

JOHNATHON KUPKA



Kupka, a Special Forces officer, exults in a training jump at the eastern edge of Seoul in 2010. U.S. Army photo

TODAY'S SOLDIER

Lieutenant Colonel Johnathon Moon Kupka, U.S. Army Special Forces, is half-Korean, a quarter Czech and the rest Norwegian. It's tempting to call him all soldier, but that's not the whole story.

His Korean mother was shunned by his grandfather when she left for the U.S. in 1969 to marry a former American Army officer. Two tours of duty in the Republic of Korea left John Kupka proficient in Korean and with a new appreciation for the challenges his parents faced when they dared to fall in love. He also acquired a keen understanding of the complicated military calculus on the Korean peninsula.

Now 42, but still "our Johnny" to his mom, Moonbeam and Michael Kupka's youngest child was an adventuresome, strong-willed boy. When he was roaming the hills above Grays Harbor with a paintball rifle in the 1980s it was easy to imagine him in camo fatigues. Yet when he was commissioned a second lieutenant through the ROTC program at Pacific Lutheran University in 1997, Kupka was far from certain he'd make the military his career.

Twenty years later, he's the commander of the Headquarters Command Battalion at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall at Arlington, Virginia. It's the Army's largest battalion; more than 6,000 soldiers. Kupka's steady progress up the chain of command has been propelled by exceptional soldiering, academic achievement and an instinctive ability to inspire teamwork. Kupka is a master parachutist, combat infantryman and survival school standout. He is steeped in the unconventional warfare skills required to earn the right to wear Ranger and Special Forces insignia.

There's more. In 2015, when Kupka was awarded a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Kansas, his dissertation explored the



Lt. Col. Kupka with the battalion's Command Sergeant Major, Kenyatta Mack.
U.S. Army photo, Jim Dresbach

“warrior class” in the armed services and the way society perceives and stereotypes the military. With “its self-perception of moral superiority,” the warrior class is a distinct sub-culture within the military, Kupka wrote, but “the attitudes and beliefs of a few” can create a negative image for the military as a whole. Rambo and the swashbuckling *Apocalypse Now* colonel who loves “the smell of napalm in the morning” are enduring warrior-class caricatures.

Elaborate honor guard rituals at sporting events and support-our-troops banners on freeway overpasses spring in part from a desire to make amends for the way our troops were demonized during and after the war in Vietnam, Kupka wrote. The public is also showing its appreciation for the valor and sacrifice of 21st century soldiers in the war on terror. But “over-sentimentalization” of gung-ho soldiering may be widening a worrisome gap.

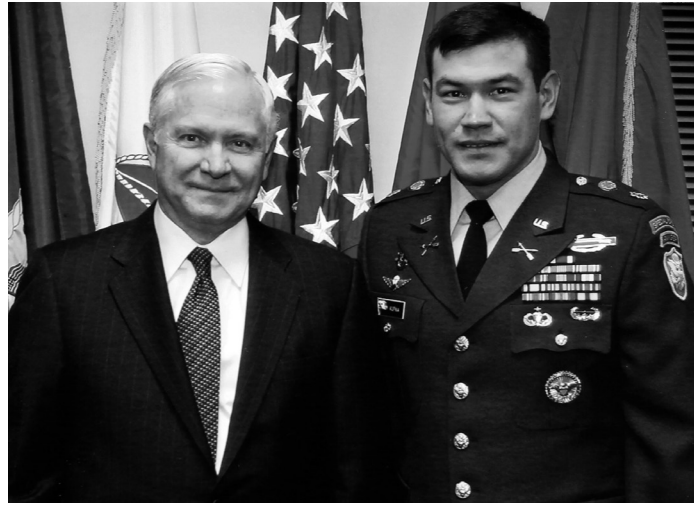
“My research set out to identify an issue that potentially could become a real problem,” Kupka says. “I think the most danger from the warrior class mentality is to the potential fighting force. We no longer have a draft, so if Americans begin to think it’s all someone else’s responsibility; that someone else’s son or daughter will volunteer to take up arms and protect the nation, that’s a problem. And if different sectors of society, especially bright young people, don’t see the military as a viable career path, the problem intensifies.”

A special report by *The Los Angeles Times* in 2015 underscored Kupka’s thesis. The newspaper’s research concluded that the U.S. military and civilians are increasingly divided: “While the U.S. waged a war in Vietnam 50 years ago with 2.7 million men conscripted from every segment of society, less than one-half of 1 percent of the U.S. population is in the armed services today—the lowest rate since World War II. America’s recent wars are authorized by a U.S. Congress whose members have the lowest rate of military service in history, led by three successive commanders in chief who never served on active duty.”

“I am well-aware that many Americans, especially our elite classes, consider the military a bit like a guard dog,” said Lt. Col. Remi M. Hajjar, a professor of behavioral sciences and leadership at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. “They are very thankful for our protection, but they probably wouldn’t want to have it as a neighbor,” he said. “And they certainly are not going to influence or inspire their own kids to join that pack of Rottweilers to protect America.”

Kupka believes policymakers, senior military leaders and the media would do well to explore ways to combat these stereotypes. He is also worried about America’s obesity epidemic. A 2015 study found that nearly 30 percent of high school students were overweight—14 percent of them certifiably obese. “If the pool we are drawing from can’t meet the physical standards of the military and we’re spending billions on heart/cardiovascular issues and diabetes, then that’s a national security issue, too,” Kupka says.

KUPKA'S master's degree thesis, *Alliance or Reliance? Reconsidering U.S. Forces in the Republic of Korea*, is even more topical. Writing in 2012, he submitted that reducing our military presence in Korea “and transferring a majority of the security burden onto the Republic of Korea will not diminish stability or degrade U.S. interests in the region.” In 2012, the United States was still recovering from the worst economic downturn since



Kupka with U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, 2010. *Kupka collection*

the 1930s, with significant reductions in defense spending. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had taxed, literally and figuratively, the U.S. military and the national debt. “In stark contrast,” Kupka wrote, “the growth of the ROK Army has not kept pace with the continuing growth of the South Korean economy. Instead, the rising expense of security on the Korean Peninsula has increasingly fallen to the American taxpayer.”

Given the heightened tensions created by North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un's provocations, does Kupka still feel the same way?

He does—with two disclaimers: The first is that the situation on the Korean peninsula is fluid. The second is that none of his opinions or reflections should be construed as official positions of the United States Army. Being a combat-ready commander *and* a military scholar in a volatile world requires strict separation of duty from point of view.

Kupka acknowledges we are “on a path to an enduring presence” in Iraq and Afghanistan to shore up their national defense and pursue terrorists who hate America and its allies. “What we need to consider now is what role our grandchildren will play if they are called upon to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan? Will they still be fighting terrorists, or will they be assisting and partnering in defense—like we have since 1953 in Korea? The problem in Korea hasn't gone away since 1953. But exactly what is the problem? What are we trying to achieve with a large troop presence in South Korea? That's what I think we need to figure out first. If 28,500 American troops in South Korea are intended to serve as a deterrent to North Korean aggression I think we should be questioning whether the strategy is working.”

No one, least of all Kupka, is impassive about Kim Jong-un's apparent determination to achieve a stockpile of long-range ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads. While South

Korea has the capability to produce nuclear weapons, it has pledged itself to non-proliferation. If it had nuclear weapons of its own, would that be a deterrent or a provocation to a character as obstreperous as Kim?

Recent articles in authoritative publications argue that downsizing U.S. troop strength in South Korea would “create incentives for Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons.” But one international relations analyst, Khang Vu, challenges that notion, saying it would “do more harm than good” for U.S. interests:

“A U.S. withdrawal would beyond all doubt create a vacuum of power on the Korean Peninsula, prompting North Korea to take on more provocative actions such as more missile and nuclear tests, attacking South Korean troops near the DMZ more often or shelling on the South’s ships and islands near the Northern Limit Line. In return, South Korea may respond militarily to avoid losing face, and if initial deterrence fails, the two Koreas will be drawn into another Korean War.” In the meantime, the best way for the United States to curb North Korea’s nuclear program should be to enforce U.N. sanctions and persuade China to join forces, and this approach only works as long as the United States sustains its influence in the region, Khang says.

Kupka agrees with Khang’s last two points—the importance of U.N. sanctions and China’s assistance. However, he isn’t convinced it takes 28,500 boots on the ground to sustain our influence in the region.

With military service mandatory—an increasingly controversial issue in South Korean society—the Republic of Korea has a standing armed force of 625,000, with 3.1 million in reserves. Its air force is equipped with Boeing’s formidable F-15K “Slam Eagle” fighter aircraft. Its Navy is expanding. In 2016, however, South Korea’s military manpower ranking dropped four spots, from seventh the year before, to eleventh in the world, according to the website Global Power. North Korea ranked 25th. The U.S. was number one, followed by Russia, China, India, France, Britain and Japan. Once a brutal colonial overlord, Japan is now South Korea’s strategic democratic neighbor, constitutionally limited to a defensive posture. During the Korean War, Japan played an important role in U.S. military operations. The U.S. today has a larger military force in Japan than in any other foreign country. By one estimate, the U.S. had 54,000 soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines in Japan in 2016. The Department of Defense pegged it at “about 38,000 ashore and 11,000 afloat,” dispersed among 85 installations, with Okinawa as an American military stronghold.

America’s capability and willingness to honor its mutual defense pacts with Japan and the Republic of Korea is not in doubt, especially given the Trump Administration’s “don’t mess with America” posture. The U.S. has multiple platforms—land, air and sea—to retaliate for a nuclear strike by North Korea. What’s worrisome is that a first strike by Kim Jong-un could result in millions of casualties. Nearly 25 million people—half the population of South Korea—live within what is known as the Seoul Capital Area—just 120 to 200 miles from Pyongyang.



Kupka with his grandparents and other family members at the DMZ above Seoul. *Kupka collection*

Kupka has Korean aunts, uncles and cousins in harm's way. It gives him special insight on that anxiety. Having served in Iraq, he understands war.

KUPKA GREW UP with a loving but demanding Korean mother and a tall, calm Caucasian father. Serving in Korea and learning the language gave John Kupka a deeper understanding of his Koreanness. His mother's temperament is quintessentially Korean. "She's stubborn, smart, passionate, caring and resilient," Kupka says. His dad, a Lutheran from Minnesota, became a federal forestry manager after his Army days. "He's a perfect gentleman," the colonel says. "Very smart and kind of all-knowing in a laid-back way. They're loving parents and a great team." In Hangul, the Korean alphabet, Kupka's doctoral dissertation is dedicated "To Mother and Father": **어머니 와 아버지**

One highlight of Kupka's time in Korea was spending time with his ailing grandfather, who had fled North Korea in 1946 after the communist takeover. When they visited the Demilitarized Zone, his grandfather gazed mournfully across the barbed wire to the land of his birth. To his dying day, Moon Sang Jum radiated pride that his handsome, respectful grandson had become such an accomplished soldier. That bond also helped him

come to a reconciliation with his own daughter.

Kupka says the most important lesson he absorbed growing up translates in any faith. “The best way I can sum it up is The Golden Rule: Treat others as you would want to be treated. There’s that adage in every language. In our domestic world today we’ve lost a lot of basic human courtesy. Technology is part of it—Twitter, Facebook, the Internet. It’s happening everywhere, including South Korea. Seoul is now a high-tech metropolis. But the way we treat one another now isn’t the way people treated one another 40, 50 years ago. We need to recover that sense of respect. It’s important for success in any field, really, to show respect in dealing with other human beings. Everything my parents instilled in me is commensurate to Army values.

“Me becoming a professional soldier is more of an accident than it was an ambition or something I had aspired to be,” Kupka says. “Growing up I was fascinated by the Green Berets and the Rangers, but it wasn’t one of those things of how I saw myself in 20 or 30 years. It was more of a way to pay for college. When I started doing it, getting into it, I really enjoyed becoming a professional soldier. Next month will be 20 years on federal active service. I’m still excited about my job.

“I’ve traveled all over the world, seeing different countries and cultures. There’s opportunities that a lot of people don’t see—education, leadership skills and adventure. But most of all it’s an honor to wear this uniform and serve my country.”

John C. Hughes