

Leonard Coughlin  
Veteran

Interviewed by Senator Patty Ritchie's Office  
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INTERVIEWER- INT  
LEONARD COUGHLIN- LC

**LC:** When I was 21 I was drafted into the United States Army

**INT:** And what branch did you serve in?

LC-Well when I was drafted, I was just a draftee like everybody else. We left, I think in the month of August from water town NY 1942. With a whole bunch of other people from water town to fort Niagara. We took our basic training and strangely enough, because I had been a quality control technician I was assigned to the chemical warfare unit.

**INT:** Oh wow, OK

**LC:** As time went on while I was taking my basic training in chemical warfare service. I found out that there was an organization called OCS, Officer Candidate School and I looked into that a little bit and talked to a few sergeants. It sounded like a pretty good deal, you get to a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant and it saves you a lot of walking. So, I applied to Officer Candidate School and was accepted, the only hang up being that while I was physically A1, I had to choose between inventory, artillery and armor as an officer. At that time the 4<sup>th</sup> armory division was stationed at Fort Drum.

**INT:** Camp Pine

**LC:** One of the things before I entered the army. When I entered the army in August, my wife Mary and I had just been married in July. So I thought to myself, if I get to be in armor I'll get to go to Fort Drum. My wife was here at the time.....

**INT:** So you were thinking, thinking of her!

**LC:** It never happened, anyway I went to Fort Knox and went through OCS got to be a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant in armor. Quite an accomplishment for a young kid, before that time the biggest gun he's seen in his life was his dad's 12 gauge shotgun. I was assign to what they called at that time the separate tank battalion. Separate in number, in this case the 785<sup>th</sup> tank battalion. At that time the 785<sup>th</sup> tank was assigned to what they called the armored school in Fort Knox Kentucky. So, we were there in this so call school duty, training with other people until about the end of 1943. First part of 1944 we were sent to Camp Carson in Colorado, to train with the 104<sup>th</sup> division, and we were eventually sent back to Fort Knox at which time we were sent overseas to the Pacific.

**INT:** So, what happened when you got over to the Pacific theater?

**LC:** We were tank unit in the Pacific, were not typically tank unit as most people understand tank warfare in Africa.

**INT:** So how was it different then?

**LC:** Well, it was different because first of all the Japanese had very little heavy armor. They

couldn't damage and second of all there was no tank maneuvering type warfare. Our mission really was to support infantry. Infantry would be 77<sup>th</sup> division which we were assigned to. We landed in the Gulf and started down the island towards Manila, and whenever the infantry would get pinned down or something would happen were they needed heavy armor ....

**INT:** You'll be there to.....

**LC:** They'll get on the horn and call us up and we'd go forward and shot at whatever they pointed out to us.

**INT:** You were like the ace in hole so to speak?

**LC:** Yea, well it was very similar to what nowadays, they use helicopters and things like that for that kind of mission. Now it was tanks in this case, and we went down through Luzon till we got to Manila and we liberated Manila. We were loaded onto a LST to go to Okinawa and just about halfway to Okinawa the war ended, because of Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb.

**INT:** What were your thoughts on that?

**LC:** Well we were all very happy about it because we had been told by our plans and training officer that when we were gearing up for this invasion, that we can plan on at least 80% casualties.

**INT:** Wow

**LC:** We were not unhappy about not having to do that.

**INT:** So, now you said you found out the news that the war has ended halfway to Okinawa, did you turn around and come back or did you....?

**LC:** No

**INT:** Oh, OK you didn't

**LC:** LST turned around and went back to the Philippines. We were there just outside of Manila for a while and I don't know how this happened but anyways, headquarters requested a company from our battalion to set up a perimeter down in the south harbor of Manila to receive incoming Japanese prisoner of war. By that time I was a captain and the company commander said your it, you take your company and you go down there and do what you need to do to do what they tell you to do. So we went down there and actually set up a prisoner of war enclosure in south harbor Manila using the tanks as toolboxes in the corner and concentrated wire and we requested tents.

**INT:** How many Japanese POW's did you have?

**LC:** Well, we ended up with 2000, we started out with 700 and something.

**INT:** Wow

**LC:** These were tankers. We were completely ignorant of how to conduct our camp..... to make a long story short on that, the first load of prisoners of war came into the dock area that we had set up the prisoner of war camp. They had dropped the gate in the tank deck, which was full of Japanese prisoner of war in all states of condition, starvation, wounded. So, now you have to understand most of my enlisted men were kids from Texas, along the border and they were less familiar with that than I was. Well anyway to make a long story short on that, when we unloaded this first load of prisoners we said throw your weapons of onto the ground

as you come down the ramp. It was a really, a real can of worms because none of us spoke Japanese.

**INT:** Yea how did that, what did you do?

**LC:** This is what's really strange about this story, while I'm trying to get these guys to line up so we can count them. My coms are going crazy not knowing what to do, I hear this person back in the crowd giving commands in Japanese lining them up. So I said to my first sergeant go find out who that is and bring him to me. Turns out to be a Japanese officer who had graduated Purdue University.

**INT:** Wow

**LC:** I said to him, you stay here by me don't move an inch. That saved the day really.

**INT:** Sounds like it yea.

**LC:** Anyway, we ran the camp for 8 months. Then my number came up to come back to the states.

**INT:** So, what happened to the camp when you came back home? Did they keep the camp running?

**LC:** They kept the camp running. Actually as far as the base camp for holding war crimes prisoners up in Bilibid prison in Manila, they were holding Japanese war crimes, that's the place where General Yamashita who was the Japanese general in charge of the death march out in Bataan, he was being tried there as a war criminal and eventually hung in that place. The Pacific method of handling war prisoners was a little bit quicker and more positive than the European method, this man was tried and found to a war criminal by border watchers and hung. A man from Texas, a sergeant who knew how to make a gallows built one out and they hung him. We had six Japanese general officers. Anyway, I came home and back about my business working. It was a I guess you might say quite an experience really.

**INT:** I would say so yeah.

**LC:** In the experience of combat and this prisoner of war thing, was quite an experience for kid who didn't have any military background.

**INT:** So, when you got the call to go back a little bit, you got the call to come in you know with your tank and your crew there, did you have any close calls?

**LC:** Well, we had a lot of mortar fire and we had a few tanks knocked out but not knocked out in the manner that the Europeans hit them. Because the Japanese had nothing equivalent to the German A8 MM gun which could penetrate a tank and go from one side to the other. The Japanese were very good at mortar fire, they knock the tracks off and maybe set a tank on fire. We lost very few casualties in the tank group.

**INT:** Now when you get those calls, were you ever nervous or were you confident you would go in there and get the job done?

**LC:** We were always nervous when you being shot at by somebody. My men were all young boys, I was 21 and most of them were one or two years younger than I was, they were 18,19 20.

**INT:** Did you feel the responsibility to kinda watch over them a little bit?

**LC:** Well you always do that, this is things people don't understand. The bond that you form between soldiers in combat is pretty strong. I few of them I still communicate with.

**INT:** That was my next question, I was just going to ask if you have been able to stay in touch over the years with...

**LC:** The 785<sup>th</sup> tank, most of the enlistment men were from Louisiana, Texas and that part of the world. They had battalion reunion in New Orleans every year, these guys will get together. Mary and I went to about 5 or 6 of them.

**INT:** What was that experience like?

**LC:** Well it was interesting because I was surprise how old some of the young kids had gotten. It was interesting, a lot of young men were from Louisiana, a lot of them were Mexican American people.

**INT:** Did you have a favorite experience from your time in service, weather it was from training or on the field during combat? Or maybe a memorable experience?

**LC:** I think the most memorable thing that I, in my career as you say in the service was handling this prisoner war camp. I had no background, absolutely no training and none of the enlisted people that I had in my company had no training.

**INT:** So to go back to that topic you discussed a few minutes ago, you said you were there for 8 months running this Japanese POW camp. What on a day to day basis, what were some of the experiences, what were some of the tasks?

**LC:** The Japanese prisoner of war camp was basically a holding camp for prisoners coming in from the other islands. They bring them in on LST and drop the ramp and we'd take them and take their clothing and give them fatigues and put them in the camp. Do all that kind of stuff. It was an interesting experience because some of these Japanese people spoke good English and we could communicate with them and there was a lot of odd experiences. One of the things headquarters did with the Japanese prisoner of war was, they used them as labor squad to clean up the war debris in the city and somebody would come down in some outfit and say they would like 20 or 30 Japs to come up and clean up the place. So we'd send a couple guys with a rifle and 20 or 30 of these guys up. But the major reason for this was to process Japanese prisoners of war to go on to more formal camp and we also had what we called a war crime enclosure.

**INT:** You touched on that yeah.

**LC:** It was an interesting experience for me.

**INT:** If you'd had to sum up your overall thoughts on WW2 and your overall experience that you endured during your time in the war, what would it be? One lasting impression that you want people to remember your experience.

**LC:** I think my experience in the war were all, I guess you might say. There is an old saying that war is long years of boredom followed by small times of terror, I guess that describes the whole thing really. You spend a lot of time waiting around in the army as anybody who has been in the army will tell you. But when you get into combat there are periods of time that, like I said times of terror. Kids like myself at that point in time, people who have been in the service would recognize this. You have a very strong feeling of loyalty towards your enlisted people. I think that's one of the things that stick in your mind more than anything, the times when times are tough. We were on 2 different invasions coming off an LST on a tank in the middle of the night with the navy shelling over your head on the beach, its not a pleasant experience. I've often said as an enlisted man it must have been an even more than for an

officer because you knew certain things you had to do particularly in armor. I can probably sum it all by saying I think my experience in the service probably prepared me for a lot of things later on in life.