

FEATURE

Long-overdue honor for Chinese American vets WORLD WAR II | Their service will be recognized with a Congressional Gold Medal, one of the nation's highest civilian awards.

<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/i-was-just-doing-my-job-seattles-chinese-american-veterans-to-receive-long-overdue-honor-from-u-s/>

By ELISE TAKAHAMA

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Gene Moy Photo by Steve Ringman / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Gene Moy is a 102-year-old World War II veteran who will be presented with the Congressional Gold Medal in a Washington, D.C., ceremony at the end of the year. Here he stands in his living room in Seattle, holding a portrait of himself during his service days.

Bill Chin, 93, will receive the Congressional Gold Medal for his World War II service in Germany. Chinese Americans served in the war when the Chinese Exclusion Act was largely still in place.



Bill Chin Photo by Bettina Hansen / THE SEATTLE TIMES



Mimi Gan



COURTESY OF GENE MOY

Gene Moy served during World War II in the Pacific on New Caledonia, Guadalcanal and the Philippines.

Bill Chin still remembers the panic he felt as he dodged the Nazi bullets raining down around him, watching in shock as a friend was killed by machine-gun fire. He was proud to be serving his country, he said, but fear was inevitable.

“Some of those shells landed pretty close to us ... If you weren’t a little scared, there was something wrong with you,” said Chin, who was born and raised in Seattle.

Chin was 18 years old when he was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II. He spent three years fighting his way through Europe as a machine gun and radio operator, participating in numerous operations, including the Battle of the Rhineland.

“We were going from town to town arresting German soldiers,” said Chin, now 93. “At that time, we were winning the war and a lot of German soldiers surrendered on their own. ...

A lot were ready to give up anyway. They were so demoralized.”

Chin is one of thousands of Chinese American veterans who will finally be recognized for their service in World War II, 74 years after the war ended. Last December, President Donald Trump signed a bill that would honor them with a Congressional Gold Medal, one of the nation’s highest civilian awards.

“All Chinese war vets need recognition,” Chin said last week. “They went to war for this country, and a lot never came back.”

Mimi Gan, a Seattle filmmaker and former television reporter, is hoping to bring stories like Chin’s to light.

Gan, whose father also served in World War II, recently started work on a documentary about the Chinese American veterans and their efforts to gain recognition for their service and loyalty to their country. She’s starting locally, but said she’s hoping to travel throughout the country to hear about other experiences.

“There’s so many stories out there,” she said. “The first woman. The Chinese American family that had seven brothers who fought in the war. Talking to a prisoner of war. They’re spread out across the country, but I know there are really great stories there.”

There’s a reason these narratives are significant, Gan said — Chinese Americans were not only risking their lives overseas, but also battling prejudice within their own country.

When the war began, the United States government had not yet repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the nation’s first immigration ban on a specific ethnic group. The law severely limited Chinese immigrants from entering the country and becoming naturalized citizens for more than 60 years, until the end of 1943.

This meant that while up to 20,000 Chinese Americans served in the military during

World War II, about 40% were not even granted citizenship, according to the Chinese-American World War II Veteran Congressional Gold Medal Act.

World War II veteran Gene Moy, 102, immigrated to Lewiston, Idaho, from China when he was 12 years old. Because his father was born in the U.S., Moy was a citizen. But while he didn't face serious discrimination in the military, he said there were times when he was treated as an outsider as a civilian.

"I remember if I wanted a haircut, I'd have to wait until the barbershop closed before I got it," Moy said. "The barber himself probably didn't care, but he was afraid his patrons might not like it because we were Chinese."

Regardless, Moy, who now lives in Seattle's Beacon Hill neighborhood, didn't think twice about going to war for the United States.

"It just makes you realize that — just like other minorities and folks who were discriminated against — [Chinese Americans] were loyal to this country and they were willing to fight for this country, despite laws that excluded them," Gan said. "And that really says something."

While Gan wants to meet as many veterans as possible and hear their stories, she also wants to honor her dad.

"He talked about not being allowed into certain places because he was Chinese American," said Gan, who is on the board of trustees of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. "But he didn't dwell on it or talk about it with any sort of bitterness. That's just the way it was."

Chinese American veterans aren't the first group to be recognized for their allegiance during the war. In fact, Gan said, they're one of the last.

Congress previously approved gold medals for Japanese American Nisei veterans,

who served despite their community's internment; the Tuskegee Airmen, the first black military aviators in the U.S. Army Air Forces; the Native American Code Talkers, Marines who used a code based on their native language to outsmart the Japanese; and Filipino American veterans, who were stripped of their status as U.S. military veterans after the war.

In late 2016, representatives from the national Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA) decided Chinese Americans should be next.

"I have great deference to the entire population of the greatest generation," said Ed Gor, former CACA president who led the effort. "And I've never said that, whether it's the Japanese or Filipino or Chinese, they're more deserving because they're more patriotic or braver or stronger. It's because they've been pretty much forgotten by mainstream society. ... There was a lot of discrimination back then, but I think we should recognize these men and women who served despite these barriers."

Sixty-eight senators, including Washington's Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray, signed in support.

Now, the challenge is to identify as many eligible Chinese American veterans as possible to register for the award, Gor said. If the veteran has died, their families can register on their behalf.

As of mid-June, almost 1,300 veterans had been approved to receive the medal, Gor said. Of those who have registered, 180 are veterans who are still alive.

He's hoping to hit 3,000 names by the end of 2020, though he said more than 90% of Chinese Americans who served in World War II have probably died.

In the Greater Seattle area, 52 veterans or their families have registered to receive the medal, said Cathy Lee, president of the local CACA lodge. As far as she knows, only four local veterans are still alive, she said.

“It’s good to have it, but to me, I don’t think it’s that necessary. I was just doing my job,” said Lip Mar, 92, who served in the Navy as a hospital corpsman and now lives with his wife in Seattle’s Mount Baker neighborhood.

He was in charge of treating burn victims and soldiers who had contracted tuberculosis, he said.

One soldier, Mar remembers, came in completely swathed in bandages. When Mar treated the burn wounds and changed the patient’s gauze bandages, he could see serious scarring.

“But it was no complaining, no refusing,” Mar said. “Just do it. It’s for the country.”

Moy, who served as a mess sergeant in the Pacific on New Caledonia, Guadalcanal and the Philippines, said while he’s also honored to be recognized, the award isn’t necessary.

“It’s the greatest thing that’s ever happened,” Moy said. “But I never expected to get the medal — I didn’t even think about it.”

Moy plans to travel to Washington, D.C., later this year with his family to attend the official Congressional Gold Medal ceremony. The date has yet to be set.

Many veterans, like Mar and Moy, are humble, insisting that their goal was never to be celebrated, Lee said.

“We’re telling them that it’s not just for them, but for their children and their grandchildren to know what they’ve done and how they showed their patriotism ... If their story’s not told, sooner or later it gets forgotten,” she said. “And we want to let people know that, yes, the Chinese Americans were also valiant and patriotic when they were needed to serve.”

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