

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 740

FRANK LUKETIC

Interviewed

by

Douglas Silhanek

on

May 2, 1985

## FRANK LUKETIC

Frank Luketic was born on November 21, 1923, the son of Peter and Helen Luketic. He grew up in Worthington, Pennsylvania and graduated from Worthington West Franklin High School in 1941. He enlisted in the Army in late 1942 and served in the 55th Armored Battalion of Engineers as a demolitionist. Shortly before the Battle of the Bulge he was injured in an accident and was forced to remain in a hospital for most of the remainder of the war.

After returning to the states he married and settled in his wife's hometown of Bessemer, Pennsylvania. There he was employed at the Bessemer Cement Company until his retirement in 1983. As an employee he was very active in union affairs serving as local president. He is a member of St. Anthony Church, Bessemer American Legion, Bessemer Croatian Club, and the AARP. Frank enjoys golfing, traveling, and watching professional football. He and his wife Zella have raised three children.

Douglas M. Silhanek

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INTERVIEWEE: FRANK LUKETIC

INTERVIEWER: Douglas Silhanek

SUBJECT: Depression, mining, farming, basic training,  
unions

DATE: May 2, 1985

S: This is an interview with Frank Luketic for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Doug Silhanek, at Mr. Luketic's house, on Thursday, May 2, 1985, at 7:30 p.m.

Tell me something about your childhood, where you grew up.

L: I was born and raised and grew up in the neighborhood of Worthington, Pennsylvania about eight miles west of Kittanning on 422. I grew up out in the country on a farm that my father rented during the Depression. I worked on the farm. When I was ten, eleven years old, besides working on the farm, my father worked in coal mines in so-called country banks where he got paid so much a ton. I would go in and help load the coal, help drill holes, help blast the coal out. I did that as a youngster from eleven. This would be basically in the summer season. It wasn't during school. I grew up that way until I was seventeen years old. I graduated high school in June of 1941. In November of 1942 I enlisted in WWII.

S: What do you remember about your childhood besides the farm? Was everything centered around the farm?

L: I remember basically it was around the family. There were five boys and a girl in our family, and we worked the farm; we scrounged out a living out of the ground. As far as the food, we ate like royalty; we had all we wanted to eat, all kinds of meat from steak to fowl and what have you. We ate; we raised all of our food. We had no rugs on the floor or anything; we had no clothes outside of what we would make ourselves or what we could buy. Basically, we ate good; we had no luxuries as far as luxuries were concerned.

S: Were your parents immigrants?

L: My father was. My father came to this country in the early 1900's from the Austro-Hungarian empire. My mother was born in West Virginia. My father and mother were a little bit of the old line set-up where the parents would arrange marriages, et cetera. My mother was only fourteen years old when she got married. My father was quite a few years older. She was born in West Virginia. She could speak English real well, and my father learned English. He was born in the old country; my father was born in Europe.

S: The fact that he was an immigrant, did that have a positive effect on you or a negative effect or a little bit of both maybe?

L: It really didn't have any effect. I didn't realize the importance of it until I was in high school. Basically the school I went to was of so-called Anglo-Saxon heritage. There were very few people of our lineage who went to that school.

S: That made it a little tougher, then, once you got to school?

L: Not really because . . .

S: Any prejudices against you?

L: No. If there were, we couldn't comprehend them at that time.

S: What do you remember about school? What was that like?

L: In a short sentence, all I can say was that it was a learning experience. I wish I would have applied myself more to what was available to us at that time. Being a normal kid, you look forward to getting out of school. You look forward to going to work to get a dollar in your pocket. I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed the learning experience.

S: What was the Depression like for you?

L: The Depression wasn't that difficult for us mainly because of the rent of the farm and work of the land. We ate good. The only reason it was difficult for us was because our clothes or our life-style or something would not be up to what the other people would have been who are more well off.

S: You don't look back on the Depression. . . You look at it as being a good experience. Did it teach you anything?

L: The only thing that it seems to me that it taught besides . . . I realized we were more fortunate than other people in that we were able to rent a farm to raise our own food. What it

taught me was that there were a lot of people who were a little more affluent living a different life-style. Maybe they didn't eat as well as we did, but it was more up front in society's eyes that they were a little different than we were because of our dress. I realize there were a lot more people who were much more hungry than we were simply because they didn't have the opportunity that we did to pick the food out of the ground the way we did.

S: So you had a little bit more of an advantage then.

L: Yes, right, plus being a big family and working together.

S: What did you do for a good time? What do you remember as a good time growing up?

L: Basically fishing, stealing tobacco off of my father and smoking.

S: How about any family activities? Did you do anything with your family that sticks out in your mind?

L: Outside of maybe going to visit a relative or something. We had no automobile. We had a neighbor who was more affluent who had a car. If we wanted to go from Worthington to Rimersburg, Pennsylvania, my father would put gas in this car and we would make the trip. This was the big outing.

S: Probably Sunday.

L: Yes.

S: Your dad didn't work on Sunday?

L: No.

S: What do you remember as being . . . When did you realize that America was going to go to war?

L: I would say when I was a junior in high school. That would have been in 1940, in early 1940, because I graduated in 1941. We could hear on the radio as it would indicate and from other teachers. They would tell us that it appeared to be headed in that direction.

S: How about yourself then? When did you realize you were going to go?

L: I realized in November of 1942. It was several days before I was going to become nineteen. I was sitting with another fellow who went to school with me. We were sitting on a barber-shop bench. We were talking about the way the war looked and what not. To this day I don't know which one of us said it

first. We said, "We are going to be drafted pretty soon, so why don't we go down and enlist?"

I had an older brother who was in the 1st Cavalry Division. It appeared to me that it was a challenge and I went in and accepted it simply because I knew that there was only one mounted cavalry unit left. That was the 7th Cavalry in the 1st Division, which my older brother was in. Big Uncle Sam enlists you into the service. I felt that I might as well enlist and that maybe I could be with my brother since there was only one 7th Cavalry Regiment that had horses, and I was familiar with horses working on a farm.

We went and we enlisted. We walked to Kittanning recruiting office and we enlisted. We were given three choices when we enlisted as to what our branch of service would be. My first choice was mounted cavalry. My second choice was driving an ambulance in the medical corps, and my third choice was coast artillery. We enlisted and I ended up in the 10th Armored Division in the 55th Armored Engineer Battalion as a demolition specialist with a little training because I worked with my father in the coal mine and had some experience with black powder.

S: So you didn't get anything you wanted then.

L: No, no way even though I was a volunteer.

S: What was the mood of the town when you left? Was it supportive?

L: Yes, everything was gung ho.

S: How about your family? Any objections to you going?

L: No. In fact I had to get signatures. My mother was willing to sign for me. I was afraid to ask my father so I forged his name. That is how I ended up enlisting in the Army.

S: Trace the steps going into camp and going through, where they sent you.

L: We got on a train and we went to Pittsburgh to Union Depot, Pittsburgh. I don't think it is there any longer. We stayed at Hotel Henry overnight. We took a train from Kittanning into Pittsburgh and we stayed in the Hotel Henry overnight. The next morning we got on a train and went to Fort Meade, Maryland for the induction. So we went there. We were a bunch of all young guys. We were all confused and everything. They fed us.

We had the induction there. We spent approximately a week there. I remember the haircuts, which was nothing new. We got our own haircuts at home. Our parents cut our own hair. We spent about a week there. We had no idea where we were

going; we weren't told where we were going or anything. We kept going south. It kept getting warmer. Somebody suggested throwing our long underwear out. We ended up in Fort Benning, Georgia in the sand hill area. We spent our thirteen weeks and then some taking basic training there. This is where I ended up in the 55th Armored Engineer Battalion in the 10th Armored Division.

I physically enjoyed the basic training; I really did. I wrestled a plow; I worked in a mine. It was no challenge to me.

S: You were really pretty ready for it anyway.

L: Yes. From there after our basic training was over, we used some time just training for our ordinary training. Then we got a call to go to . . . There was one tremendous fellow who was a commander at that time of the 55th Armored Engineer Battalion. He was a fellow by the name of Colonel Spangler. As I understand it he was from Johnstown, Pennsylvania. He was a big, rugged individual. Rumors were around the camp that he tried to create a battalion of six-footers and more for the 55th Armored Engineer Battalion, and he almost accomplished it. There were very few people in our battalion who were under six feet. As far as the physical, rugged training, this fellow never asked anybody to do something that he wouldn't do. Even in the evening after the day was done and all, you would see this fellow out in his trunks running.

S: He was a good example then.

L: Yes. Sad to say, he never made it back from Europe. I have a lot of admiration and respect for him.

We got a call. The battalion leader said to get ready to move. We had to pack everything. We went to Tennessee for maneuvers in the Smoky Mountains. It was west of Nashville in the Murfreesboro area of Tennessee. We spent three months in the Smoky's on maneuvers, which was a nice experience too outside of the little, red chiggers that would eat you up down there.

From there we went to the eastern end of Georgia to Camp Gordon at that time, which is Fort Gordon now. We spent several months there. We got orders to go overseas, and we went to Camp Shanks, New York in October. I think it was October of 1944. From Shanks we went to . . . We left Camp Shanks which was at the north border of New Jersey. I think it was pier 23 that we got on. The ship was either a liberty ship or a victory ship. I think it was a liberty ship. We went over on the S.S. Sea Owl liberty ship. We got in the wee hours of the morning. We pulled out of the Navy yard. We woke up in the morning. I heard something squeaking. We were all

on the bunks down in the hole. We went out there and it was raining. There were low clouds. I looked around and there wasn't a ship around or anything. I thought I would never see the United States again. It was sort of a low point that morning, but the following morning the weather cleared up. We looked around and here there was a whole convoy of ships with Navy destroyers on the outside.

We went across there and landed in Cherbourg, France. I think at the time we were down in Metz and in that area. We got involved outside of Metz in our first activity.

S: You must have moved pretty good inland then.

L: Yes.

S: Freely, no problems?

L: No, because the front was already up that far. We left outside of Metz. Right before the Battle of the Bulge, I know everyone in our outfit knew it was something weird because we all were told at 4:00 in the morning to get up and pack up and take off. We kept heading north. We went through Luxembourg.

S: When would this be, in the winter now?

L: Yes, right before the Battle of the Bulge. It was right around the middle of November or so. We went through Luxembourg city, and it was beautiful. Nobody shelled Luxembourg city; it was just like a city over here. We kept going north. In the late afternoon we saw puffs in the sky. Our sergeant from Texas said that there was something wrong up there. Here there were P-38's flying around with anti-aircraft fire involved. We knew we were in this for no honeymoon. Our outfit was part of 82nd Airborne hung up in Bastogne.

About two days before they got hung up in there, I got myself injured climbing out of the halftrack. My first airplane flight was in a C-47 to England. After my operation and everything else, I went back to the outfit. I went back to the outfit two days before the war was over. If there was anything else, I was just waiting to come home and hoping the war ended. That was basically it.

S: You really didn't see any action then?

L: Yes, we saw quite a bit in and around Metz. We saw the Germans coming out and wondering where in the hell they ever found these big, white sheets that they tied on a pole. They were just giving up in groves at that time.

S: What do you remember most about the first time you thought



you were going to see action? You said that was a low feeling on the ship. Was it similar or were you ready? Were you anxious to fight?

L: I was never anxious to fight. I always had a funny feeling. You tried to do everything you could to protect yourself. The feeling to just commit slaughter or anything was never there. The biggest feeling was that you did what you had to to try to keep going. You lived from hour to hour really. I really felt that you had no control over it. You figured with all of the action around you, sooner or later you were bound to get it. When it was all over, you wonder how in the hell you ever got through it.

S: How did you get hurt?

L: I got hurt bailing out. . . We had a tree burst right above our halftrack. There is a squad in there with about maybe twelve to fourteen people in the halftrack. We had a tree burst right above it. There were a couple of fellows killed in there. I felt that we ought to get the heck out of the darn vehicle and crawl in one of the tracks for protection. When I straddled the side of it, my foot slipped and I injured my testicles. This is what put me out of action. Of course, it was really later that it really started bothering me enough that I couldn't keep going.

S: When you went back to England, what was that like in the hospital there?

L: The hospital was just like another world really because you didn't hear any artillery; you didn't hear any burp guns; you didn't hear all of the commotion and all that. It was a time of peace really.

S: Was it an Army hospital?

L: Yes, 157th General. It was outside of Liverpool in England. That was my first experience with Liverpool.

S: What was a typical day like in the hospital? Do you remember?

L: Pretty much. There would be a major or a captain or one of the doctors would come through and check everybody. Someone from the Red Cross would come through or a nurse or someone. Basically, it was talking to the next guy and reminiscing where you were and all of that and what happened in your sector.

S: Did you ever run into anybody you knew while you were in the service?

L: The only one, the fellow who enlisted with me. He happened to be . . . I ran into him north of Metz. He happened to be

the jeep driver for the general of the division.

S: He did alright then.

L: I haven't seen him since. He and I were classmates in school.

S: Was your whole division, was that all of their first action?

L: Yes. The first action our division saw was when we went into the Metz area.

S: So everybody was pretty fresh then.

L: Yes. We relieved, I believe it was the 69th Infantry Division. It was a holding position, only we relieved them. We left our vehicle behind. It wasn't on our bridge. I think at the time . . . I remember we walked miles during the night, and we relieved the position that they held. I will never forget that our outfit insisted on wearing neckties and Olive Drag uniforms with a necktie. I will never forget some of those fellows who evidently had been in that holding position for some time. They were going hysterical when they saw us with the neckties. They said, "Holy Christ, they dress them up to kill them now." We relieved those people. It is just difficult to really put into words of what transpired with the feeling of seeing those guys and wondering if you were going to end up the same way.

S: That would have been a crew that probably hit Normandy?

L: Yes, they probably went through hell several times over.

S: How about while you were there? Who was your commander?

L: Patton, we went in under Patton in the 3rd Army.

S: Did you have any contacts with him at all while you were there?

L: No, I saw him one time at a distance.

S: What was the overall feeling about him? Did he drive you? Was he the leader? Did you look at him as the leader or was he somebody just so far off that . . .

L: No, we really wouldn't know. The guy who was a real leader was the fellow I was talking about, that colonel. There really wasn't anybody up front that you could holler to and say, "Hey, there is somebody out there. Guard the hole and follow me," and all that.

S: What were the circumstances that surrounded you coming home? Was it a discharge in the hospital or did you . . .

L: I got discharged by the point system.

S: You came back home then?

L: Right.

S: Out right away when you came home? You mentioned before you were waiting for Japan for . . .

L: No. I spent some time . . . They had what they called category four. It all depends. There was a certain point system. I don't recall the specific number now. If you had a certain amount of points, you were going to go home very soon. If you didn't have quite enough to get a certain date, you could be what they called category four. You just laid around and moved around. I was in about three or four different outfits. You either made an Army of occupation or went home. I didn't have enough points to go home with the outfit. I had more than enough that they couldn't fly me to be with the Army of occupation, so I shifted about four different outfits until I finally came home.

S: What did you miss about home for the time you were in?

L: Basically the family.

S: The farm, everything that . . .

L: Yes, I guess, my brothers.

S: How did your brother do during the war?

L: In World War II I went to Europe. My older brother who was in the 1st Cavalry who I hoped to hook up with when I went there, he went to South Pacific. He was in the 1st Cavalry. He was wounded, I think, in New Guinea. He had a much more hellish war experience than I did, really.

S: Did you write to him? Did you keep in contact during the war?

L: Not too much. I would write home and he would write home, but personally a letter from brother to brother, we didn't do that.

S: Is there anything else about the war that you remember, any other experiences?

L: Sure. I remember shortly after the war in Augsburg, Germany and all over the southern Germany into Bavaria seeing . . . Sure, we called it GI (Government Issue) trash or chow, but it was food. The thing I remember is that the old, German women could hardly walk in the wintertime especially. Our

garbage cans where we dumped our mess would be overflowing. There would be pieces of meat, and these old women on their hands would be digging out of the ice and putting it in their mouth, pieces of scraps we threw away. That really shook me up, more so than to see somebody get their head blown off, and there was so much.

Also, at Camp Phillip Morris, when we were coming back, we had one of these big field tents. To see a guy come in with two women and promoting sex for cigarettes and what have you. . . The guy offered his own wife and daughter. Here some of our own GI's should have known better, condemn them for it, condemn the women for it. We were more fortunate in our country. What in the world do you know what would have happened if your own family had to go through, in the United States, what they were going through over here? Those things definitely stand out in my mind. No one knows his own capacity unless he is faced with it.

S: How did you find the French and the German people? To start with the French, did the French accept the Americans or do you think they just wound up with whoever was going to occupy their country?

L: That is very hard to tell. Naturally at the time they were euphoric about the idea being under the German Army. The only experience I had in Germany was that we went through several small towns. If they had a little band that played . . . That was probably the first time I ever did a polka in my life. To me the French were more or less indifferent; in my opinion the Germans in those days, even though they lost the war, were still arrogant and I think they are today.

S: What about coming home? What was that feeling like when you finally made it home?

L: It was exceptionally fine. I remember the day I left when I thought I would never see it back. How you translate it into words, I think it just impossible.

S: What was the mood of the town when you came back? Was there a difference?

L: My problem is, it just wasn't a town. I was living out in the country. In the small towns everybody was happy that you were back and all that.

S: Did you stay on the farm then when you came back?

L: Yes, for a short period of time. I went to work. I rode 5220--GI's were entitled to \$20 a week for 52 weeks--for about six weeks and then went to work in a limestone mine outside of Worthington.

S: What did you want to do when you came out? Did you have any ambitions?

L: No. I can't say that I had any ambition. The only thing I knew was that there should be a better way for the little people to express themselves. I realized when I was eighteen years old when I went in that we were just like sheep being led to the slaughter and we were gung ho and we volunteered and everything. I felt afterwards that I gave up three years-- I didn't give up--I voluntarily did it, three years, three months, and twenty-four days of my life. I felt there should have been something better or that we should have been able to do something better with ourselves in this country after seeing what we did in the war and what it was before when my father worked in the coal mine.

I felt that I had a right, besides being a citizen with my military service, to do something better to make life better. That was when I made up my mind that I was going to be involved in union affairs and I have been ever since. I felt that was the only outcome, politics and legal outlet. The only outlet left to us as working people, in which we were . . . Ninety-eight percent of the people were through union which basically pertained to Roosevelt and the Wagner Act. I have been involved in union politics ever since.

S: Why did you first get involved in unions then?

L: Simply because I felt through my father . . . When I came home . . . They figured we must have played, drinking a little bit and chasing girls and what have you. When I came home, I went to work in a limestone mine. My father had spent a good many years in coal mines and he asked me if I was involved in the union at the limestone mine. I indicated no because I wasn't that much interested in it. He indicated that I had fought for my country and that I didn't get anything else as far as additional rights for my right to be here. He said that I should fight for my rights on my job. With that, I thought I should get involved and I have been involved and active ever since.

S: That is good.

END OF INTERVIEW