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Interview with Gordon Crisman

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Transcript of interview with Gordon Crisman

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends

December 6, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Gordon Crisman 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, OR on December 6, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Welcome, Gordon.

Gordon Crisman: Thank you.

Ralph: Nice to have you here. And so I'll start with a simple question: What year were you born?

Gordon: 1947.

Ralph: 1947. That makes you—

Gordon: 70.

Ralph: Yeah, 70 now, yeah. Okay and that makes you, seven, '67, you were 18 in '65.

Gordon: Yeah, I lived—technically lived through the Korean and the Vietnam War, course, Vietnam would've been when I was draft age, and so forth.

Ralph: Yeah. And when you were draft age, how did you register?

Gordon: Well, I believe I originally registered 1-A, or just—

Ralph: Straight?

Gordon: Straight, yeah. And then, you know, I grew up in a, in a small town down just a little ways south of where your brother was principal, at Crow High School. (We used to play them in sports, by the way.) And it was a very rural, typical town in the '50s, where I think you can just assume that you were going to perform some kind of military service. I think everybody did.

And my father, Leo, was in the Navy, so I'm not sure that I really questioned whether or not that—

When I registered, I had not accepted Christ at that point when I was 17, 18 years old, and then, so I just registered, and got here to George Fox—College, then—and ultimately met a guy by the name of Arthur Roberts, and had a couple conversations

with him about the thing. And I did accept Christ as a junior here at George Fox, and actually that, I'm not a real introspective, deep thinking kind of person, but I did start, start thinking about service in the military and that sort of thing. Is that, does that answer your question?

Ralph: It does.

Gordon: More than answers it, probably.

Ralph: No, that's, that's very good. So, that, when, when—or what happened, relative to, in other words, you weren't drafted into the military.

Gordon: That's correct. Well, you know, this is going to be kind of embarrassing to admit, probably, but I think two things happened.

One, I wasn't real anxious to be shipped to Vietnam, should I either enlist or be drafted, but secondly I really think, you know, at George Fox, there was opportunity for, for me to think about and discuss a little bit about what the service would mean, what I might be asked to do, and to think about, "Is there another way I could serve my country other than going into the military?" And I think Arthur was probably—on campus, I'm sure there were others—but was one of the go-to people to actually help young men (maybe women, I'm not sure) process through that decision.

And so, I came out the other end, and I think Arthur may have helped me. I can't remember for sure—another George Fox grad who had graduated prior to me coming on campus here as a freshman, Dale Reiner, was administrator at a mental hospital in central California, down by Fresno. And so, somebody, it may have been Arthur, put me in touch with him and I had a conversation with him, and that's where I ended up doing my alternate service down in Reedley, California, which is about 20 or 30 miles south of Fresno.

Ralph: So you, at age 18, when you had to originally register, did, what, how did you register at that time?

Gordon: Well, I just registered, whatever the, whatever the regular registration was.

I should say, my dad was in the Navy. We were not—unlike my wife's family, who discussed anything and everything all the time and, and they could disagree and remain friends and, and everything else—our family was, was probably more private. We did not really dis—go into a lot of deep discussions around the dinner table, that I remember. I don't remember my father sitting down with either my brother or me and talking about service and, and so forth. My friends at the time, in high school, were all committed or considering, you know, going into one branch of the service or another. So I probably didn't give it a lot of thought at 17 or 18 when I was preparing to register.

Ralph: However, what you did then was go to college, so you didn't have to actually—

Gordon: Right, I was deferred, right.

Ralph: Deferred for college. And during those four years, then, you met Arthur Roberts and others who influenced you, made you think about conscientious objection, I think that's what maybe you said.

Gordon: Mm-hmm.

Ralph: And so then comes graduation from college.

Gordon: Yeah, I think during my senior year, I was 21, turned 22 right after I graduated, had met (who's now my wife) Cleta. When we, I was starting my senior year, she was just a freshman, and we dated that, all that year and then became engaged in June, and so during that, primarily that final year of, at George Fox was when I really had conversations about, about how I should re-register or change my registration and, and apply for conscientious objector... I just don't remember the process, exactly—what I went through—other than, kind of the, Arthur helping me think through that, you know, my senior year at George Fox.

Ralph: Yeah. And so when you were 18, you really hadn't thought much about conscientious objection, in terms, as a spiritual condition?

Gordon: Correct. I'm not even sure, I mean, obviously we...

The little town I grew up in—and perhaps unlike a lot of society today, you know, you probably, you probably couldn't tell a Christian from a non-Christian, because everybody kind of behaved the same. We all, we had a kind of a moral code that we all followed, and I'm not even sure that throughout my high school year that I even knew what a conscientious objector was. There was no Friends church where we grew up, so we attended a Christian church and, and they were a fairly USA-patriotic kind of a congregation, so I don't know, just an assumption that you would serve your country in some fashion other than alternate service.

Ralph: But then comes the, the four years after college. Tell us again a little more. Did you, or, I guess what I'm asking, when did the issue of conscientious objection really hit you?

Gordon: You know, I don't remember. Unlike my conversion, where I can, you know, pinpoint the exact event, I don't remember an exact time that I had kind of an epiphany and said, "Oh, why there's, I'm going to start thinking and pursuing this, thinking about it, seeing if there might be an alternative." I think it was more of an evolving process than just a kind of a light going off or turning on in my head. And, you know, it may have been, you know, I don't know whether—I just don't recall

whether there was a, an opportunity to, say, come in and hear Arthur talk about what your options were relative to the draft or conscientious objection, or whether it was through peers that I talked to particularly. In those days, the student body was probably about 350 students, and a third of us, of them, were Friends. My folks were, were Friends (Quakers), although my entire growing up life there was never a Friends church in the little towns we lived in. So, I really was probably formed and shaped by the Christian Church denomination, so it was probably a combination of having conversations with friends. Some of my friends were, at that time, that may have had an influence, were Stuart Willcuts, Dean Reiner (Dale's brother), who was in (both of them were) a year behind me, the Ankeny boys (Bruce Ankeny was a very good friend of mine), and so it very possibly was through conversations with them that I started pursuing that and looking into that as a viable option.

Ralph: Remind me again of the, of when this was, what year were you 18?

Gordon: Well, I was 18 in 1966, or no, let's see, 1965, and then, sorry I was 18 in '65 and I started at George Fox as a freshman in 1965, graduated in 1969, or no, yeah, '65, and then graduated in '69. So it would have been in the '67, '68, '69—fall of '67 through graduation in May or June of '69.

Ralph: And the reason I focus on that question is, that was right at the time that there was so much protest against our being in Vietnam.

Gordon: Oh, yeah.

Ralph: And so it's a little hard to separate whether or not we were opposed conscientiously, or whether it was a part of the anti-war.

Gordon: Yeah. And I don't recall—I, in fact, you know, I don't recall any (unlike some campuses that you saw in pictures: Kent State and others, particularly) I don't recall any, any real active—certainly violent or demonstrative—demonstrations here at George Fox. What I recall was we just kind of went about our business. Sure, we were obviously very aware of it. We talked about it, and in classes (I was a business major so didn't maybe take some of the classes where that may have been more actively discussed) the—the war and the United States' participation in that war.

I've been watching that Vietnam War series on OPB, and it's pretty interesting—brings back a lot of memories, especially of things you read in the newspaper.

But I don't remember there just being a, just a real undercurrent of, kind of, civil disobedience here at George Fox, here about the war. That, that's just my memory—maybe there was and I just didn't see it or something.

Ralph: I'm interested in the fact that you, along with several others we've interviewed, mentioned Arthur Roberts. I just want to talk about him just a little bit more, his influence.

Gordon: No, I didn't, I, I actually was probably not smart enough to take any of his classes, but I know he... The conversations I had with him—I was kind of intimidated, you know, going into his home and sitting down there and then thinking, "Oh my goodness, I, just, just don't say anything real stupid!" But he, he just had a way of kind of drawing you in and making you think about your life and, you know, what, what, what the options would mean, and what it would mean to be, you know, carrying a gun and actually maybe faced with actually shooting another human being and killing another human being. And, and, you know, maybe for one of the first times in my life, I actually started thinking about those things. That's what I recall about my conversations with Arthur.

Cherice: How did he communicate to you the opportunity to go and talk to him about those things, or did you just—

Gordon: That's, that's what I can't remember, if—I can't remember if, if one of my friends (and of course, you know, getting to know Cleta exposed me to her two brothers as well [Stan and Kent Thornburg]), and so I don't remember if it was my peers, that if we were talking, suggested, you know, "Gee, Arthur would be a good resource if you want to..."

Again, I don't remember my, my own parents—my dad was a very, very close friend of Arthur's and they were in the same class at George Fox, and so I'm sure they were, they were pleased that I was having those conversations, but I don't remember them encouraging me to, so I think it was more either friends, or somehow I, I heard that Arthur was the person that would welcome a conversation with a young graduating senior from George Fox to have that conversation.

Ralph: Just before that, Arthur had been a major influence on three of our George Fox grads who were conscientious objectors.

Gordon: Right, I remember that.

Ralph: But, but wouldn't—I mean, they were conscientious objectors, but Arthur said, "You ought to go to Vietnam in peace."

Gordon: Right. John Newkirk and Sandoz and...can't recall who the other one was.

Cherice: Fred, Fred Gregory?

Gordon: Fred Gregory.

Ralph: Fred Gregory, yeah. And that's, that's very important.

Gordon: Yeah.

Ralph: So he had a similar influence on you, although not to do exactly the same thing.

Gordon: Yeah, I think—and again, maybe he saw something in those guys he didn't see in me—but, but yeah, I don't remember him really trying to nudge me in a, in a particular direction other than as a—well, I'm not even sure at that point that I, I knew my—

I knew my parents were Friends or Quakers. I always (frankly) thought it was kind of odd that we would grow up in towns where there was no Friends church, and they would, they would not (my memory was that) they did, would not join that church. And in an old church in the town where I went from the second grade through to graduation from high school, they participated to the extent that they were allowed to in, in the church services. My mom sang in the choir and my dad did other things. But the Quaker influence was definitely not heavy in my life until I got to George Fox and really started thinking about, about it. And it probably wasn't until I married Cleta that we really became members—or I became a member of the Friends church.

Cherice: And you said your dad was in the Navy?

Gordon: Mm-hmm.

Cherice: And so, he was a Quaker at the time and he thought of himself as a Quaker and wanted to join the Navy?

Gordon: Yep. Yeah, again, I've never had, like I say, my, my...we just don't discuss deep things for some reason, or meaningful things, and so I don't—yes, my dad, you know, the Crismans grew up in Camas, Washington. They, they attended the Friends churches there. There was a little church not far from their house, I think, on Prune Hill, and then they eventually went to Camas Friends.

But yes, my dad went two years to George Fox. He laid out a year to work to make enough money to come to college, and then went two years, and he wanted to become a teacher, and at that time George Fox was not accredited for training teachers, so he...I can't remember which came first, actually. I think he enlisted in the Navy, and then... But he finished up his last two years at Willamette so he could be trained as... So he's actually a graduate of Willamette University. He got his master's at the University of Oregon. But he enlisted in the Navy, and he had a week's leave in March of 1945, and he came back from wherever he was in boot camp, or stationed, and he and my mom got married, and had, like, a three-day honeymoon or something, two days, and he had to go back to wherever he was stationed. And then I think he came back and finished up his education and then

went on to become a teacher. Yeah. So did I answer your, now that I've gone all the way around, did I answer your question?

Cherice: Yeah. So what was it like then to—for you, as you changed to a conscientious objector? Did you have to change your paperwork with your draft board and...?

Gordon: You know, I must have. I don't remember doing that, but I would have had to have done that, yeah. And I'm not sure, I just, if there was a process once your deferment, your deferred time ended, after you graduated from college, if you had to go back in to the draft board office and, and re-register.

I do remember—again, this is kind of embarrassing to admit—but you know, all my friends who from high school—and I didn't stay in touch with a lot of them real closely, one or two good friends, real good friends—had joined the army and either were... (My, you know, my, my absolute best friend joined the army and he was sent to Vietnam as a helicopter pilot, survived and came back home and everything.) But you know, I was, I just hoped they didn't ask me, kind of, "What, well, what are you doing, Gordon? Are you going to go in the service, or what?" because I just didn't, I didn't know for sure that I could express myself well enough as to what, what I was going to do. I've since talked to them over the years. But at that time it was, it would've been hard for me to talk about it with them because they were so committed to their military service.

Cherice: Mm-hmm. Do you remember—yeah—do you remember if you had to talk to the draft board?

Gordon: Yeah, I'm sure I did, yes, I don't remember, I don't remember that meeting other than just, yes, there was, there was a conversation where I changed it and they, they kind of just wanted to make sure that it was legitimate.

Cherice: Was that as hard as talking to your friends, or was it harder with your friends?

Gordon: Yeah, and I'm not, you know, I think, I think probably, truth be known, I probably defaulted more on—I think Quakers and perhaps, you know, Mennonites and others were fairly well known for their, their conscientious objector stance, and probably that rather than my eloquence (or lack thereof) had to do with them going ahead and granting my status as opposed to anything I said that really convinced them at that point.

Cherice: Yeah. And then you said you did service in southern California.

Gordon: Well, yeah, well, in central California, yeah. There was—two, two hospitals that were, yes, they were mental—we called them mental hospitals in those days, I don't know what they call them now, but probably the same thing—but one of them

evolved—the one I was sent to initially kind of evolved into a facility for elderly or seniors. And we did, you know, everything from electric shock treatments to, you know, just about everything for those folks.

And then, but then I was transferred back over to the other one that had all sorts of patients from 18 to, you know, 60. And in those days, they considered drug abuse a mental illness, so we had several, particularly young people back there in the real early '70s, that—and, and some from fairly well-known celebrities, that their kids have gotten into drugs and, and that was considered a mental illness that could be cured and they could be drug free, I suppose. But most of them were either schizophrenic or psychotic behavior. Yeah.

Cherice: Did you, did you choose the, the place you went to, or did they (the draft board) send you somewhere?

Gordon: No, I chose. Yeah. I applied. And I suppose—and they, they were, they...

And again, because Dale Reinard was there, and they—when I finished my service, they offered me a job in administration. But Cleta and I were anxious to get back up here where our families were.

And, but they were known for, they were a Mennonite—it was a Mennonite-run facility, so they were known for allowing, having programs that young men and women could, could work in and fulfill their service.

Cherice: OK. So were there quite a few COs working there at the time?

Gordon: Yeah, there were. I would say there were probably somewhere between six and 10 or 12, something like that.

Cherice: Did you have a sense of camaraderie with them, or was it just the same as anybody else that was working there?

Gordon: Yeah, it was, you know, I... It was probably just, you know, none of...

I certainly, as a business major, was not trained to go face-to-face with, you know, people that had severe mental disorders. That was not something that I was, you know, trained for, certainly, so did a lot of on-the-job training and so forth. But I mean, I'm sure, I'm sure we had, we had times of... We didn't really get to know any of them—some of them. But probably the majority of them were not even, were not Christians. They were conscientious, conscientious objectors but not Christians. So we, you know, we didn't didn't hang out with them a lot, I suppose.

Ralph: And being conscientious objectors might have been conscientiously objecting to this particular war.

Gordon: Could have been, yeah.

Ralph: Because the War in Vietnam was very unpopular at that point, and so it's a little bit hard to separate those who were doing it out of a spiritual...

But your, if you were to, if you were 18 now, with, and there were a draft now, how would you register?

Gordon: Well, it is probably a hard question to answer, because at that time I, I was still pursuing a faith decision, and so I'm not sure that all my decisions were based on how I would look at it today, having now been a Christian for, you know, 50 years.

But certainly I would, I would today register as a conscientious objector. And again, it might lead me to be willing to—

You know, my wife's father, Hubert Thornburg, also, you know, came up during World War II, and he enlisted in the service, in the Coast Guard, which in those days did not, were not one of the (I guess they were, yeah, they were called the Coast Guard), but they were still kind of a (maybe they still are) a branch of the Navy, and they were the entity that stayed here in the States and just kind of protected the coast. They didn't get involved in active warfare. And he, and he actually had a position that was a non...non—

Cherice: Non-combatant?

Gordon: Non-combatant, yeah, I believe—I'm not positive on that, but...yeah.

Cherice: So you would be more likely to be full CO, but you can understand his choice?

Gordon: Yeah, I mean, it's like, like Fred and Jerry and John. At this point, that would—knowing what I know now, might be an option to think about, for sure.

Cherice: To go in and do more active peacemaking type of work?

Gordon: Yeah.

Cherice: So, so that would, you know—you would go even deeper on the CO side, kind of, is what you're saying?

Gordon: Yeah.

Cherice: Okay. Yeah. And I guess you, you kind of explained, you know, your conversion, like, more of a specific choice of Christianity, it sounds like, because you were raised a Christian, but chose it for yourself in college, and then made these

decisions kind of after that. So in what way was this a spiritual choice for you, and what, what particularly about your faith said, "I need to make this choice in this direction"?

Gordon: Well, you know, for, I suppose the best way to put it would be, for a young man in those days, and, and for some people even today, love of country and love of God were basically the same thing. I mean, we after all are "a Christian nation," and "God blesses us in special ways," supposedly. And so that's really not true. We are a Christian nation maybe in name only, now. But in those days, I think it was hard to separate the two, you know? Your patriotism was right up there maybe just one inch below your, your faith. And so, you know, you, by being willing to serve your country, you were also serving God, in a way. Now, as a 70-year-old, I, I can see that that's, that was kind of a fallacy in terms of thinking that way. But certainly in those days, that was, that was what, you know... And in certain denominations, for sure they, they put very, very much of a premium on veterans and people that have served, and you know, I'm very thankful for their service as well. It's just, it's different than serving Christ, so...

Cherice: Yeah, so what made you, kind of, make that decision to flip that idea from...

Gordon: Yeah, I think it probably just evolved during that year-and-a-half period there. I accepted Christ in a, you know, chapel service with Ron Crecelius as the speaker in the fall of '67, so I was 20. And so, then, just kind of as I grew in my faith and so forth, my service was one thing that I thought about and had conversations about, and then kind of was introduced to Arthur in a deeper way.

Cherice: Do you know what *about* Christianity, though? Because you're saying a lot of people, you know, said, "If you're a Christian then patriotism is part of your Christian duty," right? So how, how did you come to the point where you separated those things?

Gordon: Well, yeah, and I wish I could say that it just, the peacekeeping, peacemaking aspect of it was, was really the driver. It was probably more just really thinking about actually killing another human being that it was probably more of a, of an influence than that actually... It was really not until I was further along in my faith as a Quaker that I started really thinking about peacemaking and what that means, not only in a time of war, but also in everyday life.

Cherice: So it was that initial sense of, like, as a Christian...

Gordon: Yeah.

Cherice: ...it's incompatible with killing people, and so, and so that was the main catalyst?

Gordon: Yeah.

Cherice: Okay.

Gordon: And of course, the question was always, “Well, gee, what if you were, you know, at home, and somebody broke into your house and threatened to kill your wife? What would you do?” Well I’m not sure I actually know what I would do at that moment, and I’m not sure that anybody does. But yeah, so that was kind of the way that you were asked to maybe think about that. I’m sure you can think, well, gee, if you’re out there on the battlefield and you have your rifle leveled at somebody, that’s one thing, but if you’re in a hostile situation that, then what do you do? So, then there’s really not a... I haven’t figured out a good answer to that one yet.

Cherice: That’s a hard question.

Gordon: Yeah.

Cherice: Yeah. But at least not killing people intentionally...

Gordon: And, and as Ralph said, certainly, you know, in the Vietnam War, you know, from, from the earliest times, as Ralph could tell me a lot better than I can ever articulate, but, you know, it's like most things in life: they don't, it didn't just from day one start out to be a super controversial war. Day one its, I'm sure it made sense to the people that were in power, and we need to not let communism take hold in this country and... But then as time wore on, and the war wore on, and dead bodies were flying back home, it became very, very controversial, and there just didn't seem to be any end game that we could really prevail in, unless we dropped a bomb like we did on Japan, and, and really, I think people started—young people, my age at that time—started saying, “What,” you know, “what exactly is it we're doing over there in this little tiny country?” So, yeah.

Cherice: So that was part of it, too, and like, that kind of microcosm of that particular war really helped you to solidify your beliefs?

Gordon: Yeah, I mean, I would have to say, though, that early on I was more turned off by the, probably the, the ugly demonstrations that people against the war were staging. I thought, “What, what's wrong with those people,” you know? They just seem like they're, they're against our country. But you know, then as, as time wore on and I did have a chance to think about that a little bit and, and time to then talk to people here at George Fox, my perspective started to change, yeah.

Cherice: Yeah, okay.

Ralph: Well, thank you so much.

Gordon: Yeah.

Ralph: This has been helpful.

Cherice: Yeah, thanks for sharing your stories.

Ralph: Appreciate it.

Gordon: So, are you, are you publishing something, you're going to now put together?

Ralph: That's our plan, is to publish a booklet based upon those three wars, and people who lived here at that particular time and had the Quaker, Christian influence.

Gordon: Yeah.

Ralph: So that's what we're aiming toward.

Gordon: Yeah, and I'm sure your answers are from people, I would think, would be—particularly those who were my—who were draft age during World War II, where the good and evil seemed so clear, versus maybe the Korean War and especially in Vietnam, where the good and evil was very murky and hazy and unclear, and so, you know, when my dad was making that decision, and my father-in-law, it was a, it was probably a much different decision and thought process than I had, I'm guessing, in some respect. So...

Cherice: Yeah.

Ralph: Well, thank you so much.