

Fists of Steel

A Taxi Story from just after World War II

Christmas Eve 1946 found Les Cohen, now de-mobbed, sitting in his taxi outside the Savoy, the Christmas lights twinkling through the post war gloom of the reception lobby. He had been working since eight that morning and was now tired and cold.

The wind whistled through the driver's canvas window causing him to shudder even though the half door gave him an element of protection.

He looked at his fists, closed his eyes and remembered his pre war days as a professional boxer. He flinched as a glove missed his face by inches causing him to bob and weave, countering with a series of combination punches sending his opponent crashing to the canvas. Leslie's arm was raised by the referee and the crowd went mad with delight. The 'little east end boy' had won the title in front of the Prince of Wales.

"Shepherds Bush, driver", a French-Canadian accent demanded.

He snapped out of the dream and watched three large Canadian Alpine Troopers get into the passenger seats behind him. The cab rocked as they settled in, all were in uniform and had been drinking.

"What street?" Les asked, half turning round to face them. "Just drive. We'll let you know when you are closer."

"Ok" said Les and moved off into the Strand, heading for Trafalgar Square.

As they drove, spots of rain began to fall, painting an abstract of oily colours on the windscreen. The wipers tried to keep pace with the drizzle and Les had to peer through the screen to focus on the streets.

From the back of the cab all he could hear was happy singing in French interspersed with an occasional burst of laughter.

"Good for them" he thought and smiled when he heard them swear, picking out "Merde Fascists" among their words.

Soon they were travelling west, the journey taking a while because of the craters and unexploded bomb squads that barred their way. Shouts of "Merde!" came from the three troopers as they were flung from side to side. After an hour Les called behind him "this is Shepherds Bush. Where now?"

The biggest of the three leaned forward to the dividing window and said "that way" pointing to a road the other side of the 'Bush'. Les followed his directions and after several more turns found himself in a dimly lit cul-de-sac surrounded with



terraced houses on two sides and a six foot brick wall at the end.

"That house" the soldier jabbed his finger at a doorway half way up the terrace. Les was about to suggest they get out and walk the fifty feet to the door, leaving him free to turn the cab around, but the soldier motioned him to drive up the close. He nodded and drove slowly along the cobbles of the road and parked outside the indicated house.

Two of the troopers got out onto the narrow pavement on the passenger side, while the biggest of the three fumbled in his pockets, stepped out and approached Les in his cab seat.

It was now dark, the gas lantern on the other side of the cab throwing eerie fingers of light across the damp cobbles and shiny pavements. Les looked to his right and was suddenly staring down the muzzle of a Browning held by the large soldier. For a second he was stunned by the sight of the weapon and momentarily froze in shock.

"Money!" demanded the soldier indicating Les's money bag by his feet.

For a second Les considered his position, but for the soldier it was too long. He swung the butt of the gun and hit him in the mouth and blood spurted from a cut on Les's lip.



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"Money!" he whispered in **Les's** ear, pushing the muzzle close to his head. **"Ok!"** he replied and reached slowly to his coin bag and grabbed a handful of coins avoiding the notes.

"Here" and offered the coins with his left hand through the open window. The soldier narrowed his eyes angrily and knocked them out of **Les's** hand, scattering the coins over the wet pavement and under the **cab**.

"Paper or die!" his voice though soft had a menace to it and **Les** knew that this man meant every word.

Yet **Les** had not come through the war fighting against the hated **Nazis** to allow this bully to hit and rob him. It was against his character that this man would succeed.

Feeling the gun against his temple, he reached down as if to get the notes while his right hand grasped the handle and violently whipped the half door outwards knocking the gun out of the soldier's hand and trapping him between the door and the nearby wall.

Les jumped out, kicked the gun under the **cab**, and although nearly a foot and a half shorter than the trooper, hit him with a deadly right cross in the groin. The soldier doubled up and **Les** hit him again, this time in the face, the force so strong that the army man left the floor and went flying backwards through a sitting room window of an adjacent house scattering glass and wood everywhere.

One of the other troopers ran round swearing from the other side, pulling out a large commando knife, the blade glinting in the half light as his hobnailed ammunition boots echoed on the pavement. **Les** waited with his back to the **cab** and his hand on the door handle.

The trooper lunged out but did not see the door opening until it was too late. The top of the door hit him between the legs sending him sprawling heavily to the wet pavement. **Les** kicked him in the chest and dragged his massive frame onto the **cab** bonnet while hammering blow after blow into the now inert soldier.

"Police! Police!" a woman screamed from an upstairs open window, her burly husband stepping out onto the cobbles carrying a large stick.

Les let go of the soldier, whose unconscious body slid off the bonnet and lay crumpled in a heap in the gutter. He grimaced as he saw his hands and knuckles covered in blood, the skin missing in places. Above the commotion caused by the fight and the woman's call for the Police, **Les** heard running feet and saw the third trooper running to the brick wall at the end of the cul-de-sac.

The soldier was trying to haul himself up when **Les** caught his legs, pulling him down into a large puddle. They scuffled for a moment, but the trooper had the extra energy to make a leap for the wall again and disappeared from sight over the other side.

Les sat exhausted on the kerb, while some women came out to help with tea and bandages. Their men stood guard over the two soldiers.

Later that night with **Les** sitting in the back of a Police car, they toured all the billets where the **Canadians** were lodged in **London**, requesting information on a soldier matching the description and he was arrested within hours.

In **1947**, the three defendants were brought before the **Old Bailey** charged with armed robbery.

The defence suggested that **Les** had attacked their clients with an iron bar such were their injuries until the prosecution disclosed that he had been a professional boxer. The jury found them **guilty**, each receiving **fifteen years**.

After they were taken down the **Judge** praised **Les** for his courage but warned him.

"I saw you box before the war, but this is my ring now. I don't want your fists of steel in here."



Leslie Lazarus Cohen was born in the **East End** of **London** on 20th September 1910 the youngest of six children. His Father, a hardworking journeyman tailor, died as **Leslie** attained 13, leaving him and his siblings to look after his Mother, a woman of **Russian** origin.

Les was always in fights and would always stand up for the underdog. He left school at 14 and took up an apprenticeship as a compositor in the print trade. By 19 he was qualified but was encouraged to train as a boxer / wrestler in his spare time and very quickly gained a formidable reputation as a 'southpaw' with a cold but lethal right cross.

His exploits took him in **1933** to fight in the **British Boxing finals** in front of the **Prince of Wales** at the **Albert Hall**. Shortly after this **Les** did his '**knowledge**' in **London**, qualifying as a **green badge taxi driver** in the summer of **1935**.

Les met his future wife, **Sarah** herself just 17 on a **May Day Parade** in **Hyde Park** in **1938**.

As the war started he was conscripted into the **Royal Engineers** but as the **Blitz** began he was drafted by the **Auxiliary Fire Service** to drive the turntable ladders through the raging fires and collapsing buildings while being bombed by the **Luftwaffe**.

As the **Blitz** eased up in **1941**, he was moved back to the Army, this time as an **Ack Ack gunner**, after this he was transferred to the **7th Armoured Division**, '**Desert Rats**' and in **1944** in **France** he drove a reconnaissance **Willis Jeep** ahead of the spearhead armour deep behind enemy lines. He was '**mentioned in despatches**' and demobbed in **1945**.

In **1949**, still a **cabbie**, he became a father to **David Albert**, the family name being changed just after the war. **David** who has appeared on TV and in films is a true **Cockney** writing and publishing books like '**The A-Z of IT Bullshit**'. **David** is currently writing an espionage thriller set against the backdrop of the **2012 Olympic Games** in **London**.

The '**Fists of Steel**' story was sent to **Private Hire News** by **David Albert** (**Les's** son)

