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ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER (AAPI) HERITAGE MONTH



By Major Crystal Fulfer & Major Laura Quaco

Family stories from two officers: Both officers were fortunate enough to have been raised with both Asian and American influences, which they believe enabled them to have unique perspectives and experiences.

“The history of Asian and Pacific Americans in the United States is a long and honorable one. Determined to uphold America’s promise of freedom and opportunity for all, generations of Asian and Pacific men and women have helped this Nation to grow and prosper.”[1]

These are the words of President George H.W. Bush’s Proclamation 6130, in which he declared the entire month of May as Asian and Pacific American Heritage Month, on 7 May 1990. However, President Bush was not the first to dedicate this month as recognition for Asian Americans. The first President to do so was President Jimmy Carter. In his Proclamation 4650 in 1979, he proclaimed a week in May be Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week. In doing so, he acknowledged there had been discrimination and

barriers for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in America, yet they “continued to look at America as a land of hope, opportunity, and freedom.”[2]

Two Officers Share Their Family Stories

Both officers were fortunate enough to have been raised with both Asian and American influences, which they believe enabled them to have unique perspectives and experiences. Their families looked at America with the same ideals of hope, opportunity, and freedom mentioned in President Carter’s Proclamation 4650—it was the American Dream. They believe America still stands for those ideals, and those ideals motivate them to serve, but they could not have served without the strength, courage, and resiliency of their Asian ancestors. They are immensely proud of their roots and are honored to share these stories from their own lives in hopes they bring you enlightenment and inspiration.

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Major Crystal Fulfer

“Ew, your food smells disgusting. What is that?!” Friends who had never been exposed to kimchi would often respond in this way when coming to my house for the first time. Any amount of kimchi in the refrigerator would permeate the air with its distinct and, to me, yummy smell every time the fridge door opened.



Jar of kimchi cabbage. Photo: © vm2002/stock.adobe.com

Growing up in the South as a Korean American military child, I never looked like the majority and was called out on it by other children, “You look Chinese; what are you?” I’d respond, “Korean American.” They’d say, “What is Korean?” I would come home telling my mother that I just wanted to blend in; that I did not want to look different than the other kids. This laid a foundation of self-esteem issues for me and getting into some trouble as a pre-teen when I hung out with the crowd of kids who also found it difficult to “fit in” with the majority. Thankfully, though, as I matured and eventually met others who looked like me and even liked kimchi too, I developed a sense of pride in my heritage as a half-Korean, half-Caucasian person. Meeting others with Asian American backgrounds who also did not fit the stereotype (e.g., being a math whiz) became extremely assuring that I would not feel like an outsider my whole life. Almost every Asian American individual I have met is somehow connected to the military—an appealing aspect which led to my joining. After all, I was born into the military.

My mother is from Seoul, South Korea, and my father is from La Grange, Georgia and is a 25-year Air Force veteran. He met my mother at Osan Air Base, fell in love, married her, and they moved to America where she became a U.S. citizen. Shortly thereafter, I was born at Lackland Air Force Base in Wilford Hall. I grew up in a strict Korean matriarch household wherein I was told I “must” take piano lessons, practice for an hour every day, study, and later become a doctor or a lawyer ... or, marry one. Since the sight of blood did not sound appealing to me, I decided becoming a lawyer was the only other option. Speaking of only one-way streets, my mother’s style of communication was always very pointed and blunt. Later in life, when I realized that not everyone communicates the way we did in my household, I learned to temper it. Although her direct and blunt way of communicating was rooted in love, it helped me develop thick skin. Her style of child-rearing stemmed from our family’s history back in South Korea.

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My Halmoni, Korean grandmother, just celebrated her 92nd birthday in Korea; however, her husband, my Haraboji, Korean grandfather, passed away in his 50s when I was just 7 years old. One of the reasons for his passing, we believe, was due to how hard he was forced to work for the Japanese during their occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. He worked as a contractor for the Japanese military guarding a prison camp earning very low wages and working extremely long hours. Despite both of my grandparents having to learn and adapt to Japanese culture, they were grateful for a westernized country investing in Korea’s development. Their gratefulness stemmed from their concern for their nation and generations to follow them. It was this forward thinking and the communal culture among fellow Koreans that carried my grandparents through these extremely trying times.

These stories and experiences by my family shaped how I was raised—to be principled and kind to your neighbors. Principled in whatever your discipline may be and never cease being a team player among your community whether that is at home, work, or other extracurricular activity. I strive to use this foundation daily as a spouse, mother, Airman, leader, and friend.

To me, AAPI Heritage Month means sharing appreciation for what other AAPI members endured in history and celebrating the unique lens through which we contribute to the fight as Airmen today. My personal lesson as an Asian American Airman is that trying to blend in with the majority is not productive for the team. It is about sharing our unique experiences that leverages diversity which maximizes efforts to the mission.



Mochi with a tangerine on top. Photo: © Nyan TA/stock.adobe.com

Major Laura Quaco

You know when you're in a new class or group of some sort, and there's always that obligatory ice breaker in which you go around the room giving a fun fact about yourself? Well, mine has been the same since as long as I can remember, probably as far back as kindergarten—I'm quarter Japanese! Sometimes people wouldn't believe the blonde Californian girl was Japanese; sometimes they would say, "yeah, I can actually see it now that you say it!" While a quarter may not seem like a lot, I grew up with a 100% Japanese grandmother, although she would say she was 100% Okinawan.

Grandma Kiyoko was born in 1932 in Okinawa, one of nine children. She was thirteen years old during the 1945 Battle of Okinawa—an 82-day battle between the United States and Japan during World War II. During that battle, she hid in caves with her family. Eventually, her father decided he didn't want them to be flushed out of the caves, so he told the family to follow him into a sugar cane field. When United States military police pulled up in a vehicle, he raised a white flag tied to a bamboo stick. The military police offered the family sticks of spearmint gum, but Japanese propaganda spread at the time indicated Americans would poison and torture them, so Grandma Kiyoko's father did not initially allow them to accept the gum. However, the military police demonstrated the gum was not poisoned by putting a piece into their own mouths. Grandma Kiyoko and her family were placed in internment camps in Okinawa for the remainder of the war, and from Grandma Kiyoko's vantage point, the Americans treated them well. At the end of the war, they were permitted to return to their homes. Fortunately, theirs was not one of the homes destroyed in the battle.

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Unfortunately, one of Grandma Kiyoko's older sisters who was already married and out of the household did not have a similar experience. Her husband had been drafted into the Imperial Japanese Army, and because Japanese propaganda portrayed Americans in such a barbaric light, many ended up committing suicide to evade capture. Grandma Kiyoko's sister, her husband, and her child fell victim to those fears; they tied themselves up together and jumped to their death off a cliff in Saipan—a location notorious for suicide during and after the Battle of Saipan. Despite this grave loss and experience in internment, Grandma Kiyoko's perception and recollection was the Americans treated the Okinawans well and she came to love them. While Okinawa was under American control, she felt Okinawans were allowed to speak

the Okinawan language and keep their culture, but such was not the same under Japanese control. While I cannot speak to whether that was true for all, it was true for Grandma Kiyoko.

Fast forward seven years to when Grandma Kiyoko was working at the Base Exchange and she fell in love with and married my Grandpa John, a soldier in the United States Army. Their love did not come without consequences—Grandpa John was certainly no Okinawan man, and Grandma Kiyoko’s father would not speak to her for ten years. My father and one aunt were born in Okinawa, and the other three of their siblings were born in various U.S. states where Grandpa John was stationed. Grandma Kiyoko was exceedingly proud to become a U.S. citizen while they were stationed in Alabama, even though it meant losing Japanese citizenship. Japan did not allow for dual citizenship. She was so proud to be an American that she refused to buy non-American vehicles. Grandma Kiyoko and Grandpa John eventually settled in Oahu, Hawaii, where there was an incredible amount of diversity of Asian and Pacific Islander cultures which influenced my family’s traditions even more.

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My father joined the Air Force Reserve Officers’ Training Corps while at the University of Hawaii and ultimately became a B-52 navigator in the United States Air Force. It was his service and my two Grandfathers’ service that became my inspiration to serve. Grandma Kiyoko moved with my family to California, where I lived within thirty

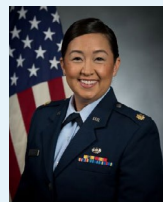
minutes of her house for my entire childhood. She always had a rice cooker full of white rice (that good sticky kind), a tub of miso in the refrigerator, and a piled tier of white mochi with a tangerine on top (a New Years’ tradition for good fortune). One of the things I remember the most is her constant encouragement to “eat, eat, eat” and to not be wasteful, because she previously had to survive on very little food. Due to her austere experiences during World War II, she carried a strong belief in saving and working hard to obtain financial independence, and consequently engrained a strong work ethic into her children and grandchildren.

Grandma Kiyoko passed in October 2020, but I am honored to share her heritage and her story. It makes me proud that we recognize the month of May as AAPI Heritage Month. As a society, it is important we recognize diversity for its positive influences and actively strive to embrace it.

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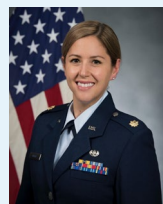
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About the Authors



Major Crystal Fulfer, USAF

(B.S., University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida; J.D., Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida) is an Instructor and Editor, The Air Force Judge Advocate General’s School, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.



Major Laura Quaco, USAF

(B.A., California State University, Chico, California; J.D., Pepperdine Caruso School of Law, Malibu, California) is an Instructor and Editor, The Air Force Judge Advocate General’s School, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

Endnotes

- [1] President George H.W. Bush, Proclamation 6130—Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month, 1990
- [2] President Jimmy Carter, Proclamation 4650—Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week, 1979