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Madison Heights

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Chinese American vets honored in digital display

New exhibit unveiled at Chinese Community Center

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MADISON HEIGHTS — Andy Wong, former post commander of AMVETS 85, says there's a misconception about the roles Chinese Americans played in the military.

Some people look back at conflicts like World War II and the Korean War and think Chinese Americans only served as cooks in the Army or as mess attendants in the Navy. In truth, they served a diverse range of roles, from tactical support to the frontlines.

"I think the Chinese Americans are underappreciated for their service to the country," said Wong, who served with the Army Signal Corps in China and India during World War II. "It's not very known."

Looking to remedy this, a memorial was created by AMVETS 85, which is largely Chinese American, in cooperation with the Detroit Flying Tigers Association.

The first part was installed in 2009. The pagoda-shaped plaque, inscribed with the names of about 150 Chinese American vets from Michigan and the greater Toledo area, can be seen at the Chinese Community Center, 32585 Concord Drive.

This past Veterans Day, the memorial grew. Mayor Edward Swanson pulled back an American flag next to the pagoda plaque, revealing another pagoda-shaped plaque, this one with an embedded screen. Many of the vets listed on the first plaque can be learned about in-depth here.



Photo by Erin Sanchez

Andy Wong of Beverly Hills, past commander of AMVETS 85, pays his respects to the American flag during the national anthem. He was project chair on the new display memorializing Chinese American veterans, unveiled at the Chinese Community Center in Madison Heights Nov. 11. Wong was a staff sergeant in the Army Signal Corps in World War II.

The screen cycles through the names automatically if left alone, but viewers can use a track pad to jump straight to a particular vet. Clicking on a name brings up the vet's picture from when they served, as well as their place of birth, years of service, where they were stationed, rank and role, their medals and honors, and other details.

Interactive and intuitive, the exhibit is a modern way to explore the lives of people whose good works may have otherwise been forgotten. The two plaques are open to the public and can be seen at the Chinese Community Center at any time.

"We owe them a debt of mind," Swanson said during the dedication.

"We're very honored to make sure this history will be shown," said Sue Sung, board member with the Association of Chinese Americans.

Afterward, attendees clustered around the new display. Among them was May Leung of Rochester Hills, who immediately spotted the name of her brother-in-law, Chin Ming Lun, on the list of veterans. Like Wong, he too was in the Army Signal Corps in China and India during World War II.

With May at the dedication was her husband, Henry Leung, who is also a vet on the list. He served as a radio operator in the 987th Signal Operations Company in northern Burma during World War II.

"There aren't too many veterans left," May said of the men in olive caps.

Wong said this is precisely why it's important to get a hold of them now.

"As the years go by, most of our veterans from the World War II and Korean (War) era are getting pretty old and they're leaving us fast, and we're losing the ability to gather any information at all on these people," Wong said. "It's an ongoing thing. We're a mobile society, and some of the veterans have moved away from the area. In fact, I have to make phone calls to both coasts to get some information from them."

The effort to chronicle the history of the veterans started with George Lim Poy, whose research into AMVETS 85's Chinese American members in time expanded into a public poster display in 2000, shown at the screening of the documentary film, "We Serve With Pride." The posters, which feature the photos and military bios of about 70 local vets, were occasionally displayed at community events.

Names continued to be added to the list, growing to 100 by 2008. It was around this time that the members of AMVETS 85 noticed a growing antagonism toward those of Chinese descent, as Americans grew upset over China's trade dominance and the loss of American jobs.

Concerned that Chinese Americans would become scapegoats, and knowing that many people do not know of Chinese American service in the military, Wong and his fellow vets decided to create a permanent public display memorializing their service.

Names are always being added and people are encouraged to contact Wong with tips of any possible additions. Donations are also appreciated to help support the exhibit.

“We’re preserving (their names) for posterity,” Wong said. “It’s very satisfying because we’re able to do something to honor these veterans.”

If you know someone who associates with the Chinese American community from Michigan or the Greater Toledo area, and who has past military experience, they can contact radiowong@sbcglobal.net for the application form for inclusion on the list.

To make donations to help support the exhibit, send checks to the Chinese Community Center, 32585 Concord Drive, Madison Heights, MI 48071, made out to Andy Wong and with Veteran Memorial as the memo.

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