

BRIDGE OF NO RETURN

A One-Act Play

by

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Cast of Characters

<u>DIPLOMAT:</u>	Civilian diplomat. Adult, any age/race/gender.
<u>OFFICER:</u>	A U.N. Battalion Officer. Adult, any age/race/gender.
<u>AIDE:</u>	A U.N. Aide. 20s. Any race/gender.

Playwrights Notes: The play is inspired by a true incident that happened in the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, between North Korea and South Korea. The discussion depicted is entirely imagined and may not even reflect a realistic procedure. It's an amalgamation of negotiations that happened surrounding the incident. Dialogue in parenthesis is there for context and is not to be spoken. When dialogue is in quotation marks, actors MUST NOT use air quotes.

Glossary of Initialisms:

<u>DMZ</u>	Demilitarized Zone. Military-free zone between North and South Korea.
<u>MIA</u>	Missing in Action
<u>JSA</u>	Joint Security Area. A politically tense area in the DMZ where North and South Koreans negotiate matters of diplomacy, etc.
<u>ROK</u>	Republic of Korea. South Korean Army.
<u>KPA</u>	Korean People's Army. North Korean Army.
<u>UNC</u>	United Nations Command. Located within the JSA.
<u>KSC</u>	Korean Service Corps. South Korean civilian auxiliary to the ROK.
<u>OP:</u>	Observation Post.
<u>CP:</u>	Checkpoint.

Scene

United Nations Command (UNC) in the Joint Security Area (JSA).
Panmunjom, Korea, in the DMZ.

Time

The morning of August 18, 1976.

SETTING:

An office at United Nations Command in the Joint Security Area (JSA) in Panmunjom, Korea, in the DMZ. The morning of August 18, 1976.

A decent-sized desk or table to lay out files and papers on. Chairs that may or may not be sat in. Enough space to move around in. There can also be a chalkboard with chalk.

AT RISE:

The OFFICER enters and holds the door (if there is one) gesturing for the DIPLOMAT to enter.

DIPLOMAT

And this is happening now?

OFFICER

The skirmish itself is over but we still have one man MIA.

DIPLOMAT

MIA on the JSA in the DMZ. Any idea where he is? It's not a large area. He can't have gone far.

OFFICER

We're looking.

DIPLOMAT

Okay. And you said this was about a tree?

OFFICER

The poplar by the Bridge.

DIPLOMAT

I know it. People are always complaining how it blocks the line of sight between Checkpoint 3 and Observation Post 5.

OFFICER

That's the one.

DIPLOMAT

What's the problem? The checkpoint and the observation post need to see each other.

OFFICER

We wanted to cut the tree down but the North Koreans objected. They say the tree was planted by Kim Il-Sung.

DIPLOMAT

Of course it was.

Okay, before we go any further, I need to clarify our parameters for my purposes. It's your job to tell me what happened, it's mine to determine why and how, then recommend what to do next. Now, I'm sure you have thoughts and opinions on all of that. It's not that I'm not interested in them – I am and I may even ask you. This is not meant to be adversarial. But for the time being I need you to stick to the facts. Is that understood?

OFFICER

Understood. I will keep my opinions to myself.

DIPLOMAT

Thank you. Now, the tree. We couldn't cut it down entirely, so...

OFFICER

It was then decided to just prune the top branches. That way the tree could remain and the line of sight would be less compromised.

DIPLOMAT

Who did we send?

OFFICER

Five KSC (Korean Service Corps), and a UNC (United Nations Command) security team, led by Captain Arthur Bonifas and ROK (Republic of Korea) Captain Kim.

DIPLOMAT

And it was Bonifas who was killed?

OFFICER

Affirmative.

DIPLOMAT

How?

OFFICER

An axe to the face.

DIPLOMAT

Oh. One they were using to trim the branches or did the North Koreans bring their own?

OFFICER

It was our axe.

DIPLOMAT

Any other casualties?

OFFICER

Just injuries – all the guards except one. No other deaths.

DIPLOMAT

And one missing.

OFFICER

The platoon leader, First Lieutenant Mark Barrett.

DIPLOMAT

And no one was armed?

OFFICER

That is correct.

DIPLOMAT

Because the UNC is limited to a maximum of five armed officers and eleven armed enlisted men, and this was a gardening mission. Okay, so...

(DIPLOMAT starts recreating the incident with objects on the table (papers, files, office supplies, whatever) and/or on the chalkboard if there is one.)

DIPLOMAT

If the tree is here... And the checkpoint is here... And the bridge is right next to it here... The observation post would be...

(The OFFICER indicates where.)

DIPLOMAT

Great.

So, the KSC workers start on the tree, when North Korean soldiers show up. How many?

OFFICER

According to witnesses—

DIPLOMAT

Sorry, what witnesses? I know I'll get a list later, but if you don't mind—

OFFICER

Certainly. The incident was witnessed from OP-5 by Captains Shirron and Shaddix, the joint duty officer and his driver... And one of the guards was able to take photos using a black and white camera and, when that ran out of film, Captain Shaddix's 35 mm.

DIPLOMAT

Please tell me at least one of those cameras has a telephoto lens.

OFFICER

Shaddix's does. Also a UNC guard at Checkpoint 3 got the whole thing on a movie camera. They're developing everything as we speak.

DIPLOMAT

Amazing. Okay so where was I?

OFFICER

The number of KPA soldiers. Approximately eleven.

DIPLOMAT

Did they start trouble right away?

OFFICER

No, Sir. They observed for maybe ten or fifteen minutes before engaging.

DIPLOMAT

Right. And who was in charge of this little brigade?

OFFICER

Senior Lt. Pak Chul.

DIPLOMAT

Say no more.

OFFICER

You're familiar with him?

DIPLOMATIC

Lt. Bulldog? Yes, he's quite the instigator. Still, nothing like this. I'm amazed he didn't start in right away. What happened when the fifteen minutes was up?

OFFICER

According to Captain Kim and several others at the site, Pak "informed" Bonifas that they were not authorized to cut the branches and had to stop.

DIPLOMAT

Did anyone see Pak communicate with his commanding officers anytime during the fifteen minutes? By phone? Walkie-talkie? Anything?

OFFICER

No one. I double checked. And they were watching him closely.

DIPLOMAT

Good. You're thorough.

So, Bulldog shows up while UNC and KSC personnel are cutting the branches off this sacred tree planted by their Supreme Leader... and he says nothing. Then, several minutes later, without sending or receiving communication of any kind, that we know of, he declares that the action he's been observing wasn't permitted in the first place. I imagine Captains Bonifas and Lee took exception to this.

OFFICER

According to witnesses, they exchanged words through the translator. Then Captain Bonifas turned his back on Lieutenant Pak and ordered the detail to continue.

DIPLOMAT

I'm sure Bulldog must've loved that. How did he respond?

OFFICER

He sent a runner back over the Bridge. A few minutes later, a KPA transport comes back across carrying approximately twenty more guards.

DIPLOMAT

A few minutes? So they were right there. Waiting for the runner to signal them. Then what?

OFFICER

At that point the North Korean reinforcements disembark the vehicle, brandishing crowbars and clubs. Pak repeats the order to cease and desist. Captain Bonifas once again turns his back on Pak. At which time, Pak shouted either "Kill the bastards," "Kill them all" or both, depending on who you talk to and how much Korean they understand.

DIPLOMAT

And that's when the North Koreans charged.

OFFICER

The whole incident took... roughly thirty seconds. Our forces managed to fend off and disperse the KPA guards. Unfortunately, at some point, the KSC workers got separated from their tools. Senior Lieutenant Pak managed to knock Captain Bonifas to the ground... then with the aid of at least five of his fellow guards... bludgeoned him to death. It's unclear who specifically was wielding the axe that... (killed him)

(KNOCK ON THE DOOR.)

DIPLOMAT

Come in!

(AIDE enters.)

AIDE

Sorry to interrupt. I thought I should tell you, Lt. Barrett has been found.

OFFICER

Alive?

AIDE

Yes, sir. He's being taken to the aid station at Camp Greaves. Once they patch him up, they're going to transport him by helicopter to a hospital in Seoul.

DIPLOMAT

Was he talking? Did he tell anyone what happened?

AIDE

Yes. He said when the fighting started, he jumped a low wall to try and outflank them, but—

DIPLOMAT

Show me.

(The DIPLOMAT points to the ground plan but since nothing is marked, the AIDE is at a loss, so the DIPLOMAT points out...)

DIPLOMAT

This is the tree, this is the checkpoint and this is the bridge.

AIDE

From what I gathered—

OFFICER

You spoke to the Lieutenant yourself.

AIDE

No, Sir, but I was there when his statement was being taken. It's being typed up now. If you want to wait for the report—

DIPLOMAT

We'll get it eventually. Show us where the wall is.

AIDE

Right here by KPA 8.

DIPLOMAT

There's a KPA station right there?

(DIPLOMAT looks at OFFICER silently asking "Why didn't you mention this?" OFFICER does not respond. They focus on the AIDE, who simply continues without noticing the nonverbal exchange.)

AIDE

Yes. Lt. Barrett wasn't aware that behind the wall is a low, wooded area – a lot of dense grass and small trees, which is why you could pass by it on a regular basis and never notice it. It's just... the landscape. Anyway, about an hour after the skirmish, the lookouts at OP-5 noticed that the guards at KPA 8 seemed to be playing this game. One guard would take an axe down behind the wall. Then a couple minutes later, they'd come back and hand off the axe to the next guard, and so on. They didn't know what to make of it until they got word that the lieutenant was missing. Then they called it into Command who dispatched a search and rescue, but by then—

OFFICER

The North Koreans had been taking turns hacking away at him for an hour and a half.

(Silence.)

DIPLOMAT

Is that all the information you have for us at the moment?

AIDE

Yes, Sir.

DIPLOMAT

(To OFFICER)

Do you have anything else?

(OFFICER just shakes their head.)

DIPLOMAT

(To AIDE)

Keep us posted.

(AIDE nods and leaves. DIPLOMAT looks at the report.)

DIPLOMAT

Well, I think we're all caught up—

OFFICER

What they did to Barrett... That's a war crime!

DIPLOMAT

I know.

OFFICER

I mean, it's one thing to kill a man. Or capture him. Even interrogate him. But this... this

goes beyond torture. They weren't even trying to squeeze any intel out of him. They were... (having fun)

(Pause. Softly.)

This is a war crime.

(Pause.)

Over a goddamn tree.

DIPLOMAT

You know as well as I do, this was never about the tree.

(DIPLOMAT goes over to the layout again.)

DIPLOMAT

Senior Lieutenant Pak is always causing trouble in the JSA, right? So today, he gets to use this seemingly benign task as an excuse to attack UNC forces and KSC personnel... not just with the few thugs he has hanging around with him... but by calling in a guard transport that's ready and waiting??? Pak couldn't just do that on his own. And even if he could... no one's going to buy that it wasn't sanctioned by higher-ups.

Bulldog, acting with the full authority of the North Korean Army and its government, killed an American soldier and tortured another for sport in the DMZ. This goes beyond international incident or even war crime... this is an Act of War.

OFFICER

And will that be your recommendation? That we go to war with North Korea again?

(KNOCK on the door. Without waiting, the AIDE enters again.)

DIPLOMAT

Yes?

AIDE

Here's that preliminary report.

(Hands each a copy.)

And I, um... I just wanted to inform you... both of you... that Lt. Barrett died in transport.

DIPLOMAT

I see. Thank you.

(Pause. Nobody moves.)

Is there anything else?

AIDE

Just that North Korean media has begun airing reports of the incident—

DIPLOMAT

I'm sure we can all guess what they're saying. We'll read those later. Thank you.

AIDE

(Nods, then to OFFICER.)

My condolences, Sir.

OFFICER

Thank you.

(AIDE exits.)

OFFICER

I know it's not my place to analyze this but right now... all I want to do is bomb that country into the stone age. Just turn it into a parking lot.

DIPLOMAT

Yes, well... I understand your wrath. And I'm sure once I discuss this with my superiors and they discuss it with President Ford, we'll come up with a clear response.

OFFICER

If you'll pardon me for saying so... it sounds like we're going to "respond" with a pussy solution.

DIPLOMAT

We've been out of Vietnam for five minutes. South Korea doesn't want another war. For many reasons. Now, North Korea, like most if not all of East Asia, is a shame-based culture. It's going to come out that they not only killed Americans who were on a peaceful mission... but that they did it with axes. They will look like psychopaths.

OFFICER

With all due respect, that's never seemed to bother them before.

DIPLOMAT

Because that's not how they see themselves. But this... This will be a source of shame. They will lose face.

OFFICER

So they're embarrassed and we let them get away with it?

DIPLOMAT

Not at all. They've drawn a line in the sand. Not only have they crossed the Bridge of No Return, but they did it in the wrong fucking direction. What's best in a situation like this... what will slap them down and shut them up... is a show of force surrounding a symbolic gesture.

OFFICER

What do you have in mind?

DIPLOMAT

I'm sure I can come up with a few things. But the first thing I'm going to recommend...
In honor of Captain Bonifas and Lieutenant Barrett... in the name of maintaining the
integrity of the DMZ and the peace between our nations...

(Pause.)

We're going to chop down that fucking tree.

(DIPLOMAT knocks over/erases whatever
represents the tree. They look at each other. Pause.)

(BLACKOUT)

END OF PLAY