

# ARMY FEVER!

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY CECILIA CHAN





People often regard collecting as no more than a hobby, but Hong Kong Regimentals Association founder and military collector Thomas Chan Wing-hang sees it as an inseparable part of his life.

Having been a fan and a collector for more than 20 years, Chan has turned himself into a United States Army expert and his apartment into a mini military storage facility.

“Influenced by my elder brother, I used to be interested in models of military weapons like tanks and military aircrafts when I was small. I liked studying their appearances and their characteristics, and I have always been a fan of war films,” the 35-year-old said as he picked up one of his jets models on the table.

“However, as I grow up, models no longer satisfy my hunger and passion for military things. After all, miniatures are reduced in size. I want something more personal, more real,” Chan added.

Chan then started to collect military uniforms and other items.

He said he now concentrated on collecting uniforms and accessories from the US Army during and after the Second World War (WWII).

Chan has a particular passion for collecting items related to the US Army.

“Military items and uniforms in different countries influence each other. If you know the backgrounds and histories before you collect them, you can understand under what circumstances these products appeared, and why people came up with that particular design,” he said.

Talking about his collection, Chan estimates that he has over 1,000 military uniforms and thousands of other military items, which range from rifles, badges, soldiers’ manuals, flags, helmets, water bottles to mobile communication devices.

He said he likes to collect daily military accessories to which others might not pay attention. A pocket Bible was one of his favourites.

“What’s special about this New Testament is that it is bearing the logo of the US Army on the cover. It’s new and rare,” he said.

The hard-core fan said he had never calculated the amount of money he spent on military goods, but added that “it must have exceeded hundreds of thousands.”

However, Chan’s family at the beginning did not appreciate his passion for military items. It brought on a “war” between Chan and his father.

“My father used to lecture me for spending too much time and money on military goods. We used to argue and fight,” he said.



“Luckily he eventually realised my determination and passion when I brought my friends who share the same interests back home to discuss our collections, and when I was being invited to lend out part of my items for exhibitions,” he added. “He is quite supportive now.”

Chan said that his father was one of the reasons why he set up the Hong Kong Regimentals Association (RA) - an organisation for people who share a common interest in collecting military uniforms.

According to Chan, his family could not understand his enthusiasm about collecting army paraphernalia. This inspired him to make it his mission to let them know about it.

“I should do something to promote this hobby, and to provide a platform for people to share their common interests and discuss about what we love,” he said.

Chan has been the chairman of the association since its establishment

Military uniform and items are sold in Chan’s first military surplus store, Airborne Military Surplus, and some of his collections are displayed there.



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in 1999. He said that activities had stopped for some time due to personnel changes of the association, but it has become active again upon the opening of Chan's first shop selling military surplus.

In June 2008, the RA was invited to hold an exhibition of military uniforms at Hollywood Plaza in Diamond Hill, in which over 1,000 military uniforms and items of different countries were displayed.

Chan said there are now approximately 40 members in the association. Dinner gatherings and barbeque events are organised, with dress code: “in military uniforms, of course”.

“Now I have my own military surplus store, a place where people can gather, chat, do research or just hang out,” he said.

Chan's passion for military goods not only motivated him to set up an association to unite people who share the common interest, but also drove him to start up his own business.

Chan rented a shop in one of the commercial buildings in Mong Kok in 2007, and opened his first military surplus store named Airborne Military Surplus. Military uniform and items are sold, and some of Chan's collections are displayed. Reference books, documentaries and military magazines are also available.

Most of the military products were exchanged from friends, friends of friends, or through the internet. “I check on sites like the eBay from time to time. Sometimes if I am searching for particular items, I will

email past sellers and ask whether they have it,” he said.

“Recently, the US had tightened its policy on selling military uniforms and items, so there are fewer channels for me to obtain them,” he added.

The collector and shopkeeper insisted that one should not buy military uniforms that do not fit.

“I came across with a set of WWII US Army soldier service uniform during 1997-1998, but it was a little bit too small for me. I don't collect military uniforms if they don't fit me, so I didn't buy it. I kept on waiting and watching, and only four years later did I find one that fit me. That feeling is simply beyond words,” he said.

Chan said there is always the chance of buying counterfeit or fake products, but it is a lesson that collectors have to learn.

“You will know when you get to touch an authentic item. The fabric

and materials of old uniforms and badges are really hard to duplicate,” he said.

He added that people today are less prone to be duped by fake products as more information is available from books and the internet.

The RA's website, for example, includes tips from Chan on how to distinguish between authentic and counterfeit items.

Chan's passion for regimental and military products is not only reflected in his business, but also personal life. He owned more than 30 sets of army service uniforms. He also dreamed of getting married in one of the service uniforms since he first started to collect them.

His dream came true. In Hong Kong Railway Museum, with trains and rails as the background, Chan and his wife took their wedding photos in a “pink and green” service uniform, which was the US Army uniform during WWII.

“People call it ‘pink and green’ because of the green coat and light taupe trousers. It is my all-time favourite. Gabardine wool is a nice and tough material,” he said.

Chan's wife, Alice Leung Wai-nga, is also a military fan, though less devoted than her husband. “Every military uniforms has its own stories. They might have appeared in the battlefield or in army trainings,” said Leung.

Leung is very supportive of Chan. “I chose him as my life-time companion, of course I accept and support his hobby,” said Leung. Also



Figures of soldiers and military units are also Chan's collection.



Chan wore one of his favourite military uniform in his wedding photo.



and friends. Chan changed into three different uniforms on his wedding day, one from the US Marines, one from the Navy and one from the Army.

"I am glad that my wife shares my interest in military items. She knew very well about my dream when we were dating, so she was psychologically prepared for it, but others were surprised. Some of my friends were inspired, and are thinking of taking wedding pictures in army uniforms also," he said.

Alvin Cheung Chun-ho, an active member of the RA, is a frequent visitor to Airborne Military Surplus. Cheung became influenced by Chan and started to collect military uniforms about a year ago.

He said his collection is more or less "things that can be found in the shop", except for two military uniforms that he found in Vietnam.

"I'll go there (Airborne Military Surplus) twice a week, to see if there are any new items, but I also go there to chat and hang out," he said.

Cheung said he is dreaming of getting hold of a set of uniform of the current US Navy.

"I like the colour a lot. The yellow embroidery stands out from the dark blue and grey camouflage patterns. It's gold and it's shining. When I first saw the uniform, I knew that was what I wanted. I had been searching it for quite a long time, but it is rare to find one on the market," he said.

Sherwin Chan Sheung-yin, Pilot Officer of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve of the United Kingdom, said that army badges represent efforts paid by the armies.

"I don't think it is appropriate to wear military uniform in Hong Kong with badges on, considering the fact that you just pay money in exchange for the badges," he said. ▣

she thought it was "quite special" for them to wear army uniforms in the wedding. "He looks pretty good in military uniform," said Leung.

Not only did Chan show the affection for his wife during his wedding, Chan also decided to march in his military uniform in front of dozens of his relatives

## WAR FILM FEVER



Chan has always been fond of movies about war. He is particularly interested in the setting and props used in battle scenes. Chan said his favourite movie was *The Longest Day*.

"The scene of the Normandy landings in *The Longest Day* was shot in the fifties at the actual spot where the Allies invaded and landed on D-Day," said Chan.

"In *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), the shore had changed; it became too modern, too commercialised and could not be used. Although *Saving Private Ryan* has a larger scale of production and used more advanced technology, the length and the width of the shore used in *Saving Private Ryan* is different from what it should have been," he said.





# HAN'S FAVOURITE



## “SON IN SERVICE” MILITARY FLAG

It was given to US families during the WWI and WWII period. One star represents one family member in service. If he died in the war, the blue star would be replaced by a gold one in honour of the fallen hero.

“This kind of flag appeared in one of the scenes in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. I searched everywhere after I watched the film,” Chan said.



## ARMY COMBAT UNIFORM

It is the current combat uniform of the US Army. Chan said that it uses a new military camouflage pattern, called the Universal Camouflage Pattern (UCP).



## GUIDELINES & MANUALS

These were often issued to US troops who were sent to bases in other countries. Basic information, historical background of the country and everyday language guides are also included.



## THE JEEP BOARD

This was a board game for US army soldiers during WWII. A ribbon is attached to the game board for soldiers to secure to their thighs, so that they could play even when they were travelling across rugged mountains.



## MOST-WANTED IRAQI PLAYING CARDS

The playing cards were distributed to US troops in 2003 to identify the most-wanted members of then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's government. Chan obtained it from the manufacturer.

He added that playing cards are often used to help US soldiers recognise tanks and military jets, as well as the languages of their enemies.



## WWI US FIELD JACKET - M41

The jacket design was modelled after a windbreaker. The cotton field jacket was officially replaced by a more improved M43 jacket, thus Chan said it is impossible to find a brand new M41 jacket nowadays. Chan possesses two M41 jackets, with one for sale. It is the most expensive item in the store.