every platoon has KATUSAs. So they are just another soldier that augments our force. It’s the only program of its kind in the world.”

Turning failure to success

The NCOs at Camp Jackson have only 21 days to turn the KATUSA soldiers — who were recently civilians, probably finishing up their university studies — into soldiers who can serve ably alongside U.S. Army Soldiers. It’s not always easy, Terenas said. When the KATUSA soldiers first arrive, 90 percent of them fail the PT test. But by the end of 21 days, Terenas said, they have achieved a 90 percent pass rate.

How does the academy turn those PT scores around so quickly? Master Sgt. Rodolfo Delagarza Jr., the chief instructor at the KATUSA Training Academy, said sometimes it’s as simple as having the patience to explain and demonstrate things most U.S. Soldiers know the day they show up, such as how to properly do a pushup.

“There are things we don’t have to do with U.S. Soldiers that we have to do with them,” Delagarza said. “We have to be more hands-on [in demonstrating how to properly do PT exercises] with these KATUSAs than we would be with a U.S. Soldier. For the most part, these kids try hard. You see them out there struggling, but they are trying hard.”

The KATUSA soldiers at Camp Jackson participate in physical training twice a day, with the focused goal of passing the PT test, Terenas said. In addition to physical training twice a day, the KATUSA soldiers are put through a mini version of American basic training, with rifle marksmanship, warrior tasks, radio use and map reading. They also continue their English training, learning basic military lingo along with standard English practice.

Fight tonight

Because of the constant North Korean provocations, every U.S. Soldier who arrives on the peninsula is immediately informed of the need to be ready to “Fight Tonight.” That focus on being ready for battle is a constant focus at Camp Jackson.

“Everything we do here on Camp Jackson, with the KATUSA program, with the Basic Leader Course, is tied to the readiness to ‘Fight Tonight,’” Terenas said. “We are at the brink of war at any moment on the Korean peninsula. For us, part of everything we do is a reminder that we have to be ready to fight right now. That includes all the warrior tasks we teach, the CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear) tasks, the physical fitness. You have to have the physical and mental strength to endure if the fight comes. Everything we tell them is about how you have to be ready to fight right now.”

Sgt. Maj. Kim Ju Sun, a sergeant major in the Korean army and the highest-ranking Korean NCO at the academy, agreed that much of his mission is to remind the young KATUSA soldiers of the need to be prepared.

“For the KATUSA, we have classes to teach them that they have to be prepared for war and they have to be ready to fight tonight. Always,” Kim Ju Sun said. “They were civilians five weeks ago, so we have to repeat ourselves and remind them that they need to be prepared to ‘Fight Tonight.’ It’s not easy because we train the KATUSAs for only one month. But we try to make them understand why they are here.”



Lessons learned

The challenge of working with KATUSA soldiers offers training lessons that NCOs can bring back to the United States. The language and culture barriers force NCOs to create new ways to train, Delagarza said.

“It’s an everyday challenge here for the instructors, which is a good thing,” Delagarza said. “It makes them start thinking outside of the box and start thinking of new ways to implement teaching

techniques or how to get their point across. They'll be able to implement those techniques when they get to their next unit.

"The takeaway when they (instructors) leave here is, for one, they're going to have some patience," he said. "If they didn't have patience before, they'll have it when they leave here. They'll be able to think back and say, 'Wait a minute, I've dealt with way worse than this.'"

Sgt. 1st Class Spencer Headley, senior instructor at the KATUSA Training Academy, said NCOs must find different ways to motivate Korean soldiers, who didn't volunteer to be in the military. In addition, he said, though all the KATUSAs have passed written English tests, sometimes their conversational English skills are lacking.

"With every unit, you bring something forward," Headley said. "But with this in particular, it's the issue of being able to get somebody who was forced into the military to do something. If you can get somebody who was forced into the military to do something, I think you can get somebody who volunteers for the Army to be able to do it. It's about finding a new way to motivate, despite a language barrier."

Staff Sgt. Andrelus Ray, an instructor at the KATUSA Training Academy, said training the KATUSAs and working side-by-side with Republic of Korea NCOs is a broadening assignment. He has learned new ways to teach, plus learned things from watching how the Korean army operates.

"I've learned patience, a whole lot more," Ray said. "It goes back to the way I speak. Being from the South, I have a faster pitch. Over time, it was like, 'Hey Sergeant, it's not that we didn't understand you; you were just speaking too fast.' I forget that I'm not training American Soldiers. I need to slow down and make sure they understand it."

Some of the lessons may be as simple as remembering how Americans speak in informal situations may not go over as well in other cultures, Terenas said.

“(The instructors) definitely have to adapt themselves to not only motivate young recruits who did not volunteer for the service, but also they have to deal with a tremendous amount of cultural differences,” he said. “The way we are as American Soldiers, and as blunt as we can be with Soldiers, doesn't necessarily work with the Korean army. A cuss word can mean, for an American Soldier, just a format of speech. While in the Korean society, it can be a very insulting, demeaning sort of speech. Our U.S. instructors definitely have to adapt to that.”

Despite the challenges, the process of transforming Korean civilians into KATUSA soldiers who serve as part of the U.S. Army is rewarding.

“The thing that I’ve seen here is that, even with the difficulties of cultural differences and having to deal with conscripts, the majority of my instructors just love the job,” Terenas said. “Very quickly, in a 21-day program, they develop some very close bonds with the KATUSAs. They really enjoy working with them.”

NCO roles

Part of what U.S. Army NCOs see while serving in Korea is that noncommissioned officers in the Korean army don't have the power or autonomy that U.S. NCOs have. But, Terenas said, partly because of the U.S. NCOs' example, the Korean army is slowly trying to change that.

“The Republic of Korea army is very officer-centric, and the NCO is relegated to administrative tasks only,” Terenas said. “They’ve seen how we operate, and they want to change that. They’ve decided now to take certain units in the ROK army and apply the U.S. model as a test bed in those units, see how that works, then apply it to the rest of the military.

“Some of that push came because of our election process,” he said. “There were comments during the election about potentially removing U.S. forces from South Korea. When that happened, the ROK military said, ‘We’re going to have a problem.’ They look at the American NCO model and see the

ability of U.S. noncommissioned officers to work independently as small units in the mission command model.”

Kim Ju Sun said that ROK army NCOs are “very strong and very well-trained and disciplined,” but he agreed that the power structure in the Korean army strongly favors officers.

“I’m very envious of the U.S. Army system,” Kim Ju Sun said. “The U.S. officers respect the NCOs.”

In addition to the U.S. NCOs, the KATUSA Training Center has Korean NCOs who help with training. Sgt. 1st Class Lim Byung Jin, one of the ROK instructors at the center, said he has learned a lot by working closely with U.S. NCOs.

“It’s my first time working with the U.S. guys, and I’ve learned so many things,” Lim said. “We don’t have the experience of going to war. So, when I teach these soldiers, I can ask one of the U.S. Soldiers to tell us about their experience. They teach us how to care for your battle buddy. The Korean army, we have a lot of training, but we don’t have actual combat experience.

“If we have a chance, I would like to bring Korean NCOs here to see how the U.S. NCOs do the job, because the U.S. Army NCO has the power to get a job done,” he said. “The ROK army is different. Even if you’re a sergeant first class in the ROK army, you’re not in a very high position.”

Sgt. 1st Class Kim Young Hoi, a ROK instructor, agreed that he learns a lot from working with U.S. NCOs, especially because so many of them have seen combat.

“We have a lot of knowledge about combat skills,” Kim Young Hoi said. “But we haven’t been on the front lines. These U.S. NCOs are all combat warriors, so we try to learn about that from them.”

With authority comes responsibility, and Cpl. Kim Kwang Woo, a senior KATUSA who represents KATUSA interests on the post, said watching how U.S. NCOs take on that responsibility had impressed him.

“I was surprised by how much is expected of you in the U.S. Army when you become a corporal or sergeant,” Kim Kwang Woo said. “In the Korean army, you aren’t given much authority as a sergeant. But in the U.S. Army, you’re an NCO, you’re a leader. You have to take care of Soldiers; you have more responsibility. I learned more professionalism and dedication from being around that.”

NCO Academy

In addition to the mission of training KATUSA soldiers, Camp Jackson is the only place in Korea where Soldiers can take the Basic Leader Course. Having the course available allows young Soldiers to know their professional development won’t stagnate during a tour to Korea, Terenas said.

“That’s extremely important,” he said. “The Army has a huge backlog on NCO professional development, especially at this BLC level, as we moved into the STEP (select, train, educate, promote) program. So when you have a Soldier come to Korea for one year — they come here as specialists and privates first class — if they came here and we didn’t have an academy on the peninsula, it would either create a larger backlog of Soldiers who need to attend NCO professional development when they go back to the States, or it would actually cost money because you would have to send them to Hawaii on TDY or Alaska, or whatever academy that could take them. When you talk about a class load of 128 students per month, just in the dollar amount alone, that’s a tremendous cost. But in the professional development piece, it’s extremely important because we would have a tremendous number of Soldiers who wouldn’t be able to attend BLC, and with the STEP program couldn’t get promoted.”

The academy also serves a role in promoting the security partnership between the United States and Korea.

“We have slots for six ROK army soldiers in every class,” Terenas said. “Not only does it achieve the goals for the professional development of our own NCO Corps and the ability of our Soldiers to attend the Basic Leader Course while they’re here for the year, but it also furthers the strategic goals of Eighth Army in strengthening our alliance and professionalizing the ROK army.”

As part of a realignment of U.S. forces in Korea, which is taking most U.S. Army assets that are north of the Han River in Seoul and moving them south, Camp Jackson soon will be handed over to Korean authorities. A new, modern facility has been built at Camp Humphreys farther south, and the NCO Academy will move there this year.

But for now, at Camp Jackson, the missions of both the Eighth Army Wightman NCO Academy and the KATUSA Training Academy are completed by NCOs. Leading by example and accomplishing the mission is just another way U.S. Army NCOs strengthen the alliance and show the way to a stronger military force for both countries.

“Camp Jackson in particular is a big model for the ROK army NCOs, because there is no way on God’s green earth that you would ever have a camp in Korea that has no officers in it, that’s completely NCO run,” Terenas said. “Every time they come here, they are shocked. It’s kind of a shining example for them of autonomy and the very basis of mission command.”

Captions:

A Soldier going through the Basic Leader Course in December at Eighth Army Wightman NCO Academy on Camp Jackson, South Korea, attempts to complete a land navigation assignment. The camp, located at the bottom of Dobongsan Mountain, offers a variety of terrain on which to test Soldiers' land navigation skills. (Photos by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)