

'I had an aching desire to live'

Seoul pastor lone survivor of commando unit

In 1968, he was among North Koreans ordered to assassinate the president

BY JEREMY KIRK
Seoul Bureau Chief

SEOUL — These days, most people don't recognize Kim Shin-jo when he walks down the street. Kim, a 57-year-old grandfather, is a pastor at a church on the south side of Seoul.



Kim

But mention his name and nearly every South Korean knows his story. In 1968, Kim was one of 31 North Korean commandos who nearly thrust the peninsula into war with a brazen attempt to assassinate then-South Korean president Park Chung-hee. The plan nearly succeeded.

Five days before the attack, the commandos left Pyongyang, making their way to the Demilitarized Zone, the 2½-mile-wide no man's land between North and South Korea. Kim was a second lieutenant in a group of young, smart soldiers hand-picked for the job.

They cut a hole in the border's fence and swam across the Imjin River into South Korea. The commandos slept in the mountains, making their way to Seoul.

But the commandos made a mistake. In a rural area, they kidnapped four woodcutters, asking them about checkpoints on the way to Seoul. The woodcutters were warned to stay quiet, but promptly informed police after the commandos left.

The commandos were coming, but no one knew when.

Dressed in civilian clothes, group members marched in a column to the Blue House, the presi-

dential mansion. When stopped by police, a commando said they were a counterintelligence unit.

A few moments later, a policeman stopped them again and asked for identification. Shots were fired, and two civilians and a police officer were killed. One commando threw grenades at two buses.

Four assassins were killed. The others fled, prompting a nationwide manhunt.

Kim was the luckiest. After the firefight, police caught him with a grenade in his hand. He could have pulled the pin — moments before, another commando blew himself up when police cornered him. Instead, Kim simply placed the grenade on the ground and surrendered. "I had an aching desire to live," Kim said.

In the end, Kim was the only commando to survive.

The rest were killed trying to make their way back to North Korea. One 2nd Infantry Division soldier was killed in a firefight with an infiltrator north of Seoul. Other U.S. soldiers were injured in scattered fighting.

Two days after the Blue House attack, North Korea hijacked the

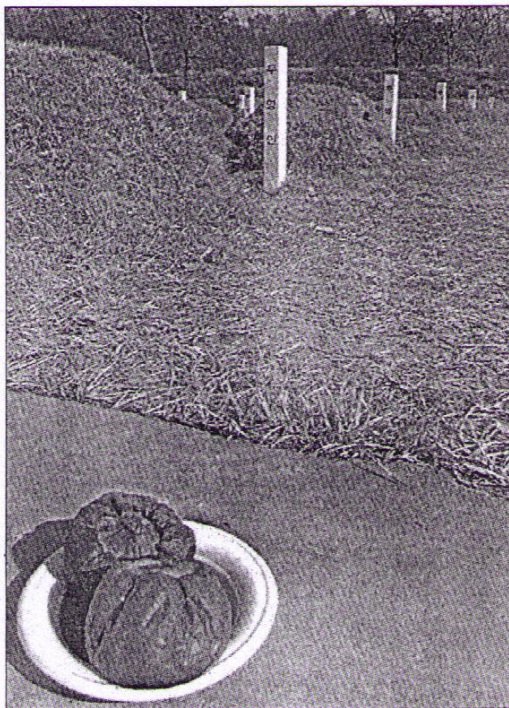
USS Pueblo, a U.S. Navy reconnaissance ship and took its 82 sailors captive.

North Korea claimed the ship was in its waters.

The incidents were the worst confrontations since the Korean War ended in 1953.

"That's when the U.S. started thinking differently about the political situation in Korea," Kim said in a recent interview with Stars and Stripes. "That's when the U.S. started thinking seriously about North Korea."

Kim proved valuable to U.S. and ROK intelligence agencies,



JEREMY KIRK/Stars and Stripes

Two shriveled pears remain from a Lunar New Year offering for the dead in a cemetery where the bodies of unknown North Korean commandos are buried. The offering, given by members of a South Korean army unit that maintains the site, is intended to help the deceased find peace.

openly talking about ideology, training and North Korea's mentality.

At a press conference a few days after the Blue House raid, Kim laid it on the table.

During the press conference, "a reporter asked me what my mission was. I answered 'I came to cut off Mr. Park's head,'" Kim said.

He said he told intelligence agents that the assassination was to precede a full-fledged attack against South Korea — the beginning of the second Korean War. However, they didn't believe him, Kim said.

Wanting to confirm Kim's story, the U.S. military sent the

USS Pueblo near North Korean waters, he said.

The capture of the ship proved a messy affair and an embarrassment to the U.S. military. U.S. officials claimed the North Koreans unlawfully seized the spy ship as it sat in international waters.

However, the United States apparently made no attempts to recapture the ship.

The Vietnam War was producing high casualties, and the United States would have faced involvement in two major conflicts.

Even today, Kim said, North Korea still views war as the best means for unification. Ceasing to make war threats would be an equivalent of backing down for

North Korea, he said.

"In order to change their view, (North Korean president) Kim Jong Il has to give up his power, but he'll never give up his power," Kim said.

About a month after the attack, Kim officially defected to South Korea and later became a citizen. After spending about a year in custody, he worked construction jobs while also lecturing the ROK military about his commando experience.

The Blue House incident haunted him for many years. When the firefight began, two younger commandos followed Kim, hoping to escape. Soldiers cornered the trio, and Kim decided that, as a group, the commandos were an easy target.

He ordered the two not to follow him. They were both shot to death.

"I feel guilty to this day," Kim said. "If they had followed me like they wanted to, they probably would have lived."

In 1981, he went to church for the first time to appease his religious South Korean wife.

The church's pastor told Kim that the dead commandos lived in his *han*, the Korean expression for a tragic experience bottled inside one's soul. The pastor touched Kim and beckoned the commandos to move on to a more peaceful place.

Since that time, Kim has become a pastor at Sungnak Baptist Church, a towering complex on the south side of the Han River in Seoul. Other defectors have been attracted to the church because of Kim's involvement.

To this day, Kim Shin-jo's name is synonymous with army training that prepares soldiers to be ready in five minutes.

However, some still hold a grudge against him because the ROK army made soldiers stay in the army six months longer after the Blue House attack.

Unification of the two Koreas is a long way off, Kim said, and North Korea still hasn't given up its designs to take South Korea by force.

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Cemetery provides resting place for unknown N. Korean spies

BY JEREMY KIRK
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PAJU CITY, South Korea — In the small, well-kept cemetery dozens of stubby white grave markers share the same black stenciling, spelling the Korean word for "unknown."

Among the buried are North Korean commandos and spies who perished during infiltration missions. Some of the cemetery's occupants were responsible for a laundry list of terrorist acts against South Korea.

The brazen attempts marked tense moments on the Korean peninsula. After the Korean War, no peace agreement was signed, and an armistice has kept a shaky peace since 1953.

The submarine commandos caught off the eastern coast of Korea in 1996 and 1998 are buried here. The infiltrators who snuck across the Demilitarized Zone and tried to kill President Park Chung-hee in 1968 are here.

So is the lone body recovered from a spy boat sunk in Pusan in 1998.

North Korea has viewed daring James Bond-like commando raids as the key to undermining South Korea. The country has one of the largest special operations units in the world.

The infiltrators' acts aren't forgotten, but many South Koreans hope the dead North Koreans can move onto a peaceful place.

An ROK Army division, which tends the cemetery, placed two shriveled pears

among the graves during the Lunar New Year in February, an offering to help the commandos' souls.

North Korea, which denies it has made infiltration attempts, will not take back the spies' remains. Abandoned, the spies rest here, overlooking a wide valley near the Imjin River.

The grave markers are purposely pointed toward North Korea.

"When we have a good relationship (with North Korea), they may want the remains," said Maj. Yi Bung-woo, public affairs officer for the army division that maintains the cemetery.

The respectful burial of the spies is South Korea's way of showing humans are valued, dead or alive, Yi said. It's a solemn appeal to North Korea to not sacrifice inno-

cent lives over ideologies that have caused the peninsula turmoil since the Korean War.

For Kim Shin-jo, South Korea's most famous infiltrator, the cemetery is an intermediary resting place. Buried here are his 29 fellow commandos who slinked across the DMZ in 1968 with orders to cut off the head of Park Chung-hee, South Korea's president.

Kim was the sole survivor, captured near the Blue House, South Korea's presidential mansion. Caught with a grenade in his hand, Kim could have killed himself, but he chose to live.

He hopes someday the commandos' remains will be laid to rest in North Korea.

"If we unite and have a good relationship, somebody has to send the remains to their hometowns," Kim said.