

**Korean Spirit and Culture Promotion Project**  
**2006 Admiral Yi Sun-sin Essay Contest**

**Blue Night in Choson**  
**Last Hope**

*Topic: What does Admiral Yi's life teach us about sacrifice and values worth dying for?*

Having stood in Trafalgar Square in London with Lord Nelson's column rising before me, I had no idea that there were heroes that trumped even the likes of the British Admiral who saved England from the French and Spanish despite constant challenges such as seasickness. Much to my amazement, I was humbled to learn that one of the greatest commanders ever to be actually hails from the Orient. There are few that rival Admiral Yi Sun-sin's character of indelible integrity, the utmost humility, and the same loving compassion that radiated from him to soldiers and countrymen. Just as Leonardo da Vinci once wrote, "*He who sows virtue reaps honor,*" the Admiral's commitment to his virtues is an example to all and his timeless example serves his country and the world to this day as a true testament to his character as a human being.

Of his major accomplishments, the Admiral had 23 victories and not a single loss. Every military hero worthy of any mention has suffered defeats. Yet despite that, Yi Sun-sin had a flawless track record that defies all logic and rationale. Delving deeper beyond statistics of resources and circumstances, it is the intangible assets epitomized in his wealth of wisdom that served as the foundation for his victories.

First and foremost, as a leader, as a person of character, the very first virtue necessary has always been *integrity*. It is a test of matching word and deed in order to illustrate one's wisdom and one's ability to be consistent in all actions. It is where obligation, needs, and desires have been internalized to unleash a human being whose word is their bond. By virtue of their being, what they say truly becomes what is so. Only one who keeps their promises and is true to the letter of every word can be like the Admiral who had only some 13 ships against over 300 enemy vessels in the Battle of Myongnyang. In the Korean historical drama clips offered off of [www.koreanhero.net](http://www.koreanhero.net), the Admiral simply declared his noble will that he will be victorious even with a mere 13 vessels. Only a man of the utmost integrity can say such a thing not as boast or threat, but as a true prophetic vision that already exists in the mind's eye that will become physical reality. All that remains is to bring it into a physical reality in this mortal plane.

In that same period, the Admiral still had appreciation and gratitude for the remaining tiny fleet after being led into a horrific defeat by Won Kyun. Still, the Admiral was earnestly thankful that some of his ships survived. If he had reacted differently, the Battle of Myongnyang would have went the other way because unless a person has taken ownership of all of life's circumstances; unless an individual has nothing resembling a victim mentality, he or she is unfit for better fortune nor do they deserve it.

Another name for the virtue of gratitude and appreciation could be humility.

Certainly the Admiral was a humble person to the core. True humility in its ultimate

sense is to be beyond all praise, but also in the same breath, to be beyond all blame as well. Despite a King trying to kill him, despite torture and a humiliating demotion, the Admiral was beyond anger or depression. To be so humble as the Admiral shows how connected he was to a greater vision that was beyond petty grievances with a King but for the fate of an entire nation, for all its citizens from children to the aged much like how Nelson Mandela was uncorrupted by hate even with twenty-seven years of prison.

Chris Evert, a tennis champion explains humility best in her classic quote, *"If you can react the same way to winning and losing, that's a big accomplishment... quality is important because it stays with you the rest of your life, and there's going to be a life after tennis that's a lot longer than your tennis life."*

Humility is thus not merely a passive virtue, but it for a call-to-arms for action. In the Battle of Myongnyang, the Admiral wrote a timeless line into his war diary, *"He who seeks death will live, and he who seeks life will die."* It is interesting to note that both Jesus and Buddha have modeled and explained this very same principle as the mantra goes, *"You cannot give what you do not already possess."* To give up your life is the ultimate test of whether or not it is really yours. To waltz with one's own mortality is to eat staple of humble pie.

Beyond humility, the Admiral was compassion incarnate. Though war is arguably a gruesome process, the Admiral was clear to make the distinction that a soldier's duty ends by stopping the threat of invading swords from a foreigner. Without that, what is to stop brothers from turning on each other? From this, one sees that the Admiral has the foresight to respect the nature of war and he pays homage to its bittersweet fruits and because of this, it tempers him to not go overboard. He is not a barbaric foreign tyrant who wants to simply lord over more land. Perhaps he understands how archaic, how backward it is to fight and bleed battlefields red with the blood of young men just for the sake of some dirt.

Perhaps at another level, it is difficult to imagine an admiral of war as a compassionate human being. Though his ability as a military leader is measured by his victories against his enemies, though death will be a natural consequence of men slaughtering one another, the Admiral's compassion shines more brilliantly with the bloodshed. His mission was simply to protect the Choson Dynasty and its people. Through his consistent victories, he fulfilled that pledge as well as strike profound fear in his enemies to the point that they lost their lust for battle, thus bringing an end to the Seven Years War.

In one of the video clips before the final battle, the Admiral addresses all 16,000 of his men and he explains how they are all sinners and if they fail to be victorious, all of their country will pay for their sins. So they had no choice but to seek salvation through victory. Truly, it is only a man of compassion that is fit to command legions of warriors that will kill fellow humans.

Ultimately, Admiral Yi Sun-sin was first and foremost, a man of integrity whose honor was unquestionable, because his humility and compassion was so profound, the Admiral was one of the greatest leaders of men ever to grace the world. What a wonder it would have been to be with his soldiers and commands in a time of such tumult yet time of hope. What valor and commitment to excellence his own example inspired in his men and what a privilege it was to serve the Admiral as a soldier. With the timeless examples and principles he lived by and taught by, surely all human beings would be inspired to live up to his model of virtue and excellence. I would have been proud to be his soldier of soldiers.