

It was the mistake of a lifetime... literally.

Nightmare In North Korea

• Shimon Rosenberg

Robert Jenkins spent almost 40 years stranded in one of the worst places on planet Earth, the communist gehinnom of North Korea—and he originally went there voluntarily! Well, almost. His ordeal began after a night of heavy drinking....

Starved, tortured and entirely controlled by a dictatorial government, his every action and even his thoughts were not free. Never has an American spent so much time in brutal and secretive North Korea—and yet succeed in escaping to recount his tale.



People make foolish decisions all the time while under the influence of alcohol. Yet few people in history—sober or intoxicated—have ever made as foolish a decision as Charles Robert Jenkins. If the *Guinness Book of World Records* had a category for dumb decisions, Jenkins would certainly be a contender for first place.

Jenkins was born in North Carolina. While in high school, he read material glorifying life in the army and decided to become a soldier. He went to a recruiting center and signed up for the National Guard. Jenkins was only 15 at the time, far below the minimum age to enlist, but he lied to the recruitment officer about his age, claiming he was already 18.

In 1958, Jenkins joined the regular army and was assigned to the 1st Infantry Division. He served in South Korea from 1960 to 1961. After that, he was sent to Europe until 1964, when he volunteered to return to South Korea for a new tour of duty patrolling the hot border zone between North and South Korea.



Sergeant Joe Jenkins.



The border between South Korea (foreground) and North Korea at Panmunjom.



A US soldier on the south side of the border that divides Korea in two.



Representatives of North Korea (right) and South Korea meet at the border.

What happened next is hard to explain. Jenkins was afraid that his unit would be shipped to Vietnam to fight at the front. Now, patrolling the border between North and South Korea was a very dangerous job. Soldiers in the North often opened fire on the sentries patrolling from the South (despite the fact that a ceasefire was officially in effect since 1953). Nevertheless, for some reason Jenkins was more afraid of fighting in Vietnam.

Today, Jenkins says there was another factor. His commanders had ordered him to perform aggressive provocations while patrolling the border, something that frightened him. Nervous and confused, he began drinking, and soon he was drinking heavily.

Missing

The demilitarized zone that separates North Korea from the South—a stretch of land 2.5 miles wide and 160 miles long (the zone was created at the time of the ceasefire in 1953)—has long been considered a very dangerous place to patrol. Unmarked minefields and unexploded bombs dot the landscape. Both sides of the border are guarded by young and inexperienced soldiers who nervously hold their fingers on the triggers of their cocked rifles, ready to fire at a moment's notice. This is true today, but it was even truer in Jenkins' time.

For hours every day, loudspeakers broadcast propaganda and hurled accusations and epithets from both sides of the border. The soldiers assigned to guard the isolated checkpoints were on a constant state of

alert. Every sound, every falling branch, could be a North Korean spy or infiltrator lurking about.

Jenkins was just 24 at the time, but he was already a sergeant, leading a unit of soldiers who patrolled the border. On the night of January 4, 1965, after drinking a bit too much, he set out with his unit for his regular patrol in the woods near Panmunjom, the village between North and South Korea where the two countries signed the ceasefire. (This border village has since been abandoned.)

In the middle of his patrol, a wild idea entered his intoxicated mind. Around 2:30 AM, he told his soldiers that he heard a sound and he was going to check it out. He told his soldiers to wait until he returned in a few minutes. Then Jenkins headed for North Korea while his subordinates waited patiently.

The temperature was below zero that night as Jenkins walked toward the border. Although in his drunken state he did not think about it, abandoning his soldiers in the field was not only a crime in military statutes but was viewed by peers as an extremely cowardly act. Looking back, it is difficult to understand what exactly Jenkins was thinking. Was he really so terrified of being reassigned to Vietnam? Was he a closet communist who was fed up with the capitalist system?

When asked today, Jenkins insists that the answer to both is "No." He believed that if he defected from the USA, North Korea would hand him over to the Soviets, who would eventually decide to send him back



Military parade in North Korea.



US bombs North Korea.