

On Uncle Gordon

I know many of you join us this afternoon because you cherished Gordon as your friend, your golf buddy, your fellow-world traveller, NASA work colleague, or perhaps as your neighbour, mah jong or poker player, fellow Democrat, or of course as a beloved family member. I, along with the many of my Mar cousins gathered here today, feel privileged to have known him as Uncle Gordon. Uncle Gordon embraced many circles – and you are all proof of that - but I would like to tell you about the first circle he embraced – his family.

So begins the story of a boy, born 77 years ago in the tiny town of Lamont, (them, population 500) located at the junctions of Hiway 25 and 831 in Alberta, Canada. This boy was given the chinese name of Quock Guen.

Uncle Gordon was the last born child of Wen Fong Wong and his father Mah Foo, who ran the “The Royal Café” in town. When Gordon was born, he joined a household full of testosterone. There was his revered eldest brother Lim, who would go on to become a fighter pilot in the 2nd world war, his second eldest brother Hong, (my father) who would also become a pilot, followed by his loving sister Ida – who mourns with us today, and his gregarious brother Barry and gentle brother Harold. This tale co-stars Gordon’s siblings because they were so very important to him and remained close in his heart throughout his life.

But let’s go back to those innocent days in Lamont. On the radio, if the family had one, they might have grooved to the dulcent tones of Bing Crosby or the Mills Brothers. Politically, Canada’s Prime Minister was Richard Bennett while those of you in the US elected President Herbert Hoover.

By the time Gordon was born, The Great Depression was in full swing: everyone had financial worries and the Mah Family was no exception. None of this of course, would baby Gordon know. Not until he was 2 years old. That's when his father decided to move the entire family to his home county in southern China. Gordon's father justified that life in Canada was harsh – the café business was dismal, times were racist, he wanted his boys and his daughter to know what it was like to be Chinese in China. Moreover his eldest boy had dreams of becoming a pilot and no one had heard of a chinese pilot in North America. Other Chinese-Canadian families were leaving as well – the Mars would do the same. It was a decision, Gordon later learned, that his father would regret.

So, it is no wonder that Gordon has no childhood memories of his birthplace. While still a toddler, Gordon lived in the bustling city of Guangzhou, China. Life as the baby in the family was probably the easiest - he was entertained by his older brothers and sister and kept safe and close by his mother's side. He remembers having been saved by brother Hong while swimming at the local watering hole one day. He also fondly recalled his glamorous big brother Lim riding his Harley and coming home to swoop him in the air, affectionately calling him, “Meow-doy” or Kitten boy.

There would be no idyllic childhood for Gordon though because life in China, was to grow grim. When Gordon was 6 years old, air raids became a part of life. China was at war with Japan forcing the family to evacuate the city. They headed to their ancestral village in the Bak Sa district.

Two years later, the second world war sent everyone in further chaos. By now, big brother Lim was supporting the family with his wages as a fighter pilot for China. Second eldest brother Hong had been sent home to Canada where he would grow up in Kelowna BC. Wartime kept everyone else trapped in China. The complete Mar Family would never live under one roof again.

Education for the young Gordon began in the village. When he was 11, brother Lim urged the family to relocate to Siew Guan where there would be better schools. Gordon, Harold and their Mom, walked 3 days to get a boat for the 5 day journey. What this family would do for a better education! (That does put a new slant on all those talks Uncle Gordon gave me and my sisters about pursuing higher education!)

Imagine what it must have been like then, for the young Gordon to function in village dialect, then learn Cantonese, and uproot every few years, sometimes every few months, with the barest of necessities. Every foray was fraught with danger – every trip to the well, every walk to school.

Four years ago, Glenn had the foresight to sit down with his dad and turn on the video camera. And it is because of those sessions, that we can fill in a chapter that was forever burned into Gordon's memory.

In 1944, he and his mother happened to be staying in a house outside of Siew Guan, where it was presumably, safer. After Christmas Day, he and his Mom decided to head to Guangzhou by boat – a several days journey. Not only did they have to look out for your everyday bandits (who were looking to steal your rice, your money, or the clothes on your back), they had to avoid the Japanese **and** the Communists who were fighting the Japanese, not to mention the American Allies in the skies.

On the second day of their boat journey, gunfire broke out in all directions. Gordon's mother frantically stuffed their money into his belt, shouted at him to jump and swim to shore and get himself to the city if they became separated. Amazingly, Gordon swam to shore with gunfire all around. He remembers seeing one child's foot being shot off but being told to keep on going. When he made it to safety, it was then that he realized his mother was not with him. She could not swim and he could see from the safety of the river bank, a boat engulfed in flames. Momentarily though, there emerged into his sightline the familiar figure of his mother, recognizable by her black plastic handbag. This, he told Glenn, was THE MOST JOYOUS moment of his life.

If 1944 was remembered as holding this most joyous of moments for 13 year old Gordon, it also held its darkest. This was the year that Lim died in a fateful crash flying over the infamous Burma Hump between India and China. Lim – the revered, popular, engaging and brave older brother was only 28 and he left behind his wife Jessie, and his young daughters Winnie and Vera. Gordon, his siblings and parents were devastated – shattered. They were never to forget Lim or his family.

The next year, Gordon would bicycle thru the streets spreading the good news that the war was over. It wasn't until he turned 16 though, that he and Ida, and Barry were able to cut through bureaucracy and get ship's passage to return to North America. Mom and Dad and brother Harold would stay behind for a while longer. It took 18 days to get to San Francisco and they arrived on March 6 1947. Gordon – Canadian-born, Chinese village boy survivor - had a new life to make for himself and he didn't speak a shred of English.

Within a week, the threesome was flown to Vancouver and into the waiting arms of their fast-talking Westernized brother Hong. Gordon remembers Hong teaching him his first english words, “telephone” and “automobile”. (Cel and car would have been easier, but that was 1947 afterall). The two brothers then went to Kelowna where Gordon's new best friend became his English/Chinese dictionary and where Gordon would learn english and how to dress like James Dean.

The land of his birthplace and the free did NOT translate into an instant paradise for Gordon. He was the baby afterall and when Hong left for aviation school in California, while the rest of his siblings were in China and Saskatchewan, Gordon was left to continue highschool on his own in Kelowna, albeit as a member of his uncle Jock's household. Everyone in the family apparently, worried about baby brother Gordon. Uncle Gordon once told me he indeed felt like the “black sheep” then. Being a normal teenager in North America was hard enough but all this family separation, tragedy and wartime toil had evidently taken its toll on his emerging psyche.

Finally Gordon asked his big sister Ida if he could come stay with her and give school another shot in California. At the age of 25, he moved to Stockton and it seems ---- Gordon blossomed. In his sister's warm household he would become the Uncle we all know and love. He often took care of Ida's 3 kids in between his studies at Stockton College and learned how to have fun.

Cousin Debbie has fond memories of being in Uncle Gordon's charge. He would tell her the story of going for walks with him and he would proudly declare to others “this is my niece”. Young Debbie, looking up at her uncle from knee height, would protest and say, “But Uncle, I'm not your knees!”

Cousin Andy also has fond memories of Uncle Gordon – so much so that when he climbed to the summit of Mount Shasta a few years ago, he installed a tribute to Gordon up there.

I like to think that Gordon simply discovered his inner child during that time with his sister Ida's family. He, who had such a fleeting and fragile family life, found he truly loved kids and their company.

In 1956 Gordon's life took a **major** turn for the better when he met Nancy. Told by a friend that she was "outta his league" Gordon obviously persevered and they were married on December 20, 1958. Four years later, Glenn was born and 2 years after that, Dana. Aunt Nancy, Glenn and Dana – you completed Gordon's life. You filled it with love, laughter, teenage angst, a son-in-law and daughter-in-law and four precious grandchildren. You were everything to him.

I have one more chapter to tell in this tale. It's the one that illustrates best how family was such an integral part of Gordon's life. He and I have often pondered this bond that ties the Mar Family together despite the fact they lived very few years together under one roof.

Recall that when Lim died in 1944 he left behind not only broken hearts but a wife and young children. The mystery of what became of them consumed the rest of the family; in particular my father Hong. For years, he sought word of their fate and their whereabouts. Then one day in 1966 Hong got word that Jessie and her girls might be living in California. He dispatched Detective Brother Gordon to leave no rock un-turned, no clue un-checked in the effort to find them. And find them he did.

Jessie had remarried and eventually got to the Bay Area safely with her girls and husband. Winnie and Vera were alive and well. Gordon was the first to see them and wrote to my dad, of this joyous occasion.

I can tell you, because by now, I was witness to the sheer joy that Gordon's news brought my father...that my dad read Gordon's letter over and over and over. In writing every detail about finding Lim's Family Gordon felt proud to have given something meaningful to his big brother Hong. The eventual reunion with the Mars and their long, lost nieces was joyous and timely. A year later, my father died in his crash on the West Coast of British Columbia, just shortly after Mah Foo died in Red Deer – back- to- back deaths that once again broke the hearts of the Mars left behind.

When brother Barry died in March of last year, Uncle Gordon said to me, “Mona, how do you say goodbye to someone you have loved all your life?” As the youngest in the family, Gordon was the only one truly able to say this. Because he genuinely did love all his siblings, from the day he came into their lives in Lamont.

For me personally, I thank Uncle Gordon for giving me such pride in our family’s story and for showing my sisters and I what true generosity is. When our father died, the Mars made sure that we would not be forgotten, just as they had done for Winnie and Vera.

Uncle Gordon was loved and received immense love back; that’s we are all here today. He was the last surviving brother of his family and after all the tragedy endured, he honoured them deeply, with pride and joy. I think his history endowed him with the bravery to face these past 5 years. And now we honour Gordon, with profound pride and joy, for a life well-lived and ... loved.

*Read with love at Unity Palo Alto Community Church by niece Ramona Mar,
July 14, 2008*