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### The Adventures of a True Charlestonian: William “Billy” Leonard

Interviewing a man who parachuted into Normandy, participated in many influential battles throughout Holland, and spent almost the entirety of the Battle of the Bulge fighting in some of the most horrible war conditions in American history, I came into my interview with Mr. Leonard anticipating stories that were going to shock me and give me a completely different perspective on what it meant to be a combat soldier in WWII. Mr. William “Billy” Leonard’s stories did just that, but in no sense did these stories shock me in the ways I anticipated. Hearing stories about the man whose first—but accidental—kill was a French cow, the soldier who parachuted next to the house of the Queen of Holland and actually had tea with her, and the guy whom the Red Cross workers would remember as the man who held the coffee wagon hostage eased both of us into the more somber stories that accompanied these more humorous accounts.

Born into “one of the old families of Charleston,” Mr. Leonard allegedly had no choice when it came to the question of whether or not he was going to attend The Citadel. However, due to the fact that “the Army said they couldn’t win the war without me,” Mr. Leonard was drafted during The Citadel’s first summer session and went to choose his branch. Desiring to be a Marine so that he could “fight the Japanese” that had captured his brother as a POW, Mr. Leonard did the next best thing he could when he was declared colorblind and told he was not eligible to join the Marines: joining one of the oldest paratrooping units in the Army, the 82<sup>nd</sup>

airborne. Mr. Leonard described the rigors of his paratrooper training which, prior to his account, I thought only happened in our modern-day armed forces.

After telling me about how Colonels were kicked out of paratrooper school for spitting out sand and such, Mr. Leonard shared the story of how he was the only person to stay in his bunk after the guns on his ship to Europe began to fire unexpectedly. Not knowing that “they



Source: [www.tumblr.com/tagged/rifleman](http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/rifleman)

were only testing the guns,” Mr. Leonard decided not to participate in the 600-man chaotic endeavor to get from D-Deck, which was at the bottom of the ship, to the main deck. Although unbeknownst to him at the time, his saying “I’d rather drown” and his

staying in his bunk led to an overarching philosophy of “how to stay alive” throughout the war. Originally trained as a machine gunner in paratrooper school, Mr. Leonard almost immediately volunteered to be a rifleman upon gaining the knowledge that “the Germans always went for the machine gunner first.” Also, starting the war as a Private and leaving the war with the same rank, Mr. Leonard refused the promotion to Lieutenant, knowing that they had a much higher chance of dying. “I’d stay in the hole” was one of Mr. Leonard’s repeated phrases throughout the interview.

Although he, like everyone else, was scared, Mr. Leonard emphasized throughout the interview that “you can’t show they guy next to you that you’re scared. He’s the only one that’s going to keep you alive.” While Mr. Leonard desired safety, he clearly put himself in harm’s way during his service: He and “the five of [his squad] that came out of Normandy walking” were given the Silver Star from General Eisenhower for knocking out tanks in Normandy.

Knocking out tanks, a process that he described to me in detail, was only one of the accounts of his bravery; Mr. Leonard also told me of how he got his squad leader, Floyd, to a medic and was able to take out the opposing German forces before they killed his friend.

Trying not to focus on himself during the interview, Mr. Leonard made a point to tell me of the “real, live heroes” he served with and shared accounts of his leaders’ bravery as well. Other than telling me about how his commanding officer pulled a gun on the Allied Commander because he refused to rescue his own men, Mr. Leonard got down to the squad level and told me stories about his enlisted superiors’ taking initiative through remarkable leadership. Mr. Leonard went into great detail when describing how the men in charge of him were excellent at “keeping you alive” by keeping a sense of camaraderie through the toughest of situations.

Although often chided for being very small, Mr. Leonard never told me of a time in which he backed down from a fight. However, when it came to fights amongst fellow soldiers, Mr. Leonard made it clear that fights were not to be tolerated. Knowing that “they [his comrades] were the only ones that could keep you alive,” Mr. Leonard played jokes on his friends, but fights were avoided. This, he said, is what kept his unit close both on and off the battlefield.

Recalling names and battles that have become famous in both the history books and in fictional depictions, Mr. Leonard cited John Wayne movies, tourist attractions, and famous WWII soldiers that were unknown to me prior to our interview. Through listening to Mr. Leonard’s stories of battles and soldiers in Holland that now are WWII common knowledge, I was given insight as to what is true about these fictionalizations, and what is, as Mr. Leonard called it, “a bunch of crap.”

What didn't go into the history books, however, was how he and other WWII soldiers reacted to their return home and the knowledge that many of those with whom they served never made it back alive. Enduring some of the hardest circumstances throughout the Battle of the Bulge, Mr. Leonard's hole was hit by a mortar shell during their pursuit of the Germans, resulting in the death of the three other men who were in the hole with him. Closing his interview saying that "most of the men I talk about are dead," I was surprised at how composed he was. Again saying that he "served with a lot of heroes," I was left with the sense that Mr. Leonard, although he wanted to get back home, derived a great sense of purpose from his time in Europe and felt that the men he served with died fighting for a just and necessary cause.