

Jack Knox: Discrimination didn't stop him from volunteering for war

[Jack Knox](#) / Times Colonist

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Gordie Quan, 93 and still active in the Canadian Legion, sells Remembrance Day poppies.
Photograph By DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

Growing up in Victoria, Gordie Quan wasn't allowed to swim in the Crystal Pool. Nor could he sit with the other kids in the cinema. "If you'd go to the movie theatre, you had to sit in a different area."

Nor could B.C.'s Chinese-Canadians become doctors or lawyers back then. Or vote. Or buy property in the nicer neighbourhoods, such as the Uplands (some Victoria land-title documents still list anachronistic prohibitions against "Asiatics.")

Yet when 18-year-old Quan finally got a chance to fight for Canada in 1944, he jumped in. Not only that, but he volunteered for a commando unit whose members were expected to die in the jungles of Burma.

"They called us the suicide squad," he says, sitting ramrod straight in a room in the Ross Place retirement home, gleaming medals covering both sides of his dark blue Legion blazer.

Two months shy of his 94th birthday, Quan is one of the last remaining old soldiers who can tell the stories of two little-known groups: the Chinese-Canadians who had to struggle just to serve in the Second World War, and the men who served in the Burma campaign. These are pieces of our past he thinks we should know.

It was a different Canada when Quan was born in Cumberland in 1926. Discrimination, including that of the electoral variety, was taken for granted, particularly in this province. "No Oriental, whether he be Hindu, Japanese or Chinese, acquires the right to vote simply by the fact of citizenship," declared B.C. solicitor general Hugh Guthrie in 1920.

"It was just the way it was," Quan says. "You don't know any better, right?"

After Quan's merchant father died when the boy was just five years old, his mother thought her best move was to take her son to her family's impoverished village in China, though they returned to Canada — Victoria — when he was nine.

He was actually known as Juy Kong back then, but a teacher at North Ward School (where the Times Colonist building now stands) thought that was too hard to pronounce, and decided to call him Gordon Quan. Why Gordon? Because of the popular comic strip character Flash Gordon. "He said: 'That would be a good name for you,'" Quan says.

In his early teens, Quan raised money for the forces fighting the Japanese, who had invaded China in 1937. But when the Second World War broke out in 1939, Canadian politicians were reluctant to let Chinese-Canadians enlist in the military. Only whites were allowed in the air force until 1943 and the navy until 1944.

B.C. premier Duff Pattullo, for one, worried that allowing Chinese-Canadians to fight would bolster their case for voting rights. Quan says residents of the Chinatowns of Victoria and Vancouver wanted their boys to volunteer for the same reason.

Quan wasn't that calculating when he turned 18 in 1944, though. "I just joined up," he said. All of his buddies did. "I thought I was Canadian."

It was while Quan was at basic training in Maple Creek, Sask., that a British officer asked the Chinese-Canadians if, rather than fighting the Germans in Europe, they'd like a go at the Japanese in Southeast Asia.

Quan volunteered. So did the other Chinese guys, including Wong. "At 18 years old, what the hell do you know?"

They shipped out to England, where they were transferred to the British Army's Special Operations Executive Force 136. They then headed to Sangha Hill, near Poona, India, where Quan trained as the demolition expert in a 15-man commando team. His squad included a British captain and sergeant, Gurkha scouts, Indian troops and one other Canadian, Victoria's Harry Chow.

Training was tough. Quan endured 50-kilometre route marches in which officers used live machine-gun fire to teach the soldiers to keep their heads down. He learned how to jump behind enemy lines by parachute (he says that's how Victor Wong ended up with a bad back), how to use a dagger, how to know what plants to eat in the jungle, and how to use pencil detonators and plastic explosives to blow up bridges, railways and ammo dumps.

In India, he rolled an army truck during a monsoon and dodged disaster during grenade instruction: "This guy pulls the pin out, and says: 'Should I throw it or not?' " A captain grabbed the bomb and hurled it away just in time.

Then came two months in the jungle around the Malaya-Burma border, where Quan always carried a .45- or .38-calibre handgun, and, in case of capture, a cyanide pill. Did he expect to come back? "No."

He never got into combat, though. One day in August 1945, as his team was preparing to go into action, an officer announced that the war had ended a few days earlier, abruptly terminated by something called an atomic bomb. Quan came home with nothing worse than a touch of malaria. "If it wasn't for the A-bomb, I don't think I'd be talking to you," he says.

Others Canadians in Burma weren't so lucky. Historians have dubbed the campaign the Forgotten War, a grim backwater conflict that never got the attention of the fighting in Europe, North Africa or the Pacific islands. No more than 8,000 of the one million Canadians who served in uniform in the Second World War fought in Burma — but 500 of those 8,000 died.

Many were attached to British or Indian units. They included 180 mule skimmers, often members of the Veterans' Guard of Canada, who escorted 1,600 pack animals across the Pacific to India and Burma, where they carried supplies across mountainous terrain.

Oak Bay High grad Atholl Sutherland Brown wrote a book, *Silently Into the Midst of Things*, about his time as a fighter pilot in Burma, and in a 2008 interview described attacking a complex of Japanese airfields: Flying a two-man Beaufighter, he had just strafed four trucks and watched them explode when his ammunition ran out during another strafing run. His navigator urged him to keep flying south before turning for home, but Sutherland Brown ignored the advice.

"The flak started coming up from all over the place." The plane, hit by anti-aircraft fire, began bleeding hydraulic fluid. Sutherland Brown climbed to 3,000 feet, then dived for the ground again, chased by flak. A shell blasted the radio apart, right in the navigator's face.

Riddled with 39 holes, the Beaufighter took 2 1/2 hours to get back to its airfield, but had no flaps or working landing gear when it arrived. "I had to crash land at the base when I got there," Sutherland Brown said.

The best-known Canadian story of the Burma campaign was that of Maj. Charles Hoey, a 29-year-old Duncan native serving in the British army. In February 1944, Hoey's company came under heavy machine-gun fire near the Ngakyedauk Pass. Already wounded in the leg and head, he grabbed a Bren gun from one of his soldiers and, firing from the hip, charged and wiped out a Japanese strongpoint before he, himself, died. Hoey was awarded a Victoria Cross, one of just 16 earned by Canadians during the Second World War.

That's why, if you go to Cowichan River Provincial Park today, you'll find a cairn near the picnic tables and campsites dedicated to the Canadians killed in Burma. The memorial was erected beside Stoltz Pool, Hoey's favourite fishing hole.

Twenty years ago, it would take two buses to haul all the veterans who travelled there each August to mark the anniversary of the end of the war, but by 2013, only five old gents — ties neatly knotted, trouser creases sharp, the Burma Star pinned to their blue blazers — were able to make the trip.

They included three Islanders. British-born Hugh Quetton, who went to Yale at age 16 but quit to join the Royal Berkshire Regiment just two years later, came from Victoria. So did Peter Lofts, who served in the ground crew of a Royal Air Force squadron in Kohima, where the Japanese advance into India was halted. Ex-commando Victor Osborne made his way from Nanaimo.

Japanese problems," said Lofts, who came down with dysentery on one occasion and landed in a Calcutta hospital with dengue fever on another.

Osborne matter-of-factly told of being spirited up jungle rivers by Indian Army gunboats that would drop him off behind Japanese positions to wreak havoc.

"I used to blow up railway tracks," he said. In and out in two days. "I didn't stay around for them to get too angry. They would execute you."

It was Osborne's daughter who disclosed that he had volunteered for special operations out of anger, German bombers having killed his father in his London hospital bed during the Blitz of 1940.

Quetton, Lofts and Sutherland Brown are gone now, but Osborne survives. Last year on Nov. 11, as he turned 100, the crowd at Nanaimo's Remembrance Day ceremony sang Happy Birthday to him.

Quan also made it back from Burma. "Coming home to Victoria, something had changed," he wrote last year. "People were more respectful when I wore my uniform."

Barriers fell. Quan's boyhood friend Andrew Wong, who forced his way into the war at sea by first signing on with the U.S. merchant marine, then transferring to the Canadian one, successfully challenged the rule barring Chinese from the Crystal Pool.

It was hard to deny rights to the likes of Victoria-born Roy Chan, one of five Chinese-Canadians who parachuted into Borneo, where they recruited local tribesmen to help free a prisoner-of-war camp.

Another member of Force 136, Victoria-born Douglas Jung (his first name came from Douglas Street) led the push to extend the vote to Chinese-Canadians. The B.C. government finally relented in 1947.

When Quan got the chance to cast a ballot in the 1949 federal election, he did so. In 1957, Jung became the first person of Chinese descent elected to Parliament.

It wasn't all rosy. "To me, discrimination was always there a little bit," Quan says.

He settled in Victoria after the war, washing dishes in Chinese restaurants before training as an auto mechanic, raising a family, and eventually becoming the mechanical foreman at the City of Victoria.

He also joined the militia, serving 35 years before retiring as regimental sergeant major of the 11 Service Battalion.

Quan is still active in the Legion, selling Remembrance Day poppies in memory of those whose stories shouldn't be forgotten.