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14. ABSTRACT Captain Young Oak Kim, U.S. Army, may seem like an odd choice for an essay on leadership. He had no connection to the Sea Services and few people today recognize his name or associate him with the U.S. military. However, Captain Kim was one of the most remarkable and yet under-appreciated officers of the 20th century. As a platoon leader and operations officer in the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team—the Japanese-American unit that fought in Italy and France in WWII and became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history—he demonstrated four leadership traits of use to junior officers and leaders in today's Sea Services: (1) tactical proficiency, (2) leading through example, (3) building unit cohesion, and (4) protecting your people. He proved, against the prevailing wisdom of the times, that he was an American leader and a leader of Americans.					
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Young Oak Kim:

An American Leader and a Leader of Americans

Introduction

Captain Young Oak Kim, U.S. Army, may seem like an odd choice for an essay on leadership. He had no connection to the Sea Services and few people today recognize his name or associate him with the U.S. military. However, Captain Kim was one of the most remarkable and yet under-appreciated officers of the 20th century.¹ As a platoon leader and operations officer in the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team—the Japanese-American unit that fought in Italy and France in WWII and became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history—he demonstrated four leadership traits of use to junior officers and leaders in today’s Sea Services: (1) tactical proficiency, (2) leading through example, (3) building unit cohesion, and (4) protecting your people. He proved, against the prevailing wisdom of the times, that he was an *American* leader and a leader of *Americans*.

Trait #1: Tactical Proficiency

Any leader worth his salt must have a baseline of tactical proficiency. That is, he must know the basic fundamentals of how to do his job. Even the most inspiring, charismatic individual cannot lead from a position of ignorance or weakness. Captain Kim possessed tactical proficiency in spades. He knew the role of infantry and he executed the mission, often subjecting himself in physical harm to more effectively lead his men.

As a young Lieutenant, Kim deployed to Salerno, the Italian port city that was the focus of the Allied invasion of mainland Italy in September 1943. In the Italian campaign, he earned a Silver Star for intentionally exposing himself to enemy fire so that his men could take out four

¹ Captain Young Oak Kim would be promoted to Colonel by the time he retired in the 1960s. However, this essay will focus on his time as a company-grade officer during WWII and refer to him as Captain Kim.

separate German machine gun nests.² He also earned a Distinguished Service Cross for single-handedly low-crawling after a German patrol back to their camp, taking two Germans prisoner in the middle of the night, and then crawling back through enemy territory with the two prisoners in tow, all without being detected.³

On other occasions, Kim showed his calm under fire. He refused to wear a helmet because he preferred his knit cap, he slept outside of his foxhole because he preferred to die on his own terms, and he never appeared to get nervous.⁴ When other officers were paralyzed and unable to make a decision, “Lieutenant Kim remained calm and led his soldiers quietly . . . he read a situation quickly and gave orders without raising his voice.”⁵

Captain Kim, of course, outranked the men he was leading. Yet he never confused rank with respect. Today’s junior officers should follow the same principle. The rank on the collar merely gives obedience. The campaign or deployment ribbons on the chest—or rather the experience they denote—give respect. Lieutenant Kim earned his respect through his performance on the battlefield, and through his baseline of tactical proficiency.

Trait #2: Leading Through Example

A leader must set the standard through his own words and actions. He need not be perfect in all things—no human is—but he does need to show that he can persevere through adversity and remain committed to the mission even when it is hard. Captain Kim demonstrated this before he ever set foot on the battlefield.

² Scott McGaugh, *Honor Before Glory: The Epic World War II Story of the Japanese American GIs Who Rescued the Lost Battalion* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2016), 37.

³ McGaugh, *Honor Before Glory*, 38.

⁴ McGaugh, *Honor Before Glory*, 38.

⁵ Masayo Umezawa Duus, *Unlikely Liberators: The Men of the 100th and 442nd* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 107.

As a young man in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Kim tried repeatedly to join the military yet he was repeatedly turned away because of his Asian heritage. In early 1941, as the United States inched closer and closer to war, conscription laws were changed and Asian-Americans were allowed to join in greater numbers. Things did not get much easier once inside. It took him years to be allowed to attend Officer Candidate School. After graduating, he was not allowed to go to any of the many storied front-line fighting units of the U.S. Army because of his race. Instead, the Army sent the Asian-American officer to the Asian-American unit, specifically the 100th Infantry Battalion, a Japanese-American unit from Hawaii and a precursor unit of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.⁶

Things still did not get easier. Many of the Japanese-Americans did not trust their new Korean-American platoon leader due in part to longstanding, historical tension between the two cultures and populations.⁷ Any junior officer is apprehensive when meeting his platoon for the first time, and Kim had the added disadvantage of racism, from without and from within. He was even offered a transfer to a different position so as to avoid any racial tension.⁸ His response: “There are no Japanese or Koreans here. We’re all Americans and we’re fighting for the same cause.”⁹

In that statement, Kim led by example. He showed a group of Japanese-American men—each of whom was fighting for their own recognition as Americans irrespective of their race or skin color—that he too believed their race or skin color was irrelevant. He did not walk into that

⁶ Woo Sung Han, *Unsung Hero: The Story of Colonel Young Oak Kim* (Riverside, CA: The Young Oak Kim Center for Korean American Studies, 2011), 36.

⁷ Han, *Unsung Hero*, 36.

⁸ McGaugh, *Honor Before Glory*, 36.

⁹ Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, “Remarks for Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, United States Secret Service, May 26, 2010,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, https://www.va.gov/opa/speeches/2010/10_0526.asp.

situation assuming that his men would trust him because he was another Asian-American. He fought for that trust and he earned it through his words and his actions.

Trait #3: Building Unit Cohesion

A leader must bring a disparate set of people, each with their own individual interests and concerns, together as one unit in pursuit of a common goal. Today's leadership mantra is to "start with why"—taken from Simon Sinek's TED Talk and book on the CNO's reading list¹⁰—but the principle remains the same: figure out what makes your people tick, and motivate them to act. Captain Kim did exactly that.

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team may seem at first like a naturally cohesive unit. After all, they were all Japanese-Americans who were purposely segregated away from the rest of the military because of their shared racial background. However, within that crew was a deep schism that could have easily torn apart the entire enterprise.

Half of the unit consisted of Japanese-Americans from the mainland—mostly from Washington and California—the vast majority of whom enlisted straight out of the internment camps once they were finally permitted to do so. Executive Order 9066 had stripped their families of nearly all their possessions simply because of their heritage, regardless of the fact that many of them were American citizens and none of them had shown any personal connection to Imperial Japan or any hints of sabotage or treason.¹¹ These men enlisted in large part to prove their patriotism to a country that did not trust them. Many were understandably skeptical of their

¹⁰ Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program, U.S. Navy, <https://www.navy.mil/CNO-Reading-Program/>.

¹¹ Richard Reeves, *Infamy: The Shocking Story of the Japanese American Internment in World War II* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015), 54.

government. Others eschewed the Japanese traditions of their parents and grandparents and distanced themselves from the “old ways.”

The other half of the unit consisted of Japanese-Americans from Hawaii, where Japanese-Americans composed nearly 40% of the population and where there were no internment camps of any sort (probably because interning should a large percentage of the plantation labor force would have been economically infeasible).¹² To these Japanese-Americans, who had never really lived as a minority and who were never subjected to race-based internment, the mainlanders’ skepticism of government seemed like a lack of patriotism. Their rejection of Japanese traditions seemed like over-Americanization. Their dourness about the state of the country contrasted with the more carefree attitudes of the Hawaiians. On top of that, there was a language barrier between the Hawaiians’ pidgin-infused English and the mainlanders’ conventional English.¹³

Captain Kim, the Korean-American, had to deal with these complicated racial dynamics and played a role in trying to mend the rift. Back during training, the unit organized a field trip to a nearby internment camp in Arkansas.¹⁴ The mainland Japanese-Americans, many having enlisted from the camps themselves, knew what to expect. The Japanese-Americans from Hawaii, who were never interned, just saw it as a weekend getaway. What they saw when they got off the bus shocked them. They were emotionally devastated at what had been done to their fellow Japanese-Americans, and marveled at the lengths their fellow soldiers had gone through to serve a country that had not served them. The field trip to the camp was a turning point. The

¹² Wendy L. Ng, *Japanese American Internment During World War II: A History and Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 23.

¹³ McGaugh, *Honor Before Glory*, 36.

¹⁴ McGaugh, *Honor Before Glory*, 47.

differences in their language and their upbringing fell away to their shared goals: what President Truman would later describe as “fighting the enemy” and “fighting prejudice” at the same time.¹⁵

Trait #4: Protecting Your People

A leader advocates for his people, and takes the hits so that his people don't have to. Put more colloquially, he is the sponge for all that rolls downhill. He takes responsibility for mistakes, and he spreads the praise for accomplishments. Officers have the ability to speak up and speak out when many enlisted do not, and they must use that power to protect their people.

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team is widely lauded nowadays, but at the time, it was viewed with skepticism and scorn. Many did not trust the Japanese-Americans in a war against Imperial Japan, even if this particular unit was fighting in the European Theater against the Nazis. The same fears of widespread sabotage and treason that led to Executive Order 9066 in the first place did not disappear once they arrived in theater. This group of men—typically smaller in stature than the average Caucasian American—struggled to prove that they too could be counted on to fight hard. Captain Kim knew that his men wanted to get in the fight—wanted to prove themselves in combat and not just serve in the rear—so he advocated for greater involvement as the Italian and French campaigns wore on.

At the same time, there was a tendency for the rest of the Army to treat the Japanese-Americans as cannon fodder to send into the breach. There was a reason why the unit later became known as the “Purple Heart Battalion” and it wasn't simply because of their bravery. Captain Kim was cognizant of these dynamics at the time and he aggressively fought back

¹⁵ Albert Marrin, *Uprooted: The Japanese American Experience During World War II* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 194.

against missions that he believed would expose his men to unnecessary harm.¹⁶ “He did not risk his soldiers’ lives for his own glory,” writes Masayo Duus, “he seemed to worry about the safety of his men, and for that reason he often did not make concessions to orders from his superiors.”¹⁷ Whenever his men were assigned a tough mission, Captain Kim would be out in front while many of the other officers chose the safety of the rear.¹⁸

In the end, the 442nd got the combat experience that it wanted, and then some. It fought at Monte Cassino and Anzio in Italy, rescued the “Lost Battalion” from the Vosges Mountains in France, and liberated the Dachau concentration camp in Germany. It became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history with over 9,000 Purple Hearts despite a complement of only 4,000. This included 21 Medals of Honor, which were not awarded until 2000 when President Clinton determined that they had been wrongfully withheld earlier. Captain Kim got his men combat opportunities, went into battle with them when those opportunities arose, and protected them whenever the missions were unreasonable.

Conclusion

There are no more internment camps or segregated units. We fervently hope that they are things of the past. Yet Captain Kim’s example of leadership still applies, even in the far less shameful circumstances of the present. There are still units within the Sea Services with similar challenges of diversity and inclusion, whether it be along the lines of race or gender or sexual orientation. The Navy, for example, is the most racially and ethnically diverse of the military services and therefore presents the most leadership challenges of leading racially and ethnically

¹⁶ McGaugh, *Honor Before Glory*, 37.

¹⁷ Duus, *Unlikely Liberators*, 107.

¹⁸ Duus, *Unlikely Liberators*, 107.

diverse units.¹⁹ There is still a need for junior officers, with a baseline of tactical proficiency, who can lead through example, build unit cohesion, and protect their people. Captain Kim should not be forgotten to history.

¹⁹ 2018 Demographics Report: Profile of the Military Community, Military OneSource, <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2018-demographics-report.pdf>, Table 2.26.