



The Long Mistake

November 04, 2004

By: Jim Frederick | Camp Zama

Until this week, only a few things about the strange, long-ago disappearance of Charles Robert Jenkins were known beyond a doubt. In the bitter cold of Jan. 5, 1965, the 24-year-old U.S. Army sergeant was leading a night reconnaissance patrol near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates North Korea from South Korea. At around 2:30 a.m., he told his radioman and another soldier he was going to investigate the road up ahead. He disappeared down the hill—and never came back.

Beyond that, almost everything about the small, jug-eared infantryman—from his motivations to what his life in the North was like—remained an enigma. Was the young man nicknamed "Super" back in his hometown of Rich Square, North Carolina, really an unrepentant traitor, as the U.S. Army charged? Accusations that he had made several broadcasts across the DMZ urging others in his unit to join him in the North—not to mention his roles in a number of 1980s propaganda films as a Yankee imperialist devil—seemed to suggest that he was. Or was he kidnapped by North Korean agents and brainwashed, as some family members and supporters claimed? Was he a privileged and pampered ward of the Hermit Kingdom, a trophy apostate to America's wicked capitalist ways? Or was he forced to suffer the same deprivation, hunger and paranoia visited upon almost every other resident of one of the world's harshest, most despotic regimes?

Now the cipher has spoken. Nearly 40 years after that dawn patrol, Sergeant Jenkins appeared on Wednesday before a U.S. one-day general court-martial at Camp Zama, near Tokyo. From a packed courtroom and closed-circuit viewing hall, the world got its first extended look at the soldier who came in from the cold. Jenkins seemed to be neither the treacherous turncoat the American military and some media accounts had portrayed, nor an innocent victim of abduction. Instead, the world saw a frail, fragile, frequently weeping old man who was, back in that day in 1965, a scared, drunk, tired and desperate youngster. One who made an epic mistake by abandoning his patrol and walking voluntarily into North Korea. Throughout a day of dramatic testimony, Jenkins presented himself as a broken man who had spent most of the next four decades alternately praying for death or struggling just to survive.

With a deeply creased face that made him look many years older than 64, Jenkins wore a dress green uniform and fresh haircut. Originally charged with one count of desertion, one of aiding the enemy, two of soliciting others to desert and four charges of encouraging disloyalty, Jenkins came to court with a pretrial agreement in which he would plead guilty only to desertion and aiding the enemy. (He taught English to military cadets in Pyongyang from 1981 to 1985.) In exchange, he would receive a guaranteed maximum of 30 days' confinement.

During the proceedings, Sergeant Jenkins filled in many of the missing gaps of his life, explaining why he decided to desert to North Korea, the first 15 years of material and emotional hardship during which he said he wished almost daily for death, how he met his future wife in 1980, and his life with her and their two children over the next 22 years. When the trial was over, he was given his 30-day term, along with a demotion to private, forfeiture of all pay and benefits, and a dishonorable discharge. With a sentence reduction for good behavior, he could be out as early as Nov. 28.

During a courtroom examination, Jenkins for the first time recounted publicly the circumstances of his defection. In a halting and gravelly drawl, he revealed that he wound up in North Korea not because he was abducted or because he had any ill will for the U.S., but for a far more prosaic reason: he was scared. Although he had been in the Army for six years and was on his second tour in Korea, his November 1964 deployment there was by far the most dangerous of his career, with frequent patrols along the DMZ and the enemy occasionally shooting at U.S. Army positions. After a few weeks in his new unit, Jenkins was asked to volunteer to lead troops on dangerous daytime reconnaissance outings, called "Hunter Killer" missions, along the 38th parallel. He always refused. In the winter of that year, he also learned that his unit was likely to be shipped out to Vietnam in the spring or summer of 1965. Breaking down while speaking with the judge, Jenkins said he started to suffer from depression, drink heavily and seek a way out of the Army. "I feared for my ability to lead other soldiers into combat," he said. "I did not want to be in the military anymore. I just wanted to go home." Seeing no way of getting past border controls if he tried to head south, he decided to turn north, find a way into Russia, and from there, he hoped, secure passage back into the U.S. and turn himself in.

Late at night on Jan. 4, 1965, emboldened by 10 cans of beer, Jenkins took the lead of his patrol. A few hours later, he told his men to wait for him where they were and started moving down the hill—and he just kept walking, stepping lightly and slowly for three or four hours, feeling his way with his feet so as not to hit a trip wire. As the sun came up the next morning, Jenkins tied an extra white T shirt he had brought with him around the muzzle of his M-14 weapon. Not long after daylight broke, Jenkins saw a North Korean soldier on the other side of a 3-m high fence, but the soldier's back was turned against the cold wind. Jenkins yelled to attract his attention, and the soldier turned around and hit an alarm. Then a number of other troops arrived and took Jenkins into custody.

Jenkins' plan to find a way back to the U.S. proved, of course, to be folly—a realization that dawned on him almost immediately. In a statement read by his lawyer, Captain James Culp, Jenkins described in detail the prison state in which he wound up living for almost 40 years. Rather than being treated as a trophy, Jenkins said, his first 15 years in North Korea were an almost unrelenting hell, where hunger, cold, and physical and psychological abuse were constant companions. For the first seven years, he shared a one-room house with no running water and unreliable electricity with three other U.S. Army deserters—Private First Class James Joseph Dresnok, Private Larry Allan Abshier and Corporal Jerry Wayne Parrish. They were all forced to study North Korean propaganda for 10 hours a day. (Jenkins says Parrish and Abshier died in 1996 and 1983, respectively, and that Dresnok is still living in North Korea. A British documentary film crew says it met with Dresnok as recently as a few months ago.)

As the reality of their situation set in, the men started to despair. They began to take chances they knew could result in death. One day, for example, they went looking in the attic for electrical insulators to weigh down a fishing net they were surreptitiously making to help boost their meager food supply, and found an array of microphones instead. On another occasion, they traded dozens of socks they had saved over many months for a small fishing boat. Once, they swam across a river at night to steal a bag of coal tar from a government construction site. "We used the coal tar to repair our boat, which we then used for fishing in the middle of the night," Jenkins said in his statement. "To steal something from the North Korean government is immediately punishable by death. We all knew it. I think we all secretly wished we would be caught." Throughout this time, said Jenkins, the North Korean government would often divide the servicemen, forcing one to beat the others for any infractions committed. They were allowed to watch only the one state television station, listen to the one state radio station, read only approved books in Korean, and no books at all in English. Jenkins, however, once got hold of James Clavell's novel *Shogun*. He hid it and read it, he says, more than 20 times.

In 1980, Jenkins' life changed. He was allowed to move into a house by himself. Shortly thereafter, the government brought him a young Japanese nurse, telling him to teach her English. Hitomi Soga had been abducted from her home on Sado Island in Japan two years earlier and bitterly hated the North Koreans. After 38 days, they were married and eventually had two children, now 19-year-old Brinda and 21-year-old Mika.

Soga is the reason that Jenkins came back to the outside world. When Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi met with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il in October 2002, Kim confirmed Japan's long-held conviction that North Korea had engaged in a systematic program of kidnapping Japanese citizens and pressing them into service as teachers at the Hermit Kingdom's spy schools. The abductees returned to Japan for a 10-day visit that wound up being permanent after they declined to return, but Jenkins had stayed behind in the North with his two daughters. In the past two years, Soga has become a heroine in Japan. When Koizumi returned to

Pyongyang a second time, he personally told Jenkins he would do everything he could to assure that he and his family could live together quietly in Japan. Again Jenkins resisted, due to pressure from his North Korean handlers. Japanese officials then started to press the U.S. to treat him leniently. In July, Jenkins finally agreed to bring his children to meet Soga in Jakarta, after which he flew with them to Tokyo for medical treatment. He turned himself in to the U.S. military on Sept. 11.

Taking the stand late in the trial, Soga declared Jenkins a good father and described the harsh conditions in which the family lived while in the North. Jenkins said he decided to leave Pyongyang to reunite his daughters with their mother and ensure they could live their lives in freedom. He insists that he arrived in Tokyo planning to plead guilty to absolutely everything. "I have been a good father, and a good husband," he wrote in a statement read by Culp. "In many ways, I guess I was trying to make up for having done such a bad thing as a soldier."

Throughout his testimony, Jenkins sought forgiveness from American servicemen who did not run from duty, as he had. In his written testimony, Jenkins called the North Korean government "evil" and Kim Jong Il "evil to the bone." As he read for Jenkins, Culp himself shed a tear as he read the line, "I want the world to know that I still love the United States."

In his closing arguments, prosecuting attorney Captain Seth Cohen argued for stern justice, asserting that being a good husband and father was irrelevant to this case. "The bond between a noncommissioned officer and his soldiers is a sacred bond," he maintained, "more sacred perhaps than the bond of marriage." Cohen accused Jenkins of a "deliberate, selfish and despicable act."

In his closing arguments, Culp called Jenkins "America's prodigal son." "Like the Bible story we all know so well," said Culp, "Jenkins took his treasure, in this case, his freedom, and squandered it." But given the first realistic opportunity, Culp maintained, Jenkins returned, to repent and face justice. At the end of the day, and a 40-year journey, Jenkins appeared to be closer to his and his wife's publicly declared desire that he be allowed to live out the rest of his years on Soga's home island of Sado. As he was whisked away by helicopter to begin his confinement at nearby Yokosuka Naval Base, he was one step closer to achieving that dream.