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Interview with Rick and Laurie Comfort

Cherice Bock

George Fox University, cbock@georgefox.edu

Ralph Beebe

George Fox University

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Transcript of interview with Rick and Laurie Comfort

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends

December 9, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Rick Comfort—and Laurie Comfort is also here, and may jump in with a few comments—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 December 9, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Alright, well, welcome, Rick and Laurie, and Rick, what year were you born?

Rick Comfort: I was born in '56.

Ralph: So in '56, which, that means that you'd be about only 12 years old or 15 years old at the heart of the Vietnam War.

Rick: Yes.

Ralph: So our questions as we ask those, of course, will be as you were viewing things mostly before you were draft age, but viewing the situation in Vietnam. When you did register for the draft, let's see, what you were you born again?

Rick: '56.

Ralph: '56, so you were eligible for the draft in '74.

Rick: '74.

Ralph: And so, how did you register?

Rick: I just, I don't remember, but I do remember registering, but as far as what class, I don't.

Ralph: So you—but you don't think it was conscientious objector?

Rick: I don't think at that time it was.

Ralph: So it was probably straight 1-A?

Rick: Yeah.

Ralph: And were you drafted?

Rick: No.

Ralph: Why not?

Rick: I was—at that time, I think, in '74, I think they weren't taking drafts, they were taking volunteers.

Ralph: Yeah.

Laurie: And you were still in high school.

Rick: I was still in high school.

Ralph: Yeah. Okay, so when you got out of high school, did you go to college?

Rick: I went to [George] Fox [College] for one year.

Ralph: Uh-huh.

Rick: And then I started working after I got out of Fox.

Ralph: Okay

Cherice: And by that time the draft was over, so, so leaving college...

Rick: Right, the draft, it was over, I think the last person that was drafted was maybe '74 or '73.

Cherice: So leaving college didn't mean you lost your deferment, at that point?

Rick: No, no.

Ralph: Okay, so you didn't have to appear before a draft board or anything like that.

Rick: No, no.

Ralph: However, if you had had to, you would have been registered as...

Rick: Probably conscientious—I think I would have gone in as a medic or something that I could still go in and still perform my duty to some other field.

Ralph: And why, why would you be a conscientious objector?

Rick: Just, I didn't like killing other people.

Ralph: You didn't like killing other people, even for your country?

Rick: Yep.

Ralph: Even if those other people were killing your family?

Rick: Mm, well...yes, I'd still...I'd go help...let's see, how...

I just saw *Hacksaw*, so what came through was what, how I felt on being conscientious, because he would—when I went in...I wanted to help my fellow countrymen, but I didn't want to be with them with a weapon. But I wanted to be there and support.

Cherice: So you would have been a non-combatant, you think?

Rick: Right.

Ralph: I understand how you feel. Well, can you tell us a little bit more about what influenced that decision, or that position?

Rick: Mostly what my dad told me, because he was a medic in the Korean War.

Ralph: Who was your dad?

Rick: Gene Comfort.

Ralph: I've heard of him. [laughs]

Rick: And he was in the Korean War, so he told me stories in South America, we were there for the revolution, and he took me outside and we watched mortars go over our house into the army place.

Ralph: And tell—you were in—

Rick: South America.

Ralph: South—yeah.

Rick: Bolivia, South America, as missionaries.

Ralph: Yeah, oh I see, with Northwest—or Oregon Yearly Meeting.

Rick: Yes.

Cherice: So, did you grow up there?

Rick: I did. I grew—we went down—Mom and Dad went to language school in sixty...like, '62, yeah, and then, they went onto the mission field after that, and I came back when I was 13.

Cherice: Okay.

Rick: Or 15.

Cherice: So you saw the war going on there.

Rick: Yeah.

Cherice: And your dad talked to you about it.

Rick: Yeah.

Cherice: Do you remember what, what types of things he said?

Rick: Not exactly, but just experiences that he had. In our houses, there's, we lived in a valley, and they're shooting over our house into the army compound, and the army was shooting back at them, and our house is two-story and the windows were six-foot wide. The only thing that got hit by shrapnel was the chimney.

Cherice: Wow.

Rick: On that big house, because it just stood out.

Cherice: And did—do you, do you feel like your dad shared with you any sort of ideas about what Friends believe about war, at that point, or just was just kind his own experience?

Rick: No, we just kind of, we talked about it off and on, and I can't remember when and how, but we had conversations about things. He told me stories about what went on and, as we were growing up.

Ralph: Well, if you had had to register for the draft, how would you have registered?

Cherice: You mean if he had had to go in?

Ralph: I mean had to have...

Rick: Not, um, conscientious...

Ralph: You would've been a conscientious objector?

Rick: Uh-huh.

Ralph: And explain, or talk about that little bit more. What were the issues, what were the things which would cause you to be a conscientious objector?

Rick: Just...just the fact that I didn't want to shoot anyone.

Cherice: So did it have to do with your faith?

Rick: Yes.

Cherice: In what ways?

Rick: Just that God says, "Thou shalt not kill," so that's a big one, probably. And to love your neighbor, but—yeah, love your neighbor, love your enemy. But still, you still have to protect your home, you still have to protect civil—I mean, I was going to go in, I was going to do whatever I could, just to do that.

Cherice: Without killing people?

Rick: Without killing people.

Ralph: Yeah. Okay.

Cherice: And how about your Quaker faith? What did it have to do with that? Did it have anything to do with it?

Rick: It had a lot to do with it, yeah. Because my, I showed Ralph, my dog tag says "Quaker" as my religion.

Cherice: Oh yeah?

Rick: Yeah.

Ralph: Yeah, that—very interesting dog tag.

Rick: So it shows your name, social security number, hold on, I'll get it out.

Cherice: One of the pockets somewhere, huh?

Rick: But on the bottom it says "Quaker."

Cherice: Uh-huh, yeah. And so, what's this dog tag for?

Rick: It's identification. You wear those when you're...

Cherice: In the service?

Rick: Yeah.

Cherice: So did do you end up serving?

Rick: Yes, I did.

Cherice: Okay, you served, but you weren't drafted, is that what you mean?

Rick: Was not drafted.

Cherice: Okay, okay.

Ralph: How did you get in? How did you go in?

Rick: Okay, well, I was working, and then all of a sudden, construction job stopped hiring. I got laid off. So, Dad said, "Well, one option is the military." I said, "Yeah." He said he didn't care—he would support me no matter what my decision was. So I went into the Air Force. And my first interview, I went in, and I had a call, and I wanted to go into air conditioning and refrigeration—

[cell phone sound]

Laurie: Sorry!

Rick: For my job. And I had a head cold. I didn't feel well. And they had me lift 50 pounds. Well, I worked on a lumber rig, and I could lift 150 pounds. This one day, I couldn't lift 50 pounds.

Cherice: Oh, no!

Rick: So they said, "Well, you can be an MP." So I went home, I said, "Okay, I'll sign up as an MP." I went home, and my mom just went off. She goes, "You are not carrying a gun!" Nobody in her family was carrying—

Ralph: What's an MP?

Rick: Military police.

Ralph: Okay.

Rick: And my mom was strictly—her father had guns, Oscar Brown had guns, and, but Dad only had this—hunting rifles. Nothing for self-defense or anything. And so, Dad said, "Okay, we'll go back and talk to them," and see if we can change my job description. And so they said, "Yeah, the cargo specialist is open." "Okay, I'll sign up for that." So that's what I did. Signed up for—so I went in to air cargo specialist, which was loading and unloading airplanes.

Cherice: Okay, and what year was this?

Rick: This was '82.

Cherice: Okay.

Rick: So I was in from '82 to '86.

Cherice: And where did you serve?

Rick: I served in Guam for a majority of the time. I loved it over there, so I kept extending. And then my last tour was Charleston, South Carolina, and I got out in '86.

Cherice: Okay. So we got a little bit off the trail of what we were saying of how your faith influenced that decision.

Rick: Right.

Cherice: Your Quaker faith, particularly.

Rick: Yeah. So, my mom had a lot of influence on it. [laughs] So, yeah, but yeah, I was, Dad kind of didn't care what I did just as long as I was happy and did what I wanted to do. Mom was very concerned what I did and how I reacted, and...

Cherice: She didn't want you to carry a gun, but she was okay with you serving in some other way?

Rick: Yeah.

Cherice: Did you have any discussions in particular about what Quaker perspective was on this?

Rick: We didn't really. Not really, no.

Cherice: Yeah. And after you came back to the States from Bolivia, did you go to a Friends church here in the Northwest?

Rick: Yes, we went to Newberg Friends.

Cherice: Uh-huh. Did you hear about any—did they give you some education on draft registration and Quaker perspectives on that?

Rick: I don't recall that they did. I don't think... If there was any classes, I didn't take them.

Cherice: Yeah, that's okay. [laughs] So did you know anything about the Quaker peace testimony or anything?

Rick: I did, and I...I don't know, I was... I think it was conflicting on what my beliefs were. I kind of agreed with it, but I had two sides to it. I didn't know how to put them together.

Cherice: So, can you explain those two sides?

Rick: It's hard. [laughs]

Cherice: I know! [laughs] Yeah, it is! But, so you felt like that you could understand two different perspectives, but you couldn't make them match up?

Rick: Right, I couldn't make them match up, right. I was right in the middle. I was kind of walking a line.

Cherice: Uh-huh. So, you could hear kind of the Quaker pacifism perspective, and then the military perspective?

Rick: Yeah, and then the other side, so, yeah. And I kind of agreed with both sides, but I didn't know how to make them both work together.

Cherice: Which parts of them did you agree with?

Rick: Um...doing things peacefully and not confrontational. Because there's two sides to every story, and I mean...

Ralph: If you were 18 today and there were a draft, how would you register?

Rick: Just, um, conscientious.

Ralph: So you feel, still feel that calling?

Rick: Yeah.

Ralph: And again, this, I think you indicated this is what you feel Jesus wanted you...

Rick: Yeah.

Ralph: To not kill people.

Rick: Yeah.

Ralph: Okay.

Cherice: But also to figure out some way to resolve conflicts with other people and...

Rick: Right. Yeah. If I can talk my way out of it, then I would.

Cherice: Mm-hmm. But if you can't, then...?

Rick: If you can't, then you have to resort to violence, but you know, that's the last resort.

Cherice: But you—okay, go ahead.

Ralph: You would use violence if necessary.

Rick: Limited violence. [laughter]

Ralph: I—how do we define violence?

Rick: That's just it! That's part of where I, where, that's the hard point is how far would you go?

Cherice: And for you, you weren't willing to carry a gun yourself, but you're supporting the military that's...

Rick: Right, I'm supporting the people that do.

Cherice: Was that a conflict—an internal conflict in you?

Rick: Yes.

Cherice: In what ways?

Rick: Well, because you want to be there to help them out, to back them up, but you're limited, because if you're not carrying, you can't really back them up, other than carry them to safety if you can.

Cherice: Yeah. And, and did anybody bring that up to you that you weren't as supportive as they wished you could be, or that sort of thing?

Rick: Well, they accept you. As long as I wanted to be with them, they took that—they sort of, because...they said, "You're part of the unit, you know, you're welcome to come along."

Laurie: You should tell about how the Lord protected you from having to carry a gun.

Rick: Oh yeah. No, so in basic training, in the Air Force, you only go the shooting range once. And so, I didn't know at the time, but I had a Baptist preacher next to me. He thought he was shooting at his target. He shot at mine. So my target had too many holes in it, and so we couldn't prove who shot what, so we both got disqualified from carrying a gun. [Laughter] Which, the Lord was protecting me, because afterwards I go, "Why did you shoot at my target?" He goes, "Because I thought that was mine!" I go, "Well, that's really weird!"

Cherice: Yeah! Did he want to be disqualified from carrying a gun?

Rick: I kind of did.

Cherice: I mean, did the other guy?

Rick: He—it didn't matter to him. He kind of thought the way I did, because we, we start talking afterwards, and we had a lot in common. It was just so weird. I said, "You're a Baptist preacher, and yet, you're here." And he goes, "Yeah," and he didn't—he needed income, so that's what he did. I said, "Well, you just took care of one issue for both of us!" [laughter]

Cherice: Yep! Did you feel any sort of internal conflict in terms of—you're not willing to kill people, but maybe the people that you're supporting are killing people?

Rick: There's conflict there. And still, I was willing to be there.

Cherice: And what was, what was important enough about it to you that, that you were willing to be there in that supportive role?

Rick: That I could be there and still witness to them about the love of Jesus, just, just be there as a support, just to help. And they knew that I was a Christian because—I mean, I didn't have to say anything, but everybody could tell that I was different.

Ralph: That's a strong testimony.

Rick: Even today.

Ralph: Yeah.

Rick: Because at work, they'll say, "You're different." I go, "Well I want—I treat people the way I want to be treated." And they just go, "Well," because they say, "you're different, you don't treat people the same way."

Cherice: Yeah. Well, any other stories from your time in service that stand out to you?

Rick: I don't have much other stories.

Laurie: Well, he served right, ended his service right—ended his service right as Desert Storm—so he was pretty much and all of it's considered during a wartime, because of the benefits we've received have been, because you served during a war, but we really...he didn't, by the grace of God, didn't have to go fight, so we really were lucky for that.

Cherice: What war were they considering was going on at the time?

Rick: Well, they did Grenada. They, you know, got the hostages out of Grenada, and then there's um...

Laurie: And Desert Storm started.

Rick: Desert Storm started.

Ralph: What years were this?

Cherice: They said—

Rick: This was eighty...

Ralph: It was after our focus, but still...

Rick: Right, but.

Laurie: '82-'86.

Rick: '82-'86, somewhere around there. There were some other conflicts going on that the military was involved in.

Cherice: Alright and... Yeah, and so, going back to your high school years, were there any kind of formative moments that you remember as, leading up to that choice of how to register, or as you were hearing about the draft in those years?

Rick: Just the stories coming out of Vietnam. I didn't agree with a lot of it, and I felt that there was a lot of cover-up that was happening that we weren't really being told.

Cherice: So, you felt like you didn't really know what was actually happening?

Rick: Right, yeah. I felt like we were only being told what they were wanting us to hear, rather than what was really going on.

Cherice: And did that have any impact on the way that you were thinking about your draft registration?

Rick: No. And today we work with Vietnamese people, which is so weird. But a lot of them have stories. One of the guys I worked with, he cut his trigger finger off, just so he didn't have to pull the trigger.

Cherice: Oh, wow.

Ralph: When did he do that?

Rick: This was during the Vietnam War.

Ralph: During the war?

Rick: Yeah.

Ralph: Yeah.

Rick: Yeah. He just chopped it off—oh, well, they drafted them when they were 12 or 13, or even younger, so when he was an 8-year-old, he cut his finger off just so he couldn't pull the trigger.

Cherice: Wow.

Ralph: Interesting.

Rick: He said he wasn't going to shoot a gun, so he made sure he couldn't pull a gun.

Ralph: Do you know any more of his story? Why wasn't he going to?

Rick: Well, he thought he was part of a family, he didn't want to fight that way. And so he just, and then he came Stateside just as a refugee, just to get away from the country.

Cherice: Yeah, so like you said, every, every conflict has two sides—at least two sides, I guess, in that case. Yeah, so you were feeling like you only had one side of the story.

Rick: Right, I was, yeah. And then when the Vietnamese started working, I could see both sides, and we had one guy that was in Vietnam, and when one of the Vietnamese came over, he couldn't adjust to them, he couldn't accept them, working with them. Finally he was able to retire so he could get away from... He wanted no relationship with the new...

Cherice: Somebody that had come here?

Ralph: Those who came here, you mean?

Rick: Right.

Cherice: And they didn't want to work with people that had stayed there?

Rick: Right, yeah.

Ralph: Say that again. Didn't want to what?

Rick: He didn't want to work with the refugees, because he felt like the refugees were fighting against him when he was over there, but yet, he's, they're over here now, and he, so there was conflict with him and his experience.

Cherice: So somebody that stayed in Vietnam, and he didn't want to work with people that were refugees that had come out and escaped that conflict, because he didn't trust them?

Rick: Right.

Ralph: I'm not sure whether this relates, but back in '75, which is what we're talking about, was when we brought 70 Vietnamese to Northwest Yearly Meeting, and I don't know whether this relates to the individuals you're talking about or not.

Rick: I don't...these...I'm not sure where they came, and I don't think—I'm not sure what church they were affiliated with when they come over.

Ralph: There were...our, our feeling in Northwest Yearly Meeting and the Friends Action Board, which I happened to be clerk of at the time, brought those 70 Vietnamese here and spread them out in the yearly meeting. I just was at Earl Tycksen's funeral. I met one of them. That was quite an interesting thing after all these years, and I met him, and we had probably saved his life.

Laurie: Oh, yeah!

Ralph: So, it's very interesting.

Cherice: One more question occurs to me about your time in Bolivia, and how did you see Quakerism being expressed there in terms of any relationship to, kind of, the Friends—I guess the things that are more singular about Friends, like the peace testimony?

Rick: I'm not sure.

Cherice: You were just a kid, so maybe you didn't notice.

Rick: I didn't recognize that...

Cherice: But you were there while they were having a war, so I wonder if you noticed something.

Rick: The revolution was just, it was all governmental. People didn't agree with what the president was doing, so they wanted somebody... And then generals—once you're a general there's no higher rank unless you're president, so every general wants to be president.

Laurie: Well, share the story of when Ron Stansell and your dad was put on the firing squad.

Rick: I don't remember—well, Ron Stansell wasn't there.

Laurie: He wasn't there? Okay, well it was maybe Knights and—there was a, several of the big Quakers were with Gene on the wall with a firing squad in front of them, going to be killed. The women had all the children in town, so they weren't there, but the Bolivians saw a difference in the Quakers, that they were peaceful people, they did not fight, they would simply walk away and leave. They were—they wanted the plantation, that's what they were—they had come to take the potato plantation, because the potatoes were much greater than what they could grow, because—

Ralph: On our farm, the missionaries' farm?

Laurie: Yeah, yeah.

Rick: Dad went down to Bolivia to be a farmer, and they had a farm, and everybody from Idaho knows how to grow potatoes.

Cherice: Right!

Rick: And so, the *campesinos*, natives down there, were jealous, because they got pea-sized potatoes when Dad was getting big ones. And so, the neighbors decided, well, they're going to take the farm over. And so, and all the guys knew that something was going on, so they sent the women in town because they thought there was going to be trouble. So the *campesinos* came in, all the neighbors, and lined up all the men to shoot them, and then all the believers surrounded them and said, "No, you're not going to shoot these people, these are good people." So they made a deal that they'd just give the farm over. So at night, they'd load all the tractors and everything up on flatbeds and take them out, so all they got was property, they didn't get any equipment or anything. They had the old crank phones. They wanted those. And they said, "No, those things only talk English." So they got on the line and they'd go, "Whatever you say, just say everything in English. Don't say anything in Spanish." So the guy cranked it and started talking, and then, English

came out. Talked some more, English came out. “Oh, well we don’t understand these boxes. Yeah. We don’t need them.” Mom and Dad have one now [laughter] as a relic.

Cherice: Yeah, so they got them out of there?

Rick: Yeah.

Cherice: That’s funny. So, the Quaker believers down there helped them escape that situation?

Rick: They protected them, yeah.

Cherice: But totally non-violently, it sounds like?

Rick: Right. And then, the revolution that we were in, they stormed our—we had a gate. And then we had four vehicles—we had missionary vehicles. They stormed in the gate. First they were going to put a grenade in the gate, but all the neighbors said, “No, you’re going to disturb the neighbors, and these are good people, just...” and so they, the mob, just knocked the gate down, came in there with their machine guns. They stormed in the house and they searched everywhere. All the Americans have guns, supposedly.

Dad lifted up his Bible and said, “This is my gun.”

And they go, “No, you have a gun. If you find—we find guns in your possession, there will be trouble.”

Dad said, well, he had two guns, he’d go to get them. It took him quite a while. The guns were in coveralls behind a door. He put the guns in the legs of the coveralls, just because when the road—street behind us had a zigzag switchback, so they could see into our property. So anytime he had the guns, he put them in the coveralls so they couldn’t see what he was carrying. And he forgot where he put them, and then he remembered. And then, the mission had two pickups and a Volkswagen bus. And so, as they’re in the house, Dad had a ham radio that he talked to the States with. We talked to Harold McGee here in Newberg. And they took the headphones and mic and they got outside and their leader said, “You can’t fight with those. Those don’t carry bullets. Take them back.” So they gave the mic and headphones back to Dad. And then as they were, they made a deal with us that they would leave us alone, but we had to give them a vehicle. And dad said, “Well, those vehicles are for the people. We help the people.” And they said, “We’re people so we’re going to take the bus.” “Okay, you can have the bus.”

And then, after the Revolution, the insurance company sent investigators throughout the country to find the Volkswagen. There was no trace of it whatsoever. They never found it. Because they looked for it for the longest time, no trace. But

they had about 15 people in that bus, the wheels were just flat, it just sat...but anyway. We kept the pickups.

Cherice: So, it sounds like they had to—your family had to be kind of creative about figuring out how to get through those kind of situations.

Rick: Yeah, and we were—when the shooting was going on, we were in the kitchen on the floor doing the Last Supper puzzle. [laughter] The Stansells and us.

Cherice: Staying low.

Ralph: Last Supper, huh? [laughter] Well, thank you so much.

Cherice: Yeah, thanks for sharing. We appreciate you coming and sharing your stories.

Rick: Yeah.

Ralph: Yeah.