

B.C.'s Louie brothers were among 300 Chinese-Canadians who fought in the First World War

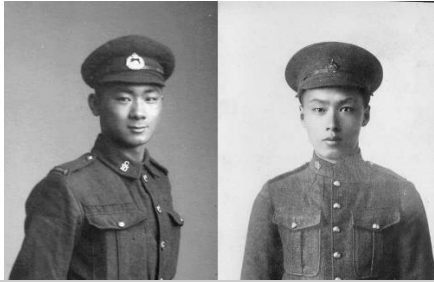


PHOTO: Handout photo, PNGWee Tan Louie (L) was refused because of his race at the Kamloops recruitment office in 1917, so he rode a horse across the Rockies and enlisted in the Canadian Army in Calgary. Wee Hong Louie (R) joined the Canadian army in the spring of 1917 and served as a gunner, wireless operator and driver.

Canadian government didn't want Chinese to fight in order to deny them citizenship

***by Gerry Bellett,
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The poet's famous condemnation of shirkers who put personal safety ahead of duty in time of war places the Louie siblings from the Shuswap – Wee Tan and Wee Hong – among his eternal band of brothers willing to risk all.

In 1917, when there were conscription riots in Canada by those not willing to fight, the brothers' dogged insistence on joining the Canadian Army and fighting for a country that refused them full citizenship and whose racial policies deemed them inferior was nothing short of astonishing.

The brothers were among the 300 or so Chinese-Canadians believed to have volunteered to fight in the First World War but about whom very little is known.

The pair's exploits, therefore, must stand in for all those unknown warriors who, like the Louies, didn't seek safety behind what they might have considered a convenient aspect of racism their exemption from conscription.

Col. Howe Lee, one of the founders of the Chinese Canadian Military Museum at 555 Columbia St., in Vancouver's Chinatown, says the Canadian government exempted Chinese Canadians from conscription in the First World War as a means to continue denying them citizenship.

"It's generally accepted if a foreigner fights for a country during a war, they are entitled to citizenship. The Louie brothers weren't foreigners, they were born here, but that didn't matter. When conscription came in, they were exempt because the government didn't want to give citizenship to Chinese," said Lee.

Photographs of both soldiers and some of the letters they wrote home from the Western Front on army-issue paper are on display in a small room at the museum, as is Wee Tan's steel helmet that he brought home from France.

The photographs show two handsome young men displaying a quiet pride in their uniform, especially Wee Tan, who is shown standing slightly sideways, his shoulders stiff, a slight smile - and if it isn't one of satisfaction, it should be considering what he went through to put that uniform on.

In 1917, when he was 28 years old, Wee Tan had tried to enlist in the army in Kamloops but was rejected because he wasn't white.

So he bought a horse and in the dead of winter set out from Kamloops to Calgary to see if a regiment there would accept him. The journey across the mountains took three months but in February 1918, he was enlisted in Calgary's 10th Canadian Infantry Battalion and sent to France.

He served as a runner, an occupation with its own set of hazards as runners were often exposed to enemy fire while delivering messages. His battalion was involved in many of the major battles in France and Belgium that year and saw the worst of the fighting.

Wee Tan was wounded and suffered a lifelong hearing loss as a result of shellfire. He returned to Canada in March 1919, and was honourably discharged from the army a month later.

He went home to the Shuswap and later lived in Los Angeles, Portland and Seattle – where he worked as a taxi driver. In 1931 he met and married his wife of more than 40 years, Lillian.

Lillian, now 103, still lives in the couple's house on Nanaimo Street.

"My husband drove a taxi in Seattle and he came to Vancouver for a holiday and that's when I met him," said Lillian.

She doesn't go out much anymore and has finally given up doing the yardwork herself. "I've had a few falls," she said.

She's been a Vancouver Sun subscriber for 60 years, she says, pointing to the paper that she reads from cover to cover on a nearby coffee table.

How many other widows of First World War soldiers there are still living in Canada is anyone's guess, but the life stories of Wee Tan and Lillian Louie nicely encapsulate the struggles and triumphs of Chinese Canadians in British Columbia during the past 120 years.

Her father came from China to work on the railway and would be forced to pay head tax to bring in his brother's wife. Her husband, riding his horse over the Rockies, has to be considered a hero in the fight for equal civil rights for all Canadians.

In 1949, with the Exclusion Act repealed due in large part to the efforts of Chinese-Canadians in the armed forces during both world wars, the couple would be among the first Chinese-Canadians to exercise their right to vote.

“I was the first Chinese woman to vote because my husband was in the war,” Lillian said with some pride.

Shortly after they married, the couple moved to Ashcroft, returning to Vancouver in 1959. They had four children, three girls and a boy, and only their son and one daughter are still alive.

Did her husband ever speak about his war service?

“No. He never talked about it to the children or anyone, so I don’t know too much about it,” said Lillian. “I know he got hurt and they sent him home.” “After the war he did a lot of different things, lot of different jobs. He drove taxi in Portland and worked in the Cariboo and when we lived in Ashcroft, he did trucking,” she said.

What kind of a man was he?

“My husband was very good. Very kind, very good to his children,” she said. “He died over 40 years ago.” A picture of the family hangs on the wall with Wee Tan in the centre, his wife and children gathered around.

Wee Tan’s younger brother, Wee Hong, was 23 years old and the first to enlist. He joined the army in the spring of 1917 and would serve as a gunner, wireless operator and a driver.

After the war, Wee Hong attended the University of Chicago, where he graduated as an electrical engineer and then purchased a radio store in Orillia, Ont. When he applied for a business licence, he was refused because he was Chinese.

Wee Hong packed up his old army uniform and his campaign medals and sent them to Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King with a letter saying he had fought for Canada and was now returning his uniform and medals in protest at being refused a business licence.

The items were returned along with an apology from Mackenzie King. The licence was issued and he operated his store until 1976.

And as an example of what a difference time can make, this year the Orillia library is paying tribute to Wee Hong by commissioning a booklet on his life and military service as part of its First World War exhibit.

Henry Yu, a University of B.C. history professor, said it was government policy in the First World War not to have Chinese (or Japanese) Canadians involved in the war effort.

“They didn’t want people who had been explicitly disenfranchised to be fighting because they didn’t want to have to grant them full citizenship and the right to vote,” Yu explained. “The

government didn't want to be presented with the moral and ethical argument that if we are good enough to die for Canada < which is what happened to some of them < why is it we can't vote?" A determination to push this argument would certainly have been in the minds of the Louie brothers and other Chinese-Canadians who volunteered to fight in the First World War, said Yu, although it did not sit well with their elders who likely thought they were too valuable to be risked.

"These were the ones who were bilingual, had been born and educated here.

They were seen as being able to bridge the gap between the two cultures and would be leaders in the fight for equal rights. So the elders didn't want to lose them," he said.

However, what the government and the elders seemed to overlook was the affection these young men had for their country despite the head tax, the disenfranchisement and the various discriminatory laws levied against them.

"It shows you can be treated like crap and still believe in your country.

In those days, people talked about fair play and justice but those ideals didn't apply to Chinese or Japanese or aboriginals or East Indians. So it was left to these people to force the country to live up to its ideals." Then there is the most compelling reason of all why the Louie brothers and the other 300 volunteered < something Shakespeare with his quip about manhood fully understood.

"Young men want to prove themselves," Yu said.

"The Chinese who lived in small towns and rural areas in B.C. were part of those communities. They had gone to school and were friends of other young men who had volunteered while they were left behind. So if you are not allowed to fight it means you are less of a man and are going to be dishonoured."

"And that would be a really tough thing for them to swallow."