

An accidental tourist?

A British connection to the death of Otto Warmbier

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This article concerns events from the last two years that took place in North Korea (NK). Bearing in mind the secrecy that surrounds not only that country itself but also the overt (and covert) efforts of Western nations to destabilise it, some of what follows involves a modicum of informed speculation. My intention, as you read, is that you might bear in mind how the events herein retold *might appear* to the isolated and beleaguered government of North Korea.

If you are a follower of international news, you will be aware of the recently deceased Otto Warmbier. He was the young American who was detained by the NK state on 2 January 2016. It was alleged that, in the early hours of New Years Day, the then 21 year old Otto Warmbier had stolen a state propaganda poster¹ from a 'staff only' area of the hotel (the Yanggakdo Hotel, the primary hotel for international tourists) where his tour group was staying.

As the *New York Times* Choe Sang-Hun reported in his piece 'U.S. Student Runs Afoul of North Korea's Devotion to Slogans':

' . . . in North Korea . . . political slogans are sacrosanct . . . And the most important among them. . . are those that bear the names of the North Korean leader . . . ' ²

The slogan on the poster Warmbier was supposed to have stolen? 'Let's arm ourselves strongly with Kim Jong-il's patriotism!' The arrest was not made public, however, for almost three weeks with the first news reports on 22 January giving the basic facts as released to the media by NK. The expected process followed, with a 'stage-managed confession' to the world's media a month later; then, in mid-March 2016, the guilty verdict and sentence to 15 years imprisonment and hard labour. *The Atlantic* gives a decent summary of

¹ New slogans are issued by the NK government each year and the literal translations into English make them sound kooky, of course. For example, 'Let the wives of officers become dependable assistants to their husbands!' might be better represented as: 'Army wives: support your husbands!'

One of the slogans for 2015 also hints at the NK 'dictatorship' caring more for its people than many Western governments by calling for 'organic farming on an extensive scale'. See the Reuters report on the 2015 batch of slogans at <<http://tinyurl.com/ybawlnbj>> or <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-propaganda-slogans-idUSKBN0LG0SY20150212>>.

² See <<http://tinyurl.com/y8ojjy9v>> or <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/18/world/asia/us-student-runs-afoul-of-north-koreas-devotion-to-slogans.html>>.

the background and timeline of events including the fact that, as part of his 'confession', Warmbier allegedly claimed his motivation was that:

'... he would receive a used car worth \$10,000. His actions, he said, were also on behalf of the Z Society, a college group at the University of Virginia that Pyongyang alleges is a front for the CIA.'³

There appear to be at least sixteen fraternities/sororities at the University of Virginia, and some of them do have odd histories.⁴ It should be noted that the allegation against the Z Society and the University has been denied; those NK nuts are simply being unjustifiably paranoid about Western spying, you'd suppose?

Firstly, though, I should bring the story of Otto Warmbier up to date. On 13 June this year – less than 18 months into that long sentence – Warmbier was repatriated to the United States in a coma. He had apparently been in that state since not long after the trial. The NK government claimed it was a result of botulism, the U.S. government said it was because he had been tortured. Either way the unfortunate young man died on 19 June, less than a week after arriving on home soil. It's a very sad tale indeed.

Following his sudden demise, there has been some coverage of the other people who were on the group tour with Mr Warmbier. It turns out that the only other single male on the trip – and thus the person who was allocated to share a room with (the similarly solo male traveller) Warmbier – was a British man, one Danny Gratton.

Gratton was the only Westerner to witness the arrest but, bizarrely, 'He was never contacted by the U.S. government or the tour company that arranged the visit.'⁵ He had not been interviewed by the media at all before the death was announced and subsequent media coverage of Mr Gratton's part of the story has included surprisingly little background information on him.⁶

What happened on the night of the poster theft? The tour party arrived in country just before New Year's Eve and the organisers – who had a reputation for being party animals⁷ – made sure the NYE festivities locally were

³ See <<http://tinyurl.com/y7onojvv>> or <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/north-korea-american-tourist-sentenced/474000/>>.

⁴ <http://uvamagazine.org/articles/wrapped_in_mystery>

⁵ See 'Otto Warmbier's North Korea roommate speaks out', *Washington Post* 15 June 2017 at <<http://tinyurl.com/y6v3hcn3>> or <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/06/15/otto-warmbiers-north-korea-roommate-speaks-out/?utm_term=.4c55f8d14dea>.

⁶ Typical of this limited coverage is the one minute BBC interview with him which can be seen at <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40371575>>.

⁷ See, for instance, Gerry Shih, 'Gung-ho culture at tour agency Warmbier used on North Korea trip' (Associated Press story featured in) *Chicago Tribune*, 21 June 2017 at <<http://tinyurl.com/yd5mepks>> or <<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-young-pioneer-tours-warmbier-north-korea-20170621-story.html>>.

not missed by their travellers. The group were celebrating in Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang when it has been stated (and this has not denied by Mr Gratton) that he deliberately got himself separated from the rest of the group.⁸

The CCTV footage from the hotel which is supposed to show Otto Warmbier stealing the poster⁹ is (predictably) not that good and could well be of any male. . . perhaps even Mr Gratton. The tour organisers encouraged excessive alcoholic consumption and, according to the statements of other members of the tour party, Warmbier had been 'drinking vodka to 5am'. The *Independent* reports that the CCTV footage timestamp shows 1:57 a.m.¹⁰ So it would seem that Otto Warmbier saw in the New Year at Kim Il Sung Square, returned to the hotel and became the second person in the group who managed to evade the constant watch of the NK chaperones that night. He then found his way to an off-limits floor of the building from where he stole the poster, returned to be with the rest of the group – none of whom seemed to have noticed his absence – and proceeded to imbibe until close to sunrise.

So, Gratton and Warmbier *both* managed to escape the attentions of their state guides on the same night. This was highly unusual. The travel writer Becki Enright has written of her own trip to NK in 2012:

'You can't travel in North Korea unless you are in a guided tour group. It's very restricted and you almost feel as though you live on the tour bus as you can't wander around freely – you have two guides who *chaperone you every step of the way*.'¹¹ (Emphasis added)

Mr Gratton's disappearance from the public square prompted a mighty panic on the part of the NK chaperones but he eventually made it back to the hotel, having used more than one taxi. I expect that the North Koreans train their own spies in the use of multiple modes of public transport as an established tactic in mobile counter-surveillance trade-craft. What conclusion might they have come to on learning that it seems like Mr Gratton had used this exact same tactic?

Mr Gratton is a taller than average male with an athletic and strong physique. In December of 2011 he undertook a sponsored trek to base camp

⁸ The article '*Who Killed Otto Warmbier?*' by Isaac Stone Fish for politico.com has several quotes from other members of the travelling party about exactly what they saw. See <<http://tinyurl.com/yd98q83s>> or <<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/23/otto-warmbier-north-korea-tour-company-215299>>.

⁹ The CBS news 'Inside Edition' video on YouTube shows the CCTV at the very start of the report, plus there is another opportunity to see Mr Gratton interviewed. See <<http://tinyurl.com/yd2krofa>> or <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4w0gCyqkQ4U>>.

¹⁰ <<http://tinyurl.com/y7nlpux5>> or <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/north-korea-video-apparently-shows-us-student-otto-warmbier-taking-propaganda-banner-a6938091.html>>

¹¹ See <<http://tinyurl.com/y98pmu89>> or <<http://www.bordersofadventure.com/travelling-to-north-korea-where-preconceptions-and-reality-collide/>>.

at Mount Everest.¹² I wonder if the North Koreans learned about the Everest trip as I did? All it took was a little bit of Googling. (Presumably while the population of NK are denied access to the Western Net the security services are not.) If they do know this extra information, I wonder what conclusions they might have drawn?

There can be few better times for a covert meeting than New Year's Eve. I don't think it would be surprising if the NK government had a *suspicion* that Danny Gratton was working for MI6, perhaps as a member of 'the increment' (as it has been called in the past).¹³ But although quite a plausible initial case can be made that Mr Gratton is a good candidate for a man on a spooky mission to North Korea, unless we are looking at an incredibly elaborate cover story, he has been working in the greetings card business for over a decade.¹⁴

¹² His Just Giving fundraising page is at
<<https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/danny-gratton>>.

¹³ For special operations MI6 usually looks to ex-special forces soldiers some of whom, following their regular service, can be found in the small permanent staff of the Territorial Army special forces regiments.

The 'rogue spy' Richard Tomlinson passed selection for 21 SAS before he was recruited to MI6 (his account of this process forms a large chunk of Chapter 2 of *The Big Breach* (London: Cutting Edge Press, 2001). Tomlinson's book also gives details regarding 'the increment', how it is drawn from the most experienced Special Forces personnel and how a specific week of MI6's Intelligence Officer's New Entry Course 'is dedicated to familiarisation with the increment'.

¹⁴ See <<http://tinyurl.com/yc7e692t>> or <http://www.greetingstoday.co.uk/news/2015/june_2015/dannys_on_the_rise.aspx>. His Linked-in profile at <<https://www.linkedin.com/in/danny-gratton-9266b6ba/>> shows that he is now running his own company in the field.