

A short history about Chinese American Military Veterans

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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.



Picture shown above. The picture of Joseph Pierce in Union uniform. Courtesy of the owner of the picture, Michael J. McAfee, Senior Editor of the Military Images magazine and Curator of the Museum of United States Military Academy, and courtesy of Philip Katcher, Senior Book Review Editor of the Military Images magazine. Photo credit also goes to Irving Moy.

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.

Among the roughly 200 Chinese Americans who lived on the East Coast, 58 Chinese Americans fought in the Civil War. Most served in the US Navy.

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. One unnamed Chinese man was known to have fought with the "Lost Battalion" in October 1918 when several American units were surrounded by the Germans and successfully held on until they were relieved.

World War II brought big changes - even though the participation of Chinese Americans was initially not welcome. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor when millions of Americans volunteered for military service, many Chinese American volunteers 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 WW II. Heroic 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.



Rear Admiral Gordon Pai-ea Chung-Hoon

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 Colonel Frank S. Fong, USAF

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.



Captain Moon Chin

Moon Chin, who never served a day in the military, is a pilot whose contributions and heroism nevertheless led the US Air Force to credit him with military service during WW II. His heroic exploits included rescuing Lt, Colonel Jimmy Doolittle in 1942 from China after Doolittle's raid on Tokyo. Chin also flew primitive aircraft across the notoriously dangerous Himalayas, from 1937 to 1945 providing critical military supplies for the Flying Tigers and the Nationalist Chinese forces that helped keep China in the war against Japan. More than 2,000 air crew perished during that period of time because of the extreme mountain weather and challenging flying conditions. Moon Chin was the only pilot to have survived flying the entire route from 1941 to 1945, a testament to his extraordinary flying skills and luck. In 1952, after 6 crewmen of a US Air Force C-119 had bailed out of their mechanically stricken plane, Chin undertook a daring float plane rescue in the Taiwan Straits during a storm. As helpless pilots from both the US Air Force and Republic of China Air Force circled futilely overhead, too afraid to land in the rough seas, Chin successfully completed the mission in his own civilian float plane even though by that time he was the president of his own airline. In 1995 the US Air Force awarded him the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal, and also gave him military service credit for his World War II service.



Colonel Richard F. Hum

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.

Asian American women (Japanese, Chinese and Filipino) also participated and played important roles during World War II. They were part of the Woman's Army Corps (WAC). Japanese and Chinese American women were recruited and sent to language schools to learn primarily Japanese, but also Chinese. They were needed to collect information from captured Japanese documents that resulted in valuable intelligence insights critical to eventual victory for America.

In 1943 the WAC recruited a unit of Chinese-American women to serve with the Army Air Forces as "Air WACs." The women of this particular unit was known as the Madame Chiang Kai-Shek Air WAC unit after the wife of the leader of China. The first two women to enlist in the unit were Hazel (Toy) Nakashima and Jit Wong, both of California. Air WACs served in a large variety of jobs, including aerial photo interpretation, air traffic control, and weather forecasting.



U.S. Army Photograph
Air WACs

Women also had an important role as pilots in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (W.A.S.P) in flying critical logistics missions. Maggie Gee and Hazel Ying Lee both flew logistics missions, and Gee even trained male pilots for combat missions, including B-17 bombers. Lee ferried combat aircraft from factory to airfields and shipping points across the United States.



National Archives
Hazel (Ying) Lee



The Women's Memorial
Maggie Gee

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.

A few Asian-American women entered the Army Nurse Corps during World War II. Army nurse Helen (Pon) Onyett risked her life tending wounded soldiers from the landing craft that came ashore in North Africa. Her hospital ship remained in constant danger from German and Italian air bombardment during the beach landings. Not knowing how to swim, Helen wore a life jacket at all times, even in her sleep. She admitted, "It was scary, especially when some of the ships you were traveling with would be sunk right under your nose. All I could think was, 'If you gotta go, you gotta go.'" She was awarded the Legion of Merit, the highest non-combat military award given, for her actions during the war and continued serving until her retirement from the Corps after 35 years of military service as a full colonel.



The Women's Memorial
Helen (Pon) Onyett

Marietta (Chong) Eng, born in Honolulu, Hawaii, enlisted in the WAVES because her brother was in the Navy. Her recruiter was initially uncertain about Eng's eligibility for recruitment since she was Chinese and had to check the rule book. Eng was trained by the US Navy as an occupational therapist and assigned to the US Naval Hospital on Mare Island, California, and later to the Naval Hospital in Corona, California. Ensign Eng provided rehabilitative services to sailors and officers who had lost arms and legs in the war, teaching them to accomplish the many tasks of normal daily life.



The Women's Memorial
Marietta (Chong) Eng

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 which restricted Chinese immigrants to just 105 people each year.



Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee

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. Then 1st Lieutenant 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 is teaching military tactics and strategy to Marine officers in Quantico, VA. Lee was also a veteran of WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

In that same war, Army Colonel (then 1st Lieutenant) Chew Mon Lee, the brother of Major Kurt Lee, also received the Distinguish Service Cross (the highest medal the US Army can award, and second highest medal below the Medal of Honor) and two Purple Hearts. Colonel Lee died in the line of duty. The Lee brothers were the only Chinese American brothers honored for these distinguished awards.



Major General John Fugh, US Army

In more recent times, an immigrant from Xian, China, Yeu-Tsu "Margaret" Lee, was commissioned in the US Army and joined the Army Medical Corps. She was one of four active duty surgeons assigned to the 13th Evacuation Hospital, a National Guard unit from Wisconsin, during Operation Desert Storm in 1990-1991. The unit set up a 400-bed hospital in northern Saudi Arabia and performed 125 operations. Lee retired as full Army colonel.

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.



American Legion National Commander
Fang A. Wong takes the Oath.

Fang A. Wong is the Adjutant and long time member of the American Legion Lt B. R. Kimlau #1291 post in New York City chartered in 1945. This post was named after World War II Army Air Corps Chinese American bomber pilot Lt B. R. Kimlau who died in the line of duty in the Pacific theater. The Kimlau post is a very distinguished American Legion post that has provided extraordinary service to our Country at their New York City location. There post has had leadership positions at all levels of American Legion hierarchy including Area, District and State level command.

In San Francisco, American Legion Cathay Post #384, which was chartered 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.

For more information about Chinese American heroes, please visit the **Chinese American Heroes** website at www.chineseamericanheroes.org.

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