

Peel Biog Bk. Jan 22 86 Ouellette, Leo

# Battle lost, but war rages on

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When I arrived at his Port Credit apartment last week, Leo Ouellette, 64, husband, father, grandfather, and former coach in the Mississauga Hockey League system, was in full battle dress — slacks, shirt, slippers, and reading glasses.

He was mad, sure; but was also glad to see me.

"Come in, Rick," he said. "Sit down. Take your coat? Coffee?"

Then came the mad part.

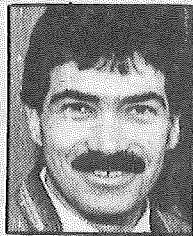
"Now read this! Can you believe it? And this. Why are they doing this to me?"

Leo was bunkered behind a wall of files, graphs, documents, newspaper clippings and letters. His apartment, small and cosy with a view of Lakeshore Rd., is operational headquarters for his \$4-million lawsuit against the Sunnybrook Medical Centre and its University of Toronto Clinic.

Claiming that they have "maliciously misdiagnosed and misrepresented his medical condition," which has prevented him from getting a full disability pension from Veterans' Affairs, Leo is at war, not with the Nazi hordes he once helped to defeat, but with a more frustrating foe — the bureaucracy.

Because of their bumbling, their cold-heartedness, he claims he lost his job, his home, his very name. He says he is one of the many suffering veterans whom time, and a new generation of leaders, have ignored.

The first thing you should know about Leo is his background. A French Canadian New Brunswicker, he grew up fast, poor, and had to work hard for a living. That left him with two qualities, both important in his war: a



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fighting spirit and a never-say-die attitude. He won't quit. Ever.

"This is," he declared, "my 45-year war!"

How did it come to this — Leo, armed and dangerous, submitting a 32-page claim against Sunnybrook with the Supreme Court of Ontario, and the doctors and psychiatrists clinging to the notion that Leo is nothing more than a pitiful little man who has nothing organically wrong with him?

Leo takes me into his bunker, a converted bedroom stuffed full of files and documents. "Here," he says. "Read this. And this. And this."

Like most journalists, I don't like to take sides in litigation. Besides, it takes time and patience to wade through doctors' reports, letters from Ottawa, and statements from lawyers. I have little patience but less time. So, I say, "Sit down, Leo, and tell me your story."

Here's what he says happened . . .

It was December 5, 1944. The Allies — Canadian, American, and British troops — were sweeping up the boot of Italy, smashing the

German Army in the process. Leo, young, short, skinny, and barely able to fill his regulation Royal Canadian Engineers uniform, was helping clear land mines, building bridges, and fighting Germans.

Five days earlier, the troops had passed Monte Cassino, a historic monastery blown to bits by the Allies. Today it was the Montone River area, another dot on the map, another town to clear in the never-ending battle to reclaim a continent.

The day was bright and warm, unlike a December day in Canada. Leo was in a jaunty mood and perched himself on the back of a truck to talk to a fellow soldier. Then, suddenly, a blast; like the earth had opened up. Leo remembers the jolt, his body being flung, but nothing else. His soldier friend? Dead. Leo lay 50 feet from the explosion. He had landed and lived. But the land mine had blown the truck apart.

He spent the next month in hospital. He suffered a concussion, there was a ringing in his ears, his throat and ears hurt, but other than a few other minor injuries and severe headaches, he was okay. Or so he thought.

Fast forward to 1985. Since that blast, Leo has had a series of visits to doctors' offices, hospitals, and the Sunnybrook Medical Centre. He says he is sick. In his 32-page claim to the Supreme Court, he states 26 different problems. They include: myofascial back strain, chest pain, musculoskeletal pain, night sweats, lightheadedness, vertigo, traumatic arthritis, severe concussion, temporal lobe epilepsy, colon bleeding, permanent throat pain and too many more to list here.

Although he claims a 10 per cent pension from the government for an ear and elbow problem, that's it. They don't buy his litany of woe. They say Leo's problem is psychosomatic, not organic. They've sent him to a number of psychiatrists, and, although they say things like, ". . . a pitiful little man to whom no one listens," there is "no thought of schizophrenic disorder (that) could be detected."

Leo claims Veterans' Affairs, the Sunnybrook Clinic, someone, is withholding facts, medical records, or both.

"I want to clear my name," he says. Leo also says the three numb fingers in his left hand are not figments of his imagination. Neither is the "clicking or cracking" sensation around the middle area of his skull. Or the severe headaches. Or the pain in his throat, eyes, elbows, neck.

A few years back, Leo lost his \$30,000-a-year job as a construction engineer because of his time in hospitals. Then he lost his home. His legal battle has cost \$4,000 so far.

So why is he doing it? Is he a hypochondriac, a man tilting at windmills in hopes of gaining attention, as the psychiatrists seem to claim. Or is he a suffering veteran who really is sick?

I don't know. But I do know this: the American People's Encyclopedia has an interesting point to make on bomb blast victims.

"In some blast deaths, there is no external injury and even an autopsy may not reveal any internal injury seemingly serious enough to have caused death . . ."