

THE RELUCTANT COMMUNIST: MY DESERTION, COURT-MARTIAL, AND FORTY-YEAR IMPRISONMENT IN NORTH KOREA¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR CLAY A. COMPTON*

I did not understand that the country I was seeking temporary refuge in was literally a giant, demented prison; once someone goes there, they almost never, ever get out.²

I. Introduction

In *The Reluctant Communist*, Sergeant Charles Robert Jenkins, with the assistance of Jim Frederick,³ recounts his desertion from the U.S. Army and the nearly half-century of captivity he spent in the most secretive, totalitarian, and militarized state in the world.⁴ Jenkins weaves a compelling story of desperation, survival, and regret. Many fundamental truths of life are to be found throughout this story, most

* Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Student, 60th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

¹ CHARLES ROBERT JENKINS WITH JIM FREDERICK, *THE RELUCTANT COMMUNIST: MY DESERTION, COURT-MARTIAL, AND FORTY-YEAR IMPRISONMENT IN NORTH KOREA* (2008).

² *Id.* at 21.

³ Jim Frederick is the Managing Editor of Time.com and the author of *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (2010). He served as Time's Senior Editor in London from August 2006 to January 2008. Before that, he worked as Time's Tokyo Bureau Chief for four years. It is during his time in Tokyo that he met Jenkins and co-authored *The Reluctant Communist*. While Frederick is listed as a co-author of the book, based on the prose from the *Prelude* onward, it is highly likely that Frederick wrote the *Foreword*, but Mr. Jenkins was the primary author for the remainder of the book. JIM FREDERICK, <http://jimfrederick.com/Site/about.html> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

⁴ See U.S. DEP'T OF STATE (Apr. 29, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2792.htm#> (The North Korean military accounts for 20% of men between the ages of seventeen and fifty-four, for a total of 1.2 million people. Military spending accounts for a quarter of the nation's gross national product. Due to North Korea's extreme isolationism, much of what is known about the state is based upon estimates from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.). See also U.S. DEP'T OF STATE, http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_988.html (last visited Apr. 16, 2012) (The United States does not have an embassy or consulate in North Korea and continues to strongly advise against travel to North Korea.). See generally *North Korea Country Profile*, BBC NEWS http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1131421.stm (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

notable being “the choices we make dictate the life that we lead.”⁵ How we handle the adversity of life, whether self-imposed or not, is often determined by our resiliency.⁶

II. A Desertion of Desperation

Resilience is defined as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.”⁷ According to the American Psychology Association (APA), many factors contribute to resilience, with the most important being the existence of supportive and caring relationships.⁸ Other factors that contribute to resilience include the ability to make realistic plans and carry them out; the capacity to maintain positive self-esteem and confidence in oneself; the aptitude to exercise good communication and problem-solving skills; and the ability to manage one’s impulses and emotions.⁹ In late 1964 and early 1965, Jenkins’s resilience, or his ability to “bounce back from adversity,”¹⁰ was virtually nonexistent.¹¹

Jenkins’s journey across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and into what he calls a “demented prison”¹² was merely a means to an end¹³: an escape

⁵ THE RENAISSANCE MAN (Touchstone Pictures 1994).

⁶ *The Road to Resilience*, AM. PSYCHOL. ASS’N, <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012). The American Psychology Association is a professional organization based in Washington, D.C., consisting of more than 154,000 psychologists, the largest association of psychologists in the world. The purpose of this organization is to advance the field of psychology through research and education.

⁷ MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

⁸ *The Road to Resilience*, *supra* note 7. Though cultural differences may reflect different factors that affect resilience, the most important factor involves having “caring and supportive” relationships. These relationships promote strong bonds based on love and trust.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ See Dorothy E. Hill, *How Do We Bounce Back from Adversity?*, PSYCHOL. TODAY, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200201/how-do-we-bounce-back-adversity> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012). See also Joshua D. Margolis & Paul G. Stoltz, *How to Bounce Back from Adversity*, HARV. BUS. REV., <http://www.scribd.com/doc/34245448/How-to-Bounce-Back-From-Adversity> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012). The concept of bouncing back from adversity and training for resiliency has also become important in the business community to increase productivity.

¹¹ JENKINS, *supra* note 1, at 17–25.

¹² *Id.* at 21.

¹³ *Id.* at 20.

from fear and depression.¹⁴ Jenkins's circumstances were not that different from those of many Soldiers, both past and present. What makes his story unique and heartbreaking is his response to those circumstances.

In September 1964, Jenkins found himself stationed at a remote guard post, close to the DMZ, where he led a squad of twelve men. He was a rather young, inexperienced non-commissioned officer who had very few adequate coping mechanisms to deal with major life crises. Soon after his arrival to the DMZ, he learned of his impending deployment to Vietnam and, with no one to confide or trust in, he began "looking for a way out." Seeing no other alternatives, he decided to abandon his men and desert the Army.¹⁵

Jenkins claims that he never intended to defect to North Korea, but rather sought "diplomatic exchange for passage" back to the United States from the Russians.¹⁶ This is a clear indication that he did not have the ability to make realistic plans or control his impulses, which are two important factors effecting resiliency.¹⁷ Jenkins would quickly learn that the North Korean regime, unlike other communist regimes, did not take diplomatic orders from the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Thus began Jenkins's forty-year existence of survival and regret.¹⁹

Jenkins's story of desperation and hopelessness is not lost on today's Soldiers. Multiple combat tours and countless hardships have caused the U.S. Army to focus more aggressively on the overall concept of mental fitness, and resilience skills specifically.²⁰ The Army has implemented the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program in an effort to raise mental

¹⁴ *Id.* at 19.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 16–24.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 20.

¹⁷ *The Road to Resilience*, *supra* note 7.

¹⁸ JENKINS, *supra* note 1, at 50.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 24–25.

²⁰ Jessica Reed & Stefanie Love, *Army Developing Master Resiliency Training*, ARMY.MIL (Aug. 5, 2009), <http://www.army.mil/article/25494/army-developing-master-resiliency-training/>.

fitness to the same level of importance as physical fitness²¹ and provide Soldiers effective tools to adapt to adversity.²²

III. “As Water Moulds Itself to the Pitcher”²³

The ability to adapt to adversity depends on the individual’s ability to adopt an effective strategy that promotes resilience. The APA provides several ways in which an individual can build resilience, including establishing positive and supportive relationships, avoiding a fatalistic mindset, developing realistic goals, taking decisive actions in response to the adversity, looking beyond the adversity, and maintaining a positive outlook.²⁴ Jenkins’s failure to adopt an effective resilience strategy resulted in his desertion and ultimately led him to become bitter and filled with rage, often turning that anger inward.²⁵

Jenkins recognized early in his captivity that in order to simply survive, he had to learn to adapt to his new, alien world.²⁶ The one saving grace for Jenkins was the fact that he was not alone. There were three other American deserters with whom he lived. Though their lives were deplorable by any international standard, they lived better than most in North Korea because they were considered cold war trophies. However, Jenkins still suffered from beatings, hunger, and mental torture on a regular basis.²⁷ Food was so scarce that he would often go days without eating.²⁸ Necessities in the developed world, like running water, heat, and electricity, were luxuries north of the DMZ.²⁹ His condition was so deplorable that he often wished he were dead.³⁰

²¹ Will King, *Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Army Leaders See Program as a New Way to Build Soldiers’ Resilience*, FORT LEAVENWORTH LAMP (July 30, 2009), <http://www.army.mil/article/25223/comprehensive-soldier-fitness-army-leaders-see-program-as-way-to-build-soldiers-resiliency/>.

²² *Resilience: Build Skills to Endure Hardships*, MAYO CLINIC (July 19, 2011), <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/resilience/MH00078>.

²³ The full quotation reads as follows: “The wise adapt themselves to circumstances, as water moulds itself to the pitcher.” *Famous Chinese Proverbs*, INSPIRING QUOTES AND STORIES, <http://www.inspiring-quotes-and-stories.com/chinese-proverbs.html> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

²⁴ *The Road to Resilience*, *supra* note 7.

²⁵ JENKINS, *supra* note 1, at 65.

²⁶ *Id.* at 39.

²⁷ *Id.* at 40.

²⁸ *Id.* at 49.

²⁹ *Id.* at 43 and 124.

³⁰ *Id.* at 40.

Jenkins and his fellow deserters were forced to fend for themselves in order to survive. They became experts in “backwoods fishing wisdom” and learned to improvise. They scavenged nylon from automobile tires for netting and lead from car batteries for weights. They used pig’s blood to toughen the netting and pine bark as floats.³¹ Jenkins recounts an entertaining story where they were able to acquire a small boat which would not stay afloat due to the amount of holes in it. He and his rag tag deserters snuck into a local power plant and stole a bag of coal tar to repair the boat.³² Stealing from the North Korean government is an offense punishable by death. Jenkins and the other deserters often did dangerous things because they felt like they were already dead.³³

However, Jenkins’s ability to develop positive, supportive relationships was hampered by the fact that he now lived in a world surrounded by enemies,³⁴ and a world where no one could be trusted, not even his closest friends.³⁵ The North Koreans tried to drive a wedge between the Americans from the beginning by encouraging them to turn against one another. One of the four American deserters, James Dresnok, often took advantage of this to gain favor with the North Koreans. Eventually the four American were split into two groups, leaving Jenkins to deal with Dresnok alone. Over the next seven years Jenkins would receive dozens of beatings at the hands of Dresnok on behalf of the North Koreans. Jenkins recalls that Dresnok chose his path of self-preservation by pleasing the North Koreans rather than joining Jenkins in a “desperate fight of us versus them.”³⁶ By 1966, Jenkins gave up any hope of escaping North Korea and resigned himself to the fact that he would die in North Korea.³⁷ In an act of sheer desperation, Jenkins, like so many Soldiers today, attempted to take his own life.³⁸

³¹ *Id.* at 50–51.

³² *Id.* at 47.

³³ *Id.* at 41.

³⁴ *Id.* at 65.

³⁵ *Id.* at 35.

³⁶ *Id.* at 65.

³⁷ *Id.* at 50.

³⁸ *Id.* at 66.

IV. “While There Is Life There Is Hope”³⁹

Resilience training is all the more vital given the suicide epidemic that currently plagues the Department of Defense and the U.S. Army specifically.⁴⁰ Despite the U.S. Army’s recognition of the suicide epidemic, and its subsequent awareness campaign, suicide continues to persist.⁴¹ In fact, more servicemembers have been lost to suicide than to combat in the past two years.⁴² Sadly, the U.S. Army recently saw its worst month in terms of numbers of Soldiers lost to suicide.⁴³ In an attempt to more effectively combat suicide, the U.S. Army, in conjunction with the National Institute of Mental Health, has initiated a study to assess risk and resilience in Soldiers.⁴⁴ Additionally, Fort Hood, one of the hardest hit installations regarding Soldier suicide,⁴⁵ has built a “Resiliency Campus” to help build mentally stronger Soldiers.⁴⁶

Protective factors that promote resilience, such as establishing and fostering positive personal relationships, can help reduce the likelihood of suicide. Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control recognize that risk factors such as isolation and hopelessness reduce resilience and are often associated with suicide.⁴⁷ The ultimate objective in suicide

³⁹ Quoting Marcus Cicero. See Kate Le Page, *Anti-Suicide Quotes—Help for Suicidal or Depressed at Christmas*, PSYCHOL. @SUITE101, <http://kate-le-page.suite101.com/anti-suicide-quotes---help-for-suicidal-or-depressed-at-christmas-a323825> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

⁴⁰ *Family Suicide Prevention and Awareness Training*, ARMY.MIL (Dec. 3, 2009), <http://www.army.mil/article/31298/family-suicide-prevention-and-awareness-training/>.

⁴¹ Karen Parrish, *DOD, Services Work to Prevent Suicide*, DOD LIVE, <http://www.dodlive.mil/index.php/2011/09/dod-services-work-to-prevent-suicides/> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

⁴² John Donnelly, *More Troops Lost to Suicide*, CONGRESS.ORG, http://www.congress.org/news/2011/01/24/more_troops_lost_to_suicide (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

⁴³ Greg Jaffe, *Army Suicides Set Record in July*, WASH. POST (Aug. 12, 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/army-suicides-set-record-in-july/2011/08/12/gIQAfGIBJ_story.html.

⁴⁴ *The Making of Army STARRS: An Overview*, NAT’L INST. OF MENTAL HEALTH, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention-studies/the-making-of-army-starrs-an-overview.shtml> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

⁴⁵ Yochi J. Dreazen, *Base Hit by Stress Disorder*, WALL ST. J., Nov. 6, 2009, at A4.

⁴⁶ Heather Graham-Ashley, *Suicide Prevention: Resiliency Campus Helps Soldiers Build Strength to Handle Stress, Battle Suicide*, FORT HOOD SENTINEL (Sept. 30, 2010), <http://www.forthood.sentinel.com/story.php?id=4920>.

⁴⁷ *Suicide: Risk and Protective Factors*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/riskprotectivefactors.html> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

prevention is to increase an individual's protective factors, while at the same time reducing the risk factors.⁴⁸

Jenkins's outlook on life changed dramatically when he met his soon-to-be wife, Hitomi,⁴⁹ and even more so with the birth of their children.⁵⁰ Soon after Jenkins and Hitomi were married, the North Korean government moved the Americans and their expanding families back together.⁵¹ By the early 1990s, the other American deserters were either dead or had developed serious health conditions, leaving Jenkins to carry most of the weight for the families' survival.⁵² Foremost in this endeavor was to ensure their apartment building was heated and food was on the table. Their building was heated by a coal-burning furnace and they received twenty tons of coal each winter. Heating the building was a monumental task. Jenkins had to first sift rock out of the coal and then move the coal into their basement for storage. He would then have to stabilize the coal to make sure it would burn slowly. This was done by mixing the coal with clay and forming bricks. It would take at least half a day to build a good fire for the boiler and, if left extinguished for more than a few hours during the winter, the water would freeze, bursting the pipes.⁵³ Thus, maintaining a proper fire was of significant importance beyond simply keeping the winter cold at bay. Three times a day, he would stoke and attend to the fire. Even still, the apartment would remain intolerably cold.⁵⁴ Additionally, all drinking water had to be boiled⁵⁵ and much of their food had to be grown and harvested.⁵⁶ Without electricity most of the time, Jenkins was forced to find creative solutions for survival. Candles were extremely hard to find and were of extremely poor quality. Jenkins learned to make his own using paraffin and stubs of crayons.⁵⁷

Jenkins truly lived "a life of quiet desperation,"⁵⁸ and, although his life did not get any easier, he now had something to live for besides

⁴⁸ *Suicide Prevention*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/index.html> (last visited Apr. 16, 2012).

⁴⁹ JENKINS, *supra* note 1, at 90–94.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 121–35.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 104 and 108.

⁵² *Id.* at 122.

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 123.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 125.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 128–29.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 126.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at xxxi.

himself. He now had a purpose in life: to care for and protect his family.⁵⁹ As a holocaust survivor and psychiatrist once wrote, “A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the ‘why’ for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any ‘how.’”⁶⁰

V. Conclusion

The Reluctant Communist is a fascinating tale of a Soldier’s desertion, his forty-year captivity behind the lines of the world’s most isolated and totalitarian regimes, and the love that saved his life. It is a tale of inspiration that is compelling, truly meaningful, and a pleasure to read. Many lessons can be gleaned from this account, but from a Soldier’s point of view, the importance of resilience cannot be understated. In today’s Army, where adversity abounds and suicide plagues our ranks, the concept of resilience is vital to mission success.

As an organization, the U.S. Army has highlighted the importance of physical fitness, but today’s Soldier and today’s adversities require a more holistic approach to fitness. We must equip Soldiers to adapt to their adversity and build resilience so that they do not become just another statistic. Jenkins shows us that, even in the most dire of circumstances, survival is not the end-state, but the daily commitment to overcome adversity.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 121–35.

⁶⁰ VIKTOR E. FRANKL, *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING* 101(1997).