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US COAST GUARD PIONEER RETIRES

HARVARD TRAINED, RECORD SETTING SAN DIEGAN SERVED FOR 25 YEARS



In 2007, Captain Jeffrey Lee's crew on the High Endurance Coast Guard Cutter HAMILTON set records by seizing more than 1.6 billion dollars worth of contraband in the Eastern Pacific Ocean off the coast of Central and South America. His team also shared in the largest drug bust in maritime history by capturing more than 19.5 metric tons of cocaine in a single load.

But on his first day of Coast Guard Officer Candidate School in Yorktown, Virginia 25 years ago -- he focused all of his energy on surviving the next 24 hours.

"It was snowing sideways, I was freezing, and my head was shaved -- they didn't let us take a shower for three days, so I had all these hair clippings down my back and neck. I was wearing a green fatigue jacket that looked and felt like it belonged to my dad because it was at least three sizes too big. And I thought, 'Oh God -- now I've really gone and done it!' I was standing on the parade field with an M-1 rifle, and all I could think about was just getting through the first day," Lee stated with a smile on his face.

That first day was in 1983 -- and now he is ready to move on to civilian life after a successful and exciting career saving lives, busting drug smugglers, breaking ice on the Great Lakes, and seizing contraband on the high seas.

Little did Lee know that even back then he was blazing a trail in Coast Guard history.

Lee was the first Korean-American to go through Coast Guard OCS, and long before he reported in as Captain on the HAMILTON -- he was already a pioneer.

Soon after his initial staff assignment in Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington D.C., Lee began to set milestones as the first Korean-American to Captain a 95 foot-

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long patrol boat, the first Asian-American Captain of an Ice Breaker, and the first Asian-American Captain of a High Endurance Cutter.

Lee, a 1981 University of California, San Diego graduate, also attended postgraduate school at Harvard University's prestigious Kennedy School of Government and earned a Master of Public Administration degree in 1996.

Said Lee, "The Coast Guard gave me great opportunities, and I had a lot of fun and adventure too. I know that life in the service isn't for everyone. I proudly served the American people for 25 years, and now it's time to move on."

Lee's duty assignments took him from the farthest reaches of Alaska's Bering Sea to Hawaii and the island nations of the South Pacific to the frozen Great Lakes. He traveled extensively in Central and South America, Micronesia, and to Hong Kong.

When asked what he thought his proudest moment was in his career, he replied without hesitation, "bringing my crew back safe and sound every time."

"There were times," he continued, "during storms or rough weather – especially up in Alaska – that I had my doubts. Every sailor worth his salt will tell you that."

"But in the end, we always came back to port, all of us, every time," Lee said.

"That's what's really important," he finished.

Lee and his family intend to stay in the San Diego area.

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