

FEATURE

Reflections on VJ Day

—Thousands of young men and women enlisted or were drafted from Chinatowns, Japantowns, Manilatowns and other small communities across the country.

By Douglas s. Chan, July 15, 2005

And then, one day in mid-August — 60 years ago — it was over. World War II had extinguished a staggering 61 million lives, 11.3 million in China alone. The maelstrom of conflict had been fought on a global scale that had touched the lives of every American, including those who a generation later would call themselves Asian Americans.

Thousands of young men and women enlisted or were drafted from Chinatowns, Japantowns, Manilatowns and other small communities across the country. They would serve honorably a country that had, for most of the previous century, robbed, murdered, burned, lynched, taxed, and excluded its pioneers while building much of the political economy of the West on the strength of Asian labor. For Japanese Americans, difficulties culminated with their mass deprivation of constitutional rights and wholesale incarceration of their West Coast communities.

By the time Allied forces had announced the surrender of the imperial forces of Japan on August 15, 1945, World War II had become a watershed event for Chinese and other Asian Americans.

According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and researchers at the Oakland Museum, 13,499 Chinese American men fought in the armed forces. Approximately 75 percent in the U.S. Army and 25 percent in the Navy.

Still others served in specialized units, such as the all-Chinese American 1157th Signal Corps, part of 14th Air Service Group that would

join the fight against Imperial Japan in the China, Burma, India Theatre of operations.

20 percent of all Chinese American men in the continental U.S. served during WWII. In the words of historian Iris Chang, "ethnic Chinese men gave their lives disproportionate to their presence in the country."

Their experiences could fill a million pages, but few Asian Americans know about the exploits of Kenny "Machine Gun" Gong of Cleveland, Mississippi, who jumped with the 101st Airborne on the eve of D-Day; legendary P-47 fighter pilot, Frank Fong, a recipient of two Distinguished Flying Crosses and 8 Air Medals; or merchant seaman Poon Lim, honored with the US Merchant Marine Combat Bar and the British Empire Medal by King George VI.

Their stories have only recently been told by a new generation of storytellers such as filmmaker Montgomery Hom, and in a new book by professor K. Scott Wong of Williams College, *Americans First: Chinese Americans and Second World War*. We hope that documentarians and academicians will accelerate the compilation of their memories, as the veterans of WWII are passing away at the rate of 1,600 per month.

During the war, Chinese Americans on the home front worked in real jobs for the first time in U.S. industry, and with the new economic opportunities, gained new respect from their fellow citizens. In 1943 — the year the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed — Chinese, especially women, were working in industries

previously denied to them. 15 percent of San Francisco shipyard workers were Chinese.

The youth of Asian America who served with U.S. air, sea and land forces and the US Merchant Marines had traveled farther, done more, and seen more of the world than their parents could have dreamed. For them, there was no turning back the clock.

VJ (Victory in Japan) Day signaled the end of a triumphal war waged by the allied nations against fascism. That war had unleashed rising expectations for economic opportunity and

social justice at home. In the U.S., the economic boom of the postwar era and the energy of the returning veterans would spur the rise of the first Asian American middle class.

Sixty years ago, Asian American veterans were coming home to United States not fully free of the strictures of white racism, but on the path to equal opportunity, if not yet full civil rights, for all of its citizens.

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