

Living 50 Plus in Cottage Grove

World War II veteran tells his story from Cottage Grove

Leonard Waitman went from WWII to college before settling in Cottage Grove



Leonard Waitman served in WWII and continues to frequent the Cottage Grove Veteran's of Foreign Wars Post.

Leonard Waitman's high school class graduated without him. In letters from the girls back home, he gathers the ceremony was planned like it always was but there were a lot of empty chairs. A light stopped on each and every one of them. The girls who did go said they had initially refused; they didn't want to walk without the classmates who had left for the war months before. Leonard didn't like school. He didn't receive his diploma but thanks to the GI Bill he went to college. That, of course, was only after one of his commanders opened his eyes to education. "We were waiting for the invasion the next day and they would send books with us," he said. "So, I had this book my hand and my commander asks me what it is. I tell him it's a history book but I don't care for history. He tells me, 'If you live through this, what we're doing tomorrow is history. You'll be in the history books. History is alive, it's happening now,'" he said.

Leonard retired as a professor of history. His father was a machinist but during the Great Depression hardly anyone worked. That didn't stop his parents from saving. "It was Christmas morning and here comes my father with two big boxes out on the driveway," he said. "There were two bikes. One for me and one for my brother. We were the only kids in the neighborhood with bikes." His mother had saved twenty-five cents for months on end for the gifts. That, Leonard said, is his greatest regret. "When you have a family like I had and you don't do right by them, it's tough," he said. "Sometimes they would not eat a full meal. But I always had a full meal. If I could say anything to anyone it would probably be my mother. And I would apologize to her for not being the best son I could be." It's a post card addressed to his mother that still sits safely in an album of his wartime keepsakes. It reads, "Good news, I'm coming home." That was the good news. "I've been in battle throughout the years," he said. "It doesn't leave you." He camped at the base of Mount Vasuvias and has the photos to prove it. He still has the manual the Army gave out for troops landed in North Africa. The picture of the Pope, who happened to bless him? He has it. The memories of the lost pieces of art from the Louvre he got to tour, post cards from home, and a binder full of photographs he has all of it. But he also has the memories of battles and the nightmares of war. "No one wins in war. No one," he says of the greatest lesson he's learned in his 90-plus years. "The enemy is fighting for the same thing that we think is right for us and you don't realize that at first. I didn't hate them until I got into combat with them," he said. "And then you learn to hate them because they're trying to kill you. But no one wins in war. You just can't win when you have 400,000 men that age dying. It was his belief in God that got him through the war he said. "I've heard a lot of people talk but no one is an atheist in the fox hole," he said. "Because in war you don't have anyone else to help you. There has to be someone there to help you. Other guys are dying all around you and you are still here. Alive." Leonard made it home and the boy who was kicked out of high school earned an advanced diploma and went on to marry. Despite the horrors of war he didn't

fully realize what his commander had meant when he said they would be part of history until he was on his way home. "I fought with a lot of brave men. A lot of them didn't make it and the first time you really realize that is when you got home," he said. "We were pulling into New York Harbor and of course there's the signs welcoming us home and the fireworks and the big whoppers but at some point they told the smaller ships to back off and we went right by the statue of liberty. And you look up at her and there wasn't a dry eye on the ship. We were home." Leonard was 19 when he joined the war effort. Now, at 94 he's settled in Cottage Grove with his wife and makes frequent appearances at the local VFW. And he's afraid of nothing. "I would say, there's not a lot of things I'm afraid of. I have the lord with me."



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