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(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Clarke: Welcome to Pritzker Military Presents with ambassador Frank Lavin talking about his book *Home Front to Battlefield: An Ohio Teenager in World War II*. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago, and it's sponsored by Ohio University Press. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). Carl Lavin was a high school senior when Pearl Harbor was attacked. The Ohio native enlisted in the US Army when he turned eighteen, a decision that would ultimately lead him to serving in combat with the 84th Infantry Division, known as the Rail Splitters, in the Battle of the Bulge. *Home Front to Battlefield* is the tale of a foot soldier who finds himself thrust into a world where he and his unit grapple with the horrors of war, the idiocies of bureaucracy, and the oddities of life back home. The book is based on personal letters, recollections, and stories of people he served with, official military history, private papers, and more. *Home Front to Battlefield* offers insight into the reflections and emotions of a small town American teenager with WWII as the epic backdrop, highlighting the role of the individual; something that is often lost in war. A lifelong student of history, Frank Lavin was inspired to write this book because of the sacrifices of US and Allied service members in the Second World War. He dedicates *Home Front to Battlefield* to the men of Company L, saying, "We are here today because they were there yesterday." Frank Lavin is the CEO and founder of Export Now, a US firm that operates e-commerce stores in China for international firms. Previously Lavin served in President Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush's administrations working in the Department of Commerce, Department of State, and National Security Council. Lavin served as director of the White House office of political affairs from 1987 to 1989. Lavin was ambassador to the Republic of Singapore from 2001 to 2005. He served as undersecretary for international trade at the US Department of Commerce from 2005 to 2007. Lavin has several advanced degrees including an MA in international relations and international economics from the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University and an MBA in finance at the warden school of the University of Pennsylvania. He is a columnist for [Forbes.com](http://Forbes.com) and has been published in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, and other periodicals. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Ambassador Frank Lavin.

(Applause)

Lavin: Thank you so much. Thank you. That's great. Thank you, Ken. That was a very gracious introduction, very kind of you. And thank you everybody for coming out tonight. It's delightful to see so many people here. And I'm also grateful to Ohio University Press for sponsoring--my publisher, and a great group to work with. And let me just offer one comment as we begin. This isn't just a wonderful forum to share ideas and offer some comments about military history, but the museum itself is just fabulous. And I encourage you, if you haven't had a chance to take a few minutes to go through the exhibits--I got here early today just to go through the two floors here, and I encourage you, at some point, to go back and walk the halls and the corridors. There's just a lot of very valuable material out there that--that any history aficionado will appreciate. Good. Listen, what I'd like to do tonight is share the story of the book and provide some insight about US

combat operations in Europe in WWII, but I'd like to start by putting it in historical context as well, about what are we trying to do in this book and what's going on in the war at that time, and then read a few excerpts from the books. Let me try to encapsulate what this is all about with a quote from a war correspondent at the time. We know John Steinbeck as a novelist and as a Nobel laureate. But he was in Europe during the war as a war correspondent. Steinbeck wrote this: "There are really two wars, and they haven't much to do with each other. There's a war of maps and logistics, of campaigns, of ballistics, armies, divisions, and regiments, and that is General Marshall's war. Then there is the war of the homesick, weary, funny, violent, common men who wash their socks in their helmets, complain about the food, and lug themselves and their spirit through as dirty a business as the world has ever seen, and do it with humor and dignity and courage." So this book is very much that second war, but you better have an understanding and a grounding in the first war in order to explain that second war. So let me try to do that.

The fulcrum of the story is the Battle of the Bulge, and it comes late in the war. It starts in December 1944. And if you look at the previous few months, you would say the United States and Allies had a very good summer and fall. Enormous success at D-Day. A lot of problems, a high cost, but after getting their footing in France--that race across France to the German border across Belgium--is enormously successful. And indeed if you get to November, December, you'll see increasingly in Allied discussions and the GIs' discussions, talk about Berlin by Christmas and we're gonna be home early next year, etcetera, etcetera. And if you did it simply on the basis of that advance, you'd say there's some plausibility to that. Well, Hitler has other plans, and this is the Battle of the Bulge, how the Battle of the Bulge unfolds. And I want to leave three takeaways for you about the Battle of the Bulge. The first is the audacity of the battle. This is Hitler's final offensive, so he's gonna put everything he has into it. He has every available troop--400,000 Wehrmacht soldiers--against 200,000 Americans on the line. To put that in context, the US Army today is only about 500,000. So he's basically got a force almost equivalent to the entire US Army today that he's throwing against these 200,000 GIs. His plan is to smash through these lines and reach the coast, reach the Port of Antwerp, cut the western front in half, paralyze the entire movement. So it is an audacious plan. But what gives Hitler any kind of sense that this might work is that he saw it work before. He saw it work in 1940. This was very much the German offensive plan against France when they launched the war. And indeed this is very similar to his assault on Poland, his invasion of Russia, his attack on Crete, and this is what sort of characterized his military tactics, was this enormous audacity. And for the most part it was successful, and there was some calamitous failures for him as well. So he sees it, and he's going to go for it. His calculation is that he has two weeks running room. It will take a week for the Allies to fully understand what's taking place and how massive this assault is, and will take another week for them to formulate a response that London and Washington and Eisenhower all have to sort of coordinate and agree on a response. So he's got two weeks before Allied forces can be brought to bear. So that's the audacity. The second interesting element of the Battle of the Bulge is the scale of the assault. I mentioned it was 400,000 against 200,000, which is how it started. By the end of the campaign--by the end of the Battle of the Bulge--the US Army has one million troops in this one battle. So the Battle of the Bulge was and remains the largest battle ever fought by the United States. And to give you some numbers for that figure, at its peak in the entire war, the US only has eight-plus million people in uniform. Right, and that's between the Pacific and the European theater. So you know if among the entire global order of battle is eight-some million and one million of them are in one battle, you know it is just a massive commitment of forces. Of the one million Americans in the battle, 600,000 are directly involved in combat; 400,000 are support troops. For those 600,000 they paid a

pretty steep price. Remember this whole battle lasts only about six weeks. Hitler launches it December 16, and it's really pretty much over--the frontlines are reestablished--around the end of January. So it's about a six-week effort. In those six weeks, those 600,000 suffer 20,000 killed, another 40,000 casualties, and 20,000 prisoners. So an enormous price paid by the Allies to grind through this. So the first point was the audacity, the second point is the scale. The third point I want to leave you with is the desperation of this or the brutality, you could say, of this, because it is Hitler's final offensive. So he knows the stakes are very high. It's--it's a long-shot in any event, but given that this is his only effort to stay and distain this incessant Allied advance, he better do everything he can to win. And when somebody like Hitler says everything you can, you'll see the standards of conduct drop precipitously in this battle. I'll give you two examples. There's more in the book, but for the purpose of this discussion let me give you two examples. The war begins as I mentioned--the battle begins, as I mentioned, December 16th. On December 17th there's a rather large group of Americans who are captured because they're forward artillery spotters. And so of course this group is forward deployed. By definition, that's their assignment. And they're also very, very lightly armed. They're not supposed to be engaged in combat, right? They're supposed to be out ahead of the forces to help the artillery battalions sight and range and hit targets and radio back. So these are very courageous folks who are out ahead of the field. Well, unfortunately, when you're facing an onslaught like the Battle of the Bulge, this is exactly who gets captured. So a group of eighty-some forward artillery spotters are captured by the Wehrmacht in a town--excuse me, in a town in Belgium called Malmedy. And almost as soon as they're captured the SS shows up and opens up a machine gun on them, after they've surrendered, after they've been disarmed. So they're murdered. Eighty-some GIs. It's called the Malmedy Massacre. And we know this--the same day it happens we know this because there are a few fortunate GIs on the fringe who are able to get into the woods when the firing starts, and they're able to report back. And there were a few who also were wounded but were able to lie still in the snow--get back. So the entire Allied front is electrified by this news that the Germans are killing POWs. So if you are captured, you stand a chance of just being murdered. Another element of this brutality that took place is Operation Greif, and if you--if you read the formal histories of the Battle of the Bulge or if you see the movies, they will fixate on this because it is almost theatrical, this initiative, but it's deadly if you're in the middle of it. Operation Greif is a element of the German assault in which the Germans identify some three thousand German soldiers who are fluent in English, and they outfit them in US uniforms and in captured American army gear to be sent back to the American lines to infiltrate and to capture positions, to wreak havoc, to kill Americans. So you have this widely known as well. And it causes enormous amount of confusion and problems for the Allied side. I mean, eventually the Americans get on top of the situation. But you can imagine if you're in a battle environment where that's taking place, how that would paralyze your ability to coordinate or to collaborate with other American units, because you're not sure that you can trust of work with the person a few hundred yards down the road. So those are three of the key defining elements of this battle that made it such a significant encounter. Now in the middle of this is one GI that we look at in the course of this book, and that's Carl Lavin. As Ken tells us, he's a high school senior when Pearl Harbor is attacked. He turns eighteen the next year and enlists. He's not mobilized until 1943. As you know, the US Army's going through a very rapid mobilization. The army strength in pre-Pearl Harbor is something like 200,000/ 250,000 active duty GIs. I think 190,000 in 1940, and it goes up in two years to about two million. So it just takes a while to--that intake. So Carl Lavin is mobilized, goes through basic training in 1943, and he has various training assignments in the US, but his division--at that time he's in the 69th

division, and he's sent to Britain in 1944, post-D-Day. The Battle of the Bulge is launched, as I said, December 16. On Christmas Day 1944, all of the rifleman of his division--he's in the 69th Division at that time--all the riflemen in his division are stripped out and sent in as replacements. About two thousand-some people from the 69th. The United States as you recall--the United States is doing something differently from every other combatant nation when it comes to replacements. Every other nation except the United States takes depleted units off the front, reconstitutes them, trains them, and then places them back into combat. The United States does not do that. The United States stands alone in saying what we're gonna do is, on an individual basis, put in GIs to replace GIs who are killed. After the war is over that's views, I think, universally as a mistake, and the US abandons that approach and does what every other nation does. But during WWII you're just sent in when somebody's dead. And of course we see right away the problem with this approach is you don't know your colleagues, you don't know their names, you don't know their strength or weaknesses. So all of those soft communication skills that make a squad effective are all sort of washed out, and it takes several weeks to reconstitute it before you build communication and trust and understanding of what your fellow GIs are doing. So Carl is sent in. Christmas lunch in South Hampton, Christmas dinner at the front. Carl tells us a few things. The company's at about half-strength. He's in a rifle company--WWII rifle company, about 150 people. It's at about half strength, so it's been hammered already when he gets there. His assignment is, he's a BAR man--Browning Automatic Rifle, right, which is the automatic machine gun that each rifle squad has one BAR man attached to. It--Carl says for the first week they're replenished and they're able to keep up the strength that he came at. The second week they're replenished, but they're not able to keep up the strength, so there's some depletion. After the second week, there's no more replenishment. After the second week it's just simply deterioration of the unit--so the combat strength. What's worse is, after that second week food and ammunition supplies are interrupted, episodically. Episodically, but it doesn't take much for morale to suffer. So it becomes a down moment. It's a tough moment for the army that--it's the flip side of what I mentioned a few minutes ago, that the Allied advance across France is so rapid that what you've done is stretch all of your supply lines. You're really operating at the end of a very long tether. The Germans have done a superb job of destroying the ports, the harbor ports. There's one rail line. There's one road line to the front, and it makes it very difficult to keep those forces in the battle. So Carl tells us that in thirty days in combat he is in the top half of seniority of his rifle company. And indeed one of the statistics that leapt out to me when I was doing research at the Library of Congress--I had to ask the archivist to explain these statistics because the company took something like 150 percent casualties. And I had to ask the archivist how, arithmetically how was this possible, that you could have 150 percent losses. Right? It seemed to me it'd have to stop at 100 percent. The answer is, what this means is people are killed or wounded, and they're taken out of action, and their replacement is killed, and that person's replacement is killed. So you end up with 150 percent casualty even as you have some people still living and fighting all the way through. So it is a mess. It is a mess. What I want to do now is move away from this context for a bit and just read a few excerpts from the book to give you some of the flavor of this. And I'll start--I'll start on a, maybe, a little bit of an up-note, or a peacetime note. But this, as I mentioned, Carl enlists in 1942, but he's not mobilized until 1943, so let me--let me read you an excerpt from basic training and give you a flavor of peacetime military in 1943. So this is in the form of a letter from Carl to his parents. "Dear folks, here's what we did yesterday. Got up at 0500, 5am to you, which was not too unusual since we've been doing it every single day. Reveille at 5:15 to 5:25, chow at 5:30 to about 5:50, then try to get washed, make your

bed, clean out your barracks, prepare for inspection, put on your leggings, fill your canteen--the water is no good here and has to be medicated--and police the area in about forty-five minutes. Then we march off to the training area with pack and guns. Either a 1917 model Enfield or a Thompson submachine gun. From 0700 to 1100 we have classes of fifty minutes each, separated by a two-minute wind sprint and an eight-minute rest period. The classes are on first aid and gas, mostly so far, but we'll be having many more different ones. We just started motor maintenance and driving, and we've also had military courtesy, the articles of war. I can be put up for life for not shining my shoes. Article of war 94, conduct unbecoming a soldier. And map reading. Then there is an hour of drill and formation exercising. From 1200 to 1330, we eat and have a rest period, most of which is taken up in waiting in line to get some food, waiting in line to get seconds, and waiting in line to wash your mess gear. To 1730 we have some more classes sometimes. Usually the last hour is spent doing something a little more exerting. Like yesterday, we had a hike. I believe I wrote before saying how hard it was marching three miles in fifty minutes with a pack in eighty-five degree heat. Well, yesterday we marched five miles in forty-five minutes with a pack and a rifle in ninety-degree heat. These marches are really the only thing that I don't like about the army. And I have a violent hatred of them. They are nothing but torture from the first step to the last, and there's no deeper discouragement than to have your leg muscles paining and your shoulders rubbed sore and come to some rough or sandy ground and realize you still have four more miles to go but can do absolutely nothing but continue to march, and march at top speed. Then toward the end your eyes start to smart from the sweat washing through them, and you hope you won't stumble because you're sure you won't be able to start up again. But the funny thing is, once you're back and you put down your pack and gun, the relief takes all the tiredness away, and you don't throw yourself down on your bunk as you so ardently desired out on the hike. You lay down for two or three minutes, drink a quart and a half of water usually, and start joking about the hike." So that's a nice snapshot, and I'm sure if people here did military service they might have had a very similar letter, a very similar experience they wrote home. So there's almost a buoyancy there combined with I would say a very typical sort of adolescent view of freely complaining about, you know, being pushed beyond his comfort level. But you also sense, and you see this throughout the book, pride in doing his doing and pride in getting through basics and so forth and accomplishing his tasks. So that's sort of a baseline letter. The tone of the book as you might gather takes on a sort of darker coloration as we get into battle. Let me read you a second excerpt, if I may, from combat activity. Put this in context for you. So now we're at the front. "Soldiers required to inspect every room and every building in a town go through offices, houses, factories. Well, Carl did his part--looking for people, looking for ammunition, looking for weapons. Usually two or three guys go through a house together, 'cause you don't want to go in by yourself. There's always a little bit of a leery feeling as you went to open a door because if someone was there and wanted to shoot you, he was in a perfect position to do so. So it's a bit of a nervous thing going in. If the door is locked, you've just got to kick in the door. You kick it in by putting your boot right by the door handle. In one particular town Carl and two others had just finished going through a house on the outskirts of town, and as they walked out a back door they heard gunfire, and Carl saw two other GIs about ten yards away. They were taking aim at a group of about four German soldiers who were running across an open field into woods about a quarter of a mile away. Now this was a perfect job for a BAR man. Carl could spray bullets. It gives the enemy two choices. You surrender or you're cut down by automatic fire. Carl begins moving up to the line of fire to assist the other two GIs when he hears his sergeant's voice calling, 'Lavin, Lavin.' Well Carl recognizes the voice. He stops, looks around, but doesn't see the sergeant.

Carl keeps looking around. Sergeant says, 'Up here. Up here.' Carl looks up high, and from a house next to the one Carl had just inspected, there was a window with horizontal and vertical metal bars and an arm sticking through the window waving. Carl knew that had to be his sergeant, Sergeant Johnson calling him. 'Well, come on up here. You'll get a good shot up here,' Sergeant Johnson says. Carl's hollering back, 'Well, the Germans are getting away.' Johnson says, 'I know. Well, you've got a perfect shot from up here. Get up here. Get to the window. Bring your BAR. Get up here quick.' Now Carl immediately recognizes this to be a bad command because of the amount of time it would take him to run to the back of the house, find the hallway, locate the stairs, scramble up them. By that time he joined the sergeant, the Germans would be in the woods. And it would have just taken a few seconds to assist the riflemen. But as a dutiful soldier he has to obey his sergeant. And he runs to the back of the house with his BAR. He gets upstairs, and he finds the sergeant firing his rifle through the bars in what was a bathroom window. Just as Carl steps in the door to the bathroom, Sergeant Johnson catches a bullet in his elbow and staggers back. He falls halfway back toward Carl. Carl's able to catch him, the best he can eases him to the floor. Well, now Carl's job is Johnson's safety. He drags him to the hallway in a half-sitting position to get him out of harm's way. Once there he can look at Johnson's wounds, and he says blood surging out of that elbow. He knows that an artery's been hit, because it's pumping a lot of blood and Carl can count his pulse by watching the blood spurt. 'Well, never mind me,' says Johnson, 'Get those Jerrys.' Get those Jerrys? Again, it doesn't sound like a good command, but Carl's job is to obey. Bullets are still streaming in through that barred window. The bottom of the window is a few feet off the floor, so Carl is able to crouch into the bathroom, get under the window, and bob his head up and down to try to get a view of the situation. Well, what he saw was startling. It was two GIs shooting in the window. Carl darts his head up one more time for confirmation, and he feels a million bee stings all over his face. A bullet had hit one of the crossbars right in front of him, and his face was peppered with rust and metal shards. Carl wasn't bleeding, but it was a heart-stopping moment when a bullet impacts a few inches away from you. Still, Carl had verified the shooters. He recognized them. One GI shooting, kneeling, one standing. They're both shooting at Carl through the window. They must have seen Johnson's rifle and assumed it to be a German soldier and opened fire. Carl runs back to Johnson and says, 'Hey, those are our guys. They aren't Germans. They thought you were Jerry.' Well Johnson gives it a minute thought and changes his priorities and says, 'Well, get Schmidty. Get Schmidty.' Schmidty was the squad medic. Schmidty always said, 'Never yell medic when you want me. Make sure you yell Schmidty, and I can come as fast as I can to help. I don't want to get diverted helping someone else yelling medic.' It gives you a sense of the number of times that cry is going to go out on a battlefield. So Carl rushes downstairs to get Schmidty, but he freezes as he gets to that front door. He didn't want to be shot by his own men. So he took off his helmet, his full field pack, he drops his BAR. He threw down his ammunition to make himself as light as possible and as visible as possible, and he bolts from the door, hoping the men recognize him before they shoot at him. It works. No one is shot. They recognize Carl. His helmet's off. All the other GIs are hiding in bushes around the edge of the yard. But they start yelling, 'Hey, Lavin, Lavin, get down. Get down, Jerry's in there.' And Carl yells back, 'There's no Jerry's. That was Johnson and me inside.' the GIs yell, 'Are you crazy? You and Johnson were shooting at us?' 'No, Johnson was shooting over your head. Hey, Johnson's hurt. Get Schmidty. Johnson's hurt.' Carl's yelling as loud as he can. Well, all the GIs start yelling for Schmidty. Schmidty decides the fastest way to get to the scene was to jump a fence. Unfortunately Schmidty's foot caught a rail, and he went sailing with his medical equipment thrown loose. Through the air went the morphine syrettes, the sulfonamide,

the gauze bandages, the compresses, the surgical tape, the tincture merthiolate, aspirin, bismuth, paregor, sodium amatol, and the tags for logging morphine injections. The GIs helped Schmidty pick up his gear. 'Hey, come on, Johnson's hurt. Stop fooling around.'" So that's a sense of combat and a battle and of violence and foolishness. Johnson is evacuated, and Johnson's life is saved despite the blood loss, but he doesn't return to the unit, to wrap that up. Give you another vignette from late in the war. This is post-Battle of the Bulge, deep into Germany. This is April 1945, so literally within a month of Germany's surrender. But bad news can happen at any time despite the overall weakening and collapse even of the German military capabilities you could encounter somebody who's not weak. "The war was essentially over. What was required in these final days was caution, planning, and steady progress. Yet the captain of Carl's company calls a meeting to tell his GIs that he has volunteered them for a mission. The company is still not at full strength, and fewer than a hundred men. The men were to take the village of Gartow from resisting German soldiers who had successfully repelled a different American company the previous day. The captain probably told the GIs that there had been a regimental meeting at which the colonel had asked for volunteers for the Gartow mission. 'I'm so proud of you,' the captain said. Carl recalled that he and all the GIs were thinking, 'Why, you sorry son of a gun. You are seeking glory with our guts.' There was no enthusiasm this late in the war for heroics. But the order had come down, and the next day Carl and his company were sent to take a village located about a mile away from their current position. The idea was that a rapid frontal assault without any artillery support would allow the infantry to surprise the village defenders." Now, remember I mentioned before Carl's a BAR man, and the BAR has two distinctive attributes. One is that it's an automatic, so he can't put out an enormous volume of fire. The second one is it's a heavier weapon. It's about a twenty-some pound weapon and then you have another twenty pounds of ammunition that a BAR man carries. "So Carl's company made a stealthy running attack across unlevel fields. Carl's carrying forty pounds more than anyone else. He can't quite run as fast, but he's keeping out. Near the village the troops reach barbed wire fencing, which was affixed to metal poles. The men use that to leap over the wire. When Carl gets to the fence he props his BAR on the other side of the wire and begins to climb over. But the moment he put down his weapon, all hell broke loose. The Germans had been watching the GIs advance all along, and they had previously ranged to that fence, knowing the GIs would have to congregate there to cross. Indeed, once the company reached the fence, they were a very good target. The Germans let loose with machine gun and rifle fire and mortars--a tremendous amount of ammunition spent. Well, Carl immediately hit the ground. Because he had just placed his weapon across the fence, he was weaponless. It seemed like the entire company except for Carl was firing back. Worse, the Germans could recognize the BAR and direct fire at Carl's position. As the fighting started to shift to one side of the field, Carl was able to clear the fence, grab his gun, and follow the momentum of the action, which was sending the fight to the left side of the village. Carl was running, hitting the ground, running and hitting the ground in short spurts. The fire was so intense, the GIs are scattering and falling to the ground wounded and dead. Moving to his left, Carl could see some GIs seeking cover in a drainage ditch half-filled with some icy water. Carl jumps in the ditch with about a half-dozen other guys from his company. They were up to their waists in icy water, but the ditch allowed them to keep their heads while taking in the situation. Carl was able to observe the GIs fighting from foxholes and trenches and other fixed positions. A few of the GIs with Carl decided to follow the ditch into town. Once into Gartow a sergeant points Carl to a barn-like structure, told him to see if he could find a firing position inside. Carl shoots the padlock off the building, found a type of office on the second floor, but that did give him a

vantage point from which to shoot down on the German foxholes." Now we--the narrative switches from military history and Carl's recollection, then we found in an oral history project an actual first-person recollection from Carl Lavin about what happened. So this is Carl's voice. "I was at the second-story window. I saw a German trying to cross an open field running in the direction of where the main action was. I took a quick shot at him while he was running to try to slow him down. It works, because he hits the ground on a plain open field. I thought that was pretty dumb, that he just lies there and doesn't move. Then I try to decide what to do. Well, he's mine, and I could have him if I wanted. I decide that I will kill him. He's not surrendering. I didn't want to kill him. Do I really want to take a human life having shot at him, and he's just lying there? I decided, 'Well, this is a hell of a time to start to become a conscientious objector.' I finally decided, yes, I would kill him. I'm ashamed to admit the final reason--was gonna be an opportunity to experience of positively killing someone. I wouldn't have to wonder anymore what it felt like to kill someone. I just did. I shot him. He never moved. I had a queasy experience about it ever since. It's the only absolute time I ever positively knew I killed someone. We had a patrol going out the next day, and we went right by the guy I killed. He never moved a muscle. Head down, I picked up his head and felt brains and gore. What it really meant, the position of the head, position of his body, was, my first quick shot where I tried to slow him down had actually hit him in the head. I know it had to be my first shot, because he never moved when he hit the ground. So the whole time I was trying to decide whether I take his life or shouldn't I, in fact I had already taken his life. That thought had struck with me very strongly ever since." So that's the second vignette from the war. And I think like the previous vignette, you get a sense of enormous amount of violence. And there's one, if I can find the final comment here--Carl's final comment. This was Carl's final moment of combat: "Bloody and pointless. Stupid Germans for not surrendering, stupid captain for ordering the assault." So it's good food for thought on that. Let me--let me just offer some closing comments on that, and then I think we can move to questions in a few minutes. I began by saying, look, there are three takeaways from this battle. Let me go back to a few points on that. Hitler says--he tells Manteuffel, his commander, "I've got two weeks." He's projecting--he's projecting, I think, his own system where it's a top-down system onto the alliance structure. The alliance at his point has been in practice in operational activity for several years. So Eisenhower has full command authority. He is the supreme commander Allied Forces in Europe. Eisenhower doesn't have to go back to Franklin Roosevelt or Winston Churchill to ask them what to do. They've empowered him what to do. So Hitler says he has two weeks. Eisenhower, the first day of that assault--December 16--is detaching divisions from Patton and putting them against the German flank. So Hitler has grossly miscalculated the ability of the Americans and Allies to respond to this crisis. So that was an enormous mistake on his part. Another element is when we look at--I mentioned the brutality of the war and touched on Operating Greif. Look, it's kind of interesting what these fellas had to do. When you're taking Wehrmacht soldiers and you're training them to act and behave and talk like American GIs. So for example the German soldiers are told it's okay in uniform to lean against a wall. Where Wehrmacht soldiers can't do that. It's okay in uniform to have your hands in your pockets. Again, German soldiers can't do that. It's okay in uniform to chew gum. Again--so clearly the popular culture in America is far more informal than popular culture in Germany. But one of the elements of the German plan that trips them up is, there's a spelling error in the official US Army ID card that trips them up. But the point to note is the spelling error is in the original US document. The real ID card has the spelling error in it. As the Germans forge the American ID cards, they correct the spelling error. So when you're checking spelling errors, you know that if it's proper American English, it's a forgery. But if it's got the spelling error in it, it's the



real document. So there's just elements of German focus on precision but sometimes missing that big picture that trips them up in the end. So we can get into that part in Q and A and other parts.

(Applause)

Lavin: Thank you.

1: How did your dad adjust when he got back home? Was it easy for him to talk about this, or did you have to drag it out of him?

Lavin: Very much in the latter category. And I would say these are two somewhat-unrelated questions. Maybe they're related. But I think he had a wonderful adjustment, but part of that adjustment was not talking about it. So he had no interest, for example, in seeing a war movie. No interest in watching a Television show that dealt with the war. These were very popular in the 1960s. He would leave the room when they came on. He had no desire to--he went to one or two veterans meetings, but never participated. Never took it beyond that. So he clearly wanted to define or position himself in sort of a post-war world and not have his life defined by the horror of that war. But I think his life was a very happy and successful life. And he never really had it defined by the war. And it was only when this material came out and I approached him and said, "I don't know where you served, I don't know your unit, I don't now what battles you might have been in. I know nothing about--I'd just like to record this so we at least have this for the record." So he never volunteered it, but he wasn't--he didn't fight it either. Once--I mean, he was in his eighties at this point I thought I felt a little more comfortable with it. And I think this is common of that generation--that repression or just locking up a negative experience and not talking about it, not focusing on it. Very different than what we tell veterans today to do, to share, to talk through your problems and so forth. But I think it was very common in the 1940s, 1950s.

Sturch: This is actually a question from backstage. Given that we work for a museum and library that specializes in acquiring military history and sharing these sorts of stories, how would you describe the worth of finding your father's letters and experiences in WWII? What does this mean to you personally?

Lavin: Oh, it's an important journey. Look, I think what's important when we look at the news and we think through foreign policy and military challenges and American defense budget and the forefront of these kinds of issues that concern all of us. I think what's very important as we grapple with that, that we never lose sight of the human element. That when you're making these decisions, you're talking about human beings. And they're teenagers with families and with hopes and with lives to live. We need to be very thoughtful about deployment of force and how we construct our foreign policy, is one of the conclusions. For me personally one of the real joys--you might say somewhat self-evident, but it wasn't to me at the time was, I'd known my father my whole life, but I had only known him in one specific identity, one specific role: that of father. So to realize, to come to the sort of shocking conclusion that everyone's father actually had their own identity before they submerged that into the more important role of that of father is kind of a pleasant surprise in some of these--some of the more colorful moments of the book are nothing to do with the war, but just letters from Carl Lavin to his mother. But if you had told me ten years ago that my father had had--ever had a quarrel or a disagreement with his mother, I would say that's impossible, because of course I'd only knew them as fully-mature adults who never had any particular quarrel or disagreement. But it stands to reason that when one of them was an adolescent and the other one's the mom, yeah, there's gonna be moments where--I mean, she's literally telling him--after he's enlisted, she's literally writing him letters about, how are your grades in school, and I'm concerned you're not studying hard enough. And he's--look, I've signed up and I'm going off to combat, and what are you writing me about here? There's other--they--he writes a note

about--they're in Germany now. They're advanced late in the war, they're in Germany, and they capture some outpost where there's a German military motorcycle. And he said, "I've never ridden a motorcycle before. It's kind of fun, kind of interesting. Each of the guys in the unit sort of took turns. And of course he predictably gets a note from his mom saying, "You've got to be very careful on it." All these guys have been killed, wounded. The last thing on their minds is getting banged up on a motorcycle, but that's--and he has limited patience for his mother's admonitions at this point. So it's amusing to say there's something almost transcendental about teenagers that they've got this set of skills and sometimes uneven judgment and their own opinion and emotions on top of that. So I'll give you one vignette that happens the same day. This squad is told by the sergeant--same sergeant--this squad is told, "Hey, we've seen movement on a tree line, we've seen some movement on a tree line." Well, we know what that is. It's a German patrol. There's no tourists. There's no farmers. You see people moving around out there on the tree line. So he says, "I need you guys--four of you guys get your rifle and go check that out." And all four of them grab rifles and go check that out. They come back a few hours later and say, "We had no encounter." But what was impressive about that little vignette is, these are teenagers told to go up on that hill, and nobody shirks or complains. Nobody says, "I did it last time." Nobody says, "I'm not gonna do it." Nobody says, "I'm tired." And this is an encounter, Carl tells us, where you'd have fifty percent casualties. I mean, they'd go up there and half of them would be killed. So it's very impressive discipline and sort of patriotism from these kids. That same day these guys come back. Fine, no encounter. We're all back at our encampment. That same day a battalion medical officer comes by. And he's got their medical jackets, and he says, "Hey, some of you guys are behind on your shots." He says across the whole unit everybody's yelling and complaining and lying and hiding and saying you got the wrong guy, and I got my shots. Guys literally hide from the medical officer. So this is the sort of teenage mind that, look, when the stakes are high and your country's calling you to do something that is life or death, you need to do it. But when the stakes are low and it's just some figure in authority saying I need to give you measles shots, they say, you know, you don't, and I don't need to take measles shots, and I'll say anything I can to avoid that. So you have these incredible moments of high sense of duty with sort of adolescent cunning all stapled together in the same human being.

Grasmehr: You mentioned in the book that he's enrolled in the ASTP program at a college in New York. Had the army indicated, since he wasn't really thrilled about the concept of being infantry, one takes--had the army indicated if he completed ASTP he would be utilized in a certain way? Or was he hoping he would be utilized in some other way other than infantry?

Lavin: Yeah. Look, the ASTP program is a sort of well-intentioned program, but we have to be honest here and say it was probably ill conceived or ultimately a failure. But the idea was to say, if we've got universal military conscription and we're taking everybody into service, we don't have the right ratio of trained people to foot soldiers. And it was George Marshall's idea from WWI experience to say we need engineers and university graduates and medical professionals in our army. We can't just drag kids out of high school and expect to win the war. So we're gonna have a cadre of people we send to university and get them trained up, and that's ASTP--Army Specialized Training Program. And these guys are placed in schools all around the country, and Carl is sent to Queens College New York. First time in New York City. So the idea I think is a well-founded idea. What happens then are a few things. It starts at the end of--the end of '43. As US forces are in combat in North Africa and casualties are being taken, there's definitely a mood that sours on the ASTP idea, 'cause, you said, you've got these guys in the army, but some of them are just college boys. What's going on here? This is

unfair. And then the breaking point comes, it's something like April, March/April '44 because if you look at what's happening to US Army personnel needs from the start of the war at Pearl Harbor through then, it's just a gradual enlargement of criteria, population criteria, and a gradual shrinking of deferment. So for example, in 1941 when the draft was installed, you needed to have all ten digits on your hand. That is reduced. They have a demarcation to say you don't need ten, you need nine, you need eight. So that's—you needed to have a certain number of teeth, which sounds arbitrary, but somebody determined that you needed to have so many real teeth to be in the army. Again, that's reduced. So they keep saying, "We'll sort of take anybody who can carry a gun. You're okay." But what happens--but ranks are depleted. Remember I said eight million in uniform at one time, but sixteen million total people in uniform, and there's just not a population base. What happens in March/April '44 is a recommendation goes to Marshall to say, "We've got to start drafting married men, and we've got to start drafting married men with kids." And so everybody says, "Look, this is gonna be electric. This is just going to be huge. Huge discussion point, controversy, political problem. If we have to go down this path," which we did eventually, "We have to first cancel this ASTP program. We're not gonna have these kids in college and take somebody away from their wife or their kids and say, 'you've got to go into combat,' while somebody else is in school." So they basically ended that program. And to your question, they simply returned these people to general infantry. So while it had been set up with aspirations, these people are set for leadership, everybody's just sent back to the regular ranks. So they missed opportunities for unit leadership that they would have normally gotten in the course of a year or two of training. They normally would have advanced in their unit to sergeant or corporal or some technical sergeant or some kind. So in a way it was sort of backwards--you needed up being the worse off for being in that program rather than better off. So it was a misplaced effort.

Sturch: Thanks for a wonderful look into Carl's service.

Lavin: Thank you for having me. May I take a minute and beg people's attention for a final anecdote, a final vignette?

Sturch: Please.

Lavin: If I can find this. So it's the summer of 1945, and the war is over in Europe. Not in Japan yet. And Carl's in the occupation in Germany. And you're looking as an American in Europe at the wreckage. Fifty million people killed, countries destroyed, economies destroyed, societies destroyed in Europe, which from an American perspective had always been viewed as the cradle of civilization--the birthplace of the industrial revolution, the birthplace of scientific revolution, the birthplace of the democratic process and so forth. And so how can one of the most advanced societies in the world have come to such a disastrous ending? And what can we take away from this? And this I think gripped everybody in the summer of 1945--what's next and what can we learn from this? Carl goes to the division library, and he picks up a book that was a huge best-seller at the time and is still in the syllabus of many college courses, and it's Will Durant's *History of Philosophy*, where Durant has nine chapters in which he has a chapter on Plato, on Socrates, and Aristotle. And we know all this now--now we're back to looking at some interesting letters. We know this because Carl is sharing this with his mother. And he said, "The philosopher who speaks to me is Spinoza and makes me think of what the role of government, what the role of state is, and what society we want." So that's great because we can go get the book, and we can read what Spinoza tells us. And here's Spinoza helping us think through the wreckage of Nazi tyranny. Spinoza's comment is, "The last end of the state is not to dominate men, nor to restrain them by fear. Rather it is to free each man from fear, that he may live and act with full security and without injury to himself or his neighbor. The end of the state, I repeat, is not to make rational

beings into brute beasts and machines. It is to enable their bodies and their minds to function safely. It is to lead men to live by and to exercise a free reason, that they may not waste their strength in hatred, anger, and guile, nor act unfairly toward one another. Thus the need of the state is really liberty," which is not a bad lesson to take out of the wreckage and destruction of the Second World War. Thank you so much for your time and your questions. It was a delight to come.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to Ambassador Frank Lavin for an outstanding discussion, and to Ohio University Press for sponsoring this program. The book is *From Home Front to Battlefield: An Ohio Teenager in World War II*, and it is published by Ohio University Press. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit in person or online at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)

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(Theme music)

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