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Interview with Eric Palmer

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Transcript of interview with Eric Palmer

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends

October 31, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Eric Palmer 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 October 31, 2017.

Ralph: Well, Eric, what year were you born?

Eric: I was born in 1932.

Ralph: 1932, that's the year I was born.

Eric: Uh-huh, uh-huh! [laughs]

Ralph: What date?

Eric: July 20th.

Ralph: I beat you, I was February 14.

Eric: Mm-hmm.

Ralph: So, when you registered for the draft, what did you register? How did you register?

Eric: Oh, going back to 1950, about there, I registered, or asked to be a conscientious objector, a CO.

Ralph: Yeah, so you signed up as...

Eric: Yes.

Ralph: ...a conscientious objector. Do you remember which of the three—of the two CO categories, one CO—

Eric: Did not want to be in the service in any capacity.

Ralph: OK. Alright, then, that, the—there's the 1O, which, and 1AO you go in, but, but don't carry a gun...

Eric: Right.

Ralph: But you just wouldn't be in the service at all.

Eric: Right, no.

Ralph: And, when were you drafted, or...?

Eric: Um, I think it was fall of 1950.

Ralph: Mm-hmm. What happened after you were drafted?

Eric: My local draft board had never had a 1-O, or 1-A-O. They did not want to have one, refused my—to give me that status. That, in turn, I appealed. The appeal board turned me down, and I was going to the University of Washington. They gave me a student deferment. Let's see, one quarter, then, I'm not sure when—'52 or '53—I took 11 course credits instead of 12 (I believe that's just about the way it was), and I had to be a full-time student to have the student deferment, even though I went—that was spring quarter—even though I went summer quarter to make up for it.

They said, "Ah-ha! We've got you!" [laughs] And they tried to draft me.

I appealed, finally, to President Eisenhower, and that appeal was agreed to, or, and whatever, and referred back to my draft board.

At, at that time, which would have been months later, 1955, 1956, I married my wife, Carol Ann, and the local draft board said, "Ah-ha! You're no longer eligible for service," so they gave me the—I forget which status—anyway, married, so no longer draftable.

Ralph: Yeah. OK. Well, how, how did you make your choice to become a conscientious objector?

Eric: OK. I was, my mother and I—my father had died when I was four-and-a-half, Bright's Disease, kidney failure, contracted in the First World War as a soldier. Anyway, I was in Sunday school, I was faithful in church, and it was the, the teaching in Sunday school, basically, that persuaded me that the Old Testament law had been superseded. Jesus said, first commandment was to love the Lord your God, second one was to love your neighbor as yourself. Well, if, if the old law had been superseded by grace and mercy, then how can I possibly kill someone else? How can I possibly help someone else in killing? And so I felt that God was first in my loyalty; country, yes, but superseded by my loyalty to my God. And because of this, OK. If I join up and, and am a non-combatant, medical person or whatever, I am there only, only—according to the army manual—there to get the wounded, the hurt, back on their feet and able to go back as a combatant: know that was the first purpose. Well, that didn't, that did not ring true! [laughs] So I took my stand as a conscientious objector. The...

Cherice: Can you tell us a little bit more about your Sunday school? Did they tell you about Quakers having a peace testimony or was it just something that you put together?

Eric: Yes, yes, it wasn't greatly emphasized, but very definitely that testimony was taught and known. I grew up as an only child in a very, very small Quaker church in Kirkland, Washington, close to Seattle, so I didn't have a big youth group or whatever to be a part of, but, you know, it was...

As I tried to think through all of this, the fact that I was here, had been placed on this Earth to serve others, to help, certainly not to kill them. It was interesting as the draft board and I went back and forth quite a number of times, they had the FBI interview 40 people that knew me.

Ralph: Wow.

Eric: And, amazingly, they did not find any, anything that would've stood against me. Thank you, Lord! They even came down to Newberg and interviewed my future spouse. Let's see. The—in Washington, the only, the only non—well, CO possibilities for service outside of the military were two medical hospitals, one at Medical Lake near Spokane, another one, Soap Lake? I'm not sure. Anyway, Central Washington. And these were for rehabilitation of service people that have problems. Again, I did not see where this would be a, a place that I could serve and feel that I was showing God's love if I was simply helping the service get them back into the trenches.

I was counseled by an attorney in Seattle that University Meeting had. Oregon Yearly Meeting—Northwest Yearly Meeting did not have any counselors in Washington, so, I think, I'm not sure who it was that set it up so that I could have some counseling up there, but it was through University Meeting. So I got that help.

Ralph: This was helping, determining that you were a conscientious objector?

Eric: Yes, and how do you, how do you walk the line, there. When they called us up for the draft, we had the very simplistic medical exam there in the high school gym. There were, I forget, a dozen or more of the guys that I'd gone to high school with there. And stripped to our shorts, you know, "Oh, you've got good eyes, you'd be good in the Air Force," etc., etc. That was what they were telling us. And so, after they saw that we had five fingers on each hand and some toes, why, they lined us up in a row on the gym floor and said, "Now, take one step forward to say that you're ready for the draft," or whatever. I was the only one, naturally, that did not step forward. And that's where the, where the adventure went.

Ralph: How did you feel at that moment when you, everyone else stepped forward and you didn't?

Eric: Well, I knew that at that point, I could be going to jail after appeals, etc. That was the, that was what would happen to those that did not serve and were not given 1-O status. And that was, for an 18-year-old (I guess that's what I was), that was a big step.

Ralph: Yeah, a tough one, I would think.

Eric: Yeah. It was tough, but I couldn't see that any other stand would satisfy God's law. I was, I was asked, "OK, if someone comes and threatens you or your family, what would you do, if they said, 'I'm going to shoot your wife'?"

My answer was, I would do everything I could to protect her, but I would not kill the other person, because I knew my wife would go to heaven. I didn't know what that other person, where that other person would be. So, it makes you think.

Ralph: Sure does. It really does. Well, so you spent that time... I, I, I'm wondering how... Most of your friends disagreed with you. And how did you feel about that?

Eric: I've never been an activist. I wasn't out there saying, "I'm better than you, because..." but rather, "OK, if that's what God is telling you, that's fine. I know what he's telling me, and so I've got to stand at that level and not participate in the war." I would've liked it to be different, but that was OK. I, I made up my mind on that. (Thought went through my mind and I don't, I'm not sure what it was.)

Ralph: So if some killer entered your home with a gun...

Eric: Yes.

Ralph: ...pointed it at your wife, what would you do?

Eric: If I could stop him in some way, I would. Not by killing him, however. If I had to give my own life to save my wife, I would, but I knew what—knew her situation, and that she'd go to heaven if she was killed, and I did not think that I should be the judge that said, "You're out."

Ralph: So you... If you have your choice of whether your wife dies or the guy that you could if you had a gun or something and could've killed him, you will choose your wife's death and the killer's life. And you gave a good reason for that.

Eric: No, it... That gets right down to a life and death situation. You're right there. And what does God want us to do? He can—he can provide a miracle. He is a miracle-working God. But he doesn't always do that. So he is the judge, and I'm here to serve him.

Cherice: Did others around you treat you differently because of your choice, or how did your peers handle your choice?

Eric: I don't think they—I don't think that made much difference. I got teased a lot over the years, but not because of that. Got teased for being a Christian, but not because of that stand.

Cherice: So, just to kind of summarize, it sounds like you were, you registered as a conscientious objector, and then you refused to, to be drafted, and you appeared before the draft board. And you said you were the only person in your draft area that had ever made that choice?

Eric: Correct.

Cherice: And what was, what area was your draft board under? What was it called, do you know? Was it Kirkland, Washington?

Eric: Yeah, it was Kirkland. It would've covered Kirkland, Redland, Juanita, all the, that little section.

Cherice: OK.

Eric: Pretty big section, now. But back then it was pretty small.

Cherice: And then you, then you had to appear before the draft board, and they—

Eric: Couple of times.

Cherice: —they didn't want to give you CO status.

Eric: No.

Cherice: So, so you applied to school, or you went to school, but then you were not exactly full time the whole time, so then you had to appear before the draft board again.

Eric: One, one quarter, by one credit, and they jumped on it, very quickly! [laughter]

Cherice: And so, how many times did you have to appear before the draft board?

Eric: I'm not sure, now. At least a couple of times, and there was a lot of correspondence back and forth, and with the appeal board—the local appeal board, and there was I think a state appeal board, and then on to the president.

Cherice: OK, so you actually sent a letter to the president...

Eric: Yes.

Cherice: ...and the president's committee had to respond.

Eric: That's right, that's right.

Cherice: And they agreed with your appeal?

Eric: Yes, and that was a relief!

Cherice: Yeah, I bet! Yeah, and at that time, you got married, and so then...

Eric: Yes.

Cherice: ...they weren't requiring married people to be drafted at that point in history.

Eric: Correct.

Cherice: OK.

Eric: That was as the Korean War was winding down.

Cherice: Mm-hmm, so they didn't need as many people, maybe?

Eric: Right, they didn't need as many.

Ralph: What, what year did you get married?

Eric: '56.

Ralph: Yeah.

Cherice: So you were in that process for about six years?

Eric: Mm-hmm.

Cherice: Wow.

Eric: No, it was...it went on, and on, and on! [laughs]

Cherice: Yeah. OK.

Ralph: Well, thank you, Eric.

Eric: Thank you!

Ralph: Nice.

Eric: Calls back some memories to me.

Ralph: Yes, and good memories.

Eric: Yes. No, uh...

Ralph: Obeying Christ.

Eric: Mm-hmm. Well good.

Cherice: Thank you very much.