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Feature Article

Major General Carroll LeTellier: A Brief History of His Service to Our Country



Armed with his rifle, Carroll LeTellier stepped ashore in Korea and was informed that North Koreans were infiltrating into South Korea. He asked about ammunition and was told that he would have to solve that problem himself; this was LeTellier's welcome to the Korean War. But he had intimate knowledge of the military lifestyle long before this incident. Mr. LeTellier grew up in a military environment. In his recent interview with me, Mr. LeTellier spoke about many of his experiences, including his childhood at The Citadel, his life as a cadet, his military career, his transition to civilian life, and the impact that a Citadel education has had on his life overall.

Carroll LeTellier moved onto the current Citadel campus in 1931 as a three-year-old boy. His father was a Professor at the school, and LeTellier continued to live on the campus until his graduation in 1949. He said that he is not sure he would have been as successful in school if "they didn't lock me up in barracks and make me study at night."

Having earned his Bachelor Degree in Civil Engineering, LeTellier joined the United States Army and went to Fort Riley, Kansas, for training. He then moved to Fort Belvoir for the

Engineer Basic Course; he completed the course in 1950. He recalled receiving orders to move to Japan for a two-year tour and stopping in Manhattan, Kansas, where he attended church while stationed at Fort Riley. LeTellier said that the rector of the church informed him that the United States was at war before anyone else had. In fact, when LeTellier asked with whom we were fighting, it was the Rector who told him of war in Korea. “Where’s that? I did not even know. I had never heard of Korea in my life, but in short while—in less than a month—I knew where Korea was: I was there,” said LeTellier.

Arriving in Korea with weapons and no ammunition was just the beginning of the Korean War for Mr. LeTellier. After arriving in the country by boat, he boarded a train that was to take him north where he was to join his assigned unit. The train ride was an interesting experience for LeTellier; he says that the “train engineer ... did not know how to speak English, and so every time the train would stop, the Army commander on the train would get a party, which I was always a part of, and we would go out and secure the area close to the train, and all of the sudden the train would begin to move and we would all run and catch the train.” Despite these challenges, LeTellier arrived at his destination and joined the 25th Infantry Division.

Mr. LeTellier served in several different units in Korea until he was given command over the 77th – a Black engineer company. He was still a Lieutenant when he assumed command of the company and began to wonder why he had not been promoted to a Captain like his peers, who assumed Company Command positions after he did. He said that he began “wondering whether I parted my hair on the wrong side.” He later learned “that you could not get promoted—the local rules were that you could not get promoted until you were 23 years old to Captain, and also there had to be a vacancy at that time. Fortunately I got promoted on my birthday.” Not long after that, LeTellier left Korea.

Mr. LeTellier worked as an instructor for schools within the Army and then earned his Master's Degree from MIT. After obtaining his degree, LeTellier was stationed in Germany. It was there that he received an unusual request to calculate how long it would take for him to pack and be in a town near Frankfurt. He said he could be there in four hours, but he was told to just come the next morning. When he arrived, he found out that he was going to Lebanon, where he spent two months.

After his time in Lebanon, LeTellier returned to Germany and then rotated back to the United States. He then deployed to Vietnam for his first tour there. He spent that tour working out of Saigon, and the day he left was also “the first day that the Vietcong attacked American facilities.” It was not long before LeTellier returned to Vietnam for a second tour. He says that his tours were completely different because when he returned for the second tour “they had a full-fledged warfare going.” He went on to explain that “it wouldn't be one or two people ambushing an American Jeep. It would be a group, and you didn't know whether they were farmers by day and warriors by night, or what.”

Mr. LeTellier's military service in Vietnam did not conclude his career in the Army. He continued to serve and worked his way up to Major General—two-star General—and became the Division Engineer of the South Atlantic Division in Atlanta. To obtain this position, he was first the Deputy District Engineer in St Louis, the District Engineer in St Louis, and the commanding General for the US Army Engineer Command of Europe. He involuntarily retired due to a medical issue in 1976 and said that when he retired he “came up with heel marks all the way out,” explaining “I enjoyed my service.”

Since his retirement, Mr. LeTellier has worked as a Civil Engineer in the civilian sector. He said that upon retirement he “went to work immediately for an engineering company which

made me feel real good about my college training at The Citadel.” As with everything else relating to himself that Mr. LeTellier said during the interview, he was very modest about his accomplishments. His list of accomplishments, though, is lengthy and includes the U.S. Army Distinguished Service Medal, an Honorary Doctorate in Civil Engineering from The Citadel, and induction into the National Academy of Engineering, which has only 212 members. He is also a strong supporter of The Citadel, serving on the Department of Civil Engineering Advisory Committee since its founding in 1996 and being a lifetime member of the Citadel Alumni Association.

Retired Major General Carroll LeTellier voiced his appreciation for the education he received as a cadet at The Citadel and said that even though he chose to attend The Citadel because he “didn’t know there was any other school” that he “enjoyed it.” He explained: “I, to this day, I enjoy going to parades here. I guess I enjoy the martial music and the environment and the regimentation.” Gen LeTellier finished our interview with a last thought about The Citadel. He said “It’s been a happy life both in service and out of service, and I attributed a lot to this school. It gave you good background.” All of General LeTellier’s accomplishments—as a service member and a civilian—evidence his success. The Citadel community is proud to call him one of its own.

