

11-3-2017

Interview with Jon Newkirk

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Recommended Citation

Bock, Cherice and Beebe, Ralph, "Interview with Jon Newkirk" (2017). *War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1940-1975*. 11.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/conscientious_objectors/11

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Transcript of interview with Jonathan (Jon) Newkirk

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends

November 3, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Jon Newkirk 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 3, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Well, it's so nice to have you here. And, so I'm going to, just, y'know, run through a series of questions. What year were you born?

Jon Newkirk: 1944.

Ralph: Okay. And when you registered for the draft, how did you register?

Jon: I registered as a conscientious objector, classification 1-O.

Ralph: Yes. And when were you—were you drafted?

Jon: I was not drafted. I volunteered to serve. My service, I, I believe I probably would have been drafted fairly shortly, but here at George Fox there was a...

Dr. Roberts challenged us to be—to use our alternative service as a positive expression of our faith, and, and with... He, working with the number of others, put together the possibility that three of us from George Fox (Fred Gregory, Jerry Sandoz, and myself) would have that opportunity to go to Vietnam to serve our alternative service. So we volunteered, had to make arrangements with our draft boards (at least I did, because my draft board was in Southern California, pretty conservative), and it was one of the reasons I believe the connection was made to the Mennonite Central Committee, and so then I went on to serve two years in Vietnam.

Ralph: Tell a little bit more about Arthur's talk in chapel that day and how it affected you.

Jon: Well, I'll have to admit, coming into this, I was a very naïve, reasonably uninformed 21-year-old—very aware that the Vietnam War was going on, but had not ever spent much time thinking about the politics and all of that. I took a course (I'm—maybe a little longer answer than you're looking for but I need to build a little context to get there). I took a philosophy course with Dr. Roberts (my major at George Fox was biology) and, but I took a philosophy course there in which, it was a long time ago, but if I remember right, we spent some time there talking about our peace testimony and possibilities for service. At that point Vietnam wouldn't, as a possibility for us, but then there was the presentation in chapel and, which, you

know, he was—at that point, the demonstrations had started in the streets. There'd been some violence around those, and Dr. Roberts's challenge to us was kind of to be an alternative to that and to make a positive statement in our, in our peace testimony and our opposition to war. Now, that really didn't really come home to me until Fred Gregory came to me and said, "Jon, how'd you like to go to Vietnam?" I mean, Fred was the one that approached me. It was actually his dad that had made the arrangements with Church World Service back east about this possibility of some young men from George Fox going from Oregon Yearly Meeting, supplied, and so... But the impetus was, was Dr. Roberts. And I could still remember: it, it gave me real pause for thought. I was probably the least... The thing I wasn't going to do was go walk in the streets, in any case. That just wasn't in my... You know, I came from a pretty conservative background, so, but, you know, it struck a chord. And when Fred brought it up, it didn't take me long to make a decision and said, "Yeah, that's something I ought to do." So it's been, you know, let's see, that was 1966, so how many years ago was that? Fifty...fifty one? Long time!

Ralph: Yeah, so it was a lifelong experience?

Jon: Yeah, it entirely changed the trajectory of my life. It was, turned my perception of the world upside down, I would say, a mind-blowing experience on many levels, just many levels.

Ralph: And so, again, of those choices, obviously you didn't go into the military. Did you choose the 1-O, or the 1-A-O? Do you remember which one you chose?

Jon: No, I choose, I, when I, when I signed up for the draft, I, I spent some time thinking about that. In one of the quadrants, for me, which I moved past really quickly—I love to fly. The ultimate flying experience is flying military jets. It didn't... I'll have to admit, it was a temptation, but it wasn't one very long. The 1-A-O, to serve as a noncombatant in the military, really wasn't where I was at, because I had moved pretty quickly that I didn't want to support the military machine, and so the 1-O was the, was the reasonable and appropriate choice for me, where my belief system was at the time.

Ralph: You've already touched on this a little, but expand on your role as a Christian, and the Quaker faith. How important were they in this decision?

Jon: How important? They provided the framework for the decision. The Quaker teachings, of course... I'm just going to be really direct. In Evangelical, fundamental Friends at the time, the peace testimony was not given a lot of time in the teachings of the church, even in my own home. And, and, so, my dad was a minister, was supportive, saw that I got the, the Quaker published information, I think maybe the Yearly Meeting had published it; it was a matter of self-study. At the time I had to make that decision, my parents were pastors at Yorba Linda Friends Church, and most of the young men that came out of that church went directly into the military, so my choice coming out of there was the exception. So, I wouldn't really say that...

It was a self-study, and the support of my dad in helping to put the information together. I don't believe the church, the, quote, "church," at that point, had much to do with it, to be really direct and honest.

Ralph: But your dad's faith had a lot to do with it?

Jon: He did, and my mom, and they provided me the information, and had—we, we hadn't talked about it for some time. My, one of my brothers was 1-A-O. He never had to serve. And the other one of my brothers, I don't know, he, what he may have registered as, but went directly into the ministry, and I don't believe it was ever a, an alternat—a necessity there. So, but I would say it was more the support of my parents, and, and I had this visual image (and I thought one of them said "Ralph Beebe" on it, but that's probably because I read yours later in life), about the...I can't remember the title, but it had to do with the peace testimony of Friends. And I spent a lot of time with that, making the decision.

Ralph: So it was a decision—basically you and Jesus, in the long run, decided that you didn't want to kill anybody.

Jon: Right. And, and several points at my time at George Fox, I would say, Arthur Roberts.

Ralph: Yeah.

Jon: Just, I mean, it wasn't just that chapel, it was in that philosophy course and, and some other interactions with, with him. And there is an individual that played a role, that's after I had to make the 10 decision, but in terms of really committing to do something about it rather than just pass the time, which many of us had to do, so...

Ralph: Tell us a little bit more about what you actually did. Well, of course you didn't go into the military, so how did you wind up in Vietnam?

Jon: Well, the, the... Well, Dr. Roberts gave the challenge about doing something positive, and I think probably the background work had already been done about the opportunity for some of us from George Fox to go to Vietnam with Vietnam Christian Service. Actually, it's only been in the last few months that I've had some discussions with Fred that I got a much better picture of how that all got put together.

But, and so, it was fairly late in the school year when that opportunity came up, so graduation wasn't too far ahead, and I would say, until I got to Vietnam, we really didn't have—and Fred and I and Jerry have talked about this—none of us really had any idea of what was coming, or what our, our role was going to be.

We, we spent the summer traveling around the Yearly Meeting, visiting with churches, helping raise the support (because I believe the Yearly Meeting had made

the commitment that provides the support for the three of us through the Mennonite Central Committee to cover our travel expenses).

We, we all got paid \$22 a month [laughs], but, you know, there were maintenance costs for us, and the Yearly Meeting completely provided and covered that. We first went to a Mennonite orientation for a couple weeks in Akron, Pennsylvania, and then flew to Hong Kong for a few days to begin to deal with culture shock, you know.

I, I was raised for the almost entire part in rural, the rural West, in Melba, Idaho. Earlier than that, Cape Rancho, where the church was at a rural crossroads, you know. Fallow, Kansas, a town of 600. So the only Asian that I ever had any interaction with was an individual named Hideo Kaneko, who was a student at George Fox, who came home with my brothers for holidays. He was a Japanese student here, and so, our, my cross-cultural experience was next to nothing. I did share—top of one of the older buildings there were a few rooms that some of us—I can't even remember the name of it. Was there a Minthorn Hall?

Ralph: There was a Minthorn Hall. Was that kind of a dorm there?

Jon: At the top, and shared it with an individual from Iran, so the, the cultural transition was, it was a shock starting with Hong Kong and then Vietnam, and it was one of the, one of the great lightbulb-going-off things from my Vietnam experience was the exposure to different cultures. And, and that really triggered an interest in that for me going forward, but it also gave me a very different understanding and appreciation, that the culture I came out wasn't necessarily the only one, or the only right one, so that was a really important part of Vietnam.

And part of that was within the VNC, we had about 16 non-Vietnamese in the Vietnam Christian Service. They came from all over the U.S., and we had a Swiss doctor who had spent his adult life in the Congo, and there were the Mennonites and Brethren and Methodists and Episcopalians and people of different faiths, and in essence you can say there's a different culture associated around each one of those faith communities, and that was really important for me to, to begin to understand it. I've gone beyond your question, sorry.

Ralph: So, how long—you said a little less than two years, right?

Jon: Right, my commitment was for two years. Tet Offensive happened in—at the end of January, 1968. I had, by then, was living and working in a little hamlet called Tonkin, which was the area more commonly known as Dak To where some of the major fights were in 1967. And I had traveled to Pleiku, which was 50 kilometers just ahead of the Tet Offensive, and was in Pleiku when that happened, and could never go back to Tonkin. And so the place where I was working, I couldn't... So the organization probably would have found a place for me, but, so, the decision was for several of us to return home. So I still had four months of my alternative service to do. So, that's why I spent 20 months there.

Ralph: Yeah. Did you ever feel in danger?

Jon: Oh, we... I could spend the next hour-and-a-half talking about the situations that we were in, and I'll just give you a couple.

Ralph: Yeah.

Jon: One night, a little hamlet came under a mortar attack—wasn't many, I don't remember. At the same time, evidently, some of the Vietcong came through town, dropped grenades on our trucks sitting out front, blew the doors off, shot through our front door, but it didn't come in. And a little later, and it happened to be the Protestant minister,—Vietnamese minister—and his family, came knocking on the door, just figuring that we knew how to handle medical issues, and they had—two of their family, one of them was injured very seriously, the other one not so much. So, and the fellow I was with, Bill, took the very serious one in our Land Rover to take her where she could get some good medical advice, and the other one didn't—the other woman didn't want to go, so it was my responsibility to get that shrapnel and everything. So that was one of the examples.

We, in our Land Rover we had covered the floors—floorboards—with sand bags under the seats behind us. We went places that the military wouldn't go with less than a company, and just the two of us would go to do our feeding programs out in the hamlets, and we just, on the roads, we just drove as fast as we possibly could, hoping we'd be over any mine that went off, as it was very common for roads to be mined. The night of the Tet Offensive, as I said, I had driven to Pleiku, and the fight that night in Pleiku was right at our house—it wasn't at all like Jerry's experience, in Huế', but it was right at our house. A tank right in front of it got hit with a B-40 rocket. The captain that was in charge of that tank, seriously wounded. We ended up with him in our house. Fortunately we got a couple of nurses. They saved his life. We ended up carrying him out over a fence and getting him into, into town, but the... Through the night (that happened after dawn), but through the night the fight was right at our house. So those were just two of the examples.

Ralph: Sounds scary.

Jon: It was. My mom said that when I came home (and they were, by then, were dorm parents here on campus at George Fox), I was like a caged tiger. I couldn't sleep through the night so I'd get up and wander around town. And yeah, it was.

But I can tell you, we, we've worked in scary situations, but in comparison to what U.S. infantry folks got put through, it was nothing. And that's part of what really made me a peace activist.

Even today, when I think about my Vietnam experience, there are two images that always come to mind first. One are dead American soldiers in the body bags, stacked

like cordwood in the Pleiku air base during the fight for Hill 875. And if you followed the Ken Burns *Vietnam*, as soon as that fight was over, the U.S. walked off that hill, so why? And we saw that repeatedly all over the country. And so, what, I mean, any war is probably—but that war was especially—useless; loss of life on both sides. So that's one.

The other image was—the Tet Offensive, since this fighting went on right across from our house—the day after, after the fighting was over, we were there to gather up our stuff because we were told we needed to, to leave there, and, but across the road, which had been honeycombed with trenches and tunnels, there were dead Vietnamese—North Vietnamese and Viet Cong—soldiers laying all over the place. (I think they were probably mostly Viet Cong there, rather than North Vietnamese, although you couldn't tell the difference.) What a senseless loss of life. And those—here 50-plus years later, those are the two main visual images that whenever I think of Vietnam, come to mind, pop up.

Ralph: You mentioned the Tet Offensive a couple of times. Maybe you should quickly explain what that was.

Jon: Okay. The... Tet is the Chinese New Year. There's also the Vietnamese New Year, and every Tet Offensive up to that there'd been a ceasefire, you know.

U.S. military leaders and political leaders had been telling how well the war was going for the U.S. on a pretty regular basis up until then. And the Tet Offensive was that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, with often many, many soldiers, attacked every major and many minor urban areas in Vietnam and other U.S. and South Vietnamese military bases all at the same time, and a tremendous battle went on. Pleiku was just overnight and a bit into the next day. And in Huế', where Jerry was, it went on for nine days. And, and it, so where, like, in Tonkin where I was, it was dangerous, but we would still work and drive out to the mountain hamlets, but there were large areas of the country after that we couldn't go to. It was, well, if you... Anyway, that was the Tet Offensive, so...

Ralph: And in all of that, here you were, over there doing service, trying to love people and help people, but there are lots of other people around: the enemy. They carried guns.

Jon: Yes.

Ralph: You didn't.

Jon: We didn't.

Ralph: And I can imagine how it must have seemed a little more dangerous to be out there without any way of protecting yourself.

Jon: I, you know, we soon learned it was probably just the opposite.

Ralph: Oh really?

Jon: Let's...I talked about the event where the Vietcong came through town. They did drop a grenade in our truck, shot in the door. They knew we were in there but they didn't come in. Several places around the country with our people—because we, we just lived in the hamlets, you know. We didn't live in encampments or within the... We just...

A little place in Tonkin I lived was right on Main Street amongst the Vietnamese places. My neighbor, who I got to know and liked me, and I liked him and liked his little [child] really well and we would play together, just before the Tet Offensive, when I went to drive to Pleiku, he says, "You don't want to go." He says, "You don't want to go." I says, "I have to," I said. "No," he says, "you don't want to go." He knew that the area—and he was a, he was not a pro-North sympathizer. The, I believe, I don't know this, but I believe in most of those areas they were local cadre which supported the Vietcong, part of the intelligence of the North Vietnamese. They understood what our testimony was and what we were doing. While, and I'm sure unbeknownst to us, we became friends with some of them, and I think they were far better protection than any gun we could have had.

Ralph: Interesting.

Jon: I mean, I may not have been able to, to reason that at the time, but we, you know, there were enough of these events beginning to build up. The only individual at Vietnam Christian Service that was ever killed in Vietnam, we believe was killed by a member of the South Vietnamese military out of jealousy because he was doing such good work.

Ralph: Oh my!

Jon: We don't know that, but that's what I think is a common consensus among all of us. And so in all of that, we never lost anybody. Yes, so, it was, it was scary.

We got to know a lot of the American military. There was something called the MACV (Military Advisory Command Vietnam). They were there advising the South Vietnamese Army. They would often look us up. They would supply us with medical supplies. I mean, we, we also developed good relationships wherever we were with the local U.S. military structure, and they were helpful—often helpful and supportive for us. And so, we just, and I think the fact that we lived there and they knew we weren't armed...

You know, my breakfast every morning there in Tonkin was to get up and walk over to the local market, buy a papaya and a couple eggs and some black market C rations and come home and have my either soft-boiled or hard-boiled egg. At lunch I'd walk

down to the local little place and had my bowl of pho. People got to know who we were and what we were doing, so...

Cherice: Can you—you said a little bit about the food program that you were doing, but maybe tell a little bit of stories about what it was like, what specifically you were doing as your service, and maybe any stories of, you know, connection with the local people doing that service work.

Jon: In the Highlands, the Montagnard people were...Actually, they've been there before the Vietnamese, it's kind of like the Native Americans: the Native Americans were here first. In Vietnam, along the lines of 21 different groups...

In the Highlands, and I gotta give a little background to get to the feeding program part. And they survived in the past on slash and burn. They'd slash and burn a section of the jungle, plant their rice for two or three years until they'd depleted the soil, and they kind of rotate, and I don't know all the details, but 10-20 year rotation, but they would camp in a little village, and the Montagnards, all of their houses were up on stilts and they were made of thatch. Well, with the advent of the war, and both sides using the areas as free-fire zones and such, they could no longer, it was not safe for them to do the slash and burn.

So they were in their hamlets, and they had no means of producing their own food. The remedy to that, they'd been doing these programs. And so, we, using U.S. surplus ag commodity, which the United States government supplied us, through the USAID program, cook something called CSM, which was corn, soy powder, and powdered milk, fairly high in protein. Fortunately, we also had surplus sugar and raisins, because when we try—we first tried to introduce these into the villages for the children, because the children really had—were showing signs of malnutrition, well the only way we could get them to eat it was to cook up a pot really early in the morning, sweeten it with the sugar, and put the raisins. And I know the sugar, you know, wasn't the healthiest thing, but it got the rest of the healthy food to them. And I have a photo on one of my slides which I'm going to find sometime and blow up and put on my wall, because here's a mother showing us her baby, and telling us how much weight her baby has put on since this program, and whereas we couldn't get them to eat it before, suddenly they were all clambering. And of course, I mean, we did the early morning feedings initially to get it gone, but then it really wasn't safe for us to be traveling. I mean, I mean, it wasn't safe anytime, but it really wasn't safe to be doing that at night, so we ended up hiring someone from the village to, to do the feeding program, and we just kept it.

So that was, we, and we ended up... There, there's, there's so much of what the U.S. operation, which, them going in the highlands, going out and dropping in on hamlets and capturing everybody there and bringing them into these great big camps, and not having thought in advance, and having, not having food or blankets or anything for the folks, and all of a sudden they were cranking up the heat on us to get out there and, and, and of course, there were people in need, so even though it was a key

part of the military operation, which we just thought was awful, there were people in need, and so we moved to supply that, and, but we could not correct all the mistakes, because one of the big ones we were working with—leprosy was common with the Montagnards, and the people, the folk, had learned how to kind of separate the folks with leprosy but still within the community, their hamlet, took care of them. Well, when they brought them into these camps, eventually the U.S. decided they had to build a separate camp for the folks with leprosy, but they built it upstream, and within six weeks this large camp with all these people in it was empty, because they weren't going to...they just snuck out in the night and were gone, because they, they, they understood. I mean, yeah, they weren't medically educated, but they'd lived with leprosy long enough they understood the impact. So I, I...[inaudible]

Ralph: I would be, did all of this open the door to a life, we won't talk about it now, but a life of service, for a lot of people over the years. Really appreciate it, and appreciate you coming and talking with us today.

Cherice: I have a couple of other technical questions first, before we wrap up. But, so you said that you volunteered as a CO, and so you just did 20 months in Vietnam, but didn't do the additional four. As a volunteer, were you required, then, to finish up the, the rest of your service? Or was it just—

Jon: I was.

Cherice: Did you do something else stateside?

Jon: Yes. So when I got back, I had to negotiate with my draft board on what I was going to do. My brother Fred was a, is a Friends minister, and at that point had just begun to get involved in what back then we called the ghetto (I don't think that's an appropriate word today), but the inner city of Long Beach, and made some connections, and made arrangements for me to work as a welfare rights assistant, helping folks—mainly folks immigrating out of the South, coming to California until they could get established. So, I had to go in and talk to the head of my draft board, who was a retired Marine colonel. And he just, we sat down and immediately, you know, and he, told him, and so he, we immediately had an hour-and-a-half discussion about Vietnam and what I had seen and what I had done and all of that, and we got done, he says, "I don't care what you do, I'll approve anything you want to do. You've already more than met your obligation." So he approved. So I spent—and I worked, actually, longer than my time in that, and it was an eye-opening experience in and of itself to—urban poverty and beginning to understand a little about some of the issues of race.

Cherice: Mm-hmm, okay, yeah, and that also brings up the other question of, I don't think we heard about your appearance before the draft board at the beginning. What—did you have to tell them that you were volunteering as a CO, and how did that go over with your draft board?

Jon: Well, my, my classification had already—it had been approved.

Cherice: Okay.

Jon: And they did not—there was some give-and-take. I didn't, I didn't have to meet with them, but they, they were questioning, and, and they—I believe the contact that the Mennonite Central Committee—some of that went on behind the scenes—and the fact that it was in Vietnam was really all it took for. They, they, the fact that I was offering to go there. Of course, in their minds, I'm sure, and though we, we didn't have this discussion, in their minds, I was going to do my part for the effort, you know. The discussion—and I was young and naive enough, I don't know that I could have had an in-depth discussion. So it was not a tough sell.

Cherice: Okay, great. Alright.

Ralph: Well, thank you so much.

Cherice: Yeah, thanks so much for sharing your stories.

Jon: Did you get what you wanted?

Cherice: Yeah, thanks!

Ralph: I think so!

Jon: Okay, well, I'm sorry in the beginning I couldn't be a bit more positive about...I mean, there were people in the church that were supportive, but it was not a big part of our youth education.

Ralph: Yeah.

Cherice: Yeah.

Jon: So...

Cherice: OK.