

NO PEACE AT PANMUNJOM

THREE times a week subject to cancellation without notice) a Norwegian-built bus rumbles northward out of Seoul, the South Korean capital, carrying parties of foreign visitors to a realistic lesson in War and Peace — and an In-Between State — at Panmunjom.

Panmunjom — a tiny Korean village that before the war was considered too insignificant to appear on maps — is the site where for 18 years the parties to the Korean War of 1950-1953 continue to face each other "eyeball to eyeball" in only slightly less than combat conditions.

The trip to Panmunjom, arranged by the Republic of Korea Transport Ministry, is available only to non-Koreans, who must present their passports two days before for an identification check. The United Nations Military Command watches over the bus once it enters the Demilitarized Zone bordering the North Korea frontier.

The Korea Tourist Bureau advertises the trip to Panmunjom by saying "one can see the tragedy of the division of Korea and sense to the fullest the reality of the Communist threat." The Bureau also stresses that the trip is military-escorted and perfectly safe, and indeed they have never lost a tourist nor has one even suffered a scratch.

However, since its inception three years ago, the tour has been suspended several times, once for many months, after serious incidents had flared up between the opposing sides in the DMZ. If border tension is running high, or meetings of the Military Armistice Commission have been called to sit at Panmunjom, no innocent bystanding is allowed, and tours for that day are cancelled.

Defector in Mig

We were scheduled to make the journey on the morning after two days of unusual activity across the normally quiet but tense Military Demarcation Line. A North Korean pilot had defected across the eastern end of the DMZ with his Mig-15 jet; this was followed by a night of firing across the Imjin River, the dividing line in the western end of the Zone. We expected our trip to be called off, but the U.N. Command was not yet ready to agree to a North Korean demand to discuss the pilot's "straying off course," and our trip went ahead as planned.

Heading toward the slender waist of Korea's mountainous peninsula, we rolled through thatched-roof villages, skirting oxcarts driven by wispy-bearded farmers in puffy trousers, and passing heavy-duty trucks fresh from the docks of San Francisco. Soon the civilian traffic thinned out, and greenish-brown military vehicles dominated the road.

Signs in English on village shopfronts gave evidence of military camps nearby: "Baby Doll Record Shop," "Playboy Store," and a huge one-word placard: "WHISKY." Further on, at the entrances to military installations, another kind of sign read: "Information on North Korean agents welcomed at this gate." Still other signs in English hung outside a number of orphanages, noting the names of U.S. Army units supporting them.

We arrived at the DMZ entry checkpoint, where our identity documents were rechecked and our bus was cleared through.

We drove into the 4,000-metre-wide bleak strip, overgrown with 20 years of weeds, past the barbed-wire barrier meant to trap infiltrators from the North electronically. Under the Armistice Agreement the DMZ is bisected by a Military Demarcation Line which snakes its way 151 miles across the

Frostily formal truce talks, similar to those held by the Mixed Armistice Commission between Israel and the Arab states before 1967, have been going on for 20 years in Panmunjom, Korea. The talks have little real effect, but they have become a tourist attraction, writes JACK GOLDFARB, who visited Korea recently.

the old 38th Parallel frontier, was the battleline at 10 p.m. on July 27, 1953, when the guns were silenced. It has slightly expanded South Korea's post-war territory.

According to the truce terms the DMZ is limited to 1,000 "civil police" on each side of the Line. On the southern side, they are volunteers recruited for this patrol duty from U.N. Command soldiers.

Half a dozen of these tall, smartly-dressed American G.I.s met our bus as it entered their advance camp. Politely, but briskly, they ushered us into their Mess Hall for lunch.

At a briefing afterwards, a sergeant provided historical background on the armed truce ending the Korean War. The negotiations took two years and 18 million words before the cease-fire was reached.

The sergeant warned us not to converse with or make gestures at the Communist soldiers we would encounter in the Panmunjom Area a short distance away. We then signed statements absolving the U.N. Command of responsibility in case of "hostile action."

Machineguns

Now transferred to a U.S. Army bus, escorted by jeeps flying white flags and bristling with machineguns, we drove down an underbrush-fringed road into Panmunjom itself.

Inside the circular, half-mile-wide enclave — officially called the Joint Security Area — a lineup of blue

(U.N. Command) and green (North Korean) buildings perches exactly astride the Demarcation Line. Within the JSA are guard posts manned by M.P.s of both forces. The all but defunct Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission of Swedes, Swiss, Poles, and Czechs still occupies installations in the Area, though their investigations of truce violations have been blocked by both sides for many years.

Just below the Demarcation Line stands Freedom House, a handsome building with a pagoda-like tower, dedicated to Korea's "peaceful reunification... under a free and democratic government." The building houses displays on the industrial and political achievements of the Republic of Korea. One of these exhibits, a shiny new model motorcycle, was so admired by the North Koreans recently that they commandeered it one dark night. Since then, Freedom House, remains locked after sundown.

Verbal clashes

Of the seven barracks-style buildings straddling the Line, the one in the middle attracts the most attention. Inside this simply-furnished structure the frostily formal meetings of the Military Armistice Commission are held. Across the green felt cover on the long rectangular table, the MAC members of the U.N. Command and the Republic of Korea confront their counterparts of the North Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteers. The protracted truce has

withstood hundreds of border incidents, and verbal clashes in the hundreds of sessions conducted to date. Perhaps this is why there are, after 19 years, still those die-hard optimists in Korea who believe that a permanent peace will eventually be worked out in this room.

Prominent on the table are the flags of North Korea and the United Nations, but it is immediately noticeable that the North Korean flag stands higher and is larger. At Panmunjom the aim of the game is one-upmanship — the North Koreans inflate their flag; the U.N. assigns only six foot-tall soldiers to tower above the shorter North Koreans. The Communists add an extra unauthorized building on their side of the Line — the South Koreans put up a statue to a seventh century Korean general who repelled the Chinese invaders...

Conspicuous on the table are the black rubber microphone cords strung precisely down the middle of the tabletop. In actual fact this is the Demarcation Line dividing country, room, table, and people.

While curious M.P.s watch us through the windows, we step around to the other side of the table into "North Korean Territory" to observe a battery of Japanese-made tape recorders used by the Communist side to record the proceedings of the meetings. The austere leather and wooden chairs add a grimness to the building and we are ready for the spring air outside.

The meetings that take place in this building are no longer "truce talks" in the sense that they are aiming toward a goal of peace. Both sides talk (the Chinese mostly listen) only to complain or answer to charges of truce violations.

Wild pheasants

Across the way from the ornately-roofed guard post of a North Korean M.P. we climb the stairs to the top of the U.N. Observation Post. We look out over the hostile terrain of North Korea to the distant jagged peaks on the horizon, while the Communist M.P.s watch us intently through their binoculars. A few hundred yards away a covey of wild pheasants circle over a vacant-looking hut. The North Koreans claim it is a house inhabited by farmers cultivating crops in the vicinity. But the U.N. Command G.I.s speculate on its real purpose; the least sinister guess is that it is there for propaganda purposes to show how "normal life" goes on in the DMZ for North Koreans.

Down below is the Bridge of No Return, the stone link across the Demarcation Line over which the repatriation of thousands of war prisoners was carried out. Once a prisoner had chosen which of the two Koreas he preferred, the span became a one-way passage. The bridge has been used again recently as a gateway to freedom for the crew of the captured American intelligence ship "Pueblo," and for passengers hijacked on Republic of Korea aircraft.



The "Bridge of No Return" at Panmunjom, across the Demarcation Line, over which the South and North Korean prisoners of war were repatriated, and more recently, the crew of the captured U.S. intelligence ship s.s. Pueblo.

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