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Some comments on the detention of an American serviceman in Vladivostok



In early May 2024, the media reported that a US Army sergeant had been detained in Vladivostok. This incident inspired a number of conspiracy theories, many of which sought to draw parallels with the attempted defection of a US private to the DPRK six months ago. But in reality the two incidents are very different.

Travis King's story

It is now more than six months since North Korea extradited to the United States a Black serviceman named [Travis King](#) who, after serving time in a South Korean prison for disorderly conduct and fighting while drunk, tried to escape to the DPRK posing as a political refugee because, he claimed, he “harbored hard feelings about the inhumane treatment and racial discrimination in the US military.”

King was the first American to be detained in North Korea in nearly five years. However, the North Koreans quickly realized who they were dealing with and chose not to make him a prisoner of conscience and further aggravate their relations with the USA. The private was sent to America via China and as reported by the South Korean newspaper [The Korea Times](#), was most likely taken to an army hospital for a psychological examination and questioning about his time in the DPRK. Given his legal status as a deserter, he will be in custody the entire time.

On October 20, it was reported that Travis King had formally been charged with desertion, obtaining child pornography and a number of other offenses including initiating fights with other servicemen and consuming alcohol in violation of the applicable rules. He is expected to stand trial in the near future, but as Rachel VanLandingham, a national security law expert and professor at Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles, told The Korea Times, the investigation could take some months, although King could simply be discharged from the US Army without charges.

What has happened before in cases like this? According to VanLandingham, the last soldier to be returned to the US by America's adversaries was Bowe Bergdahl, who deserted his post in Afghanistan in 2009, was kidnapped by the Taliban and was held captive and tortured for nearly five years. After his return following a prisoner exchange, he was court-martialed for desertion and misbehavior before the enemy. Bergdahl pleaded guilty to both charges in 2017, but a judge overturned his conviction in 2023.

After King's return to the US the news about him dried up, but the stories about American soldiers in Korea have not gone away, and new reports periodically surface in the media. We will look at some of these in this article.

Gordon Black's story

On May 6, 2024. [NBC News](#) reported that US Army Staff Sergeant Gordon Black, who was serving in South Korea, had been detained in Vladivostok on May 2 "on charges of criminal misconduct." According to a statement by US Army spokesperson Cynthia Smith, "The Russian Federation notified the US Department of State of the criminal detention in accordance with the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations." The Army has notified his family, and the US Department of State is providing appropriate consular support to the soldier in Russia. Given the sensitivity of this matter, we are unable to provide additional details at this time."

White House Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said he was aware of the case. "[I can't really say much about it right now... I hope you can understand that](#)," he said at a

press briefing. “It’s certainly a better question put to our DoD [Department of Defense] colleagues, but we are aware of this case.”

Deputy spokeswoman for the US Department of Defense [Sabrina Singh](#) said that Washington’s military leadership has launched an investigation to determine the facts and circumstances relating to Gordon Black’s trip to Russia. Singh could not respond to a clarifying question regarding the sanctions that Black might face from the US Army. She only noted that the US Department of State strongly discourages Americans from visiting Russia at this time “due to the risk of unlawful detention.” The Department of Defense is also restricting travel to Russia by Pentagon employees.

Inevitably, this incident attracted significant interest. Firstly, because Black served in South Korea and the ROK media covered the story in detail, which is how it came to the attention of the present author. Secondly, because, given the worsening relations between Moscow and Washington, when a US serviceman is arrested in the former closed city of Vladivostok, despite the official advice not to visit Russia, it is easy to draw the conclusion that there is some ulterior motive behind his arrest. After all, those inclined to believe in conspiracies will always find evidence of intrigue even where there is, at least initially, nothing out of the way. However, the news reports about Black that are circulating at the moment generally treat the story as a domestic incident that would probably not have been considered newsworthy had he not been a US sergeant.

Black joined the US Army as an infantryman in 2008. He served in Iraq from October 2009 to September 2010 and in Afghanistan from June 2013 to March 2014. Relatively recently, Black was assigned to the US Eighth Army at America’s largest overseas military base, Camp Humphreys in South Korea. According to NBC News and [The Associated Press](#), Gordon Black was scheduled to leave South Korea at the end of his posting and return home to Fort Cavazos in Texas. Instead, he traveled to Vladivostok via China to visit a woman with whom he was romantically involved. Black did not apply for [official authorization to travel to Russia](#), nor did the Department of Defense authorize him to travel to China and Russia (as Cynthia Smith explained, travel and leave are currently officially restricted under the DoD Foreign Clearance Guide), but there is no consensus among Pentagon officials on whether such a visit should be considered an unauthorized absence.

Who is the Russian woman in the story? Gordon Black’s wife Megan revealed that they have just finalized their divorce proceedings. Her attorney [Jeff Linick](#) said Black had refused to pay his wife child support, as required by a court order, and that the military had only begun withholding some of child support from his paycheck after threats of legal enforcement.

The Russian newspaper [Izvestia](#) was informed by a source that the officer had met a woman from Vladivostok over the Internet. However, Western media claim that they first met face-to-face. “Black, who is married, met a Russian woman in South Korea back in 2023. Last fall she and Black got into some type of domestic dispute or altercation. After that, she left South Korea,” according to the [Stars and Stripes](#). [The Washington Post](#) writes that “Gordon Black seemed smitten with the Russian woman he met while stationed until last month in South Korea. She poked fun at him, called him her “husband” and prompted him to swear in Russian.”

According to the website [Politico](#), Radio Free Europe’s Mark Krutov found videos published on TikTok by a 31-year-old Russian woman surnamed Vashchuk, who referred to Black as her “husband.” Judging from these videos on social media, “the atmosphere of the relationship between Black and his Russian lover seemed strange.” In one of the videos, the staff sergeant stands in uniform looking uncomprehendingly at Vashchuk, and she says, “I came home and there was this Yankee.” In another video, Black describes the relationship between Russia and America as “definitely not good now,” adding that “it was definitely better under Trump. Frankly, America, I think, and NATO are quite aggressive,” he said, and “I certainly understand Russia’s position. You know, they want to protect their country.” He then adds: “Biden... doesn’t handle the situation the way he should, and I think that’s one of the bigger reasons things are the way they are now, and it’s not just with Russia. You can see it with other countries, too.”

According to Cynthia Smith, “[There is no evidence Black intended to remain in Russia after his PCS \[permanent change-of-station\] leave period ended.](#)” Meanwhile, Megan Black also said that on the day the Russian authorities arrested Black, she received a text message from him saying he was not coming home.

But love is spiteful, even if neither of the couple like President Biden. A few months before his arrest in Russia, Gordon Black called his daughter. “Instead of a normal chat, however, his daughter and wife witnessed a fight break out between Black and his Russian girlfriend that became bloody. Screaming turned to violence, [and she clawed at his face](#). Then she pulled a knife. “She stabbed him,” Megan Black told Reuters.

On May 2, Gordon Black was arrested on suspicion of theft. A source quoted by [Izvestia](#) described the crime as follows: “[He came here and lived with her for a while. Then he started beating and choking her. He ended up stealing 200,000 rubles and alcohol from her.](#)” The police also said that the girl had [a quarrel with the American](#), and after he left she found the money missing and went to the police.

On May 7, the Pervomaisky District Court of Vladivostok **ordered** Gordon Black to be detained on charges under Article 158 § 2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (theft involving significant loss), under which he faces up to five years' imprisonment. The US serviceman's lawyers **have challenged his detention** but it is likely that Black will remain in custody pending a court order.

To summarize

The Russian Foreign Ministry has confirmed that this case **has nothing to do with espionage**. The department of the Russian Foreign Ministry in Vladivostok has informed **TASS** that the detention of a US military officer in the city is not related to politics. And although, according to NBS News, "the US Army is conducting **an administrative investigation into whether a soldier now being held in Russia on theft charges was lured there by intelligence agencies**, so far, this looks more like a domestic dispute than anything else."

That's why, although the Russian bureaucratic machine is unlikely to speed up the proceedings against Black, the result will probably not be any different and Black will get the same kind of sentence as the average Russian would. Of course it is possible that the Russian intelligence services will take an interest in him and play on his dislike of the current American leadership in a bid to extract useful information from him, but just like King's case, he is not a particularly valuable prize.

To be fair, unlike the conspiracy theorists, the US and South Korean media are trying not to aggravate the situation and the present author has not yet come across any allegations, at least in serious media outlets, that the "Russians lured Black to Russia in order to arrest him on false charges."

Of course, we will continue to monitor the situation, but so far Gordon Black's story resembles the case of **Lee Geun**, the South Korean former special forces captain and YouTuber who bravely went to Ukraine to film himself against a backdrop of military conflict and boost his on-line popularity, but ended up sparking rumors that "South Korean special forces are fighting for Ukraine."

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