

Panel Presentation by Senator Vivienne Poy

**"The Role Played by Chinese-Canadians in WWII -
with reference to the life of Kam Len Douglas Sam"**

**Association for Asian American Studies
Conference**

Toronto, Ontario

March 29, 2001

In fall, 1944, as World War II neared its end in Europe, and the German soldiers retreated, the American army moved slowly through previously occupied territory in France. The Americans were surprised at what they encountered when they reached the small café that served as the headquarters of the Resistance movement in Reims:

"The next day a solitary American tank entered Reims and was directed to the Café-Bar de l'Univers. A major from Boston emerged - and was intrigued to find a Chinese-Canadian airman in charge."

The name of that Chinese-Canadian airman was Kam Len Douglas Sam. The story of Douglas Sam's journey to the Café-Bar de l'Univers in Reims is one of courage and determination. Not only did he have to battle the enemy, Sam also had to overcome the Canadian government's policy of outright discrimination towards Chinese-Canadians who wished to volunteer for military service.

Douglas Sam was born in Victoria in 1918. He was one of eight sons and a daughter born to Mr. & Mrs. Sam Wing Wo, who came to Victoria from Yin Ping near Canton. Sam always wanted to be a pilot. His Victoria high school yearbook bore witness to his ambitions with the inscription, "Doug has aspirations to become the Chinese Lindbergh." Sam knew his best opportunity to fly lay with the military. So, in 1938, with Europe on the brink of war, Sam headed to the recruitment station for the British Royal Air Force.

Rejected because he was non-white, Sam returned in 1941 to offer his services to the Royal Canadian Air Force. Once again, the criteria specified that candidates must be of Caucasian origin.

A federal Order-in-Council (PC 79/11160, December 9, 1942) removed the racial requirement, but, in effect, this change in policy only applied to aircrew. The official policy was that no British subjects could be barred from enlistment in Ground Duties although all applications from "coloured applicants" had to be submitted to "headquarters for enlistment sanction". [letter from Ottawa, October, 1941, to commanding officer at the RCAF No. 2 Recruiting Centre in Calgary] However, a senior officer noted late in October, 1941 that "the Air Force does not want coloured personnel because of the difficulties of racial differences."

However, the RCAF accepted Chinese-Canadians for aircrew from October 1, 1942, and this acceptance never became entangled in definitions as to whether the applicants were British subjects or Chinese nationals, unlike the Canadian army which lumped all categories together as "Allied Aliens". Sam was recalled by the RCAF and allowed to take aircrew aptitude tests and medical exams. He enlisted in the RCAF on October 21, 1942.

As for the Royal Canadian Navy, the same regulations applied - an Order-in-Council (PC 1986, March 12, 1943) removed all racial restrictions and specified only that the recruit must be a British subject. However, not more than about 10 Chinese-Canadians enlisted in the Navy.

Like many Chinese-Canadians, Sam was determined to serve Canada in its war effort. Sam's reasons for wanting to join were both personal and political. Personally, in addition to wanting to fly, Sam was a patriot whose only attachment was to Canada - the country of his birth. However, like many other Chinese-Canadians, Sam recognized that WW II offered his community a unique opportunity to prove its patriotism, and potentially gain the franchise as a result. This viewpoint was not without merit. A number of Japanese-Canadians who fought in WW I had been rewarded with the right to vote in provincial elections.

In fact, it was the very possibility of Chinese-Canadians obtaining the franchise that led to such virulent opposition to their participation in the

military. This fear was especially pronounced in British Columbia, which had the largest population of Chinese-Canadians in the country at that time.

Why was the franchise such a divisive issue in British Columbia? Besides social Darwinism and the belief that whites were superior to other races, there was the fear of economic competition, especially from Asians. For Chinese-Canadians, the vote was a tangible expression of their rights as a community. Their lack of the franchise left them with no voice in public policy decisions at the municipal, provincial or federal levels. As a result, they had no weapon against racist statements and discriminatory government policies that were an integral part of politics, especially in B.C. More pragmatically, the vote was also tied to economics. Chinese-Canadians who could not vote also could not hold jobs in the government, or in professions, such as pharmacy or law. As such, they were largely restricted to working in ethnic businesses and within their own communities.

As a result of pressure from the British Columbia legislature, in October, 1940, the Cabinet War Committee made a decision not to call up Asians for military training. Racist ideas, as much as security concerns, underlay the government's policy. Chinese-Canadians were not considered a security threat, however, the army was not anxious to have Orientals train alongside white soldiers as "it would be very lowering to the prestige of the white race if they were to become the menials of the coloured races."

When Japan bombed Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, and Canada declared war on Japan, Japanese in Canada were refused enlistment in the military, even as volunteers. A few Chinese-Canadians, such as Douglas Sam, were able to volunteer but the Chinese were not officially called up under the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA). However, the government's contradictory statements, and insistence on secrecy in decision-making, meant that, in practice, the official policy was often overlooked by the Canadian armed forces. As a result, in the eastern provinces, Chinese-Canadians volunteered and were even called up under NRMA from the first call in 1940. British Columbia, on the other hand, remained strongly opposed to Asian involvement in the war effort.

As such, it was not until the summer of 1944 that Pacific Command headquarters received orders to call up the Chinese in British Columbia. By this point, Chinese-Canadians in the region, who were anxious to participate in some way in the war, had begun to request permission to join the

American armed forces. Meanwhile, Canadian recruitment services on Canada's west-coast were suffering a dire shortage of able-bodied men.

Why was there a change in attitude toward Chinese-Canadian recruitment in B.C. in 1944? Was the shortage of men at this point in the war so dire that a policy shift was warranted? Without a doubt, Pacific headquarters was embarrassed that Chinese-Canadians were trying to join the American forces. But ironically, the softening in the position towards Chinese-Canadians may have been an unexpected result of the animosity directed at Japanese-Canadians. Japanese-Canadians were singled out as the enemy, with Chinese-Canadians benefitting from China's role as an ally during the war.

On June 16, 1943, the sense of a common cause was heightened by the appearance of Madame Chiang Kai-Shek before a Special Joint Session of the Senate and the House of Commons in Ottawa.

Pressures for a change in enlistment policy also came from outside Canada. The British High Command was looking for recruits to work with their Special Operations Executive (SOE) in Asia, dubbed Force 136, to do sabotage and reconnaissance work behind enemy lines in Burma, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies.

The appearance of the Chinese-Canadians, and their Chinese language, which were considered a deficit in Canadian society, were suddenly viewed as an asset as these men could be dropped into the jungle to work alongside Chinese-Communist guerrillas and act as spies in Japanese occupied territories. The irony of this reversal was not lost on the Chinese-Canadians, more than 100 of whom volunteered for duty on extremely dangerous missions in South-East Asia.

The fatality rate among the troops in Southeast Asia was high - as high as 50%. Malaria outbreaks were common. Members of the Force were given cyanide pills, to be used in the event of capture by the Japanese.

13 Chinese-Canadians were also specially chosen for the rather ominous mission called "Operation Oblivion", mounted in August, 1944. The men were given little chance of surviving their mission. Initially, the 13 men were to parachute directly behind enemy lines in China to raise and lead an army of 300,000 Chinese against the Japanese. They were to use

weapons captured from the German Afrika Corps. If they were caught, it was understood that the government would disavow any knowledge of their existence, which could mean that they would be executed. The operation was diverted at the last moment when U.S. General Douglas MacArthur claimed China as an American theatre of war. The men were sent to an equally dangerous mission in Burma. Miraculously, all returned and 4 were awarded medals for bravery. The four were Roy Chan, Norman Low, Louie King and James Shiu.

Back to our story of Douglas Sam. By 1944, Douglas Sam had already lived his lifelong dream, flying in a four-engine Lancaster on 28 missions. On June 28, 1944, Pilot Officer Sam's Halifax bomber, while on its way to a mission to Metz, France, was attacked by 3 German Ju-88 night fighters. He flamed one of them with his machine guns, but his aircraft was riddled with cannon shells. The crew bailed out over Reims, France, with the exception of his mid-upper gunner, who was killed.

The Canadian government informed Sam's widowed mother that her son had been shot down over France and was presumed dead. His relatives and friends waited anxiously for further reports. They didn't hear from him for several weeks and, even the most optimistic, believed that Sam had paid the supreme sacrifice.

His grandmother, a devout Anglican, went to the Chinese temple in Victoria and lit incense sticks. The joss told her the signs were favourable and that her grandson was not dead and the joss was right. Sam had parachuted down safely, landing about 180 metres from a German Air Force base.

In France, Sam faced a new challenge. Evading capture, he contacted the French Resistance through a fisherman and was taken in by a member named Raoul who introduced him to Marcel Lacour, the owner of the Café Bar de l'Univers. This was the unofficial headquarters of the French Resistance movement in the Reims region.

At the request of MI-9, the British Military Intelligence Service, and the French Resistance, Sam remained in France posing as an Indochinese student who was stranded there by the German occupation. Sam stayed even though his high school French, which he learnt in Victoria, was rusty and he knew little about the history, geography or culture of Reims. A slight

slip in his mannerisms - such as the way he held his cigarettes - or the accent in his speech, could make him a target for the Gestapo.

Sam's job was to act as a liaison between the various groups of Resistance fighters; to distribute arms and other equipment dropped by RAF aircraft, and to set up escape routes for Allied servicemen. The job was far more hazardous than flying on bombing missions since the Gestapo regularly stopped passersby to check their papers. Sam was caught in two separate round-ups, but on both occasions, he managed to convince the Germans of his story. Sam's work soon became even more dangerous when he became involved in ambushing German convoys and executing German agents and collaborators.

Fearing that any disclosure might jeopardize his safety, the RCAF reported Sam's death. It was officially entered on the Casualty Lists and an editorial in the Victoria Colonist noted that he was the first Chinese-Canadian victim of the war.

When Douglas Sam did return home from the European theatre in October, 1944, was his mother relieved to see him back alive! He returned as a hero with the French government recognizing his contributions to the Resistance movement by awarding him the Croix de Guerre with a Silver Star.

In Canada, Sam continued his work with British intelligence in what columnist Denny Boyd of the Vancouver Sun called Sam's 3rd War. After receiving training from MI-6, he went overseas from 1950 until 1951 as an intelligence officer with the British Royal Air Force in Singapore and Malaya. The Communists in the jungles of Malaya, many of whom had been released during WWII to help fight the Japanese, continued their struggle for power after the end of the war. Ironically, Sam's mission was to pacify forces that may have been trained and equipped by his fellow Chinese-Canadians. Not surprisingly, he noted that the guerrillas had been trained too well.

By 1950, Douglas Sam, and all the Chinese-Canadians who had fought in WWII had received the recognition they deserved. Despite discrimination, approximately 600 Chinese-Canadians served in the Army, Navy and Air Force during WWII. Many of these men and women were volunteers, although some of those who lived in eastern Canada had been

conscripted. In 1945, they all received the right to vote, along with a number of Chinese veterans from WWI. This was rapidly followed by the franchise for all Chinese-Canadian citizens in 1947, as well as the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The significant participation of Chinese Canadians in the war had the direct result of improving the status of Chinese-Canadians in Canada. With 600 men serving in the war, the community contributed more manpower than any other ethnic group to the war effort. But the Chinese-Canadian community's contributions went well beyond providing manpower - they also contributed 10 million to the Victory Loan Drive, more, per capita, than any other group in Canada, besides participating in the Red Cross and other service work.

After the war, Chinese-Canadian soldiers who served their country were offered the same educational benefits as other soldiers, and they entered professions that were previously barred to them. The end of the war led to a shift in the economic life of the Chinese-Canadian community, from a traditional dependence on small ethnic businesses such as laundries and restaurants, into the professions.

Douglas Sam, and all the Chinese-Canadians who fought for Canada in WWII, acted as catalysts for post-war change in our nation. Ultimately, their efforts, along with that of others, brought about a shift in the attitude of the Canadian population, which led to the crucial changes in the immigration legislation of 1967, with the removal of the "whites only" clause.

The change in Canadian society towards tolerance formed the basis of two very important pieces of legislation. Both the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom (1982) and the Multiculturalism Act (1988) are based on the fundamental understanding that the rights of the majority should not preclude the rights of a collective minority or of an individual.

When Douglas Sam died in July of 1989, as the most decorated and highest-ranking Chinese-Canadian officer in Canadian history, he had served his country for over forty years. In peacetime, he continued with the RCAF in intelligence, retiring as Squadron Leader in 1967. This was followed by a stint in the Armed Forces' Primary Reserve as a Lieutenant Colonel until 1978. At the same time, Sam worked full-time in intelligence work with Immigration until his retirement in 1983.

Despite Sam's lifelong devotion to his country, and his sterling record of achievement, his story remains virtually unknown. Part of the reason for our ignorance lies with Sam's own reticence to speak of his past. After his death, a colleague at Immigration was moved to write to his son, Trevor:

"I think it is a considerable tribute to your late father's innate modesty that his brilliant war record was probably unknown to most, if not all, of the senior personnel at Immigration Headquarters. I felt a strong sense at having been a part of the same organization as such a genuine war hero."

As the Chinese-Canadian community grows and flourishes in Canada, it is important that we share the stories of our heroes because their stories epitomize the collective struggles, aspirations, and victories of our community as a whole.