

Transcript of Oral History Interview (edited)

Interviewee: Admiral Andrew M. Sugimoto

Interviewer: Karen Lau

Date: August 11, 2022

[Interview Recording Link](#)

Summary: Andrew M. Sugimoto is a Rear Admiral in the U.S. Coast Guard. He is the third Asian American and the first Japanese American to make flag rank. In this interview, he describes how his Japanese and German heritage has influenced his military service, the Coast Guard's missions of intelligence, security, and environmental stewardship, and the importance of remembering the history of Japanese Americans' service and sacrifice during World War II.

Karen Lau

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Hi everyone today I'm here with Admiral Andrew Sugimoto. My first question for you is when and where were you born?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I was born in Redondo Beach, California in 1967.

Karen Lau

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Could you describe your childhood, upbringing, and your family, please?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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My dad is Japanese, and my mom is German. I grew up in Southern California and in Germany. I'm a product of multiple different cultures. It was always very interesting having friends come over for dinner because we would have something very Japanese on the plate and then a little bit of German, so it could be like chicken teriyaki and sauerkraut on the same plate. My friends would just stare down at this thing going, "Well, I've never seen that combination before."

Karen Lau

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What motivated you to apply to the Coast Guard Academy and what was your experience as a cadet like?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I was a lifeguard and my guidance counselor who happened to be from a Coast Guard family, recommended that I apply for the Coast Guard Academy. I did, and I got in. It was tough, even though I had traveled extensively before, I got really sick my first year and I ended up doing two freshman years, which at the Academy, is the equivalent of doing two different boot camps. So, I had a tough time of it, but I got my way through it and graduated in 1990.

Karen Lau

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Does your family have a history of military service? If not, what was it like for you to be the first in your family to serve?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I am the first in the family to voluntarily serve. My father was one of the Japanese Americans in World War II that served in the Army along with my uncle. And then I had two other uncles who were part of military intelligence. One was stationed in Hawaii and the other one was stationed in Alaska along the Aleutian Island chain.

Karen Lau

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I think it's really fascinating that you have a history in your family of Japanese Americans serving the military. When I was writing questions and looking at your career, I was also thinking about the history of military intelligence, especially the Japanese Americans who volunteered or were drafted into the Army and helped with intelligence. So, my next question for you is, what does the history of Japanese American codebreakers and counterintelligence officers mean to you? Does this history motivate or inspire your approach in your role as the previous Coast Guard's Chief of intelligence?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Wow, that's a fantastic question and it is something very personal to me and something that I take a great deal of pride in that. My uncles directly participated in military intelligence and counterintelligence operations in that they were also there in rebuilding Japan afterwards. One of my uncles was there and helped with the MacArthur staff, basically helping Japan come back together again under the Marshall Plan. So that rich history makes it very personal. It almost comes sort of full circle when I was back in intelligence on my last tour of duty and got to see what they accomplished. [This history] allowed me to be where I am because of it.

Karen Lau

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Thank you for sharing. I now have more questions about the start of your military career. If you could go back to the start, what advice would you give yourself?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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There is no substitute for the journey and there is no substitute for the hard work that will come along the way. Not that I took shortcuts or anything, but you often wonder when you're starting out, "What will this all mean? Why do I have to do entry-level work? Why can't I just jump ahead to something that perhaps interests [me] more than other things?" Each of those jobs that I had along the way provided the foundation for me to be a much better officer the more senior I became. So that journey and that hard work that you put into it is absolutely worth it in the end.

Karen Lau

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That's some great advice. Speaking of your journey, I think it's really interesting that you decided to go to law school, so I wanted to ask you what motivated you to attend the University of San Diego School of Law, and what was your experience going from being an active service member to a law student like?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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First of all, I was still on active duty at law school. The Coast Guard paid for my way through law school and of course, when you're in San Diego, staying in San Diego, it's great motivation because it's a great place to be. The University of San Diego is a fantastic school, and I had a great experience there. I come from other lawyers in the family. My cousins were ... pioneers. They helped develop the self-help law books and other things like that under a company called Nolo Press and always inspired me a little bit with how they thought the law should be equally accessible to everybody. And so, as they went through that journey, I wanted to become a lawyer. My emphasis was probably more on operational law and being able to enable Coast Guard operations as well as on the legal assistance side in helping fellow service members with any of the issues that they had. So those were some great outcomes of those three years of law.

Karen Lau

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I've asked service members who have attended both the military academies and graduate school this question. What was more challenging, your 1L year at law school or swab summer?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I don't want to do either one again. I think probably, swab summer. It's a great question. I think I was mature enough to understand the how hard it was and why it was necessary to really dig into the 1L year at law school. I don't know if I truly understood the mechanics and certainly isn't a great place to be indoctrinated and yelled at and all those other things that we did as young adults. You are trying to establish who you are as a person and everything else [while] having other people try to impose what they think is the picture that you should be is challenging ... When I went to law school, I knew who I was. I had just come off command of a ship and was going to law school. It's a little bit different for me. It was not academics versus physical. To me, it was more in who I was as a person and developing.

Karen Lau

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That's an interesting perspective. My next question is, Admiral, you recently celebrated a change of command where you became the commander of the Eleventh U.S. Coast Guard District. What does this achievement mean to you and how was the transition from overseeing intelligence programs to missions across several states and waters?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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This is where I started. So, when I was a high school student, I went down to see the very First Coast Guard unit. It was here in California. To sort of come full circle and then be the commander here and come every single day to work to support the frontline women and men that actually do the operations out on the water, saving lives, enforcing laws, protecting the environment, and ensuring our ports and waterways remain open and safe is a huge privilege. [There is] a certain amount of satisfaction in watching them do fantastic work every single day and making sure that they get what they need in order to carry out their missions. So, it's gratifying and a little bit full circle for me.

Karen Lau

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That's a great story of how you started at the Eleventh Coast Guard District, and now you're leading it. I have a question about the environmental stewardship operations. How are these operations in the Eleventh District different from Alaska and the Arctic Shield, and how are they similar?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Wow, another great question ... In many ways, they're very similar. We take protection and environmental stewardship as one of our priority missions. You have some of the most pristine waters here off the California coast. There are a number of national marine sanctuaries in places where endangered species are protected. The same thing goes for Alaska, which [has] among the most pristine waters in the world. We make sure that the food basket, that strategic protein stock, all of those things continue to remain viable as well as protect the environment in other ways and make sure that it's there for generations to come. It helps the planet continue to heal itself and operate in the manner that it's supposed to. Operating in the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean is very much similar to operating off the California coast and in both places you can get beat up pretty good by the waves.

Karen Lau

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I think the environmental mission of the Coast Guard is what sets it apart from a lot of the different branches. In my sophomore year of high school, my first exposure to seeing veterans was this volunteering event at the Mystic Seaport where we had a lot of Coasties and members of the NOAA Corps pick up trash on their day off. It was really inspiring to see how dedicated they were. Being able to speak with them one-on-one, they told me about their mission of saving marine wildlife and battling climate change, which is also becoming one of the big issues in defense and foreign policy. So, thank you for sharing about that.

Karen Lau

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I have some questions about intelligence for the next part of the interview. How have military intelligence operations and technologies changed since World War II?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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The fundamentals are always going to be the same, I think. That is, how do you apply what you have been able to gather now that how you gather may technologically have changed considerably? But taking it and then analyzing it and superimposing culture and the thought patterns and other things ... which are so key to a deeper understanding of our competitors, that part remains the same. How we've collected those various different pieces of information has changed, and that could be because we've gotten better at overhead imagery, or we've gotten better at collecting signals or we've gotten better at human intelligence and techniques in that particular regard. The ability to measure different items across the board, all those things have been enabled. What is also very, very different is the amount of data that we get as an intelligence agency and the ability to then sift through that data in a very smart way. Through the

use of algorithms, artificial intelligence, or simple scripts and to be able to prioritize what is necessary to be analyzed by human rudimentary analysis done by AI and the ability to safeguard that data as a whole in the cloud environment, and to give access to the to our other partners so that they can also work on it, that part is absolutely revolutionary in the way we continue to move forward and we have to be very good at that because our strategic competitors are very good at it also.

Karen Lau

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Absolutely. I think the use of human intelligence is really interesting.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Nothing beats a human, that's for sure.

Karen Lau

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My next question is how have threats to national, economic, and cybersecurity changed since 9/11 and how has the Coast Guard's identification of and response to these threats changed?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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One of the things that 9/11 taught us is that we no longer are protected by the two ocean moats that we learned about in high school ... The idea that [if] a war was going to occur, [it] would occur someplace overseas, and yet somehow the homeland was primarily protected with the exception of perhaps Pearl Harbor, [is obsolete] by the fact that there was a terrorist attack on U.S. soil, the idea that cyber-attacks and others can reach in at any time to any part of our society and affect our daily lives. More importantly, those same applications could also then affect us economically and or the ability to ship goods, services and perhaps even more importantly, humanitarian aid around the globe. Those things suddenly come into stark focus when we realize we're no longer protected as we have thought by those oceans. Now that we have to look much closer at what's happening, [we have to think about] how we are protecting those systems and making sure that there is resilience baked into them so that if something does happen, then it could be because of climate change, ... natural disasters, or a human attack, then we are able to still function and still be able to respond in the shape and way that we need to.

Karen Lau

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I think it's great that humanitarian aid has come into such a large focus, especially recently with the war in Ukraine, but it also has been part of the mission all along.

Karen Lau

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I've asked this question to a U.S. Army Major and a member of the Marine Corps, but as a veteran, do you have any thoughts on the Biden administration's withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan and the end to Operation Enduring Freedom? I'm not sure how much of an extent the Coast Guard played in the War in Afghanistan, but I just wanted to know if you had any thoughts.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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As a sitting, active-duty officer, I'm going to stay away from the politics of the situation, but I will tell you that the Coast Guard was absolutely involved in Afghanistan, both in intelligence purposes as well as other support functions that we did, ensuring logistics for safe [transportation]. The Coast Guard has been in Iraq and many other different places. We have a patrol boat squadron that currently operates out of Bahrain, protecting the vital sea routes for oil and other things like that, and we continue to do whatever we can to meet our commander's intent to protect the national security and ensure safe commerce as it flows all over the place. So.

Karen Lau

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With oil, gas, and other fossil fuels becoming more and more of a danger to the environment, could you describe some of the Coast Guard missions you've prosecuted and led, including responses to oil spills and other natural disasters?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Absolutely. So, first of all, one of the things that we continue to work with in our industry around the globe is how do we reduce that dependence upon fossil fuel? How do we reduce the carbon footprint that is out there? We are looking at different fuel types for vessels so that we can still operate and have commerce ships but have less of a carbon footprint. We are looking at allowing wind energy to be a supplement and a generator of electrical power along the coastlines and separating the shipping channels out to give the at a safe space. There are a lot of these things that we are very supportive of in order to help continue to do what we can in terms of the environment. In my personal experience, I have responded to ... multiple different hurricanes and natural disasters, and obviously the primary concern and every one of those is the safety of human life first and then doing everything that we can do to clean up and get the environment back to where it is. That includes deep water horizon oil spills off the coast in any of the different places. Even if a vessel inadvertently [or deliberately] spills fuel oil or other things like that into the water, the Coast Guard tracks those things and continues to hold individuals accountable for it so that we can continue to meet the best environmental standards.

Karen Lau

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Could you just describe some of the search and rescue missions that you've participated in when you were serving aboard cutters?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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If you read the book, *The Perfect Storm*, there is a storm mentioned at the very last chapter called the "Motherwell storm." I was a part of a very dedicated crew that went out and rescued the fishing vessel *Courtney Elizabeth* in that particular storm, and that was something that I will never forget, watching my fellow Coasties on deck doing everything they could to save those particular individuals and bring them back to safety into Newport, RI. I've stood watch and conducted a search and rescue missions in the Bering Sea. If conducted search and rescue missions off the California coast when a vessel caught fire. I've also conducted search and rescue missions down South in the eastern Pacific when fishermen have been caught adrift ... If they happen to celebrate Thanksgiving or something like that, then there isn't going to be that empty chair at the table when the family gets together, and they actually get to sit down with their families. For me, that gives me a measure of comfort that we are able to return those individuals back to their family and that they can continue to go on and hopefully do good for mankind.

Karen Lau

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Right, those are definitely a lot of sacrifices and heroic actions that you and your fellow cuttermen have done to save these people and return them to their families. You've served more than 12 years at sea, and you describe yourself as a "proud cutterman." When you think about the history of Asian American cutterman serving since 1853 and your own experience aboard cutters, what comes to mind?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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It is a life of sacrifice, but I want to emphasize the sacrifice of the families. They are the ones that are [left] behind, and we get caught up in our missions and we do those things, but they're the ones that have to deal with anything that comes in and the families don't choose to serve like we do. They become a part of this life. [During] hat separation and all the other things that that occur, the difficulties trying to juggle multiple different activities in school, work, and everything, they don't get a break during those time periods. I am always very mindful of the support of our families when we serve. I'm here because of a number of individuals that have gone before me and paved the path. I get to stand where I am and ... had the experiences I got to have because someone else blazed the path for me, so I'm eternally grateful for their sacrifices

and their family's sacrifices in going to sea, and I hope to continue that long tradition of individuals that go to sea in order to help mankind out there.

Karen Lau

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Absolutely. I think it's very interesting to think about cuttermen who really look forward to going out to sea and the experiences that they faced. In my very first interview with a Korean American Coast Guard veteran, he describes finally going at the sea and going to Alaska after two years working in a vault and just keeping track of important documents and thinking that this is the adventure that he signed up for.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Being able to see a rainbow at night by the light of the moon, watching baby dolphins being born, taking the ship and shutting off all the engines because you're surrounded by a pod of 150 different whales when they're reaching all around you, seeing the sunrise or the green flash when it sets, or those other things that you don't get to see anywhere else on the planet and just understanding the vastness and the power of the ocean is an experience that not everybody gets to have. Those are some of the experiences that make it a very special life.

Karen Lau

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Do you ever feel nostalgia or miss these experiences even now that you're in such a high position?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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What I miss is the cruise aboard the ships and the work, going out there and whether they're doing a search and rescue mission, law enforcement, protecting our nation, or protecting the environment, doing it with those unbelievably talented women and men who stand all around you and do that great work and you watch them just truly bloom and get into it. You count yourself lucky to be a part of that crew. That is something that I miss every single day. The only thing better is that I get to go home to my family every single night. But if you are going to serve, you are going to go out to sea. I hope you're lucky enough to get to serve with the Coast Guard women and men that are out there at sea. They are truly an exceptional bunch of individuals, and I missed that part every day.

Karen Lau

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I've heard from every service member I've interviewed that the military is a family. Do you have

any stories about your relationships and camaraderie with your shipmates and mentors aboard the cutters?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I'm very, very lucky. I think I am in touch with somebody from every unit that I've ever served with over the over the last 32 years. Quite unexpectedly, I was blessed to have my very first commanding officer when I was an ensign and just started out show up to my change of command at the Eleventh Coast Guard District. That was Rear Admiral John Tozzi. It was just awesome to see him again after so many different years, so many years to have them there and to go a little bit full circle in starting out brand new and then being here at the other end. It doesn't matter if they're enlisted or [retired] officers, being able to exchange books and reading lists, catching up on birthdays, and watching them retire or move on from the Coast Guard and do fantastic things [is universal]. I have another shipmate who just left a little while ago and got a note from him that he got into nursing school and is going to San Diego to pursue those dreams. It's just absolutely fantastic to see. It would be the same as you watching your cousins, brothers, and sisters go off and do something great. How happy you are from it is a pretty cool thing.

Karen Lau

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Thank you for sharing those stories. Among the different locations where you have served, including California, Alaska, Massachusetts, the Gulf of Mexico, and now the Eleventh District, which spans the California-Oregon border to Peru, what have been your most memorable experiences interacting with people and cultures?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Being there for the 200 anniversary of the birthday of Australia and watching them celebrate was amazing. Helping the natives of Alaska prepare for their caribou hunt and making sure they have life jackets on [was another memorable experience]. I have a picture of them all wearing their life jackets before they head out onto a Caribou hunt. Being able to help them with key equipment for their sustenance and hunting and going to Peru and Ecuador and talking to the fisherman there [were other significant interactions I've had]. I've been throughout the Caribbean in a number of different places and seeing how humanity has adapted and universally pursued fishing and other [survival methods]. What is apparent to me and what is something I think that is a key enabler for the U.S. military, for everybody here is our acceptance of the diversity of thought. It doesn't matter where you are from, what you believe in, or what you identify as. You come in with a different experience than the next person and you [have] the ability to harness all of that diversity of thought together. That's how we overcome these really difficult problems and how we are able to continually succeed over the last 232 years of Coast

Guard operations. But [as a] nation, [that goes] even further. To be able to do all that is one of our strengths and one of the things I think is incredibly important to remember.

Karen Lau

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I completely agree that we're at our best when we embrace all the cultures and diverse perspectives among our people. Previously, you've served as a staff judge advocate and practiced operational law, military justice, and legal assistance. Could you tell me about your experience practicing military law and what lessons from your time at the Academy and aboard cutters have helped you in this arena?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Academically, you can boil anything down to a black and white rule. What the operational side has taught me is that you also need to inject common sense, though with the law and real-world experiences, and you need to put it together to be able to deliver an answer to the operational person who has the legal question so that it's legal, ethically, and morally right. This supports the way I'm doing operations. Simply coming in and saying "yes" or "no" in the black and white fashion does harm to the legal program. It does harm to the operational program, so you need to truly understand what the customer needs and wants to do, then focus on how to get there legally, ethically, and morally in the right direction. We have an obligation as law enforcement agency as was mandated by Alexander Hamilton from the very beginning to treat our fellow Americans as fellow Americans and not anything else. To approach it in a very pragmatic manner, not be overbearing, or try to use positional power or law enforcement powers to change [the law] is a key part of doing that and making sure we get it right. We are all human beings. How we treat each other as such a key component of that. When you apply the legal rules to it, it shouldn't be a surprise. It should be the right way for the right reasons moving forward.

Karen Lau

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It's often said that justice is blind, but I've always felt that the experiences and heritages of people really help them navigate challenges, especially in the law. So, I was wondering, as an Asian American lawyer, how has your identity shaped your ideals of justice and equality?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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My father was one of the Japanese Americans who was uprooted from his home and was taken away. My grandfather's business was taken away. They were put into [an incarceration] camp. Their rights as U.S. citizens were taken away and then he was shipped to Arkansas. The idea that those rights are fungible or that somebody thought that those rights were fungible was one of the

main reasons that I became a lawyer. Those rights are for everybody no matter what, and it doesn't matter what the situation is and who your opponents are. Those inalienable rights are just that inalienable. We must protect that for each and every one of ourselves. Now, it doesn't mean we don't protect ourselves because our opponents will take advantage of the society that we've created here, but that is our core identity. That is who we are and to make sure that that doesn't happen again, that is absolutely one of those pillars on which I stand as a lawyer.

Karen Lau

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Thank you for sharing about the experiences of your father being incarcerated during World War II. I was wondering if you had any thoughts on the military's role in the Japanese American incarceration camps during World War II, especially how there were military leaders who were directly responsible for putting Japanese Americans in camps, and they were never really punished for this.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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That's a tough question because when you look to all of the different avenues of the government that came together to enact the law [and] the appeals ... they all worked in concert at the time to make it a lawful general order. It doesn't mean it was right, and obviously it's the only one of the few times that the government has ever apologized to a populace. So, we have evidence that it is not right even from the government's point of view, but at the time, those individuals that were simply carrying it out to do their job because all those other steps have been taken. It's kind of hard to fault them to a certain extent. I'm assuming that they treated [the Japanese Americans] humanely, that they didn't beat them up, that they weren't malicious, that they didn't take away to the extent maximum extent possible, the dignity, the respect, and everything else afforded to a fellow human being. Those that did take that away, of course, I have a problem with that. In the totality of it, it makes it a very difficult thing to fight with, which is why when you talk to that generation, my father's generation, the idea that the motto for the [442nd Regimental Combat Team] then became "Go for broke," meaning, "We were going to be more American than the Americans. We are going to show everybody, no matter how difficult it was, that we had every right to be a U.S. citizen and prove it as such." That's what drove the greatness for the unit.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Blind following of orders is not the right thing, but in the totality of it, when you have to look at it in that manner, how do you push back on it? It takes something that I'm not sure the nation had at that particular time to deal with. So, what I do know is that for many people and many other Americans, neighbors took over the land and farms. They took care of it while the Japanese were

in camps and then turned it back over to them when they came back ... It was many, many years later that they received some minor compensation for [their incarceration].

Karen Lau

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I think one of the most inspiring periods of World War II was the resistance by Japanese Americans like Fred Korematsu, who fought against Executive Order 9066 and refused to have their civil rights and liberties get taken away. Throughout my years, I've often heard the phrase, "dissent is patriotic," that you can love your country, but also believe that what it's doing is morally unjust. So, I was wondering what you think of patriotism and that phrase, "dissent is patriotic."

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I believe it's foundational to the United States. We started out in dissent to the king. We started out in dissent to the Church of England. We started out as individuals that wanted to manifest our own destiny and move out ... When you have that executive order and then Korematsu's [resistance], absolutely they are brave. That is what I was talking about in terms of bravery and pushing back. But when the Supreme Court and others all line up ... dissent is kind of hard when every avenue of the government is pushed in in the U.S.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I think dissent is absolutely at the very core part of it. When we talk about taking in different opinions, you have to take in the opinions that you don't like either, the dissenting opinions. Otherwise, we're all going to think alike, and it defeats the whole purpose of what we were talking about all the way through. You have to acknowledge it and hopefully learn. Figure out why they are dissenting. Peaceful demonstration is absolutely a very important and critical part of the United States experience. To be able to do that, to change civil rights, to change human rights, to change workers' rights, all those things have been accomplished because people stood up and dissented. I applaud it absolutely every day.

Karen Lau

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With what you brought up of people dissenting and protesting [issues] that were unjust, I'm thinking about how during your childhood, the Vietnam War was [happening] and there must have been so many protests [happening] in the West Coast ... Do you remember any of that and did that help you think about going into the military at all?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

0:41:19.140 --> 0:42:3.160

Yes, it was actually a balance. Wow. You're the first person who's ever asked me that question. My mom grew up in Germany during World War II and was bombed and strafed by the British. My dad had his experiences that we've already talked about. For both of them, war was the absolute most important thing ever. Don't get me wrong, they had tremendous respect for the military ... but they never wanted the world to see another World War II. That was born out of their experiences.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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As my cousins were growing up and the Vietnam War came along, they were a part of both the protests and support. The political spectrum in my family stretches the whole gamut of it. I have a cousin that absolutely protested and decided to go to Canada, and I respect him and his decisions and all the other things he stood for. He stood on his principle. He chose to dissent. He chose to do it in a peaceful manner, and he chose to sacrifice for it. He couldn't come back to the United States for many, many years because of it. That is all born out of out of my opinion that the sacrifices [made by] my dad's generation in order to make sure that the United States was [free] and those things we call freedom, liberties, patriotism, or rights, that they have the inalienable right to those things.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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As a as a serving member and an officer in the military, I abstained from the politics of it all, but those things are imbedded in our oath. When we raise our right hand and we swear the oath to serve, it's against all enemies, foreign and domestic. It doesn't just say outside. So, we have a duty and a responsibility to uphold the Constitution. And they take that very, very seriously.

Karen Lau

0:43:47.570 --> 0:44:3.0

Speaking of upholding rights both at home and abroad, during the pandemic, there has been an increase of violence against the Asian American community. How has this affected you and have you used your voice to speak out against the anti-Asian hate in any way?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

0:44:4.670 --> 0:44:8.700

I actually created a couple of different ways that we did this. We did listening sessions. We provided support groups to individuals that were affected in the military as well as at the Coast Guard Academy. As a whole service, we provided some listening sessions and support that we created to help those individuals deal with what's going on. In many cases, [the hate] didn't stop

just because it was the pandemic. Just last week, there were two different attacks that were carried out against Asian Americans and so I don't want to say that this is in the past. This is an ongoing [issue] and we must continue to push back against hate in every form so that everyone can enjoy their existence here.

Karen Lau

0:45:14.420 --> 0:45:38.170

It's great that you were able to organize listening sessions and support the mental health of Asian American service members, especially with all the existing stressors that are already in their life and now having to worry about the safety of their family members, who they are separated from at home. I think one of the best ways to counter this violence is to increase the visibility of Asian Americans.

Karen Lau

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I know that the Coast Guard and other branches in recent years have taken a lot of strides to diversify their ranks. In some of my interviews, the idea of the "bamboo ceiling" has been brought up, [the notion] that historically, it's been more difficult for minorities seeking promotions in the Armed Forces. Do you believe that the "bamboo ceiling" still exists?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I don't think so. My boss is Vice Admiral Andrew Tiongson, and he is the proud son of a Filipino senior chief. And now he's a three-star Admiral, one of the six most senior individuals in the United States Coast Guard. There are other flag officers [who] are Asian American. We are a product of those individuals that came into the service though 30 years ago. The number of individuals during the time period of dealing with the Vietnam War and the aftermath, how many of those individuals saw the military as a viable path as a [career] or saw an individual that they could identify with? We're still dealing with some first, but the good news is we are dealing with firsts, right? So that Admiral Tiongson is the first Asian American three-star in the Coast Guard. I'm the first Japanese American Admiral. People can see themselves in the future in those [positions]. When we look to the academies like the Coast Guard Academy ... close to 40% of the incoming class last year was Asian American. That means if you look out into the future, when those individuals achieve flag rank in the time period that we had, [it will become] normal.

Karen Lau

0:48:10.50 --> 0:48:17.500

As the first Japanese American to make flag rank [in the Coast Guard], do you have any advice for students who aspire to be the first at something?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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I will tell you that there are probably three things that if you do these three things, I'm pretty sure you can achieve anything that you want to. One, you have to have a positive attitude. It has to be positive in that it's infectious. It drives everybody else around you. If you see the positive possibilities, everybody else will around you will, too. And so, showing up, being happy, greeting people, treating them with respect, all those other things change the very dynamic of the workforce around you. Two, there is no substitute for hard work or the journey. You've got to work. There is just nothing that will change that, and you have to be willing to do long, hard hours. There is a sense of satisfaction that comes from it as well and you get confidence. And finally, you can't let a problem block your way. You have to be innovative and that's where things like continuous learning, acceptance of divergences of thought, all those other [ways] you look at the problem [come into play]. As we have talked about for the for the lawyer piece, you find a way that's legally, ethically, and morally the right way forward, no matter what is standing in your path. And then you go through it. If you do those three things, you can achieve anything you want to in this life. It doesn't have to be in the military.

Karen Lau

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I think in about just under a minute you made the best graduation commencement address that could ever possibly be made, so thank you. My next question for you is what legacy do you hope to impart to future Asian Americans who will enlist in the Coast Guard, and have you served as a mentor to ever any service members?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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Yes, I don't know if I'm a good mentor. You have to ask them, right? But I try to dedicate a good portion of my week to many, many different individuals and helping them. I just had a mentoring session. I met somebody for coffee, we talked for an hour and a half this morning. I have another one tomorrow scheduled to talk about emotional intelligence and the aspects that it brings to a leader. I think as a leader that is absolutely your obligation to help pave the path for everybody else around you. I guess that's my legacy. I think the most important thing is that my boys are proud of me, and my wife is proud of me. I see [myself] more as a good person than whatever rank I have on my shoulder. As long as I'm a good person and I can go through life that way, that's okay with me. And that could be as a janitor or it could be as an Admiral, it doesn't matter. Being a good person is by far one of the most important things.

Karen Lau

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I feel very grateful that my students in the future will be able to hear these pieces of advice from

you, but I know that across the country there are so many students who won't be able to. So why do you think that Asian American history should be taught in schools, especially the stories of Asian American veterans?

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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The reason [AAPI history] should be taught is that we are stronger when we're all together, and if you only learn about half, then you've only learned half the situation. When you look at Asian Americans and what they've done in the medical field, in the military, as astronauts, or in business, we have an amazing legacy that has been blazed by our individuals. At the very, very beginning, some of the most profound seafarers were members of the Asian naval services, whether it was Korea, China, or Japan. And as they set sail around the globe, that's our legacy as well. To simply not recognize that or not incorporate that as part of who we are as Americans is a ... disservice. Every one of those individuals that helped blaze the path so that we can be where we are right now, recognizing them is part of the manners of our profession, what we like to say in the Coast Guard. We should and need to acknowledge their sacrifices because we are better today because of the many things that they have done for us. So, we need to teach it. We need to acknowledge it. The nation should be proud of it.

Rear Admiral Andrew Sugimoto

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If you look at the simple story of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, one of America's most decorated units, how can you not be proud of the stories and their accomplishments? [Being proud of them is] not just because I'm a Japanese American or a descendant of individuals that served with that particular unit. That's simply by being an American looking at the great things that they had done. That is a legacy that they and many others have laid for us. I look at other individuals in the military like General Nakasone, who heads up the NSA, there is a towering intellect that has led us in so many different ways. We are safer as a nation because of him, and we can learn a lot from his path of dignity and character that he has led. I hope that inspires other people to continue to look into Asian American history and to understand the legacy that is left by the richness of those many veterans that have served.

Karen Lau

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Thank you so much, Admiral Sugimoto. It's been such a pleasure to get to learn about your story and to have this conversation with you today.