

Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The War Years at Dartmouth
Interview with Howard B. Leavitt '43
By Mary Stelle Donin
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DONIN: How is it you ended up going to Dartmouth? Did you have family that had gone ahead of you there? Or how did you decide to go to Dartmouth?

LEAVITT: My father was a Dartmouth graduate. And ever since I was four years old, he had brainwashed me like no one should ever be brainwashed. So that when I came to apply for Dartmouth.... Now if I had not gotten into Dartmouth, I would've been in big trouble. And my dad—pardon me, Father, in your enthusiasm you may have taken a risk that I could not... But I got into Dartmouth, and so the question is irrelevant.

DONIN: So that was the only school you applied to?

LEAVITT: I think so.

DONIN: Wow! Well, that was common I think in those days. So you'd seen—

LEAVITT: Well, I think the fact that I had relatives who went to Dartmouth because my grandfather went to Dartmouth. In those days, that helped.

DONIN: Yes. Had you visited it before you actually enrolled there? Did he bring you back for football games?

LEAVITT: I don't think so, no.

DONIN: But you were growing up in New Hampshire, so it's not like you were....

LEAVITT: No, I grew up many places. I grew up overseas in Lebanon. My dad was an administrator in the American University of Beirut. And so I spent quite a bit of time there. Then I went to Newton High School for a year. So I'd been back and forth quite a bit. The background in Beirut, Lebanon, my great-grandfather was the founder of the American University of Beirut. And he was a missionary. And then

he quit the mission in order to pick up an academic career, and was the first president of the American University. Which has had a... The university in Lebanon has had a great deal of influence because it's been about the only way in which local Arabs could get a view of United States culture. And so it was really a precious institution.

DONIN: So your father carried that on, carried on the connection.

LEAVITT: Yes.

DONIN: And did you as well?

LEAVITT: What do you mean?

DONIN: I mean did you go and be an administrator there as well?

LEAVITT: No. But after I got my Ph.D. from Columbia, I was asked as a visiting professor to teach out there. So I taught for two years.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

LEAVITT: And it was one of the most satisfying teaching jobs I ever had. For one reason: women had only newly been admitted into higher education. And therefore the women that were there, that I taught, I have never seen more dedicated and motivated students because they knew that they were at the forefront. And I've never said before nor since had such satisfying teaching because these women were determined to show that they could do it. It was a very meaningful experience to me.

DONIN: They really wanted to be there.

LEAVITT: Yes. So many the time, later on, I kept saying to myself, I wish I could get some of those AUB students back.

DONIN: Yes. Okay. So let's go back, though, to let's see 1939, when you matriculated at Dartmouth. What was the experience like? I mean, did you go through all the sort of traditional hazing and wearing a beanie and....

LEAVITT: Wearing a beanie and the hazing wasn't too bad. It was irritating.

DONIN: Right.

LEAVITT: But I didn't like it, and when I was a sophomore, I did not indulge.

DONIN: So you didn't join a fraternity?

LEAVITT: No.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

LEAVITT: No.

DONIN: What's that like socially? What was that like socially to not join in that Greek life then?

LEAVITT: I think bad. And I was—a little personal incident. I was asked to—my best friend, Brad Copeland, who was my roommate later on, joined Sigma Chi. And so Sigma Chi made me an offer. So I quickly sent a cable to my dad in Beirut saying, I need \$200. And he said, "Sorry, I don't have it." So later on when I was asked again— No, so then I decided I was going to join anyway, and that I would work extra hard on summers to get that 200 bucks. So then I told Sigma Chi, here I come. And they said, "Sorry, we have filled your place." And that was one of the big disappointments in my life.

DONIN: Yes.

LEAVITT: But this guy who invited me into Sigma Chi but became my roommate, Brad Copeland, and just as an aside, later on he went to medical school and he became the inventor of the method of measuring cholesterol. And he received worldwide acclaim because that was a huge discovery. And he was the one that did it. So all these years he was my best friend and roommate, I've been consorting with the world's first discoverer of this invention.

DONIN: Oh, amazing! Did he go to Dartmouth Medical School?

LEAVITT: Yes.

DONIN: For two years and then moved on to somewhere else.

LEAVITT: Yes, yes. And he was a very, very quiet person, self-effacing. And to my regret, Dartmouth never recognized the fact. They should have given him an honorary degree.

DONIN: I should think so.

LEAVITT: But he was so modest that he wouldn't take any initiative to let people know. So Dartmouth didn't know about it. Anyway, that's a little side issue.

DONIN: Yes, interesting.

LEAVITT: So, yes. I missed on social activities. And I regret it. But I don't— Some people say I didn't miss anything; some people say I did. So I don't know what the answer is.

DONIN: How did you make your friends if not through the fraternity? How did you make friends?

LEAVITT: Oh, just—How do you make friends anywhere else? Classes and....

DONIN: Other activities?

LEAVITT: Sure.

DONIN: What did you do for fun?

LEAVITT: Well, I had a lot of athletics. I played squash.

DONIN: Oh, did you. Ah-ha.

LEAVITT: I played soccer. Mountain climbing.

DONIN: Were you in the DOC, the Outing Club?

LEAVITT: Yes, indeed. Yes. And I roamed with the president. And one of the most spectacular achievements at Dartmouth, freshman year you had to sign up for physical education, something sport. So I signed up for cliff climbing. And we drove across the river. And if you know your terrain, if you turn north, on Route 5, is that it?

DONIN: Yes.

LEAVITT: About a mile, there's some great cliffs.

DONIN: Oh.

- LEAVITT: And so we would go there week after week. And we had more fun and learned to do some very dangerous things.
- DONIN: Yes, I bet.
- LEAVITT: Scaling down a cliff backwards.
- DONIN: Oh!
- LEAVITT: Rappelling.
- DONIN: But did you have leaders that were not students? I mean did you have....
- LEAVITT: Oh, yes. Oh, of course. We were very well trained by a professor, I suppose, or someone from the athletic department.
- DONIN: Right.
- LEAVITT: So this was a lot of fun. And I remember, for a short hike we used to hike Mt. Moosilauke.
- DONIN: Oh, yes.
- LEAVITT: And go out and take overnight bicycle trips. And so I had a lot of outdoor fun. So Dartmouth... I regard Dartmouth as my place because Dartmouth is an outdoor college.
- DONIN: It certainly is.
- LEAVITT: And I loved it.
- DONIN: Yes. And at that age, did you know—When you first started there, did you know what you were going to major in?
- LEAVITT: I knew what I was not going to major in. My dad was an educator, and I said I am never, never going to follow my dad. And I was an English major. I didn't know what I wanted to do. In junior year I took a course: Education III, because the reputation of this man was so great. And I took this very reluctantly because I was going to have nothing to do with teaching. This man changed my life because he was a person who believed that the way you teach is to open up with a challenging statement. And then let the students battle it out. And instead of the professor making remarks, you urge

this person. And I never dreamed that this was possible, where students would be the [inaudible] and the professor's role was to needle you to respond to someone else's question and to respond to here. So the whole class was just abuzz with the ideas. And the professor kind of sat back and did nothing but needle. It was a great....

DONIN: And it worked. It inspired.

LEAVITT: I was so inspired. So then I took the education courses that were required for teacher certification and hated them. They were so boring. Then I did student teaching at Hanover High School.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

LEAVITT: And I taught farm kids from Vermont, and that was a tremendous experience because the professor I had said—if you'll pardon me—he said, "You're the best student teacher that Dartmouth's ever had." Which of course was a lie. But anyway, that was very.... So then I looked back at my experience, and I said, "I'm going to go into teacher education because these very poor courses I had in education, I can do better than that. I can design some courses better. I can design courses that would feed in and improve student teaching. So I made my decision to go into teacher education, and that's what I did for half of my career.

DONIN: That's terrific. I mean does that....

LEAVITT: It shows one professor can make a difference.

DONIN: Right.

LEAVITT: There was a Professor Burns, and he was using the Socratic method. It doesn't usually work because professors are egotists by and large.

DONIN: Yes.

LEAVITT: And they want to be... They want to show off their knowledge. And to sit back and let people go at it, very carefully and tactfully inserting additional information where it's needed, but then quickly turning it back to you and shutting up is a skill. So I did that all my career. I mean I did a lot of that by needling people. And the students are overwhelmed with satisfaction. They just love it when

their professor is giving them credit for ideas and gently steering them into a different direction. And Professor Burns really changed my life.

DONIN: And you went on to change the life of lots of other potential students.

LEAVITT: Maybe. Who knows? You'll have to interview them.

DONIN: Right. [Laughter]

LEAVITT: But I've encountered these typical education courses which are hated by most students. And I tried my very best to make them more... At the same time, there is some things you have to learn about teaching. What the laws are. What the teacher's liability is. One the other hand, it's possible to make these courses some to life and I think I did it.

DONIN: Well done. Thank you Professor Burns, right?

LEAVITT: Here's an example of how one professor had a tremendous impact on a life. Because I had sworn to my dad I'm never going to go near a school.

DONIN: He must have been delighted, your dad.

LEAVITT: He was delighted, yes.

DONIN: Did you—I know a lot of students in those days had jobs, had part-time jobs. Did you have a part-time job?

LEAVITT: Sure. I was waiting on tables at Thayer Hall.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

LEAVITT: Oh, I had a lot of fun.

DONIN: And you got meals for free, as well, didn't you?

LEAVITT: Yes, yes.

DONIN: Any memories of President Hopkins? Do you remember matriculating with him in a ceremony?

LEAVITT: No, my memories are negative. Excuse me if I may be frank.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

LEAVITT: Hopkins I think was in his last year. I regarded him, I think wrongly, as a remote person who didn't care about students. We never saw him. I never shook his hand. And in fact, I don't think I ever heard him speak. So as far as I'm concerned, we had no president. And I hope you don't mind my being frank.

DONIN: No.

LEAVITT: Because everyone that I hear praises Hopkins to the sky. I don't.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

LEAVITT: And Dickey came right after, and I was always jealous of what Dickey did in that international course that he had.

DONIN: Right.

LEAVITT: So I feel kind of cheated. On the other hand, people do come to the end of their career. I think he just....

DONIN: He was getting there.

LEAVITT: Yes. But he was irrelevant to me. So I don't mind. I don't criticize him in public. You're the first person that's asked me. I concentrated on people like Professor Burns who made my day and Hopkins was a nobody. On the other hand, nowadays since I've been involved in Dartmouth affairs a great deal, I'm very jealous that the activity, for example, of President Wright and the way he gets to know people. I'm sure he makes an impact on people's lives. [...]

DONIN: So, do you remember, though... You were there in 1941 in December, Pearl Harbor Day. Do you remember that day?

LEAVITT: I can never forget it. I was waiting on table. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. And I know exactly what part of Thayer Hall. I was standing with a tray in my hand waiting on people. And I went over to the radio which was turned on. And I can locate exactly where that was in Thayer Hall. And then heard President Roosevelt say we are at war. It was quite a shock.

DONIN: And did Hopkins call the campus together to do a speech of any kind?

LEAVITT: I don't think so. I don't think so at all. His Dean Neidlinger, we saw him quite a bit.

DONIN: Yes.

LEAVITT: But he had the reputation of being a real tough guy, and we were scared of him. And we didn't want to go near him. He was a real toughie. But that job requires some people some who need some tough handling.

DONIN: He was sort of the disciplinarian, wasn't he?

LEAVITT: Right. That's the right word. And so while one could admire... I mean, there are some— Everyone agrees there are some bad apples, students, and we were glad to see Neidlinger handle them. But as long as we didn't get involved. [Laughter] And thank goodness I didn't.

DONIN: Many people have said, you know, you did not want to be requested to come see the dean. That was very scary.

LEAVITT: Right. Because it would be bad news.

DONIN: After December 7th, was there lots of talk among your classmates of enlisting?

LEAVITT: Oh, yes. Yes. And there were some students who panicked. I shouldn't use the word panicked. But felt so strongly they immediately left campus and signed up.

DONIN: Wow!

LEAVITT: And in retrospect what they did may not have been wise because those of us who stayed on, we had to enlist. But then, to our great surprise, the military developed these officer training programs which we all entered, and this was a big deal because we got paid, we got status, we got... And these people who had raced off got private, and they missed the entire officer.... That was a huge, unexpected—that they would make us officers.

DONIN: So what happened to you specifically? What did you do?

LEAVITT: We all went to register immediately for the draft.

DONIN: With your home draft board, right?

LEAVITT: Yes, yes. And if one didn't do anything, you were then eligible for the draft and you had no idea whether your number.... Well, I've forgotten what my number was because immediately the Navy moved in. And the Navy targeted Ivy League colleges, I think. And they wanted to get officers fast, and they didn't have time to select from all the colleges. So they took a chance that the Ivy League would produce a better officer. And I won't say whether that's true or not. But anyway, at this end, they said if you sign up, we will defer you. We'll let you finish college if you speed up and graduate early. Then the president did something very smart. He said, "We will then give you a summer—so long as you come to summer school, you can graduate in December. So that was very favorable. A lot of people signed up for that.

DONIN: Yes, they started running year round right away I think.

LEAVITT: I think so, too. Right. But what it meant was somewhat amazing. Because when I graduated in December '42 and had to immediately go to officers' training, 95 of my classmates were all shipped off to Notre Dame midshipmen's school.

DONIN: With you?

LEAVITT: With me. I was with them. And so at Notre Dame there were four months of officers' training. And here you had your old buddies, 95 Dartmouth.... I think there must have been about 500 students in this, and 95 of them were Dartmouth classmates. So this was really a Dartmouth officers' training program.

DONIN: So you were there for four months with all these Dartmouth guys?

LEAVITT: Yes, yes.

DONIN: That's terrific. Did that happen with groups going to other schools together as well? I mean, were there other places where bunches of Dartmouth guys went together?

- LEAVITT: Now, I'm not sure. I think so. But nothing like this one. This was a great big... I think the answer there is yes, but in many smaller numbers. Because I think that for some reason when we, in December '42, the Navy needed people fast. And so they took a big hunk. And Dartmouth agreed, so they just grabbed Dartmouth. Unusual experience.
- DONIN: Between December of '41 and when you graduated in December of '42, the class—the college—must have shrunk because kids went off.
- LEAVITT: I don't think so. Because not many people—
- DONIN: Went off and enlisted.
- LEAVITT: —fast.
- DONIN: Uh-huh.
- LEAVITT: The Navy moved in quickly. And I think that almost all.... The Navy and the Army.
- DONIN: Yes.
- LEAVITT: They had their own program. And I'm almost certain that most of our class waited.
- DONIN: Stayed around.
- LEAVITT: Yes. That was a pretty good deal to graduate and not have to use deferment.
- DONIN: Right.
- LEAVITT: So I think we all graduated.
- DONIN: So life sort of continued on pretty normally for you then.
- LEAVITT: No. No, because of the classes. We had to... If we signed up for this Navy thing, we had to take certain classes like Navigation 101 and 102, Naval Orientation. There were two or three others. So anyway, that really... I was an English major studying 17th century poets.

DONIN: Yes.

LEAVITT: And I was very restless. And I started off—I chose my English major because freshman year one had to take two semesters of English. And I chose a year's worth of the great novels in about six or seven countries. Six or seven countries' greatest novels. And I've been a reader all my life, and I was just carried away. You read the top French novels, German novels, Russian novels.

DONIN: Oh.

LEAVITT: And I got this international... The comparison of novels. It was my first introduction to international which I spent career doing. So I decided to major in English. Then we started to deal with the 17th-century British poets and the 18th-century playwrights. And then quickly came these naval courses. And frankly, I deeply regretted majoring in English because what I had was older professors. They believed in art for art's sake. And they didn't show— Reading Shakespeare, they didn't show how it revealed American life. They were art for art's sake. You study Hamlet for the sake of Hamlet. I had one professor who taught me Dante. I would never have taken a course in Dante unless this professor hadn't taken *The Inferno* or Dante's *Inferno* and pointed it out. I don't know if you know the book where people are relegated to circles in Hell. What he did was if Dante were writing today, what current Americans would he have assigned to each circle in Hell? Which was very creative. Very clever. And what it did, it proved beyond doubt that Dante was onto something. Dante was on to a very deep concept of punishment that came alive to us. Now why didn't other professors do that? They did not do it.

DONIN: Who were the ones teaching these naval courses? Did they import officers?

LEAVITT: They imported—yes—they imported people there. Yes.

DONIN: So it was a combination of continuing your liberal arts training—

LEAVITT: And they don't combine too well, especially with.... Now, if I'd majored in sociology, which I should have, I think I would have seen more relationship between naval orientation and navigation. But since we were all aiming for a dangerous war, and these courses were 100 percent different, it was easy to leave these English

courses behind and concentrate on these courses which might save your life, you know.

DONIN: Right. Exactly.

LEAVITT: So let's put it this way: In looking back, I don't think that I had a very good sustained English major at Dartmouth. Even though this first freshman year was a tremendous experience, with the top novels. Doesn't that sound like an interesting thing?

DONIN: Wonderful. What a great way to spend a year.

LEAVITT: And the professors who taught that must have had deep insights into the international differences, the cultural differences between. And that's what got me started on a teacher education plus international career.

DONIN: Right. But then that got interrupted with this naval training.

LEAVITT: Sure. Well, I came out a much more mature person. When I got out of Dartmouth, I was tired of books. I spent three years in the Navy. My deal in the Navy, you deal with a lower class of people who are not readers. I was on Saipan Island after the war was over, I was stuck there for seven... bored stiff. And I searched high and low for the most esoteric books I could read because I was bored.

DONIN: Sure.

LEAVITT: When I came back, I plunged into graduate school, and I can remember the great thrill of being back among people that you can argue with at the idea level, and I read.... So in a way, I was ready for graduate school. It makes me think you shouldn't go to graduate school until you've been around a bit, knocked around. And then you're ready. I feel very strongly about that. [...] I got my degree in education and sociology at Columbia. And I had to teach for two years, so I left Columbia to teach in Tenafly High School. [...]

DONIN: What was your overall take on the quality of the teaching there that you received? I mean I know Professor Burns was spectacular. But....

LEAVITT: Mixed. I had some very poor professors. They were old. Let me give you— If I may be frank, let me give you an example of a poor

professor. This was of course in English literature, and you had to write papers. And I wrote a paper, spent a lot of time on it. Did it under pressure because they wanted you to work... And I got it returned: C+. No comment of any kind. I had no idea why I got a C+. I'm sure I deserved it. No comment, no way to improve because I didn't know what it was. No chance to talk to the professor. Now I call that bad teaching. I think that's terrible. Now that didn't happen very often. But it happened once, and it shocked me and made me very angry. So, there were a few of those. On the other hand, I had some English teachers who were terrific. And I had this Dante professor and Professor Burns. And a lot of good ones, and a lot of intermediate ones. So I would say that in general, my experience was good and bad. But I can't help mentioning that someone gave me a C+ without any help at all. That guy should have been fired.

DONIN: Shows very little effort on his part. Now did you get to have— Because you graduated in December of '42, did you get any sort of graduation... Was there any sort of graduation ceremony?

LEAVITT: There was a dinner.

DONIN: But a large portion of the class was graduating, right?

LEAVITT: Right. We had a huge dinner. And you know what? I think maybe Hopkins may have said something. But my guess is that he meant so little to us that we didn't pay attention to the speech. The editor, what was his name? The editor of the *New York Times* was brought up to give the speech. What's his name? I should know it.

DONIN: So should I.

LEAVITT: Salinger.

DONIN: Oh, Sulzberger.

LEAVITT: Sulzberger, of course. Good for you. And all our attention was on him because he was talking about the war effort. And, you know, somehow we were passing Dartmouth. Psychologically we were leaving Dartmouth and picking up our new career. And so we were much more interested in what Sulzberger had to say about the war because we were really pointed at the war. And who knew? We knew anything could happen in the war.

- DONIN: And you were all so young. How old were you? 18? 19?
- LEAVITT: Twenty. I was born in 1921, so I was 21. [...]
- DONIN: So, overall, your experience, did you feel it was marred by the fact that the US had entered the war? Did you feel your Dartmouth experience was marred? They shut down the fraternities?
- LEAVITT: That didn't bother me at all. I look back with very negative feelings about a certain number of very older English professors who were teaching us what I thought was nonsense. And I still have some questions as to whether 17-century British poets should be given as a general course. I think that's a specialty course. And as I say, I have mixed feelings about Dartmouth. I mean obviously it's a great place, and I'm glad I went there. But I can be critical. Should have done better. No, because the war really messed things up. And Dartmouth probably did very well in arranging this speed-up. And this bringing in courses must have thrown the faculty off base. And that was handled, as far as I could tell, very smoothly. [...] Do you want me to talk about student reaction to the war?
- DONIN: Yes, that would be great. I know there was a block of, you know, isolationists.
- LEAVITT: Right.
- DONIN: And a block of interventionists.
- LEAVITT: Right. And this was quite during the first year. This was a source of.... Would you like to know my feelings?
- DONIN: Yes.
- LEAVITT: I had been overseas and had been in Europe and had even bought photographs of Hitler and Mussolini in Italy. And so believe it or not, when I came to Dartmouth, when war broke out, I didn't know which way to go. My father wanted me to join the military. My mother wanted me to be a conscientious objector. So I was just pulled. Now believe it or not, what I was aware of that after World War I, Germany, the Allies, punished Germany pretty cruelly. I think everyone agrees about that. And I was aware of that. Therefore, when Hitler made his move, this factor was part of my memory, that maybe these Allies deserved it because Hitler—not Hitler—

Germany was given huge, huge reparations levied on them. Reparations so big that the country couldn't survive. I was aware of that. And so part of my attitude towards World War II was, these Allies are asking again for payback. I mean this is a minor thought of mine. And I remember thinking about that. And debating with classmates all the time: Yes, go in or not. And what finally made me sign up, were several things: One is the feeling that I had been chosen to be an officer was very flattering—very flattering. The money was much more and etc. Another thing was that—I've forgotten what I was going to say. Oh, the spirit. I'll never forget what the war did to the country at large. The country just came together. And I've never in my life felt such patriotism and people wanting to help the troops. And I had an experience, both before graduating and after graduating. I was hitchhiking. Before the war started, hitchhiking was, you know, 20 minutes. After the war started, the average time to have your thumb out was five seconds. Everybody wanted to help the troops if you had a uniform on. And I have never since then felt this unanimity. Especially now the country looks broken apart. But I'll never forget that sense of pride of being part of the country.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

LEAVITT: One time I was on a troop train going to California, going overseas. And the train was full of GIs. And the train suddenly stopped in the middle of Kansas in a deserted place in a tiny little town. And the question was, why in the hell are we stopping in this godforsaken little town? We stopped. We were told to get off. And there on the platform every member of the town had showed up with a huge table with every last goody in town. Doughnuts and even babies were there. And this was a show of pride for the military. And it was a very, very moving experience. They all cared so much that they had stopped the train, brought all these eats out, and then brought their little babies to shake hands with the GIs.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

LEAVITT: And that's an example of the tremendous solidarity that they had that's never been shown since. That was the last time. And maybe never again will that be such a, will the world be... It was a popular war.

DONIN: It was that.

LEAVITT: So one more thing we talked about. We talked about, some of us at Dartmouth, about how the state was manipulating us, and we talked about how the state produces medals in order to fool us into thinking that we're doing brave things. And we didn't hear too much of that because we all got swept away. But nevertheless, some of us were a little bit aware that we were being manipulated and this was a government war, and why we were involved? And the state was generating this hoopla in order to use us. But that soon died down because of this overpowering flattery that you were needed and you were wanted to help your country.

DONIN: And if you had to describe Dartmouth at that point in terms of which side they were on, was it more popular to want to go to war or less?

LEAVITT: Oh, yes, no doubt. Because Dartmouth had to. Oh, no, everything was to make the war. I have no idea what Hopkins was thinking or the pressures on him. I never thought about that before. I don't think the college could have considered isolationism.

[End of interview]