



STILL OUT IN THE COLD; THIRTY YEARS LATER, FOUR ARMY DEFECTORS ARE ALIVE AND LIVING IN NORTH KOREA

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CLAUDIA MORTIS ROCKS GENTLY in an old wooden chair in the living room of her Corydon, Ky., home, surrounded by photographs of family men in uniform. She pages through a tattered Bible, turning to its back leaves—a registry of births, marriages and deaths--and stops at one scrawled entry: "Jerry Wayne Parrish, born March 10, 1944."

"He was almost like one of my own," Mortis, 74, laments of her husband's sister's son, whom she hasn't seen since 1963--the year Parrish left to serve a 13-month hitch in Korea from which he never returned.

On Dec. 6, 1963, the Army maintains, Parrish defected to North Korea, one of the most secretive and totalitarian Communist regimes. And for the next three decades, his family heard nothing more of him. Then, this past January, came a terse news bulletin from the Pentagon: Jerry Parrish, now 52, is "believed to be" alive and living in North Korea.

His name was released along with those of three other alleged 1960s defectors: Pfc. James Joseph Dresnok, 54, of Norfolk, Va.; Sgt. Charles Robert Jenkins, 55, of Rich Square, N.C.; and Pvt. Larry A. Abshier, 52, who last lived in Normal, Ill. All four are said to be English teachers at the state's Reconnaissance Bureau Foreign Language College, a military language institute in the capital city of Pyongyang. If so, they live in a land that has been gripped by drought, starvation and political uncertainty since the 1994 death of Kim Il Sung, North Korea's ironfisted leader for nearly a half century.

The lives of the four men in the notoriously isolated society can only be guessed at, unlike the very evident anguish of their relatives left behind. "Nobody will never make me believe it," declares Mortis, who contends Parrish was captured. "Nobody will never make his family believe it. And nobody will never make his friends believe it."

But at least one of her nephew's friends harbors no such doubts. "He really defected," says Richard Contardi, 50, Parrish's closest Army buddy in Korea. Now managing a meal program for the elderly in Rocky Fort, Colo., Contardi says, "Nobody shoved him over, nobody grabbed him. It was his doing."

The Pentagon's unexpected announcement--more than 30 years after the men's disappearance--was triggered by an article in the Jan. 16 Chosun Ilbo, a leading South Korean newspaper, suggesting that North Korea was still holding American prisoners of war. A Congressional aide who specializes in Korean affairs says the South hoped to scuttle the first-ever direct North Korea-U.S. negotiations on the emotional POW-MIA issue (an estimated 8,734 from the Korean War remain missing) that were slated for the following week--and that produced no breakthroughs. Asserts Stanley Roth, an Asian specialist who recently left the National Security Council: "The deserter topic turned attention to a false issue suggesting that there were live POWs. The existence of defectors has been long known." Accompanying the article was a blurred photograph culled from a 1982 North Korean propaganda film titled Nameless Heroes, depicting a gaunt, bald actor strongly resembling Jenkins in the role of a U.S. intelligence officer. Military and intelligence analysts assert that he, Abshier and Dresnok played American soldiers in the black-and-white film about heroic North Korean spies outwitting the U.S. during the Korean War.

Thirty years ago, loudspeakers blared similarly unsubtle propaganda to entice U.N. and other peacekeeping troops stationed in the Demilitarized Zone, a no-man's-land that has separated North and South since the 1953 truce ending the war. "They'd say you could have houses, cars, women, money," recalls Contardi of the Communist sales pitch. "Maybe [Parrish] thought he could have a better life over there."

Granted, the one he had led back home in Henderson, Ky., was rocky. Parrish was born in 1944 to James Parrish and Virginia Evadine Mortis, who married when she was 14 and divorced a few months after her baby's birth. Parrish remained in his mother's custody and only occasionally saw his father, who remarried in 1952. As a boy, he "was always pulling practical jokes," says his half sister Wanda Graff, 40, "like he had one of those pretend vomit things, and one time he put it in the living room." An indifferent student, Parrish dropped out of high school as a 17-year-old sophomore. And because he often clashed with his mother's third husband, Richard Craddock, he moved in with the family of his then-girlfriend, Sue Skaggs, 16, who was in the hospital dying of lupus. He stayed for 11 months after her death. Then, in the summer of 1962, said Sue's mother, Mabel, 87, "he up and enlisted." Assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division in Korea, Parrish was an exemplary soldier--though homesick. At the end of a letter dated May 31, 1963, he added the postscript: "The 261 on the envelope is how many days I got left in Korea."

Contardi, however, remembers a different Parrish. "Korea, for a kid coming from a small town, it's an eye-opener," he says. "Anything goes. We would go into the village and drink. He had a girlfriend. He was gone every night."

On Dec. 6, 1963, Parrish's mother received a telegram from the Army. "Your son, SP4 Jerry W. Parrish...has been reported as absent without leave. Any additional information received will be furnished you immediately."

"She was real sad and tore up," says his aunt Claudia Mortis. "She didn't know what it meant." When Parrish was listed as missing, Contardi led the search party and found only his pal's helmet, cartridge belt and a note: "Tell mother I love her. I'll be back home some day. Tell my friends goodbye."

His mother, Virginia Craddock, wrote to newspapers, to the Red Cross and to then-Kentucky Sen. Thruston B. Morton in a fruitless effort to get information about her son. In 1967 she died of cancer--as did James Parrish in 1994--without ever knowing his fate.

Abshier, Dresnok and Jenkins also left behind splintered families and puzzled friends. Larry Abshier, who allegedly defected at 18, was a ward of the state at 14, living at the Illinois Soldiers and Sailors Children's School in Normal until he enlisted in 1961. "He left the home because he didn't like authority," says schoolmate Anthony Spataro, 53, now an epidemiologist for the state of New Mexico. "And I believe he left the service because he didn't like authority there." Abshier was last seen running toward the North Korean lines on May 28, 1962, two months after being court-martialed for dereliction of duty and intoxication.

James Dresnok, too, was by all accounts hardly a model soldier. "A chronic complainer, lazy...belligerent, defiant to authority," reads a mid-'60s Army report. Dresnok's parents had divorced when he was 9, and he grew up in a foster home in Richmond, Va. A steady though unspectacular student and a frequent churchgoer, he joined the Army at 17, right after high school, and was married and divorced by the time he finished basic training. First stationed in West Germany from 1958 to 1961, Dresnok was a gunner in Korea. Last seen on Aug. 15, 1962, 12 miles east of the North Korean city of Kaesong, he was reportedly set to face disciplinary action for alleged "drinking, promiscuity and indebtedness" the next day.

In contrast, Charles Jenkins earned "excellent conduct and efficiency ratings," according to the Army. Growing up in tiny Rich Square, N.C. (pop. 1,000), the red-haired, freckled Jenkins was one of seven children born to Clifton and Pattie Jenkins (his father died when he was 13). A poor student, he was kept back at least twice in elementary school. Recalls Jenkins's classmate Mary Leggett, 53, a homemaker: "He was just a good ole country boy who clearly came from a good, hard-working country family." Jenkins joined the National Guard in 1955 and three years later enlisted in the Army. "The last time I saw him, he had come home for Christmas in 1964," says Wayne Pope, 51, a classmate. "He kept saying that we would never see him again."

Days later, on Jan. 5, 1965, Jenkins, by then a sergeant, was leading a four-man night patrol just south of the DMZ. Around 2:30 a.m., he disappeared. Like Parrish, he left behind a short note. "Dear Mother, I am sorry for the trouble I will cause you..." it began.

Those were Jenkins's last words to his family. Indeed, of all four defectors, only Jerry Parrish has spoken from behind the bamboo curtain. Within days of Parrish's defection, it was his voice GIs heard over the Communist sound system. "He got on them speakers and talked to everybody," recalls Don Hollis, 66, a Nashville retiree who served with Parrish. "He'd say he was having a good time, and come and see him."

Still, the mystery remains. Did he and the others become committed Communists? Did they fall in love, raise families, build lives? Says Hollis, musing on Parrish: "I'd like to ask him what it was like all those years. I'd like to know if it was worth it."