Growing Up Country

Alfred, born June 24, 1924, eldest son of immigrant parents, came from a family of two sons and four sisters. His Chinese name means, “Beautiful View of the Clouds.” He grew up on a ranch in the Sacramento Delta, in Courtland, CA. When he was old enough to work in the orchards with his sharecropper father, Al toiled in the sweltering 100 degree sun digging irrigation ditches, picking, pruning and planting pears – all for a dollar a day.

Al remembers, “Those were hard days. Hard years. Everyone worked. From youngest to oldest. If you didn’t work, you didn’t eat.” He grew up around heavy machinery, learning how to drive and fix tractors and trucks at a young age. Drafted in his junior year in high school, a rugged country boy, Al was well-suited to serve in a Navy Seabee Construction Battalion, their motto being, “We Build, We Fight. Can Do!”

Midway Island Bound

In 1944, Al was shipped aboard the carrier, USS Hancock to Midway. There he built critical infrastructures for the invasion of Japan – airfields, munition depots, and island fortifications. He felt “fear, boredom, and home sickness, but I will kill or be killed.” Al celebrated V-J Day on Midway upon Japan’s surrender. He did not remember much that day, “as the beer flowed freely”.

Alfred Chan

U.S. Navy Carpenters
Mate 3rd Class

Construction Battalion
Maintenance Unit #530 / #524

Midway Island - 1944 to 1945

Congressional Gold Medal

Twenty thousand (20,000) Chinese American G.I.s served in WWII from the shores of the Pacific, to the battlefields of Europe defending American values of freedom. Nearly one in five Chinese Americans served. Forty percent were not even U.S. citizens, as the Chinese Exclusion Act declared them unfit to be Americans. Their acts of heroism, bravery, and sacrifice have largely been ignored, or forgotten. Until now.

Now, after 75 years, Alfred Chan and his WWII Chinese American comrades-in-arms will finally be recognized with the highest U.S. civilian award, the Congressional Gold Medal. Finally, they receive the honor and respect they deserve.

Here is one sailor’s story.
Racism  Growing up Chinese was not easy. Al was forced to attend a segregated “Oriental” school. He knew what it was like to go hungry after being refused restaurant service or to stand out in the cold when refused a movie ticket. In wartime, tensions were especially high. Al was the only Chinese American on Midway Island, and remembers he was confronted by an angry Marine, who said, “I’m gonna to kill me a Jap (sic).”

Post War  For 38 years, Al proudly served his community and country, working at the Alameda Naval Base and the City of Oakland. Al was a Commander, Founding and Life Member, of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) East Bay Chinatown Post #3956. He closed each VFW meeting with “Let there be no future wars. God Bless America.” Al (96) and his bride of 70 years, May (92), are still active seniors.

A Son’s Reflections  Dad and I went on an Honor Flight in 2016 with 24 other veterans to the WWII Memorial. To walk with soldiers who felt the bitter cold of the Battle of the Bulge, or dogged the bloody sands of Utah Beach was an experience of a lifetime. We then went to the Vietnam Memorial where the names of thousands of the honored dead are inscribed. A woman stopped to thank dad for his service, and called him a hero. Dad pointed to the Memorial Wall, and said, “The heroes are over there.” That moment, I felt the depth of my father’s patriotism.

Dad was a typical Chinese American father of the 1950s. A man of few words, he rarely expressed his emotions and never spoke of his service. Dad worked six days a week to make ends meet but still gave my sister and I his Sundays. We made trips to the park, Lake Merritt and the Oakland duck pond. He was proud when his children graduated from college, as he did not. Dad provided a lifetime of example, instilling in me the value of work, love of family, and respect for country. There is no better legacy a father can leave to a son.

Congratulations to Alfred Chan, and to all Chinese American WWII Congressional Gold Medal Honorees who fought for freedom

Love, Ron, Luci, Bryan, Ryan, Jennifer, May, Alfred, Melanie and William