

Author A.C. Frieden Explores the North Korean Side of the DMZ

KAESONG, North Korea (Sep. 13, 2009) – Chicago-based author-lawyer A.C. Frieden traveled to North Korea this week to research scenes for his upcoming thriller *The Serpent's Game* and to collect information for other planned Cold War-related thrillers, mysteries and short stories. After spending a few days in Pyongyang, Frieden headed south to Kaesong. Escorted by government guides most of the time, Frieden visited many of the prominent sites in and around Kaesong, as well as the heavily fortified border area and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) at Panmunjom. His visit coincided with the 61st anniversary of the founding of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK), the country's official name.



Photo above: A.C. Frieden with a Lieutenant Colonel of the Korean People's Army on the balcony of the Panmungak (Tongil House), North Korea's administrative building in Panmunjom. The building overlooks the demarcation line, the U.S./South Korean "Freedom House", as well as blue-colored conference rooms for the Military Armistice Commission (MAC), Joint Duty Officers, and the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission.

The Korean Demilitarized Zone is a 155-mile long (248 km), 2.5-mile wide (4 km) strip of land that cuts the Korean Peninsula roughly in half and serves as a buffer between the two Koreas. The DMZ crosses the 38th parallel at an angle, and the areas immediately north and south of it are the most militarized in the world, patrolled by thousands of soldiers and heavily mined. "At the North Korean security complex bordering the Joint Security Area (JSA), military inspectors examined passports and permits of all the visitors, Westerners and North Koreans alike," Frieden noted, "and photography was strictly prohibited, though I felt compelled to take pictures." The 38th parallel was the original boundary between the US-occupied and Soviet-occupied areas of Korea resulting from Japan's surrender at the end of World War II. Upon the creation of the DPRK and the Republic of Korea (ROK, informally South Korea) in 1948, it became the *de facto* international border. The Korean War that began in 1950 ultimately ended three years later in a stalemate with the front line close to the original border. As a result of the armistice of July 27, 1953, the DMZ was created to lessen tensions along the Military Demarcation Line, which is the true border along the center of the DMZ.

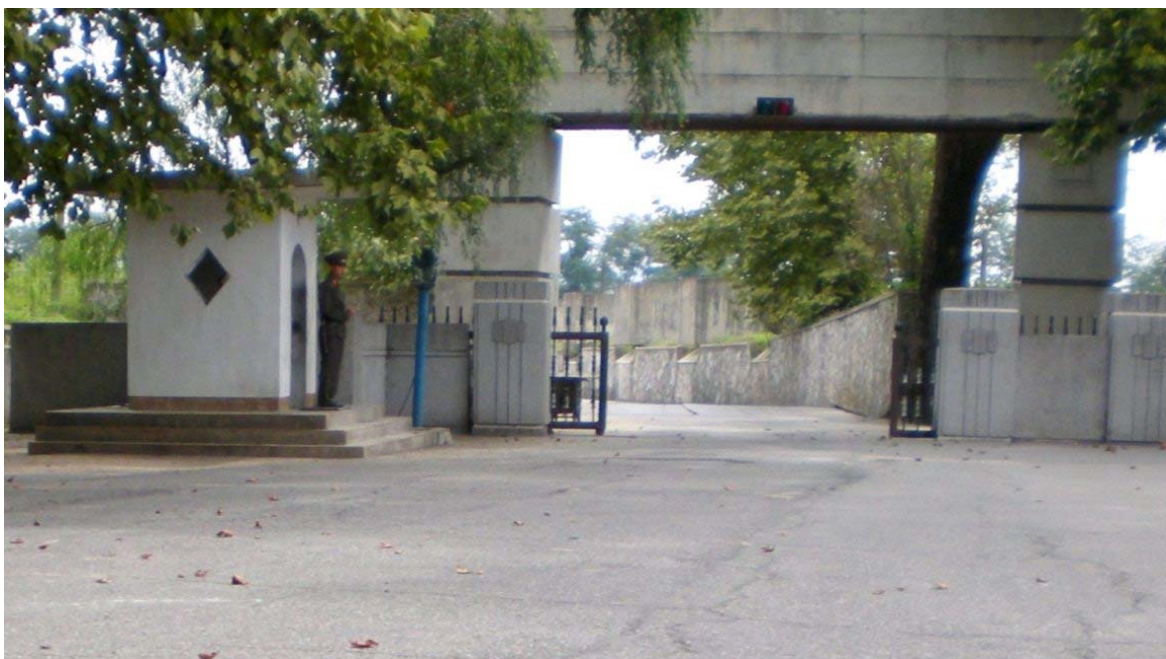


Photo above: A North Korean soldier guards the fortified entrance to the Joint Security Area (JSA). The road leading into the JSA is filled with anti-tank obstacles and is surrounded by minefields and electric fences.

Frieden visited the JSA, which is located in the former farming village of Panmunjom and is the only portion of the DMZ where the armed forces from North Korea and those of the U.S. and South Korea face each other at close range. The area is used by the two Koreas for diplomatic engagements and, until March 1991, was also the site of military negotiations between North Korea and the United Nations Command (UNC). The site features opposing observation posts, many of them equipped with signals intelligence devices and cameras, and three blue conference shacks that straddled the demarcation line.



Photo above: A group of North Korean laborers pay homage to a monument commemorating Kim Il-sung shortly before visiting the Demarcation Line in the JSA. Armed North Korean guards were especially vigilant as this large gathering of ordinary workers walked only a short distance from South Korean soil.

Author A.C. Frieden stayed overnight in Kaesong, at the Folk Hotel, which was made to resemble an old Korean street with traditional stone and wood accommodations. But like in Pyongyang, Westerners were not permitted to venture beyond the hotel's tall gate without government guides. "Several cameras at the perimeter of the property ensured that we all behaved," Frieden mused. "Regardless of the restrictions, I was able to see many parts of Kaesong, and it is a strange blend of tradition, history and post-war socialist order, the central government having cleansed some of the historical influences to fit its controlled image."



Photo above: View of downtown Kaesong, a town located only a few miles north of the DMZ.

Photo below: A.C. Frieden visits the ancient grounds of Koryo National University, which have been turned into the Koryo Museum and houses artifacts from various dynasties.



Most of Kaesong, like many towns in the DPRK, lies in near-complete darkness at night. Hot water is a rare luxury (not even available at the tourist-friendly Folk Hotel). Most people travel by bike or walk, and only the main boulevards are well-paved. There are very few traffic lights, and just as few private cars or motorcycles. The town has a multitude of large concrete housing units scattered among older, 1950s dwellings. Gas is rationed, the few food shops in sight have only a small selection of goods, and billboards only have political or patriotic themes. Much of the city is gray, void of the colors and the animation of commercialism. "But even in this town, with all the hardships that exist, you'll find locals smiling, even waving back at you," Frieden remarked. "You'll see moments of humanity. You'll see signs of innocence."



Photo above: Located near Kaesong are tombs and other relics of the Koryo Dynasty that may soon become a UNESCO World Heritage Site, though questions remain as to the authenticity of some of the site's ruins.

Photo below: A farmer makes his way through Kaesong. Most North Korean farmers are unable to obtain motorized transportation or modern farming equipment.





Photo above: North Korean soldiers guard the Demarcation Line at the DMZ, while a U.S. soldier (background, far right) takes pictures of A.C. Frieden and other Westerners from the south side of the border.

PRESS NOTE: For information on A.C. Frieden's visit to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, see Press Release 090913PR1.

About the author: A.C. Frieden is a Swiss-Brazilian novelist and lawyer living in Chicago. He is currently working on several political novels and thrillers, including one set partly in North Korea. For more information, visit his website at www.acfrieden.com and his literary travel blog.

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