

Secret Hero Recounts his Unforgettable Korean War

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By Spc. Eric S. Bartelt
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WASHINGTON, April 24, 2001 -- War is a destructive, bleak picture that can make the skies of any canvas gray. For the picture to brighten it takes the heroism of a few ordinary men who look into the face of death, take on the challenges that break most men and overcome what is thought to be impossible.

The war took place in Korea. The mission was to protect the freedom of a country. The tale is of one man's bravery and defiance of death to help democracy prevail. Hiroshi H. Miyamura, a Japanese American, survived the bullets and bloodshed of the battlefield only to brave 28 months as a prisoner of war.

Cpl. Miyamura's ordeal began near Taejon-ni on the evening of April 24, 1951. He and his unit, Company H, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, were occupying a defensive position against Chinese troops on the move.

"After I heard the bugles and saw a flare or two going off, that's when the firing commenced," said Miyamura, a machine gun squad leader for his heavy weapons company. "I was positioned between two other machine gunners, I had two cases of grenades, an M-1, a carbine and a pistol. I don't recall how long the guns were firing, but pretty soon, the first gunner came by and said it was getting 'too hot.' I fired as long as I could until it (the machine gun) jammed on me, then both gunners were gone, I was there by myself."

Miyamura started throwing grenades and firing his rifle to repel the Chinese who were trying to flank him. "I started shooting at them as they silhouetted across the skyline. I knew the situation was getting bad so I told my men to withdraw," he said. "While they were leaving, I just fired and threw (grenades) all that I could. After they left, our own mortars started dropping phosphorous bombs on our position. That woke me up to the thought I've got to get out of here."

He started making his way down the hill when he met the enemy face-to-face. He brandished his bayonet in hand-to-hand combat and killed 10 Chinese as he tried to make his way back to safety.

"Once I got to the base of the hill, I got caught up in our own barbed wire entanglement," Miyamura said. "I didn't know it was set up down there, and I was concentrating on one of our tanks that was getting ready to move. I was waving to him, and that's when I ran into it (barbed wire). I wanted to get on the other side of the wire so I could get his attention and get out of there, but he didn't see me."

He was gallant in evacuating and administering first aid to the wounded and in manning his position during the battle, killing about 60 enemy soldiers. But the battle was just the beginning of his long trek



President Dwight Eisenhower congratulates Korean War veteran Army Staff Sgt. Hiroshi H. Miyamura after presenting him the Medal of Honor. Miyamura earned the medal as a corporal during an April 1951 battle that resulted in his capture by Chinese soldiers. His award was kept secret for his safety until after his repatriation in August 1953. (Click photo for screen-resolution image; [high-resolution image available](#)). ([More photos ...](#))

back to freedom.

"I crawled underneath the wire and I ran another 25 to 30 feet, then I couldn't run anymore because it was a high mountain," Miyamura explained. "I passed out there and, before I knew it, I heard troops going by my position. I was lying face down, but I didn't move because I didn't know if they were the enemy or ours. I heard the noise die down, and then thought I was safe but before I even moved I heard a voice in English saying 'Get up, you're my prisoner. Don't worry, we have a lenient policy. We won't harm you.'"

Miyamura recounted that he first realized he was injured when he tried to get up. He'd received leg wounds from grenades -- not bad enough for him to notice while trying to get free, but enough to cripple him while walking after he was captured. The enemy took him to a rear area where other men from his company were wounded.

"We didn't have any medical assistance from the Chinese. We had to doctor our own wounds," said Miyamura. "I saw other American soldiers with wounds. We helped each other out." For him and the other POWs, fixing their wounds would become the least of their worries over the passing months.

"I never had any side effects from my wounds, but I had dysentery almost the first month or so because we were drinking water that wasn't even good for our systems," he said. "We didn't learn until much later that we needed to boil our water, but we weren't allowed to boil water during our march because we had to make a certain number of kilometers a day. The only time we could boil water was during our stops at night."

Miyamura described how they would travel from one village to the next, where another group of guards would be waiting to take them. During that time the Chinese would fill them with communist propaganda, and the interpreters, some of whom were educated in Russia, spoke English well.

The trek and the lack of proper food wore down some of the soldiers, many of whom were very young.

"I was exhausted and so hungry, and I almost gave up," he said. "We were each given a sack, about 2 or 3 inches in diameter, and about 2 1/2 feet long that we had to carry on our marches. That was our rations for one week. It consisted of finely ground barley and rice. We were told to grab the whole of the grain, put it in our mouth and wash it down with water."

Unfortunately, many of the younger soldiers refused to eat and starved as the march went along. Some died because they lost the will to live, but Miyamura, even at the end of his rope, knew he wanted to go on.

"I didn't want to think about what was happening," he said. "I wanted to concentrate on raising a family once I got home. I think that's what kept me going."

Problem was, his family didn't even know if he was dead or alive. The Army had sent them a letter that said only that Miyamura was missing in action. His family didn't hear any word of him for about a year.

A native of Gallup, N.M., Miyamura had been a member of the World War II Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team. He didn't see fighting, however, because he was too young to ship overseas immediately and then he suffered a hernia. By the time he recovered from surgery, the war was over. He was in the Army Reserve when Korea flared.

The days passed into months and the months passed into more than two years. "For over a year we heard rumors that we were going to go home, peace talks are going well, then the next thing we would hear is that they are not going well," said Miyamura. "So it got to the point later that we thought we would never be released."

He was repatriated Aug. 23, 1953, at Freedom Village near Panmunjom.

"We crossed Freedom Village. To this day I don't remember crossing the bridge," said Miyamura. "All I can remember is seeing a big U.S. flag flying in the breeze, and I just concentrated on that flag. After a short period of relaxation, I was escorted to a room where I met a reporter from my hometown and the general of the 3rd Infantry Division (Brig. Gen. Ralph Osborne). He told me that I would receive the Medal of Honor. I didn't feel I was doing anything out of the ordinary. I felt I was doing my job."

Miyamura was overwhelmed because he'd seen himself as a follower, not a guy who was in charge.

"Today I'd rather be in the background than sit out in front," he said. "The medal is very humbling, and I'm very honored to receive it for what I did."

The citation for his medal was signed by President Harry S. Truman in 1951, but was kept secret until his release because of fear the Chinese would retaliate against him for his part for killing so many of their soldiers. He received his Medal of Honor Oct. 27, 1953, from President Dwight D. Eisenhower at a White House ceremony, becoming the second Japanese American to earn the award up to that time.

Miyamura went home to Gallup to be with his wife, Terri, and started a family. Today, he has three children and four grandchildren. After the Korean War, he worked as an auto mechanic, a skill he picked up during his high school years working with his cousin.

He returned to Korea in the 1970s for the 25th anniversary of the war and again in 2000. On the second visit, he traveled to his battleground.

"Everything is overgrown, so visually nothing looked the same," said Miyamura. "It did bring back some memories, though I tried to put some of them out of my mind. I was grateful to see the area again, I thought I never would see it again."

Today, Miyamura said, he feels South Korea is free because of the sacrifices made by the men who gave their lives and who put their lives on the line.

"I feel the lives lost and the time we Korean veterans spent over here was well worth the effort because seeing how South Korea has prospered makes me feel it was all worthwhile," said Miyamura. "They are a free country today because of what we did."

(Spc. Eric S. Bartelt wrote this article for the July 2000 issue of KorUS magazine, published by U.S. Forces Korea in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The military journalist currently is assigned to the 40th Public Affairs Detachment at Fort Campbell, Ky.)

Related sites:

- [Korean War Medal of Honor Recipients' citations](http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/mohkor2.htm), www.army.mil/cmh-pg/mohkor2.htm.
- Fact Sheet: "[Asian-Americans in the United States Military during the Korean War](http://korea50.army.mil/index.html)"; includes photo of Miyamura's repatriation after the Korean War, <http://korea50.army.mil/index.html>.



Army Staff Sgt. Hiroshi H. Miyamura, Medal of Honor recipient for valor in combat near Taejon-ni, South Korea, April 24, 1951, while serving with Company H, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division. Photo courtesy National Archives. (Click photo for screen-resolution image; [high-resolution image available](#)).



Hiroshi H. Miyamura recounts his Korean War experiences while on a return visit to the peninsula. Miyamura was a prisoner of the Chinese following a harrowing battle in April 1951. The fact he earned a Medal of Honor for valor during that battle was kept secret until after his repatriation in August 1953. Photo by Pfc. Eric R. Gonzalez, USA. (Click photo for screen-resolution image; [high-resolution image available](#)).