

WorldViews

A U.S. soldier who defected to North Korea in 1962 has died, his Pyongyang-born sons say

By Cleve R. Wootson Jr.

August 21, 2017

Five decades after a 21-year-old soldier from Richmond named James Joseph Dresnok sprinted through the demilitarized zone and began his new life as a propaganda tool for North Korea, his Pyongyang-born sons have announced his death.

Dresnok's health had been failing for years, and his sons said he died of a stroke in November. He was 74 and had spent two-thirds of his life espousing the virtues of the country he ran to on that summer day in 1962. The death of the man thought to have outlived or outlasted the other U.S. defectors to North Korea had been rumored, but his sons recently confirmed it on the state-run Uriminzokkiri website, [according to the Guardian](#).

“I have never regretted coming to the People's Republic of North Korea,” Dresnok said in a 2006 BBC documentary. “I feel at home. I really feel at home. I was just a regular soldier. And when I gave it up and came over, I wouldn't trade it for nothing.”

But like most things the man known as “Comrade Joe” said publicly after defecting, it was impossible to suss out which statements were genuine and which were parroted propaganda.

As his health failed, Dresnok's Korean-speaking sons spoke on their father's behalf. But their words, too, were heavily scripted and overwhelmingly supportive of North Korea and its policies.

“I want to advise the U.S. to drop its hostile policy against North Korea. They've done enough wrong, and now it's time for them to wake up from their delusions,” Ted Dresnok, the oldest son, said in a video [published online in 2006](#) by the pro-Pyongyang news service Minjok Tongshin.

Those words were spoken amid escalating tensions between the United States and North Korea that have worsened under President Trump, who has promised that the isolationist country would be “[met with fire and fury](#)” if it doesn't stop threatening the United States.

Dresnok and other Army defectors — including Pvt. Larry Abshier, Sgt. Robert Jenkins and Spec. Jerry Parrish — were seen as propaganda victories for North Korea.

“Comrade Joe” even played an evil American in North Korean propaganda movies. And his disembodied voice was broadcast across the demilitarized zone to entice U.S. troops with promises of better food rations and beautiful women.

It was a world away from what Dresnok described as a humble and tumultuous childhood in Virginia's capital. His parents were in constant conflict and, later, estranged. They died when he was a child. He was briefly raised by relatives and spent time in foster care.

“My father was a worker, my mother was a housewife. And they fought like cats and dogs,” he says in the BBC documentary. “She stayed in the bars and on the streets day and night. We slept, ate and drank everything in the back seat of a car.”

He joined the Army the day after his 17th birthday, according to the Guardian, but Army life — and regular life — quickly soured.

On a trip home from deployment, he discovered that his wife had run away with another man. Despondent during the ensuing divorce, he put in for Army service in the most dangerous place he could think of: near the demilitarized zone. One night in South Korea, he left base without permission to be with a woman. Soon, he found himself facing a court-martial.

“I was fed up with my childhood, my marriage, my military life, everything. I was finished,” he told the documentary makers. “There’s only one place to go. On August 15, at noon in broad daylight, when everybody was eating lunch, I hit the road. Yes, I was afraid. Am I gonna live or die? And when I stepped into the minefield and I seen it with my own eyes, I started sweating. I crossed over, looking for my new life.”

He was interrogated in the North Korean capital but was ultimately embraced, along with other defectors.

It was not an easy fit at first. Four years after defecting, he and other former U.S. soldiers went to the Soviet Embassy, trying to find a way back to the United States, the Guardian reported. The Soviets handed them back to the North Koreans.

That's when Dresnok said he vowed to try to fit in.

Resigned to his new life in North Korea, he learned to speak Korean and taught English, [according to The Washington Post's Anna Fifield](#). He married a Romanian woman, Doina Bumbea, who reportedly had been abducted by North Korea and died of cancer in 1997. They had two children, Ted and James. Ted goes by the Korean name Hong Sun Chol. His younger brother goes by the name Hong Chol.

They also appeared in North Korean movies:

James Dresnok Sr. later fathered a third son with his third wife — the daughter of a Korean woman and an African diplomat.

“Comrade Joe” lived a simple life in North Korea, drinking and fishing and smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. He'd gained some acclaim from the films. People on the street stopped and stared at the large white man from the movies.

His adopted country provided him with a monthly stipend and a small apartment. But in the capital, blackouts were frequent, as were moments when there was no running water. Every home was equipped with a built-in radio that played propaganda and could not be turned off.

In 2008, in an interview with the Guardian, he discussed how he viewed his decision to turn his back on the United States.

“I don't consider myself a traitor,” he said. “I love my country. I love my town.”

But he said he considered himself a citizen of Pyongyang.

“I call it my country because I have been here for 46 years. My life is here. Enough? The government will take care of me until my dying breath.”

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