

NAM  
PYO  
PARK





## EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY

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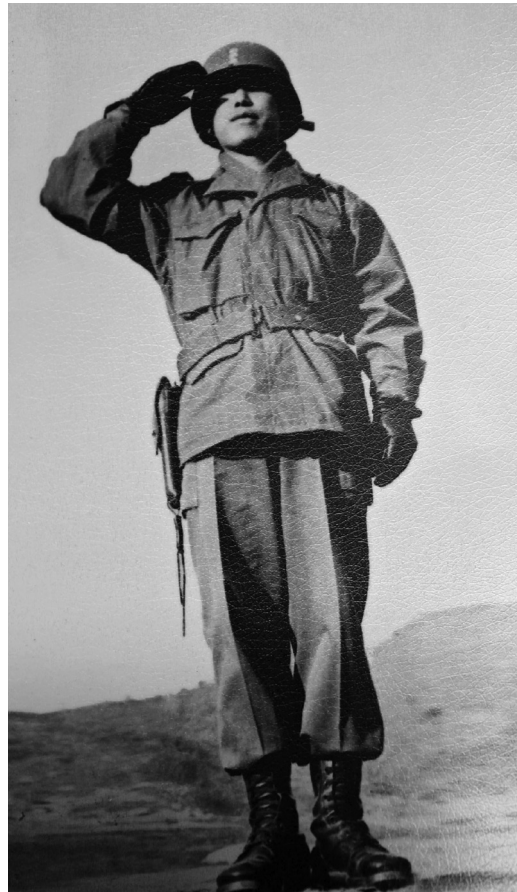
**N**am Pyo Park's visitor apologized for his ignorance of Korean beyond yes, no, hello, goodbye and thank you. The handsome old general smiled warmly and said it was OK; his English wasn't so hot, either. A few minutes later, however, he politely interrupted a translator to declare, "*I am a live witness of our whole history!*" He enunciated each word.

The moment was so powerful that the visitor remembered the formal way to say thank you—"Kahm-sa-hahm-nida."

Born in 1923, Major General Park witnessed the pivotal events of World War II in Asia—from Manchuria to Tokyo. After graduating from South Korea's military academy, he became a front-line officer during the brutal back-and-forth fighting that punctuated the Korean War. In the two decades that followed the uneasy armistice, he rose steadily to general officer, only to see his career derailed by politics.

The general came to Washington State in the 1970s and quickly emerged as a leader in Pierce County's growing Asian American community. Today, he is the highest-ranking *Korean* Korean War veteran in Washington State—perhaps in the entire U.S.

The general and his wife live modestly but contentedly in a house behind Fort Lewis. "I have lived in all different cultures—six countries!" he says in English, counting them off on his fingers: "Russia, Manchuria, Japan, North Korea, South Ko-



As a young lieutenant. Park Collection



General and Mrs. Park at the Korean War Memorial in Olympia with other “Forgotten War Remembered” honorees. At left, Amy Lt. Col. Barbara Jean Nichols. At right, Marine Corps Corporal Jim Evans and his wife Rita. *Ben Helle photo*

rea and America. United States is a very, very nice country. Freedom country!”

For any occasion honoring fellow veterans of “the forgotten war,” General Park dons an immaculate dress-white uniform adorned with medals, six rows of service ribbons and the shoulder patches of the ROK’s famed White Horse and Tiger divisions. At 94, his military bearing is still evident. Rank was irrelevant one day in the summer of 2017 after the general returned the salute of an 89-year-old U.S. Marine Corps corporal. Jim Evans of Hoquiam revealed he was one of the Americans surrounded by the Chinese in the bitterly cold winter of 1950. When Evans pulled out his harmonica, two old soldiers sang a lilting Korean folk song.

GENERAL PARK’S family roots run deep in the north half of the peninsula, now paradoxically named the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. In truth, it is one of the least democratic places on earth. His father was an educator who became a resistance fighter after the Japanese formally annexed Korea in 1910. The general’s parents and grandparents evaded the Japanese by moving around Manchuria for the next 30 years. In 1923, when General Park was born, his father was looking for work in China. The general’s pregnant

mother had stayed in Vladivostok, the Russian port above North Korea, because she could speak passable Russian.

“My father was a principal of an elementary school in China,” the general explains through a translator. “I was raised by grandpa and grandma while my parents were fighting for Korean independence. The Japanese made a new law when they invaded Manchuria in 1931 and established a new country (Manchukuo). If you cooperated you could go back to live in your town or village. But my mom didn’t want to go back to the Manchu area. They went to the border in the mountains. My grandma was helping the independence fighters when the Japanese found out and killed her. I saw her killed.” The general shakes his head. The horror of that moment is indelible. “The Korean Independence Association was in Shanghai. When the Japanese attacked there in 1937 and went on to massacre people in Nanking, many Koreans were also killed or put in labor camps and forced to work. Later, the Japanese killed my grandpa, too.”

As Japan lunged toward World War II, 14-year-old Nam Pyo Park was excelling in the classroom and in all manner of sports. He learned Japanese in Manchuria and was offered a chance to attend school in Tokyo. “I had a teacher who graduated from a Japanese university. He came back to Korea as a teacher and sponsored me.” It was a very difficult decision. “I was conflicted,” he says. Japan was advancing everywhere in Asia and the Pacific, acquiring rubber, oil and the other raw materials to fuel an empire. Sublimating his resentment, he decided to bide his time. He would go to Japan, study hard and dream that one day he could live in a free and independent Korea. For now, however, he was forced to take a Japanese last name. “Instead of ‘Park’ I was now ‘Arai.’ If I didn’t change my name they won’t even accept my application.”

By 1939 there were nearly a million Koreans in Japan. Most did menial work, making up for the labor shortages caused by the conscription of Japanese men for the military. Koreans at first were recruited. Then, as the war accelerated, they were ordered into the defense plants and factories, “often under appalling conditions,” one historian notes.

Park graduated from high school in Japan and passed the rigorous entrance exams to attend one of the imperial universities in Tokyo. Promising Korean students were assumed to be destined for leadership roles in the post-war Japanese Empire.

In 1944, with the war going badly, Japan began conscripting Korean men into the armed forces or defense industries. “I was fortunate that my place of residence was Manchuria. They didn’t touch Manchurian people” for the military, at least then, the general says. By the winter of 1945, life in Tokyo was a nightmare for civilians. Stringent rationing had given way to a daily struggle “to find enough food for bare subsistence,” and the American Air Force was unleashing its big bombers with growing impunity. Still, people didn’t know Japan was losing the war, the general remembers. They thought their sacrifices were merely their contribution to ultimate victory. “Tojo, their prime minister, didn’t let people know the truth,” the general says. “But he told the people and the media that all the Japa-

nese, every person, had to go out and become ‘like a bullet whizzing through the wind’ if the enemy ever comes.” So ingrained was the warrior ethos that death was preferable to the dishonor of surrender.

The enemy arrived overhead with overwhelming fury in the early-morning hours of March 10, 1945. “It was Japanese Army Commemoration Day,” a day for speech-making to boost morale, the general remembers vividly. “I was out looking for food. I was poor so I had to be self-sufficient. Nearby there was a POW camp for captured Americans. They were hungry too. I went back to my friend’s place and we shared some porridge. Suddenly all the lights went out and the sky was filled with American airplanes attacking Tokyo at that moment. The guns went Brrrrrrrrrr!” he remembers. People screamed in terror as napalm cluster bombs rained down from 279 silver-winged B-29s. Whole blocks burst into flame. When the firebombing ended, central Tokyo was in charred ruins; 100,000 civilians were dead, a million homeless.

Park set out for the house where he had rented a tiny room, only to discover “house is all gone! Everybody was killed. My student uniform was very important to me, and it was gone. I only had my student ID.”

AFTER TWO atomic bombs persuaded the emperor to end the war, Park hopped a boat to Pusan, took a battered train to Seoul and from there began the trek north to his old hometown. “I expected that all the family would be back now that we had Korean independence from Japan. But no one showed up. I found that Stalin had taken all my family to Russia.” Park would learn he had relatives “scattered from Turkestan in Central Asia to the Soviet Maritimes to northern China and Manchuria” as well as in both halves of a newly divided Korea.

“The communists were already there, in control of North Korea. They told me, ‘Your family were independence fighters, so we can recognize you and you can go to Pyongyang and go to higher education.’ But I could not do that.” It was December of 1945. He fled back south to the U.S. zone below the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The U.S. Army Military Government in Korea, headquartered in Seoul, established a Korean “constabulary” security force. With his university training, Park was a prime recruit. By 1946 he was in the second class of the Korea Military Academy.

Park was a young officer with the army of the Republic of Korea when the North Koreans, armed with Soviet-built artillery and tanks, surged across the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel on June 25, 1950. They seized Seoul and forced the South Koreans into a desperate, fighting retreat. “Our soldiers fought bravely, but they were outnumbered,” Park says. The North Korean juggernaut drove the ROK Army and its American allies back to a defensive perimeter at Pusan.

General MacArthur’s audacious amphibious landing at Inchon in September turned the tide of war—temporarily at least. The allies liberated Seoul, captured Pyongyang, the

North Korean capital, and were moving north with a full head of steam when the Chinese, 300,000-strong, entered the war and repelled the advance. "We were heading for the Amnok River (the Yalu) when we got orders to withdraw," Park remembers. "That was really, really hard. Everybody cried! We could see a united Korea. Our U.S. Army officer said it was an order we had to obey. General MacArthur wanted to push ahead—go all-out. In Korea he's still our hero."

The war settled into a bloody stalemate. Park became a 28-year-old colonel.

In 1952, he was selected to attend the U.S. Army's Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. "Many people [from my division] applied. Only three passed the test. I was one of them," the general says proudly. "I trained in Georgia for six months. The United States paid \$150, plus \$30 from the Korean government. So I have \$180," he tells the translator, before guffawing in English, "Big money! I'm rich!" He went to New York City on leave, hoping to see maestro Arturo Toscanini conduct a symphony, only to discover the tickets had sold out months earlier. A *New York Times* reporter overheard the unhappy exchange at the box office. "He said, 'You've fought in the Korean War! Wait a minute.' And they found us tickets!" The general listens to classical music every morning.

Park returned to combat early in 1953. The war had devolved into a hilltop by hilltop defensive struggle. President Eisenhower wanted the U.S. to cut its losses. That July, an armistice was signed. It ended the bloodshed, but left Korea more divided than ever. The Republic of Korea's military casualties were just short of one million, including 227,800 dead. The U.S. recorded nearly 170,000 casualties, 33,642 killed in action. The communist casualties topped 1.5 million, of which a staggering 900,000 were Chinese. And millions of civilians perished in a civil war of epic proportions, fought in an area the size of Utah.

General Park had relatives fighting for North Korea. The fate of some remains unknown. "The war is not over," he says, shaking his head at the dangerous provocations of North Korea's erratic young dictator, Kim Jong-un. "But all the dictatorships in the history of the world eventually failed. Hitler is gone. Stalin too." He last heard from a nephew in North Korea in the 1990s. "In 2000 we sent him a package, but now it's not allowed. We don't know how he's doing."

GENERAL PARK was decorated by President Eisenhower for his work with the American military during the war. He became deputy director of the Graduate School of National Defense. He served as director of the ROK's infantry training center from 1968 to 1970 when he received his second star. He says he was forced into retirement by his old military academy classmate, Park Chung-hee, who had seized power in a 1961 military coup. Park Chung-hee weeded out potential rivals he styled as leftists. "My North Korea home background was a pretext," the general says.

Simultaneously authoritarian and the architect of his country's emergence as a global economic power, Park Chung-hee is a controversial figure in Korean history. By the



time Park was assassinated in 1979 by another of their classmates, the general had retired to Tacoma, drawn in part by Pierce County's respect for its military population. "America is the best country in respect to human rights," the general says. "I am very grateful to America for coming to help us in the war. When they started work on fundraising for a Korean War memorial in Olympia, I wanted to show our appreciation to the U.S. and the American people. The consul general called and we talked about how we could help. I became a fundraising chairman, and we raised \$58,000 for the memorial. Koreans weren't so wealthy then, but I had 48 meetings over three years. We received donations from all over the state—Spokane, Walla Walla, everywhere. Sometimes people could only donate \$5; some gave us \$500. To each we say, 'Thank you very much!' " The impressive memorial on the Capitol Campus at Olympia was dedicated in 1993.



*Park Collection*

The general turned 94 in 2017—95, if you count birthdays the traditional Korean way. (In Korea, you are one year old at birth, and a year older on New Year's Day—not on your actual birthday.) He is busy promoting a Korean War memorial at Federal Way. "When I came here, I was poor because I left everything in Korea. But my third son came here and went to engineering school at WSU; he got a student loan and paid on it for 18 years!"

There were 200 in his class at the Korean military academy. "Only five are left," he says wistfully. "I went to Korea three years ago to meet with them. Korea is my home, but I appreciate that I could live my later years in the United States, this great country. The U.S.-Korea alliance will never break. Korean people never break."

**John C. Hughes**

