

CHINESE AMERICAN HEROES

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December 3 - Chinese American Hero Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee

December 3rd honors the United State Marine Corps and their heroism at the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir, in particular that of then 1st Lieutenant Kurt Chew-Een Lee.

Kurt Chew-Een Lee holds the distinction of being the first regular Marine Corps officer of Asian extraction in nearly 200 years of proud Marine Corps history. He accepted the challenges and demands to prove his fitness to hold officer rank and to lead U.S. Marines into battle. 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. By distinguishing himself as an effective, fearless leader in battle under the harshest of combat conditions, 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. Most of his boot camp buddies ended up with a unit that suffered heavy casualties landing on Iwo Jima.

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.

The Marine Corps re-instituted its regular officer training program in September 1945 by reactivating The Basic School (TBS) which was deactivated for the duration of WW II. The First Basic Class was convened the following month with Lee as a member. When he graduated without incident 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 his new recruits of the machine gun company he commanded by then, 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 along with other UN forces 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 and engage American and UN forces in combat. 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 the 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 hurling grenades and shooting, 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 back to an Army field hospital at Hamhung.

After five days in hospital and about to be sent to Japan for treatment, Lieutenant Lee "liberated" an Army jeep with another wounded Marine and dashed back to Baker Company. His surprised but pleased company commander immediately assigned him to take over the 2nd Rifle Platoon whose leader had just been injured and evacuated. With his arm in a sling he retrained the platoon whenever he had the opportunity under combat conditions. He and his platoon played a major role in the unfolding drama of the Chosin Reservoir Campaign when the US X Corps, including the 1st Marine Division, fought against 120,000 Chinese Communist troops from November 27th-December 11th, 1950.

Despite many ignored warnings about how many Chinese soldiers were coming into the war the UN forces blithely advanced to the Chosin Reservoir, about 80 miles inland from the port of Hungnam 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. The Marines were forced to consolidate their far-flung positions at Yudam-ni, Hagaru-ri, and Koto-ri in order to fight their way out of the trap. For the 7th and 5th Marine Regiments at Yudam-ni to reach Hagaru-ri about 14 miles to the south, they had to go through the vital Toktong Pass held by Fox Company of the 7th Marines. Fox Company was located on high ground (Fox Hill) that overlooks the Toktong Pass, which had been under savage attacks for four days and five nights. In a third effort to relieve Fox Company, which was in imminent danger of being overrun, 1/7 got approval to relieve Fox Company but strong roadblocks had been established by the Communists on the narrow main service road. They would have to make an overland trek of 8 miles through the unmapped mountains occupied by unknown numbers of Chinese troops overlooking the service road.

It was already evening of December 2nd when Lieutenant Lee got the word that the 500 man battalion would continue the attack with the men of his Baker Company at the lead with himself at the point. It was a virtual "mission impossible" because of the confluence of five factors: the troops had been in constant combat for several days and were completely exhausted. They were now expected to bear additional heavy loads on their march; extreme sub-zero weather conditions (20 degrees below zero); poor visibility (complete nighttime darkness hampered further by snow blizzards); unfamiliar

and extremely rugged mountain terrain; and unknown enemy numbers and dispositions. With no available information it wasn't possible to plan the march and normal land navigation techniques were unworkable. Lieutenant Lee, still hampered by his right arm in a sling, and without any instructions from battalion, had to improvise and rely on his own judgment, initiative, survival instincts, and dogged perseverance to lead his 500 heavily-laden Marines in a single file extending for one-half mile to Fox Hill. His only aid in this highly challenging endeavor was a simple compass and a big dosage of luck. As it was, only Marine discipline kept the men going under their excruciatingly heavy combat loads through cold and thigh-deep snow and up and down the mountains.

After a brief rest of about three hours called by the battalion commander because of the total physical exhaustion of the men, Lieutenant Lee resumed the attack toward Fox Hill at first light of December 3rd with Baker Company still in the lead. As they moved out of some light woods, the lead elements came under heavy fire and were pinned down. Noting that it came from enemy positions located under some big boulders near the crest of a steep rocky hill, Lieutenant Lee quickly deployed his platoon on line with maximum fire power forward, including his sole remaining machine gun. At his signal all weapons opened fire at the same time to establish fire superiority and his platoon marched forward employing marching fire to keep enemy heads down. His men swept up the steep hill to overrun the enemy positions and killed about ten soldiers in their foxholes. Upon reaching the crest with his assault troops, Lieutenant Lee, who personally shot and wounded two soldiers himself, was astounded to see the reverse slope pockmarked with enemy foxholes. The enemy had been facing the opposite direction towards the service road and had now abandoned their positions. A staggered line of about 20 enemy soldiers were floundering in the snow about 400 yards distant, fleeing in panic from the Marines. Lieutenant Lee said he never felt more exhilarated in the flush of victory over a defeated enemy or prouder of his men -- regulars and reservists -- all now uniformly professional Marines.

Communication was established with Fox Company for the first time. Within an hour, after pulverizing the next ridge with heavy mortar fire followed by an air strike, Baker Company moved forward and joined Fox Company, whose men lined their hilltop waving colored parachute panels and cheering the arrival of their Marine brothers. Within just a few hours the unit had already moved back up into the hills and continued a leapfrogging advance from one strong point to another to clear the enemy from their positions overlooking the road all the way from Toktong Pass to the port city of Hungnam. It was in the last of these firefights that Lieutenant Lee was finally struck down and wounded by a burst of enemy machine gun fire on December 8th. It seems fitting that that this was also the last firefight that Baker Company participated in before leaving North Korea. Lieutenant Lee has been credited with giving Baker Company its fighting character, and the name Baker Company of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment is the only rifle company that is allowed to retain that phonetic name when the US military switched to the NATO phonetic alphabet in 1956.

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. According to retired USMC Major General Michael Myatt, the CEO of the Marines Memorial Association, a personal tribute was paid to Kurt Lee. "In November 2002, General Ray

Davis (former Assistant USMC Commandant) spoke here at the Marines' Memorial about the Chosin Reservoir campaign. General Davis, then a Lieutenant Colonel, commanded Lieutenant Lee's unit, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in Korea (Davis earned the Medal of Honor in the battle.) He called 1st Lieutenant Lee the bravest Marine he ever knew." Despite these accolades and the feeling of many Marines that Lieutenant Lee deserved the Medal of Honor he was awarded the Silver Star, the third highest combat medal awarded by the Marine Corps.

Major Lee considers his most challenging, high-pressured, and gratifying assignment in the Marine Corps was his four-year assignment to The Basic School at Quantico during the period April 1962 - April 1965. He was initially assigned as Commanding Officer, Enlisted Instructor Company. When he was promoted to major on 1 January 1963, he was selected by CO Colonel Jonas Platt to be the Chief, Platoon Tactics Instruction Group for 27 consecutive months. He and his instructor staff of three majors and seven captains provided tactics instruction to a whole new generation of Marine Lieutenants and Warrant Officers to qualify as rifle platoon commanders. Luminaries among his TBS graduates include Generals Charles Krulak (former Commandant) and John Sheehan. His greatest sense of satisfaction was to follow them in assignment to Vietnam and personally observe the superb job they were doing as infantry platoon commanders in combat. Major Lee served in the Vietnam War from 1965-66 with the 3rd Marine Division, III Marine Amphibious Force, as the Division Combat Intelligence Officer. He established the Division Document Translation Center for timely translation and processing of captured enemy documents for field use by Marine units.

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 male chauvinism -- a pure warrior caste. Racism, he feels, is inherent in the nation's historical makeup, and 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."