

FEATURE



A Short History about Chinese American Military Veterans

By Philip Chin

The stories of the many Chinese Americans veterans who have served in the American military from the Civil War until the present has been completely forgotten or ignored. This is even more deplorable as they serve as a counter to the accusations and negative stereotypes about the loyalty and courage of Chinese Americans that we have regularly been treated to in the popular media over the past decades.

Chinese Americans, including 1st generation Chinese Americans, have served in the American military since the Civil War (1861-1865). Most surprisingly they fought on both sides of the Civil War depending on their home state. Some of the Chinese were given Christian names and therefore, historians had to dig deep to discover them.

Joseph Pierce from Canton, China fought for the North with the 14th Connecticut Infantry which played a major role in repulsing Pickett's Charge at the Battle of Gettysburg. Corporal John Tommy was another Union soldier. He'd made the news headlines in both North and South early in the war when he was captured by amazed Confederate troops and was asked by a general if he would join them. He told them only if they made him a brigadier general. He was sent to the notoriously harsh Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. After his release he fought again for the Union and died of his wounds from Gettysburg.

In the Mexican Expedition of 1916-1917 against Pancho Villa Chinese Mexicans supported the US Army, providing invaluable logistics support for the Americans. Fearing retaliation against them after the US withdrawal, General John "Black Jack" Pershing, brought over 500 Chinese back to the United States, with most of them settling in San Antonio, Texas. Despite the existence of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and other official forms of discrimination, General Pershing successfully fought for and gained residency rights for these refugees.

Many Chinese Americans served in our military during World War I, but those stories are the hardest to document as these military veterans have all passed into history and their stories were either never told or hidden still. Chinese males were mostly used in logistics, moving the tons of supplies needed for the war, or performing duties such as cooks, and were not in direct combat against German military forces. There were hundreds of Chinese Americans known to have been in the military during this war.

WWII brought big changes even though the participation of Chinese Americans was initially unwelcome. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor when millions of Americans volunteered for military service, many Chinese American were initially turned away. General “Hap” Arnold declared that there would be no bigotry in his Army and opened up the Army to Chinese Americans. It’s estimated that 20,000 Chinese Americans served during World War II. Army Captain Francis B. Wai repeatedly ran into the open, exposing enemy position after position when they shot at him, on the landing beaches of Leyte in the Philippines. He was finally killed leading an assault on the last Japanese pillbox in the area. The Distinguished Service Cross he was posthumously awarded for this action was upgraded to the Medal of Honor in 2000 after a Department of Defense study concluded that he and other minority soldiers had had their awards unfairly downgraded during the war.

The US Navy had the courageous Rear Admiral Gordon Pai-ea Chung-Hoon who was the recipient of the Navy Cross, the second highest Navy award for combat valor, and the Silver Star for conspicuous gallantry and extraordinary heroism as Commanding Officer of USS Sigsbee (DD 502) from May 1944 to October 1945. After his ship was struck by a kamikaze causing massive fires and damage to the ships engines and steering, Commander Chung-Hoon successfully directed his men in putting out the fires and saving the ship while continuing to fight more kamikaze planes. In his honor the powerful US Navy DDG 93 guided missile destroyer was named after him, the only US Navy ship ever named after a Chinese American.

Lt. Col Frank Fong, US Air Force, served in the Army Air Corps in WW II and shot down two German Air Force fighters before suffering wounds that ended his combat career. As the Commander of the 5th European Air Rescue Squadron, Colonel Fong’s unit rescued over

1,000 Allied and American aircrew by the end of WW II. Fong served in WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Colonel Richard F. Hum, US Air Force was the recipient of five Legion of Merit awards for his very significant contributions to his country. He was most notable in briefing President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962. Hum also served in WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

WWII also saw the participation of two Chinese American women in the Women Airforce Service Pilots in flying logistics missions. Maggie Gee and Hazel Ying Lee both flew logistics missions, and Gee even trained male pilots for combat missions. Women were not allowed to fly combat missions but were badly needed



Maggie Gee joined the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) in March 1944

to deliver planes from the factories to airfields and shipping points across the United States. In 2010, the surviving women of the W.A.S.P., including Maggie Gee, were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian medal awarded by Congress. Unfortunately, Hazel Ying Lee had been killed in a landing collision in heavy fog in 1944, the last of the W.A.S.P. to die in World War II.

The participation of 20,000 Chinese Americans during WW II and the US alliance with China resulted in the repeal of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and opened the doors to very limited changes in Chinese immigration; just 105 people each year.

During the Korean War, there were several Chinese American Army Colonels and the Marines commissioned their first Chinese American as a regular officer in 1947. He is retired Major Kurt Lee, the winner of a Navy Cross (the highest medal that the US Navy can award, and the second highest medal below the Medal of Honor), a Silver Star and two Purple Hearts. Lee helped save the lives of 8,000 fellow Marines with a forced company march through unmapped mountains at night through a blizzard to relieve a decimated company holding a crucial pass through which the Marines had to retreat at the famous Battle of Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. Lt. General Ray Davis, former Deputy Commandant of the US Marine Corps, called Lee the bravest Marine he had ever known. Now 85 years young, retired Major Lee still teaches military tactics and strategy to Marine officers in Quantico, VA. Lee was also a veteran of WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.



Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee

In the past two decades, there have been at least 3 one star generals/admirals and 2 three star generals of Chinese American descent in our military serving the United States loyally and effectively.

This year former Army Warrant Officer and Vietnam veteran Mr. Fang A. Wong was elected the first Asian/Chinese American National Commander of the American Legion. Wang now leads 2.4 million veterans in the largest military veterans organization in America.

In San Francisco, American Legion Cathay Post #384, which was established in 1931, is one of the most active veterans organizations in the Bay Area. Led by the late dynamic Bok Pon, who served in the famous 82nd Airborne unit of the US Army, the post was revived at the end of the 20th Century and today, led by Commander Ron Lee and several very dedicated and capable Vice Commanders have served as a model Post

for the past decade. This past year the Post conducted 60 major activities including the hosting of two US Navy warships, supporting Hepatitis B awareness programs year round, awarded scholarships to JROTC and ROTC cadets, honored local firefighters and police officers, supported three local high school Boys State delegates, visited Ft. Miley Veterans Hospital, and hosted activities and events that served the San Francisco community.

In this short history of the contributions of Chinese American military veterans we have highlighted a select number of stories about our loyal and brave American citizens of Chinese heritage. Their bravery and dedication to our Country and the mortal sacrifice many of them made for America is not well known but should serve to counter the negative stereotypes that are still heard today against Chinese Americans.

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Posted in Chinese American Heroes • Features • October 17, 2011