



In From The Cold

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By: Jim Frederick/Camp Zama

Sergeant Charles Robert Jenkins arrived at south Korea's Camp Clinch in 1964. Although he had already served in the Army for six years and had overseas postings, this was by far his most perilous assignment.

The Americans patrolled along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separated the two Koreas and occasionally drew hostile fire from North Korean soldiers across the border—even though an official cease-fire had been in place since 1953. Jenkins had served with enough distinction to find himself leading reconnaissance missions.

But he couldn't cope with the danger.

A seventh-grade dropout from Rich Square, N.C., Jenkins possessed an intelligence that military aptitude tests determined was far below average. He had doubts about his ability to lead men into battle, and he slid into bouts of depression and heavy drinking. His life was about to get worse. Jenkins' unit, he had learned, was scheduled to ship out soon to the live war in Vietnam, a prospect that terrified him. "I did not want to be responsible for the lives of other soldiers under me," he said during his court-martial trial last month. So Jenkins looked for a way out. He could confess his cowardice to superiors and accept the consequences or attempt somehow to flee. He chose the latter option. In the wee hours of Jan. 5, 1965, having downed 10 cans of beer a few hours earlier, Jenkins, then 24, made his move. At first he stuck to his routine, taking command of a dawn patrol near the DMZ. But at about 2:30 a.m., he told his men he was going to check on something up ahead. He disappeared down a hill and never returned. It would be nearly 40 years before he would return to face the U.S. military.

As it turned out, Jenkins' plan wasn't much of a plan. He figured he would cross into North Korea and then try to find a way to Russia, where he would seek some form of diplomatic deportation back to the U.S. and turn himself in. As he made his way toward the border, he tied a white T shirt over the muzzle of his M-14 rifle and traipsed for several hours through the bitter cold, stepping lightly so as not to trip a land mine. Not long after dawn, Jenkins came upon a 10-ft.-high fence. A North Korean soldier spotted him, alerted his comrades, and they whisked Jenkins inside. The American says he realized almost immediately that he had made a mistake.

The North Koreans moved Jenkins to a one-room house that was home to three other U.S. Army deserters: Private First Class James Joseph Dresnok, Private Larry Allan Abshier and Corporal Jerry Wayne Parrish. Life in that initial period, Jenkins says, was an unrelenting hell of hunger, cold and abuse, both physical and psychological. There were no beds or running water; electricity and heat were unreliable. The men were assigned a "leader" who watched their every move, listened to their conversations and constantly threatened them. They were forced to study propaganda 10 hours a day, six days a week, and memorize it in Korean. (To this day, Jenkins can recite lengthy propaganda monologues: "The Great Leader Kim Il Sung taught ...") There were frequent exams. If any of the men failed one, they would all be forced to increase their study to 16 hours a day, every day. Jenkins' tale adds intriguing detail to the outside world's sketchy understanding of North Korean society. No other American who has spent so long a time or seen so much inside what may be the world's most despotic, secretive and brutal society has escaped to tell the tale. While a steady stream of Korean defectors, as well as escapees from its prison camps, has talked of the horrors of the Hermit Kingdom, Jenkins is the first to provide a detailed view of this little-known land from the perspective of an outsider who became intimately familiar with its perverse inner workings.

While unique, Jenkins' experience mirrored the bleak existence that North Koreans have lived through. Ordinary citizens are similarly terrorized and watched over by "leaders" directed by the ruling Workers' Party. Hunger and deprivation are the norm. Speaking in his barely intelligible rural Carolina drawl, Jenkins says North Korean society is "backwards." He seems, even now, like a man on the verge of collapse, his voice cracking as he recalls painful memories. He frequently breaks down in tears.

When Jenkins and the three other American defectors were living together, they barely got along. "It was uneasy," says Jenkins. "The North Koreans made it like that." Under 24-hour surveillance, the four managed a difficult coexistence. When one would commit an infraction—failing to memorize propaganda lessons, complaining about something, leaving the house without permission—their leader would get one of the other soldiers (usually the 6-ft. 4-in., 280-lb. Dresnok) to severely beat the offender. Jenkins soon concluded that feigning fealty was the only way to survive. "In North Korea, when you lie they think you are telling the truth," he says, "and when you tell the truth they think you are lying. You learn real quick to say no when you mean yes, and yes when you mean no."

The men shared the house for seven years, doing little apart from studying. Gradually, they began to despair. They took risks, Jenkins says, that they knew could lead to death. In his amused telling today, their escapades sound almost as if they could be ripped from the pages of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn—except that the punishment for getting caught would not be a few lashes with a belt from Aunt Sally but execution.

The Americans even coined a word for doing things without permission in this land of the unfree: "freedalisms." On one occasion, the four swam across a river to pilfer a bag of coal tar from a government construction site to repair their (illegal) fishing boat. "To steal something

from the North Korean government is immediately punishable by death," Jenkins said during his court-martial. "I think we all secretly wished we would be caught." Another time, they stumbled upon an array of microphones in the attic of their house and blackmailed their leader (who feared he would suffer if his superiors learned that the bugging had been exposed) into taking one of them into town to buy wine. On yet another occasion, Parrish sneaked out of the house one night to go looking for a girl he had a crush on. But Jenkins, as a practical joke, had given him a bogus address, and Parrish wandered the streets aimlessly for hours. He ultimately got picked up in central Pyongyang by police, who suspected he was meeting a spy contact; the leader had to get him out of jail.

Despite the Americans' penchant for freedoms, the North Koreans were, after seven years, evidently pleased with their behavior and apparent indoctrination. In 1972, the four received North Korean citizenship ("Whether we wanted it or not," says Jenkins) and were ordered to start teaching English at a military school in Pyongyang, run by the party's Reconnaissance Bureau. Jenkins taught three 90-minute classes a day, 10 to 15 days a month. There were about 30 students in each class. "They wanted us to teach them American pronunciation," he says, a prospect that seems amusing considering many Americans would have trouble deciphering Jenkins' thick accent.

Often the text consisted of translated utterances by Kim Il Sung, who became the North's first leader in 1948, when Korea split into two countries, and remained in power until his death in 1994. The classes studied the guerrilla fighters who took on Japanese soldiers during World War II and discussed the "news" students had heard that morning on state-controlled radio.

Although the four Americans attained a new level of comfort around this time, when they were allowed to move into their own homes, they were still subject to constant surveillance, beatings and, occasionally, torture. For example, according to Jenkins, in the summer of his first year teaching, the short-sleeve shirts he began to wear to class with the warmer weather revealed an old tattoo on his left forearm: an infantry insignia of crossed rifles above the inscription U.S. army. Officials deemed the tattoo unacceptable, and Jenkins was carted off to a hospital. A doctor, he claims, cut the flesh bearing the offending words from his arm with a knife and scissors—and no anesthetic. "The doctor told me that they save anesthetic for the battlefield," he recalls.

Politics further scrambled Jenkins' life. The school suddenly shut down, he says, just after a deadly exchange along the DMZ that became known as the Panmunjom incident. On Aug. 18, 1976, two American officers were hacked to death with axes and metal pikes by a band of North Korean border guards. The melee broke out after the North Koreans tried to stop American and South Korean soldiers from trimming tree branches that blocked the line of sight. The North Koreans expected retaliation for the killings. "They mobilized for war instantly," Jenkins says. "Everybody evacuated and joined up with their units. It was very tense. Me, I just went home." Over the next several years, Jenkins says, he was forced to study more propaganda and translate English radio broadcasts into Korean. In 1981 the school finally reopened, under the name

Mydanghi University, and Jenkins taught there for four more years. In 1985 he was fired for good, he says with a laugh, when the Koreans realized that his English was actually having a negative impact on the students' skills.

But Pyongyang had designs on Jenkins beyond teaching English. Like his three colleagues, Jenkins was a prize cold-war souvenir: an American who had voluntarily wandered into North Korean hands. He was an asset and certainly more valuable alive than dead. "At some point, someone told us that Kim Il Sung said that one American was worth 100 Koreans," says Jenkins. "After that, I didn't think they would kill us without a good reason." His first experience as a propaganda tool occurred soon after he was captured, when he and his fellow deserters were profiled in a cover story in *Fortune's Favorites*, a state-run publication. And in 1984 he was cast in the North Korean film *Nameless Heroes*, playing the part of an evil U.S. imperialist.

Jenkins also became convinced that he was unwittingly being used as an asset in another way: to produce Western-looking children that the state could turn into spies. In the mid-1970s, the Americans were allowed to consort only with Korean women the government believed to be infertile. (When Abshier unexpectedly got his Korean girlfriend pregnant, she disappeared.) The regime then decided the deserters should marry foreigners from among the East European, Asian and Middle Eastern women brought to North Korea against their will.

Within a few years, all four Americans had wives. Dresnok married a Romanian, and they had two sons. After she died, he married a half-Korean, half-Togolese woman, and they had a son. Parrish wed a Lebanese Muslim, and they had three sons. Abshier married a Thai woman, but they didn't have children. (Jenkins says Parrish and Abshier are dead. Dresnok, he says, is still living with his family in Pyongyang.) As might be imagined, these unions weren't love stories in any traditional sense. In Jenkins' case, the government in 1980 brought a young Japanese nurse to his door, instructing him to teach her English. Hitomi Soga, 19 years Jenkins' junior, had been abducted from her home on Sado Island in Japan two years earlier. Jenkins says they quickly fell in love, and that his feelings for Soga saved his life. "When I met her," Jenkins says, "my life changed a lot. Me and her together—I knew we could make it in North Korea. And we did.

Twenty-two years." Just 38 days after their abrupt introduction, the pair asked to get married, and the government assented. Jenkins and Soga have two daughters: Mika, 21, and Brinda, 19. Only many years after the girls were born did Jenkins start to suspect they were meant to be spy fodder, a theory that can't be independently confirmed. "They wanted us to have children," he concludes, "so they could use them later."

Back in the U.S., many Americans viewed Jenkins as nothing more than a traitor, particularly given his occasional appearances in Korean propaganda missives. His family had more faith. His nephew James Hyman, for one, argued vigorously for decades that Jenkins was innocent, that he must have been kidnapped on that twilight patrol.

But because little information filtered out of North Korea, by the 1990s Jenkins' plight had drifted into the stuff of legend. He had become a curious cold-war footnote, presumed by many to be dead. Only in 1996 did a Pentagon report state that it suspected there were at least four American defectors, including Jenkins, still living in North Korea. For most of those years, Jenkins was locked in a drab, hardscrabble existence, sustained only by hope that somehow, someday, he and his family could leave North Korea. The bleakness was tempered somewhat over the years, as Jenkins attained a standard of living better than that of most North Koreans. But it was still far below that of most other countries. The Jenkins house had no hot running water, the electricity frequently did not work, and the heating was so feeble that during winter family members wore five layers of clothing at home. By raising their own chickens and growing their own vegetables, however, they usually had enough food, even as others in the country were starving.

Indeed, life for Jenkins—as for many others in North Korea—depended on cleverly working the system. He extended his \$120-a-month income by trading black-market currency with other foreigners. He made contacts who could smuggle him the occasional English-language novel or Hollywood movie. He rigged a radio to pick up the BBC and Voice of America. He even managed to buy a handgun from a Chinese exchange student. But such liberties extended only so far: even when Jenkins and his family got their hands on a Western videotape, they had to take precautions, pulling the curtains over their windows and turning the volume down to the threshold of audibility.

Such comforts did little for Jenkins' morale. He increasingly became despondent about his children's future. Jenkins was particularly distressed when the government enrolled the girls in Pyongyang's Foreign Language College, an elite institution believed to be a training ground for intelligence operatives. "I knew what they were trying to do," says Jenkins, starting to sob. "They wanted to turn them into spies. My daughters, they could pass as South Korean. There are lots of children of American G.I.s and South Korean mothers in South Korea. No one would doubt them for a second." Since he believed he was locked forever inside North Korea, he didn't see how he could fight it.

Jenkins' world suddenly began to brighten two years ago. The breakthrough was Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's meeting with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il (the son and successor of Kim Il Sung) in Pyongyang. Kim confirmed Japan's long-held suspicion that North Korea had been kidnapping Japanese citizens and forcing them to teach at its spy schools. Soga, Jenkins' wife, was acknowledged to be among the abductees. After the summit, she and the four others Pyongyang said were still alive returned to Japan for what was meant to be a 10-day visit. They never went back to Korea. Soga is viewed as a hero in Japan, and it became a national priority to bring the rest of her family to Japan too. When Koizumi made a follow-up visit to Pyongyang this past spring to retrieve the abductees' surviving family members, he personally told Jenkins he would do everything he could to ensure that he and his family could reunite in Japan. At the time, Jenkins resisted, fearing North Korea's reaction. "They didn't want me to go," he says. "I know if I left that time, I never would have made it to the airport."

After a series of negotiations to find a suitably neutral country to receive Jenkins, Japan and North Korea finally arranged for the American and his daughters to fly in July to meet Soga in Indonesia.

Jenkins had assured Pyongyang that he would return with his daughters and try to persuade Soga to accompany them. "They promised me all kinds of things if I came back with my wife," he says. "They would give me a new car, a new house, new clothes, a new television. They told me everything I wanted would be Kim Jong Il's gift." But Jenkins had resolved instead to turn himself in to the U.S. military, against the urging of his North Korean contacts and Dresnok (the two Americans had met up again in Pyongyang). "They told me, 'If you go, you are going to jail for life,' but I didn't care," Jenkins says. "I thought, If I go to jail, I go to jail. As long as I get my daughters out."

Three days before he left, Jenkins saw Dresnok one final time. Dresnok, Jenkins sensed, knew his friend was leaving for good, although the two didn't dare discuss it. "During the time my wife was gone, Dresnok would come over every day. We would have coffee and talk. He is all by himself now."

As bleak as Jenkins knew North Korea to be, it was the only home his daughters had known, and he had to handle their exit gingerly. He told his younger daughter Brinda that they were leaving for good, but he felt he couldn't tell Mika. "Mika didn't want to leave. They had her thinking that Americans would kill you just as soon as look at you. They educate all Koreans to believe that," says Jenkins. "Brinda also learned that, but she also believed what I said too, though I couldn't ever talk much about what I thought about North Korea. I was too scared to." When Mika arrived in Indonesia, she panicked, Jenkins recalls, saying, "Back in North Korea, they are all going to call me a traitor." Jenkins told her, "America calls me a traitor. If people knew everything, they might think different."

While Jenkins was in Jakarta, Japanese officials became worried about complications from prostate surgery he had had in North Korea, and on July 18 he was flown to Tokyo. While in a hospital there, Jenkins announced that when he was well, he would turn himself in to the U.S. Army. On Sept. 11, Jenkins presented himself at the gates of Camp Zama, a U.S. Army base about an hour's drive from Tokyo. He approached Lieut. Colonel Paul Nigara, provost marshal of the U.S. Army Japan, briskly saluted and said, "Sir, I'm Sergeant Jenkins, and I'm reporting." The longest-missing deserter ever to return to the U.S. Army, he was initially charged with one count of desertion, one of aiding the enemy, two of soliciting others to desert and four charges of encouraging disloyalty (charges that could have carried the death penalty).

When Jenkins arrived at his one-day general court-martial more than seven weeks later, he had won a pretrial agreement in which he would plead guilty only to desertion and aiding the enemy (for the time he spent teaching English). In exchange, his penalty would be a maximum 30 days' confinement, a demotion to private, forfeiture of all pay and benefits and a dishonorable discharge. Military-law experts assume Jenkins won this relatively lenient treatment in exchange

for providing intelligence about North Korean spy programs. Neither Jenkins nor the U.S. government will comment on any such discussions.

During a day of dramatic testimony on Nov. 3, veteran defense lawyer Captain Jim Culp, himself a former infantry sergeant, argued that Jenkins shouldn't do time. Culp presented his client as a broken man who had suffered so severely under North Korea's brutal regime that compassion could only dictate he had already paid for his crimes.

Colonel Denise Vowell, the Army's chief judge, apparently agreed. She recommended to the commander of the U.S. Army Japan that the 30-day sentence be suspended for clemency's sake. The commander, Major General Elbert Perkins, ignored the suggestion, although according to standard Army confinement rules, Jenkins' sentence was ultimately reduced by five days for good behavior. "I have made my peace with the U.S. Army," Jenkins said after his release, "and they have treated me very fairly."

For now, the Jenkins family lives in standard-issue enlisted-family housing in Camp Zama. When Jenkins is officially discharged from active duty and released from the U.S. base, he plans to settle down in his wife's hometown on Japan's Sado Island. He wants to work, and the local mayor's office has said it will try to help him find a job, although it's unclear what work Jenkins could do, especially since he doesn't speak Japanese. His wife already works at city hall and receives a government stipend every month in a program benefiting North Korean kidnapping victims. At some point Jenkins also wants to visit North Carolina to see family members, including his aging mother. Asked how his daughters are faring, Jenkins concedes that he isn't sure. "I just spent 25 days in jail. I haven't really gotten a chance to talk to them that much yet. But I think they will be all right." He starts to sob. "I made a big mistake of my life, but getting my daughters out of there, that was one right thing I did."