

**Charles Leven
Veteran**

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Interviewer**

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Shaker High School, Niskayuna, New York**

FG: I am here with Chuck Leven who is a board member of AARP, but also a WW2 veteran. You actually served in the Canadian army. How did you end up in the Canadian army?

CL: It was amusing in a way but horrific in another. I tried to join the American navy, I went through the physical, and I went down to Church Street in New York. I was thirteen at that time I looked older. I passed the physical and was all set to go in, but they wanted the birth certificate, which obviously I couldn't produce because it would assure them that I was too young. So I decided after reading a magazine I should go to Canada. So I hitchhiked up to Plattsburgh, New York [unclear] and I got there in one night, and I had just turned fourteen and I had fifteen cents and that meant...it was bitter cold, it was seldom and I wasn't prepared for that. So I went into a little cafeteria, a diner of some-sort and I had a cup of coffee and a chocolate bar, and that had used up all of my resources; but I had read that fellows joining the Canadian army were being put up at the jail overnight, so I went over to this little police department in Plattsburgh, which was very small. I said to the desk sergeant that I was going up to join the Canadian army, this was in 1941 when we were still at peace. And I would like to sleep there because I had read that you could do that, and he said of course you can do that. He said I'll give you a blanket and I'll open a cell up and you can sleep there, and I said well that's terrific, he said however let me see your draft card, I said well I don't have my draft card with me, he said you can't not have your draft card, everybody has to have a draft card, well I don't have it, well let me see your driver's license, well I don't have that either. He said put your hands on the wall, he came out from behind the desk and he began to frisk me, then he called in another guy and the two of them put me in a little room and they turned on a spotlight in my face and started interrogating me. I was really scared so I started to cry, then they knew, they had thought I was a German spy trying to sneak into Canada, but once I started to cry they knew that German spies wouldn't cry, so I obviously wasn't that. Then another fellow came in and he had a little ticket taker and he said your name is Charles Leven and you ran away from home didn't ya. So they had sent me back home. That didn't deter me, a couple months later I went back to Canada and I went into Montreal. I went to an enlisting area where the Canadian army was supposed to be volunteers and I enlisted in the army and the fellow said to me how old are you, and I thought to myself well I will tell him I am seventeen because I won't be able to get away with more and he said well I'm sorry but you can't get in at seventeen when you are nineteen come back we will get you in. He gave me a big wink so I went out and came back in and he said happy birthday and signed me up. And that very night I went to training camp because they were desperately short of

soldiers. And what I didn't know was that I enlisted into the regiment called Blackwatch, which I didn't know was the infantry but I found out immediately thereafter because from there on I went to basic training and I was overseas. In 1942 I found out I was an infantry soldiers and that's where I stayed for the four years of the war and I was in France, Belgium, and Holland, it was a great experience and then unfortunately I headed into Germany and I was shot and then I came back to Britain and by the time I recovered really the war had ended. That is just a brief synopsis.

FG: That is a great summary, now let me go back, you were joining the...what did you expect and was it what you had expected when you had started. You had already gone through all of this stuff to get in then you get there, was it what you expected?

CL: Well you have to remember the times, to be in the army in a war was a very patriotic thing to do. Most kids wanted to do that, first of all it was an adventure, secondly I didn't have to go to school anymore, and that was a big attraction and thirdly it sounded like a very romantic kind of a thing and it would mean I had reached my maturity so to speak. So I expected it to be a very glamorous, exciting, interesting time and it turned out to be quite like that. Canada in basic training in January and February is a very cold place. We had these little Nissen hut's they were called and they were light by a, or heated rather by a little pot belly stove in the middle of the hut, and there were about thirty men in each hut something like that, thirty or forty. You slept on a little metal thing, it was a wooden bedstead but it had little metal straps, and a little mattress that fit, and some blankets and it was bitter cold, and so I quickly learned that I was delusional that everything about being a soldier was a piece of cake like I thought.

FG: Given that you were fourteen, did you think about, maybe well I should tell them I am fourteen and go home?

CL: Very often, but I decided I wanted to stick it out, we were on a twenty mile group march, in the middle of the winter marching in the snow I very often said to myself, I gotta tell 'em I gotta get outta here. They gave me an intelligence test, it was really an aptitude test. They said ya know you're really only fourteen to fifteen on this aptitude test and I said that's because my schooling was very limited, so they ignored it. They needed men desperately. As soon as we were down we went right onto shipment.

FG: I'd like to get to...you were obviously fourteen were there up, and the people you were in basic training with and I assume you went over with them? Or did you all disperse?

CL: We went over with them and then we had dispersed.

FG: Were some of them also fourteen/fifteen or were you just that much younger?

CL: You see, by then most of the young men who were enthusiastic about the war had enlisted, they had now gone to the prisons, they had offered to anyone who had less than four years of a sentence if they were willing to serve for the army and serve with good conduct, they would erase their prison record, so most of the fellows that left the group they'd imprison. I wanna tell ya for a fourteen year old boy this was some experience. They talked a language I didn't understand, ya know [unclear] and their whole point of

view was something I didn't really understand. But they were pretty nice to me actually, they could have harassed me considerably but they did not.

FG: You had originally wanted to be in the navy?

CL: Mhm

FG: Did you realize you weren't in the navy?

CL: Oh I knew I wasn't, it was pretty clear. No I was in the army because it was the easiest to get in.

FG: So when you went over, where did you go first?

CL: We went to England first, and we were assigned to beach protection. The British were still afraid of, in terror I guess, of an invasion, so we patrolled the beaches in southern England, right near Dover, Briton, places like that. And that consisted of, there were big mine fields on both sides right near the beach, and in-between there was a little narrow path, and there was barbed wire on both sides and in the middle of the night, we each had two hour tours and we went by ourselves with a Thompson sub-machine gun down this path with no lights of course, and you spent two hours doing this, and of course at every sound, your heart went into your mouth, but that's basically what we did for a while then we went to a place called Nieppe in France in 1942, I think it was August but I'm not sure. My division was involved there, I was not on shore, but we took terrible casualties. We lost of our group of eight thousand men that went in only about two thousand had come back, it was only eight hours. It was a disaster and then we reformed and refitted and got ready for the D-day invasion several years later.

FG: Now when you were in this situation with eight thousand soldiers...

CL: Oh I wasn't on the beach fortunately.

FG: But you were now?

CL: Oh anti-craft.

FG: Did you know what was going on when it was going on? This was this kind of carnage.

CL: Well when you are in this kind of combat, there is so much happening, and you are in a narrow little area, you have no grand view of what's happening at all. Basically what you are trying to do is survive.

FG: So when they refitted/reorganized this...

CL: There were probably replacements and that kind of thing.

FG: Obviously you saw combat because they shot you.

CL: That was in 1944.

FG: When did you first see combat again?

CL: In [unclear] invasion, that was in Germany 1944. Then we landed on Gull beach, the Canadians did. The difficult beaches were the American beaches really Omaha in

particular. Ours were not quite as difficult, we didn't have as much resistance. The division moved inland fairly quickly, to our initial objectives. And then we sat there for a while because we couldn't break through and then ultimately we did.

FG: Now you were in the Canadian army, and now you were fighting next the American army.

CL: Well, in British and America there's a British army [unclear].

FG: Were there other Americans in the Canadian or was it just the Canadians?

CL: Oh yeah, but by that time most of the Americans who were in the Canadian army were allowed to go back, but I couldn't do that because my age wasn't right, so I stayed there.

FG: How did you, if you don't mind, how did you get shot?

CL: It was shrapnel actually, a shell had exploded near me and I had gotten hit in the shoulder and after a certain number of days of difficulty of getting the doctor to tend to it, I got sent to, thankfully, a field hospital, they operated took it out and they didn't really...there were so many casualties and they had very few doctors, so as a result the doctors had developed and became experienced surgeons, and so what they would do it, there were a whole bunch of men lying on stretchers and the doctor who was going to operate on you would draw a line with a crayon on your body where he was going to cut you, then the chief surgeon came along to check that what he was going to do made medical sense. So they got into a big argument after he drew the line because he drew the line from my shoulder down to my naval and the chief surgeon, started calling him names, and this guy was just defending himself and I am lying on my side and I'm thinking how do I check out of this hospital? But thank God it worked out he didn't kill me and I recovered. In fact I was ready to go back in front with the, I guess it was in May sometime when the war had ended in Europe.

FG: So you were basically there the four years that America was actually in the war and actually before that.

CL: I was never in the United States during war, so I have no idea what it was like here.

FG: Obviously you trained with some men who were probably a little out of the norm, did you serve with some of those same fellows?

CL: We had dispersed, we had all gone to different regiments we were all replacements, because of regiments had been overseas for years, Canada was at war for six years remember.

FG: Now the men you did serve with, serving under those kinds of conditions under that kind of pressure what was the relationship like, had they been lasting? Do you still contact them?

CL: I may have mentioned to you, I went to the fiftieth reunion of my regiment in Windsor, Canada, just a month ago, and that particular battalion, in Canada they had enlisted everybody from the same town which was a mistake, because when the

regiment got badly beaten up the town lost a huge number of them, and the battalion I was with SS Scottish, we lost six hundred men out of the eight hundred in the battalion. So you could imagine how devastating that was to Windsor, Ontario. So when we met, for me this was the first time in fifty years, I met some fellows who I hadn't actually served with, not been in contact with, and we all lined up, the fifty of us that were left, who showed up at the reunion, and we were all wearing blue blazers and gray slacks and a cap, a Glen Gary cap, which was a blue cap that goes this way to the tail and a plaid around it. And we had a pipe band from our active army, the battalion which is in existence today and they lined us up and the major from the active battalion started yelling at us to get in line that's when I realized I never really liked the army. The pipe band started up and we started out on the main street of Windsor the [unclear], and we had a little ceremony, it was quite moving, it was interesting to see that there were fifty men who were number one able to stand up and walk but they all fairly [unclear] which was surprising to me.

FG: What was it like to see them again after all of this time?

CL: It was good, it was moving a little bit actually, well we started to chat and then of course every saw the war from a different point of view, which you can imagine we are all different individuals, but some of the things they described I was there I swear I don't remember them happening that way at all but that's part of any group getting together over a long period of time, but it was interesting and it was very heart moving actually.

FG: Fifty years later, those four years you went through this, everything from the amazing story of you getting there to you getting wounded...what do you...is there one thing that kind of sticks out in your mind about the whole four years or so?

CL: Probably, a lot really the growing up and maturing was so obvious, very quick, which means if you start when you are fourteen and finish when you are eighteen, you really don't have a childhood or a teen-hood I should say, that is a total gap in your life that will never come back, on the other hand, when I had to come back I had to go back and start high school as a freshman. I realized how important education was and I stayed in school, at that point I welcomed school, which was something I hated up to that point and we did high school in a year and a half because they had special high schools set up for vets, and many of us...you have to think back to what the world was like then in the 1930's a lot of people did not go to high school and certainly didn't finish. So for a lot of us who were vets I was the youngest a lot of them were a lot older than me most of my class were made up of fellows who were in their twenties, who had never been to high school, so they set us up for an eighteen month course. Eliminated all things like gym and that sort of thing. And we went eighteen months continuously and graduated and went to college. From the GI Bill.

FG: You would run away to be a part of this and then when it is over you would go home, how did you feel going home?

CL: Very happy, I was glad to be there. I was ready to be spoiled.

FG: Obviously you went away as a little boy, you came back...

CL: Well kind of half a man.

FG: How would you say that experience shaped the rest of your life?

CL: I think it gives you...you have a better understanding of who you are and what life is all about. There are very few things that phase you after spending four years in that situation. Things that happened...were earth shattering events, and because you had a better sense of proportion let's put it that way, about life in general.

FG: Your group, of I guess it was fifty who were with you, but started out so many had been killed or wounded, when you were going through that, how did you cope with it?

CL: You can only cope with it day to day and you take it as, it becomes the norm, the normal is [unclear], in the trenches, we called them the slip trenches, the normal is to be dirty, the normal is to be hungry, the normal is to be bored most of the time and scared certain parts of the time, and really frightened beyond anything I had suspected or contemplated. Then, you do somethings that I really don't wanna talk about, and you see things I don't really wanna talk about, and you really don't forget for the rest of your life. The one thing you do above all is hate, is war. At least for people like us that experienced this.

FG: Some of the horrific things I understand, but is there a piece of that whole time where something is wildly funny or like a wonderful memory where you say I'm gonna remember that my entire life, where it was like one of the funniest times, or one of the greatest times?

CL: The thing I remember most about life is the last day of December in 1945 it was a place called Longueuil, Quebec which is where the expo of '67 was held, but at that time it was an army demobilization center, and I reached the door and a guy handed me a piece of paper that said I was discharged, and I walked out the door and outside the camp, and that was the happiest moment of that four year experience, I think.

FG: It seems appropriate!

CL: Yeah it was appropriate, let me tell ya.

FG: Well, anything you'd like to add?

CL: No Not really.

FG: Well this was terrific thanks so much.

CL: My pleasure.