

A Brief History of the American Legion Lt. B.R. Kimlau Chinese Memorial Post 1291

The American Legion Lt. B.R. Kimlau Chinese Memorial Post 1291 was created in 1945 by a group of World War II veterans who managed, with great motivation and effort, to obtain a charter from the National American Legion Headquarters. The new Post was formed by 96 founding members, one of whom was not of Chinese descent. The Post's namesake was chosen in honor of Lt. Benjamin Ralph Kimlau, an American of Chinese descent, who served as an U.S. Army Air Forces bomber pilot during World War II. He was killed in action during an air mission over the New Guinea Islands.

When first organized, the Post was located at 185 Worth Street, but the space became too small to serve the rapidly growing membership of returning servicemen. In need of more operational space, the Post leased the second floor of 196 Canal Street in 1945 and moved in after much needed renovation.

On April 28, 1946, the Lt. Kimlau Post hosted an official opening ceremony in Columbus Park, Chinatown, followed by a memorable parade and celebration. The first Post Commander was George Mar Lee who led a membership that exceeded 600 veterans.

Vastly involved in community affairs, the Post quickly stood out as an influential organization in the Chinese community. It became a strong ally of the Chinese Benevolent Association and assisted in resolving local community issues.

The Lt. Kimlau Post was instrumental in the two successful appeals to Congress for the fair and equal treatment pertaining to the Chinese immigration and the increase of Chinese refugee quotas. At the same time, the Post petitioned the New York City Department of Transportation for traffic lights in Chinatown, who agreed to the initiative to address the rapidly increasing number of traffic accidents in the area, and to protect pedestrians in Chinatown.

In 1958, the Lt. Kimlau Post petitioned the City of New York for a site in Chatham Square to build a memorial to honor the supreme sacrifice of Chinese-Americans who answered the call to protect our great nation. After many delays and rejections, the Post was granted permission in 1961 to rename "Chatham Square" to "Kimlau Square" and to erect a memorial monument. The unveiling ceremony took place on April 28, 1962, a day of many celebrations.

In 1961, the Lt. Kimlau Post acquired a six-story building at 191-193 Canal Street to establish a permanent headquarters. After two years of renovation, on April 28, 1963, the Lt. Kimlau Post celebrated its 19th anniversary and its grand opening of the new headquarters. Newly elected officers were installed and the ceremony and celebration numbered over 1,000 participants, which included its members, their families, and notable guests that included the American Legion Department Commander Charles L. Bacon, U.S. Senator Hiram Fong of Hawaii, Republic of China Ambassador to the U.N. Liu Kia, Republic of China's Chief Military Delegate to the U.N. General S.M. Wang. Numerous state and city officials, and community leaders were also in attendance.

In September 1970, the President of the Republic of China's Executive Yuan Mr. Chiang Ching-Kuo visited New York City as part of his state tour of the United States. He was well received by the Chinese community and was honored by the Lt. Kimlau Post. Other prominent individuals who received distinguished recognition from Post include Air Force Lt. General Chennault, U.S. Army General J.A. Van Fleet, U.S. Senator Fong of Hawaii, Mayor R. Wagner of New York City, Ambassador Tang of the ROC, and NYPD Inspector Beatty.

Many people consider the 1950s and 1960s as the Post's most influential period. The Post exceeded 1,000 members and many who were also active leaders in community organizations. The Post created extensive

service programs to aid various causes: flood relief, earthquake relief, refugee relief, educational grants, etc. The Lt. Kimlau Post donated funds to the True Light School Drum and Fife Band for the purchase of lockers to store uniforms and to the Chinese Community School Band for instruments and uniforms. The Post also contributed \$1,000 to the creation of a recreation center for Chinatown youths at the Chinese Community Center.

The Post sponsored a Scholarship Program during 1965 through 1968 for over 100 members' children to study the Chinese language and culture, and provided financial aid to needy students with excellent academic achievement so that they could continue or complete their higher education.

The Post provided many services to its members which included immigration application assistance for family members, employment referrals, rehabilitation care, weekly visitations of sick and disabled members, and care for their dependents. The Lt. Kimlau Post supported a variety of programs to respond to the needs of different age groups with the annual installation dinner, parades (Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Memorial Day, Double Ten, etc.), weekend movies, teen parties, picnics, and the annual Thanksgiving and Christmas parties. Occasionally, over 1,000 children received toys and candy from Santa Claus at the Post annual Christmas Party.

To keep members informed, the Post published newspapers, both in English and Chinese, such as "the Bugle Journal" in 1957 and "the Kimlau Post Journal" from September 1963 through March 1968 for about 14 issues, self-supported by advertisement. These newspapers were the first ever bilingual publications produced by an American Legion post. The editors were recognized by the American Legion National Press Association and these editors soon joined their ranks.

In 1965, the Lt. Kimlau Post formed a "Tai-chi Chuan" class for its members who were very enthusiastic and grateful to be taught by the internationally renowned Tai-chi Master William C.C Chen and later by Master Lee Kuo-ying.

In 1970, U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War created great political turmoil and economic uncertainty. Inflation soared and the Lt. Kimlau Post was in financial difficulty. The Post came close to borrowing money to sustain its operating expenses which necessitated the Post Commander to launch a restructuring program. Unnecessary activities were curtailed or suspended to make ends meet and the Post had to find ways to generate additional income to fund its activities. Post leadership decided to convert the 4th, 5th, and 6th floors into office space for rent, thereby alleviating the financial hardship. Despite the changes, the Lt. Kimlau Post never neglected its commitment to the community. With the influx of new immigrants, the Post created an integration program to teach English and American history.

In the 1980s through the late 1990s, a large influx of immigrants, especially from Hong Kong and Taiwan, arrived in America, which shifted the core of the local community. Real estate values skyrocketed, local businesses flourished, and the Post finances improved significantly. However, programs that had been long suspended could not all be revived because the Post's aging members had changed their interests. The Post's activities and benefits were adjusted to meet the needs of its members. A newsletter was also periodically mailed to members to keep everyone informed.

Currently, the Lt. Kimlau Post provides a variety of newspapers, magazines, and books for its members to read. The Post continues to provide recreational activities that includes Mah-jong and card games. The Post afternoon tea and buns are served every day, and its hospitality has been appreciated by members who continually recruit veterans into its membership. The members are especially pleased that younger generations of veterans are gradually joining the Post to carry on the service to the community and to pass on the values of its heritage.

The Lt. Kimlau Post has known much success and achievement in the past 75 years, and its members are grateful to the vision and efforts set forth by the founding members and the able Past Commanders. These

efforts have provided a solid organization that is fully committed to its membership and its service to the community.

The Lt. Kimlau Post has a fine tradition of caring and giving; with members dedicated to upholding the goals and ideals of Justice, Freedom, Democracy and Loyalty. Looking toward the future, the Lt. Kimlau Post will certainly continue to serve its members, community, state and country, as per the national preamble.

The Four Pillars of the American Legion

Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation

National Security

Children & Youth

Americanism

