

**CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM**  
**IN THEIR OWN VOICES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

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**INTERVIEWEE: Cheryl Lamerson**

**INTERVIEWER: Michael Petrou**

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**TRANSCRIBED BY: B. Busby and C. Tavukciyan**

**Transcription of Interview Number 20220035-059**

**Cheryl Lamerson**

**Interviewed 9 August 2022**

**Michael Petrou (00:02):**

My name is Michael Petrou. I'm a historian at the Canadian War Museum. It is August 9th, 2022. I'm speaking with long time [Royal Canadian] Air Force veteran Cheryl Lamerson. Cheryl, you are in Lunenburg [Nova Scotia], I believe.

**Cheryl Lamerson (00:18):**

That's right.

**Michael Petrou (00:19):**

I am in Ottawa [Ontario]. I'm talking with Cheryl for the *In Their Own Voices* oral history project. Cheryl, you signed the permission form I sent you, yes?

**Cheryl Lamerson (00:28):**

Yes, I did. And I think they've come back to you. And the photo one should have just come back as well.

**Michael Petrou (00:35):**

Wonderful. Thank you very much. I have a lot of questions, including about your post-service career in life, but I'd like to go way back to the beginning and ask why you enlisted in the first place.

**Cheryl Lamerson (00:48):**

Well, I was—when I was 16, 17, 18 years old—and almost 50 years later am still—very idealistic. And I grew up with a father who had served in World War Two and told lots of stories that always had moral versions of them. So, that idea of serving Canada and doing something with Canadians was very important to me. It was also leading up to—I actually joined in 1975—1975 was the [Royal Commission on the] Status of Women's, as it was called then, had a campaign called *Why Not!* And there were these fantastic buttons—and I still have one somewhere around here—and there were posters that were, you know, “Why aren't more women in the military? Why aren't more women going to university? Why aren't women paid the same as men for the same job?”

**Cheryl Lamerson (02:03):**

This was all coming out of the 1970, 1971 Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which had, I think, 250 plus recommendations about the status of women. I forget how many pertained to the military, but a lot. They were things like, you know, why aren't women be able to do all of the occupations in the military, and why can't they stay when they get married, or they get pregnant? Because up until 1971, I believe it was, they couldn't. So, that all changed with the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. And by '75 it was affecting me as well. I think I was 16 when I wrote a letter to my local recruiting centre and said, “I really want to join the

military.” And they said, “Stay in school and when you finish high school, then you come and talk to us.” So, I did. I went in my last year of high school, which in Ontario at that time would have been Grade 13, so I went and talked to the closest recruiting centre, and they started the paperwork and away we went.

**Michael Petrou (03:27):**

Tell me a little bit more about your father’s service and the influence that had on you.

**Cheryl Lamerson (03:32):**

Well, my father was born in Canada, in Ontario, but his father was an American and he was born during World War One. His father was, I think, a conductor on the railway. He was on the railway anyway. The father took them back to the United States, where he was from, New York City. He grew up in what he would have described as the slums of New York, the tenements of New York. Pretty hardscrabble, depression, life. He would have gone every summer with his two older sisters by train by themselves to North Central Ontario, Georgian Bay area of Ontario, to visit his grandparents. So, he certainly knew a loving family and a semi-rural family, but he predominantly grew up in in a huge city in the slums.

**Cheryl Lamerson (04:39):**

When World War Two started in Canada, he told the story that he was engaged to a woman and doing his high school by correspondence, I think. And he decided that he didn’t want to marry this woman and his way of getting out of the engagement was to drive to Toronto [Ontario], where he had relatives and join the RCAF [Royal Canadian Air Force]. So, he joined the RCAF as a pilot, and I have since gotten all of his military files. It’s fascinating for me to read it as a former personnel selection officer. I’m reading documents by people who were in my occupation 60 years—sorry, 40 years, I guess before I was, 30-40 years before I was—during World War Two.

**Cheryl Lamerson (05:34):**

He joins as a pilot. He says that or said that he had a very thick New York accent, and he would talk about the dowdy little boy that sat on decoy typing and typing at Toidy-Toid Street and Toid Avenue. <speaking in a New York accent> Stories, you know, come down the generation. He was put on a troop train in Toronto with a British airman who had a Cockney accent and my father with his New York accent and 20 Canadians, and the 20 Canadians pushed the two of them into a corner and said, “When the two of you can understand each other, come and tell us because we can’t understand either one of you.”

**Cheryl Lamerson (06:24):**

So, they went off to Brandon [Manitoba], I think, and then somewhere probably around Moose Jaw [Saskatchewan] and did their pilot training. He eventually was in some kind of a crash and was injured. Not severely, but enough that he wasn’t going to be able to be a pilot. Or if I read between the lines of the pilot training, which says this somewhat nervous young man is a pretty good pilot, but he has trouble with landings, which would kind of be a problem. <laughs> He was released from pilot and there was some confusion about the fact that he was born in Canada versus that he was American. The rules at that time, apparently, were if you were not a Canadian citizen, you could only stay in the occupation for which you enrolled.

**Cheryl Lamerson (07:29):**

So, they released him completely from the Air Force. He was processed for, I think, for tail gunner. But then this confusion came up and they, thinking he was an American, they said, “No, you got to go back to the [United] States. We have to take you to Ambassador Bridge,” I think, probably, and “We’re letting you go back into the States.” And at the border, he said to them, “Wait a minute, this isn’t fair. I’m Canadian. I was born in Canada.” Well, it was too late at that point. But they let him go back to Toronto.

**Cheryl Lamerson (08:07):**

He joined a tool and die metalworking firm. He was always very good at metalworking. He worked with them for, I think, probably a couple of years. And then at some point he tried, I think, to go back to the Air Force, but this challenge and the medical always caused a problem. Eventually he goes to the Army, and he always described it that at that point in the war, the Army was much more relaxed in who they were taking, medically. So, he joined the Tank Corps. He became what was called a tracked motor mechanic, which would make sense with his tool and die making and his mechanical abilities.

**Cheryl Lamerson (09:01):**

He went off to [Canadian Forces Base] Borden [Ontario] to do officer training, served with the Eaton family on officer training, but got frustrated by the fact that as a corporal on officer training with university students that he was being treated [...]. He and another corporal were told that if the young university students from wealthier families got into trouble, that the two corporals would bear the trouble. So, he said, “I don’t want to do officer training,” and was sent overseas with the Tank Corps.

**Cheryl Lamerson (09:43):**

There was some kind of an accident on, I kinda think Salisbury Plains [England] by the sounds of it—everything’s a bit redacted in that portion of the file—but in some way or another [...]. He had always, kind of described it as a tank on fire and there was heroics. I would say the board of inquiry, as much of it is there, he fell off a tank, broke his leg very badly, and was in the hospital for the next six or seven months and was there when the war ended and was invalided back to Canada shortly after the war ended.

**Cheryl Lamerson (10:35):**

He had got married to my mother in London, Ontario in April of ’42, and my sister, my oldest sister, was born in the end of April ’45, so I’m not quite sure of the dates in there, but he would have come back in ’45 at some point on a ship, a hospital ship called the [RMS] *Lady Nelson*. And I’m amazed I can remember half of that, but we heard those stories a lot.

**Michael Petrou (11:12):**

When you were a girl, I mean, when did you first become aware that your father had served and how so?

**Cheryl Lamerson (11:18):**

Oh, I probably would have been four or five years old. I’m the youngest of three daughters, and I’m the tomboy in the family. The story goes [...] and I’m the youngest by ten years. My sisters

are 11 and ten years older than me. I would have always been the one that at the dinner table said, "Daddy, tell us a story." And he would then go on to tell a story. The story also goes that when I was born, he went back and asked the nurse to go check five times because he was so certain that I had to be a boy. His own father had said, "If it's not a boy, I'm going to get up and go do the job myself" and had died six days after I was born. So, there was a bit of social pressure to be the boy, too. I don't ever remember my dad saying, "What a good girl," or anything like that, but if I did something right, it was, "That's my boy." If I cooked something or wore a nice dress or whatever, it'd be kind of, "Yeah, that's nice." If I got good marks or if I did a good job at something, it was, "That's my boy." That kind of valuing of the male aspect was always there.

**Michael Petrou (12:57):**

So, you made the decision. You enlisted in 1975, I believe?

**Cheryl Lamerson (13:04):**

That's right, yes.

**Michael Petrou (13:05):**

You discuss that this was in the midst of the aftermath of the Royal Commission, but still, you would have been a minority as a woman enlisting at the time. Tell me what it was like for a woman in the Air Force in 1975 and in the years that followed?

**Cheryl Lamerson (13:20):**

Well, because of the work that I did later, I probably now know a lot more about gender integration in the military than I certainly did then. Then I was living it. Now, I know the stats and things. We would have been less than five percent at that point. But it was really exciting. I wanted something different. I didn't want the secretary, schoolteacher, mom, you know, I didn't want all of those. It was the middle of the '70s and I wanted excitement and adventure and here was a place that was very different.

**Cheryl Lamerson (13:59):**

Now, I do remember as much as my father had inspired everything about the military for me, right before I went to the recruiting centre, he very seriously sat me down and said, "Are you sure you want to do this? This is the military. If there's a war, you go to war, you carry a weapon, you have to shoot at people. You're going to be an officer. You're going to be leading the charge." You know, he had painted a beautiful picture, but he also, I think, at that last minute had had some trepidation about it, but I was sure. I had thought it through. I had read a lot. I joined the Air Force, which was the most, as it turns out, the most accepting. It was also at that time, I think there were only 60-65% of occupations that were open to women. So, nothing in the Navy would have been open to me. Very little in the Army would have been open to me other than, you know, clerical, administrative, medical, administrative, and some of the Air Force occupations would have been open.

**Cheryl Lamerson (14:59):**

Air weapons control and air traffic control, that are sister occupations, were open both officers and NCMs [non-commissioned members] but had only recently opened. And I remember the recruiting centre in Kitchener [Ontario] when they got the paperwork back saying that I was slated for what was called “air operations”. That terminology had just changed to include air traffic and air weapons. Previously, it was only for pilots and navigators, and they were really excited because they thought maybe somebody was putting me into the pilot and navigator occupation, and even if it was wrong, maybe I’d get a chance at it.

**Cheryl Lamerson (16:02):**

Well, they just hadn’t been aware of a change in a policy and terminology. So, I thought at first, I was going to be an air traffic controller. I had an uncle who was an air traffic controller at Pearson [International Airport] in Toronto. The family was very excited about that. I’d get to control aircraft and everything. We really didn’t know what air weapons was. We hadn’t heard it. It was a Cold War occupation. It came out of World War Two, but it was Cold War predominantly. It was the plotters that you would see at Biggin Hill and the Battle of Britain, moving those little planes around the table and talking to aircraft and using radar to direct them to other aircraft.

**Cheryl Lamerson (16:49):**

And it was a NORAD [North American Aerospace Defense Command] occupation, but planes and the Air Force [...] and I have this theory now, this I came up with many years later working in diversity and gender integration. The Air Force has, on average, the least physically demanding occupations. They’re more intellectual occupations. The Navy is next; they’ve got some physically demanding, but they’ve got a lot of technical science as well. The Army has the most physically demanding, some technical, but probably the least technical. In terms of acceptance of women, the Air Force has always been quicker to accept women than the Navy, then the Army.

**Cheryl Lamerson (17:46):**

I think a lot of that is because of that technical component could be where you were valued even if you were questioned on physical. A woman in the Army is going to have to be very physically capable, as well as very technically competent. Navy, you’re kind of in between, and the Air Force, it’s going to be more about the intellect than the physical. I think I saw that right from the get-go, that you’re doing a job, you’re doing well, but you’re not out marching, you know, 30 miles a day in the Air Force. You’re either in a radar squadron controlling aircraft or you’re in the back seat of a fighter jet or controlling an aircraft.

**Michael Petrou (18:40):**

Did you feel welcomed and accepted in those early days, given this comparative openness of the Air Force?

**Cheryl Lamerson (18:49):**

I did, I did. Certainly, if there was any discrimination and I know there was, I’m sure there, was it was more based on youth. The senior technicians and the senior, not just senior officers, but officers who were older than me, technicians that were older than me. If anything, it would have been age that they would [say], you know, “Now, little girl, come on and we’ll show you how to

do this.” But I was keen as mustard, so somebody who was in that position and older with someone who was keen, I think that was okay for them. And I’ve always taken the approach and my friends have always said I’m a hellion, but I’m just a very polite hellion. So I would take the approach of, well, let me show you I can do it. You’ve taught me really well. Let me show you that I’ve learned it. So, I wasn’t, I don’t think, threatening to anyone. It was like, okay, we can show this little girl what to do and maybe she’s actually doing it okay. She’s not too threatening.

**Cheryl Lamerson (20:15):**

As many women have said, I would have said what was a little bit more challenging was in the mess, two factor in the mess: Men if they were drinking. And at the same time, if I was drinking, I had to be pretty careful. I’ve always not drank very much for that reason to maintain that control. Sometimes it was difficult with the spouses and the girlfriends, because I was kind of neither fish nor fowl. I got to see their men all day, every day. So, in a social setting it was like, well, should you be over here chatting with us, or should you be over here chatting with them? So again, that was just something that had to be kind of, almost like a slalom. You had to just kind of wend your way through it and make sure that people knew that I’m not threatening you. I’m just doing a job with them. Yes, we can be friends and, yes, we’re working together, but, you know, I’m not here to steal your man, you know. I think that was probably more challenging than working with the guys.

**Michael Petrou (21:30):**

As you mentioned, you were involved in studying and implementing policies to make the Air Force and military more gender inclusive and inclusive of a greater variety of ethnicities as well. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

**Cheryl Lamerson (21:44):**

I went to university as a regular officer training plan in a psych degree. So, I knew from the moment that I joined, as much as I love the Air Force, I loved controlling aircraft, I got to tell fighter pilots where to go, how to get there and what to do when they arrived, that was always fun, but that’s very immediate, you know, you tell a fighter pilot, “Turn left, there’s a target,” and they do it. Sometimes they turn the wrong way, but that’s okay. That is exciting, but I had a psych degree. I wanted to use that psychology degree sometime in the military, somehow in the military.

**Cheryl Lamerson (22:32):**

When I joined, you could not go into personnel selection first. You had to have another military occupation first. We did, and still do, in our initial personnel selection jobs, vocational assessment and vocational counseling, for people being commissioned, for people changing occupation, for people who may have failed out of a training course for promotion. And you can’t do that kind of vocational assessment and vocational counseling, if you don’t understand the military. [...] How do you explain to somebody what it’s going to be like to be in the combat arms if you’ve never even met anybody in the combat arms? So, I did my undergrad in psychology. I did four years of university, and then three years as an air weapons controller, and then, I reclassified to personnel selection, or occupationally transferred, I think is the terminology now, and very quickly realized that I was going to be studying and working with people about using the psychology of their human motivation and their human ability.

**Cheryl Lamerson (23:50):**

So, I, fairly early into my personnel selection career, got involved in diversity and gender integration and all of those areas of human performance and human motivation. As much as I loved controlling aircraft, the excitement of that, you know, I'm never going to forget going supersonic in a fighter jet, but I think I had a lot broader impact on the whole of the Canadian [Armed] Forces and hopefully on Canadian society, by using the psychology. So, I wasn't right there and personal with the fighter aircraft, I was further back but broader. And that I really enjoyed as well, maybe harder because sometimes you would interview—even starting off in personnel selection—you'd do an interview with somebody, you would recommend them maybe for commissioning or a change in occupation. You'd send off the report and you might never hear back whether they actually went on to do that or not, or you might hear six months later, a year later whether it happened or not. So, it was a different way—it was a delayed gratification or sometimes a gratification you never heard about, but it was gratification, nevertheless.

**Michael Petrou (25:31):**

So, what sort of changes did you see and help bring about over the course of your career? How did things look different in 2007 than they did in 1975?

**Cheryl Lamerson (25:41):**

Well, you know, '75 with about five percent and 60% of the occupations, each year with each project that we did, each policy that was changed, there would be a higher percentage of women, more occupations. When I left in 2007, every occupation but one was open to women, and the one that was not open was Catholic priest, and that wasn't ours to change. In fact, I could say only half of that occupation, because priests or Padres of other denominations, could be women, only Catholic priests couldn't be.

**Cheryl Lamerson (26:21):**

And the percentage was, I think it was 16 point something or 15.9. It was a good chunk. We had just done, in my office, we had put in place a policy that talked about recruiting targets. Not enrollment targets, but recruiting targets, that would have seen 25% of recruits being women. And a reasonable proportion, a representative proportion for Aboriginal and visible minority as well. And those were huge changes in what was essentially 25 years of my personnel selection career. So, those kind of changes, I think, were really important.

**Cheryl Lamerson (27:29):**

A lot of what I worked one from the mid 1970s to the mid 2000s were, I guess, they were social policies, we would call them, or social science policies. I did see with Afghanistan some backing away from some of that. A lot of it was to do with, you know, Afghanistan was a very Army centric operation. It was a war, so there were probably less women applying for the Army than there had been. It was no longer an equality issue. It was “boots on the ground” and it's going to be bad kind of issue. There were things like that had started to ease off a little bit, back off a little bit, but all of those social, some people would call social engineering, had maintained their importance with maybe a little bit more daunting factors facing them as well.

**Michael Petrou (28:46):**

If I understand correctly, you were involved towards the end of your career, you mentioned Afghanistan, advising on PTSD [Post-traumatic stress disorder] issues as well. Do I have that correct? Explain that to us, please.

**Cheryl Lamerson (28:55):**

Yes, it was. That was very challenging. The personnel selection branch, as a Psychology Corps, is not a clinical Psychology Corps. It's an organizational Psychology Corps. It's to do with human behaviour, human motivation. It's not to do with therapy, but it has an element of it that not only do you have to design programs and policies to minimize stress as much as possible, the stress in all its facets, but then you need clinical people to do therapy, clinical and counseling people to do therapy. There were no uniformed clinical psychologists in the military. There were psychiatrists, there were social workers, but there were no clinical psychologists.

**Cheryl Lamerson (29:51):**

Largely because for a long, long time, the military had—the medical service because that's where they would have appeared—the military had always said, "Oh, no, no, we don't have anybody that needs therapy." You know, "We're the military. We're strong. We're proud, we're brave." And right up probably some people still saying that now, you know, "You're not tough enough to be in the military if you need therapy." But there was a move with Afghanistan to realize by a lot of the senior leaders and senior leaders, not just in personnel, but in personnel as well, to say, "We do need to have therapists in the military and they should be uniformed therapists," again for that understanding of the military culture, ethos, structure, etcetera.

**Cheryl Lamerson (30:57):**

I was considered the chief psychologist at that time, it would have been chief organizational psychologist, had gone to the powers that be the head of personnel and said, "You know you could create a new occupation." Well, they had some limitations from the government, and I'm not sure the details, but they didn't feel that they could create a new occupation. So, I had, as the senior, the branch advisor of the personnel selection branch, and the chief psychologist had said "Use my occupation but make a subspecialty with—" and this was just going to be a technicality—but, "Use our occupation, make a sub occupation that would be clinical psychologist and get some clinical psychologists into uniform, get them some training. It's maybe going to take you a couple of years to grow them because you're going to have to get somebody with military experience who's doing clinical psychology and bring them into the military. But get some clinical psychologist into the military. And if you can't do it by creating an occupation, then create a workaround."

**Cheryl Lamerson (32:17):**

So, we were, at the same time as we were trying to set up a lot of critical incident stress programs and policies, even before Afghanistan. I mean, we knew that if you had an accident on a ship, you didn't have to be in a war zone to have stress reactions to a big accident on a ship, or an airplane crash, or a training accident at whatever Army base that you had it. You were going to have people who were having difficulty. So, initially, we were working on what was called critical incident stress. Eventually, that realization, as peacekeeping operations turned more to peacemaking and then war fighting with Afghanistan, there was a recognition that they weren't critical incidents, they were critical operations, and they were big, and they were messy, and they

were going to be horrible. Not everyone was going to suffer, but some were, and you needed to do something about it.

**Cheryl Lamerson (33:33):**

So, at the same time as I'm working on social issues and I'm working on human resources policies, I'm also working on those stress related issues to try and bring them all together. Quite frankly, one of the biggest challenges we had was the medical service. We used to joke, and it's not just the Canadian military that's dealt with it, it's a lot of militaries around the world have dealt with this, that if the bone's not showing, there's no problem. The medical service was largely, still at that time, physically focused. They weren't focused on mental health. Now, you know, even in the last 15 years since I've left, what huge changes. They've made big strides and they've learned so much. And I don't even have any idea all of the big strides they have made, but I know there's a lot of people have been working very hard at it.

**Michael Petrou (34:42):**

Tell me about your departure.

**Cheryl Lamerson (34:45):**

Um. <sighs> A bit of a mistake. Having been somebody, who personnel selection had always done, part of our job was also transition services, helping service members to make that sometimes difficult transition from a military culture and lifestyle to finding a civilian culture and lifestyle or a civilian job. And I probably relatively, smugly, thought, I can do this. I've been doing this my whole career. But when I left, there were a fair number of things. Again, Afghanistan predominantly related, the branch, our occupation, was being looked at for either being shut down completely and there would have been no personnel selection in the Canadian [Armed] Forces or we would have been rolled in with another occupation. Our sister occupation was called Training and Development, and they were the curriculum developers and training developers.

**Cheryl Lamerson (35:58):**

Those two occupations were being looked at to being rolled into personnel administration. So, we would have been the people filling out the personnel forms on people across the country, and we would have done a little bit of our previous jobs as well. And I, as the senior for my last seven years, had to constantly argue that that was not a good use of our training and our background and our experience. Every single personnel selection—and I had 125 personnel selection officers in the Regular Force and about 35 in the Reserves—every single one of them had at least ten to 20 years of military experience in another occupation and then whatever experience they had as a psychology, either associate or a psychologist. I was constantly arguing that our value to the military, what our value was, how we could be used.

**Cheryl Lamerson (37:12):**

But with Afghanistan, the focus was very much “boots on the ground.” So, that was a frustrating time. We also had General [Rick] Hillier was the CDS [Canadian Defence Staff] at the time and I would go to meetings with General Hillier. I would not be at the table with General Hillier. I would be sitting behind my superior who was at the table and passing some notes or whispering in his ear to make points. And it was very clear from General Hillier around every table I ever sat

at, or sat near with him, that if you weren't going to Afghanistan, you weren't going ahead in the military. He said that very clearly. He said that to briefing of colonels that I was at where he said, "Don't expect to get promoted if you're not going to Afghanistan." And I took that to heart. You know, I was still the idealistic little 18-year-old from however many years before.

**Cheryl Lamerson (38:17):**

A position came up in Kabul [Afghanistan]. That would have been a year long position in NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]. It was a liaison position, so no occupation attached. It just was a colonel's position. It had no gender attached. It had no training attached. It had no occupation attached. It was liaison between all of the NATO countries at the colonel level. So, I went to the career management staff, my personal career management staff, and said, "Put me in coach. I'm keen." My daughter would have been 15 at the time. I said, "Send me, I can do it."

**Cheryl Lamerson (39:05):**

The answer came back after some shocked thinking about it that, "No, we think we need somebody in the combat arms." And I said, "But the application doesn't say combat arms. It says any occupation, and you don't have any female colonels in the combat arms. Ergo. This is discriminatory." You have just created a situation where no woman colonel can apply." "Oh, no, no, but we think a combat arms would be a really good idea. You know, Kabul could get dangerous." Yeah, it could. That's why it's in a war zone. But, no, there was no change.

**Cheryl Lamerson (39:57):**

So, all of the frustration with everything that was going on with the branch and that—there is something in the military—a phrase—and some of these joking phrases have a very strong element of truth. So, after you have 30 years, you can leave with 30 days notice, and it is called the 1 in 30 plan, or was, I don't know if it probably still is. Piss me off once and I'm gone in 30 days, and I exercised the 1 in 30 plan. I regretted it immediately. I regretted being frustrated and leaving. I regretted leaving. I regretted leaving projects that I was working on with the branch behind because I felt like I was just kind of handing it over to people who I really hadn't had the chance to prepare and saying, "Over to you. You got it. I'm pissed off, I'm going."

**Cheryl Lamerson (41:06):**

I really missed everybody that I left. I missed all of the very positive good things. I left to avoid something instead of to approach something. And that's never a good way to leave a job, a relationship, any situation. So, that was a bit hard and I've actually—15 years in about a month—I still regret it. And probably for the last 15 years, I've really not been in very good contact. I'm not one of the people that stayed in touch with the branch, went to the mess dinners, went to the conferences, went to those kind of meetings and things.

**Cheryl Lamerson (41:55):**

Now, partially, living in Lunenburg, you know, you don't run into a lot of PSOs [Personnel Selection Officer] on the street, so if I was living in the national capital region, maybe the situation would be different. But I pretty purposely didn't stay in touch because I was a bit embarrassed that I'd left and that I had those regrets. And I didn't quite know how to voice them with people. But over the last year and a half, I've kind of explored some of that a little bit more.

And I've been sick for the last year and a half, so, with not only people in my very small community, who are fantastic at looking after me, but people in the branch reached out too.

**Michael Petrou (42:50):**

You should explain, Cheryl, when you say branch, what do you mean?

**Cheryl Lamerson (42:52):**

I mean the personnel selection occupation. It's an occupation but it's a branch as well. Sometimes like the medical branch would probably have 20 occupations within it. The personnel selection branch is a branch and an occupation at the same time and is considered a specialist occupation and branch. But personnel selection officers reached out to you [ask], "How are you doing?" You know, "We miss you." So, contact that I hadn't had for 15 years kind of started getting re-established and I was being more introspective as well. Even the willingness, you know, I've been asked before about doing some projects like this, and it was like, "No, no, I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to revisit it." Maybe 15 years is a good time frame anyway to kind of reflect on your history. I've come to be more willing to talk about things.

**Michael Petrou (44:01):**

You said there are things you missed immediately. What were those things?

**Cheryl Lamerson (44:05):**

Well, a lot of the things where—I think when you leave the military—people leave in about four different ways. First of all, people when they retire or they leave, they go from perhaps a Regular force occupation to a Reserve occupation, or sorry, not a Regular Force job. They stay in the same occupation to a Reserve job. They may be doing exactly the same job. It may just have changed its status from Regular Force to Reserve Force. They're wearing the same uniform. They're probably the same rank or rank that they previously wear. They may drop down a rank. They know all the same rules. They get paid in the same way. They go to the same doctor. They go to the same dentist. They may even live in the same place or base housing, whatever. So, there's very little cultural language transition, experiential transition, and everybody around them understands them as well. It's like a ripple in a pool, so that's the tightest in ripple with the Canadian forces in the centre.

**Cheryl Lamerson (45:16):**

The next ripple out is somebody who goes to a job, retires to a job, probably as a defense contractor. And you see this at big bases most. You see it in Halifax [Nova Scotia], you see it in Winnipeg [Manitoba], Ottawa [Ontario], Toronto, maybe a little bit less. But, you know, Halifax and Esquimalt [British Columbia], you see people going to defense contractor.

**Cheryl Lamerson (45:42):**

Now, they may be doing a civilian job in a civilian occupation, but probably the majority of the people that they are working with are ex-military. So, their uniform would look like yours, but they would know what rank you wear, what occupation you wear, they would probably know a fair bit of your history. If you slipped and used a military acronym, they'd probably recognize it, or they'd be able to figure it out. So, the culture is predominantly the same, but not exactly the same.

**Cheryl Lamerson (46:22):**

And the changes that they have to make is they have to find their own doctor. They'll have to find their own dentist. Some of the policies in their new occupation or their new job, their new business, may be slightly different, but a lot of defense contractors were companies that were formed by ex-military. So, sometimes even the policies are pretty similar. People who go to work for the Corps of Commissionaires describe it as being very similar to having been in the military because it was formed by the military. So that's the first two.

**Cheryl Lamerson (46:57):**

The third one is somebody who goes to a civilian occupation, a civilian job. And that's what I did. I was hired by the Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations. This is the oversight body of the provincial credentialing body for human resources professionals. It's like getting your registration as a doctor or your engineering ring type of thing, your probably professional engineering for HR people across the country.

**Cheryl Lamerson (47:36):**

Initially, I was hired to do the test development and the test standards. I was their, I would call it, second in command. They wouldn't have used that terminology, but I was second executive, and I think I was considered vice president or something. I was there three years. Eventually, they asked me to be acting CEO [Chief Executive Officer] for my last year, basically. I think it was supposed to be a month and it ended up being a year. So, I was doing both jobs at the same time for the last year. Like the good military that I had been, it was like, "Yep, I can do that. No problem."

**Cheryl Lamerson (48:17):**

So, that civilian job, though, they had no idea of my military background or very cursory. I would go to meetings sometimes and they'd say, "Now you were a colonel. Is that higher than a corporal or not?" Although I had worked in HR in the military and they were working in HR and civilian jobs, sometimes we would be using the same terminology with different meanings. Sometimes we'd be using different terminology but have the same meaning. So, you know, I had to learn to find a doctor, had to learn to find a dentist, didn't have the culture, the same culture, didn't have the same language, didn't have the shared experiences. So that's the third ripple of retirement, I guess.

**Cheryl Lamerson (49:14):**

The fourth one, I think, is somebody who for whatever reason says, "I'm leaving the military and I'm just going to retire. I'm going to sit in a rocking chair somewhere and I'm just going to do that." Now, that probably has some of the similar—and that's probably kind of a delayed decision, you know, a little bit further down the road too—but that's got some of the lack of shared experience, lack of culture. Because I live in a town of 2300 people now, probably less than 100 of them—I think I know a fair number of people in town. If they know I'm military, they don't necessarily know what that's about. In Canada, less and less people have military experience. So, there's not that either. So, I can count the number of former military, all men, in the community and probably have fingers left over on my two hands.

**Cheryl Lamerson (50:23):**

[...] The store that I own, that my husband and I own, is a social enterprise microbusiness. We do community development. I work largely with women because it's a volunteer organization and men and women are great volunteers. But when you're talking about selling household items, it's the women have seemed to be more interested than the men. <chuckles> They will say to me, you know, "You were in the military for 32 years. Why?" You know, like, "How are you doing this?" I say, "Well, teamwork, leadership, project management, problem solving, human motivation. There's a lot of what I learned in the military, a lot of the skills that I learned in the military in 32 years are being put to use every day in Lunenburg." "All right." You know, "Did you ever carry a weapon?" "Yeah." You know, "What else did you?" "Well, I flew back seat in fighter jet." "Oh wow! Were you ever in a tank?" "Yeah, and a submarine." It's not a shared experience. It's fascinating and it's enjoyable, but it's not a shared culture and a shared experience. It's building a new shared culture and a new shared experience.

**Michael Petrou (51:57):**

Tell me a little bit more about some of those—these seem like great transferable skills that you developed in the military and have been able to put to use in your civilian career, yes?

**Cheryl Lamerson (52:04):**

I think most military people—and certainly whenever I was doing either one on one or more policy-oriented transition work—that was what we would be trying to convey to the soldier, the sailor and the air personnel is the transferability of their skills. The corporal in the combat arms may think that he was just a foot soldier, but to help him or her understand that you had a level of attention to detail because you were making sure that your weapon was clean every day. You had a leadership skill. You had ten people working for you and you were, you know, getting them to do whatever was needed to do, you know, teasing out from the military experience. If you just write down what the military experience was, you get terminology that probably only someone in the military is going to recognize.

**Cheryl Lamerson (53:18):**

But if you tease out the skill that came from that military experience, then you're talking about skills that are absolutely transferable to every other occupation, job, whether it's in retail or opening a plant or whatever. You've got a lot of experience. You've worked with people, you've worked with teams of people, you've worked with a purpose. You've learned how to look at a situation and problem solve. All of those are so important. And a lot of times you would see military people spending, you know, 30, 35, 40, 45 years in the military, they'd be terrified—wouldn't necessarily tell you that—but they'd be terrified about what they were going to do next.

**Cheryl Lamerson (54:19):**

Because it's kind of like being the 16-year-old who, you know, "What am I going to do with my life?" Because for however long they were in the military, the military told them what to do, told them what to wear, told them where to eat, what to eat, when to be in different places, probably transported them from place to place, often may have told them where to live or gave them a pretty good option of where to live, told them across the country or around the world where they were going to go and gave them a doctor, gave them a dentist, gave them pay. You know, when I got hired by that Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations during the interview, when they offered me the job, they said, "Now what a salary would you like?" <laughs> And I

was like, “Oh, well, for the last 32 years I’ve been told what I was going to be paid.” I never asked what I was going to be paid. I had no clue.

**Cheryl Lamerson (55:17):**

Now, I went away and very quickly did some comparables. Couldn’t find much. Sat down with, it was the CEO who was doing the hiring and said—and this was an office that was being created, so they were forming the office—I said, “Well, if I’m going to be your vice president, then how about 75% of your salary?” And I thought that that was a pretty professional, pretty smooth, I suppose, way of suggesting a pay because I wasn’t asking her how much she was being paid. I was just, you know, throwing out a relative figure, a relative percentage. And she was absolutely shocked. She said, “Oh, no, they paid me too much. They’re not going to pay you that much.” I thought, oh, okay. <laughs> I’m not quite sure what that means. Came to find out, as they were firing her and asking me to fill in, that—we were an office of four people—she was being paid—sorry, the other three of us were paid less than 50% of what she was paid together. So, my suggesting 75%, no wonder she was shocked! <laughs>

**Michael Petrou (56:48):**

The three of you added up, didn’t total 50% of—

**Cheryl Lamerson (56:52):**

That’s right. Yeah, it was a bit of a shock. <laughs>

**Michael Petrou (56:57):**

I want to ask you. Of course, you’ve talked about how these skills are transferable, but there’s also this fear for a lot of people when they’re reintegrating into civilian life. That must be because there are certain changes or impacts that being in the military has on an individual and your outlook and who you are. Does that apply to you? Do you think or?

**Cheryl Lamerson (57:19):**

Yeah, I think it did. You have a lot of things that you have to reflect on be and again, I think it’s because the military is a fairly—I don’t know whether it’s fair to say it’s a closed system, but in essence, I guess it is. It’s a capsule. You’re encapsulated in it. That’s part of what I describe as the culture and the shared experience. You know where you stand and suddenly, you’re popped off into the big world. Again, I said earlier that sometimes we use phrases and things jokingly, but they are quite insightful.

**Cheryl Lamerson (58:15):**

People in the military often talk about, “When I get out,” kind of sounds like prison, or they talk about, “When I grow up, I’m going to do this.” It’s kind of that sense of going through something and you’re popping out the other side. And when you when you think about it, for most military people, they were born a civilian, they become military, they’re going to leave as a civilian. You know, obviously some are lost. For most, you have to make that adjustment to a different style of life. I suspect maybe police and fire would have some of the same elements. They’re organizations with a fairly strong structure that is, I think I called it encapsulated.

**Cheryl Lamerson (59:21):**

They try to build a fairly tight structure. And sometimes this is where you see when there's some kind of a scandal occurs. We've seen some over the last year, two years, five years, ten years. You see military people saying, "You just can't understand what it's like," and that's true. But we have to be able to explain things. If we can't—again, when we were talking about when I was working in employment, equity and diversity and gender integration, one of the things that I talked a lot to senior commanders about and we would be working with them to try and change policies to improve the situation with all personnel in the military, but also targeted on gender and visible minority and Aboriginal people—and I would ask the question of why do we do something a certain way? "Well, we just do." "We just always have. It's tradition." I'd say, "No, no, let's dig a little deeper on this. Let's figure out the why. If we can't figure out the why, then maybe we don't need to be doing it anymore."

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:00:49):**

So, there's an example from the personnel selection branch. The personnel selection branch was formed in 1941 by General [Andrew] McNaughton, who was the first war time, I guess, chief of defense staff. He brought in medical people and psychiatrists and psychologists to form—I think it was a committee at first, but it morphed into an occupation—who would take all of these thousands of Canadians who were flooding to the war effort and try to figure out what skills and abilities they had to get them into the right occupation, to do the right job. So, if you've got somebody who would be really good at flying, you know, don't make them a foot soldier. If you've got somebody who'd be really good in a tank, don't put them on a ship, you know, that that kind of a placement. So, the occupation was formed at that point.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:01:52):**

And the story goes that in England there was one of the personnel selection officers who was doing what was essentially a time and motion study. This was a psychology—I don't know whether you've ever heard that expression or not. It's probably done a little bit still, but it's a study where you're looking at how people at work are spending their time and their activity, to try and see if you can make it more efficient. So, this personnel selection officer goes out onto the plains, probably Salisbury Plains, with an artillery detachment. And at that time, you would have had the truck with the gun behind it and the gun would have been facing away from the front of the truck.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:02:54):**

So, he goes, and the truck pulls up with the gun, be pointing backwards behind it, and the crew jumps out of the cab of the truck in the back of the truck. The gun sergeant says, "Ready, the guns," and probably little gunners go around to the back of the truck, to the front of the gun and the back of the gun and get the gun all ready. They get everything ready, and they say, "Ready, Sergeant." The sergeant says, "Make ready." They run from the gun to the front of the truck, and they stand at the very front of the truck.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:03:35):**

It maybe takes from the back of the gun to the front of the truck three seconds, four seconds. But for a time and motion person, that would be, "Why are we spending four seconds doing that? We could save time if they just stayed by the gun." So, after they've done their firing, you know, the sergeant says, "Fire." They fire and then they run down back to the truck, offload the shell, put in

a new shell, do it all over again and over and over and over. And if you're sending hundreds of rounds into a battle, those four seconds are adding up over time. So, the time and motion scientist says to the sergeant and the crew, "Why do you do that?" "Well, we've always done it that way, sir. It's tradition." "Yeah, but why?" And he really digs for the why. Well, gun pieces used to be drawn by horses and carriages, and that crew would have had to hold the bridles of the horses to keep them from bolting. So, what had been a very effective use of time and motion with trucks no longer was. And it was a waste of time in motion, and it was an inefficiency that had to be changed.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:04:55):**

So, I would use a story like that to talk to commanders and say, "We have to understand the why. Because if we don't understand the why, we're perhaps misusing it. If the why is effective, if it's still effective, then great, let's use it. If it's no longer effective, let's change it." So, you know, was it effective at one time to have this policy? Yes. No longer is. Let's change it. Let's not just assume it's tradition and it needs to be kept.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:05:33):**

At one point, my staff and I worked on the policy for whether Sikhs in the military, because at that time, Sikh individuals in Canada were very interested in joining the military. They have a very fine military tradition. They wanted to join the military, but they were being told—they weren't specifically being told that they couldn't join, but they were being told that they would have to take their turban off. They were not allowed to wear their turban, and that was significant.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:06:08):**

So, we started looking at that policy and saying, "Okay, what is it about the policy? Why do we want to get rid of the turban?" Well, it boiled down to two things: A hat badge on a beret or a hat is an important identification of which occupation or regiment you're with. So, a hat badge was important. "Okay, well, you can put a hat badge on a turban. Is that a problem for the Sikhs?" "No." "Is that a problem for the military?" "Well, it's not tradition, but I guess we could get around it." Okay, good. You have to wear a helmet in certain settings. Okay. For the Sikhs, "You don't want your brains blown all over the place. Are you willing to put a helmet over a turban?" "Yes, we have a type of turban that is thinner, that could be worn with, and we'll just wear those in the field if we need to be wearing helmets." "Okay, so it's okay with you, it's okay with the military. Problem solved. Let's change our policies." That was the kind of thing that was important to look at and say, "We have to figure out the why. We have to we have to change those structures."

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:07:31):**

I also with gender integration, with diversity, all of diversity, gender integration, visible minority Aboriginal, we would try, my staff and I, became pretty astute at trying to find anecdotes that would make sense to the groups we were briefing, and we would be briefing from groups of privates to groups of generals, but you had to find a way of doing it. For example, at one point we were, [the] recruiting group, was doing a lot more focused advertising for women joining the combat arms. This was causing a bit of backlash because people felt that, or were misperceiving

it, thought we were not going to be hiring men. We were only going to be hiring women. So, we were going out and trying to explain that, “No, that’s not the situation.”

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:08:39):**

I remember going to Toronto to the staff college—this would have been, senior corporals, junior majors—and they were furious. I mean, like a lynching could have been possible as far as I was concerned, but probably not really. They were just, you know, “This is bias and it’s reverse discrimination.” I said, “Okay, now let’s just hold on a minute. So, we’re talking about advertising for more women, attracting more women. Just down the street is John Labatt’s Brewery. Do you think that if Labatt’s is having trouble selling ice beer, that they put a whole lot of extra money into buying into advertising Blue? They’re not having any trouble advertising Blue. They can sell Blue without doing any advertising because we all like our Labatt’s Blue. But they’re having trouble selling ice beer, so they’re going to put some advertising money into ice beer.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:09:46):**

So, what we’re doing in recruiting advertising is we’re advertising for ice beer. We are trying to attract more women. But that’s not what we’re, you know, we are still selecting using all of the same selection standards. You have to be able to do the job. You have to have the right medical, you have to have the right fitness, etcetera, etcetera.” Honest, I think when I said it, I was just frustrated and was just trying to make a somewhat humorous point. But it was like light bulbs went off all around the world. I thought, oh my gosh, all I needed to do was use a beer analogy and I had them! [...] You know, it was important to be able to that kind of thing.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:10:57):**

[...] The other thing that was very important for our office at that time was we had to find a way—as the military, we had gone through, we had gone through the status of women, we had gone through winter, we had gone through CREW, Combat Related Employment of Women. Now my office was working on bringing the Canadian Forces under the Employment Equity Act. And all of those had been kind of progressive changes. I’ll give you a neat quote in a minute about it.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:11:34):**

But a lot of the times in dealing with those, the resistance to them and the challenges and the difficulty with them had to do with whether they were just seen as a social issue, a nice thing to do, the right thing to do. You know, it was sometimes hard to kind of figure out how to motivate. I feel particularly proud that what our office, we came together. We really studied it and worked on it. We said, “If you’re talking to people and you’re trying to change minds on a social issue, some people will do it because they think it’s the right thing to do. Some people will think it’s a moral issue. Some people will think it’s the wrong thing to do. Some people will, you know, will just think it’s a nice to have. It’s just political correctness or whatever.”

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:12:39):**

But really, what we wanted to talk about was that it was an operational effectiveness issue. If you are an organization that is supposed to protect the sovereignty of your country, how can you be ignoring a large portion of your population? You. You have to be able to incorporate that. You make yourself a better organization by including representing everyone. For example, again, I

would go to briefings, and I would have people struggling with this issue and I would say, “Okay, so now let’s talk about operational effectiveness. Perhaps you think that everything in the military should be exactly the same for every person in the military.” And I would go around the room, and I’d say, “Okay, now, Sergeant, what size boots do you wear?” “Well, I wear eight, ma’am.” “Corporal, what size boot do you wear?” “You wear a size five.” “Lieutenant, what size boot do you wear?” “You wear a size ten.”

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:13:50):**

“Okay, so, we’re going to issue everybody a size eight boot, and then we’re going to go on a long march. “Now, Sergeant, you got no problem because you were wearing a size eight boot anyway, so you’re operationally effective.” “Lieutenant, you wear a size ten and you’re now in a size eight and within about 50 feet, you’ve got blisters and you’re pinched, so you’re not very operationally effective.” “And Corporal, you got the size five and you’re tripping over your feet in a size eight, so you’re not very operationally effective.” “So, should my policies in this organization, in order to be operationally effective, should I be doing exactly the same thing for all of you? Or should I be treating you in an equivalent way? Should I be finding a way to give you a boot that fits?”

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:14:49):**

The first time I used that example I had, I think it was probably the sergeant that I used as the example came up to me afterwards and he said, “You know, ma’am, before we had women in my unit, I could never get boots that fit. They were always too big. I got small feet.” So, he said, “Gender integration had something about operational effectiveness for me.” It meant something to him. So, we would try and do that kind of anecdotes or examples that would bring a point home to people. And talk about the fact that as a military, we need to be able to—not represent in the political sense, but we need to reflect all of the abilities of our populace. We don’t do that if we’re not open and accepting of those abilities and skills of everybody in the populace. That was important.

**Michael Petrou (1:15:53):**

I think that’s fascinating. I do want to, push a little bit further, if I can further if I can, on the personal changes that you experience yourself. How did the military change you or how has it changed you still?

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:16:09):**

I’m still that 18-year-old who’s so idealistic. <chuckles> It’s interesting because Joyce said, “Oh, it didn’t change me because I grew up in a military family.” Now, I hadn’t grown up in a military family as she had, but I think it built on qualities and interests and abilities that I probably had. It brought them out more. I think it made me a stronger person. It certainly made me, you know, I grew up in a town just as small as this one, 2500 people. If I had stayed there, I might not have ever gone off to university. I wouldn’t have traveled around the world. I wouldn’t have sat next to the President of Chile at an event. I wouldn’t have flown in the back seat of a fighter jet. There were a lot of things that I would never have done.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:17:14):**

Now, could I have, you know, sure. A civilian can go and jump out of an aircraft and do a lot of things, but it certainly gave me a structure. But I think it gave me a lot of [...] moral fortitude sounds like I'm bragging, but I think it did give me a strength that I might not have had. It gave me a bigger worldview, and I think that's a strength. Maybe that's the better way of saying it.

**Michael Petrou (1:17:55):**

When you weigh all that, I mean, you spoke earlier on about some of the regret you felt about the nature of your leaving the military, but we've also been talking about some of the expanding horizons that it gave you. How do you reflect on your service now 15 years out of it?

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:18:12):**

I loved it. I absolutely—and I suppose that's part of the regret, too that I could have [...] I left at 32 years. I could have stayed—I'm almost 66—so I probably could have stayed til I was 60. I have done a lot of, you know, between the time I was—I'm trying to do the math. If I left at 32 years, then I was 58, you know, or no. [...] I'm getting the math all wrong. Must have been in psychology, wasn't good at math. Anyway. You know, that intervening time, part of it could have been still in the military. And yet I've loved what I've done since I got out, too. I don't regret what I've done since I got out. I guess I regret the way I left, that it was just, you know, a little bit too fast, a little bit too negative, so there's that portion of it. I think you just you have to keep going forward. You can't go back, so that's fine, too.

**Michael Petrou (1:19:26):**

Just for listeners, you mentioned your friend Joyce, this is your Second World War veteran who lives in Lunenburg. We should get that on the record. You said that when you left, because of the nature of your leaving, you kind of cut yourself off from your former comrades for a while, and lately they've reconnected. Tell me a little bit more about that, if you don't mind.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:19:49):**

Well, they've been actually so lovely. I mean, sometimes it's just a little Facebook note, "How you doing, ma'am? Saw something on Facebook, wishing you all the best," type of thing, but you know that means something, too. That's lovely, too. I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in January of 2021, and actually spent the first eight months of 2021 dying from cancer. That was probably more my mindset than the physical situation. But that's a pretty natural mindset for a cancer patient to have. Since then, so for the last year, we've been able to get a lot more normalized in the care. It's become more chronic, so I've spent the last year living with cancer, going from dying from to living with, and that's a huge emotional shift to make. Last year, at this time, I didn't know whether I'd make it to my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. This year I'm going to be 66 in a week and a half. You know, knock on wood, I'm not, you know, unless there's trucks running by, I'm not too worried about it.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:21:20):**

So, that was some of the, that was a huge reason for me to be doing a lot of soul searching and introspection. That was also a really lovely reason for a lot of people that hadn't heard from me for a long, long time. Through no fault of their own, through my not being in contact, they reached out and said, "You know, we've just heard, and we want to be in touch." It was just lovely, that connection and that shared experience that I've mentioned so many times, that came

out again. It was like, you know, “I remember you 35 years ago,” or, “I remember you 40 years ago,” and making that connection. I had a friend who visited from Ottawa two weeks ago. We figured out that we met 47 years ago at CFB [Canadian Forces Base] London when we were both regular officer training plan students. I was at Waterloo [University] and she was at Western [University] and 45 years ago we were both maids of honour at each other’s first marriages. Her still, mine, you know, I had to have a training marriage first. <chuckles> But, you know, that bringing out those connections, you know, nobody wants to be sick with a serious disease, but you certainly find the important people in your life when you are.

**Michael Petrou (1:22:59):**

What sort of relationship do you have with commemorative events or remembrance events? Do you take part of Remembrance Day ceremonies? How do you reflect on that?

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:23:08):**

I do. I am not very good with legions and with—not just the Legion, but I’m not all that good with some formed organizations. The Legion, I think across the country during between kind of Korea and Afghanistan, there weren’t a lot of veterans to be going to the Legion. It was less numbers and things. It became less of a military or quasi military organization. Because the Legion was formed because of that shared experience and common culture again. That had kind of changed.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:23:57):**

Certainly, in my local Legion, I was invited to join. There was a little bit of challenge with the idea that I was high ranking and female. That was probably a little bit uncomfortable for some of the older gentlemen. As well, I am—and I would say this is some of my military experience—I am not very good at joining organizations without becoming a doer in the organization. My friends have often told me that I’m a human doing instead of a human being. And I’m learning to get better at that. But the very first time that I went to a legion meeting, and I would have immediately volunteered to become the president and take in charge of stuff and, “Look out, guys, because I’m going to be the boss.” That probably wouldn’t have been a good thing. <chuckles> And I really didn’t want to do that, so I kind of backed off from the Legion,

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:25:11):**

But, you know, Remembrance Day events. The first female brigadier general in the regular force was a woman by the name of Sheila Hellstrom, who just passed away in December 2020. I knew Sheila. I worked with her and for her at various times when she was still in the Regular Force and after as well, and she was born and raised in Lunenburg. So, when she passed away in her will were directions for a military funeral, certainly because of her rank and because she was the first, as well as having some of her ashes buried with her parents in Lunenburg. She was an only child. So, last October, sorry, last September, was the military funeral at Beechwood [Funeral, Cemetery and Cremation Services]. In October, there was a celebration of life here in Lunenburg and I was so honoured, having known her and idolized her, she was a mentor and a role model, to organize that celebration of life for her here in Lunenburg.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:26:37):**

So, that kind of military involvement in the community or that involvement with military aspects in the community, and I worked very closely with the Legion people on that. They were very involved with it, as were other groups in the community. So, informally, I guess, is more the answer than anything. It was really lovely to be able to kind of bring that message to the community and say, “Here was this military woman who, during the Cold War, she joined the Air Force in 1954 when there was about 1.5% women.” When she was made Brigadier General, she was one out of 120 brigadier generals, 120 men in her kind of thing. To bring that education to the community and to be a former military woman, bringing that was pretty special too, it was really nice.

**Michael Petrou (1:27:51):**

So, you are informally involved in the Legion, but you haven’t joined as a member?

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:27:56):**

Yeah, that’s right.

**Michael Petrou (1:27:58):**

Are there other ways that you kind of bring these sort of messages to community members? I’m thinking school visits, stuff like that.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:28:05):**

Yeah, I do. One of the things that a couple of years ago, the Legion asked me to—or I guess the school asked me because the Legion was having difficulty finding somebody who was comfortable to do the presentation to the school. And I love doing school visits with kids. You can probably tell I love talking. We have a primary to grade nine school. And one thing that I have never liked doing is going into, especially a Remembrance Day school visit, and making it very military. I know that some families are bothered by that. I know they can be uncomfortable, so I try and make it more human than military, but bring the military element to it as well.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:29:03):**

So, I borrowed pieces of uniform from various veterans and from the Legion and went in. In Lunenburg, there’s a beautiful old building called the Lunenburg Academy. It’s from 1895. It was a movement in Nova Scotia called the Academy Movement. And the idea was that if you built a beautiful school, you would convince families to send their children to school longer and you would inspire children to study. It was, you know, the farmers, fishers, foresters would pull their kids out of school, so they were trying to inspire the children. That’s no longer the active of school, although it was the last one functioning in 2012. But it sits on the hill. Everybody calls it the “Castle on the Hill” because it looks like Hogwarts. So, I went into the current school Bluenose Academy, with these uniforms, and I picked out some kids who were kind of 13, 14, you know, might look 15, 16 [years old], and a couple of little ones got to put hats on and things too.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:30:18):**

And I said, “Now, in World War One and World War Two, there were kids who were just a few years older than you who were at Lunenburg Academy, and they really wanted to help their country. Maybe their dad was gone and maybe their mom was gone and maybe somebody was

working in a war defense industry. But they all really wanted to help, and they saved string, and they saved tin.” And I’m telling them all of these, again, stories and they put on these uniforms, and I got the kids to put on the uniforms and they went off and they did a job, and they were probably pretty scared, and they were doing. [...] I’m telling them all of this and trying to engage them in kind of, how does it pertain to me? How would it affect me? And my gosh, those kids, they were beautiful. They were getting it. That’s the kind of thing that I enjoy doing with school visits.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:31:28):**

I will go and do at the school, or any other group, International Women’s Day and talk about women in different occupations. I will go to businesses. We have a defense contractor here, an aerospace component parts company. They’ve asked me to come and talk about, to the women in their workforce, about the experience of women in the military. I try to kind of morph it into women in all walks of life. It’s not just the military because they’re in a science and technology industry, which also has a lower proportion of women. Just to try and kind of expand that.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:32:24):**

I wanted to read you this quote. I can’t, unfortunately, having been a researcher and written lots of research reports, I did not write down the reference on this, which is not good. But I know I used it in some of my research reports, but do you think I can find that report? I probably didn’t keep that one. It’s gotten thrown out somewhere along the line. So, this says, quote, “In any case, from the viewpoint of employment equity, the Canadian Forces consistently exhibited lethargic, reactive incrementalism, in response to powerful body blows delivered by external legislation.” I love that phrasing of “lethargic, reactive incrementalism.” And I said, “The status of women in ’71. The *Why Not!* year in ’75. In ’78, the service women in non-traditional environments and roles. In ’86-87, the combat related employment of women. In 1997, the Employment Equity Act. Finally, in the 2000s, opening up submarines and opening up all of the occupations. Each one of those tended to be a legislation or a human rights tribunal or a court case.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:34:08):**

So, that quote is now, you know, from the standpoint of a military person, I don’t like being told that we were lethargic and reactive and incremental. I’d accept the incremental. And I factually, I probably have to accept the lethargic and the reactive as well. But it was, and again, I’ve talked to people about, “There is no revolution in the military. There is evolution in the military.” Whoever is writing that is putting it from a very strong and perhaps a pejorative way, but they’re not wrong. The Canadian [Armed] Forces did only act when it was pushed to act.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:35:02):**

Now, militaries, by their nature, are pretty conservative. I believe they have to be because you don’t want a military swinging all over the place. You want to know that whoever is defending your country is pretty steady. And if the military is the controlled delivery of violence, the military has to be controlled, too. You don’t want uncontrolled delivery of violence. You want very controlled delivery of violence. So, I accept the statement. I probably would put it in a more positive, you know, phraseology. But, again, I think the military evolved over time. I like to think that I was part of that evolution. And I don’t want to be a rebel. I want to be an evolver. That more my style, I guess, to do that, to change with good reason over time.

**Michael Petrou (1:36:09):**

Cheryl, you've been very generous with your time. I'll let you go soon, but I did want to ask you before I do, if there's anything important that we haven't touched on that you think we should. I'm thinking specifically how, on a personal level, how your time in the military might have changed you or [...]? Well, anything at all, really.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:36:29):**

I think it made me a better person. Well, let's put it this way. I am a better person now than I was every day before. The military was a lot of that time before, so maybe that's not causality, maybe that's just correlation. But I'm going to take it as causality and say, I think the military made me a better person. It gave me three degrees on scholarship, a wonderful career, it gave me all kinds of interesting experiences. It just was a wonderful life, so far, and we'll keep it going for as long as possible.

**Michael Petrou (1:37:19):**

Thank you. Anything more about the transition? Any other themes that kind of [...]?

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:37:26):**

Yeah. I think for anyone I would just say, "Just keep looking at what would you like to do and then how would you get to it? What do you bring to it?" As with problem solving, you look at the problem and then you have to work around that problem to decide how to solve it. Sometimes it's not just straight on. Sometimes you have to go around, sometimes you have to decide, you know, different things. For example, I'd always wanted an antique store. In the military, I always said, "When I grow up, I'll have an antique store." When we moved to Lunenburg, I started looking at it and said, "Okay, well, here I am. Put your money where your mouth is. You always wanted an antique store. Are you going to open an antique store?" Well, not everybody likes antiques. Am I going to be able to sell enough times? You know, this was kind of 2010 type of thing. Are we going to have people wanting to spend money on it? Hmm, yeah. Then I started to kind of say, "Well, you know, could we expand it? Could it be used items?" There'd be people in the community who would not be interested in antiques or not have the money for antiques, but who might want something gently used. So, I'm problem solving, but I'm expanding the definitions.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:38:59):**

Then I looked at it and went, okay, so do I want to be the one working full-time? Hmm, well, am I going to be able to hire staff? Well, not and keep the prices reasonable. How could I convince volunteers to join? Hmm, well, maybe I could turn over what would be profit or part of the profit to help the volunteers. Well, if I'm giving the money to the volunteers, then they're paid staff, so can't do that. But if I'm making a donation to the charity of the volunteer, then I'm acknowledging their effort. By the way, I'm helping the community, and I want to help the community.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:39:51):**

So, I kind of went from saying, okay, well, I want to do something that helps the community, I want to do something with antiques and used items and I'm a good organizer, so let's build this store with those skills that I have and coming up with a solution. And that's what we ended up

creating. So, we're about to go ten years with this store next Monday. We've had 225 volunteers work in that store. We've raised \$185,000 in ten years for the community, in a small—

**Michael Petrou (1:40:33):**

Which charity are the volunteers affiliated with?

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:40:36):**

Well, and that was the other thing. I looked at it and I said, "If I pick one charity in a small community, if you don't like that charity, you're not going to come and volunteer." I remember, in my hometown, my mother wouldn't go into one of the charities because she didn't agree with that charity. I said, "Instead of picking one or two charities, I'm going to let each volunteer pick their charity." So, you come, and volunteer and you work more hours than I do, your charity gets more money." And it usually works out every year to about \$10 per volunteer hour. We keep track. It's a bit of a, you know, a bookkeeping exercise, but we keep track of each volunteer's—they keep track and give me the information—but we keep track of each volunteer's hours. And at the end of the year, if you've worked more hours than I have, your charity gets more money. If you convince three friends to also come and volunteer, that charity gets even more money. And volunteers can also say, "Just give it to whatever charity you want," and we spread it across all the charities. We usually sponsor 50 to 60 charities in a year. As I say, [\$]185,000 in the first nine and a half years. It'll go over [\$]200,000 this year.

**Michael Petrou (1:42:05):**

Wow.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:42:06):**

In a small community, and that was going through Covid [Covid-19 pandemic], too. I mean, we were locked down for a good portion of 2020 and 2021, but we just kept on going. So, again, that's using those military skills in a totally different setting, but they work because leadership is dealing with human beings. Problem solving doesn't have to be dealing with human beings, but it also can be. And heaven knows, humans have some problems sometimes. So, team management, all of those human activities are skills that you learned in the military, and you translate to other places.

**Michael Petrou (1:43:00):**

That's wonderful. Cheryl, thank you so much. You've been wonderful and it's been a real pleasure to talk to you.

**Cheryl Lamerson (1:43:07):**

Well, thank you. It's been very good for me, too.

**Michael Petrou (1:43:11):**

I'm going to just hit stop. But please don't hang up. I'll end recording.

**TRANSCRIPTION ENDS**