

Four Decades in North Korea

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One cold night in 1965, Sgt. Charles Robert Jenkins disappeared from a patrol in South Korea. Forty years later he has resurfaced. In his first interview since leaving North Korea, he tells the REVIEW his story. After surviving nearly four decades in North Korea and spending a month in a Tokyo hospital room, United States Army Sgt. Charles Robert Jenkins wants closure. And to get it, he's ready to tell his story.

In Jenkins' first interview since taking flight from the North Korean regime in July, the alleged defector tells the REVIEW why he intends to turn himself over to the U.S. Army even though he expects to face a court martial. Jenkins reveals that he sought asylum at the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang in 1966, endured repeated beatings at the hands of another alleged American defector, and was pressured by North Korean authorities to reject a personal invitation by the Japanese prime minister to leave the country with him. And he describes how his difficult life in North Korea was lifted from misery by a love affair with a Japanese nurse who shared his hatred of the communist regime and eventually helped him and their two daughters escape.

"When I got on the airplane in Indonesia coming to Japan," Jenkins says, speaking in a colloquial English that reflects his seventh-grade North Carolina education, "my intentions was to turn myself in to the military, for the simple reason I would like to put my daughters with their mother, one thing. Another thing: I'd like to clear my conscience."

Rising from his hospital bed at the Tokyo Women's Medical University, Jenkins greets his visitor with a deferential Korean handshake, briefly makes eye contact and immediately looks away. A graying 64-year-old with a heavily creased face, Jenkins is still restricted in what he says: On the advice of his military lawyer, he withholds the circumstances of his alleged desertion to North Korea and many of the details of his life there--information that he intends to offer to the Americans in return for their leniency.

On September 1, Jenkins released a statement to the press saying he would voluntarily report to a U.S. Army base in Japan and "face the allegations that have been charged against me." The U.S. charges Jenkins with desertion, aiding the enemy, soliciting others to desert and encouraging disloyalty. In a document seen by the REVIEW that was initially intended to argue his case for other-than-honorable discharge, Jenkins acknowledges that he is guilty of at least one of the four charges against him or of a lesser included offence, without specifying precisely which offence. The U.S. military informally rejected Jenkins' discharge request.

The U.S., not wishing to send the wrong message to its troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, has publicly vowed to prosecute Jenkins. But privately the matter is much more delicate. Jenkins presents a starkly different picture than that of a deserter who enjoyed living in North Korea and supported the regime by acting in propaganda movies. It's of a man--and family--who scraped by while North Korean officials watched their every move.

As he talks, Jenkins stares at the floor, absorbed in his past, frequently on the verge of tears. His voice cracks and wavers when he speaks of his wife and children. A three-pack-a-day smoker who suffers heart problems and anxiety attacks, Jenkins speaks slowly, in a hoarse North Carolina drawl, deliberately choosing each word as he lucidly recalls dates and events from decades ago.

Jenkins arrived in North Korea already a service veteran. He dropped out of school in North Carolina in the seventh grade, not long after the death of his father, and in 1955, at 15, he entered the National Guard. After an honorable discharge in April 1958, he enlisted in the regular army. By August 1960 he had begun a 13-month tour in South Korea, during which he was promoted to sergeant; he returned for a second tour in September 1964. Then, on a bone-chilling night early the following January, on patrol along the Demilitarized Zone, the 24-year-old sergeant with an unblemished nine-year service record vanished. The U.S. government considers him a deserter, saying that he left behind letters stating his intention to defect; members of his family in the U.S. have said they are convinced that he was captured by the communist state.

From 1965 to 1972, on the other side of the DMZ, Jenkins shared a harsh life with three other alleged U.S. Army defectors: Pfc. James Joseph Dresnok, Pvt. Larry Allen Abshier and Cpl. Jerry Wayne Parrish. "At first the four of us lived in one house, one room, very small, no beds--we had to sleep on the floor," Jenkins says. "There was no running water. We had to carry water approximately 200 meters up the hill. And the water was river water."

The North Koreans played the Americans against each other, Jenkins says. "If I didn't listen to the North Korean government, they would tie me up, call Dresnok in to beat me. Dresnok really enjoyed it."

The diminutive Jenkins, about 1.65 meters tall, describes Dresnok as "a beater, 196 centimeters tall, weighed 128 kilograms. He's big. He likes to beat someone. And because I was a sergeant he took it out on me. I had no other trouble with no one as far as Abshier and Parrish, but Dresnok, yes." Abshier died of a heart attack in 1983 and Parrish died of a massive internal infection in 1997, according to Jenkins' discharge request. Dresnok is still living in North Korea.

An August 25 psychiatric report by Tokyo doctors, seen by the REVIEW, says Jenkins suffers from a panic disorder as a result of his treatment. "He had been suspected for espionage and continuously censored. During the first several years, he was forced to live together with three American refugees so as to mutually criticize their capitalistic ideology with physical punishment such as beating on face," the report says.

Jenkins would have had particular trouble erasing his past: He bears a tattoo of crossed rifles--the branch insignia of the infantry--on his left forearm. When he got the tattoo as a teenager in the National Guard, the letters "U.S." were inscribed underneath; North Koreans cut the letters away.

According to Jenkins' discharge request, which was written on his behalf by his military attorney, Capt. James D. Culp, Jenkins and the three other men tried to escape. "In 1966, Sgt. Jenkins even risked his life to leave North Korea by going to the Russian embassy and requesting asylum. Obviously, the Russian government denied the request."

During the 1960s, according to another revealing passage in the discharge request, Culp writes that contrary to rumors "Sgt. Jenkins had no interaction of any kind with any American sailor taken captive during the USS Pueblo incident." The January 1968 incident began when the North Koreans seized a U.S. Navy spy ship off the country's coast near Wonsan. One crew member was killed, while 82 others were beaten and threatened with death before being released 11 months later, after an embarrassing apology by the U.S.

Meanwhile, between 1965 and 1980, Jenkins says he was beaten by Dresnok at least 30 times. Then, in 1980, Jenkins met Hitomi Soga, and his life changed. "Approximately 10 o'clock at night she came to my house," he says in the interview. "At that time she was 21 years old. I was 40 years old. Anyway, she came to my house, the Korean government told me to teach her English so they told me to take a few days rest so that we could get very well acquainted, so after about 15 days I started teaching her English."

Soga had been abducted in 1978 by North Korean agents in Japan, and brought to North Korea. "They wanted a schoolteacher to teach the Korean children Japanese language, Japanese customs in order to turn them into espionage agents," says Jenkins. But the kidnappers made a mistake, he says. "The North Korean government did not have any use for my wife because she was not a school teacher, she was a nurse. Therefore they had nowhere really to put her, so if she's with me they'd know where she's at."

When Soga told Jenkins one week after they met that she had been kidnapped, Jenkins says he couldn't believe it. "I'd been in North Korea at that time approximately 15 years and I never heard of anyone being kidnapped. I never heard anything about any civilian being taken to North Korea by force. I learned that my wife, she didn't like the Koreans for it. I also learned that when my wife was taken, the same night her mother disappeared. Her mother never been heard from again. I felt very, very sorry for her. And she learned that I had been in North Korea for 15 years. She knew that I also did not want to be in North Korea so me and her became much closer than before. So it wasn't long after that I asked her to marry me. She said she must think about it a little bit. Her and I got much, much closer and in the end she said she would marry me. So I notified the Korean government, and they agreed. They didn't care."

Jenkins says "there was no one in the village I lived in that thought that she would ever marry me" because of their age difference. "But after meeting her 38 days later we were married. My wife and I became very close as far as love because she hated the [North] Korean government as well as I, so her and I joined hands in marriage on August 8, 1980. From that time on we lived very, very happy."

The couple's first daughter was born three years later. "I named her Roberta because my name is Robert. My wife I told her to give her a second name. She gave her the name Mika and of course my name is Jenkins. Mika means in Japanese 'beautiful'." Their second daughter was born in 1985: "We named her Brinda Carol Jenkins. That's B-R-I-N-D-A. The reason, my half sister in America was named Brinda Carol."

While Jenkins was building a family, to the outside world his existence and that of other Americans in North Korea was slipping into legend. Jenkins appeared in a North Korean anti-U.S. propaganda film in the 1980s, but by the 1990s the notion that there were still American soldiers living in Pyongyang was mostly a rumour. It was not until Jenkins resurfaced in 2002 with his teenage daughters that his presence was confirmed.

KOIZUMI'S OFFER

That year, in a summit with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, North Korean Leader Kim Jong Il agreed to allow a number of Japanese who had been abducted by North Korea to return home. The issue of abductees had long been an emotional issue for the Japanese public and a major sticking point in relations between the two countries.

Jenkins' wife, Hitomi Soga, went back to Japan that October, leaving her husband and their two daughters behind and bringing international attention to the family. Soga soon became a national heroine in Japan, trailed by the media. And Jenkins showed his face as well, giving a rare interview to a Japanese magazine in North Korea. He was quoted as saying that he had not known until that year that Soga was an abductee; he was also quoted as praising Kim Jong Il.

Now that he's left the country, Jenkins no longer disguises his bitterness at the North Korean regime. His legal defense is based in part on the notion that he learned to feign fealty to a regime he despised to avoid death and keep his family together.

Following Soga's release, the North Korean government sought to convince her to return to her husband and daughters, while others tried to find a way to reunite the family in another country. In May 2004, Koizumi travelled to North Korea a second time. On this visit he won the release of the children of Japanese abductees, and tried personally to persuade Jenkins to come to Japan.

Jenkins says he was told he had 10 minutes with Koizumi, but the meeting lasted nearly an hour. "At that time, my wife had been in Japan for 21 months," he says. "Prime Minister Koizumi had a document signed by Kim Jong Il. He got it that morning." The document said that Jenkins and his daughters could leave with Koizumi.

"But before Prime Minister Koizumi came that day," says Jenkins, "four people came and talked with me what would happen to me if I left North Korea. One was the vice-minister for foreign affairs. The other three I don't know exactly who they were. They come and give me a lecture on not to go to Japan. And I knew if I left that day I would never get to the airport."

Jenkins says he also knew the room he was in with Koizumi and his delegation was bugged. "So I told Prime Minister Koizumi I could not leave North Korea," Jenkins says. "He said, 'North

Korea will not let Hitomi leave if she comes back and she does not wish to come back to North Korea.' He said, 'Today I would like to take you and your daughters with me to Japan'."

Jenkins suggests that he feared what would happen if he accepted the invitation. "I knew that if I left the guest house that we met Prime Minister Koizumi in, instead of going right, to the airport, they'd had went to the left, and I would have went right back to the area I lived in before, and it may have been the end of my life," Jenkins says, his voice cracking.

Jenkins says he was told later that day that Kim Jong Il was very pleased that he did not go to Japan with his daughters. The North Koreans then told Jenkins they would allow him to travel to a third country to meet his wife and bring her back to North Korea.

"North Korea said, 'Let's go to China.' I agreed," says Jenkins. "But my wife would not. She said no." Soga, determined not to return, feared that China was too close to North Korea. Instead, a meeting was arranged for July in Jakarta.

"The reason I agreed to go to Indonesia because at one time it was a socialist country for one year--that was under Sukarno," says Jenkins. "The purpose of going to Indonesia was to bring my wife back to North Korea. And they [North Korean officials] thought if I went with my two daughters, that she would follow me. But she would not do so and I had no intentions of going back to North Korea."

That leaves him to face his next challenge: a possible court martial. His lawyer, Culp, says Jenkins can offer details about the use of foreign nationals in the North Korean spy programme. The request for a discharge asserts that Jenkins can confirm that "a number of Americans were used, most often unwillingly, by North Korea to arm spies with English-speaking skills so they could target American interests in South Korea and beyond."

Culp writes, "The value of this intelligence about the lives and fates of the fellow Americans who lived for decades in North Korea is immeasurable."

The document suggests that Jenkins can help American intelligence identify possible North Korean spies: "At least three other Americans who are suspected of deserting to North Korea were allowed to marry East European and/or Middle Eastern women who had been brought to and held in North Korea against their will. In two of the cases, the Americans had multiple children who are now young adults who appear to be American or European themselves." Jenkins possesses what he says is an April 2004 photograph, seen by the REVIEW, of an ageing Pfc. Dresnok with 19-year-old Brinda and five other non-Korean looking people.

Jenkins has been at the Tokyo hospital since arriving in Japan. In addition to his chronic health problems, he is recovering from prostate surgery in April in North Korea that left him with an infected post-operative wound. Koizumi, a supporter of Washington in the war in Iraq, has raised Jenkins' case with President George W. Bush, but U.S. officials insist that the two governments have not negotiated over the outcome of the continuing legal process. Jenkins expresses appreciation to the Japanese government, who made his wife's freedom possible, and eventually took in him and his daughters. "It was not my intention whatsoever for the Japanese government

to try to get me out of trouble," Jenkins says. "And I really appreciate the Japanese government for all they have done for me."

What he wants now is an end to a nearly four-decade odyssey as he prepares to turn himself over to the Americans. He has no interest in getting a civilian attorney. "The American army has supplied, assigned a very capable man to me, to help me, bring me to military justice. I don't think I need no civilians. All I want to do is clear myself with the American army."