



Name in English: Kurt Chew-Een Lee
Name in Chinese: 吕超然
Name in Pinyin:
Gender: Male
Birth Year: 1926
Birth Place: San Francisco, California
Current location: Washington DC

Korean War Hero

Profession (s): United States Marine Officer

Education: Graduate of Marine Corps and Navy schools to qualify as: Infantry Officer, Special Weapons Employment (nuclear) Officer, Amphibious Reconnaissance Officer, Intelligence Officer, Operations & Training Officer, and Supply Officer. (Attended Georgetown University in Washington D.C. and William & Mary College in Norfolk, Virginia)

Awards: 1950, Navy Cross, United States Government; 1950, Purple Heart (twice awarded), United States Government; 1950, Silver Star, United States Government; Navy Commendation Medal w/Combat V ; Presidential Unit Citations: (Korea - 4; Vietnam - 2); Navy Unit Citation: (Vietnam - 1)

Contribution (s):

Kurt Chew-Een Lee holds the distinction of being the first regular Marine Corps officer of Asian descent in nearly 200 years of proud Marine Corps history. Major Lee undertook a self-imposed mission to consciously demolish the fallacious thinking spread by Hollywood movies that the Chinese, as a race, are too meek, obsequious and subservient to make good soldiers. He opened the Marine Corps towards accepting more racial minorities into its officer ranks.

He was born in San Francisco, California but grew up in Sacramento. His father, M. Young Lee, had been born in Hawaii and immigrated to the mainland to make a living supplying bulk farm produce to restaurants and hotels in Sacramento. Kurt was in high school serving with the Junior ROTC as America fought World War II. He was inducted into the Marine Corps in 1944 at age 18 while a mining engineer student. Following boot camp in San Diego, he was assigned to learn Japanese. Private Lee was again disappointed when he was retained as an instructor at the Marine Corps Japanese Language School following his graduation. However, it was sweetened somewhat by his accelerated promotion to sergeant, the rank he held when World War II ended in August 1945. By then he had been accepted for officer training by meeting all requirements, including passing the four-year college equivalency examination. When he graduated in April 1946, he made history by being the first non-white and Asian American to be commissioned as a regular Marine officer.

With the outbreak of the Korean War, Lieutenant Lee found some friction with the new recruits of the machine gun company he commanded, many of whom had never even seen or spoken to a Chinese man and saw all Asians as the enemy. Lieutenant Lee was also resented for his strict and intense training regimen. However, once his unit entered the war, the troops witnessed his leadership and bravery in battle. "Certainly, I was never afraid," he says. "Perhaps the Chinese are all fatalists. I never expected to survive the war. So I was adamant that my death be honorable, be spectacular."

In September 1950, Lieutenant Lee and his Marines landed in Inchon, South Korea and began to push the North Koreans back northwards. The People's Republic of China had just intervened and begun sending troops to support the North Koreans. It was on the night of November 2nd that the young officer proved his bravery and silenced many of those who doubted his loyalty. The Americans were attacked by Chinese forces from midnight onwards. In a pause between attacks the men were unable to see where the enemy forces were. Lieutenant Lee directed them to watch for and shoot at the flashes made by Chinese weapons and then made a one-man raid on the Chinese positions, repeatedly advancing from one spot to another while feigning a much bigger American force. He made it up to the Chinese position by identifying himself as Chinese in Mandarin then attacking, thus forcing the enemy into full, confused retreat. The Chinese left several dead behind and Lieutenant Lee was able to save his men. It was for this action that he was awarded the Navy Cross, the second highest combat decoration given by the Marines Corps. The next morning he was shot by a sniper and sent to an aid station but escaped back to his company in a "liberated" jeep before he could be evacuated to a hospital.

Despite many ignored warnings about how many Chinese soldiers were coming into the war the UN forces blithely advanced to the Chosin Reservoir near the Chinese border. They were then completely surprised by the attack on November 27th of over 120,000 Chinese soldiers that badly outnumbered them 6 to 1. It became obvious that to avoid surrender or death they'd have to retreat down a narrow single lane road through the mountains to be evacuated by sea. Lt. Lee was tasked on December 1st with relieving Fox Company, a unit that had been badly reduced by five days of incessant combat that was holding Toktong Pass, a critical chokepoint along the road. The task was unprecedented in Marine Corps history and it was a measure of the respect that Lt. Lee and his Baker Company had earned that he was given the mission. The battalion of 500 already exhausted men following him would have to avoid the obvious road and secretly move single-file, cross-country in the middle of a sub-freezing blizzard, in pitch-black night, and through unmapped and treacherous mountains, all while surrounded by Chinese forces. Lee himself was still fighting injured with his arm in a sling. Thanks to the discipline that their officer had instilled in them the men pushed on and fought. Never expecting Americans to fight under such severe conditions at night and facing attack from what they thought to be impassable mountains the Chinese forces were taken by surprise at dawn on December 2nd and by morning the rifle company had relieved Fox Company. Over 8,000 Marines and their wounded successfully made their way to the port city of Hungnam where they arrived on December 10th. Two days after his heroic march Lieutenant Lee was shot in the face by a ricochet and sent back to recuperate, thus ending his fighting days in Korea. Although a lost battle, the example

set by the Marines and by Lieutenant Kurt Chew-En Lee at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir is still seen as epitomizing the highest ideals of bravery and dedication to duty in the long history of the US Marine Corps.

Major Kurt Lee would go on to help devise strategy and training for Marine officers who would go on to serve in Vietnam as Chief Platoon Tactics Instructor at The Basic School for 27 months from 1963-1965. He himself served in Vietnam from 1965-1966, earning the Navy Commendation Medal with Valor device . After leaving the Marines, he worked for New York Life and then for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association before retiring for the second time. His bravery was recounted in the Smithsonian Channel documentary special "Uncommon Courage: Breakout at Chosin" aired on Memorial Day, 2010. In his 22 years of commissioned service, Major Lee was fully conscious of his unique position in the bastion of America's pure warrior caste.

Racism, he feels, is inherent in the nation's historical makeup, but it is his nature to meet all challenges, including racial incidents, head on without equivocation. Some may charge that he operates with a big chip on his shoulder, but he says that this is fine as long as people know that the chip is "my teaching tool to dispel ignorance."

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<http://militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=5719>

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