

CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM
IN THEIR OWN VOICES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: Deborah A. Legg

INTERVIEWER: Michael Petrou

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Transcription of Interview Number 20220035-050

Deborah A. Legg

Interviewed 27 April 2022

Deborah A. Legg (00:07):

Hello?

Michael Petrou (00:05):

Hi, is this Deborah?

Deborah A. Legg (00:07):

Yes, it is.

Michael Petrou (00:09):

Hi, it's Michael Petrou calling from the [Canadian] War Museum. How are you doing?

Deborah A. Legg (00:11):

I'm very well and how is yourself, sir?

Michael Petrou (00:13):

Good, thank you. Thank you so much for writing me back. I'm glad you're willing to take part in this.

Deborah A. Legg (00:21):

Well, I'm just honoured that you asked me.

Michael Petrou (00:23):

It's a pleasure. When would be a good time to chat?

Deborah A. Legg (00:28):

Well, I can do it right now if you'd like.

Michael Petrou (00:31):

That'd be great. I will need to send you a permission form, but I can do that afterwards, if that's OK with you.

Deborah A. Legg (00:38):

Sure. Yep.

Michael Petrou (00:31):

Alright.

Deborah A. Legg (00:43):

I have my notes here. I don't think fast on my feet, and I've had time to prepare, so I wrote a few things down about Dad. Are you still there?

Michael Petrou (00:57):

Yeah, I'm still here.

Deborah A. Legg (00:58):

Oh, sorry. <laughs> OK.

Michael Petrou (01:01):

OK, so I'll just get it down recorded. This is April 27th, 2022. I'm interviewing Deborah Legg about her dad, Lawrence Ross, who was a veteran of the Battle of Hong Kong during the Second World War and subsequent imprisonment. So, I haven't sent you the permission form yet, but I will, and, just to confirm you're willing to do the interview and to allow the museum to use it afterwards. Is that correct?

Deborah A. Legg (01:34):

Yes, it is wonderful.

Michael Petrou (01:35):

Thank you. Well, I'm especially interested in you growing up with your dad and what happened to your dad after the war, but can you tell me a little bit about what you know of his service first, if you don't mind?

Deborah A. Legg (01:48):

He was the youngest of three brothers. They came from a small town in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, it was Sherbrooke [Quebec], and there was no [...] their jobs were very poor, so they volunteered. Dad was 21 and they went to, I think it was Quebec City [Quebec] to enlist. It just went on from there.

Michael Petrou (02:23):

As a young girl, when did you first become aware of your dad's wartime service?

Deborah A. Legg (02:33):

So, we were probably about, I'm going to say eight-ish, and I have a twin sister and three other siblings who were the oldest. As children, you play tag and all that kind of stuff, and you just sneak up on people and scare them. So, the one time that we did it to Dad he lashed out. He didn't hit anybody, but he could have. That's when Mom explained to us that you never, ever touch him or sneak up on him, so that's when the first inkling that I knew that, you know, there was something wrong, but I didn't understand until much later and when I was in high school about the sorts of things that he went through.

Michael Petrou (03:26):

How did you learn about those?

Deborah A. Legg (03:29)

Well, when I was in home economics class, we were doing, like there would be one semester of sewing, one of food, and we were doing a food project, and it was about nutrition and diet and stuff like that. So, I asked Dad because by this time we knew he had been in the war and such, but we didn't know any more about his deficiencies. So, I asked him if he would be able to tell me a little bit about his diet. He did open up some, but only pertaining to that particular, events in his imprisonment. So, we talked [...]

Michael Petrou (04:19):

Yeah, go on. OK.

Deborah A. Legg (04:21):

So, he talked about beriberi and dysentery, and the one that he was the most elaborate about and that pained him the most, I think, was a condition called electric feet, where they walked barefoot all the time in the mud and everything. At night, it was like electric shocks through their feet the whole night through, so they never got any peace, day or night.

Michael Petrou (04:56):

Were there other hints in the household that he had been a soldier or mementos or photographs or anything else that you noticed when you were young?

Deborah A. Legg (05:06):

Yes, he had a picture of himself and his two brothers when they enlisted, and there was a picture of the three of them when they had returned. He was the youngest, so he was in the camps that did the hard labour. The other two were older, and I don't believe that they were in that type of situation, but I couldn't swear to that. [...] He also had a certificate framed on the wall about his returning and it was from the [...] it would be like from England. It could have been from the Queen. Some kind of recognition and acknowledgement and thanks for his service, so he had that up on the wall as well.

Michael Petrou (06:10):

So, Lawrence and his two brothers were all in Hong Kong together then?

Deborah A. Legg (06:13):

Yes.

Michael Petrou (06:15):

Was this, I mean, you mentioned your class project, but was this something that you talked to your dad about ever?

Deborah A. Legg (06:23):

Well, I kind of gave an, had an interview with him and he said that their diet was very poor, that they had rice twice a day and whatever scraps that there were. At one point the medical physician for their camp went to the commander and asked if he would switch their white rice with the brown rice because the brown is what they fed the pigs, and it had more nourishment in it than the white. But he was counting on them not knowing that, but they wouldn't switch it, so. Then,

you know, just whatever insects they could find and lace [sp?] in each other's hair and stuff like that. Pretty disgusting.

Michael Petrou (07:18):

Was this something that you got the impression that he enjoyed speaking with you about, or was this something that he would share reluctantly? Tell me about your conversation.

Deborah A. Legg (07:26):

Oh, no. Oh, yeah. He, unless it was a direct question and because he didn't talk about it, we didn't bring it up either. It was only because of this event in school that I would ever have approached him. I think Mum must have kind of steered us away from that because every time he talked about it, his nightmares and thrashing at night were worse than ever.

Michael Petrou (07:53):

Did he stay in touch with other people that he had served with? Was he involved in the Legion or things like that?

Deborah A. Legg (08:00):

He was always a member of the Legion. He wasn't particularly involved in them, but there were a few in London [Ontario]. Some of them went to our parish and he had, they had like parish group things, so he would associate that way. He'd have them over to the house and they'd have a Saturday night beer night and stuff like that, but he didn't seek people out unless they were a close friend.

Michael Petrou (08:37):

What about Remembrance Day or other commemorative events?

Deborah A. Legg (08:45):

OK, I remembered them most once I started high school because at that time November 11th was a holiday. So, we were off from school and my then boyfriend, but future husband, his birthday was November 11th as well, and for decades we went with to our house and sat and watched the Ottawa celebrations or Remembrance on TV with them.

Michael Petrou (09:18):

How did he act during those days, or did he talk about anything then? What were those afternoons or those mornings like?

Deborah A. Legg (09:25):

We watched it in silence. Dad teared up a little bit, he got choked up. We never actually talked about it afterwards. It was just an honouring and just to keep them company because we knew it would have been a hard time for him.

Michael Petrou (09:50):

Did he ever attend—I know some veterans of Hong Kong went back to Hong Kong and in later years. Did your dad ever do that?

Deborah A. Legg (09:59):

No, he never did go back to Hong Kong. He was a member of the Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association, and through that they had like yearly meetings and reunions and such like that. He went to quite a few of them. If they were in Ontario, like southwestern Ontario, or if they were in Montreal [Quebec], Quebec City, because he was from Quebec, so he would go back home and see [inaudible].

Michael Petrou (10:35):

Was your dad a Francophone or [...]?

Deborah A. Legg (10:38):

He could speak French, but he lost it quite quickly when he moved to Ontario, which was in '53. He and my mother married in '46. They stayed in like the Eastern Townships for those eight years or so. Work was very hard to get. He wasn't happy there. He wanted to make a better life and start a family, so they moved to Ontario at that time.

Michael Petrou (11:15):

And you growing up, were you curious about this or how did you feel about your dad's service? If this was something you thought about or at all?

Deborah A. Legg (11:28):

No. I'm ashamed to say we didn't take that much of an interest in it. Around the time that I was in high school, I know that he started taking glucose readings. Only the readings at that time wasn't by pricking your finger, it was with the urine strip. So, we found out that he was Type 2 diabetic. So, there was diabetic fruits, cans of fruits, and things like that in the house and so we knew about that.

Michael Petrou (12:10):

And this was related to what he suffered during his imprisonment or was it [...]?

Deborah A. Legg (12:15):

Yeah, yeah. Because in the later years of his incarceration, they went to the mines, so they would march before sunup, go and work in the mines all day and march back after sundown, so they didn't see sunlight until they had one day off in ten-ish [days] or something like that. It was a really long period of time.

Michael Petrou (12:52):

I mean, the conditions that the Canadians and other allied prisoners under the Japanese were extremely difficult.

Deborah A. Legg (12:59):

Oh, yeah.

Michael Petrou (13:01):

Did he ever talk about that? Was he angry at the Japanese or was he angry at the Canadians for sending him there? I mean, did he ever kind of reflect on the circumstances that brought him to Hong Kong in the first place?

Deborah A. Legg (13:16):

Well, they went on a volunteer basis, but [...] can you rephrase your question again?

Michael Petrou (13:30):

I'm wondering if he ever if he harboured any [...]?

Deborah A. Legg (13:34):

Oh, yes.

Michael Petrou (13:34):

Anger towards the Japanese or the Canadian government or anyone or how did he [...]. He ended up in a very difficult situation. I just wonder how he reflected on that later on.

Deborah A. Legg (13:46):

Well, I know that when we were teenagers, and he was getting rid of one car and going into another kind of car and for the longest time, he wouldn't buy anything Japanese, especially Toshiba. But then in his later years, you know, he did have a Honda and stuff like that. But he did have a resentment towards them. We found out more once he was considerably older and he was in the Parkwood Hospital in the veteran's wing. That was such a blessing for him to have been there because that's when all his demons came out. He found peace and he died relieved from all that pain and suffering. It was actually quite beautiful.

Michael Petrou (14:51):

Tell me about that, if you don't mind. What do you mean by his demons came out and you found out more about some of what he was harbouring. What happened?

Deborah A. Legg (15:00):

Well, at that time, I would visit him like at least three to four times a week. Between my siblings, he was never there alone. There was always somebody there every night to sit with them. They had wonderful activities. He had other veterans there that he could—none of them were Hong Kong because it was a pretty rare battle, but he spoke to other veterans about it. They had all kinds of programs for them to partake in.

Deborah A. Legg (15:44):

I don't know what the nurses would speak to him about all the time, but I'm sure that they asked him questions about things like that. But they had a Remembrance Day ceremony at the auditorium in the veteran's wing. There was all kinds of dignitaries there from the city, politician representatives. The one close to when his death came, it was all dedicated to him. They wrote a biography on him. They had a local magazine from the hospital that went to all the hospitals in London [Ontario]. He was he was featured in that and that's when he really started to kind of open up about things, not talking in specifics, but just knowing that he was recognized and appreciated for his service.

Michael Petrou (16:47):

He would open up to you, or to others, or tell me about that.

Deborah A. Legg (16:51):

Well, he was interviewed, so they asked him questions and they wrote a bio on him. So, they didn't get into like, what kind of punishments did you get? He spoke more generally, like if somebody, well—I know there was a couple of attempts of escape and if in the camp when they were talking about people who were supporting them or assisted in that you couldn't help somebody else that was in trouble because if you did, they turn that punishment towards you. They just felt helpless that they couldn't help their fellow men.

Michael Petrou (17:38):

You mentioned that when you snuck up on him, he kind of lashed out, and your mother cautioned you and you talked about some of the nightmares that he had. How much did you know about that? I mean, did he ever get treatment or what could you discern?

Deborah A. Legg (18:04):

Hmm. I know when he came back from overseas—like PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] wasn't even around then. But they also had tropical diseases that the doctors here knew nothing about, so he did end up in a psychiatric hospital for, I think, around six months, and that was between the time that he got back home, which was a Halloween night in '45. Their liberation was on the 15th of August. So that was the period of travel home. [...]

Deborah A. Legg (18:45):

He must have been home for a short time, but then he ended up in Montreal in this hospital. I remember that because it was prior to my mom and dad's marriage, so I don't know if he came out—he must have come out a little bit better—but he didn't have like a psychiatrist that he went to or anything like that. He just had to deal with things, so the less said the better for him, and for us too, probably.

Michael Petrou (19:20):

Were there other signs you could see as some of his mental trouble that he had suffered as a result of the war later on in your life?

Deborah A. Legg (19:31):

He was very stern, he said—and I didn't really realize this until the interview at the hospital much later—that the only thing that got him through every day was his faith. His faith in God. I actually, just two nights ago watched a movie and it was *Hacksaw Ridge*. It's a different kind of soldier, but it was still a battle in Japan and this fella's belief in God was, was so immense that he actually performed miracles. He did unspeakably good things. So that's how he got through. We just knew enough to not poke the bear. We just [...] he wasn't very loving. He wasn't a touchy kind of person. He had his own schedule in the day and [...]. We did do a few family things, but not a whole lot. [...] I think he was always reserved. He never really was a really jolly person.

Michael Petrou (20:50):

You attribute this to his time during the war? Yes.

Deborah A. Legg (20:55):

Pardon?

Michael Petrou (20:56):

You attribute this to his time during the war? You think this shaped, that aspect of his personality?

Deborah A. Legg (21:02):

Yeah, I think so. I mean, I can't speak about the past that I wasn't there for, but I know when he came home, he said the first thing he wanted to do was go dancing. So, he did have a lively side and that was probably kind of just a release from his capture, but I don't know what his life was like when he came home. He lived in in Cookshire [Quebec] for eight years before he came here, so I don't know if that kind of lifestyle continued, and it was when he came to Ontario or what, but he wasn't really outgoing and loving. I know he loved us, but he just didn't show things like that.

Michael Petrou (21:53):

What year were you born in?

Deborah A. Legg (21:56):

Fifty-four, yeah. And I have to say that one trait that I did pick up on his was you bury your feelings. Like I carry things very deeply and I don't talk about them. I have a hard time expressing myself and finding words because everything is—or even like my husband—like you can't find words. They're just all down in there and you just kind of choke it back and carry on. So, I think that was a definite trait that I picked up from him.

Michael Petrou (22:35):

Are there other ways that you think that your father's service has shaped your life and who you are.

Deborah A. Legg (22:45):

Umm. [...] I have strong faith, so that carried over. [...] I don't know. That's something I'd have to ponder. I know at home, we watch TV from after supper to bedtime and like, he would not watch—*Hogan's Heroes* was the thing back then—he didn't watch any kind of war pictures or anything like that. He was more strict with the boys than the girls. He was harder on them, so I don't know if that was the fallout from that.

Michael Petrou (23:44):

OK. Well, listen, Deborah, this has been so enlightening, and it's been very generous of you to share it with me. Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you think is important that you'd like to add before I let you go?

Deborah A. Legg (24:04):

Umm. [...] Well, some of the things that I'm just looking at here on my notes. Not long after he was married, his teeth were in terrible shape. He had to have them all removed and get dentures because of the diet.

Deborah A. Legg (24:33):

He had no particular interests or hobbies. I just know that the experience that he had at Parkwood Hospital was life changing for him, it was a release. I'll be forever grateful for that, and I have copies of all of the things I spoke of from the hospital about the interview and the magazine and all that kind of stuff, if that was ever of interest for you.

Michael Petrou (25:16):

Yeah, I'd love to see that.

Deborah A. Legg (25:18):

OK.

Michael Petrou (25:19):

Do you think the care at Parkwood was so meaningful because of the care he received or the other veterans that were there? Why was that such a positive experience for him, do you think?

Deborah A. Legg (25:31):

Well, he didn't really have a lot in common other than they were in war together. Most of them were in a different war battle than he was. I think it was just the respect that the government and the staff gave the guys. I don't know that he got a lot of that after he came back, even—like everything that they received in retribution from either Japan or Canada, they had a fight for it. None of it was given over to them freely. So, that put a bitter taste in his mouth too, a lot of the vets were disappointed with that, but.

Deborah A. Legg (26:23):

It came in slowly. Unfortunately, you know—he said this to me, too—he said that the years that he needed it, he didn't have the money. And then when he was, you know, an old man and we had grown up and left the house, that's when it seemed to come in. He felt really gypped about that.

Michael Petrou (26:46):

Did he talk about the apology that came from Japan? Was that [...]?

Deborah A. Legg (26:52):

OK, so he was very upset, and I can't remember which prime minister it was, that he accepted the apology from Japan on their behalf without asking them. That pissed him off, right. Oh, he was furious about that. [...]

Deborah A. Legg (27:19):

Yeah, I think the payback they got from that was a dollar per hour. It could have been per day—it must have been per day—for the length of their being in camp.

Michael Petrou (27:34):

When did he get that? Do you remember? I'm looking it up now.

Deborah A. Legg (27:38):

Oh, OK. So, we would have been [...].

Michael Petrou (27:43):

1998, I believe.

Deborah A. Legg (27:47):

I was looking at around that time period, too. I just I was trying to associate with things in my life to get a year, but yeah, that sounds about right. [...]

Deborah A. Legg (28:02):

I mean, probably from my teen years on. I remember he was given full disability benefits for his injuries and conditions as a result of the capture and labour camp. His eyes were going. He was close to glaucoma. He ate very well and quite quickly. Part of that could have been because, with four boys, you had to go when the youngest, they got served last <laughs> because things were so hard for him there.

Michael Petrou (29:01):

OK. Well, this has been, again, this has been very useful. I've learned a lot. Thank you, please—go on.

Deborah A. Legg (29:09):

Would you like to know a couple of other things that I know about his time in the camps?

Michael Petrou (29:15):

Yes, please.

Deborah A. Legg (29:19):

I know that they never received any of their Red Cross packages except for—I know one time for sure, but maybe a couple of times when the Red Cross went in to do an inspection and they got their packages on those days only. [...] They had a doctor that was in their unit, and he was the one that administered any kind of medical care as far as he could. They didn't get any from the Japanese at all.

Michael Petrou (29:58):

Yeah, I think I've interviewed the son of that doctor, John Banfill.

Deborah A. Legg (30:03):

Oh really? Hmm. Yeah, OK. It was just a very typical upbringing, I think. Very kind of low key. He worked, we went to school, Mum did look after the house. Nothing really spectacular, but we got by.

Michael Petrou (30:30):

Where did your father work? You mentioned this earlier on in the interview, but I forgot.

Deborah A. Legg (30:34):

[...] He left Quebec because of the lack of jobs. When he got to Ontario, he went to the employment office, and they had all the postings on the board about where to find jobs. So, he went to a couple, and they didn't suit him at all. One of his friends that was overseas as well, he worked at 27 COD, which was the Central Ordnance Depot in London, and he told them about openings there. And he said, "That's what I want to do." So, he went to the employment office and said that's what he wanted to do, and he wouldn't take no for an answer. He did get in there. So, he was there for 17 years before he had to retire because the government was moving the Ordnance Depot to New Brunswick and he wasn't willing to uproot, so he just took a retirement.

Michael Petrou (31:46):

Well, listen, what I'd like to do is I have two forms that I'd like you to sign. One is a permission form, which gives the museum permission to use this interview.

Deborah A. Legg (31:59):

Right.

Michael Petrou (32:00):

The other one is, I think it's called a pre-interview data sheet, but it just asks for some biographical information about you and your dad. Some of it I know, certainly, and some of it you might not have. If you could fill out and send that back to me. I'd appreciate it.

Deborah A. Legg (32:13):

Absolutely, I will. And then with your return address, I'll forward some information that gives—I mean, it's personal to him, but I'm sure it's general enough for most of the people that were in the camp and stuff, so.

Michael Petrou (32:30):

Yeah, I'd appreciate seeing that. Thank you.

Deborah A. Legg (32:33):

Sure, OK.

Michael Petrou (32:34):

Thank you so much. This has been so kind of you, and I appreciate it.

Deborah A. Legg (32:37):

Well, I thank you for doing this because it's such a little-known battle and any kind of education that we can put out there for the public that ever since the pandemic—oh and I'm so thankful that he didn't live to see this because to be locked down and not see anybody, oh, that would have been agony. Anyways, I've dedicated my time to the different anniversaries, like we had the 70th and 70th anniversary and the 75th of them going, them coming back and such like that. I just feel really connected to him because of that. It's all based on educational things, getting things out there for the public.

Michael Petrou (33:27):

Why is it so important for you to do that?

Deborah A. Legg (33:32):

Because he was a hero, and he is my hero. [...] He put his life on the line. Originally when they signed up, they were going as peacekeepers. They were never intended to see battle at all. So, they were ill equipped and ill knowledge about this kind of stuff. They were told the fabrications about the Japanese, you know, they can't see at night and things like that. They were there on false pretense because the government knew that it was a lost battle right before they even went, but they had to save face.

Deborah A. Legg (33:22):

Anyway, it made a big impression on me. I think the most of it came once he went into Parkwood Hospital and that's when I realized because he loosened up some, like he was fun. They had activities there that—we went bowling. We did bingo cards. They took field trips around. They would put them on buses on Remembrance Day and take them down to the Cenotaph. They'd sit from the bus—because usually the weather's terrible—and watch the ceremonies there and they just treated them so well that he was fun. I enjoyed his company so much.

Michael Petrou (35:09):

I see. OK. Well, again, thank you. I've enjoyed this. And please, I'll send you those forms, and I look forward to reading what you can send me as well. OK.

Deborah A. Legg (35:17):

OK. Thank you so much. Thanks, Mr. Petrou. And I appreciate your time as well.

Michael Petrou (35:23):

I appreciate yours. Take care. Bye-bye.

Deborah A. Legg (35:24):

OK. Thank you. Bye-bye.

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