



First Lieutenants to Korea: My Experience With the Program

By Captain Chad Suitonu

If you are a new lieutenant in the Army and are dissatisfied with your current assignment—if you're looking for a change and seeking career progression—then Korea could be for you. I went there from my first duty station in October 2000 on the First Lieutenants to Korea Program; was immediately sent to a company executive officer (XO) position in the 2d Engineer Battalion, 2d Infantry Division; and can honestly say that I was pleased with my decision and experience.

The Program

The First Lieutenants to Korea Program is an unofficial Army program that encourages experienced first lieutenants to serve a tour in Korea as company XOs or in staff positions. Because the short overseas tour is a year long, units are losing second lieutenants before they gain the rank and experience needed to fill company XO slots. This leaves most companies without XOs and forces them to assign their most senior second lieutenant to the position. These lieutenants often have limited experience and only serve in the position for a few months until their tours are up.

The target recruits for this program are first lieutenants with 18 to 24 months on station at the time they move to Korea and who will not be promoted to captain during their tour. Korea is considered a hardship tour, and you may wonder why someone would volunteer to participate in such a program. In this article, I share my perspective of the program's advantages.

Make a New Start

One reason for going to Korea is if you are dissatisfied with your current job. As a young second lieutenant, you may make a lot of mistakes. You may go about business incorrectly, gain an unfavorable reputation, or rub someone the wrong way—such as your platoon sergeant or your company commander. As you climb the steep learning curve a new officer faces, you should grow and mature and see the errors of your past ways. It is difficult to make a change to

your leadership style and management practices while being part of the same organization and working with the same people. Going to a new place and working in a new organization, with new people, allow you to make a fresh start. You can more freely implement the lessons you learned from your previous assignment. The people who saw you struggle early in your career are not there; there are no looming notions about your shortcomings.

Obtain an XO Position

Another reason to go to Korea is if you want an XO position. If you have done your platoon leader time and want to progress to an XO spot, this program was especially designed for you. Most companies have three to four platoon leaders but only one XO. There could be a long wait at your current duty station for an XO position, and you might not get that opportunity at all but be moved to a staff position, such as assistant battalion S3, instead.

If you plan to take a company command, gaining experience as an XO will help set you up for success as a commander. As a platoon leader, you only see a slice of the company's overall operations. You do not gain the experience of tracking and running supply and maintenance issues at the company level. As an XO, you learn what needs to happen to allow the company to function successfully. You are drawn into the planning process and exposed to company- and battalion-level planning and coordination.

After your tour in Korea, you are automatically slotted for the Captain's Career Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, which puts you on a fast track. You can serve as little as 18 months at your current duty station, spend a year in Korea, and be at Fort Leonard Wood learning to be a company commander after being in the Army for only about three years.

Learn More and Faster

Korea has a high operating tempo. Things happen fast, and you are always busy and constantly reacting. It is demanding, and you will put in long hours. There is a

real-world threat from North Korea, so along with addressing normal operations and training issues, you must deal with periodic alerts and maintain a high state of readiness to be prepared to “fight tonight.” There are other complexities that come with working in Korea that enhance your learning experience. For example, there you are constrained by unique rules and procedures. Often you lack adequately trained manpower. It takes much longer to receive supplies ordered from the United States, and land to use for training is scarce. With all of the constraints you deal with and overcome, you become better at managing resources and finding innovative ways to accomplish the mission.

A side benefit of always being busy is that it helps time pass quickly. Everyone I have talked to agrees that although the year in Korea is somewhat difficult, it seems to fly by.

Broaden Your Experience

Going to Korea will broaden your professional and life experiences. This cross-fertilization helps you develop into a more sophisticated and well-rounded officer. Exposure to a new working environment gives you something your peers at their original duty stations will not gain.

Unique to an assignment in Korea is the opportunity to work with Korean Augmentation to U.S. Army soldiers—commonly known as KATUSAs. These Korean nationals live, work, and train with U.S. Army units to supplement manning needs. The assignment provides young officers the

opportunity to manage and lead foreign soldiers, gain up-close exposure to a new culture, and address the cultural differences and language barriers.

How to Apply

If you are interested in the First Lieutenants to Korea Program, discuss it with your chain of command. They might be able to develop a solution that satisfies your desires and their needs without your having to make a permanent move. If you and your chain of command decide that going to Korea would be the best solution, call or e-mail your Engineer Branch representative for further details about the program. In my case, I simply submitted a DA Form 4187, *Personnel Action*, signed by my battalion commander, and I had orders a few weeks later.

A Korean assignment is not for everyone, but if you are interested in some of the benefits outlined in this article, it may be what you are looking for. I learned a lot from my participation in the First Lieutenants to Korea Program, and the opportunity for new experiences and professional growth was invaluable. 

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