

**“We were dead once we flew into Burma.”**

**Chinese Canadians in Force 136**

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April 18, 2016**

## **Introduction**

This paper is, broadly, about Chinese Canadians in who served with Force 136 in the Second World War in Southeast Asia. Force 136 was the designation given to Special Operations Executive units serving under Southeast Asia Command. I had originally hoped to write a more purely military history about this niche Canadian contribution to the war in Southeast Asia. Apart from memoirs, only a handful of works have been written about the SOE in Asia, and only two books (partially) about the Canadian role in it. However, it quickly became apparent that the veterans I interviewed were much more interested in talking about how their service contributed to the campaign for civil rights for Chinese Canadians. I asked them questions about both topics, but found they had much more to say about the latter. I have therefore made that the main topic of this paper.

The question I will ask is: What can we learn from Chinese Canadians who served in Force 136? The veterans I interviewed for this paper were recruited into Force 136 fairly late in the war and did not see combat before the war ended. They were most interested in talking about the contribution their service made to civil rights in Canada. Their service is significant as part of the overall Chinese Canadian service in the war. Chinese Canadians served in all three services, in every theatre Canada fought in. But fighting Japanese had extra significance in overcoming the ambivalence towards military service held by many members of Chinese Canadian community.

I will proceed by first discussing my methodology. I will say a little about how I have incorporated oral history into the paper, how I went about conducting the oral history interviews, and some issues about oral history that came up in my research. I will finish the methodology

discussion by saying a bit about how I used written sources. I will then provide a brief background on Force 136 and Chinese Canadians' participation in it. Next, I will discuss the Chinese Canadian experience before the war. This will serve as a baseline, to see the issues which had to be overcome, and will serve as a contrast with their experience after the war. I will then discuss the veterans' experience in the war itself. The fact of military service is the key to their contribution, but their activity during war itself is not central to paper. That said, these three men took grave risks to their lives, and took the time to tell me about it. I interviewed them and asked specifically about their war experience for this paper, which is meant to be centred on their experiences. Their war experiences therefore deserves to be acknowledged. The war experience also serves to break the continuity of Chinese Canadian experience. While those on home front probably saw a gradual process of change, these men did not; they came back to a very different environment. I hope that by using a discussion of their war experience as a break in middle of the discussion of the evolution of civil rights, I will convey something of marked change they experienced. I will conclude with the Chinese Canadian experience after the war, by describing these changes, and the final push for full citizenship.

## **Methodology**

This paper is centred on three oral histories. I will let the veterans speak for themselves, occasionally supplementing their stories with written material, mostly for background or clarification. Before conducting the interviews, I met with two interview subjects informally. I met Gordon Quan at the Royal United Services Institute – Vancouver Island luncheon, and I visited Victor Wong at his home. It quickly became clear from the conversations that what they were most interested in telling me about the contributions they felt their service made to reducing

racism and promoting civil rights in Canada. I had intended originally to write more of a pure military history, and asked questions about this, but also I also asked about racism, discrimination, and civil rights. The result is as much social as military history.

There were some issues with the oral history aspect of this project. What I have written about was determined as much by what the veterans wanted to talk about as what I wanted to learn about. Their memories seemed clear, but in once case his short-term memory seemed less clear. Immediately after conducting one interview, I received a phone call from the veteran asking when I would like to come meet him. All three know each other, and meet periodically at veterans' functions. Two are close friends. Where there are clear differences between their stories, they are obviously relating their own experiences. Other experiences I know to be common. There were a couple of occasions, however, when I was not clear whether or not they were incorporating parts of each other's stories.

I was not entirely sure what questions to ask going in. Ronald Lee stuck closely to the questions I asked, elaborating more on some, and less on others. His daughter was present and said nothing until I had finished my questions. Then she said, "Dad, why don't you tell him about..." and raised a few questions I had not thought to ask. His response was to laugh, say "oh yes..." For example I had not thought to ask about tropical diseases. Mr. Lee had spent a year in hospital after the war with malaria, but had not thought it significant enough to volunteer information. This left me with the impression that there are probably important issues I had not thought to raise.

The other two subjects talked freely, and the interviews came out much less structured. I was careful to get through all my interview questions, but a lot of other material came up which was not directly related to project. For example, Mr. Quan talked extensively about daily life in

Victoria's Chinatown, and that of Cumberland, where he was born. I continued to record, in the hope that it may prove useful to someone later on.

At other times veterans raised issues I did really not feel comfortable recording, including volunteering details of their sex lives. I hastily returned to my questions. Occasionally they questioned things the others had said. This arose particularly with one anecdote I was told by Mr. Quan the concerning treatment of people in Chinatown who refused to contribute money to Guomindang war effort. They were dragged out of their shops and tied to telephone poles, where people asked why they had not given money. I could not find any written evidence of it, and when I mentioned it to Mr. Wong, for verification or elaboration, he stated he was sure such a thing had never happened. He was sure he would have heard about it if it had, which I think is likely, from Mr. Quan if no one else. The two are friends. One possible explanation offered by Mr. Wong was that he did not live in Chinatown, so had not seen it. But he was probably correct that he would have heard of it. A second explanation he offered was that Mr. Quan was telling me tall tales. A third may be discomfort with that part of history. He stated that did not want it "getting out." It is now going into the archives, and I am not sure, in retrospect, whether it was appropriate to bring this up with Mr. Wong.

A prior incident occurred during the informal conversation after I had finished my questions, but recorder still running. I mentioned in passing another University of Victoria whose work on Victoria's Chinatown I had read. His name was met with small tirade about him, denigrating his work and knowledge. I stopped recorder abruptly, formal part of interview having concluded anyway. Again, I am not sure if it was appropriate to bring this up, or whether I should have stopped the recorder.

Some issues seemed very mundane to the veterans, scarcely worth discussing. One example was their training. On one hand I feel I should have asked a greater number of more specific questions about it. On other hand, the questions I did ask elicited changes in posture and facial expression which suggested boredom. Since the SOE's training is one of the areas that are fairly well documented, (see, for example, M.R.D. Foot,<sup>1</sup> and Charles Cruikshank<sup>2</sup>) I did not press too much. Again, I am not sure if this was correct decision.

Another issue which came up was psychology. One of the most interesting phenomenon was their change in feeling from a feeling of adventure to the realization of a high probability of not surviving. I wish I had researched more into this before in order to ask more probing questions. In general, this was a steep learning curve. More discussion of the experiences of former students in this course during the first half might be helpful.

A large part of the written material on Force 136 is composed of memoirs, biographies, other oral histories of people who had gone in behind lines. They tend to focus on the time in field. This was not particularly relevant for this paper, because none of my interview subjects had gone on their missions before war ended. The most relevant sources this paper provided background information, about SOE in general, or about Burma campaign, which put into context what Force 136 contributed to the war effort. Sources about civil rights for Asian Canadians, and how Chinese Canadians' military service contributed were also helpful.

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<sup>1</sup> M.R.D. Foot, *SOE: An Outline history of the Special Operations Executive 1940-46* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Cruikshank, *SOE in the Far East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

## Background on Force 136

The Ministry of Economic Warfare was established in September 1939, tasked with sabotaging the German war economy. The Special Operations Executive was established in 1940 under MEW and tasked with sabotage and subversion behind enemy lines. It incorporated the prewar Secret Intelligence Service's Section D, for sabotage, propaganda and irregular warfare; Military Intelligence, Research (MI(R)); and other MEW agencies for propaganda. The SOE was active in Singapore from 1941,<sup>3</sup> where its original purpose was to supply "stay behind parties" to train, supply, and cooperate with Malayan Communist Party guerillas in the event of a Japanese invasion of Malaya. The MCP was mostly ethnic Chinese, so Chinese speakers were needed,<sup>4</sup> although it is not clear that Canadians were initially used.

Cruickshank argues that Chinese Canadians were first recruited for Operation *Oblivion*, one of four operations planned for the South China coast from 1944. which Cruickshank argues was actually the first planned use of Chinese Canadians. In the event, *Oblivion* was the only one of the four which went ahead, under Major F. W. Kendall, a Canadian. The SOE men were to join forces with Chinese Communist Party forces and start special operations around Hong Kong. The Americans were though unlikely to allow their citizens to cooperate with communists to recapture a British colony. Kendall did indeed find the US opposed, although Canadian military authorities, the RCMP and the BC Provincial Police were all supportive. A training camp was established in the Okanagan. Recruitment, however, proved difficult, due to anti-Chinese discrimination in BC which left many Chinese Canadians "...embittered about their Canadian citizenship and disinclined to volunteer for dangerous activities on behalf of Canada or

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<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War Against Japan: Britain, America, and the Politics of Secret Service* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-112.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 188-191.

the British Empire.” The problem was overcome by recruiting Chinese Canadians who were already in the Canadian Army. Their training proved very successful and in August, 1944 a proposal was put forth “to expand the scheme and set up a number of permanent India Mission posts along the South China Coast.”

Despite the success of the initial recruits, *Oblivion*'s planners did anticipate a number of problems. The British Army Aid Group, tasked with helping Commonwealth prisoners of war held in Hong Kong, had undertaken to the Chinese government that it would not be involved with the Communists, and the Chinese government was though unlikely to distinguish between SOE and BAAG, or to believe that BAAG was not involved with the Communists if SOE was. Furthermore, as Cantonese speakers, the Canadians were unable to operate outside the Guangdong area. Finally, the United States was politically opposed to working with Chinese Communists, and in the end US opposition ended *Oblivion*. Despite these obstacles, the Chinese Canadians in Operation *Oblivion* were so successful that 150 more were recruited to work as interpreters in the Malaya Country Section of Southeast Asia Command. They arrived in India in April and May, 1945. Some were sent into Malaya, where they did well.<sup>5</sup> In Canada, British officers interviewed Chinese Canadians who were just finishing their basic training.<sup>6</sup> By the time the veterans I interviewed arrived in India, SOE's focus had changed to recapturing Burma. Japan surrendered before an invasion of Malaya was necessary.

Force 136 is the name given to India and Ceylon-based SOE operations under Southeast Asia Command control. The names SOE and Force 136 are often used interchangeably, but

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<sup>5</sup> Cruickshank, 156-8.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Lee, “My Force 136 Recollections,” interviewed by Trevor Gallagher, 18 March, 2016. Gordon Quan, “My Force 136 Recollections,” interviewed by Trevor Gallagher, 24 March, 2016. Victor Wong, “My Force 136 Recollections,” interviewed by Trevor Gallagher, 25 March, 2016. Canadian Military Oral History Collection, University of Victoria. Victoria, BC.



properly only in the context of SEAC. The veterans themselves never referred to SOE. Aldrich speaks only of SOE,<sup>7</sup> while Marjorie Wong uses the name only with respect to SEAC,<sup>8</sup> using other names in other commands, for example Z Special Unit for Sarawak, under Australians.<sup>9</sup> F. Spencer Chapman, who served in SOE in Southeast Asia throughout the war, has a specific chapter in his book on Force 136.<sup>10</sup>

### **Chinese Canadian experience before the war**

Chinese Canadians before the war suffered widespread racism, especially in British Columbia. Anti-Chinese discrimination seems to have been less prevalent in other parts of Canada, and the Army appears to have been relatively free of it. Growing up in Victoria, as a child Mr. Quan was afraid to leave Chinatown. If he did he would suffer verbal abuse. He described pre-war discrimination as “scary.”<sup>11</sup> Mr. Lee described racism in Vancouver as “pretty bad.” “We were not forbidden to go anywhere, but we never did; because if we went out of Chinatown, the white people would frown on us.”<sup>12</sup> This experience was not uniform. Some Chinese in Victoria, like Mr. Wong, lived outside Chinatown and had white friends whom he met playing in the park as a child. However, he was not allowed to use the public swimming pool, or sit on the lower floor of a theatre. In some areas Chinese could not buy property.<sup>13</sup> The war against Japan was good for Chinese Canadians, however, as Caucasians showed growing sympathy for China’s fight against Japan, especially after Pearl Harbour was attacked.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Aldrich, 108-208.

<sup>8</sup> Marjorie Wong, *The Dragon and the Maple Leaf*, 158.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

<sup>10</sup> F. Spencer Chapman, *The Jungle is Neutral* (London: The Reprint Society, 1950), 214-236.

<sup>11</sup> Quan.

<sup>12</sup> Lee.

<sup>13</sup> Victor Wong.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia E. Roy, *The Triumph of Citizenship: the Japanese and Chinese in Canada, 1941-67* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 149.

All the veterans reported a lack of discrimination outside BC.<sup>15</sup> By comparison with their civilian lives they also experienced little of it in the Army. Mr. Lee told me, In the Army it was different. In the Army we were all together. All brothers.”<sup>16</sup> Chinese Canadian soldiers were also allowed to vote in 1944 election.<sup>17</sup>

Getting into Army was a challenge before late in the war. Many Chinese Canadians tried to volunteer, but in 1939 Premier Thomas Pattullo had written a letter to Prime Minister Mackenzie King asking that the armed forces not call up Chinese or Japanese, for fear of having to grant them the franchise. If they wanted to join, they had to travel to other provinces.<sup>18</sup> Mr. Quan left School at 18, and joined the Army in 1944. He had tried to join before, but was too young. Older friends had been turned away, but later, when more troops were needed for operations in Europe, conscription notices sent out to everyone, including Asians. Mr. Lee had tried to enlist in Vancouver in 1939, but was rejected. In Vancouver. In 1943 he was conscripted. Mr. Wong graduated from high school in 1944, and was able to enlist immediately.

There were divisions in Chinese community. Some resisted joining the military, asking “why should we fight if we have no rights?”<sup>19</sup> Town hall meetings were held at churches and schools to discuss the matter. Some people decided that they would volunteer for overseas service. As conscripts they had the option of remaining in Canada as “zombies,” but this would not translate into any power after the war. This was a deliberate decision to go to fight overseas, specifically to get full citizenship. Fighting Japan had more support in the Chinese community.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lee, Quan, Victor Wong.

<sup>16</sup> Lee.

<sup>17</sup> Victor Wong.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* The letter from Pattullo is also mentioned in Marjorie Wong, 71, citing Mackenzie King papers: NAC, MG 26J1, Vol. 293, pp. 247684-28556, Reel C.4573.

<sup>19</sup> Quan.

<sup>20</sup> Victor Wong.

## The war

All my veterans were recruited by a British officer right out of Basic Training. They were told only that they would go to China to fight the Japanese. They had no idea what exactly they were signing up for, or where they were going.<sup>21</sup> In Mr. Lee's group in Chilliwack, when asked if they would like to volunteer, all did. The same happened in Mr. Quan's group<sup>22</sup>. They went to England first, then either by sea or air to India. Mr. Lee continued to Ceylon.<sup>23</sup>

They arrived in India in Bombay, then went to Poona for training. Specialty training was long and comprehensive: wireless operators trained for eight months, eight hours hrs per day,<sup>24</sup> while the demolitions training took about three months. Other training was much shorter: jungle survival and parachute training each took about same one week. Missions were to comprise small sections of seven to eleven men under a British. The groups normally included a British officer and NCO, one or two Chinese Canadians, and Gurkhas. There would be two demolitions experts, a radio operator; and engineers, and would form a self-contained group.<sup>25</sup> The veterans I asked said no one ever knew where they were going, other than to Burma. They were told not to fight unless had to. They were told to avoid capture at all costs, "or you would suffer." They were given cyanide tablets, and told to shoot themselves as a last resort. There was no provision for getting out; they were expected to live off the land, indefinitely, until the war was over. "We were dead once we flew into Burma."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Victor Wong.

<sup>22</sup> Quan.

<sup>23</sup> Lee.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Victor Wong.

<sup>26</sup> Lee.

None of the veterans, all non-commissioned officers, had much understanding of Force 136's place in overall strategy; they only knew they were fighting Japanese. Burma was important as a supply route to Chinese forces, Japan having secured control of China's coast. However, northern Burma, the area where contact was to be made with Chinese forces, was in the American area of operations. Despite SOE's having long been in contact with the local Karen, Joseph Stillwell used all his influence to push them out of his area.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, unlike most of the Chinese in Malaya, the majority of Chinese forces were not Cantonese speakers. The Chinese army functioned in Mandarin. All the Canadian Chinese spoke Cantonese and, having been educated in English, most could not read Chinese proficiently. They were therefore probably not in Burma for their language skills. Mr. Lee, for example, told me that he was the only Chinese in his group. His group's mission would have been to provide intelligence on Japanese movements in Burma.<sup>28</sup> Force 136 had not been established as an intelligence organization, but sabotage and demolition operations were found to be of limited use, except in conjunction with a major offensive.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, from June, 1944, Major-General William Slim was complaining about a lack of intelligence from within Burma, and providing this intelligence became the main military task of Force 136 in Burma.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to Cruickshank, Aldrich argues that SOE's main function was to support British policy in Southeast Asia, especially with regard to the post-war order. The primary role of the SOE was not to help win the war, but to support the British government's interests with regard to the peace. Aldrich thus relates operations directly to policy and strategy. Secret operations were in no way decisive to the outcome of the war, but they may have been in

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<sup>27</sup> Cruickshank, 172-3.

<sup>28</sup> Lee.

<sup>29</sup> Cruickshank, 164.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 169-71

determining the nature of regional postwar politics.<sup>31</sup> Most other works relating the SOE to strategy deal with China,<sup>32</sup> not Southeast Asia, and so are not particularly relevant here. In China, the British trying to maintain commercial and political influence in an independent country; in Southeast Asia they were trying to re-establish their colonial empire in Burma, Malaya and British Borneo.

### **Chinese Canadian experience after the war.**

On V-J day, everyone, Chinese included, joined the celebrations together.<sup>33</sup> When my veterans returned to BC there were lines of people greeting them at the train stations, and on returning to civilian life, Caucasian veterans accepted their Chinese Canadians as equals. Some residual discrimination remained, but not much.<sup>34</sup> Mr. Wong could now swim at Crystal Garden, and Chinese with university educations could now obtain licences to practice their professions in Canada. Even to this day, discrimination continues, although not systematic. Mr. Wong notes comments such as “they” own everything, are all rich, and are responsible for unaffordable housing prices. These slurs seem to be directed against recent immigrants and their immediate descendants, rather than families which have been in Canada for generations. Yet being an invisible minority within a visible one, the distinction is not always made, and the slurs still affect Mr. Wong. He compares them explicitly to similar, anti-Semitic accusations about Jews’ alleged economic dominance.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Aldrich,

<sup>32</sup> Robert Bickers, “The business of a secret war: Operation ‘Remorse’ and SOE salesmanship in wartime China,” *Intelligence and National Security* 16, No. 4 (Dec. 2001): 11–36. Edwin Ride, *BAAG: Hong Kong Resistance, 1942-1945* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1981). Maochun Yu, “‘In God We Trusted, In China We Busted’: The China commando group of the Special Operations Executive (SOE),” *Intelligence and National Security* 16, No. 4 (Winter 2001): 37–60.

<sup>33</sup> Roy, 149.

<sup>34</sup> Lee.

<sup>35</sup> Wong.

Some of the Chinese Canadians who had not fought “didn’t honour us, because they didn’t know any better; all they know is grocery store or laundry.” This attitude and, judging from Mr. Quan’s facial expression and tone of voice, veterans’ bitterness about it, lasted a long time, even until the present. Mr. Quan laments that half of Chinese Canadians do not honour the Chinese Canadian Veterans’ Association “because they come from Hong Kong.” They did not experience Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, and the improvements that came about because of the war. The fact that Chinese Canadian soldiers were fighting the Japanese at the same time that Japan was brutally occupying China does not seem to make a difference. Many are too young to remember the war anyway. “Even my own children, they don’t understand,” Mr. Quan said. He feels that Caucasians are more appreciative of his service than Chinese,<sup>36</sup> although it is difficult to imagine this being the case for the majority of Chinese Canadians in the country at the end of the war.

These men had fought for full citizenship, and got it at last in 1947. Attitudes in British Columbia, the most racist of the provinces towards Asians, had clearly changed. The last push remained to obtain the franchise. There was organized lobbying, based in Chinatowns, for the vote, and a delegation of veterans went to Ottawa to address the Dominion government in person. Among them was Douglas Jung, who would be the first Asian Canadian elected to Parliament ten years later. In local Chinatowns, young people helped older Chinese, who did not understand how, to vote.<sup>37</sup> When asked, all three veterans were convinced that their military service had contributed directly to right to vote.<sup>38</sup> Given the content of Pattullo’s 1939 letter, asking the Dominion government that Asian Canadians not be allowed to serve, lest they had to

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<sup>36</sup> Quan.

<sup>37</sup> Victor Wong.

<sup>38</sup> Lee. Quan. Victor Wong.

be enfranchised, this is a logical conclusion. Once the franchise was expanded to Chinese Canadians, Japanese Canadians, Sikhs, and Natives soon followed.

## **Conclusion**

In an environment where they faced severe discrimination and restrictions on their rights, the Chinese community in British Columbia was divided over whether to support the war effort in the Second World War. Some were apathetic, or actively opposed fighting for a country which would only grant them second-class citizenship. Those who wished to serve found that they were not able to enlist in BC, the premier having asked Ottawa not to accept them, for fear of having to grant them the franchise after the war. After Japan declared war on the British Empire, more Chinese Canadians supported the war effort, and later as operations in Europe put more strain on the Army's manpower, restrictions against Asian Canadian enlistment were eased. Young Chinese Canadian men enlisted and volunteered for service overseas, in a deliberate effort to earn full citizenship. At the same time, Britain's Special Operations Executive found a need for Chinese-speaking members, and recruited them from the Canadian Army. It sent them to India for training, and formed them into Force 136, the name given to SOE forces working under Southeast Asia Command. I interviewed three of these men for this paper.

Although the SOE may have made a significant contribution to promoting the British government's aims for the post-war order in Asia, its military contribution to defeating Japan was probably marginal. The primary significance of these men's service was in securing civil rights and the franchise for Chinese Canadians and, ultimately other minorities as well. It was significant as part of the overall Chinese Canadian contribution to the war. But the men of Force 136 played an additional role in legitimating that war effort to ambivalent Chinese Canadians. If some members of the community were apathetic about the war in Europe, most

cared deeply about Asia, where China had been waging a bloody defensive war against Japan since two years before the war in Europe began. By directly fighting the Japanese, the Canadian members of Force 136 had a second significance by legitimating Canadian military service to skeptical Chinese Canadians at home.



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