Black History Month - Short Story from the CEO

When I think about Black History month, I remember my roommate at Kings Point, USMMA, Joe Scroggins. Joe and I entered the Academy together in June of 1958. We lived in a room about 20x30 feet wide with a bed in each corner and a desk in the middle of the room. We decided that we would work very hard together to complete our first year. We were in the same section of about sixteen plebes (a newly entered cadet or freshman, especially at a military academy), went to class together, ate together at the same table, and suffered upperclassmen harassment together. In those days, they harassment was known as "plebe beats". We did seem to be every upperclassman's target.

Joe and I found our courses quite a challenge. We studied together, tested one another, and on weekends reviewed all of our prior weeks' course material then prepared for the new week. We were both great note takers so our study habits were recognized as extraordinary by our classmates. We focused on completing our plebe year and ultimate graduation.

We were a very special partnership. Those who attend any military academic institution know the first year is the toughest. Joe and I finished our first year and went on to graduate from Kings Point.

After graduation, Joe went to sea for several years. He served as Assistant Dean of the Academy for about three years and personally developed a nationwide minority recruiting program at Kings Point. Joe then attended the Harvard University School of Business and received an MBA with an emphasis in International Business, Finance and Economics. This was not surprising to me as Joe and I both excelled in our plebe year course in Economics. He was better at it than I, and mostly my teacher. Joe went on to a distinguished career in the maritime industry with Conoco, Inc., and the port of Houston; a most challenging port with the notorious Houston Ship Channel. Joe finished his maritime career ashore in Washington, DC as a member of the Federal Maritime Commission. Joe passed away in 2008.

As I reflect on my friend and classmate, I have been studying the history of his ancestors and the tortuous voyage from the West Coast of Africa to the Americas. The numbers are staggering - ranging from an estimated 11.5 million to 15 million transported and enslaved people over a period of 350 years. The sea voyage is about 4000 nautical miles lasting anywhere from four weeks to about two months or more. Men, women and children, who may have never seen the ocean or
ventured on any kind of sea voyage, were transported. I remember my own first sea voyage and being horribly sea sick for many days.

A description of the slave ship FELEZ is an example. On the coast of Africa, she had taken in 336 males and 226 females, totaling 562 in all. She had been out for seventeen days and of those aboard, fifty-five were thrown overboard who had died of dysentery or other causes. The slaves were all enclosed under grated hatchways between decks. The space was so low that they sat between each other’s legs and were stowed so close together that there was no possibility of lying down or changing their position by day or night. They were branded like sheep with the owner’s mark, burnt with a red hot iron.

The account of Olaudah Equianos, a slave survivor is equally telling... “The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably and loathsome that it was dangerous to remain there for any time .... it became pestilential. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and groans of the dying, rendered the whole scene of horror inconceivable.”

I invite everyone to read the histories of slave ships. The many thousands of intolerable voyages only to be forced into slave labor and humiliation of a proud people. Every black man, woman and child have come a long way since the first slave appeared on our shores at or about the year 1500. It is a remarkable achievement. The year 1958 was in small part the beginning of a movement in American. My friend Joe, was part of that movement. He was a part of the dream that Dr. Martin Luther King spoke about. Joe just worked hard, was soft spoken, never angry, and a true gentleman all the time. I was honored to share a small part of his life as we helped one another get through the first year as plebes at the USMMA. He was a success story of the American Civil Rights movement.

As a school, let's keep in focus that we are all brothers and sisters ... "Free at Last, Free at Last, and if America is a great nation, this must become true." It must be true at MACS.

Eugene Mattioni, CEO