

Eddie Fung

Part 1 - Chinatown Kid and Texas Cowboy 1923-1941

By Philip Chin

Eddie Fung was the only Chinese American to be taken prisoner by Imperial Japan during World War II. His personal background and experiences had much to do with how he survived and forms one of the most interesting and unique biographies of the 20th Century.

Eddie Fung's father had immigrated to the United States in the 1890s by slipping into the country illegally across the Canadian border and ending up in San Francisco and was present for the 1906 Earthquake and Fire. Sometime before 1911 he was running an errand for an employer, when his long queue, the hairstyle the ruling Qing Dynasty forced all Chinese to wear under penalty of death, became wrapped in the stanchion of the streetcar he was getting off from. The resulting accident led to one leg being amputated above the knee. This forced him to become a watchmaker and jeweler because that job could be done comfortably sitting down. He was a smart man. His first fortune of \$10,000 was made during World War I when he bought old gunnysacks used for storing potatoes and even repaired frayed ones that had been discarded. He had so many gunnysacks that he had to rent a warehouse to store them all. People thought he was crazy, but when the war ended there was a shortage of such gunnysacks, so he made quite a profit by selling them. The family eventually moved from crowded tenement apartments in San Francisco's Chinatown sharing a single bathroom to their own house based upon his financial investments and good planning.

Eddie Fong's mother came to the United States in 1914. Even though she was already married to Eddie's father she came in as his sister-in-law along with two adopted sons. US immigration laws at the time only made exceptions for Chinese women if they were married to one of the classes of men exempted under the Chinese Exclusion laws such as merchants. Legally, and in practice, all Chinese women were presumed to be prostitutes barred from immigrating under American law unless proven otherwise after lengthy and humiliating investigations (real prostitutes brought over as pseudo-wives by criminal gangs usually weren't troubled by very well paid immigration authorities.) Fong's uncle already had a wife and three sons in China, but didn't want to bring them to the United States but he'd declared they existed to the immigration authorities. He then sold the exemptions to his brother who could then bring in his wife, and because she was assumed to be barren, their two adopted sons as well. A year later she was pregnant with the first of Eddie's four older sisters. Eddie was the first natural son, born in 1923, he was followed by another son. There were six kids born into the family in America in addition to the two adopted sons from China. A divorce and a legal marriage in America between the couple would only happen in 1939, just a year before Eddie's father died. Such were the convoluted ways racist American immigration laws against the Chinese were evaded.

Unlike the stereotype of Chinese men, Eddie's father was quite progressive, once telling a friend who kidded him about having so many daughters that, "My girls are better than the sons you have." All four daughters graduated from UC Berkeley, which would have been an amazing achievement for a white family let alone a Chinese one in the 1930s and 40s. People asked why waste time and money sending girls to college since they'd just be married off and have a family anyway but he responded that education was something nobody could take away from you and that even with a family a woman could have an education too.

Eddie didn't take to schooling, to his father's disappointment. Instead he developed a reputation as a troublemaker with a quick temper who was always getting into fights and sometimes shoplifting. He especially didn't like the Chinese schools almost all Chinese kids attended after American school to learn how to read and speak Chinese. Later he regretted not having learned to speak or read Chinese fluently. Eddie finally quit Chinese school with his father's agreement after Eddie told him it was just a waste of money to send him. The formal American education system though was something he couldn't escape since they had American truant officers to enforce his attendance as well as his father. Eddie helped support the family as soon as he was able to, shining shoes, doing odd jobs for money, and picking up free things as he could. In those days internal organs from pigs and cows and the feet from chickens, ducks, and turkeys were given away for free in San Francisco's Chinatown since white customers didn't want them so Eddie would often bring those home along with whatever else people had discarded and the family could use. It was an excellent education in scrounging.

It was Eddie's mother, who never learned to speak or read Chinese or English, that taught him some of his most important lessons. She never let a single thing go to waste, even painstakingly cleaning out chicken intestines to serve at meals. She taught him to cook and she also taught him to sew, which proved very useful as a prisoner. She also boiled every drop of water she drank even though everyone told her she needn't bother in America. After seeing the horrific effects of cholera in the prison camps Eddie understood just what a strong impression seeing the disease in China must have had on his mother when she was a young girl.

Life in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1920s and 30s was a very limited world of twelve square blocks which was among the most densely populated places in the United States. Everyone know everyone else and there was very little privacy. Chinese couldn't go anywhere else because many state laws didn't allow Asian Americans who weren't American citizens to buy property. There was also the very real threat in California and other Western states that Chinese could suffer a beating or worse if they ventured outside of their ethnic enclaves. Even crossing the street on Broadway from Chinatown into the Italian district of North Beach could be dangerous in those times.

Eddie became fascinated by the school and public library books he read and movies that showed the wide open spaces of the American West, the cowboys and Indians, the freedom that such a life promised, and especially the horses which he particularly loved. He became determined to become a cowboy and escape the boundaries of Chinatown.

This vague plan became much more solid in 1938. Eddie passed academically in his sophomore English class but failed in deportment for talking back and questioning teacher authority so he was failed from the class. This decision was backed by the principal. Eddie had already been thinking about dropping out of school but needed to reach sixteen to avoid being legally compelled to go so he saw the timing was right and dropped out. His brother spun him around and Eddie pinned a spot on a map of the United States and determined that he would become a cowboy in Midland, Texas, which was actually not the center of cattle country but of oil production. Eddie Fung, who only stood only about 5'0 at the age of 16, gathered his \$200 in savings, packed a few belongings in his father's carpetbag, and ran away to Texas. For clothes he packed only some cowboy boots, figuring he'd buy jeans and other work clothes once he got there.

The Texans he met plainly thought he was crazy for wanting to get into a profession that most people were only too glad to get away from. Nevertheless they helped him and soon enough everyone in Midland knew about the crazy Chinese kid from the big city who wanted to be a cowboy. Two weeks later he was hired for a ranch job near Seminole, Texas. He was offered ten dollars a month and room and board, quite generous for a complete greenhorn when a real cowboy was paid forty with room and board. One of his first jobs was unloading a truck full of gravel along with an elderly African American. Eddie started shoveling like crazy but was told, "Eddie, take it easy. You're not going to last if you go at that pace. We got this whole truck to unload. Relax, a ranch day is a long day. You're not even going to last through this job if you don't slow down and pace yourself." This was among the most important lessons Eddie ever learned as a cowboy but he only realized it a few years later. He also learned to be observant and the value of cooperation. In Texas, everyone banded together. If someone was sick and needed help on their ranch then every neighbor showed up to help without even being asked to. If they needed their cattle to be sold and were unable to then it was done for them and every penny would be given to them. Eddie also learned to adjust to a life without electricity, telephones, radios, newspapers, or other communication with the outside world, very much like a prisoner of war would be.

He did get communication from his family though. All they had to figure out was where he'd gone from the bus station in San Francisco then ask bus stations along the route if they'd seen a crazy Chinese kid. This was how they'd tracked him when he'd run away before. Somebody would always remember the rare sight of a Chinese and point his family in his direction. His sister wrote, "In a way Pop is proud of you because you showed so much gumption, and in another way he's disappointed because you're not getting your education. But he knows where you are." His father sent a card for Eddie's seventeenth birthday containing a check for \$20 so Eddie figured he'd been forgiven.

The first time Eddie said he ever experienced racial discrimination was in Texas. He went to the movie theater in Lubbock after helping deliver a shipment of cattle. He was told tickets weren't sold to Mexicans or Indians. The manager had to be summoned by the bewildered ticket seller to decide Eddie could be let in as a Chinese. There were so few Chinese in Texas at the time that whites generally just treated them as being outside of the segregation system and let them use the "whites only" facilities.

Eddie was later employed at a horse and cattle ranch in Tucumcari, New Mexico, right on the border with Texas. Their horses were sold to the United States Army. It was there that Eddie became determined to join the cavalry when he heard two majors talking about how life in the Army playing polo, which pretty much summed up how Army officer life was for many of them in the 1930s. Eddie didn't realize the life of an enlisted man was different but thought it was another opportunity to work with horses. As a 17 year old though he wasn't legally allowed to join the Army until age 21 without parent permission. He dutifully wrote home for permission and was told in no uncertain terms that his mother absolutely forbade it. He then decided he would join the Texas National Guard since they didn't care what age you were as long as you passed the physical. Moreover the Texas National Guard was set to be nationalized and brought into regular Army service in November 1940 anyway.

Eddie signed up in May and reported for his National Guard duty in June. National Guard meetings were monthly and paid a dollar a meeting and there were no penalties for not bothering to show up, such was the casualness and lack of seriousness of the whole business in those days. Since he'd joined the National Guard in Lubbock he was assigned to the artillery unit there. At only 5'4 by that time and underweight he was regarded warily by his sergeant who couldn't believe he'd hack it in the artillery. Eddie persevered though and insisted on doing just as much as any other soldier, he said, "As I learned from working on the ranch. I never let my size stand in my way of doing a job. That's not to say I can handle anything, but anything within reason. I'll find a way to do it."

Eddie's father died in September 1940 from complications from colon surgery that probably was cancer. Doctors rarely if ever uttered that particular taboo word to families in those days. Eddie attended the funeral then started basic training after the Texas National Guard was nationalized. His memoirs don't record his mother's reaction to his going against her wishes and joining the army. Sergeant Brody believed in showing that anyone could handle the biggest weapon in the army inventory so he assigned the four smallest men, which included Eddie, to handle the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) which functioned as a light machine gun. The BAR was a hefty twenty-two pounds when fully loaded and usually sergeants assigned only the biggest men in a unit to carry it. Eddie became a marksman during the twenty-two weeks of training. He also learned to march for miles carrying a seventy-eight pound pack and his twenty-two pound BAR. Eddie only weighed about a hundred pounds at that time.

In August 1941 his unit joined others in mass military maneuvers in Louisiana. Fighting had been going on in Europe since 1939 and China had been fighting against Japan since 1937. The United States had to be prepared to enter World War II if they were called upon or attacked. This was the reason why National Guard units across the United States had been nationalized. Like the regular US Army units they were fighting with in practice the National Guard units were well equipped and prepared for a world war. They drove trucks around painted with the word "Tank" and used stovepipes to simulate mortars. The Army Air Corps practiced bombing missions by dropping flour sacks. Calling up military forces was a cheaper way to show America was prepared to fight any enemy if provoked than actually spending the money to provide them with the

weapons and practice to fight a real war. Like most American wars, America would go into this one underequipped and almost unprepared.

It was because of these unrealistic maneuvers and the fact that they were judged to have performed so much better than the others that the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery, 36th Infantry Division (Texas National Guard) was selected to go overseas. Eddie was in 'C' Battery of the 1st Battalion but decided to transfer to 'F' Battery of the 2nd Battalion when Sergeant Brody was assigned to the unit. Eddie thought he still had things to learn from the sergeant about being a good soldier. It was one of the best/worst decisions of his military career. Out of the 105 men in 'C' Battery, only five men survived the fighting in Europe. 2nd Battalion would suffer a different fate and become the other "Lost Battalion" of World War II.¹

For more information please read:

The Adventures of Eddie Fung: Chinatown Kid, Texas Cowboy, Prisoner of War, edited by Judy Yung, University of Washington Press, (2007) ISBN: 978-0-295-98754-5

1 The 36th Infantry Division had the awful distinction of producing two "Lost Battalions" during World War II. The more famous one, the 1st Battalion of the 141st Infantry Regiment, was surrounded by the Germans in 1944 in the Vosges Mountains of France and had to be rescued by the all Japanese-American 100th/442nd Regimental Combat Team, which was almost annihilated as a result. Several movies and documentaries have been made detailing this battle while the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery has been almost completely forgotten in history.