

# Story arc of Chinese American WWII veterans

By Maj. Gen. Bill Chen, U.S. Army, retired



14th Air Service Group Memorial Day Parade 1943, Springfield, Ill.

On May 10, 2019, at Promontory Summit, Utah, the recognition and honoring of Chinese railroad workers at the 150th Anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad completed the story arc of Chinese railroad workers. Along the way, Chinese railroad workers endured hard work, danger, risk of life, and sacrifices while also being ignored, forgotten, excluded and snubbed. Progress in recognition has been slow - the completed arc gave closure to the first major contribution of Chinese in America - the building of the First Transcontinental Railroad.

While not a historian, I would say that the second major contribution of Chinese in America and Chinese Americans was their service in World War II. Here I distinguish between Chinese in America and Chinese Americans, where the former were Chinese, not American citizens in America; and the latter predominately are native or natural-born Americans of Chinese origin.

Using some poetic license on what a story arc is - this article recaps the storyline of the Chinese American World War II veterans.

The story begins in the pre-World War II period, before Pearl Harbor, with Chinese Americans who performed with distinction even before America entered the war, such as Arthur T. Chin, from Portland, Ore., participated in the Second Sino-Japanese War. He was part of the first group of U.S. volunteer combat aviators. He gained U.S. veteran status and is recognized as America's first flying ace in World War II. During the Sino-Japanese War, Chinese American communities, as in San Francisco, raised funds for China relief and also organized Chinese American volunteers to fight against the Japanese. Among those was Bill King from Locke, Calif., who went to China in 1939. He flew for the Chinese Air Force and was a highly decorated fighter pilot in the Chinese American Composite Wing of the 14th Air Force under Gen. Claire Chennault of the legendary Flying Tigers.

At the time of World War II, the total population of Chinese in America and Chinese Americans was about 100,000. They were largely in major cities, mostly in Chinatowns across the country though some were in rural areas. For the most part, they were isolated and largely interacted with other Chinese and Chinese Americans. Chinese and Chinese Americans in the territory of Hawaii probably were more integrated with the general population than on the U.S. Mainland.

Of the 100,000-plus population of

Chinese and Chinese Americans (hereafter referred to as Chinese Americans), about 20,000 volunteered or were drafted and served in the U.S. Armed Services. Of the approximately 20,000 who served, about 40 percent were not U.S. citizens - at that time, Chinese immigrants had been denied U.S. citizenship.

Chinese American World War II veterans served in every theater of war and in every branch of the services: Army, Army Air Forces, Marine Corps, Navy, Coast Guard and Merchant Marines. In contrast to other minority groups such as Japanese Americans and African Americans, Chinese Americans were predominately integrated into the U.S. Armed Services. The only all-Chinese American units were the 14th Air Service Group and the 987th Signal Company assigned to the China Burma India theater.

While there were Chinese Americans who earned every type of award for valor up to the Congressional Medal of Honor, the basis for the award of the Congressional Gold Medal to Chinese American World War II Veterans was not for bravery or valor. The basis for the award was that they served and fought for America as Americans in spite of the discriminatory aspects of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, in-place until December 1943.

Along the trajectory of the story arc, many Chinese Americans distinguished themselves. Some notables:

- **Francis B. WAI**, awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for actions during the recapture of the Philippines.
- **Gordon Pai'ea CHUNG-HOON**, awarded the Silver Star and Navy Cross, later promoted to Rear Admiral, the first Asian American flag officer in the U.S. Navy.
- **Dewey LOWE**, pilot in China Burma India theater, later promoted to Major General, the first Chinese American general in the U.S. Air Force.
- **Wau Kai KONG**, the first Chinese American fighter pilot in the U.S. Army Air Forces.
- **Randall CHING**, the only Chinese/Asian American in the Rangers in WWII; fought from Normandy, June 6, 1944 until the end of the war in 1945.
- **Loren L. LOW**, awarded Silver Star in the of invasion of Saipan.
- **Pak On LEE**, member of American Volunteer Group, the original Flying Tigers, later integrated into the U.S. Army Air Forces.
- **K. J. LUKE**, achieved rank of Major during WWII; highest ranked Chinese American officer in the U.S. Army during WWII.

- **John C. YOUNG**, designed and helped to implement a plan to tunnel, install, and detonate U.S.-supplied TNT beneath the Japanese garrison in the Battle of Mt. Song -- resulted in opening the Burma Road; returned from war as a major.

- **Clarence YOUNG**, lead navigator, Luzon raid.

- **Leo SOO HOO**, P-51A Mustang fighter pilot, 14th Air Force.

- **Hazel Yang LEE & Maggie GEE**, first and second Chinese American Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) who tested aircraft, ferried aircraft, and trained pilots.

- **Jesse Yi LEE**, Women's Army Corps, believed to be one of the first to enlist in the San Francisco bay area.

- **Moon F. CHIN**, distinguished civilian Hump pilot who flew Jimmy Doolittle out from China to India; was granted U.S. veteran status.

But the real heroes were the Chinese Americans in the U.S. Armed Services who made the ultimate sacrifice and were killed in action in World War II. It is highly noteworthy that St. Mary's Square in San Francisco has a memorial plaque saluting Americans of Chinese ancestry who gave their lives for America in World War I and II. Likewise, in New York City, the Kimlau American Legion Post has an arch that is in memory of the Americans of Chinese ancestry who lost their lives in defense of freedom and democracy.

Collectively, what did these Chinese American World War II Veterans do? They:

- Made known to the American public who Chinese Americans were and their abilities.
- Demonstrated their skills, competencies, loyalty, and patriotism.
- "... demonstrated highly uncommon and commendable sense of patriotism and honor in face of discrimination," as stated in PL 115-337.
- Were proud to serve and served with pride as Americans.
- Paved the way for future generations to serve in the U.S. Armed Services.
- Opened up opportunities for Asian and Chinese Americans to be in Mainstream America post-World War II.
- Continued the Legacy of Progress of Chinese Americans in the United States, as initially established by the Chinese railroad workers, and they enabled follow-on generations to live the American dream.

The storyline of Chinese American veterans continues after their separation and honorable discharge from the U.S. Armed Services. They continued to work hard;

brought wives to the United States based on the War Brides Act, or married women already in the United States, and raised families. They viewed their war experiences as seeing a whole new world outside their family traditions - making friends and acquaintances from all walks of life in America. Many took advantage of the G.I. Bill and began businesses or attended college and started their professional careers. They provided a better life for their families and encouraged their sons and daughters to attend and graduate from college - to live the American dream and be an integral part of mainstream America. Indeed, the Chinese American World War II veterans were part of America's Greatest Generation, although no book on the Greatest Generation captured their lives and stories.

Currently, the U.S. Mint has completed its design of the Congressional Gold Medal for Chinese American World War II Veterans. The obverse side of the medal will have images of servicemen in all branches of the services. Also, a female nurse is included to represent the service of Chinese American women in the armed services. "Proudly Served as Americans" is also inscribed on the obverse side. The reverse side shows how Chinese Americans fought in World War II -- on land, sea, and air with images of a Sherman tank, battleship USS Missouri, and the P-40 fighter of "Flying Tigers" fame; with a 48-star American flag serving as a backdrop. The official award ceremony to be presided by the Speaker of the House on Capitol Hill for presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal is projected to be held in the spring of 2020. Subsequently there will be regional award ceremonies held in major cities for living veterans and/or their next-of-kin for those who cannot attend the Washington, D.C. ceremony.

Similar to Chinese railroad workers, progress in the recognition of Chinese American World War II Veterans has been slow and late, as many veterans have passed away, or are aging. September 2, 2020, will mark the 75th anniversary of the surrender of Imperial Japan and the end of World War II. Hopefully, we can say by then that the award of the Congressional Gold Medal to Chinese American World War II Veterans finally gives recognition and honor to these veterans -- and completes the arc for Chinese American World War II Veterans. ♦

*Maj. Gen. Bill Chen, U.S. Army, retired, is a veteran of 32 years active duty service. He served as the commanding general, U.S. Army Missile Command, and program executive for Missile Defense. He is a descendant of a Chinese railroad worker, as well as a descendant of a World War II veteran.*

**Editor's note:** Go to [www.caww2.org](http://www.caww2.org) to register known Chinese American veterans of WWII and to establish eligibility for a free replica of the Congressional Gold Medal that is now estimated to be awarded in the spring of 2020.