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Interview with Sam Morse

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Transcript of interview with Sam Morse

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends
November 14, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Sam Morse for the project War and Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1940–1975. You will also hear the voice of Ralph Beebe, one of the researchers for this project, and I am Cherice Bock, the other researcher. The interview took place at Friendsview Retirement Community in Newberg, Oregon on November 14, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Hi, Sam, nice to have you here. A few questions, like: what year were you born?

Sam Morse: 1935.

Ralph: This helps us know whether you're eligible for the draft. So when you registered for the draft, what—how did you register?

Sam: You mean like...

Ralph: I mean like, 1-A, 1-A-O...

Sam: I guess it was 1-A-O...

Ralph: Conscientious objector?

Sam: Conscientious objector.

Ralph: 1-A-O is that you would go into the service—

Sam: Yes, I would.

Ralph: But not carry a gun.

Sam: Yes.

Ralph: Yeah, okay, and when were you drafted, or were you?

Sam: Let's see, 1957.

Ralph: '57.

Sam: In July.

Ralph: That's kind of between the wars.

Sam: Yes, it was.

Ralph: Yeah. And what, what happened to you after you were drafted?

Sam: Well, I went over—I was living in Portland, but I, my draft board was in Boise somewhere, so I went to Boise, and then I went from there to Fort Ord, and they, they issued my clothes, but I didn't get the shots that they were giving everybody else, because I was destined to go to—and I did, after I got my clothes, and I don't know how long I was there, about a week, I guess. Then they shipped me on a train to San Antonio, Texas to, for my basic training. And that was where the C—COs had basic training. So we had, I think there were three barracks in our company there, and that's as far as I know the only basic training that was going on. Most of the base was doing advanced training in medical, but that was the idea that we would do basic there and then stay on that base and get medical training. So I finished and got my week vacation, after the eight weeks' basic training, came home in time from my brother's wedding, and then went back. And then I qualified to take a class in dental laboratory there, and so then they taught me how to do the laboratory part of making dentures and partials, all the laboratory work there at Fort Sam Houston. And then, after that, I graduated from that, and then I was shipped to North Carolina to Fort Bragg. And then I, I worked in the laboratory for a while, but they had two or three in-house sergeants that were, you know, they were lifers, and they didn't need me in the lab, and they found out I could type. I'd taken typing in high school. So they put me in the office, you know, in the dental clinic, and it was the dental clinic for the airborne that was there, so my job was just to enter, enter in what we did in the dental clinic for the each person, type it up in the, in their records. And we kept the records all in order by which company they were in, so if they shipped out a whole company, well, we just grabbed the records, and give them so they could take the records with them.

Ralph: Would you tell us about the, the process in your mind and your experience of choosing whether you would be 1-A, which would be, of course, accept it, or 1-A-O or 1-O. How did you, how did you decide that?

Sam: Well, I, I went to some classes at my church, at Greenleaf Church, to kind of help me sort that out, what I should do, but I didn't have any problem. I just applied for that at my draft board.

Ralph: Why, though, did you apply from that?

Sam: What?

Ralph: Why did you apply to be a conscientious objector?

Sam: Well, I didn't think I ought to be killing anybody.

Ralph: Why?

Sam: Because of the, the scripture, I think. Yes. And so, what—basically they told me in those classes what, what the scripture said, and so I decided that I didn't—like, you know, the option was to be 1-O, or whatever, not go into the service.

Ralph: Yeah.

Sam: So I didn't feel like that I could do that. And over the years I've come to be—feel more inclined to think we do need a military to—or they'll just run over the top of us. And everybody else in the world as they can. So...

Cherice: So, at the time, how did you choose between being a noncombatant or a full conscientious objector?

Sam: Well, I just, you know, I just decided that I couldn't carry a gun and kill people, but still, like, I thought I could be part of the military if I wasn't.

Cherice: What was important—

Sam: I was a young guy!

Cherice: Yeah.

Sam: I didn't think it all through very well.

Cherice: Okay.

Sam: I don't know. It's still a problem.

Ralph: Yeah. How would you do it if you were 18 right now and the law was like it was then?

Sam: I'd probably do the same thing: not carry a gun. Maybe that's just a chicken way, I don't...for my own sake. No, I don't think so. I don't mind doing hard things. It's worthwhile.

Ralph: That's the same position I took, I might say.

Sam: Yeah. Because I, if, if you're, in effect, you know, they just put me in a job that wasn't carrying a gun, but I was helping the whole operation, and I can see that if you say, "Well, I won't do that, but I'm going to go in," then I was still part of the army. So...

Ralph: You were part of the army but...

Sam: But I wasn't carrying a gun.

Ralph: I don't think you were helping the army an awful lot.

Sam: Well, I drug my feet a lot, yeah. There were a few times I volunteered. The one time it was really a big deal, we were going on bivouac, everybody else marched three miles and I rode on the truck. I'd volunteered to help the kitchen unload the truck. Anyway.

Ralph: The point is, you wouldn't shoot anybody.

Sam: No, I didn't shoot anybody.

Ralph: Or wouldn't.

Sam: Wouldn't, yeah.

Ralph: Yeah, and why wouldn't you?

Sam: Well, well, the commandment says, "Thou shalt not kill."

Ralph: Even bad guys?

Sam: Well, yeah, I think you need the death penalty, so I, I am for the death penalty. Because I think it does deter, deter some people, a little bit. I'm on the spot here!
[laughter]

Ralph: Well, it's a hard question!

Sam: It is a hard question.

Ralph: Yeah, because you believe that Jesus taught you not to kill anybody, and that's, that's the basis of what you're saying.

Sam: Yeah.

Ralph: Yeah. Well, can you tell us a little bit more about what influenced you to take that position?

Sam: Well, I did take, I had become a member at Greenleaf Church, so they had a class to teach us what, what the Friends taught, and what the Bible taught on different, different topics, but that was one of them, and so... And I, I read through quite a bit in my Bible, most days, I had read a lot.

Ralph: So basically, it's what the Bible said.

Sam: Yeah.

Ralph: And what Jesus taught you. Yeah. Okay.

Cherice: Was it something that was taught regularly, or just a one-time thing, or a series, or do you remember how it was taught?

Sam: It was because I had applied to be a member, it was a class they had for...

Cherice: Oh, okay, so it was a membership class? Okay.

Sam: Yes, it was a membership class.

Ralph: I doubt that you can answer this, but would you have been rejected if you didn't take a conscientious obj—as a member, would they not have accepted you as a member if you hadn't?

Sam: Oh, I think I was already a member before I did my draft thing.

Ralph: Yeah, okay.

Sam: Now, you know, they taught me that, but I don't know if they required me to sign anything saying what I thought or what I believed.

Ralph: And so, you've touched this, but tell a little bit more about what you did when you—otherwise, if your conscience, if you hadn't had conscientious objection, we know what you would have done, you would have gone in and carried the guns.

Sam: Oh, yes.

Ralph: What did you do?

Sam: Well, well I, I was, because I was CO, they sent me to a different base and I did basic without a gun. We, well, we learned to drive ambulances, except I flunked the driving test. I'd been driving since I was 14 and I smart alecked on the test. They let somebody—lots of guys that hadn't ever driven before do that, so I sat, stayed back in barracks while they were driving ambulances overnight and stuff. I was just out back taking care of flowers around the barracks.

Cherice: So you did—you didn't do ambulance driving, but you did some paperwork and some typing and that sort of thing?

Sam: Well, that was, yeah, that was later on.

Cherice: Okay.

Sam: When I did the paperwork. So...

Cherice: So what were the main things that you did while you served?

Sam: Oh, well, yeah, when I was serving then I was, for a whole year I was at Fort Bragg and doing records, typing records and the dental, and then of course cleaning and doing KP in the Special Forces headquarters, which is where we were barracked, so I lived with the Special Forces people, you know, the Green Berets, those guys.

Ralph: Yeah.

Cherice: How did they feel about—

Sam: I don't know how they felt.

Cherice: How they felt about non-combatants being there with them? Did they mention anything?

Sam: No, no, and so...

Ralph: And so, you've been a conscientious objector all the rest of your life?

Sam: Yeah, but, but...

Ralph: But you don't, it's not, it's not, I mean, it's not active in terms of you going into the military...

Sam: Yeah...

Ralph: But how—

Sam: Well, I think I've changed a little bit. You know, looking back at history and Hitler, I think something needed to be done. I can't object to the World War II. Somehow we needed to stop Hitler. I'm not sure if there's a better way, so...

Ralph: But Hitler's forces all wore those belt buckles that said, "God is with us well."

Sam: [laughs] Well, it was...

Ralph: I guess, probably what I'm asking, if you had have been born in Germany, would you have fought on Hitler's behalf?

Sam: Would I have had a choice? [laughs] I don't know. [laughs]

Ralph: My point, of course—

Sam: I only have one life to live, here! [laughter]

Ralph: Well, it's a tough question, but my, my thought is, are we are—or are you, in this case—directed by who, where you live? Would you fight for Germany? Would you fight for Japan against the United States in World War II if you had been born there?

Sam: Couldn't [laughs], well, that's pretty theoretical.

Cherice: Well it sounded like earlier you were more saying that there was a moral reason to fight World War II, which was more important to you than maybe the moral reason to stand aside as a noncombatant. Is that more accurate? Like, there's a moral reason to say, "We need to stand up and do something against Hitler," right?

Sam: Yeah, I guess that's right. [laughter]

Cherice: So, some sense of, you have a moral center of, this thing is important to stand up for. What would you say that is? Or, describe how that feels to know what that moral space is.

Sam: Yeah, well I, you know, we have police in our country. That—and it doesn't mean that we're killing people because they're doing the wrong thing, but, but at least apprehending them.

Ralph: Yeah.

Sam: I think, I think most discipline needs to hurt, or isn't, it isn't very effective, and I think some—a lot of people need discipline. I think God disciplines us, but sometimes it's too late if we wait for God to strike us down, or harm us, I don't know.

Ralph: But basically, your position is the Quaker position, as I understand what you're saying, which says that, "I won't kill."

Sam: Yeah, I won't kill somebody.

Ralph: Well, do you have any other—

Sam: But—

Cherice: Go ahead.

Sam: Well, I just, but as a nation we needed to do something. Maybe we did the wrong thing, but I think most of the time we let other nations alone until they encroach on others.

Cherice: So there's a line at some point of where you have to stand up and do something?

Sam: Yeah, I think so. Our nation needs to defend ourselves to some extent, I believe.

Cherice: And what do you think your responsibility is within that?

Sam: Hmm, I don't know.

Ralph: It's a hard one.

Sam: Yeah, I don't know what, you know. I served my two years, but...

Cherice: I guess are you saying there's a difference between what the nation might do as a, as a proper course of action, and what you particularly feel like is your role, in terms of your willingness to take up arms?

Sam: Yeah, if I were young again, we don't have a draft now, so, I wouldn't volunteer from the draft.

And I think in actuality, I did volunteer for the draft, back then. I had to—they called me and I took my physical, and I had broken my neck.

Cherice: Oh wow.

Sam: Earlier. So I thought, "Well, I won't pass the physical."

But my doctor says, "You're good to go."

And so they checked me out, and I was good to go. So when I found that out, I volunteered to be drafted, so I didn't have to wait and wonder where I was going to go.

Cherice: Did they, did you have to appear before a draft board to tell them about being a noncombatant?

Sam: No, I think I just, I probably filled out some papers to my draft board—in Caldwell, I think, was where they were—but, but no, I don't, once I was drafted in, why, I don't know. They just put me, they sent me where I was supposed to take basic.

Ralph: Well, Sam, thank you.

Cherice: Yeah, thank you for your honesty and willing to wrestle with difficult questions. Appreciate it.

Sam: Okay.