

The 51st Fighter Wing still patrols the skies of the Korean peninsula.

BACK TO MIG ALL

Low over the rice paddies and farms near Osan AB, South Korea, this A-10 and F-16 of the 51st Fighter Wing represent the formidable deterrent of US airpower on the Korean peninsula. Tensions between the two Koreas are nearly at their highest state since the armistice was signed in July 1953.



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Photography by Guy Aceto, Art Director, and Paul Kennedy

Staff photo by Guy Aceto



Korea is often called the “land of the morning calm,” a description that belies the dangers just over these rugged hills. Osan AB is only 38 miles south of the South Korean capital of Seoul and a mere 60 miles from the border with North Korea.

In the last year, the two Koreas have engaged in several skirmishes, which included fatalities. Despite an economy in collapse and chronic famine, North Korea has been testing intermediate range ballistic missiles and pursuing a nuclear weapons program, all the while spouting threatening rhetoric. Osan, home to 7th Air Force and the 51st Fighter Wing, has all the trappings of a Stateside base, but the sense of being on the “front lines” is never lost on those assigned here.



Nuclear, Biological, Chemical warfare training is mandatory and taken seriously at Osan. Above and right, TSgt. Mike Reed sponges off SrA. Klint Fritz, demonstrating decontamination procedures in one of many specially prepared shelters on base for protection against NBC warfare.



Designed as safe havens in the event of attack, the shelters are stocked with food, water, and communications gear. Those entering must pass through a maze of checkpoints and decontamination stations, to ensure they are “clean.” During such exercises, all normal duties around the base must be performed in full chem gear. Practice makes perfect and focus on the mission is evident at USAF’s most forward-deployed base—just minutes in flying time from “MiG Alley,” as the skies over the area between the Yalu and Chongchon Rivers in northwest Korea were known during the Korean War.



The 51st FW includes two fighter squadrons—the 25th Fighter Squadron and 36th FS. The 25th FS flies the A-10, designed in the 1970s to be a potent destroyer of enemy armor. The A-10s fly low over the terrain where they may have to fight, their pilots memorizing every nook and cranny of the South Korean countryside. Above is a specially marked 25th FS “Warthog.”



Photo by Paul Kennedy

The 51st FW traces its lineage to World War II, when the 51st Pursuit Group flew P-40s in India. As the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group, the unit operated from bases in Japan and Korea during the Korean War. The unit settled at Osan permanently in 1971 as one of the guarantors of the cease-fire.



Above, SSgt. Michael S. Bell clears an A-10 to taxi out on a training sortie. At left, a seemingly unlikely pairing—a 25th FS A-10 and 36th FS F-16. The two dissimilar types train together closely for the fast and slow interdiction and close air support missions.



A \$3 million runway renovation at Osan, earlier this year, brought changes in flying training. Osan's A-10s, F-16s, and a U-2 detachment moved to Suwon, a South Korean air force base to the northwest.



The flying schedule was adjusted to account for the bus rides to Suwon, by flight and ground crews alike, but everyone put in long hours to maintain the sortie generation rate. After seven weeks, Osan was back in business. At right, a ground crew pushes an F-16 into a concrete-and-steel protective revetment at Suwon.



At left, an F-16 provides an impromptu desk for a crew chief conference.

Living space at Osan is at a premium, but efforts are under way to upgrade the enlisted dormitories to the new DoD 1+1 configuration. An improved quality of life is a recognized morale booster and sortie generator.



Force protection takes on a sharp edge at Osan. Defensive strong points ring the base and look more than a little odd adjacent to the golf course and movie theater.

Above, SrA. Michael Williams runs an M113 armored personnel carrier from the driver's cupola, while, below, SrA. Kevin Schmuck takes the vehicle's machine-gun station.



Air Force troops from career fields other than security forces also receive training in small arms and defensive tactics to deepen the base's protection in the event of war.



In one of the many defensive positions around the base, left and above, SSgt. Jessica Simon on the .50-caliber machine gun and Schmuck on the M-16 demonstrate readiness for anything.



An F-16 pops off flares to distract a heat-seeking missile threat in an exercise. Crews from Osan can get realistic training in many places on the peninsula and also deploy to Pacific Air Force exercises, such as Cope Thunder, for training with a wide variety of US and allied air units.



Capt. Todd Dozier performs his preflight walkaround while crew chief A1C William Harrison keeps an eye on "his" jet. Unlike most USAF pilots, those at Osan know that if they fight, it will be right where they live. Col. Tom Poulos, who was 51st Operations Group commander, said wing airplanes are watched by the North every time they take off. "We're looking at the enemy, [and] they're looking at us—every day."



Photo by Paul Kennedy



Anyone who joined the Air Force to "see the world" need go no farther than just outside the main gate at Osan. Restaurants and shops cater to personnel at the American air base, which is an anchor of the local economy. Osan's Korean hosts are quite friendly to the airmen and soldiers assigned here, and a taste of the Korean culture is a major benefit of any tour of duty on the peninsula.



The 36th FS—the “Flying Fiends”—operate the F-16CG, which is capable of carrying the Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night system. LANTIRN is a set of pods mounted under the F-16—one for seeing in the dark, the other for designating targets for laser-guided bombs.



A multirole fighter, the F-16 can perform precision attack, counterair dogfighting, and close air support. At top, a “Fiend” on final approach to Kunsan AB, about 70 miles from Osan. The Osan F-16s often train with fighters from the 8th Fighter Wing at Kunsan. During the Korean War, the 36th was a unit of the 8th FW’s predecessor and, as such, was one of the first to see action in Korea.



The Korean War never really ended, and the tentative, 46-year “peace” on the peninsula is an extended cease-fire. For that reason the 51st is constantly ready to head back to MiG Alley. ■