Overlooked No More: Lau Sing Kee, War Hero Jailed for Helping Immigrants

The New York Times

May 18, 2020 Monday 18:49 EST

Section: OBITUARIES

Length: 1347 words

Highlight: Kee was awarded for his bravery in World War I, but later became a convicted criminal when he skirted discriminatory laws to help immigrants move to America from China.

Body

Kee was awarded for his bravery in World War I, but later became a convicted criminal when he skirted discriminatory laws to help immigrants move to America from China.

Overlooked is a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in The Times.

Lau Sing Kee was an American war hero, but he was also mocked as a “Chinese boy.” He was a civic leader, but he also became a convicted criminal for skirting discriminatory immigration laws.

His path, from decorated soldier to prison inmate, was emblematic of how Chinese immigrants and their descendants struggled to find their footing in early 20th-century America.

In 1917, after he moved to New York City from California and settled in Chinatown, Kee enlisted in the Army in the midst of World War I. His unit, the 77th Infantry Division, became known as the Cosmopolitan Division because of its high concentration of first-generation immigrants. It soon shipped out to the Western Front.

In August, Kee, by then a sergeant, was stationed at the village of Mont-Notre-Dame in northern France when German guns began to bombard and gas his post at a rate of 30 shells a minute. Kee was one of 20 runners who were a crucial communication lifeline between units and from command posts to the front lines. In the face of a German offensive to take the village, the runners navigated through machine-gun fire and gas and flamethrower attacks until all were wounded, unconscious or dead. Kee was the only one who managed to keep going.

“I felt as if I had been hit in the face with a pound of red pepper,” he recalled in a 1919 interview with The San Jose Mercury Herald. “It burned my eyes, nose and throat, and I could not breathe. The pain was so intense.”

But he maintained communications single-handedly for more than 24 hours, collapsing on the ground after delivering his last message. The village held.

When asked by a reporter for The Los Angeles Evening Herald how he had managed to man his post for so long on the battlefield, Kee said simply, “There was nobody to do it but me.”

Kee's division pushed the retreating German forces across the Vesle River in France. Kee was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the second-highest military award for an Army service member after the Medal of Honor. He is believed to be the first Chinese-American to win a United States combat medal.

"Throughout this critical period he showed extraordinary heroism, high courage, and persistent devotion to duty and totally disregarded all personal danger," the medal citation said. He was promoted to color sergeant and awarded a Purple Heart as well as France's Croix de Guerre for valor.

Kee was honorably discharged after the war, on May 9, 1919, and returned to the United States, where he was met with a mix of admiration and incredulity. Thousands of spectators greeted him and the other soldiers ecstatically in June when they marched in a military parade down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. But most news coverage of Kee's honors made reference to his race, sometimes in disparaging ways. The New York Times described him as the parade's "star exotic." The Brooklyn Eagle, calling him "the Chinese boy," published a cartoon of him as a diminutive, paddy hat-clad child being stroked on the head by Uncle Sam. The Los Angeles Evening Herald called him a "quiet, law-abiding, little almond-eyed 'chink.'"

Kee is believed to have been born between 1894 and 1896 in Saratoga, Calif., southwest of San Jose, to Low Chung Kee and Mary Low, immigrants from China.

His name at birth is unclear. His family name is either Low or Lau, but since both are phonetically indistinguishable in Chinese, different members of the family took one spelling or the other. It's customary for Chinese names to list the family name first, but American immigration officials recorded his last name as Kee rather than Lau. He kept Kee as his last name, then passed it down to subsequent generations.

During his childhood Kee and his family moved to the outskirts of San Jose's bustling Chinatown, where his father owned a cigar and candy store and contracted work for Chinese laborers.

The neighborhood was a refuge from widespread animosity toward Chinese immigrants. Thousands of immigrants performing manual labor in agriculture and railroad-building were cast by tabloid newspapers and others as representing a "yellow peril" that would take jobs away from the white working class.

The reaction was violent at times; in 1885 white workers in Wyoming massacred 28 Chinese coal miners. And it led to institutionalized racism in the form of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1882, which shut the door on Chinese laborers. Later laws required Chinese-Americans to carry photo passports at all times and forbade them from buying land. Many Americans of Chinese origin, like Kee, were considered "aliens."

After serving in the war, Kee settled in New York's Chinatown, where he secured a job as a translator for the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service on Ellis Island. It was around this time that Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which severely restricted immigration from Asia and banned Asian-American citizens from bringing their spouses to the United States from Asia.

Whether coincidentally or purposely, Kee's wife, Ina Chan Kee, arrived from China weeks before the law went into effect. She had worked in the silk mills in Guangdong, in southern China, and her marriage to Kee had been arranged. The couple had five children, some of whom would grow up to become doctors and lawyers, including Herbert and Norman Lau Kee, prominent figures in Chinatown.

As restrictions mounted and legal Chinese immigration to the United States slowed to a trickle, migrants, eager to escape the poverty and upheaval experienced by many during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45) and the Chinese Civil War, teamed up with Chinese-Americans to find creative ways to gain entry.

In one practice, migrants became "paper sons" by obtaining fraudulent documents that claimed they were the children of Chinese-Americans. Kee aided immigrants in this practice when he became an immigration broker and travel agent for the China Overseas Travel Service in New York's Chinatown.

His business thrived, especially in 1943, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed and a quota of 105 visas a year was established for China.

Kee became a civic leader in Chinatown; when the United States entered World War II, he served as a volunteer member of his local Selective Service board, helping administer the draft and acting as a liaison between the military and the recruits from his neighborhood.

He also used his savings to open Chinese restaurants in Brooklyn and Staten Island.

But Kee's involvement in illegal immigration caught up to him. In 1956, he was arrested and found guilty of conspiring to violate the country's immigration laws and sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

After serving his time in Danbury Federal Correctional Institution in Connecticut, he moved with his wife to Staten Island, where he remained active in the veterans community but struggled with diabetes. He died at his home on Staten Island on June 3, 1967, two years after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965abolished the quota system and ended an admissions policy based on race and ethnicity.

In 1997, his body was interred at Arlington National Cemetery. In 2011, the Senate formally apologized for its history of discriminatory laws against Chinese immigrants.

Kee received a more unusual form of recognition in 1976 when Stevie Wonder released a song called "Black Man," which celebrates a diverse set of historical figures. In arguing for equality and tolerance, he sings the praises of Cesar Chavez ("a brown man"), Sacagawea ("a red woman") and other well-known pioneers.

Toward the end of the song, Wonder sings:

"Who was the soldier of Company G who won high honors for his courage and heroism in World War I? / Sing Kee — a yellow man."

Alain Delaqueriere contributed research.

PHOTO (PHOTOGRAPH BY HISTORY SAN JOSÉ)

Load-Date: May 18, 2020
