



Crash Landing into Freedom: The Stories of Former North Korean Soldiers

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion.....2

- Dr. Patrick M. Cronin, *Asia-Pacific Security Chair, Hudson Institute*
- Colonel Steve Lee, U.S. Army (Ret.), *Senior Vice President, Korea Defense Veterans Association*
- Oh Cheong Seong, *Former Driver in the North Korean Panmunjom Military Police Unit of the Operations Bureau*
- Lee Unggil, *Former Member of the North Korean People’s Army 11th Corps Special Forces and Member of the North Korean People’s Liberation Front*
- Henry Song, *Translator*

About Hudson Institute: Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations.

Please note: This transcript is based off a recording and mistranslations may appear in text. A video of the event is available: <https://www.hudson.org/events/1786-crash-landing-into-freedom-the-stories-of-former-north-korean-soldiers32020>

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Good afternoon everyone. I'm Patrick Cronin, I'm the Asia Pacific Security Chair here at Hudson Institute. And it's a great pleasure today to bring you a program that we've called Crash Landing into Freedom: the Stories of Two North Korean Soldiers. This is a very serious subject. I'm poking fun though with this title a bit with the recent K-drama about the South Korean heiress that paraglides into North Korea and falls in love with a North Korean soldier.

That's K-drama. This is going to be more the reality version of what it's like to crash out of North Korea into freedom.

I think for the United States policy on North Korea, the intensive focus, obviously the past couple of years in particular has been predominantly on the nuclear and missile issues. And there's no doubt that when you're engaged in diplomacy with an adversary, you sometimes put aside other values and interests. There's no doubt that the human rights issues have been given short shrift, in general, because of the need to try to prioritize the security issues. But in reality, they're all connected.

And when it comes to torture, arbitrary detention, the denial of freedom of expression, movement, religion, and the right to life, North Korea has, in the words of the UN human rights inquiry, "No parallel in the contemporary world." Everybody knows this in the policy world. It was reaffirmed at a personal level by Cindy Warmbier, the mother of Otto Warmbier, here last May when she said that North Korea is a "cancer on this earth." And you could see the depth of her feelings at a personal level in terms of thinking about the North Korean regime.

I think the stories we hear today are going to reinforce the concerns about the human rights questions and atrocities, really, out of North Korea. And we're really very fortunate today to have with us two individuals who have personally taken great risk and want to share their stories. And I'm also delighted that we're joined by my friend, retired Colonel Steve Lee, who was the man at point at the DMZ when Mr. Oh came across back in 2017.

So what I'd like to do now is to turn to Oh Cheong Seong, who was a driver in the North Korean Panmunjom Military Police unit of the Operations Bureau only two and a half years ago, when he drove that Jeep into the ditch and then tried to make a dash to the South Korean side. And it was quite a harrowing story. I know we have some video as well that we may be queuing up. There's one item regarding the media filming of Mr. Oh speaking; he's asked that he not be filmed by the press while he speaks. It's all on the record. And yes, we are live streaming. But he doesn't want it to be somehow misused in the media. So, for just Mr. Oh's comments, if we could ask you to respect that. I want to hand it over to Mr. Oh. And Henry Song will be doing some interpretation here for us.

Henry Song:

I'll try.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Thank you. Please, Mr. Oh.

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

Good afternoon. My name is Oh Cheong Seong. I escaped North Korea in 2017 to South Korea and I've been in South Korea for about two years now. And I was born and raised in Kaesong, which was the old capital of the Korean peninsula a long time ago. And so when I was about 25 years old is when I escaped from North Korea through the JSA Joint Security Area. And that obviously became a big issue worldwide. And I got shot five times by AK 47 bullets and I'm going to show a brief CNN clip.

[Video Clip Audio] Speaker:

A video that you have to see. A North Korean soldier is apparently trying to escape across the border into South Korea, running for his life, getting shot at while he's doing so. North Korean troops then violate the truce that ended the Korean [inaudible 00:06:06]. It's an armistice, right? What did they do? Well, they opened fire across the border. They chase the soldier. CNN's Anna Coren has more from Seoul.

[Video Clip Audio] Anna Coren:

Chris, Allison, a North Korean soldier is recovering here at Arju University Hospital following his dramatic defection to South Korea. Well, his daring escape was captured on CCTV, something that is rarely shared with the public.

A desperate run for freedom. This video shows the dramatic moment a 24 year old North Korean soldier left his post last week running across the demilitarized zone, the DMZ, that divides North and South Korea. It's one of the most heavily fortified borders in the world. First in a Jeep, then on foot he's pursued by his own comrades. They fire more than 40 shots. Doctor's saying he was hit at least four times before reaching safety.

These scenes captured on CCTV were played at a news conference in Seoul. The UN Command says that as the North Koreans pursued the defector, they violated an armistice agreement between the two countries. The armistice dates back to 1953 with the cease fire between the North and South, but the war has not officially ended. US forces Korea claim the North Korean people's army or KPA fired across the military demarcation line and that one soldier crossed it briefly during the incident.

[Video Clip Audio] Speaker 1:

UNC personnel at the JSA notified KPA of these violations today through our normal communication channels in Panmunjom and requested a meeting to discuss our investigation and measures to prevent future such violations.

[Video Clip Audio] Anna Coren:

When the North Korean soldier arrived here at Arju University Hospital on the outskirts of Seoul, he'd already lost more than 50% of his blood and was unconscious with barely a pulse. Doctors say he'd suffered gunshot wounds to his chest, shoulder, arms, and abdomen. And by the time he reached the operating theater, he was almost dead.

[Video Clip Audio] Anna Coren:

And in his intestines, doctors found large parasitic worms, one nearly a foot long. After multiple surgeries, doctors say he is now conscious and able to talk.

[Video Clip Audio] [Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

He and I have spoken a lot and I feel that this North Korean soldier defected to South Korea of his own will.

[Video Clip Audio] Anna Coren:

The soldier is the third member of the North Korean armed forces to defect this year. Now, the US led UN Command has notified the North Koreans all of the armistice violations and demanded a meeting. No comment yet from the North Koreans about this latest defection. Chris and Allison, back to you.

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So the CNN clips said I got shot four times, but it's actually five shots, five bullets that I got shot with. I got hit in the leg, arm, the back and one entered near the kidney. And so four bullets and one was also found lodged near my spine, near my intestines. So the surgery was done in that area as well. And as that CNN clip said, 40 to 50 shots were fired at me. And according to the armistice agreement, the North Korean soldiers cannot be carrying a rifle such as AK-47 in the JSA area. But as you saw in the video clip, they were found to be carrying that around and running around looking for me. And so I myself was posted at the JSA for about a year and six months and there were actually many violations of the armistice agreement while I was serving

After I collapsed on the South Korean side of the JSA or the DMZ, the blood loss was so severe that basically all my North Korean blood was shed when I was lying down there. And then when I was transferred to Arju Hospital, they had to transfer almost 12000 CCS of South Korean blood. So my body was filled with South Korean blood.

I woke up after about 15 days. And the first thing that I remember seeing was the South Korean flag, the [Korean 00:12:26]. And I remember just breathing a sigh of relief. And what's interesting is that when I was in the North Korean Military, when I looked at the North Korean flag, I don't recall feeling any sense of emotion or anything like that. But when I saw the [Korean 00:12:36], when I saw the South Korean flag, I remember just feeling a great sense of relief.

And so as you can imagine, anyone getting shot at with just one bullet, you would expect to die or just, it's a very serious situation. But I got shot five times. You may wonder or anyone may wonder why I made that escape in spite getting shot at five times. And I would simply say for freedom or in Korean, [Korean 00:13:19]. And so for that simple word, I escaped North Korea and I did not grow up in North Korea being very poor or just having a very miserable experience.

So my parents were both military officers, so I grew up pretty well off compared to the rest of the North Korean population. My father was high ranking officer and he had no negativity or feelings towards the regime, towards the Northern government. And I grew up having been growing in that situation, I was a propagandized or brainwashed into believing everything that government taught me. And so from an early age, I grew up not suffering or going through what most other North Korean people went through.

And as I mentioned earlier, my hometown is Kaesong in North of Hwanghae Province. And so in Kaesong is where the factories and industrial complexes were formed and the [Korean 00:15:25], or the Korean [inaudible 00:15:23], there was more exposure to be outside or South Korean things compared to other parts of the country. And even when I was employed, stationed or posted at the JSA, I had a chance to see numerous Western tourists, Canadians, French or what have you, tourists visiting the area. And I saw how freely, even though they were traveling to the North Korean side, how freely they were able to walk about and act. And I realized looking at them that, "Wow, this is what freedom must be." So that's when I began to have a somewhat favorable outlook regarding South Korea.

And so there are 30,000 North Korean defectors that are resettled in South Korea. And many defectors have resettled in the US, the UK, Canada and elsewhere. And I myself am a unique situation obviously because I did not go through the typical way that other defectors took in terms of escaping North Korea. And I would say that my body is a witness to the journey that I took in my escape from North Korea to freedom.

So in conclusion, after I came out of North Korea and we settled in South, I went through a lot of difficult process to adjust to my life in freedom. And so even coming to the US, I was invited to visit some acquaintances in the West Coast. And it was only going to be a short trip, but I had the opportunity to be invited to come to the East Coast to Washington DC.

And coming here to the US, it's so nice to be here. First of all, the clean air reading the clean air is so refreshing and it's such a difference. And when I was in North Korea, I never imagined that I would be able to travel to the US and visit. Even in living and working in South Korea, I never thought that I would be able to make time out of my busy schedule to visit the US. But [inaudible 00:18:31] actually in the US, when I actually came to America and I experienced all the things around me. And hopefully in the future if the opportunity is there, I would like to visit the US to further my studies and contribute myself to making unification of the peninsula happen.

And I like to thank Dr. Cronin and Hudson Institute for inviting me and Mr. Lee to this really important stage for me to share my story and so thank you very much.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Well, Mr. Oh, it's a great pleasure to have you. Thank you.

What I'd like to do is to turn to Colonel Steve Lee, now retired from the US army. He is currently the Senior Vice President of the Korea Defense Veterans Association. But when I met him, it was the day after Mr. Oh crossed the demarcation line and we were visiting the DMZ. And the secretary of the military armistice commission responsible for communications between North and South was the responsibility of Colonel Steve Lee.

I will just say a word of context that in that November, 2017 visit, I know you're going to amplify on this, Steve. If you go back to 2017 that was the summer of "Bloody Nose" strategy, "maximum pressure," "fire and fury." North Korea was doubling down on missile tests and nuclear tests. South Korea, through special election in May of 2017, brought Moon Jae-in to power and he was desperately seeking inter-Korean peace and harmony. The Moon administration was floating a hundred different ideas for trying to reduce tensions.

So this incident happened at the peak of this fire and fury, maximum pressure, and desperate search for inter-Korean peace. And it was just prior to when North Korea would pursue a new diplomatic tack on January 1st, which is when Kim Jong Un finally accepted going to the Pyeongchang Olympics in 2018. Kim then began a series of summits and essentially the experimental diplomacy that South Korea and the United States have had with North Korea ever since. But not with a lot of success, I might add. So, Steve and I don't know if we want to try to show the clip or are we able to queue up the clip where Steve explains, this is to a journalist, exactly where Mr. Oh ran. And, so, from the view of the Americans and South Koreans at the DMZ.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

This is Savannah Guthrie of the Today Show. As you know, today show, NBC had the broadcasting rise to the Pyeongchang Olympics and because of that, we gave them special access to this area. And so this is the interview.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

And not to something that's hanging over these games, of course: The North Korean crisis and that country's standing in the world. President Clinton once called the DMZ the scariest place on earth. We've visited it today with the help of US Army Colonel Stephen Lee, Secretary of the United Nations Command, Military Armistice Commission. We were given an exclusive moment by moment account of one North Korean soldier's bid for freedom.

This morning, NBC news is the first Western news outlet to get a glimpse of the path that a desperate North Korean soldier took when he made a mad dash for freedom. Back in November, that soldier, Oh Cheong Seong scrambled across the DMZ, the heavily guarded border that separates the two Koreas. It's widely considered one of the most dangerous places on earth and we were given a rare tour. The daring escape that captivated people around the world. Started in a speeding Jeep. Camera's on the South Korean side captured the defection as it unfolded, the vehicle blowing through a North Korean guard post and then crashing into a ditch.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

That ditch that you see on their side, just about 10 yards away, is where his Jeep got stuck.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

He was trying to drive across the dirt, just to drive across.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

Right, and then when he realized he couldn't, he got out. As he took about two steps that you saw in the video. There are about four North Korean soldiers that started to shoot at him.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

That soldier, the first defector to pass through the heavily guarded area since 1984.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

These were part of the 24 rounds that we have physical evidence of.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

The joint security area located Panmunjom Village, the so-called Peace Village. It's meant to be an area that encourages diplomatic exchanges and is the only place where North and South Koreans can stand face to face.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

It must have been astonishing to have gunshots ring out here, in one of the most tense places in the world.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

This place is different than all of the other places along the demilitarized zone. It is specifically for dialogue. And so we shouldn't have provocations like that. So that was even more significant that they fired here in this area.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

Can we go see where you found the soldier?

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

Sure. Just right there.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

So he ran this same path.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

This is basically the path that he ran. It was actually quite remarkable. When you see the video, right, of him running and he was getting five to six times.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

He's taking bullets on this whole run.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

Right.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

But he wasn't found right away?

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

No.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

It took South Korean soldiers and US service men nearly 15 minutes to find the defector. You can see him here hiding under leaves, helpless.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

The South Korean soldiers crawled up from this hill to rescue him.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

Right. And that's because we knew that their guard posts there could see here. And so instead of just walking up to him, they literally had to crawl on their belly, inch by inch to get to him.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

Because for all you know, if they see him being rescued, they take another shot.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

Right, exactly. That's why we took what we assessed to be very prudent measures to rescue him, but also try to protect our forces.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

That's incredible. I mean, the North Korean-

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

You can see.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

Towers right there. They probably are watching us right now.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

Yes they are.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

They probably know what we're talking about.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

Bullet holes from the incident still scar this wall. I count one, two, three, four, five. As the defector was medivaced to Seoul where he was treated for several gunshot wounds, Colonel Lee worked to lower the tension ricocheting through the area.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

[inaudible 00:24:55] a message. And we actually opened that door and used a Bullhorn, which is very unusual for us, to just make sure they got the message. Okay?

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

What was the message?

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

The message was very simply that, "Hey, one of your soldiers came to our side. We have him. He needs medical attention. He's getting that now. We're going to conduct an investigation and when it's done I'll come and talk to you about it.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

We did that once. The North Koreans actually signaled to us with a flashlight, that they wanted to hear it again, because they didn't really hear it well. So we actually read the message again, so we knew that they received it and so I think that helped to also deescalate and make sure that they knew what happened and how we read the situation.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

You literally shouted it over a bullhorn.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

Right, right. From this area so that they could clearly hear it. Yeah.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

Because if you called, what would have happened?

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

We actually did try to call. They didn't answer the phone. That would have been actually a very good time for them to pick up the phone.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

I think so.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

The UN Command does call North Korea some three times a day.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

This is the Bat phone.

[Video Clip Audio] Colonel Steve Lee:

Yeah, sure.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

Okay. Don't worry, I'm not going to pick it up.

[Video Clip Audio] Savannah Guthrie:

But North Korea hasn't picked up the phone either since 2013.

Colonel Steve Lee:

13th of November, 2017 was a Monday. And that's significant. I don't know if Mr. Oh knows this or not, but our soldiers work over the weekend on Saturday and Sunday for education tours for all the tourists that come up there. And so Monday is normally a day off for our soldiers and so on our side, there aren't tourists there. So I got a call from our United Nations Command Security Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Matt Farmer, wonderful commander. Thank goodness he was the commander on site, just telling me about what was happening. This was around three o'clock in the afternoon on Monday. And we just talked about some emergency procedures and I agreed with his assessment that we needed to understand what's going on, because we don't know if this is just one incident out of many going on in the DMZ.

So I think they did a very good job of assessing what was going on. They realized it was an isolated case, wanted to make sure we protect our forces, be on good alert security posture. And then after that we started working immediately on crafting a message to my North Korean counterpart that I am supposed to negotiate over incidences like this. And as you saw in an interview per our SOP, we tried to call them just to let them know, "Hey, this happened. We want you to know that we have him. He's okay. We're not trying to do anything unusual. We just want to make sure that both sides understand the situation so we can deescalate."

Again, it would've been great if he'd picked up the phone. But because they didn't, we took the extraordinary measure of opening that door where we have people there 24 hours a day specifically to talk with the North Koreans and use the bullhorn.

Again at that time, You got to understand this is a very unusual thing, right? This is an area for dialogue. No rifles were supposed to be in there, let alone fire. So we didn't know what we should do for force protection measures other than just take prudent measures. That's why we actually opened the door slightly and used the bullhorn. And it was extraordinary in that the North Koreans communicated with us by with flashlight saying, and the way we interpreted obviously is, "Hey, can you repeat that? I don't think we got that clearly."

Couple of points that came out of this, a lot of people in Korea had a knee jerk reaction of, "Hey, how come the South Koreans, our forces on our side didn't fire back. Okay. As you saw, it was really quick. I think it lasted about 11 seconds, about 40 rounds. And as you can see, the North Koreans were as surprised as we were. Right? You could tell by their poor marksmanship and the way that they reacted.

So clearly our side, we're trying to just gauge and by the time they stopped firing rounds, there was nothing to fire at. So again, very important lesson learned for all sides was understand

what's going on before you decide that you just want to fire back because shots were fired in your direction. That was a point that I emphasize to both the South Korean Minister of National Defense and the Unification Minister who came within one week of this incident happening when I visited the location.

The other part of it was, "Hey, we were actually very lucky," and this is a question that I would pose to Mr. Oh, is did he know that he was coming on a day when there are no tourists? Because think about it, if we were in the middle of a tour group of 50 people, how this situation could have unfolded much differently, right? Because that's an area that we directly, some of y'all have actually been there.

So again, the importance of having good SLPs, great working relationships between the US and the South Korean military who occupy and man the United Nations Command Security Battalion. Although the great communication with the bigger military behind us ready to react, if anything else were to happen. So from, again, my perspective, did you know that the day that you came was a Monday when we wouldn't have tourists on that side?

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So I knew that since I was posted in that area and I knew about the South Korean side of their schedule in terms of accepting the tours and things like that. For us, for the North Koreans, Saturday was the day that we didn't have tourists.

Colonel Steve Lee:

So did you deliberately pick Monday or was that just a day of opportunity for you?

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

It was not on purpose that I picked that day, Monday, it just coincidence that it was a Monday.

Colonel Steve Lee:

Again, from my perspective I was so thankful that it did happen on a Monday when there wasn't ... because think about it Patrick, if they came on the day you came, we would have been taking some actions-

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Indeed, in the context of the maximum pressure strategy and all that had and had not happened on diplomacy with the North Koreans, the concern about rapid escalation was very real. In fact, was this a provocation from the North to scuttle inner-Korean peace even before it got started? Or conversely had you fired back, and shots were exchanged, what would this mean for any chance for diplomacy? Then finally your attempt, Steve, to try to deescalate and just how long that took to try to communicate with the North was also a huge lesson, and that's the preparation.

This was in a microcosm, a real-world situation where you could have rapid escalation. I mean the shots were fired within 11 seconds. How do you try to deescalate and make sure that you don't make this an incident that causes outright war and conflict? When you have missiles at the

other end of these militaries, it puts this all into perspective that this is a very important flashpoint, and being in Korea at the time and visiting you even the next day, it was palpable in the air just how much tension there was at the DMZ.

Because I wanted to ask Mr. Oh about what he did expect. I mean there were shoot-to-kill standing orders, I think on the part of the North Korean military. So, were you expecting to be fired at? Was that part of your plan or were you hoping to drive across so quickly that no shots would reach you?

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So, in the video that wasn't shown. So, as I was driving the Jeep towards on the road, passing the guard post and on the bridge, that's when I was getting shot at also. Obviously, nobody wants to get shot at. So, my original plan was to take the Jeep all the way into South Korea. But as you saw in the video, what happened was that the wheel got stuck in the ditch and I had no choice, but to get out of the Jeep and run.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

When you decided to drive that Jeep to try to cross, was that spontaneous or was this something you thought, "Today is the day I'm going to do this," or was it, "This is the moment I'm going to do this." I mean, how much, ahead of time had you thought about this?

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So, in order to answer that question, I wasn't planning on taking the Jeep in, escaping that day. But there were some things that happened personally between my colleagues and I that led up to just me making that decision to make that escape from North Korea to the South.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Well, needless to say, it took a lot of personal courage and we want to hear more about this, but I think we should, Henry, turn to Mr. Lee Unggil because he'd been in South Korea for 10 years before Mr. Oh's escape. Mr. Lee has his own story to tell as a former member of the North Korean People's Army, 11th Corps Special Forces, the Storm Corps, And he is now a member of the North Korean People's Liberation Front, in addition to his day job. But he very much helps think about former soldiers trying to come to freedom, and so he can provide his story as well as some, maybe perspective, on what's Mr. Oh is facing in his future.

Translator for Unggil Lee:

So my name is Unggil. I was born in Chongjin in 1981, and both my parents were doctors. My father was a pathologist and my mother was a pediatrician. Unfortunately, they both died in an accident when I was 17 years old. So, at the age of 17 was when I went to the North Korean military to do my compulsory service. In the military, I served in the 11th Corps, 11th division and this is a sort of a special forces division that Kim Jong-un visits quite frequently.

The performance, a band, they also visit and perform with this particular division. In the case of war breaks out, our unit or our brigade was tasked with doing a lot of assassinations, attacking ports and airports, kidnappings and those types of activities, as a special forces soldier. I was

here for about six years and then I was recommended to go study further in college. That's why after six years, not finishing my complete 10 years of service I was released from the military and then sent to college to study. This was when I also began my other activity as a North Korean defector broker. I helped people escape from North Korea and that's the activity that I began to get involved with as well.

So part of the work that I did that got me arrested by the ministry of state security agents was I was asked to rescue, or to send out a South Korean POW that had been held in North Korea, out from North Korea to China. But this operation was a failure. So I was arrested, the POW was arrested and I was destined to be executed or sent to prison camp. However, my relatives and my family, they were able to get some sort of leniency from the officials and instead of being executed or sent to prison camp, I was released.

The whole process of going through the interrogation and the torture with the MSS, ministry security agents, and going through the whole process of almost getting executed or sent to prison camp, I felt great anger and frustration at the regime that they would treat their citizens like this. So that led ultimately to make the decision to escape from North Korea again and make my way to freedom in South Korea.

So when I made my attempt to escape from North Korea in 2005, in October, I was actually caught by the Chinese officials and sent back, repatriated back to North Korea. On my way to being sent to a prison camp, I believe back then I didn't know about God, but I believe looking back now that God really saved me from being sent to the prison camp, and I was able to escape from that situation, and finally, made my way to South Korea.

So for the past almost three years we've seen all these summits and talks that have happened between Kim Jong-un and the leaders of South Korea and the US, talking about denuclearization, but there has been no progress and unless there is true freedom and human rights guaranteed for the people, we've seen what the North Korean regime does. Dr. Cronin mentioned [inaudible 00:00:41:44], parents being hosted at the Hudson. What they did to Otto is truly a terrible thing that they did in terms of human rights violations. So I'm focusing on working towards helping the North Korean people truly attain freedom and to enjoy human rights as well.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Mr. Lee, I wonder if I can just ask you a question about your reception in South Korea. Not immediately, but over time, the ability of maybe younger South Koreans in particular, to understand the situation you had lived in. That, to understand that there might be a place where not only is there a hereditary leader who's the leader for life, but that you have no freedom. I mean, could they really grasp what you were escaping from or did you find them more knowledgeable than you thought about North Korea?

Translator for Unggil Lee:

So in my experience, and my interactions with South Koreans in their twenties and thirties, when I talk to them about my experience or talk to them about the reality of what's going on in North Korea, they are really surprised to hear my story or hear about what I tell them about North Korea, despite the fact that North Korea or defectors are talked about in the media, and that there are 30,000 defectors in South Korea.

I would say that it's probably disinterest or other just utterly not interested in anything that has to do with North Korean human rights or defectors, and the questions they ask such as, "Really, there was no internet in North Korea?" So that sort of question that I get clearly shows the lack of knowledge, awareness, especially among the young people, and it seems like for me, the students in the US that I've met so far, they seem to have more interest or passion about North Korean human rights. So I hope that more people in South Korea can take interest in this issue of North Korean human rights and of the defectors as well.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Just before we pass a microphone around for some questions from the audience, I want to have Steve Lee making a comment or question here.

Colonel Steve Lee:

So, Mr. Lee, I know that you're mentoring, helping Mr. Oh transition into living in a free society like South Korea. I know you're very successful and have transitioned well, and I think that 14 or 15 years that you've been in South Korea, what advice would you give to other North Koreans who are trying to make their way in South Korean society?

Translator for Unggil Lee:

So my advice to young defectors or any defector that has a reason to be settled in South Korea, I would say that the reality is that South Korea is difficult even for South Koreans because it's that type of society. So I would say that for defectors, because we come from a socialist background where everything is provided in a public distribution system, so even if we didn't work or did work, we would get the same as if somebody did work. So that sort of mindset is sort of a wall that prevents many defectors from trying to do well when they resettle in South Korea.

So I would tell them, have a positive, optimistic outlook. You know South Korea may be difficult, but it's heaven compared to where you came from in North Korea. So work hard and really try to make the best of your new opportunity here in South Korea. That's the advice that I would give to a defector. That's the reason we settled in South Korea.

Colonel Steve Lee:

Awesome, thank you.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

It's good advice. We have a microphone and our questions and we'll start right up here. Up front. Patrick is bringing you a microphone. If you just wait. Thank you.

Audience Member:

I'd like to ask to Mr. Lee, North Korea is sandwiched between South Korea and China, the biggest centers of coronavirus outbreak. I want to hear your thoughts on how susceptible the North Korean military is to the coronavirus outbreak of a potential super spread within the

military? Also, if you could share your own experiences back in early 2000s when there was a SARS outbreak? Thank you.

Translator for Unggil Lee:

So when the SARS outbreak happened in the early 2000s I was a soldier in North Korea. The situation in the military, it was already terrible because of malnutrition, weak immune system that all the North Korean soldiers were suffering from. So we had no proper medical testing kits, for example, to see whether it was SARS or just a typical other infectious diseases that was going around the various units. So if a soldier just died from suffering from diarrhea or high fever, we just assumed it was because they just got very sick. So we had no sense that this was specifically because of something that was caused by SARS.

So regarding the coronavirus question, the one thing that Kim Jong-un probably fears the most is the soldiers getting infected because once that happens then, because in North Korea, the military, the barracks or the units, the soldiers, share the building, they're all grouped together. So there is a high chance that if one gets infected it will spread very fast.

Another issue is a lot of these soldiers, because things that are so lacking within their units or their barracks, a lot of them they go out at night to either rob or to barter or to steal from the civilian population nearby wherever they're stationed. So this may increase getting infected or spreading whatever they have. So that's the fear that we should worry about when it comes to the coronavirus within the military.

Another thing is when the soldier is very malnutrition, they're basically sent home to recuperate from home because the military would probably not want to be responsible for taking care of a soldier that's very malnutrition or even on the verge of death. So if there's anyone that's perhaps sick or malnutrition enough to be sent home, and they are somebody who is infected with the virus, they'll probably just end up dying at home instead of dying in the military unit where their stationed.

In terms of the state of the medical care in the military, I would say that it is better than for the average civilian, which isn't saying much, but for the civilians, they can go to the [Korean 00:53:43] or the markets and buy black market penicillin or other antibiotics. Whereas for the soldiers and the military, the officers, they would probably get better access or treatment, in terms of medical care and availability of medicine. Whereas for the enlisted or the lower ranking members of the military, they might not have the same access as the officers might.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Just a quick footnote for Mr Oh because they removed parasites. I mean, can we ask what you were eating. What was your nutrition before you escaped? I mean, what was your diet?

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So I myself, because we were stationed ... to be stationed at [inaudible] is considered a great honor for soldier. For example, our uniforms were especially or tailored made for the Northern soldiers posted there and for example, if the regular North Korean soldier was given cigarette that had value of like ten won, which is basically worthless, that we would be given high quality cigarettes for example.

For us soldiers in the [inaudible] or DMZ area that were posted in that area, we were given a rice and also every couple of days, three or four days, we would be given meat to eat. So basically the soldiers posted in that area, it was because it was a special area and considered a great honor for the soldiers to be posted there. They were given a better treatment than soldiers in other parts of the country.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Which is not saying much, but yes, it was better. Yes sir. Go ahead. You in the back here. You're already speaking, so please.

Audience Member:

Thank you. Let me ask a question in Korean, again. Thank you.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Who are you, sir? Ask in English.

Audience Member:

Radio Free Asia.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

And in English, could you just briefly.

Audience Member:

Translations?

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Nope, you can do it faster, it's your question.

Audience Member:

Yeah, through the resource case, North Korea, the health system was well known to the world. So at the current coronavirus it's a widely spread out, so would like to hear it your comment on the North Korean health system at the current situation. Thank you.

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Well take a microphone then please. If you want to add two fingered intervention here, go ahead. Yes ma'am.

Audience Member:

So I'm just wondering, even though North Korea insists that there is no confirmed case of coronavirus, but a lot of experts have a doubt about it because he's close to China and South Korean and the numbers are going up and up, and some inner source in a report said that there

must be some confirmed cases and then North Korea shot them. So it's not spread anymore. Or kind of if there is any bad cases, they kind of-

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin:

Have they covered up-

Audience Member:

Cover up, yeah.

Translator for Oh Cheong Song:

I mean, so there are two parts of this, right. One of them is that the North Koreans may have cases of the Corona virus and not yet tested those cases. So they may not know who's contagious, but then you're saying if they did find them, maybe they've covered it up. Even you're saying executed them.

So in my experience, to my knowledge, I don't think that would have happened in terms of shooting somebody who is infected with corona virus. I don't think North Korea has done that when talking about somebody who got infected with some disease.

I would say that between 1994/1995 I would say that many people, up to 1.5 million people died from starvation. But much of that death is due to people getting sick with typhoid fever. Then with their weak immune system, if they eat, for example, expired food or raw, uncooked fish or meat or some type of, something that would worsen their immune system, they would end up getting diarrhea or high fever or even cholera and just die from that.

So that's to my knowledge in terms of the North Korean people dying from infectious diseases. And even with SARS, we didn't know anything about SARS except the fact that this is something that came from China, that was the extent of the average people in North Korea in terms of their knowledge about what SARS was about. And basically was talked about as just flu that caused the deaths of many people when SARS was going around.

And regarding the current corona virus situation, I've heard from some of my network in the border area between North Korea and China, that there are many people that have died according to them. Of course, there's no way to verify what they say obviously, but I've also heard that there are special quarantine areas for these North Korean citizens that are known to have become infected with the corona virus.

Patrick Cronin:

We've got a couple of questions right here in front, these two gentlemen, we can take both of them first. And then we still have time, but so yes, Allie. Thank you.

Audience Member:

We try and get information into North Korea using the Christian radio stations. We smuggle these things in through balloons and water in a bottle along the coast. And of course things come across the Chinese border through smugglers. Which of these things did you two guys

see personally while you were in North Korea? And in your opinion, what is the most effective technique for reaching the civilian population?

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So in North Korea I had the opportunity to access CDs and different types of material that were sent from abroad, from South Korea. And nowadays the USBs are the latest way to send out certain information. But I would answer your question by saying that probably the most effective way is to use the 30,000 plus North Korean defectors that are already in South Korea. And what I mean by that, these defectors in South Korea, at least twice or maybe more, twice a year, they send money to their family, relatives back in North Korea. And when they send the money, usually a phone conversation has to happen. And during this phone conversation is probably the most effective and most direct and most up to date way of sending not only money but also sending information news and things that they want to share instantaneously over the phone.

In my case, I have still my in laws in North Korea. So whenever I have the opportunity to be able to connect with them via phone and talk with them, I send them money also. But I also tell them about what's going on in South Korea. And also tell them that living in South Korea, which is democratic and capitalist free market, the economy, things may be difficult, but if you work hard for your money then you could earn as much as you work.

And I think using the defectors and using the network that they have with their relatives and family members and telling them about what's going on in South Korea, what's going on outside the world, that's probably the most effective way to reach the North Koreans that are still inside the country in North Korea.

Patrick Cronin:

Mr Oh, did you want to add. One question for Mr Oh is, when you got to South Korea and you finally were well enough to look at the internet that was not sort of controlled by North Korea, I mean, were you amazed at the amount of information on the internet?

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So in North Korea I knew about the internet, obviously I couldn't access it. But when I came to South Korea, when I first logged on and started using the internet, it was so convenient. Anything that I needed to know about or find out information about, it was just basically click away. And I could just find out everything online.

And so in North Korea there are 6 million cell phone in usage. Most of it, a lot of it is that's approved by the state. And these phones that are given or that are approved by the government, they have every functionality that you can use that we have here in the West. We could take pictures, we could play games, you could shoot video. The only thing is we can't access the internet from these phones.

Patrick Cronin:

Right, they don't have a new flip phone that Samsung has out as well. But anyway, yes, go ahead.

Audience Member:

Two questions. Number one for Mr Oh, a big event like this happens, first thing that comes to my mind is the retaliation. Do you have a family back in North Korea? Do you know they are safe or not? Because the retaliation usually comes around pretty quick. So that's my first question. I hope your family back in North Korea is safe, okay.

Number two question is, Mr Lee, I always wonder about labor camp up in North Korea. My question is, are they being fed? Are they being treated like a human being or how? My curiosity is pretty high on that. So if you can talk about it, appreciate it. Lastly, Mr Lee, thank you for serving our country.

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So regarding the first question, it is a sensitive topic so I will not answer that question. Thank you for your understanding.

So I was arrested. So when I attempted to escape from North Korea, I was caught by the Chinese security officials. And then there's a facility that's run by the Chinese officials in the city of Tumen where they basically interrogate the North Korean defectors before they're repatriated it back to North Korea. And this is where I was tortured by the agents there, electrical shock.

So I just falsely admitted that, yes, I was going to go to South Korea, and basically wanted to get out of that situation. And then I was repatriated to North Korea, and this is where the MSS, the military state security agents, would beat and torture me. And I was tortured for about four months.

And then we were sent to what's called a [foreign language 00:14:55], which is basically a holding facility type prison camp before they're sent to the proper labor reform prison camp, or the political prison camp. And I was here for about six months. And out of the 40 people in our group that were sent, six of my fellow inmates died. And I was going to be the seventh person. But I remember praying, as I mentioned earlier in my talk earlier in the event, I remember praying to God or to a God, to let me live and survive. And I believe that prayer was answered and I was able to make it out alive out of that situation.

And so on average, I would guess looking back, I probably got hit about 200 times a day. And these agents would, these guards would only hit you on the most painful part of your body where you're already injured. And if you lose consciousness they would wait until you wake up or force you to wake up, regain consciousness, and they would repeat the process and beat me up again.

However worse than getting hit or the torture was enduring the hunger. I was so hungry. I literally just wanted to die from the starvation, just to die. And so it's really difficult to describe what the feeling is to suffer from hunger and starvation. But for me, what was worse than the torture and the physical abuse was not having enough food, to suffer the hunger and just being hungry and starved all the time.

Patrick Cronin:

One can only imagine, I think there's a gentleman in the, nope. Yes sir, right here.

Audience Member:

My questions are, among the populace what percentage do you think actually love the Kim regime versus those that realize that they're an enslaved people? And the same thing for your military colleagues?

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So regarding the military, because all males at the age of 17 are required to go into the military, there's no gap or there's no chance for these young men to have any opportunity or any exposure to having any doubt against the dear leader or the leadership. Because by the time you reach 17 you've gone to school all your life and you've been taught the brainwashing and propaganda at school. And then you go straight to the military, which is even more enforced. And it's doled out in greater level in terms of the brainwashing and propaganda-ization.

So after 10 years of military service, when they come out of the military, no matter if they were offered money or whatever, they would not budge in the sense of their loyalty or their fealty to the Supreme Leader or to the North Korean government.

Whereas in the general population, I would say now under the Kim Jong-un leadership, I would say about 80% to 90% of people will not have real faith in Kim Jong-un. And the idolatry that was prevalent in Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il is probably all gone with Kim Jong-un.

However, what sort of restored or brought back that sense of idol worship of Kim Jong-un, unfortunately I have to say this, would be in my opinion, the South-North Korea summit talks and also the summit talks between the US and North Korea. Because the way the regime has propagandized is that this is something the grandfather and the father, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jung-il, could not do. And yet, here's the grandson, the son, Kim Jong-un, accomplishing what neither grandfather or father could not do, which is meeting not only the South Korean leader but more importantly, meeting the president of the United States.

Patrick Cronin:

Got time maybe for one more question. We have several hands coming up here, but yes sir, right here. And then, we'll fit both of you in. Yes, this gentleman just behind you.

Audience Member:

Did Mr Oh or Mr Lee ever hear anything while in North Korea about the Japanese citizens that have been kidnapped by the North Korean government agents and held in North Korea for three, four decades.

Patrick Cronin:

That's a good, very specific question. We'll just take the other question right now as well. Two rows behind you.

Audience Member:

Mr Oh, you emphasize the importance of freedom and liberty. So what does this freedom mean to you now? And how do you explain about this freedom to your friends and soldiers in North Korea? Thanks.

Translator for Oh Cheong Seong:

So regarding Mr Kim's question, there's physical freedom and there's also, I guess, mental freedom, but in North Korea, even these two are very severely limited. And I would say an example of that is, voting for somebody in an election, in North Korea you're basically told who to vote for. And I don't have the freedom to vote for who I want to vote for. Whereas living in freedom in South Korea, I do have that freedom.

Sorry, my apologies, I interpreted incorrectly. He knew of many North Koreans who had come from Japan. And a neighbor in front of him that lived in the house in front of him was a family that had come from Japan. And he was sort of exposed to Japanese cultural things because this broken family had come from Japan. So I explained to him that I interpreted incorrectly. The question was, did you know of the abductees from Japan. And he only found out about that when he came to South Korea.

Patrick Cronin:

Anyway, I'm afraid we're out of time. This is a remarkable set of stories I think we've heard today. And it should be a reminder to everybody in Washington and my friends and think tanks in particular that when we talk about North Korea policy, we're really talking about individuals who are subject to a brutal regime.

Patrick Cronin:

And we have Americans who are bravely on the front lines trying to keep the peace like Steve Lee and people like Henry Sung, who's helping to bring this information to a wider understanding. And I just want to thank, especially Mr Oh, Mr Lee, Colonel Steve Lee. Would you please join me in thanking them.