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Office of Asian & Pacific Islander Affairs

The Commission on Asian & Pacific  
Islanders (CAPI)

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## **SPECIAL API VETERANS DAY FEATURE**

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### **MEET CAPI COMMISSIONER STAFF SERGEANT JAMES SUONG**

Unassuming. Humble. Likeable. These adjectives fall short of describing newest CAPI Commissioner Staff Sergeant (SSG) James Suong. He is also a dedicated US soldier of 21 years and a veteran, husband and father of two, and one heckuva hard worker. Digging a little deeper, one begins to grasp the circumstances that shaped Suong into the person he is today. He is also a refugee who came to America at a very young age and faced adversity and overcame numerous hurdles along the way.

Suong's compelling life story begins in a war-torn Cambodia in the late 1970s - at a time when the Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot is sweeping across the country forcing urban residents into rural areas where forced agricultural labor camps awaited them. In what later became infamously known as the Killing Fields, a young 7-year old James is separated from his father, mother and baby brother. His father went missing after an air raid bombing. To this day, no one is truly certain if he died or survived.

James is sent to live with other youth at a nearby youth labor camp where they begin reprogramming or “re-educating” youth to embrace Maoist and Marxist Communist principles. Risking beatings and possible death, he often smuggled his food ration of hot rice, a luxury at the time, down to the main camp for his mother and brother. He evaded soldiers and returned before the evening roll call and anyone noticed his absences.

Over time, a plan is devised to flee to neighboring Thailand which required them to cross a severe and mountainous terrain riddled with landmines. During this three-month trek, his sibling fell ill, died and was buried in an unmarked grave. Reaching Thailand, he and his mother joined fellow Cambodians and lived in a refugee camp for one year before they embarked on the next leg of their odyssey – the one to the United States and Des Moines, Iowa.

The year is now 1981, and James is a mere 11 years of age. He and his mother live in an apartment complex with other Cambodian refugees near Methodist Hospital in Des Moines learning to eke out a new life - one with hope, opportunities and uncertainty. James’ mother works a job at a meat-packing plant that provides for them, but he sees the toll it takes on her health. He focuses on learning English quickly and becomes an advocate for his community – translating and filling out forms for basic benefits, utilities, school registration and whatever else needed done.

English was the path to a better life in his newly adopted country, and James embraced it fully. But, James also recalled the time that Academy Award-winning Cambodian actor/doctor [Haing S. Ngor](#) from the movie [The Killing Fields](#) visited his high school and inspired him “...to do something better with your life, now that you are in this country.” Ngor’s words lit a fire in James to keep pushing forward, and never take “no” for an answer.

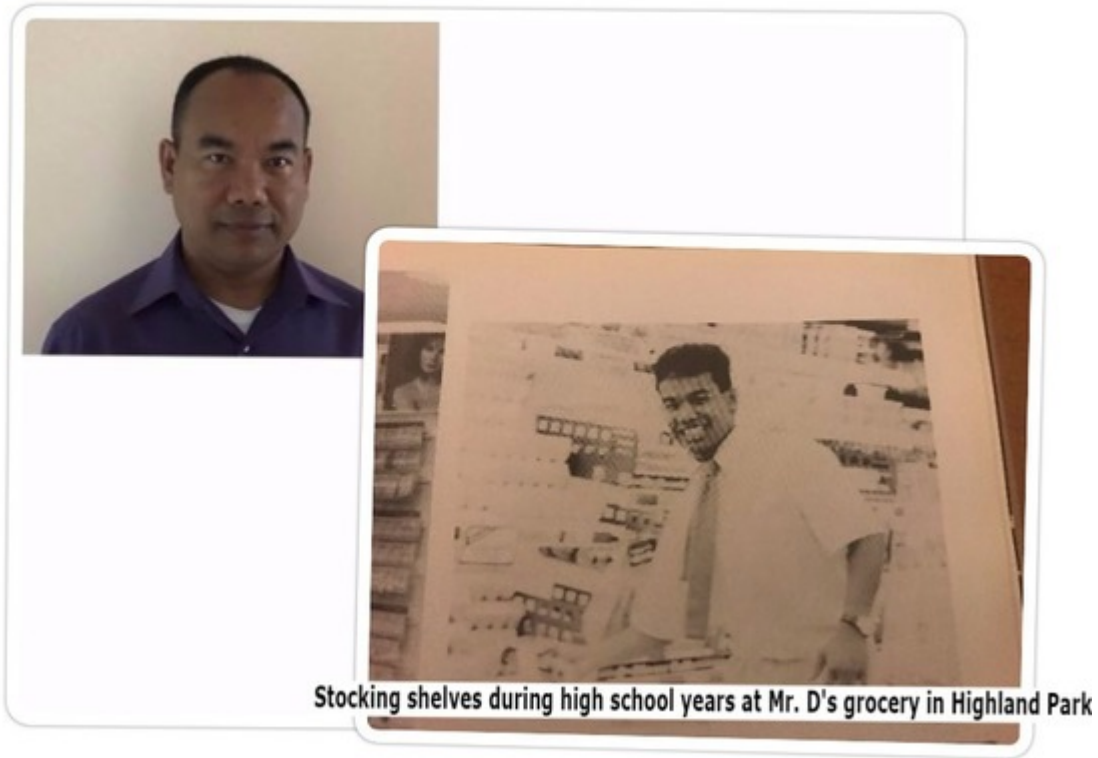
Over the next three decades, he enlisted in the part-time or traditional Army National Guard (1996); deployed to Kosovo as part of NATO’s peace-keeping Operation Enduring Freedom mission (2003); transitioned to Active Guard Reserve or full-time active duty (2009); graduated from Grandview University with a business degree on the GI Bill (2011); and owned & operated two successful businesses somewhere in between.

At Camp Dodge, SSG Suong wears two military hats these days. In his dual role as both Human Resource Specialist and Equal Opportunity Advisor, for both traditional and active duty reserve forces in Iowa, Suong is the point person for all API personnel matters and a member of the Joint Diversity Executive Council which aids in planning opportunities to celebrate and educate culture and diversity on military bases. The biggest surprise, in the context of diversity education, has been the learning process to understand the myriad of ethnic, cultural differences among Asians, who come from all walks of life, to serve in the US military. Cultural competency is a much-needed skill in order to do the job well, and Suong credits the Department of Defense for providing this training and continuous guidance via the [Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute \(DEOMI\)](#).

This Veteran’s Day, Suong also recognizes the military for improving his and the lives of his family. Suong is proud of his Equal Opportunity Advisor role, because he can now help guide people to a career ladder in the Guard and generate awareness of programs, enrichment trainings that could lead to promotions and a fulfilling military career. Part of the job is to also assist those planning to retire and help them transition into civilian life. A program Suong speaks highly of is the Home Base Iowa project that connects veterans to careers and resources. <http://bit.ly/2jdjFQe>

Today, we honor all veterans who served in the US military forces. Please remember to thank them and their families for their service, sacrifices and for answering the call to protect our nation - both here and abroad. We also take this opportunity to thank James Suong for his civic service to the State of Iowa by volunteering on the Commission on Asian & Pacific Islander Affairs on which he and fellow commissioners strive to make Iowa a better place to live for all generations of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders.

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