

# STARS AND STRIPES

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## Death of American college student in Seoul hotel baffles investigators

By *Jeremy Kirk, Seoul bureau chief*

SEOUL — Six weeks after a raven-haired and dark-eyed American was stomped to death in a cheap hotel room, authorities have made no arrests and leads are wispy.

Police have a partial bloody footprint, a witness who says she saw the killer, and a witness who says she heard the beating. They have questioned U.S. servicemembers who might have seen 21-year-old Jamie Lynn Penich the night before she died.



**Jamie L. Penich, 21 an anthropology and religious studies student at the University of Pittsburgh, was studying abroad in South Korea when she was found dead in her hotel room in Seoul.**

But the case has hit a block, Yongsan Police Station officials said.

"The best chance now [to catch the killer] is for someone who comes forward with new information," said a South Korea police official close to the investigation.

Penich, a University of Pittsburgh coed spending a semester at Keimyung University in Taegu, died March 18 from severe head and chest injuries at the Kum Sung Motel in Seoul, police said.

U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command agents are participating in the investigation because the Itaewon entertainment district is frequented by U.S. soldiers, said Marc A. Raimondi, chief of public affairs for CIC. Yongsan Garrison, the headquarters of U.S. Force Korea, is less than a mile away. The Korean National Police requested help, Raimondi said.

Five U.S. soldiers have given blood samples to Korean police for testing, said Lt. Kwon Young-heoi, chief of violent crimes for Section No. 4. The suspect is described in a poster produced by the Korean police as a white man, 5 feet 9 inches.

So far, no one has been arrested. As of Friday, Raimondi said, there are no American suspects.

## The journey

Penich came by train to Seoul with six friends from Keimyung University in Taegu on Friday, March 16 for St. Patrick's Day. The students stopped by a travel desk at Seoul Station and asked where they should stay, said Dr. Kim Hye-soon, director of the International Affairs at the university.

Kim said she spoke with students soon after Penich's murder.

The travel attendant recommended Itaewon, a neighborhood of cheap shopping, hotels and food, and called motels for the group, Kim said.

Penich and six friends checked into the Kum Sung Motel, not far from Burger King. Later, Kim said, the group complained that they wanted to find a different hotel because the Kum Sung Motel's walls were paper thin.



*Jeremy Kirk / Stars and Stripes*  
**The Kum Sung Motel, Itaewon, where Jamie Lynn Penich was murdered.**

The Kum Sung Motel is the kind of inexpensive place recommended by travel books like Lonely Planet. Known as a "yogwan" — the Korean word for an inexpensive inn — the three-story Kum Sung Motel is a faded white slip of a building on a crowded commercial street. Out front, a long, slender sign announces its name, but the hotel's façade is little more than a door wide.

Park Jong-soon, 51, and her husband, 52, have managed the motel for about 11 years. Park said she is scared, and began locking her office door after the murder occurred.

They said foreign merchants from Japan and Nigeria occupy the inn during the week. On weekends, the clientele switches to U.S. soldiers accompanied by women, Park's husband said. He declined to give his name.

They don't remember who registered when Penich arrived, they said. Park registers guests from a small office window about two feet off the ground. She and her husband sit on the floor as they work, typical of small convenient shops and other businesses in Korea.

Guests lean down or squat to pass money or keys through the registration window. Because of the window's position, Park said, she

doesn't remember people's faces.

## The party

Nickleby's, a popular bar for expatriates, was full that holiday evening, said part-owner Detlev Hatterscheid.

Green beer flowed from the taps. People danced and laughed. As many as 200 people crowded into the large, Western-style "English Pub," as its sign says. Dark wood offsets the shiny hardwood floors in the clean establishment.

Shin Sun-hee, a 30-year-old waitress who worked that night, remembers many revelers taking photographs. It was a busy night, she said, because only she and three other waitresses were working.

Penich and four friends got to the bar around 10 p.m., Korean police say. Shin recalled it being earlier. Penich spent some of her time dancing and hanging out with U.S. soldiers in the bar, a police official said.

Around 2 a.m., three of Penich's friends returned to the motel, Korean police say. Penich and Kenzi L. Snider, another American student, remained at the bar until around 3:30 a.m, police said. Barkeep Hatterscheid says he thinks they left earlier, around 3 a.m., because when he was cleaning at 3:30 a.m., about 15 people lingered at the bar. Penich wasn't one of them, he said.

Police believe Penich and Snider walked back to the Kum Sung Motel, where Penich went to Room 103 that she shared with Anneloes Verwyk, a student from the Netherlands.

Verwyk was asleep when Penich and Snider returned, Korean police said. Penich said she wanted to shower, and Snider helped her adjust the water temperature. Snider left for her room next door, checking on Penich five minutes later. Penich was fine, she said.

When she left to return to her room next door, Snider told Korean police, she left the door to Penich's room unlocked.

## The murder



*Jeremy Kirk / Stars and Stripes*  
**Nickleby's English Pub in Seoul's Itaewon district, where Jamie Lynn Penich and her friends celebrated St. Patrick's Day.**

On March 17, all 17 motel rooms were booked, and Park was working the night shift. Her husband had gone out with friends. She watched television and napped through the night. About 2 a.m., the woman in Room 102 came to the office, asking for water.

Park said she remembers calling to ask her husband what time he was coming home. She stepped out the office door to look for him outside. On her way, when she heard another door closing, she turned and walked back down the hallway toward the rooms.

She first saw the man in a mirror placed at the corner of two hallways, providing a view around the curve to down the other hallway. That's when she saw a white, clean-cut man coming out of Penich's room.

Park said the young man quietly shut the door to Room 103, Penich's room. Wearing a checkered shirt and beige pants, he calmly walked down the hallway and out of the motel. The two passed each other without making eye contact, she said, but she looked at his face.

She noticed he had splatter stains on the cuff of the right leg of his pants, but didn't think much of it. She went to bed after her husband returned to the motel around 5 a.m.

Around 8 a.m., Penich's Danish friend, Verwyk, found the battered body and ran to wake up the others, Korean police said.

Two men, whom police said were friends of Penich's also staying at the hotel, fetched Park's husband.

The door to Room 103 was open. Park's husband glanced in and saw Penich's naked body. Her friends stood there and appeared in shock, Park's husband said.

The attack happened quickly — in the span of 10 or 15 minutes — and she died after being stomped by a shoe on her head, neck and chest, Kwon said.

As the killer retreated, he left a bloody shoe print on the room's vinyl floor.

The police arrived and herded the six friends into one of the small motel rooms for questioning. Soon afterward, about 40 officials — some of whom were CIC agents — were investigating the scene, Park said. When they were finished, the friends were released, and the room was locked and sealed, as it remains today.

"I think of the body lying there whenever I pass the room," Park's husband said.

"I don't want to walk in front of the room," said Park, who locks the door to her office at night.

## **The witnesses**

Verwyk, who slept in the room as Penich was murdered, was questioned from Sunday until Wednesday, said Peter Hooft, second secretary of consular and administrative affairs at the Netherlands Embassy.

After watching Verwyk being questioned at the Yongsan Police Station, Hooft said he advised her parents — who had flown in from the Netherlands — to retain a lawyer.

"The police kept asking questions, expecting to hear anything from her," Hooft said. "She kept saying 'Well, I didn't hear anything.'"

"When I sleep, I don't wake up," Kwon said Verwyk told police.

"This is far enough," Hooft told the police. "This girl has gone through an ordeal, and you have made it worse. He (the policeman) said 'That is our business.'"

On Thursday, Verwyk was dismissed by the police and her passport was returned to her, Hooft said. She left a blood sample with police, and left the country March 27, he said.

According to police, Snider and other university friends were interviewed. In a case summary sent to Penich's parents, the interviews resulted in "nothing pertinent to the investigation."

## **The investigation**

The investigation has been split, Kwon said: South Korean police have interviewed mostly Koreans and Army CIC agents have talked with mostly Americans, Kwon said. Raimondi deferred questions about the investigation to the Korean police, saying they, not CID, are the lead investigative agency.

"They are the owners of the case," Raimondi said.

More than 10 CIC agents out of 45 in South Korea initially worked the case, Raimondi said. As of a May 1, eight agents were in some way involved in the investigation, he said.

Police have four possible scenarios in Penich's murder: a person from the bar could have followed Jamie to the motel, a person could have followed Penich from the time she left the bar to the motel, a hotel guest could have killed her or it could be a random robbery.

Korean police have interviewed all 25 guests at the motel, and none are suspect, Kwon said. Nothing was taken from Penich's room, which rules out robbery, he said.

Witnesses, Kwon said, have placed people later identified by police as

U.S. soldiers as among those dancing with Penich. Kwon estimated there's an 80 percent chance the killer was among those dancing with Penich in the bar.

Police said Penich was killed between 3:30-4:40 a.m. Within that time, Kati Peltomaa, 22, a Finish student in the room next to Penich's, said she heard a man say angrily in English "But you are here now. Let's go," and then a girl moaning.

"It sounded so bad. It wasn't even like, death, or anything. It was like, very painful and wounded," she told Stars and Stripes. Korean police confirmed the information.

Korean police did not interview numerous U.S. soldiers interviewed by CIC, Kwon said. They have received reports from CIC on them, he said.

Kwon said legal rules have made questioning U.S. people difficult, Kwon said.

"When you are investigating you have to be able to call the suspect in and make him cry and make him laugh and question to get something out of him," Kwon said. "That's how the investigation works."

Raimondi said Friday multiple joint teams consisting of a Korean police person, a CIC investigator and a U.S.-provided translator traveled to U.S. installations to question people. The interviews took place on post, and Korean police were allowed to question the soldiers, Raimondi said.

"They did have access to the soldiers," Raimondi said.

The Korean police requested CIC to handle the American side of the investigation, Raimondi said.

"They have asked us to speak to the Americans," Raimondi said. "We have done exactly what we were asked to do."

CIC helped quickly identify Americans and interview them after the murder, Raimondi said.

"There's no longer any U.S. Forces Korea personnel listed as suspects," Raimondi said. "Everyone that has been identified as having anything to do or in the proximity to her (Penich) has been eliminated as suspect that we are aware."

The two agencies have daily meetings to share their findings, Kwon said.

CIC has provided the Korean police with photos taken in Nickleby's that night, Kwon said. The photos – a few which include Penich – were taken by bar patrons that night, he said.

In one photo, Penich and Snider pose with a man in between them, the

man's arm around Penich. In another, Penich appears to be dancing.

Korean police spent about two to three hours on Sunday night at Nickleby's interviewing people, said a U.S. soldier who was there. They showed pictures of Penich's body as it was found in the motel room, said the soldier, who wished to not be identified.

CIC agents came to Nickleby's and showed the photos from the night, said waitress Shin Sun-hee. She recognized Penich, but didn't recognize the men in the photos.

Korean police have sent 63 samples, including blood spots and hair, to National Institute of Scientific Investigation in Seoul for analysis. But some evidence has posed a problem, Kwon said. Since Penich died in a motel room, investigators have found more than 10 different hair samples.

And investigators have a partial bloody shoe print left at the crime scene, Kwon said.

According to the tread, the boot – about a US size 9 or 10 – could have been either a Timberland or Skechers shoe, Kwon said. He said similar shoes are sold throughout Itaewon and the post exchanges at U.S. installations. Korean police keep a binder of photos of similar shoes that the killer may have worn. Police have analyzed the tread pattern, Kwon said.

Evidence samples collected from the motel room haven't been shared with CIC, Raimondi said. If the Koreans asked CIC to help with evidence testing, "we'd certainly assist the Koreans in any way we are able to," Raimondi said.

"We have not been asked to process any of the evidence at the murder scene," Raimondi said.

CIC has a state-of-the-art crime lab at Fort Gillem, Ga., he said. When asked if it would be prudent to have two labs do the testing, Raimondi said, "I have no opinion on whether it is prudent or not."

If the Koreans close their investigation, Raimondi said CIC can't operate in a sovereign country on its own.

"Unfortunately, if they are the lead agency, once they close their case, I don't know what we can do," Raimondi said.

## **The poster**

Korean police composed a sketch based on the description provided by Park about a week after the murder, Kwon said.

The sketch has been put on a

poster that the Korean police have given to taxi drivers and smaller police offices through Seoul, Kwon said. The poster, written entirely in Korean, has a description of a five-foot, nine-inch white male wearing a checkered shirt and beige pants.

The man, the poster says, might have been wearing a Timberland shoe between a U.S. size 9 and 10.

CIC made eleven large posters that were put up on U.S. installations around South Korea, Raimondi said. The posters have a high school picture of Penich and a cropped photo of Penich taken in Nickelby's the night she was murdered.



**An artist's sketch of a suspect in the killing of Jamie Lynn Penich, taken from a Korean wanted poster.**

"Jamie was loved by her parents, family and friends who described her as an energetic, happy, fun-loving intelligent young woman with great promise," the poster reads. "Help us find who murdered Jamie. Help bring closure to Jamie's grieving parents, who have lost a beautiful child."

The CIC posters do not include the description of the suspect given to Korean police by Park or the drawing.

"I think our investigators put together a poster that they think are the best way to get information regarding this case," Raimondi said.

One U.S. soldier said he was at Nickleby's on St. Patrick's Day. He recently saw the poster in a post exchange.

"I heard about the murder the next day," said the soldier, interviewed at Nickelby's recently. "It was at least four weeks later when they put the posters up."

He was at the bar for only a half-hour and said he doesn't remember Penich. There might have been a better chance to catch recollections if the posters had gone up two or three days after the murder, he said.

### **The victim**

Penich's body was autopsied by the National Institute of Scientific Investigation in Seoul on March 19. Her body was sent to her family in Derry Township, Pa., where the local funeral director advised the parents against viewing their daughter, even for the last time.



The autopsy report remains in a sealed envelope, along with photos from the post mortem and the crime scene. Penich's parents, Patty and Brian, have contacted Pennsylvania medical examiner Cyril Wecht to review the photos for clues.

In Itaewon, people who were at Nickleby's that night are at a loss.

"The whole story is very wild to me and unbelievable," said Hatterscheid.

One 31-year-old woman, who didn't want her name used, said she remembers talking to Snider at Nickleby's on St. Patrick's Day. The two spoke briefly in the bathroom, and the woman introduced Snider to some of her friends.

Since Penich's murder, she hasn't returned to Nickleby's.

"If that guy is roaming Itaewon, it's a scary thing," said the woman, who had nightmares for two weeks after the incident. "I don't feel safe in Itaewon."

Someone in Nickleby's must remember something that might help investigators, she said.

"I think everybody should help (find Penich's killer)," the woman said. "I really want to know that they got this guy and this is not going stay unpunished."

*Julie Park, Charles Rhee, Chon Hye-suk, B.R. Sargent and Franklin Fisher contributed to this report.*

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