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### **Beside the Golden Door**

Some years ago, I wrote a paper dealing in part with the Battle of Chosin Reservoir in the Korean conflict. Looking back, I am ashamed to say, my focus was more on development of my own attempts at courage than on the very real courage of those who participated in that epic battle. Tonight, I am going to make amends by focusing on one of the Marines who made a distinctive contribution to the Corps' achievement at Chosin in the bitter cold of late November and early December 1950. That engagement ended with a retreat, but the Marine Corps justly considers the battle one of its finest hours. At Chosin, the First Marine Division escaped from encirclement defeating six to ten veteran Chinese Red Army divisions, perhaps 85,000 men or more, at least five times the Marines' number. The mauled Chinese divisions were withdrawn permanently from the Korean conflict.

I was dimly aware of Korea back then. One Saturday morning in 1951 at the age of six as my father and I were driving to his restaurant in Louisville's West End, we stopped to pick up a young fellow he knew: "I thought you were in Korea. . ." said Dad, himself recently back from a stint in the National Guard in Louisiana. The young man told how he had been injured in a night attack by a horde of Chinese swarming over his position, most without guns, brandishing clubs and sticks. He had been knocked unconscious by a club and was lucky to escape with his life. He was mustered out and sent home. I didn't think more about that fellow or about the early days of the Korean War until a few years ago.

Early in the Korean conflict, our forces had driven the North Korean army almost to the Yalu River. General Douglas MacArthur, his colossal ego already swollen with the victory over Japan and his position as Viceroy of the conquered Empire, was spoiling to drive the North Korean army across the Yalu, reunite the two Koreas, and put himself in a position to run for President. Mao's Red Army had only recently won the long and bloody civil war with the corrupt Kuomintang and its war lord chieftain, Chiang Kai-Shek.

With our forces rapidly approaching the Yalu, the Chinese entered the Korean Conflict and Chinese "volunteers" poured into North Korea. MacArthur and his high command did not immediately realize the gravity of the situation. The First Marine Division was strung out along primitive roads in the North Korean wilderness along the West side of Chosin reservoir. Elements of the US Army were on the East Side of the reservoir equally oblivious that Chinese forces were preparing to mount a major offensive. It was cold, very cold, and the fighting about to be described took place in temperatures down to 25-30° below Fahrenheit, with wind-chill of down to 50° below.

By November 26, General Oliver P. Smith, commander of the First Marine Division, knew that he had a difficult situation on his hands. The First Marine Division was based in three villages, Yudam-ni, Hagaru-ri and Koto-ri, with smaller forces at other locations. The primitive roads connecting the desolate towns, little more than tracks, had been cut by the Chinese. In fact, the First was surrounded at Yudam-ni, at Hagaru-ri, and at Koto-ri, with the bulk of the troops at Yudam-ni, the northernmost, most beleaguered position. Smith began the necessary task of drawing the First back together, chiefly at Hagaru. To do this and then break out to the South, the Marines had to win three major battles, breaking out of Yudam-ni, securing Toktong Pass between Yudam-ni and Hagaru, and then breaking out of Hagaru and fighting across an improvised bridge at Funchilin pass.

The story of the breakout from the Chosin Reservoir is remarkable. Raw heroism imbued this campaign, with a full measure of the ferocity and horror of battle and the undaunted courage of the Marines.

In the midst of these and earlier battles, one Marine restored honor, an ideal he cherished, to a name famous in American military history. That name is "Lee." At the very dawn of our country, Major General Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee of the Continental Army fought with distinction at various major battles as well as doing surveillance and reconnaissance behind enemy lines. He was at Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown, the

last battle of the war. Later at Washington's request he assisted in quelling the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania. It was he who said of Washington at his funeral that he was "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

One of Light-Horse Harry's sons followed him into the military. His name was Robert E. Lee. You all know General Lee. He served with distinction in the war with Mexico, served as Superintendent of West Point and put down John Brown's insurgency at Martin's Ferry. Despite being one of our nation's finest, he declined the command of Union forces at the outset of the Civil War and threw in his very formidable skills with the Confederacy. It is my own opinion that his unfortunate choice unavoidably prolonged the war. No other general on either side had his skills, imagination or courage. Grant beat him only with overwhelming force.

At the end I'll return to General Lee, but now let's shed light on the more honorable Lee, Marine Corps 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, Kurt Chew-Een Lee, the first Asian-American to serve as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. Chew-Een Lee, born in 1926, probably in San Francisco, grew up in Sacramento. His father, M. Young Lee, was from Canton, now Guangzhou and came to the States in the 1920s. After returning to China to honor an arranged marriage, Lee returned to California and raised a family of six children, three boys and three girls. The eldest was Chew-Een Lee. All three boys served in Korea with distinction.

1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Chew-Een Lee had enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1944, after graduating from high school. When the war ended he stayed in the Corps and qualified for an officer's commission. At the start of the Korean War he commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment at Camp Pendleton. They shipped out on September 1, 1950. For two weeks Lee drilled his troops incessantly on the ship deck, despite the derision of other platoon leaders. He resisted efforts to reassign him to staff

work and handling translation duties. Lee was only there he said, to “fight communists” and die a courageous, honorable death.

Landing at Wonsan, his platoon was ordered north. On the night of November 2-3 his unit unexpectedly came under fire at Sudong Gorge. Lee calmed and focused his men. In the darkness, he instructed them to shoot at the enemy’s muzzle flashes. How to generate the muzzle flashes? Lee single handedly attacked the enemy positions pretending to be a whole platoon, climbing the hill above, drawing fire, shooting his carbine and lobbing grenades, revealing and flushing the Chinese out of every position, as his men followed him. He was shot twice, once in the knee and once more seriously in the elbow. He was awarded the Navy Cross for his efforts. As he waited for transport to the hospital, he answered the solicitations of his troops with a promise that he would soon return.

At a military hospital behind the lines, Lee found out that he was scheduled to be sent to Japan for further convalescence. With the help of another wounded Marine, acting against orders, Lee stole a Jeep and drove back toward his unit. When the purloined Jeep ran out of gas, Lee walked the last 10 miles to rejoin his battalion. Realizing what he had on his hands, his commander, then Col. Ray Davis told Lee that he would take care of any paperwork and put Lee, wounded arm still in a sling, back in command of a platoon. Despite still being in a weakened state, Lee drilled his men constantly. He honed them to a state of constant conflict readiness.

As said earlier, once at Chosin, the Marines found themselves in a terrible fix. As part of the necessary withdrawal south, the main forces at Yudam-ni needed to secure the route at Toktong Pass where an exhausted and depleted Fox Company was desperately holding on. The plan was to send Ray Davis's battalion directly across country, down one mountain ridge and up the next and so on until they made it to relieve Capt. William Barber’s Fox Company. Through a driving blizzard at night and in subzero

cold over two days, Davis's troops fought their way across miles of wilderness. On the point at Ray Davis's order was the best unit available, Lt. Chew Een-Lee and his platoon. And when I say "point" I mean it as Chew Een-Lee was always at the front of his men leading. Always first into battle, always first on the march. Lee never dodged bullets. He walled through them.

The task was arduous beyond belief. Marching single file through snow and darkness, with only rudimentary maps, Lee holding in his good hand a compass, the heavily laden Marines climbed up and down ridges, turning snow filled tracks into sheet ice. They edged their way by enemy emplacements in the night, knowing that a firefight would be the end of the expedition. When Davis, Lee and another officer were stymied and gathered to figure out directions, they would huddle under their parkas in a depression in the snow, so no light would be visible. On one occasion, Davis and Lee came up for air so fatigued that they could not remember what was just decided; they had to go back under and start their deliberations all over again. Somehow, eventually they made it to Toktong Pass. This one maneuver could just have been the pivotal act that saved the whole campaign. For this and other service, Lee was awarded the Silver Star.

As the expeditionary force approached Fox Company's emplacement, Lee led his platoon forward in an attack to force a path through to Fox Company. During this attack, he took yet another bullet, again in his right arm, just above his cast. A few days later his unit again came under fire on a road. Lee, standing in the open, ushered his men to safety. Only when he was sure that all of his men including the wounded were under cover, did he seek shelter himself. It was at that moment that a Chinese machine gun finally found its mark, wounding Lee so seriously that it ended his active service in the Korean War.

After recovery, Lee remained in the Marine Corps, retiring in 1988 at the rank of Major. He served on active duty again in Vietnam. He died in 2014 in Arlington, Virginia.

Raymond Davis, who retired as a Four Star General and Medal of Honor winner said that Chew-Een Lee was the bravest Marine he ever knew.

Chew-Een Lee was a complex man who lived by a simple code. A stickler for discipline, he could chew out a subordinate in the midst of enemy fire for not addressing him as Lt. Lee. He could also tell Marines who exposed themselves to enemy fire that if he ever saw their silhouette against the sky again that he would shoot them himself. He wore colored panels taken from parachute fabric on his shoulders so that his troops would see him easily – out in front of them, of course. And, of course, the enemy could see him as well. But Lee did not care. He had joined the Marines to earn an honorable death. Not achieving that he did earn an honorable life.

And yet, despite his medals, a documentary, meeting with President George W. Bush, serving as key note speaker at veterans' gatherings, he and his brothers honored with an exhibit at a military museum, how many remember or mention him in the same breath as they might Robert E. Lee? Let me do so here tonight and say that the scales of ultimate valor tip in favor of the Asian-American immigrant's son rather than the aristocratic West Pointer who, sad to say – Southern born though I am - chose the treasonous path of waging war on his country.

We live in a troublesome time. On the one hand voices from the highest levels of American government fan the flames of xenophobia. Chew-Een Lee joined the Marine Corps the same year that thousands of loyal Japanese-Americans were interred in camps in the west. Despite 75 years having passed since that disgraceful episode, we still read stories of honorably discharged American servicemen being deported because of questions about their citizenship. In another direction we see struggles over display of the Confederate flag and Confederate statuary, including equestrian statues of the symbol of the Lost Cause, Robert E. Lee.

Born in the South, my heart stirring at the sound of “Dixie” for far too many years, it pains me, but I must ask:

Why would we honor a man who chose rebellion over loyalty more than we honor the totally loyal, ferocious, wiry 5-6”, 130 pounds banty rooster Lee? Yes Chew-Een Lee was not without flaws. He was stunningly arrogant, had a lifelong chip on his shoulder and knew nothing of diplomacy. Nevertheless, I submit that the courage of Chew-Een Lee rises to another level. We should cherish it in these days of xenophobia, of fear of the immigrant and the person of color. Like so many before and one can only hope in the days to come, Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee, U.S.M.C. Ret., had the additional courage to turn his back on his ancestral homeland and cultural heritage and devote himself totally to protecting all of us, his fellow Americans. It is for him and those like him that the lady in New York Harbor lifts her Lamp beside the Golden Door. If we are not just to survive but to fulfill what we too lightly call our American destiny, we must honor the service of Chew-Een Lee.

Ironically, I have no doubt that the Lee family of M. Young Lee, had they been banned from our shores, would have done just fine elsewhere. By dint of self-sacrifice and courage they would have survived, even prevailed, as William Faulkner famously put it. Will we?

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