Korea's Legendary Admiral

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One man had already carved his place in history. The other was an obscure naval officer. One man held the proud title of Regent of Japan, earned by conquering that entire island nation, which he unified after a long period of feudal wars. The other had limped through a troubled career to the mere admiralship of one part of the coast of a single province of Korea. One man entertained the Emperor of Japan in his palatial house called the Mansion of Pleasure; the other fine-tuned the details of cooking rice for the troops. One man launched a huge land-sea invasion force. The other had just 24 warships at his disposal when the conflict began. One man plotted strategy from the rear, in godlike detachment, while the other shared enough of his men's risks to take an enemy bullet in his shoulder. And yet the humble commander outfought and outfoxed the Regent and, in the end, the path of empire changed course.

The Korean admiral's name was Yi Sun-Shin (1545-1598). He rode to glory when the Japanese launched a full-scale invasion of Korea in 1592, the brainchild of the Regent, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598). There followed over six years of war up and down the Korean peninsula. In the West the war is known, if it is known as all, as the Hideyoshi Invasions or the Imjin War, but the latter is a pale translation of the Korean name: "the Japanese-started Invasion of the Year of the Dragon." The Japanese call it the "Choson Campaign"--as Korea was then called. The Chinese have a name for it too—

"the Eastern Pacification"--and not merely because they were keen observers. As in the Korean War of 1950-1953, so in the 1590s, war in Korea led to Chinese intervention and on a massive scale. To Koreans, the Hideyoshi Invasions — as we may as well call the war – is one of the major events of their history. They see it as a devastating, humiliating, but heroic struggle that drove out the invader, saved the nation, and gave rise to one of the country's heroes: Admiral Yi Sun-Shin.

Admiral Yi is remembered today in South Korea as a mythic figure like George Washington. A man whose statue stands in nearly every city and town in the land is likely to be the subject of tall tales. Yet there is no need to exaggerate Admiral Yi's achievements. Few commanders in history, whether on land or at sea, have ever accomplished as much. A list of his qualities reads like a roster of the complete general: he was patriotic, self-sacrificing, a shrewd strategist, a tactician who smoothly mixed courage and caution, a technological innovator, a superb quartermaster, a fine administrator, a natural leader of men. Trained in land warfare, he was flexible enough not merely to adapt to the sea but to master it. He knew how ships worked and made them work better; he kept his eyes on the complicated tides and currents off Korea's coast and used them to his advantage against Japan.

His story begins in February 1591, when Yi Sun-Shin, then 45 years old, was appointed Fleet Admiral of the eastern coast of Cholla Province in southwestern Korea. A month before, across what Koreans call the East Sea and Japanese call the Sea of Japan, a remarkable event took place. The warlord Hideyoshi became master of all Japan, after having obtained the surrender of his last enemy's fortress, which he had besieged. By force of arms, in years of fighting, he had unified the islands.

Less than a year later, in autumn 1591, Hideyoshi gave the order for a new military undertaking, a huge expedition abroad. Some evidence suggests that he had been planning this campaign already for many years. With more than 500,000 now-unemployed soldiers, it was perhaps inevitable that Hideyoshi would divert military energies outward rather than risk the outbreak of civil war at home. Perhaps it merely reflected his huge ambition.

Hideyoshi appears to have believed in his own invincibility. He had risen from obscurity, from the lowly status of a peasant. Canny and brilliant, Hideyoshi had a lean and hungry look out of Shakespeare. He was short and thin and his sunken face earned him the unflattering nicknames of "monkey" and "bald rat."

A huge force was gathered for Hideyoshi's expedition. A base was constructed in the southern port city of Nagoya. Special gold and silver coins were issued. Orders were given for soldiers and sailors, ships and weapons, cargoes and commanders. Hideyoshi himself did not take part in the invasion but his generals included the leading *daimyo*, that is, feudal lords, of western Japan. Chief among them were Kato Kiyomasa (1562-1611) and Konishi Yukinaga (ca.1558-1600). They were personal rivals who could hardly have been more different, since Kato was a Buddhist of the traditional *samurai* or warrior class while Konishi was a Catholic and son of a wealthy merchant. Christians were heavily represented in the invasion army, since many of the *daimyo* of western Japan had converted.

On May 23, 1592, the vanguard of the Japanese army, 150,000 men strong in all, began landing in southern Korea near Pusan. They had just crossed the Tsushima Straits, a treacherous waterway, 180-miles wide, that separates Korea and Japan. It was the

beginning of a vast undertaking: ambitious, unabashedly aggressive, and stunning in its vanity and ignorance.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi aimed at nothing less than the conquest of all China, then ruled by the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). He sometimes spoke of capturing India too. He is supposed to have said of invading China that, "To take by force this virgin of a country, Ming, will be [as easy] as for a mountain to crush an egg."

Korea was all but an afterthought in Hideyoshi's plans. Of relatively little value to him in and of itself, Korea served a strategic purpose as a land bridge between Japan and China. Korea was, as a later Chinese ruler would say, "the jaws of the dragon's mouth." A modern Japanese analyst turned the matter around by describing Korea as "a dagger pointed at Japan's heart."

To invade China in 1592, the Japanese would have to march north up the Korean Peninsula, but they did not expect any difficulties along the way. For all practical purposes, Korea was disarmed.

The Korean state or Choson, as it was then called, was an agrarian and bureaucratic monarchy, ruled from the capital city, Seoul, by King Sonjo (r. 1567-1608). The Korean elite prized learning and courtliness; they looked down on military virtues. As a result, Korea had virtually no full-scale field army. An enormously powerful class of landowning nobles ruled the provinces and kept the power of the central government limited.

Korea was not, however, without defenses. A combination of geography, culture, technology, and diplomacy made Korea potentially a formidable enemy, even without an army.

The land itself was Korea's first defense. The Korean peninsula's roughly 85,000 square miles (about the size of the states of New York and Pennsylvania combined) are almost entirely mountainous and in 1592 Korea lacked good roads. An invading army, if forced to bring its supplies overland to China, would find the going slow and frustrating.

To make matters worse, the Korean people were tough and deeply patriotic. Effective leadership could organize them into guerrilla soldiers, who could attack Japanese supply dumps, raid Japanese columns on the road, and deny the Japanese access to the countryside and its food.

The obvious alternative for Japan was to move as much manpower and supplies by sea as possible. That, in turn, required merchant ships and a navy to protect them but Japan was not a naval power. Paradoxically, although Japan was a chain of islands, it was land power and not sea power that the Japanese had built up. Few of the ships in Hideyoshi's armada were fast or maneuverable. In fact, most were little more than transport vessels. At sea, Japan was vulnerable.

Korea, by contrast, had a strong naval tradition and genuine warships. True, the Korean navy in 1592 was relatively small and inexperienced, but sound tactics and inspiring leadership could give Korea the edge. The defenders could snap the invaders' naval lifeline. By doing so, they would close off Japan's main avenue of advance and re-supply. Japanese strategy would face a crisis.

Diplomacy could turn that crisis into a disaster. For centuries, Korea had enjoyed close relations with China. In western terms, we might say that China was the suzerain and Korea was its vassal. But the reality was both tighter and looser. In terms of theory, the relationship between the two countries was based on a family model. The Koreans

spoke of their relationship to China as *sadae*, that is, "serving the superior," as a younger male might serve an older male in a traditional family.

This relationship brought practical benefits to both parties. China gave Korea autonomy in its own affairs in return for loyalty in foreign relations. Korea got the benefit of a powerful Chinese army to defend it without the political and financial burden of a big Korean defense establishment. For its part, China was guaranteed a friendly and subservient state to its south. Ever since the establishment of the first Chinese empire in 221 B.C., China has considered it essential to control or neutralize Korea to protect its flank against northern "barbarians." These included not just the Japanese but also such continental peoples as the Huns, the Mongols, and the Manchus. For China, a friendly Korea was a buffer, a hostile Korea was a danger.

Yet each side suffered from a matching drawback: inflexibility. China and Korea were committed to each other. Neither power would find it easy to engage in that betrayal which, throughout history, has been the price for survival that many states have eagerly paid.

If the Koreans thought that they had family relations with China, they considered their ties with Japan to be merely contractual and hence revocable. Add to this Korea's boundless respect for Chinese culture and its traditional contempt for Japan. Koreans considered China to be the fountainhead of civilization while the Japanese were thought of as pirates and barbarians. It was all but inconceivable for Korea to betray China by allowing Japanese armies to march up the peninsula and attack Korea's suzerain.

When Japan threatened invasion, therefore, and demanded Korean submission, the Koreans refused. In fact, most of the courtiers would not even take the threat

seriously. They neglected to put the country on a defensive footing, which all but guaranteed that the Japanese would win pile up victories at first. It also left the Korean people vulnerable to the mercy of the invaders, and in an era not known for soldierly respect for civilians.

Yet even had Korea been mobilized, it would have had a tough time against Japan's advantages in land-fighting. Japanese soldiers had been steeled in the long wars for unification. The Korean soldier's main weapons were the bow and arrow and the spear. The Japanese had muskets. They had borrowed musket technology from the Portuguese and by the 1590s, the Japanese manufactured their own guns.

So in spite of its well-walled cities and fortresses, Korea fell rapidly to the invader. Korean soldiers put up little resistance; some blundered; others panicked. Although the Japanese began the invasion with a huge mistake, the Koreans took no advantage of it. The Japanese invasion force had been divided into three groups, and their arrival was supposed to have been coordinated. But most of the fleet arrived several days late, after the vanguard had already landed at Pusan. Had the Koreans been organized, they could have crushed the divided Japanese navy. But the Korean government refused until the end to believe that the Japanese would carry through their threat of invasion.

After landing in May, the Japanese headed northward in a two-pronged attack, with Katō and Konishi each commanding an arm. It took less than a month to march from Pusan to Seoul, which Konishi's men captured on June 12. On July 22, they took Pyongyang. Katō and his troops marched northeastward, where they not only reached the Tumen River, Korea's border with Manchuria, but even crossed it.

Yet little of Korea's rugged and largely roadless territory was actually in the invader's hands. The northernmost part of the country, to which the king and his court had fled, were still free. So was the southwestern province of Cholla. Protected by a fortified pass, Cholla was economically vital as the nation's breadbasket, and strategically vital because of its harbors. In one of them sat the naval commander of the eastern coast of Cholla, a little known leader who was poised to display genius. He was Yi Sun-Shin.

Admiral Yi's career up to then had displayed mixed results. He was born into a family of poor scholars. As a youth, he drove his father to distraction by choosing a soldier's rather than a scholar's career. But Yi Sun-Shin failed at first to be admitted to the army when he broke his leg during the horsemanship exam. He was thirty-two before entering the military. Between 1577 and 1591 he served in a variety of posts on the northern border, in Seoul, and in a naval garrison in Cholla. These various assignments showed him to be outstandingly brave, efficient, disciplined, cunning, and a good administrator. But they also demonstrated a near total lack of ability to navigate the treacherous political waters of Korea's highly factionalized government. Despite winning a big victory over the tribesmen who crossed into northern Korea on raids, Yi Sun-Shin was practically forced out of the military by jealous political enemies. He only survived thanks to the influence of a boyhood friend, Yu Song-Nyong, who became prime minister. It was he who had Yi Sun-Shin appointed fleet admiral of eastern Cholla in 1591, on the eve of the Hideyoshi Invasion.

The crisis brought out the best in Admiral Yi. "His face," said Yu Song-Nyong, "is full of grace like that of an elegant scholar, sober and reflective." Traditional Korean

portraits depict Admiral Yi with a beard and moustache and a serious demeanor. A student of the Chinese military thinker Sun Tzu, Admiral Yi emphasized the importance of cunning and discipline in war. The imperturbable admiral displayed a combination of intelligence, courage, and patriotism that allowed him to leverage maximum force at minimum effort. It was a stunning demonstration of tactical genius. And much of it can be traced in the war diary and memos to court which the literate admiral penned and which were preserved for posterity.

The Korean navy began the war with several advantages over its Japanese opponents. The Koreans knew the peninsula's treacherous coastal waters intimately, and they could count on logistical and intelligence help from the local population. Korean warships were heavier than their Japanese counterparts, which allowed the Koreans to deploy more and bigger cannons on board. The result was considerable superiority in firepower. This more than compensated for Japan's huge numerical advantage in its number of ships.

But Korea suffered the major disadvantages at sea of a factionalized and out-of-touch government and of a disunited command structure. Enter Admiral Yi. He received an urgent request for help from Admiral Won Kyun of the neighboring Kyongsang Province (which includes the city of Pusan). Admiral Yi was reluctant to respond. He had not received permission from Seoul, he commanded only 24 warships, and he had not completed important preparations. Even so, he organized a conference of port garrison commanders and local magistrates. Their unanimous advice was for him to help Admiral Won. Admiral Yi agreed. He drafted a report for Seoul and stiffened his men's morale by having a Korean deserter beheaded and his head hoisted on a tall pole as a warning. He

then prepared to sail for Kyongsang the next day at the first cock-crow. By now, he commanded 91 ships, but they included fishing vessels.

Chief among Admiral Yi's preparations for war was the building of a small number of turtle boats. This ship is remembered as his signature weapon. The turtle boat indeed struck great blows for Korea's cause, but it has given rise to many misconceptions. It is sometimes mistakenly called an ironclad, but the turtle boat was in fact a fully enclosed wooden galley whose roof was covered with iron spikes. (Ordinary Korean warships were larger and heavier than the turtle boat and had open decks.) Impenetrable by enemy guns and protected from boarding tactics, the Turtle Boat spearheaded Korean attacks, more than once succeeding in killing the Japanese commander on his flagship. Admiral Yi never had many turtle boats – probably never more than six – and he won some battles without them. Still the ship represented a remarkable weapon.

The turtle boat was based on a traditional Korean design. Like a turtle, whose shape it resembled, the boat had a protective shell. No data on its size survive, but based on a later version, we might estimate that Admiral Yi's turtle boat was about 65 feet long, about 14 ½ feet wide amidships, and about 20 ½ feet high. It was built of thick and solid wood but it was faster than any other contemporary ships, thanks to its 16 oars and 80 oarsmen, taking turns in teams, to power them. It was circled by 36 gun ports. Cannon and fire arrows were the ship's weapons, and they could be fired from all sides of the vessel. Meanwhile, sulfur gunsmoke poured out of the mouth of a large wooden turtle's head in the bow, to blind and frighten the enemy. The turtle boat made an excellent assault weapon, perfect for targeting the enemy chain of command. The Japanese called it

a “blind ship” because it fought as fearlessly as a blind warrior. But it was not ready when Admiral Won called for help, so Admiral Yi would have to go into his first battle without turtle boats.

What he had instead, in addition to superior firepower and local knowledge, were his skill as a superb tactician and a charismatic leader of men. Admiral Yi always chose his battlegrounds carefully and he exercised discrimination in choosing which enemy detachment to target. He understood well the necessity of keeping his ships well clear of Japanese vessels. Get too close and Japanese soldiers would be able to board Korean ships and fight, in effect, a land battle at sea. In that case, the Japanese would enjoy their superiority in hand-to-hand conflict – and the Koreans had to avoid that.

The naval war that began in spring 1592 unfolded over the next six years on Korea’s south coast. This is a dramatic region of mountains and deep-water harbors, of coastline indented by bays lined by sand beaches, and of sparkling turquoise water dotted with pine-covered islands. And the romantic scenery was now to be broken by gunfire and stained by blood.

Admiral Yi’s first victory over the Japanese came in June at the port city of Okpo, on the northeast coast of Kojedo Island, off the central part of Korea’s southern coast. Here Korea’s 91 ships surprised a Japanese fleet of 50 ships docked at the wharf while its men were looting the city. The Koreans surrounded the enemy and attacked with guns and arrows. By sunset, 26 Japanese ships had been destroyed and burned, with no Korean losses. That evening, after retreating to the open sea, the Koreans chased and destroyed five Japanese ships. The next day they headed toward the coast and destroyed 13 more

Japanese ships. Admiral Yi returned to his base at the city of Yosu and rested his crews. He had not lost a single ship.

About three weeks later, Admiral Yi went back to sea, this time to attack a Japanese force in the Bay of Sachon. Although he had only 23 warships, he discarded the fishing vessels in favor of the turtle ship, which was now ready. On July 8, when they reached Sachon an ebbing tide prevented the Koreans from entering the harbor, so they began to lure the Japanese out to sea after pretending to retreat. Then the tide turned and the Koreans entered the harbor. There followed a furious battle, with the turtle boat in the van. Admiral Yi described the battle thus:

> I ordered my oarsmen to row my Flag-Ship at top speed, and dashed to the foremost front, hammering the enemy vessels; then my officers' and ships' captains rallied around me and hurled cannon balls, long arrows, winged arrows, fire arrows, and other death-dealing missiles from big guns "heaven" and "Earth," while our battle-cries shook land and sea. Finally shrieks and death agonies were heard from the enemy vessels as their warriors fell dead or ran away with the wounded on their shoulders in countless numbers. The survivors pulled back further up the hill and dared not come forward to fight. (Ha Tae-hung, trans. *Imjin Changch'o. Admiral Yi Sun-Sin's Memorials to Court*. Ed. By Lee Chong-young. Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1981, 41)

The Koreans had destroyed all 12 Japanese ships. Admiral Yi was struck in his left shoulder by the bullet of a Japanese arquebus. The wound was several inches deep. So as not to upset his men, he kept the fact a secret until the battle was over, when he calmly removed the bullet with his own sword.

This success was a taste of things to come. During the summer and fall of 1592, Admiral Yi won ten victories over the Japanese fleet. At one of them, in July at Tangpo Harbor, the Koreans caught 21 Japanese ships, including the flagship of a Japanese admiral, Kamei Korenori. On deck stood a tall, painted pavilion surrounded by a red brocade curtain. Inside sat the commander. A turtle boat attacked the ship and killed Korenori with an arrow to the chest, after which he was beheaded. After the battle, the Koreans found a gold fan inscribed with the name of Hideyoshi. And they liberated a Korean woman who had been enslaved and made the commander's mistress. She described Korenori as "a tall strong man, aged about thirty" and claimed that he "wore a yellow brocade robe and gold crown and sat upon his dais in the pavilion of his boat." (Ha, trans. *Imjin Changch'o*, 44.)

The greatest of Admiral Yi's victories came at the battle of Hansan Island, south of the modern city of Chungmu, on August 14 against a Japanese fleet led by Wakisaka Yasuharu. On that day, 70 Korean ships sent out a small decoy force to lure the Japanese fleet of 63 ships out of a narrow strait to fight in the open water. There the Koreans attacked the Japanese by arranging the Korean ships in a semi-circular formation known as "the crane wing." This allowed the Koreans to concentrate their firepower, with the turtle boats in the lead. In a memo to court, Admiral Yi describes what happened next:

> Our ships dashed forward with the roar of cannons "Earth," "Black," and "Victory," breaking two or three of the enemy vessels into pieces. The other enemy vessels, stricken with terror, scattered and fled in all directions in great confusion. Our officers and men and local officials on board shouted "Victory!" and darted at flying speed, vying with one another, as they hailed down arrows

> and bullets like a thunder storm, burning the enemy vessels and slaughtering his warriors completely. (Ha, trans. *Imjin Changch'o*, 58.)

The Japanese lost 59 ships – almost their entire fleet. The Koreans destroyed 47 Japanese ships outright and captured 12. Thanks to the speed of his flagship, Admiral Wakisaka escaped.

"So ended, we may well believe, one of the great naval battles of the world. It may truly be called the Salamis of Korea." This was the judgment of Homer Bezaleel Hulbert in 1905 in his *History of Korea*, today still the most detailed (though not the most up-to-date) book on that subject available in English. He compared Hansan Island to the epochal battle of 480 B.C. in which the Greeks defeated the Persian fleet and saved Greek civilization.

After Hansan Island, Hideyoshi ordered the Japanese to avoid sea battles entirely. In effect, Admiral Yi had driven the enemy from the water. The Japanese fleet was kept out of the Yellow Sea and thereby it could neither supply nor even communicate with its forces in Pyongyang. The Japanese had to carry all supplies by men or horses on Korea's insecure roads, which severely taxed their organizational ability and manpower.

This was a revolution in strategic terms. Unless they commanded the sea, the Japanese could not advance into China. As Admiral Yi's patron, Yu Song Nyong put it, the Korean naval victory at Hansan Island "cut off one of the arms" with which Japan had tried to envelop Korea, isolating the Japanese army at Pyongyang and securing Chinese waters, so that "the Celestial Army [that is, the Chinese] could come by land to the assistance" of Korea.

Admiral Yi now transferred his headquarters to Hansan Island, which he turned into Korea's main naval base. It was here that he wrote poetry in the classic manner of a Confucian gentleman. His most famous poem is the "Hansan Island Song":

By moonlight I sit all alone
in my tower on Hansan Island;
I stroke the long sword at my side,
nnd breathe a deep sigh toward the tide.
Hark! Whence shrills this tuneful flute
So sharp to pierce my heart? (Ha, trans. *Imjin Changch'o*, 197.)

From his Hansan Island base, Admiral Yi devoted himself to mopping-up operations, patrols, and preparations for future battles. Among other things, he trained and hardened his men, drafted new sailors, administered examinations to enroll new officers, arranged for food supplies, and set up a gun foundry to compete with Japanese muskets. In a biography of his famous uncle written by Admiral Yi's nephew, Yi Pun, the admiral's rigorous self-discipline is recorded:

> During his camp life … [he] never suffered any woman to come to him, and when going to bed he never loosened his belt. He always got up early in the morning and called in his staff officers to talk over military affairs until daybreak. He took only two meals a day, averaging five or six bowls, but he was full of energy in handling his business. His mental energy was twice as great as that of an average person so even after drinking wine with some guests until midnight he would seat himself erect, with a candle burning, to read or write or discuss naval tactics. (Ha, trans. *Imjin Changch'o*, 218.)

It would be hard to overrate Admiral Yi's achievement as a commander. A brilliant tactician, he was a superb leader of men, incorruptible, courageous, and endowed with clear strategic vision.

And yet, Admiral Yi's spectacular victories at sea were not enough to win the war for Korea. Korean seapower could frustrate Hideyoshi's ambition to conquer China but it could not drive his armies off the Korean peninsula. Only Ming's armies, supported by Korean guerrilla harassment in Japan's rear, could do that – or rather, could come close to doing that. Because the truth is, in purely military terms, Japan was able to withstand the blow. The combination of Ming regulars and Korean guerrillas forced the Japanese military to withdraw southward but not to leave the Korean peninsula altogether. Conditions in Korea were terrible for Japan's soldiers. About a third of the invasion force died, most through exhaustion, hunger, cold, disease. Nevertheless, the rest hung on.

Ming's army crossed the Yalu River into Korea in late January 1593. On February 10 they defeated the Japanese at Pyongyang and drove them southward. But a few weeks later on February 25 it was the Japanese turn to defeat the Chinese a few miles north of Seoul. Then, a Korean force in a castle north of Seoul pushed back a Japanese attempt to head back north. The Japanese held Seoul but it proved a bitter prize.

Hundreds of Korean guerrilla units had sprung up around the country. Known as the "Righteous Army," the guerrilla ranks united nobles, peasants, and slaves. Most guerrilla groups were headed by local notables, but some were led by Buddhist monks. The guerrilla's domination of the countryside was so complete that the Japanese could barely forage for food. The garrison in Seoul was hard-pressed and miserable.

By spring, the Japanese were ready to accept the Korean and Chinese offer of an armistice. In April, the Japanese withdrew in relative security to the southeast corner of the peninsula. Peace talks between Ming and Japan now ensued – with poor Korea on the sidelines. The talks dragged on for years without success because the two sides were still far apart. Ming wanted to enroll Japan as a vassal state, while Hideyoshi wanted to keep southern Korea, hold a Korean prince as hostage, and arrange a marriage between the Japanese emperor and a daughter of the Chinese emperor. In 1597, furious at Chinese stonewalling, Hideyoshi launched a second invasion of Korea. This time, he had an army of about 140,000 men. Konishi led his forces back to Korea.

The Koreans and Chinese were better prepared for the second invasion than for the first. Together, they held the Japanese army to the southeastern corner of the peninsula. Meanwhile, Japan did much better at sea. Admiral Yi could not stop them, because he was himself a prisoner in jail, victim of factional infighting in court. Amazingly, the Koreans had sacked their best leader. His rival Won Kyun had obtained command of the Korean fleet, which he then proceeded to wreck.

Won Kyun replaced Admiral Yi's skilled officers and neglected his men. He took unnecessary risks in battle and on July 15, 1597, he paid for them with total defeat. The Japanese carried out a successful surprise attack on the Korean navy at Chilchonryang, a narrow strait facing Kojedo Island. The Japanese struck at night. The incautious Admiral Won allowed his ships to close which the enemy, which permitted the Japanese to overwhelm the Koreans with boarding tactics. The Koreans lost over 160 ships and, in short order, their naval base at Hansan Island as well, which fell into Japanese hands.

Won Kyun was among the dead. A week later, the King reappointed Admiral Yi to his command.

He had a fleet of only 12 ships, all that was left to Korea. Although the court ordered him to disband the navy, the admiral had other plans. In spite of a seemingly hopeless situation, he was optimistic. The Japanese planned now finally to use their navy to sail northward towards China, as they had originally hoped to do in 1592. Admiral Yi aimed to stop them again. After winning several skirmishes with Japanese squadrons, he prepared for his most remarkable victory at sea. It was October 26, 1597.

A Japanese fleet of 133 ships sailed into the Myongyang Strait in the southwestern corner of Korea, between Chindo Island and the mainland. The Japanese were heading northward for Admiral Yi's base at Byokpajin. But he did not retreat. On the contrary, although utterly outnumbered, the admiral used his knowledge of the narrow strait and its fast and treacherous tides as a force multiplier. He prepared his men for battle with a stirring encouragement: "According to the principles of strategy, 'He who seeks his death shall live, he who seeks his life shall die.' Again, the strategy says, "If one defender stands on watch at a strong gateway he may drive terror deep into the heart of the enmy coming by the ten thousand.' These are golden sayings for us." (Ha Tae-hung, trans. *Najung Ilgi. War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-Sin*. Ed. Sohn Pow-key Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1977, 311)

The Japanese advanced into the strait in the early morning. The Koreans met them at the midpoint, taking immediate advantage of their superior firepower. Because of the narrowness of the channel, the Japanese could not surround the enemy. The Koreans quickly destroyed several enemy vessels including the commander's flagship. The

Japanese admiral was killed and then his corpse was captured and beheaded: his head was hoisted on top of a mast on Admiral Yi's flagship. The sight struck terror in the Japanese officers, who immediately turned their ships to flee. By now, however, the tide had turned, which hindered their escape – just as Admiral Yi had planned. On top of that, the Koreans had stretched an iron chain across the southern end of the strait. The order was now given to lift the chain and so stop the Japanese. The Koreans sank more than 30 enemy ships before the battle was done.

The "Miracle at Myongyang," as it is sometimes called, put the Japanese navy back on the defensive, just as its land army already was. The arrival soon afterwards of a Chinese fleet under Admiral Chen Lin to reinforce the Koreans only added to Japan's military woes. By April 1598, the Japanese commanders on the peninsula were ready to go home, but Hideyoshi refused. When Japan eventually decided on total withdrawal, it was a political and not a military decision. However incapable of achieving Hideyoshi's original, grandiose goal, and however weary, Japanese land power was strong enough to hold on in Korea. Hideyoshi knew this, and insisted on holding on to a Japanese colony in southern Korea.

Whether Japan would have been able to maintain such a colony for a long period of time is doubtful, given the political and financial costs. In any case, no sooner had Hideyoshi died than his weary successors decided on a complete Japanese pullback. The warlord died, after an illness of several months, in September 1598; by December, the Japanese army was in the process of withdrawing from Korea. Meanwhile, the Koreans continued to make war on them.

According to Admiral Yi, the Chinese under Admiral Chen Lin were willing to take Japanese bribes in order to let the enemy leave in peace, but Admiral Yi refused. In any case, after negotiations followed by much maneuvering of ships, the Japanese managed to threaten the Chinese fleet gravely. Admiral Yi hurried to the rescue with his ships. A great battle was fought in the Noryang Strait, between Namhae Island the southern Korean coast. It was December 15, 1598. Once again, the Koreans inflicted a devastating defeat on the enemy, this time with the help of their Chinese allies. Some reports speak of the loss of hundreds of Japanese ships. Unfortunately, the price was enormous: a stray bullet killed Admiral Yi as his fleet was pursuing Japanese ships in flight. Concerned to the last about the morale of his men, he insisted on his deathbed that his fate be kept secret until the battle was safely over.

Admiral Yi was 53 years old. His men mourned him, while Admiral Chen Lin supposedly fell three times to the deck in mourning over Admiral Yi's death. He was eulogized in Korea. The judgment of his old friend, Premier Yu Song Nyong, was typical: "he was capable of withholding the falling sky with a single hand of his." Within two weeks of his death, Admiral Yi was granted the posthumous title of Third State Counselor. In 1605, he was posthumously given a feudal rank as Great Lord of Tokpung. Admiral Yi was also lionized in China and eventually even in Japan. It is said, for example, that Japanese Admiral Heihachiro Togo, the great victor over Russia at the battle of Tsushima in 1905, called Admiral Yi the greatest naval commander of all. Today in South Korea, the site of Admiral Yi's ancestral home is a national shrine.

The truth of Japan's defeat, of course, is more complicated than one man's efforts, no matter how great. And the aftermath of the war exhausted the victors as much as the

vanquished. To begin with China: it is estimated that Ming sent a total of 75,000 soldiers and sailors to Korea between 1593 and 1598. Ming's efforts in Korea made a vital contribution to victory but at a heavy price. They exhausted Chinese finances, which thereby weakened the state's ability to resist the threat of invasion from Manchuria. Within fifty years of winning in Korea, Ming collapsed, to be replaced by a Manchu regime – the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

In Japan, Hideyoshi's dynasty proved as short-lived as his control of Korea. After his death in 1598 a short, violent struggle led to the transfer of power to the leading *daimyo*, Tokugawa Ieyasu. His Tokugawa descendants dominated Japan for the next two and-one-half centuries. Under the new regime, Hideyoshi's dream of foreign conquest gave way to introspection; Tokugawa Japan adopted a policy of closing the country off to the outside world. Meanwhile, Japanese culture had been enriched by Korean captives and forced imports: Korean pottery and skilled potters, Neo-Confucian thinkers, Korean and Chinese books, and possibly moveable metallic type (although this may have reached Japan from Europe).

Korea was the biggest loser of the war. Virtually every province in the country had suffered some damage, especially Kyongsang Province in the southeast. Whole villages and Buddhist temples had been destroyed. Cultural treasures, from palaces to history archives, were burned. The people suffered from famine and disease; taxes were hard to collect; anti-government uprisings sprang up. A generation after the Hideyoshi Invasions, Korea was swept up in war, faction, and rebellion as the Manchus replaced the Ming on the throne of China.

However mightily Admiral Yi contributed to the rescue of his people and to their glory, he could not keep them from the painful consequences of a victory that nearly destroyed the land it saved.