

Admiral Yi Sun-sin
Impressions on his Leadership and Character and Lessons Learned

By Jerome L. Pionk

Admiral Yi Sun-sin A World Leader and Naval Genius

When we examine the characteristics and impact of famous world leaders, many common traits materialize. All leaders, since they are human, are fallible, yet some stand out as truly inspirational and charismatic. They gain respect from not only the example that they set through word and deed, but also by the example they set when not seen by others. Admiral Yi Sun-sin was such a leader.

I have been to Korea many times, and actually lived there for eleven years. Like most tourists I have seen his statues, visited the life sized turtle boat on display and read of his exploits. It wasn't until I finally sat down and read the book: *Admiral Yi Sun-sin A brief overview of his life and achievements* that I truly felt a connection to this fully magnificent and selfless human being. As I stated earlier, some leaders give the appearance of great leadership but in private they do not meet the perception that they portray in public. Admiral Yi, on the other hand was the standard bearer for selfless patriotism and altruistic behavior. The jealousies and personal attacks that he suffered from the Royal Court and malicious and career threatening accusations from General Won Kyun and the Japanese agent Yoshira resulted in imprisonment, banishment to the role of foot soldier and total loss of social standing. In the face of this treatment, he remained as a true patriot, dedicated to his country and to delivering his country from foreign oppression. Despite all of this he persevered and became one of

history's great men. I say "great man", not simply great naval hero or military leader not to demean his

Admiral Yi Sun-sin

accomplishments, but to recognize that a truly "great man" has risen above all adversity and placed himself after his country and those he leads. American General George S. Patton once stated that the fullest wish of a military leader is to die in the last battle of the war that is won. Admiral Yi did this. On November 19, 1598, Admiral Yi was shot during the final battle of the war. He commanded that his body be hidden by a shield so his enemies could not see that he had fallen. I found one account where upon receiving his mortal wounds, he whispered to his oldest son, "Do not weep, do not announce my death. Beat the drum, blow the trumpet, wave the flag for advance. We are still fighting. Finish the enemy to the last one." This deed alone showed the patriot inside him and the concern for his country to evolve victoriously.

Great leaders are also measured by how they are viewed by their enemies and peers. Admiral Yi has been recognized as one of the great military and naval leaders in world- not just Korean- history. British Admiral Ballard, Japanese Admiral Togo and a host of others called him the "equal of Admiral Nelson" and "god of war". Personally, I call him an inspiration and one of the most selfless examples of mankind. This is most evidenced by the fact that Admiral Yi is

“admired and revered” by the Japanese, the very people whom his greatest naval battles and victories so convincingly decimated.

Another side to Admiral Yi however is his sheer genius in minimizing the losses of his own people, but inflicting maximum loss on his enemies. He did this by knowing the habits of his enemies and the terrain the battle was to be fought on. The decision to display the body of fallen General Matashi at the Sea Battle of Myongnyang and to

Admiral Yi Sun-sin

capitalize on a favorable tide and the cumbersome effects of a far larger force demonstrated Admiral Yi’s genius. The turtle ship or Kobukson also demonstrates his inventive spirit and pragmatic approach to battle and the tendencies of his enemies.

Admiral Yi’s diaries left a treasure trove for historians. It also left a legacy of leadership philosophy and a set of standards for living a fulfilling life. What touched me however was the poignant account of how Admiral Yi agonized while his men trained in poor conditions and with little food and inferior equipment. This is what I believe to be the true trait of leadership- empathy for his or her subordinates, yet dedication to the mission at hand and to one’s birthplace, not necessarily those in power. In short, he was a selfless “people person”, a human with great personal tragedies in his own family, tested by the powerful people

who ruled, imprisoned unjustly, yet true to his own loyalty was able to lead men against the adversaries of a regime that he despised, for he knew that in the end he was doing the best thing for his beloved country. What a script for a movie, yet alone a life that left a lasting legacy and a true inspiration for young people, not just Koreans, but for all people. I am honored to have met this great man finally, through reading the wonderful account of his remarkable life I feel that I am a better person and have a deeper respect for this great leader in a world historical context.