

## **A Korean War Veteran's visit to North Korea**

**- VFP delegate to the International Conference for Peace on the Korean Peninsula, July 22 - 29, 2003 -**

**by J. Gary Campbell**

During the last week of July 2003 I joined a U.S. delegation of nine participants attending the International Conference for Peace on the Korean Peninsula in Pyongyang, North Korea. Fifty-three other delegates came from 25 countries of North and South America, Asia, Africa and Europe. We were there to express solidarity with all the Korean people – in the north and south and those living in other lands – on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armistice Agreement ending hostilities of the Korean War.

This was my third return visit to Korea since being there as a U.S. Army enlisted man more than 52 years earlier. In each of my three return visits I was one of several representatives of the U.S. organization Veterans for Peace (VFP). We had first gone to Korea or to Vietnam or World War II-involved countries as soldiers of war. Now we were returning as representatives of an organization committed to the abolishment of war and to the building of world peace.

Each of the three visits had their particular characteristics and special values. In the first visit of July 1995 I was reminded of my first sight of Korea nearly 44 years earlier when as a very young soldier I arrived on a troopship in Inchon Harbor shortly after dawn on September 17, 1950. The city of Inchon was still smoldering from the attack two days earlier by an invasion force of U.S. Marines and Army infantry troops under the command of General Douglas McArthur and the Battleship USS Missouri was still rocketing its artillery shells toward the city of Seoul about 24 miles away. What a contrast between that memory of Korea and now (in 1995) seeing for the first time the vast urban industrial metropolis that today makes almost indistinguishable the cities of Inchon and Seoul!

Vietnam War veteran Brian Willson, of Arcada, California, was the VFP leader of both the 1995 delegation and the second delegation of which I was a part in the summer of 2001. Coordinator and translator of all three delegations was Ms. Yoomi Jeong of New York City, Acting General Secretary of the Korea Truth Commission. That first delegation of 1995 included another participant in this year's delegation to North Korea -- Roy Wolff, a peace education consultant of St. Paul, Minnesota, also a U.S. Army veteran of service in Korea shortly after the war.

My second visit to Korea in July 2001 came just a few weeks following an international tribunal held at the Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive in New York City, sponsored by the Korea Truth Commission, charging U.S. armed forces of crimes against Korean civilians during and since the war years of 1950-1953. The particular characteristic of that visit was its focus on visits of a dozen civilian massacre sites in South Korea. Original plans had included an equal number of days in North Korea but those plans had to be cancelled. Another VFP colleague with both the 2001 and this year's VFP delegation was filmmaker Mickey Grant of Dallas, Texas who with Brian Willson is co-producing the documentary film on Korea -- "*Divided Country; Disposable People*" -- expected to be released in the near future. At the time I could not imagine ever feeling more overpowered with the visceral experiences of shame and grief shared with the other veterans when we visited the massacre sites of South Korea in the summer of 2001.

But as the only veteran of the Korean War among the international delegations to this year's visit and conference in North Korea, the same combination of shame and grief made an even greater impact when we visited a massacre site and memorial park in Sinchon, North Korea. Fortunately fellow VFP delegate Roy Wolff was at my side as we both made brief statements at the memorial ceremony. Feeling wobbly knees shortly before we were scheduled to speak, I told Roy, "please pray that my legs won't give way on me before I finish my comments!" Yet with those unprecedented feelings of shame and sadness came another invaluable moment for us veterans in what Brian Willson has described as a

“revolution of consciousness.” The memorial’s exhibition with photographs of murdered victims, the presence of surviving victims and family testimonies were compelling evidence of a horror story starting in October 1950 and lasting 152 days in which 35,000 men, women and children of Sinchon, in the words of this year’s tribunal indictment, were victims of “brutality of mass killing...beyond human imagination.”

Pyongyang, capital of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea, is both an ancient and modern city, totally rebuilt following the 1950-53 war when U.S. fighter planes and bombers reduced the city to ruins. Its description as a “garden city” describes Pyongyang’s beauty today with its striking architecture of hotels, museums, monuments, government and public buildings, all distinctively of Korean design, surrounded by vast areas of green and flowers along the shores of the Taedong River. Throughout our week there, between sessions of the conference, our program also included visits to several monuments, museums and historical sites, as well as artistic and political celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> Armistice anniversary.

Most of the week-long visit of July 22-29, 2003 focused on the international conference in Pyongyang, with greetings, reports and testimonies from our Korean hosts and statements of solidarity from delegates and the organizations we represented from around the world.. During two conference days, delegates also participated in the second International Tribunal on U.S. Crimes in Korea. While the tribunal process might be faulted for the absence of any reference to documented DPRK crimes against South Korean civilians, what has been done in our name as U.S. citizens and the documented toll of crimes inflicted by U.S. and U.S-supported forces in North as well as South Korea is a far greater concern for us as U.S. citizens. Detailed documents of delegation statements, conclusions, resolutions and communications from the conference and tribunal may be found at the following websites: [www.koreatruthcommision.org](http://www.koreatruthcommision.org) (note spelling of commission--one “s”) and [www.iacenter.org](http://www.iacenter.org) .

Unfortunately our limited stay did not allow as many opportunities as wished for to travel through the country and to meet families, workers and students in the factories, farms and schools. And undoubtedly there was much of the down side of life in the DPRK that we did not see of economic and social problems and needs. But within the limitations of those brief days we saw a picture of North Korean reality quite different from what might have been expected based on popular impressions of mainstream U.S. media. From our bus and taxi windows on riding through the city, in the faces of workers and students hustling to and from their places of work and study, and in the sight of farmers in the lush fields of grain and vegetables about ready to harvest, we found no signs of alleged threats of famine and despair. To the contrary, in those brief travels and among the Korean delegation members as well as conference staff and hotel workers with whom we interacted most as well as those we met at public events and artistic celebrations, we observed a people who appeared to be in generally good health, gifted, hard-working, and good-humored who also have their dreams, within the parameters of their socialist society, to build a better and more peaceful world.

Admittedly the recent trip meant new and renewed concerns for the North Korea people and apparent limitations in the opportunities to develop their gifts and aspirations. As a veteran for peace and as a Christian, convinced of the folly and futility of war in this nuclear age, it was troubling to observe the militaristic culture that permeates all aspects of the North Korean nation’s life --- in the world of sports, recreation, art and music, etc. Yet it is far more troubling and more immediately challenging as a U.S. American to face the responsibility I am persuaded corresponds mainly to the militaristic foreign policy and threats of my own nation’s government which provokes the DPRK government’s decision to maintain a system and culture of military defense to defend its national sovereignty and self-determination.

In a recent essay entitled “Peace on the Korean Peninsula is Essential to Global Peace,” Karen Talbot

of the International Council for Peace and Justice comments on how today “perilous events are moving at war speed, fueled by the new policies of military preemption and first-use of nuclear weapons proclaimed by the U.S. Bush administration.” She comments: “The Korean people have such a glorious and proud history and culture. They live in a beautiful land. But they also have the sad misfortune of residing on a strategic peninsula, which is positioned like a dagger at China and at the vastness of Russia. Thus it is a land historically trampled over by conquerors, colonial powers, occupation forces, and empires. Unfortunately that reality still prevails today when the weapons of war can destroy the peace of the entire planet.” Talbot’s essay highlights the urgency of our task “to prevent the launching of a new war against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and to set in stone permanent peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula.” She affirms: “We need to stand unflinchingly with the Korean people in fully realizing the fruits of the North-South Declaration of June 2000, concluded between President Kim Dae Jung of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Chairman Kim Jong Il of the DPRK.”

A decisive influence in my motivation for returning to Korea on each of my three trips was my spiritual journey that began following the war. After returning to my home in Tennessee and being discharged from army service in late 1952, over several of the years that followed I was haunted by memories and often had dreams, sometimes nightmares about Korea, the war and particularly about one small shoeshine boy in Pusan. That experience eventually had a strong influence on my decision to study to become a minister of the Presbyterian Church and with my wife to become international mission workers, at first hoping to return someday to Korea to help rebuild that war-torn land. Because of personal health problems we were not permitted to return to Korea and eventually were invited to go instead to Latin America. But my special interest in Korea has continued over the years and led eventually to experiences of being re-connected through Brian Willson and other war veterans met in Nicaragua during the war years of the 1980s in Central America.

And now the journey has brought me to this point where as a Christian and minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA) I am linked through my church with partner churches and Christian leaders in North as well as South Korea committed to the goals of peace, justice and reunification of all the Korean people who have suffered pain and brokenness for more than 50 years. One valuable experience of the week-long visit in Pyongyang, accompanied by veterans Roy Wolff and Mickey Grant, was the opportunity to worship at the Pong Soo Church Sunday July 27 when the sermon, prayers and music focused especially on the challenges and hopes of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armistice Agreement. A personal highlight was being at that worship service with the Rev. Insik Kim, originally of North Korea and for the past several years PCUSA’s Worldwide Ministries Division Coordinator for Asia.

During the June 2003 General Assembly of Presbyterian Church (USA), in Denver, Colorado, an important joint statement of the two South Korean national Presbyterian churches and our own denomination with commitments for initiatives for Korean peace and reunification was adopted which commits the three denominations, in their respective countries of the U.S.A and South Korea, to support the following actions: “1. The implementation of the policy of engagement and reconciliation toward North Korea must be intensified.... 2. The current nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula must be resolved by peaceful means, and the confrontational policy of the United States toward North Korea must stop...and 3. A permanent structure for peace must be established on the Korean peninsula....” Under each of these guidelines are a series of principles, actions and initiatives to be taken. For the complete statement, see <http://pcusa.org/ga215/business/commbooks/comm12.pdf>.

At the recent (August 9-10) Veterans for Peace National Convention in San Francisco, California, veterans Brian Willson, Roy Wolff and others participated in a panel discussion on Korea led by John Kim, Coordinator of the Korea Peace Campaign, and presented a resolution on Korea which was adopted by the convention. Find the resolution and other information about the Korea Peace

Campaign at [www.veteransforpeace.org/korea.htm](http://www.veteransforpeace.org/korea.htm)

Hopefully the convergence of these and other initiatives will be a great boost for the international peacemaking movement and renewed commitment for Veterans for Peace, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and other U.S. Americans to join our voices with the voices of the Pyongyang conference and others around the world to support the struggles for a just and peaceful reunification of Korea, to express our opposition to increased U.S. government's military build-up in South Korea and increasing threats of pre-emptive war military strikes against North Korea, to call for adequate humanitarian assistance in medicine, food and other material assistance for the people of North Korea by the government of our nation and other rich nations, to call for the replacement of the tenuous Armistice Agreement with a permanent peace treaty through direct negotiations between the U.S. and the DPRK governments, resulting among other actions in the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea, and finally, to call upon the U.S. Congress to establish an independent commission to investigate the U.S. war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Korea, providing just compensation for victims and their families.

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August 27, 2003