



## **ORGANIZATION OF CHINESE AMERICANS, HAWAII CHAPTER BANQUET TO BENEFIT WAH KAU KONG ENDOWMENT**

**August 20, 1999**

Aloha! Good evening ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to join you, the members and friends of the Organization of Chinese Americans, tonight to inaugurate a national effort to endow a fund to honor the memory and spirit of Lieutenant Wah Kau Kong, the first Chinese-American fighter pilot for the United States who was killed in combat during the Second World War.

Let me thank Mun Charn Wong, Benjamin Chen, Pat Fujieki and the members of Organization of Chinese Americans-Hawaii Chapter who are working to establish Wah Kau Kong Memorial Computer and Audiovisual Laboratory at the University of Hawaii Department of Aerospace Studies. It is with great pleasure that I accept your invitation to serve as a member of the Honorary Board of Directors for this most worthy project. I also wish to thank the University of Hawaii Foundation and Army ROTC at UH for their assistance to this project.

In addition, I want to recognize and thank Mun Charn Wong, who has led a long crusade to honor the memory of his best friend. It is said that the true measure of a man is the company he keeps. By this standard, Lt. Kong certainly was an exceptional person, for his life has had a deep and lasting impression on those who knew and loved him.

In 1994, Dean C. Sensui and Mun Charn Wong collaborated on a biography, Wah Kau Kong, America's First Chinese -American Fighter Pilot. The booklet is a good read; I heartily recommend it if you have not already had a chance to pick it up.

It is also a testament to one man's quest to honor the memory and courage of a fallen buddy. In 1944 Mun Charn embarked upon a journey that eventually took him into the mountains near a small village north of Blomberg, Germany--to the exact spot where Wah Kau Kong's Mustang P-51 fighter had crashed.

This evening, 55 years later, we honor the legacy of an American hero and celebrate the extraordinary bonds of a friendship never diminished by the passing of time. Thank you, Mun Charn Wong for sharing the heroic and inspiring life of Wah Kau Kong with all of us.

When I first read about Lt. Kong, I felt it appropriate--indeed, necessary--to share his story with my colleagues and offered some selections and a brief account of his life in a statement to the U.S. Senate.

It is a remarkable coincidence that today we also celebrate Admissions Day, the 40th anniversary of Hawaii's becoming the 50th State. I am convinced that the patriotism and bravery of young men from Hawaii-Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino, the sons of

immigrants, who, along with thousands of other Hawaii boys, by their deeds, dispelled once and for all any doubts about the bravery and allegiance of Asian Americans.

Certainly, that generation's achievements under the most dangerous conditions made officials in Washington and their fellow citizens feel at ease with the idea of admitting a state to the Union with a multi-ethnic, Asian majority population.

As we observe Admissions Day, and reflect on the blessings and responsibilities which came with statehood, let us remember the thousands of young men, living and dead, who proved that patriotism is a circumstance of the heart, not a consequence of the skin.

Wah Kau Kong epitomizes this remarkable generation. As a youth growing up in Palama, Wah Kau Kong embraced and excelled at school and sports. A bright student and exceptional athlete, he never sought the safe way or easy path.

As a chemist working toward his master's degree when the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, Kong found himself in great demand, particularly to the government's war effort. However, not having been called to active duty, when so many others had, bothered Wah Kau. He loved the freedom he experienced in flying and decided to join the fighting, enlisting in the Army Air Corps in early 1942, and recording the highest national score in his entrance examination. As an experienced flyer and with his commissioned officer status through ROTC participation, he gained immediate acceptance into the aviation cadet training program.

He ably withstood the rigors of military flight school and the harassment of a particularly tough instructor to earn his wings.

Throughout his training and assignment to the 353rd Fighter Squadron, Wah Kau Kong realized his unique position as the first Chinese-American fighter pilot. While others christened their craft with the names of girlfriends or mothers, suggestions of bravado and the like, it was all far too unimaginative for Wah Kau. With his typical irreverent good humor, he had emblazoned on the cowling of his Mustang: "Chinaman's Chance" and "No Tickee-No Washee."

During his far too brief career as a fighter pilot, Kong rescued U.S. Bombers under fire of the German fighters. (From a Feb. 28, '44 account), "A U.S. P-51 B Mustang turned into him, and the Nazi peeled off into a diving turn. Ten thousand feet farther down the Mustang pilot nailed his man with a long close-in burst. Second Lt. Wah Kau Kong, pilot of "Chinaman's Chance" and one of the U.S. Fighter Command's hottest aerobats, had made his first kill." Kong wore the mantle of trailblazer with ease and grace. In the cockpit, in athletic competitions, at the ping pong table, or around the gambling table, Kong personified the All-American hero. He overcame adversity through hard work, always aspiring to be the very best.

As he waited impatiently to see action, Wah Kau was interviewed by an Army public relations officer and tried to enhance his reputation in a unique way. "Well," he said, "you could announce that Kong is without question the handsomest Chinese fighter pilot in the ETO." When it was pointed out that he was the only Chinese pilot in the ETO, he replied, "Well, we could drop the ETO and eliminate the Chinese. There's a story, the handsomest pilot."

In closing, let me share with you the perspective of Wah Kau himself. In a letter to his parents, he wrote: "To me, to sit on the sideline and cheer when I'm needed in the battle, brings a distaste in my conscience and thoughts. I'd like to know and feel that I

had a part in the fulfillment of my kind of world and creed--glamour, excitement, adventure, and thrills have something to do with it, but mainly, 'twas my beliefs."

These lines give concise measure of the life and legacy of Wah Kau Kong. They reflect the values we strive to teach our children and the responsibilities we share as citizens in a vibrant democracy. These are ideals we all share as Americans, whether we are Chinese Americans, or Italian Americans, or Japanese Americans, or multi-ethnic Americans.

As the first Chinese-American fighter pilot, Lt. Wah Kau Kong represents the aspirations and dreams of millions of people yearning to share fully in the opportunity and promise of America, but who may have found their path blocked by prejudice or discrimination.

Today, the legacy of Lt. Kong stands for the very best: family, duty, honor, love of country. His indomitable spirit still soars free. And his life reminds us of the blessings and obligations that flow from liberty.

I thank all of you for helping to honor the memory and service of an American hero. Mahalo nui loa. God bless you all. A hui ho.