

Why Does Charles Jenkins Refuse to Leave North Korea?

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For

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Charles Jenkins is afraid to leave North Korea. Outside Japan and North Korea, few people have ever heard of Mr. Jenkins. Only his wife Soga Hitomi, daughters Mika (20) and Belinda (18), and a few people in Japan probably are concerned about his fate. Jenkins' wife, understandably, wants to reunite with her daughters and husband. But Jenkins is not in any rush to do so. Why?

Mr. Jenkins has several reasons to worry about his future if he departs North Korea. Unlike his wife, he was not abducted to North Korea. He went there voluntarily, according to unclassified United States Army reports. On January 5, 1965, Charles Robert Jenkins was a twenty five years old (born 1940) sergeant in the US Army. He was in charge of a twelve man squad that was part of Company C, 1st Battalion, 8th Calvary, 1 Calvary Division in South Korea. On the bitter cold morning of January 5, Sergeant Jenkins was leading his soldiers on a patrol along the southern edge of the Demilitarized Zone that has divided South and North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953. About 2:30 a.m. that morning, he apparently told some of his colleagues that he was going to look for something.

Sergeant Jenkins never returned. He was reported missing at 5:30 a.m. that morning. Back at his barracks, soldiers found four notes that he had left among his personal belongings. In one note, he told his mother, "I am going to North Korea."

At that time, Jenkins appeared to be a typical American soldier. He was born and raised in the tiny town of Rich Square in Northampton County of North Carolina state. Today, this rural village has a population of less than 1,000 people. In 1965, all American males over the age of 18 faced the possibility of being drafted into the army for at least two years. Jenkins, like so many other young American men, then and now, probably joined the army "to see the world" beyond his small home. Also, in January 1965, the number of American soldiers being sent to Vietnam was increasing. By March 1965, thousands of Jenkins' fellow soldiers were being ordered into combat in Vietnam.

We simply do not know why Jenkins went to North Korea. There is little reason to believe that he did so for political or ideological reasons. As a twenty five year old youth, he had not had much opportunity to study Marxism-Leninism in college or elsewhere. Nor is it likely that he had made any contact with anyone from a communist country. In 1965, the study of communism or its practice was outlawed

Some people claim that he crossed the DMZ into North Korea to escape punishment. According to military records, Jenkins had received two minor punishments, what soldiers call "Article 15s. One was for disorderly conduct, which usually means he got

drunk and misbehaved. The other Article 15 was for failure to report to duty. Neither of these, however, are serious offenses. But when Jenkins abandoned his fellow soldiers and went to North Korea, he committed several serious violations of US military law. First, he became absent without leave, or "AWOL." Before long, however, Jenkins' offenses became much more serious.

Jenkins prospered in North Korea. North Korea's Ministry of the People's Armed Forces proclaimed in 1964 that it would render preferential treatment to "servicemen of the enemy army who come over to the North individually or collectively." The relatively small, five foot eight inches tall soldier began to act in North Korean films. He made several, always playing the role of the nasty American "imperialist" army officer. He appeared in magazines that proclaimed the benefits of living in the "socialist paradise" of North Korea. He also taught English at Pyongyang's University for Foreign Languages, where he eventually met his wife.

Jenkins is not the only American soldier to defect to North Korea. Between 1962 and 1965, four American soldiers, including Jenkins, abandoned their colleagues and defected to North Korea. Three of them, including Jenkins, were from the 8th Calvary, 1st Infantry Division: James J. Dresnok, Private First Class who went to North Korea August 15, 1962; Jerry Wayne Parrish, Specialist 4th Class, who went to North Korea December 6, 1963, and Charles Jenkins who went to North Korea January 5, 1965. A fourth soldier, Larry Allen Abshier, a private, went to North Korea on May 28, 1962, but he was from the 9th Calvary in the 1st Infantry Division.

According to an undated statement that James Dresnok apparently wrote, he and the three other former US soldiers lived together in Pyongyang. Dresnok, in his statement, claimed, "As for Abshier, Parrish and Jenkins, who live with me, they are all quite content with their own jobs and conditions for rest, with the proper amount of work and excellent food. As for our life itself, it leaves nothing to be desired." This statement and several photographs of the four former soldiers enjoying life in North Korea appeared in an undated North Korean booklet entitled, "Fortune's Favorites."

In July 1996, I was an American diplomat sent to Pyongyang with the US Army to search for the remains of American soldiers who had died in North Korea during the Korean War. Together with a US Army colonel, I made a formal request to North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to meet with Charles Jenkins and any of the other former US soldiers. After several days, a North Korean diplomat informed us that these Americans did not wish to meet us. We were assured that all four were in good health, married to "North Korean" women and enjoying life in their new homeland.

If and when Charles Jenkins leaves North Korea, the United States government is certain to prosecute him for his past misdeeds. But he has only himself to blame because, unlike the unfortunate victims of North Korea's abduction, Jenkins voluntarily went to North Korea. For this, he owes his former soldiers and the American people more than an apology. But any punishment that Jenkins might receive should be relatively mild. After all, he has endured forty years without freedom in North Korea.