

GUEST: TAKESHI YOSHIHARA: AN HISTORIC JOURNEY

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Have I experienced failure? Many times. Have I stumbled along the way? Many times. Have I faced dead ends during my career? Certainly.

Takeshi Yoshihara is a humble man who holds a special place in history. After growing up in poverty and spending three years in a Japanese American internment camp, he was chosen to do something no Japanese American had ever done before. Takeshi Yoshihara, next on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Takeshi Yoshihara's childhood on the West Coast was not easy. His parents lost everything in the Depression, and again during World War II. At one point, he and his family of eight lived in a leaky shack without electricity. Despite his hardships, Yoshihara persevered and made history just out of high school. His journey started in 1949, with an invitation from a member of Congress; a letter that this self - described loner never expected to receive.**

If I had my choice, I would have picked anybody but myself. And I'll tell you why. Here I was, such an introvert; I lived my own life, I was not socially aware. On the other hand, those attending the Naval Academy, I think ninety percent were varsity athletes, they had letters or stripes on their sweaters, and they were class presidents and Eagle Scouts. And the only thing on my resume, aside from my grades, was the fact that one semester during lunch, I volunteered to be -- they called it a patrolman. So, I got to wear the belt, and during lunch hour, I stood at the crosswalk to let students cross. And for that, I got a certificate, which is the only recognition that I had ever received in high school. But the congressman wrote me this letter saying, You have done very well in the competitive examination, I'm considering appointing you to the Naval Academy, but don't say anything about it, because I have some policy issues to address before you're notified. So, we agreed to that announcement as an opportunity. For me, it was that or nothing. I'd tried for scholarships; nothing came along, and I was resigned, as so many of us in those days, to find a job probably in gardening and earn some money for the family. So, this was my

only chance. And what a wonderful chance, I thought, because they won't charge you tuition, they won't charge you for your food or for your room. In fact, they would pay you to go to school. And accepting it was beyond my dreams. And so, we waited, and sure enough, a month later came and he sent another letter saying, You are appointed to the Naval Academy.

It was a big deal. Takeshi Yoshihara was the first Japanese American appointed to the U.S. Naval Academy. However, Takeshi was worried he'd never spend a day in class for several reasons. For one, he'd have to pay his own way across country from Washington State to Annapolis, Maryland, and he feared he would not pass the physical exam.

Well, I had been wearing these glasses since freshman in high school.

That's what you were worried about; your eyesight.

I was worried; very worried. Because that was the leading cause of people being disqualified in the physical.

Ah ...

What I did was, I just prayed to God that He would heal me, and I just took off my glasses and for the last few months, the strength of my eyes, I think [CHUCKLES] ...

Wow.

The other thing, of course, is, I got sick on anything that moved, whether in a car or a bus. I'd never been on a boat, but I can imagine being on a boat.

So, you were a seasick person applying for the Naval Academy.

That's right. And I had deep reservations about that; very deep reservations. Yes.

That's a lot of reasons not to do it, isn't it? I mean, you have find you way for free, you were broke.

That's right; that's right.

You didn't have the eyesight.

That's right.

But you did it anyway.

Well, we had a family debate about that. And my older sister was a strong advocate, because she had a lot of fears about me, I guess, not being able to survive in that environment in the first place. So, she was the one that said, You must get a roundtrip ticket, because it's cheaper, and will make sure you get home. But my argument made out that I'm just trusting God; He'll find other ways for me to get back, and this is my step of faith to just buy a one - way ticket. So, that sounded good to the rest of the family. [CHUCKLE] So, I appeared before the physical, would you know it, the first question on this long list of do you or do not things, have you had this illness or that illness; the first question is, Do you have a serious problem with seasickness?

And your problem was serious; right? I mean, you got sick in cars.

I got sick in cars.

Yeah.

I paused a long time, and I think I answered all the other questions to come to that. And I decided, well, for one thing, I want to be truthful. I don't want to say no, and they find out a month later that I should have checked yes. And besides, the good Lord's gonna carry me through whatever direction He wants anyway, and if this isn't for me, there's something else for me. I felt that faith. And so, I checked, yes.

You do get seasick?

I get seasick. And as far as my eye examination, I think it was at the end of a hectic day for the medical technicians, and I think they just kinda waved me through.

And so, Takeshi Yoshihara became the first Japanese American sworn in as a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy. His nickname, Tak. As part of his studies, he had to spend two summers on a ship; he did, in fact, get seasick. He was so violently ill on his second tour that he almost got kicked out of school.

Well, the saying goes, when you get sick, you're afraid you're gonna die, then you get so sick so you're afraid you're not going to die. And I was in that latter stage for three weeks coming back. I wished I could jump over the rail and just end it all, because it was that bad. But when I got back in the fall, the authorities convened the board, and they said, Reports are that you're unfit for the Navy, and we're going to discharge you now, and will not let you permit to go any further, you will not graduate with your class, and you'll be just discharged. And I agreed with everything they said, except I said, Well, if you look at my records, my very first physical questionnaire and every subsequent one for four years, I put what I honestly thought I was, which is seasick, and nobody questioned me about that. And I think that took them aback a little bit, and they checked it, and they called me back and said, You know, you're right, we should have kicked you out before you entered. But now that you're in, we're gonna make sure that we give you the opportunity to graduate. You'll get your diploma, but you will not get a commission to be an officer in the United States Navy.

How was your school experience in Annapolis as the first and only Asian in the class?

Well, it was more than that, because here, I had come from a family... well, we were at the chopstick stage, for eating, and all of a sudden you go there; formal dining table, linen covered white tablecloths, and all the utensils out. All of them. And I'm looking at it, and looking to the side, left and right, and figuring out what's the proper utensil to use.

You didn't have computers in those days, so you couldn't do a Wiki - how

[CHUCKLE]

That's right.

Which one is which?

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That's right. And that went with so many other things. I never really learned how to Make a tie, for example. We had to wear neckties a lot. And all those other things I had to learn.

The things that were common to the other kids who were kind of BMOCs, big man on campus in their hometowns.

That's right; that's right. So, I think that's part of the wisdom of the Naval Academy, that they never let you be assigned into a single room. They know that you could get help from your classmates and your roommates, and I think that's a good way that they have there. So, I always had classmates or roommates throughout my four years, and I think that was a good experience.

And they mentored you, to an extent?

Oh, yes. We just became best friends. But being plebes -- we were called plebes as soon as we were ... as we took the oath of office as a midshipman, which all students at the Naval Academy are called. It was a shock and awe experience, because what they do is, they immediately do everything to strip you of any of your personal habits, personal ways. What they want to create is an empty bowl in which they start building up your character, your personality, your habits, things like that. So, I think maybe some of these hard football programs when they go out to football camp, they may face that kind of circumstance too, where they want to break you down, then build you up. And that was called Plebe Summer, and for seventeen hours a day, for six weeks, the one single thing you have is pressure. Physical pressure, mental pressure, moral pressures.

And the pressure, you mean to say, it was never racial discrimination?

I never experienced racial discrimination.

Even right after the war like this?

That's right. I experienced a lot of mischievous tricks, but never racially motivated.

Eighteen - year - old Tak Yoshihara adapted to life in the Academy. In the beginning, he struggled to stand out in a very competitive field.

You wouldn't believe how competitive in those days the Naval Academy was. It was important whether you stood tenth, or twelfth, or a hundred or five hundred. And we started out with twelve hundred. Everything was based on competition. It's changed a great deal now, but back in 1949, your class standing was the most important thing, and it was cumulative over four years. And there were people in my class that were repeating classes that they had taken. My best friend at our wedding, who lives here, he had already graduated from Yale in engineering. I don't know why he wanted to start all over again, but he was taking the exact same class in engineering. So, he played Bridge most of the time. But, here I was struggling, thinking I might what they called bilge out, which is flunk out, which many did. But, I loved academics, and that was my source of self - esteem in high school. My only

source of self - esteem was to get good grades, and so, I worked twice as hard as anybody else, and I'd take home my grades, and my parents would be happy for me, and I would feel built up.

So, you had the discipline.

I made the discipline, because that was a good source for building up my own self - esteem, when I had nothing. And so, I carried that through the Academy, and I kept plugging away, and plugging away, and plugging away. And I'd start climbing up the ladder, so to speak, in my class standing. But then, every week, you knew where you stood. You took a quiz in every class every week, and on Saturday morning they'd put your results on a board in numerical order. So it was very, very competitive.

Did you enjoy that competition, the academic competition?

I don't think anybody really enjoyed that competition. And I might say there was one exception. Everybody took the identical course, except we had a choice in language. And, we had a choice of French, German, or Russian. I chose Russian, because I knew everybody had taken French or German in high school, and I wanted a level playing field. And sure enough, nobody had taken Russian before, so that was my entry into foreign languages. But everything else identical course, identical exam, and then at the end of the week, you knew where you stood.

Well, from twelve hundred with whom you started, how many ended?

Nine hundred and twelve. And they left for a number of reasons. Just the environment was not good for some, and academics were not good for some. So, I don't know why they left, but there was about a thirty percent reduction in attrition.

So, that must have been some day when you graduated.

Yes.

How did you celebrate?

Got married two hours after graduation.

So, you were busy with something other than Annapolis?

[CHUCKLE] I was very busy with my studies, but along the way, I met my wife Elva, and just fell in love with her. She had gone to a college in Boston, and transferred to Johns Hopkins University to get her bachelor's degree in nursing. And she graduated at about the same time that I did from the Naval Academy, so we were both wondering where we're going after we graduate. Of course, I was in the Navy, and not a place that she would travel to, I'm sure, so we decided best that we get married, and that's what happened. [CHUCKLE]

The year was 1953; and while Tak Yoshihara was a newlywed, he thought his chance at a career in the U.S. Navy was over, until, one of his instructors at the Academy stepped forward.

He was an officer at the Academy who had been grievously injured during the Pearl Harbor attack or the Japanese attacked on his ship, on his battleship. And

he had come from three generations of admiral, and he had every expectation to succeed as part of his family tradition. Well, I didn't know him well; I just took one lecture from him, but he heard about it. Well, as a result of Pearl Harbor, he had lost his leg and he was the only officer on campus walking with a wooden leg in uniform. So, they had made an exception for him. And he contacted me and said, I know a remote part of the Navy you've never heard about where officers never need to go to sea, and I just want to know if you're interested in serving in the Navy. Well, I jumped at that, because it would have been a shame for me to complete Annapolis and be reported that I was discharged for being unfit for service in the Navy. So, I jumped at that, and within a matter of a week or so, he had gone to Washington, D.C. and had a waiver prepared for me so that I could ultimately join what was called the Civil Engineer Corps in the Navy.

But first, you had to get a civil engineering degree?

Yes; that meant I had to wait a year, and I would be sent to a very nice school called Rensselaer Institute of Polytechnics, a private college in Upstate New York, where I got my bachelor's degree in civil engineering, and then I received my civil engineering degree and became officially a part of this navy that I knew nothing about.

And what did you do as a civil engineer in the Navy?

Well, first of all, I had like ten different stations. [CHUCKLE] But my first trip was out to Midway Island. From New York, traveled.

So, definitely not the cushy first station; right?

No.

With the atoll. [CHUCKLE]

It was middle of the Pacific. You've heard of Midway Island.

Gooney bird central.

It's only one mile by two miles. And when I got there, Elva was pregnant, and the day our son arrived ...

Did Elva give birth on Midway?

Yes. She was the first one that year to give birth on Midway; it was in March. And it coincided in 1957, when a tsunami hit the Pacific that very night.

Oh!

So, she gave birth while I was out clearing out the airfield which had been inundated with trash and everything else. And so, we have memories of our little time in Midway together. [CHUCKLE]

You know, nothing you've described has been really easy so far in your whole life.

Well, no, I thought it was not that difficult. From Midway, I went to Las Vegas, and nobody knows that there's a naval base in Las Vegas.

Who would think a landlocked state, right?

They don't now; they did it for a very short time, and I happened to be along when they needed somebody to be in Las Vegas. So, I had an interesting career there. But the rest of my career was more peanut butter type things,

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where I built things, and took care of the sewage and the roads, and everything else, interspersed by opportunities for education. And that's what I loved so much to do from way back. That was a passion for me that I developed in high school. I always had a passion for education; still do.

That passion for education drove Tak Yoshihara to get two master's degrees, and a PhD, while serving in the U.S. Navy where he rose to the rank of Captain. At one point, he was sent to Vietnam, where he was the deputy in charge of construction for all U.S. military services. He helped build ports, runways, and barracks during the war.

Periodically, the Navy ... I think it's kind of a carrot - and - stick approach. When you get to the point where you've completed your obligated service, or thinking about leaving and maybe going to school, or getting a job somewhere, they'd put this carrot out and say, If you're interested in graduate school, we've got a few openings and you're welcome to apply. And so, you can understand how grateful I am, how the Navy changed my life. Here, I may have been a laborer as a gardener following in my father's footsteps, or being here in Honolulu, living in paradise. So, I credit a great deal to the wonderful, wonderful government that I'm so proud of.

Somehow, I just don't picture you ordering people around.

Well, I don't either. I would have never thought ... entering the Navy in any form, whether it's the lowest enlisted man or anybody, being able to get up and shout, Don't give up the Navy, or Don't sink the Navy, or these famous sayings that thank God, I've never been in that position to do so.

But you've led men.

Yes.

And later, women.

My styles have been very different, and I'm grateful for that opportunity.

Well, what was your military style, your naval style?

Well, I like to say that whenever I had people under me, I never forgot my roots. I wanted to be an encourager. I try to find ways for people to realize their hopes and dreams. I was a helper, and a leader can be a helper.

In 1974, after twenty - five years in the Navy, Takeshi Yoshihara retired and moved to his wife's hometown here in Hawaii. Soon after, he took a job working for Hawaii U.S. Senator Spark Matsunaga.

I worked for him; I agreed to help him for two years. Elva was teaching at the Kapiolani Community College, so I felt I could take off two years, and they were one of the most wonderful years of my life. A senator who is one of one hundred most powerful people in the country, being senators, and I saw the world in a different light from power; the power that they have.

Did that necessitate a move to D.C.?

I moved to D.C. We kept our house, and Elva took her second year of teaching as a sabbatical, and so, we lived the second year in Washington, D.C. Had a marvelous time. Going to that capitol every day, and just being in awe of all the senators and congressmen, and hearing them speak, and that sort of thing. It was a wonderful experience.

There you are, back to government service. Did you do other government service?

Well, I returned, and the federal government established and wanted me to head a Federal Energy Office out of the Federal Building here, which I agreed to do, and it covered the entire Pacific. I did that for three years, and through Governor Ariyoshi, I got the privilege of starting the first State Energy Office in the State. I did that, and then I later worked for Governor Waihee. Both governors were wonderful people.

Throughout Tak Yoshihara's life of ups and downs, his love for his country and his faith in God never wavered.

Very much so, Leslie. I'm glad you mentioned that. Because, how can a family of eight children be so blessed.

In the Depression, during a world war.

We're still all alive; all eight of us, from eighty - eight to seventy. And our closeness is as tight as can be; and it's because of one thing, God at the center of each of our lives. Have I experienced failure? Many times. Have I stumbled along the way? Many times. Have I faced dead ends during my career? Certainly. Well, what got me through is, in every case I had stretcher bearers, beginning with God maybe sending people on the way. They could have been friends, family certainly, people praying for me. God has given me the opportunity that I've sometimes taken, where I could pray for others, where I could, in raising my children act as a stretcher bearer in their growing up. And then, when I took command or supervised people that I had to lead, I could be a stretcher bearer for them. I could inspire them, I could encourage them, I could hope to see them fulfill their aspirations; and to that extent, I was a stretcher bearer. So, we can all identify, if we've gone through life's trials and triumphs, as both being a patient as well as a stretcher bearer. And we're blessed.

Takeshi "Tak" Yoshihara watched his younger son follow in his footsteps. David Yoshihara also graduated from the Naval Academy and also became a Captain in the U.S. Navy. And just before our conversation in 2013, Tak and his wife Elva happily celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary. Mahalo to Takeshi "Tak" Yoshihara, the first Japanese American ever appointed to the U.S. Naval Academy and a career naval officer. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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Does Elva speak Pidgin at all?

No, she does not at all. I mean, she's third generation, so her parents were like me; they spoke English. So, she never spoke Japanese or Pidgin. She grew up in this area, and I think she understands pidgin.

I'm sure she does.

Well, yeah, we all do to a certain extent. I love Frank DeLima.

[CHUCKLE]

I can understand him. [CHUCKLE]