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WORLD NEWS

A Tale of Life in North Korea

Alleged Defector Tells His Story, And Why He's Turning Himself In

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TOKYO -- Charles Robert Jenkins, the U.S. Army sergeant accused of defecting to North Korea in 1965, said he hates the Pyongyang government and tried to seek asylum in 1966 at the Soviet Union's Embassy in the North Korean capital.

Mr. Jenkins, who in July left North Korea for Indonesia and one week later came to Japan, announced yesterday that he will surrender to U.S. military authorities.


In his first interview since leaving North Korea, Mr. Jenkins told The Far Eastern Economic Review of life under the Pyongyang regime and why he intends to turn himself in even though he expects to face a court martial. The Far Eastern Economic Review is published by Dow Jones & Co., publisher of The Wall Street Journal.

"When I got on the airplane in Indonesia coming to Japan," Mr. Jenkins told the Review, "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."

The 64-year-old Mr. Jenkins, who in North Korea married a Japanese woman kidnapped by Pyongyang, is accused of abandoning his Army unit and defecting. Desertion carries a maximum life penalty, but he is hoping for an agreement with the U.S. military that sends him to his family rather than to prison.

Mr. Jenkins's offer to surrender is a major step toward solving a diplomatic quandary between U.S. military officials eager to prosecute him and Tokyo, which hopes to win him leniency so he can stay in Japan with his wife. The U.S., not wishing to send the wrong message to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, has publicly vowed to prosecute Mr. Jenkins. Privately, the matter is much more delicate. Mr. Jenkins presents a starkly different picture from that of a deserter who enjoyed living in North Korea and supported the regime by acting in propaganda movies. It is of a man -- and family -- who scraped by while North Korean officials watched their every move.

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In the interview Monday in Tokyo, Mr. Jenkins withheld some details about his life in North Korea and the circumstances of his alleged desertion, on the advice of his military lawyer. He intends to offer this information to U.S. military authorities in return for leniency.

His attorney, Army Capt. James D. Culp, wrote in a discharge request that Mr. Jenkins can offer details about the use of foreign nationals in the North Korean spy program. A document prepared by Mr. Culp requesting an other-than-honorable discharge suggests that Mr. Jenkins can help identify possible North Korean spies, noting that at least three other Americans suspected of deserting to North Korea married Eastern European or Middle Eastern women. Some had children who now are young adults and who appear to be American or European themselves. The U.S. military informally rejected Mr. Jenkins's discharge request.

Mr. Jenkins, then a 24-year-old sergeant with a seventh-grade education, on his second tour of duty in South Korea, disappeared in January 1965 while on patrol along the Demilitarized Zone. The U.S. government says he left behind letters stating his intention to defect; members of his family in the U.S. have said they are convinced he was captured by North Korea.

From 1965 to 1972, on the other side of the DMZ, Mr. Jenkins shared a harsh life with three other alleged U.S. Army defectors, he said. "At first, the four of us lived in one house, one room, very small, no beds -- we had to sleep on the floor," he said.

The North Koreans played the Americans against one another, he said: "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." Pfc. James Joseph Dresnok, one of the other alleged American deserters, still lives in North Korea. The other two Americans died in North Korea, according to Mr. Jenkins's discharge request.

According to the discharge request, Mr. Jenkins and the three other men tried to escape. They sought asylum at the Soviet Embassy, but the request was denied.

Then, in 1980, Mr. Jenkins met Hitomi Soga, a Japanese woman who had been kidnapped by the North Koreans seeking a schoolteacher who could teach Japanese to future Pyongyang agents. Ms. Soga, however, was a nurse. At a loss for what to do with her, the North Koreans sent her to him to learn English, Mr. Jenkins said.

The two quickly became close, Mr. Jenkins said, because "she hated the [North] Korean government" as much as he did. Thirty-eight days after meeting, they were married, and eventually had two daughters.

While Mr. Jenkins was building a family, to the outside world his existence and that of other Americans in North Korea was slipping into legend. Mr. 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 rumor. It wasn't until Mr. Jenkins resurfaced in 2002 with his teenage daughters that his presence was confirmed.

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. Mr. Jenkins's

wife went back to Japan that October, leaving her husband and their two daughters behind and bringing international attention to the family.

This May, the Japanese prime minister traveled to North Korea a second time. On this visit he won the release of the children of Japanese abductees, and personally tried to persuade Mr. Jenkins to come to Japan.

"But before Prime Minister Koizumi came that day," Mr. Jenkins told the Review, "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. They come and give me a lecture on not to go to Japan."

Mr. Jenkins said he also knew the room he was in with Mr. Koizumi was bugged. "So I told Prime Minister Koizumi I could not leave North Korea," Mr. Jenkins said. "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."

The North Koreans then told Mr. Jenkins that they would allow him to travel to a third country to meet his wife and bring her back to North Korea. A meeting was arranged for July in Jakarta. "They [North Korean officials] thought if I went with my two daughters, that she would follow me. But I had no intentions of going back to North Korea," he said.

Now Mr. Jenkins just wants an end to a nearly four-decade odyssey. "All I want to do is clear myself with the American Army," he said.

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