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Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
National Library of Australia

Giese, Diana, 1947-  
Courage and Service: Chinese Australians  
and World War II

ISBN 0 646 37051 0

1. World War, 1939-1945 -Participation, Chinese Australian.
2. Chinese Australians -History- 20th century. I. Courage and Service Project. II. Title.

940.5394

*Cover photographs* (from top): Jack Goon (third from left) from 1940 served in the Army Signal Corps, the RAAF in Melbourne and Sydney, the Dutch East Indies and Borneo, and from 1946 with the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces in Japan. On return to Australia, he worked as an Intelligence lieutenant, specialising in Asian affairs. These mates are Indonesian, seconded to the RAAF in 1941-42. (courtesy Jack Goon)

George Fong, an engineering student at Melbourne University and a talented jazz musician, joined the RAAF in 1942. He was mustered as an airman pilot, commissioned in 1943, and sent to Britain. He was transferred to the Middle East in 1944, and his plane was lost at sea out of Palestine in 1945. (courtesy Peter Liefman)

Eunice Leong (top left) worked from 1940 as a wireless operator for the Army in Melbourne, Sydney and Alice Springs, and as a signals instructor at Bonegilla. Her sister Valda worked as a radar plotter with the WAAAF, and her brother Max went with the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces to Japan after the War. Their family, the Chinns, were active in raising money for the War effort, including War in China. (courtesy Eunice Leong)

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# Courage and Service

## How the project came about

The *Courage and Service* project tells stories of the courage, loyalty to Australia and honour to their families of Chinese Australian servicemen and women. Begun in 1997, with support from the Honourable Bruce Scott, Minister for Veterans Affairs and Senator Bill O'Chee, *Courage and Service* recorded sound and video tapes and collected material country-wide. It builds on the communal memory and strong backing of those who in February 1997 formed the Australian Chinese Ex-Services National Reunion, under the Presidency of Mr Bo Liu.

Diana Giese co-ordinated the project, with assistance from Kaylene Poon in Western Australia and Warren Lee Long in north Queensland. Interviews were conducted and material collected in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Darwin, Perth, Brisbane, Cairns, Townsville, Ingham, Innisfail and Atherton, as a result of publicity circulated through RSL and Chinese community networks.

*Courage and Service* draws on the Honour List of over 400 Chinese Australians who saw action in World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars. This was prepared and is maintained by Mr Gilbert Jan.

The images, voices, letters, documents and artefacts collected by the project form the *Courage and Service* exhibition from April 1999 at the Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo. In time, they will be a substantial permanent resource at the Museum for researchers.

This overview, focusing on the contributions of Chinese Australians to World War II, pulls together much of this information. Its publication was made possible by the generosity of Mr Tom Cheong, Vice-President of the Ex-Services National Reunion. Chinese Australians served in all theatres of war and at home. When war came to Australia with the bombing of Darwin in February 1942, many who were witnesses went on to join up. As the Japanese moved inexorably closer to north Australia, Chinese Australians helped build airstrips and fortify beaches, supplied food, transmitted coded messages, maintained amphibious vehicles to repel a possible invasion, and flew on raids into occupied areas of New Guinea and the Pacific. Further afield, they continued to serve at the front, on the seas, and behind enemy lines on dangerous Intelligence missions.

Here are their stories.

## The author

Diana Giese is the Co-ordinator of the National Library of Australia's *Post-War Chinese Australians* oral history project, 85-plus interviews with Chinese Australians from communities country-wide. This has produced the books *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons* (University of Queensland Press, 1997) and *Beyond Chinatown* (National Library, 1995), ABC Radio programs, workshops, talks and presentations at libraries and museums, and for historical and community groups. Since 1996, she has been the Convenor of *Reclaiming the Past*, presentations on history, community and identity at the Museum of Sydney. This has showcased heritage work from Chinese, Vietnamese, Aboriginal, Lebanese, Khmer, Polish and Jewish communities.

## Chinese Australians and World War II

What makes people want to fight for their country?

When Prime Minister Menzies announced in September 1939 that Australia was at War, many were eager to enlist. Among them were young Australians of Chinese origin. Eunice Leong's grandfather was an interpreter on the Victorian goldfields. Ray Chin's grandfather was a land and property owner in China, and rented these out when he came to the Northern Territory in the 1880s to start a business. His father was born in Darwin.

From Palestine to Milne Bay, from London to Okinawa, Chinese Australians served with courage in all theatres of war and at home, behind the front lines. Harry Hoyling and Albert Lougoon served in both World Wars. Of the eight sons of W.C. Tankey of Queanbeyan, son of John Tan Kee, who arrived in Sydney in 1851, five served in either World Wars I or II. Arthur, Mavis, Harry, Peter, Frank and Clarence Moo of Darwin all took part in World War II. Remembers Arthur Moo: 'The government used to issue a little badge. If you had one son or daughter in the forces, they'd give you one. If you had two, they'd give you a badge with a little star. My mother used to have a badge with five stars. She was very proud. Everywhere she went, she used to wear it.' John, Norman and Frank Lee-Ack all served. 'Our parents were very proud that they had their only three sons in the forces. No doubt they could have done with some assistance in running their small mixed business. And Mum, though a semi-invalid, worked tirelessly for the Red Cross and any other charity that required assistance.' The four Young brothers from New South Wales, Alan, Les, Ellis and Colin, served in the Middle East, New Guinea and Australia itself. When the Australian Chinese Ex-Services National Reunion was formed in 1997, they discovered a fifth digger -their half-brother, Bill. 'I was a bit nonplussed' says Colin Young. 'I'd always thought I was the youngest of the Youngs.'

When universal military service was introduced in Australia, there were those living and working here who were defined as not wanted, as the 'enemy within'. Most Australians were of Anglo-Saxon or Celtic stock, with only a few per cent coming from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The *Defence Act 1909* exempted those not of 'substantially European descent or origin' from any but non-combatant duties. White Australia began with the first Act of the Australian federal Parliament, the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, aimed at keeping out non-Europeans, the 'enemy without'. Those of Chinese descent already in the country, or who managed to enter despite the hurdles of the poll tax and the dictation test, were subject to further legislative restrictions. They were prevented from owning property, excluded from many occupations, denied the right to be naturalised, found it difficult to leave and re-enter the country, and almost impossible to reunite their families. Australia's Chinese population fell from around 30,000 in 1901. In the tough years between World Wars 1 and 11, numbers dwindled to the 14,349 Chinese and part-Chinese recorded by the 1933 Census. Yet out of this unpromising soil flowered young men and women willing and eager to defend this country.

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Why? There were many reasons. 'During 1939, a lot of the Darwin boys, school friends, joined the AIF' remembers Tom Cheong. 'They used to march along the street, the bands playing...and you'd get all excited, and you'd feel that you should be part of it. You didn't care what colour or nationality you were -you were just friends, all Australians. And I'd always wanted to fly. When you were young, you wanted adventure.' He and his Aboriginal friend Steve McGuinness went out to the RAAF Base to enlist. It was just before Darwin was bombed, when war came to Australia for the first time. Mr Cheong also thought it likely that the Japanese would invade Australia, as they already had China. 'I felt that I should join up and do my share as far as protecting Australia was concerned.' He eventually joined the RAAF in Sydney, and became a wireless air gunner.

'Every morning when I walked to work, I passed a lady's home, and I could tell by her attitude she didn't care for me very much at all.' Jack Wong Sue had grown up in Western Australia, and been a member of the Sea Scouts since he was nine. 'She was always watering her garden and would ignore me as I walked by. I found out after the War that she had two sons. She had no husband that I know of. Both her sons were fighting, one in the Middle East. And this woman eventually sent me a white feather in the mail. And of course white feathers were a sign of cowardice. When I was 16, I used to look every bit of 18. So she probably thought: "It's good enough for my sons to be cannon fodder- why not this lad?"'

Mr Wong Sue was hurt. 'When you're 16, you think you're a man -even though you're not.' He went down to Fremantle the day after he received the feather, a Tuesday. On the Thursday, he sailed on a Norwegian tanker as a member of the Merchant Navy. Returning to Australia at the age of 18, he applied to join the RAN. With his experience, he might have been seen as the ideal recruit. He was called up with all the others, 'fifty or sixty other young fellows in a very gaily decorated room, full of propaganda and servicemen and servicewomen, standing around in uniforms'. The lieutenant commander in charge of proceedings demanded: 'Is there a Jack Wong Sue here?' He raised his arm. 'We can't take you' was the shattering response. 'He didn't even have the decency or courtesy to draw me aside, but bawled me out in front of everybody else' remembers Mr Wong Sue. Why was he unacceptable? 'Because your father was born in China. The law says your father must be either a British subject or be naturalised.' A heated exchange followed, then: 'I stamped out of the room and went straight round to the RAAF.'

In February 1940, the enlistment of aliens and British subjects of non-European descent was referred to a committee. For the RAN and the Army, the admission of those so classified was 'neither necessary nor desirable', it was decided. The RAAF, however, could admit non-Europeans at its discretion, as ground crew confined to Australia.

By mid-1941, regulations against the service of non-Europeans were increasingly ignored. The threat to Australia had become too great. Jack Wong Sue went on to have a RAAF career which won him the Distinguished Conduct Medal for 'leadership, gallantry and cold-blooded courage of the highest order'.

According to *Courage and Service* informants, there was little discussion during Wartime service of racist slights such as he suffered -or indeed of what it was like growing up Chinese Australian. Such

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stoicism continued after the War- and extended to what had been experienced. The terror of the front line and the nightmares suffered for years after; the chaos, panic and confusion of evacuation; the fear of invasion; the ways so many lives were changed forever -many of these crucial issues have still not been fully discussed, in public or in families.

## **Making soldiers**

Having jumped the barrier of admission, some found that to be Chinese in the forces was immediately to invoke stereotypes. Charles See-Kee, getting his first RAAF haircut, was closely questioned on what had happened to his pigtail, and whether he smoked opium. Straightfaced, the graduate from Shanghai announced that he'd just had the pigtail cut off. As for the opium: 'Oh yes. Do it all the time.'

Enlisting meant becoming what Tom Cheong describes as 'a common rissole out of the mincing machine of the RAAF'. Boys like him and fellow Darwin recruit Ron Chin, used to a carefree outdoors tropical life, found themselves sleeping in their overcoats in the freezing winter of the south. 'Sheets? Pillows? Teddy bears? This was wartime.' The excellent Chinese food of home was replaced by stew, bread and jam, bully beef, 'goldfish' (tinned herrings), 'dog biscuits', powdered eggs and scalding tea in enamel mugs. And as rookies, they were 'forever marching'.

But there were compensations, including interesting specialist training. Tom Cheong learned to fire a machine gun at an object being towed by another plane, and to dismantle and reassemble his gun blindfold. They were trained in Morse Code, at which he is still proficient.

Hamilton (Ham) Chan remembers sleeping on 'chaff bags' filled with straw in draughty stables at the showground at Shepparton, Victoria. Ron Chin lived in the Exhibition Building 'just like a big refrigerator. I slept with socks on, and overalls, overcoat and six blankets -before I was comfortable.' Having first joined the Army at 18 in 1942 -and been summarily removed as underage by his father, whose signature he had forged- Ham Chan found the RAAF, which he joined in 1944, offered superior food and uniforms. There was 'a bit more status -"Menzies' Blue Orchids". Glamorous.' He also appreciated the opportunity to learn a trade. He was servicing Beaufort bombers: 'We used to change the oil and mechanical parts, and after we signed the sheet, we had to go up in the plane -just in case, to make sure we'd serviced it properly.'

Lionel Nomchong, a qualified motor mechanic, joined up in 1940 from the Monaro area of New South Wales 'always with the boys from Goulburn, including a couple of fellows who were part-Aboriginal. A lot of our officers were gentlemen officers, graziers, some World War 1 veterans. Our CO was a World War 1 digger. He gave us the works. They took us out during the first week on a route march -and I came back sore and sorry. My feet were all blistered and tired and aching. I used to be in pretty good nick, I thought. I played all the sports. But I wasn't. We cursed the Army.' A couple of months later, he was sent to a school which trained people in the use and maintenance of Bren gun carriers. He topped the course and was seconded as an instructor.

The experience of some Chinese Australians parallels the course of the War in its movement from

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Europe and the Middle East in the British Empire's conflict with Germany, to the struggle against Japan which reached Australia itself. Les Young joined up in 1940 and went with the AIF to Palestine, Egypt, Syria and Libya. He was in a transport unit. 'Their job was to carry supplies and ammunition, whatever was needed, to the front line troops' recalls his brother, Colin. 'About this time the Japanese came into the War and they were sent back to Australia.' Les Young went on to serve in New Guinea, helping repel the Japanese push through the islands and beyond.

Henry Leeton, who put up his age and, like Ham Chan, forged his father's signature, joined the Army in 1940. He was in both the cavalry and the infantry, and trained extensively as a machine gunner. His first experience of battle came as part of the Milne Bay campaign, when Australian troops were part of the determined effort from 1942 to dislodge Japanese forces from Papua and New Guinea. 'That was my first stoush. I had the experience of going in, fighting an enemy, first battle I've ever been into. And when we came out, I said: "What a silly bugger I was!" Fighting in the *kunai* grass, coconut plantation, steaming hot -and you get the occasional downpour and you're all wet. Then half an hour later, hot and fined up, you're sweaty.'

## **War comes to China and Australia**

China was torn by civil war, the Guomindang Nationalists, under Chiang Kaishek, in conflict with Mao Zedong's Communist forces. In 1931-32, Japan invaded northeast China and established a puppet state in Manchuria. In mid-1937, Chinese and Japanese troops fought on the outskirts of Beijing. At the end of that year, the Japanese took Shanghai and laid Nanjing waste, then pushed south and west. The Nationalists moved their government to Chongqing. By 1938, the Japanese occupied Canton (Guangzhou) and other southern coastal cities.

Ray Chin, who had begun his education at the Darwin Public School, was studying in China at the Pui Ching Academy in Canton in 1937, when the west of the city was bombed by the Japanese. 'Fires started about 10 miles away' he remembers. 'Part of our school then evacuated to the country for two or three months. Then the Japanese came there, too. Enemy planes flew up and down the railway line. So I went home to my mum.'

It took Ray Chin and his mother twelve months to get back to their Australian home, in Darwin. 'We were frightened. We were like refugees in the countryside. Mum had one suitcase, and I had a little bag. Refugees were everywhere, dodging the cities. There were too many people in the countryside. There could have been food shortages. So we kept on moving.'

In 1938, they managed to escape by boat from Hong Kong.

Charles See-Kee was working for one of the largest British companies in China, Jardine Matheson, at a brewery. His family had business interests in Australia, but Mr See-Kee had graduated from university in Shanghai. The Japanese marched in and took over the International Settlement.

The Jardine Matheson brewery there was staffed by a mix of nationalities, including Germans and Indians. Mr See-Kee's position was unclear to the Japanese. 'I said to them: "If you wait, I can prove that I'm not a spy."' He was not believed. 'How do you want to die?' they asked, indicating a

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