

Pvt. Danny Chen, 1992–2011

He was 19 years old, a scrawny six-four, and wanted nothing more than to join the Army. Just like so many other young men. But very few from Chinatown.

- By [Jennifer Gonnerman](#) Published Jan 6, 2012
SOURCE: <http://nymag.com/news/features/danny-chen-2012-1/>



Private Chen's bedroom on January 5.
(Photo: Ashley Gilbertson/VII Photo for New York Magazine)

On the evening of October 3, 2011, Su Zhen Chen heard a knock at the door. In the hallway outside her apartment on Avenue D stood three soldiers. Su Zhen doesn't speak English, and none of the men spoke Taishanese. She couldn't understand what they were telling her, but figured it must have something to do with her 19-year-old son, Danny, an Army private stationed in Afghanistan. She called her brother in Staten Island, and he handed the phone to his wife, Melissa, who speaks fluent English.

The soldier on the other end of the line asked her who she was, then quickly got to the point: "Can you tell Danny's parents that Danny died?" Danny had been on guard duty, the soldier told his aunt, and had been found with a gunshot to his head. "He's dead," he said. "Can you tell his mother that?"

Melissa turned to her husband. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Just say whatever you heard."

So she did, telling Danny's mother, "They said he died. He had a gunshot to his head."

At first, Danny's mother did not seem to understand. "Okay," she said. "He has a gunshot to his head. Is he okay?"

"No," Melissa said. "He's dead."

Slowly, the news sunk in. In Staten Island, on the other end of the phone line, Su Zhen's relatives could hear the sound of a long, tortured scream.

Danny's mother had never wanted him to become a soldier. If it had been up to her, after high school he would have attended a college close to home and grown up to be something else, something safer. Maybe a pharmacist. Danny was her only child, born in 1992, just five years after she'd immigrated to New York City from the Taishan region of China and three years after she brought over her husband. Growing up in Chinatown, Danny had always seemed an exemplary son: obedient, studious, devoted. And very attached to his mother.

While Danny's father, Yan Tao Chen, had put in ten-hour days working in the kitchens of Chinese restaurants, his mother had been the one who raised him.

She didn't want to see him join the Army, and made it known. Danny told his best friend, Raymond Dong, that he feared his mother might disown him if he enlisted, so he signed up without telling her first. But Raymond agreed with Su Zhen; he too thought Danny would be better off sticking around New York and earning a degree, maybe at Baruch College, where he'd taken prep courses the summer after high school. "You could do a lot better than join the Army," he told Danny. "You're so smart." It was true: During his senior year, Danny would fall asleep in math class, wake up when the teacher called on him, and still give the right answer.

But in a community of immigrant strivers, Danny wanted something different for himself. During his senior year, while everyone else was polishing their college applications, he was dreaming about the Army. Many Chinese-American families with just one son won't let him join the military, since sons are so highly prized in their culture. But this did not deter Danny. "I want to live for myself," he told Raymond, "not for someone else."

When asked about his decision to enlist, his friends and relatives offer up myriad explanations: He planned to join the NYPD and thought the Army would be good training; he wanted a steady income to help support his parents; he thought college would be boring; he loved action and adventure, and wanted more of it in his own life; he was anxious to test himself and prove his mettle. Perhaps he was hoping to strike out on his own, to put some distance between himself and his parents. But one fact looms over all the others: He joined the Army because he wanted to, not because he needed to, and knowing all the while that he was likely to be catapulted into a combat zone. In fact, he was eager to get there. "hooah for leaving," he wrote in his diary on his way to basic training last January. "Excited as heck."

Nine months later, he was found dead in Afghanistan of what the Army has described as "an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound." Since Danny Chen's death, details of his story have slowly emerged, relayed by Army officials to his family. A group of his superiors allegedly tormented Chen on an almost daily basis over the course of about six weeks in Afghanistan last fall. They singled him out, their only Chinese-American soldier, and spit racial slurs at him: "gook," "chink," "dragon lady." They forced him to do sprints while carrying a sandbag. They ordered him to crawl along gravel-covered ground while they flung rocks at him. And one day, when his unit was assembling a tent, he was forced to wear a green hard-hat and shout out instructions to his fellow soldiers in Chinese.



Chen in 2010.
(Photo: Courtesy of the Chen Family)

The Army recently announced that it was charging eight soldiers—an officer and seven enlisted men—in connection with Danny Chen’s death. Five of the eight have been charged with involuntary manslaughter and negligent homicide, and the coming court-martial promises a fuller picture of the harrowing abuse Chen endured. But even the basic details are enough to terrify: What could be worse than being stuck at a remote outpost, in the middle of a combat zone, tormented by your superiors, the very same people who are supposed to be looking out for you? And why did a nice, smart kid from Chinatown, who’d always shied from conflict and confrontation, seek out an environment ruled by the laws of aggression?

Danny Chen was born in New York City, but he couldn’t speak much English before starting Chinatown Head Start in the fall of 1996. Mostly he spoke Taishanese—his parents’ Chinese dialect. The Head Start program was filled with the children of restaurant and garment-factory workers, and there was nothing unusual about being unable to speak English, even if you’d spent your whole life in America.

Compared with his peers, Danny had an advantage. “He had such a loving mom,” says Renny Fong, who taught him in pre-K and kindergarten. Later, as Danny grew up, a friend had another name for it: “mama’s boy.” While other kids were raised by grandparents, with both parents working long hours, Danny had a mother who dropped him off and picked him up every day, who went on school trips and made sure he stayed focused. By the time he reached first grade, Danny was not only fluent in English, he’d won a slot in the school’s gifted program.

The family lived in an Elizabeth Street apartment so tiny that the stove and fridge occupied a corner of the living room. There was only one bedroom, and for ten years Danny slept in a bed just a few inches from his parents. He was not typically one to complain, but in middle school he made a sign and posted it on the bedroom wall: “I want a room!” Not long after, his parents got him one, moving out of Chinatown to find it. The new place was more spacious, with two bedrooms and a separate kitchen, but its location was much less safe: in a housing project on Avenue D.

“I want to live for myself,” Chen said. “Not for someone else.”

Twice over the next few years Danny was set upon by other kids in the neighborhood. Once they stole his cell phone; he called home from a subway station, and when his father came to retrieve him, he found Danny so shaken up that he was in a huddle, his arms wrapped around himself. Another time, a group of boys tried to rob him, but he got away, called the cops, and drove around with them to track down his assailants. When he discovered how young they were, he declined to press charges, saying he worried that a conviction might harm their futures.

In middle school at M.S. 131 on Hester Street, he was a gentle kid, his friend Jing Mei Huang recalls, and would often go straight home from school to do his homework. He tried to avoid confrontation, though one day during gym class he accidentally hit a girl with a ball, enraging her boyfriend so much that he started kicking Danny. “Danny didn’t flinch at all,” Huang recalls. “He just kept going to his locker.” When a friend asked him later why he didn’t fight back, he just said: “Let it go.”

In high school, things began to change. He started lifting weights, spending every afternoon at the Y on Houston Street with his friend Raymond Dong. Danny wasn’t very athletic, but he was determined to try to put some muscle on his skinny frame. He didn’t have any girlfriends in high school—“He was really, really shy,” says a friend—and when he wasn’t working out, Danny would pass the hours playing handball and video games like Call of Duty. Or eating. Most days, he and Raymond would eat all afternoon—one meal right after school, then another after they worked out, then home for dinner. But Danny couldn’t seem to gain any weight. By the end of high school, he was six foot four and towered over his friend, but he still looked as thin as a feather.

The letters home from basic training were handwritten on Army-issued stationery, adorned with the boldfaced motto: army strong. “Dear Mom and Dad,” Chen wrote in January 2011. “I’m suffering here but it’s not too bad so far.” He was then in week two at Fort Benning, with seven more weeks to go. While his friends were sitting in college classrooms back in New York—Dong was at St. John’s, Huang was enrolled at St. Francis—Chen was limping around training camp, a giant blister on his foot. But he had no regrets. “I love this place,” he wrote.



Chen's parents on January 5.
(Photo: Ashley Gilbertson/VII Photo for New York Magazine)

The letters he sent home over the next two months offered a running commentary on basic training and at times read like letters from camp:

“I’ve taken 6 showers since I got here, 2 of which are 30 second ones. If this letter stinks ... o well.”

“Everyone here likes country music ... Lots of people here are from the south too so they know every song. Weird as hell to me.”

“We call each other by our last names here. I might not even respond to Danny anymore.”

“Random Facts—we running out of toilet paper, TP is like money here.”

“I might come back using curses like crazy, everyone here even the Drill Sergeants say fuck like every sentence.”

“In the showers ... people bust out singing songs. Tonight they took their waterproof headlights and started dancing and singing. Weird as fuck but it was fun.”

Unlike his fellow recruits, Chen didn’t have to worry about using expletives in his letters, since he knew his parents would never read them. They couldn’t read English, and, like many first-generation Chinese-Americans, he couldn’t write in Chinese. His parents would have to enlist a relative to translate, and he knew his curses would be edited out. Besides, it felt great to sound like a soldier.

And not just sound like one. For Chen, one of the Army’s appeals was the chance to actually fire real weapons. No more just playing shooter video games in his bedroom. “I been shooting the rifle,” he wrote home in January. “It’s dam awesome.” Later, he added: “by far the best weapon I shot is the .50 caliber ... They didn’t let us shoot real ones but the feel was the same. That .50 Cal can rip a man in half as said by the Sergeants ... it’s like some call of duty shit.”

When he wrote about his family, he could be just as exuberant. “Happy Valentines Day Mom!” he wrote in February. “Dad should have gotten her roses, if he didn’t, tell him to, my request from Basic T since I can’t get her anything. Still missing both of you.”

Two-thirds of the way through camp, as the training got more strenuous, relations in his platoon became increasingly tense. “People here are getting more angry now,” Chen wrote home. “There have been a shit ton of fights, not fully physical, but more just pushing.” Chen

himself didn't like to brawl, and when he did get into a fight with his bunkmate, there was no doubt who prevailed: "got my ass handed to me," Chen wrote in his diary. "Didn't even stand a chance."

Inevitably, basic training produced dropouts. By mid-March, many of the recruits Chen had started with were gone, unable to keep up. "People here are leaving left and right now, everyone is getting stress fractures and broken legs," he wrote. "All of the weaker people have either left or gone home for 30 days to heal. Now I'm the weakest one left."

Chen stood out in another way, too. "Everyone knows me because I just noticed, I'm the only Chinese guy in the platoon," he wrote home. His fellow recruits called him Chen Chen, Jackie Chan, and Ling Ling. But, he added, "Don't worry, no one picks on me ... I'm the skinniest guy and weigh the least here but ... people respect me for not quitting."

Four weeks later, the Asian jokes hadn't stopped. "They ask if I'm from China like a few times a day," he wrote. "They also call out my name (chen) in a goat like voice sometimes for no reason. No idea how it started but now it's just best to ignore it. I still respond though to amuse them. People crack jokes about Chinese people all the time, I'm running out of jokes to come back at them."

Chen had no friends or relatives in the Army before he joined, so he had no firsthand information about how tough it can be for Asians in the military. Anyone who stands out as different—because of his race or ethnicity, because he's quiet and shy, because he's weaker than the others—can find himself singled out and targeted. Sometimes it's just a matter of getting picked on; sometimes it takes the form of physical abuse. Many former soldiers say that, in part because of low enrollment and in part because of enduring prejudice, the military is especially tough on its Asian soldiers. And in the aftermath of his death, Chen has come to represent the plight of the Asian-American soldier, his family and a local advocacy group called OCA-NY joining forces to propel his story into the national press in an effort to end racism and hazing in the military.

One of the most high-profile cases of the past year involved Harry Lew, a 21-year-old lance corporal in the Marines, who was found asleep on guard duty in Afghanistan one night last April. It was the fourth time. After a sergeant announced over the radio that "peers should correct peers," his fellow lance corporals ordered him to do push-ups, then stomped on his back and legs if he didn't do them right; poured sand in his mouth; punched him in the back of his helmet; and forced him to dig a chest-deep foxhole. At 3:43 a.m., while crouching in the foxhole, he placed the muzzle of his M249 inside his mouth and pulled the trigger.

In the months since Chen died, Harry Lew's story has come up often as an example of how bad things can get for Asian-Americans in the military. But a closer parallel to how Chen was treated may be the story of 20-year-old Brushaun Anderson, one of the few African-American soldiers in a unit deployed in Iraq. A report in *Stars and Stripes* detailed how a group of superiors singled him out: overpunishing him for even the smallest mistakes; ordering him to put on his body armor and do extreme physical exercises; calling him "dirty" and forcing him to wear a plastic trash bag. His tour of duty ended in 2010, inside a portable toilet in Iraq, when he fired a bullet into his forehead.

Danny Chen turned 19 years old at Fort Wainwright in Alaska, a new member of the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, known as the "Arctic Wolves." He had arrived in mid-May, shortly after some 4,000 soldiers from Fort Wainwright had deployed to Afghanistan. For those soldiers left behind, life felt like a waiting game; everyone knew it was only a matter of time until they, too, would be deployed. Some looked forward to shipping out with a mix of anxiety, anticipation, and dread. Chen couldn't wait.

He lived in the barracks, but spent most of his free time at the rental house off-post in Fairbanks where Bryan Johnson, a friend from basic training, lived with his wife, Mary. The Johnsons' house was a favorite hangout; six or seven friends would drop by on weekday nights, ten on weekends. To pass the hours, the soldiers would play Call of Duty, toss a ball around, watch TV, swap jokes.

Chen was the youngest of the group and more innocent. When his friends learned he'd never gotten drunk before, they took it upon themselves to teach him the joys of beer pong—and keg stands. Chen was so tall that it took three guys to hoist his legs over his head, so he could gulp from the tap upside down. "He did pretty good for his first keg stand," Mary recalls.

Chen and Johnson had expected to deploy to Afghanistan in July, but at the last moment they were told they wouldn't be shipping out just yet. The news enraged them: Soon they were stomping around the house in frustration. "They were throwing a temper tantrum," Mary says. Chen sent a text to his best friend in New York. "Holy fuck I got bumped off the flight, I go in August now ... fml," he wrote, using the acronym for "fuck my life."

"All the weaker people have left," Chen wrote. "Now I'm the weakest one left."

Phone calls and e-mails are prohibited during most of basic training, so soldiers take to letter writing, often for the first time in their lives. By the time Danny Chen had arrived in Alaska, however, he'd stopped writing letters, since he could call home every day. But

communications with his family dried up again once he reached Afghanistan on August 13. From there, he could only phone home every few weeks.

When he got access to the Internet, he'd send Facebook messages to his cousin Banny, who would relay messages to his parents. On August 25, Banny wrote: "Your mom wants to know where you specifically are and if you can ever call back. Also what you are doing there, if it's hard work." The response from Danny came two days later: "Tell her that no shit its hard work, but its what I signed up for."

Near the end of August, he was sent to a combat outpost in Kandahar Province, which had been dubbed "The Palace" by the Canadian troops who had been there previously. It was anything but. A Canadian news agency later described this part of the country as "a boiling cauldron of never-ending roadside bombs, booby traps, and ambushes that drove even the best right up to the edge." The last two Canadian casualties there were suspected suicides.

When he arrived, Chen was at the bottom of the social hierarchy: a newcomer to his unit, a lowly private, still just a teenager, in a combat zone for the first time. And the only Chinese-American in his platoon. In a meeting with Chen's parents on January 4, Army officials said that his superiors had considered him not fit enough when he arrived, and singled him out for excessive physical exercise: push-ups, flutter-kicks, sit-ups, sprints done while carrying a sandbag. Such punishments resemble the "smokings" that drill sergeants mete out at basic training to correct mistakes. But, in Chen's case, it wasn't long before this campaign of "corrective training" escalated into sheer brutality.

The eight men later charged in connection with his death are all white and range in age from 24 to 35; they include one lieutenant, two staff sergeants, three sergeants, and two specialists. Members of this group allegedly harassed and humiliated Chen from almost the day he arrived at The Palace. They belittled him with racial slurs. They forced him to do push-ups with a mouthful of water, refusing to let him swallow or spit any out. And, on September 27, a sergeant allegedly yanked him out of bed and dragged him across about 50 yards of gravel toward a shower trailer as punishment for supposedly breaking the hot-water pump. He endured bruises and cuts on his back. Army officials told Chen's family that although the leader of his platoon found out about this incident, he never reported it as he was required to.

One week later, on the morning of October 3, Chen was scheduled to report for guard duty at 7:30 a.m. But when he got to the guard tower, he realized he'd forgotten his helmet and didn't have enough water. A superior sent him back to the trailer to get what he needed, then allegedly forced him to crawl, with all his equipment, across some 100 meters of gravel in order to return to the tower so he could start his shift. While he was on the ground, two other superiors pelted him with rocks. And once he reached the tower, a superior grabbed him by his body armor and dragged him up the steps.

He entered the tower at about 8 a.m. The soldier he was relieving asked him if he was okay. "No sweat," Chen answered. The other soldier left. At 11:13, from inside the tower, the sound of a gunshot echoed through the Palace.

These days, inside the Chens' apartment, the loudest sound is the hum of the two fish tanks in the living room. For the past three months, a shrine to Danny Chen has been sitting atop a foldout table in the corner of this room. A framed photo of him in his dress blues looks out over a scented candle, a vase of lilies, the folded-up American flag that once covered his casket, a folded-up Alaska flag (sent by the governor of Alaska), a few medals, and a thick pile of condolence letters typed on official stationery—from the secretary of the Army, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the secretary of Defense.

In the center, a plate holds Danny's favorite foods. One morning in December, there are cookies, clementines, and an open bag of Skittles. A few packets of ketchup are visible underneath, at the bottom of the plate, left over from earlier meals. His mother changes the offering every few days, usually American food, since that's what he preferred: sometimes Burger King, sometimes Subway, sometimes pizza. Two plastic bottles—one Coke, one water—stand next to the plate.

Down the hallway, inside his bedroom, the doorway still shows the marks he made recording his high-school growth spurt. His collection of video games—mostly shooter games like Dead Space and Left 4 Dead—line a shelf above his desk. And now three plastic crates cover the bedroom floor, each filled with clothes that were shipped back from Afghanistan.

For his mother, walking by this empty room every day has become too painful to bear; she and her husband have put in for a transfer to move to another apartment. On an afternoon not too long ago, she and Danny's father showed me into Danny's room. His mother remained in the hallway, a tissue in one hand. When asked how she is holding up in the wake of her son's death, she lifts the tissue to her eyes. "I'd rather go with him," she says.