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Interview with Elmer Baron

Cherice Bock

George Fox University, cbock@georgefox.edu

Ralph Beebe

George Fox University

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Transcript of interview with Elmer Baron

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends
November 20, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Elmer Baron 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 November 20, 2017.

Ralph: Well, thank you Elmer. I appreciate you coming.

Elmer: Thank you.

Ralph: When were you born? What year?

Elmer: 1922.

Ralph: 1922, so you were 18 in 1940?

Elmer: Yes.

Ralph: Yeah, right just before the war. And did you—how did you register: conscientious objector or straight 1A?

Cherice: Non-combatant, or combatant?

Ralph: Yeah.

Elmer: I just registered as a plain citizen, not a conscientious objector at that time. I wouldn't say I am yet, as far as that's concerned.

Ralph: Yeah, okay, so you just, just registered normally like most everybody else did.

Elmer: Right, right.

Ralph: Yeah. And were you drafted?

Elmer: I was.

Ralph: And tell us a little bit about your military service.

Elmer: Well, begin with, I wanted to get into the navy, and I wanted to get into radio and radar at the time. And so they had a school in Portland, Benson Tech, that we could go to as a preliminary to this whole thing, which I did for three months. And

then I went down to see if I could get into the navy, and at that time they didn't have room in the radio school, so they said, "Go home and we will call you when we have room, or if you get drafted, come in and we will sign you up as a navy personnel," so I did that. And it was about a month later I got my draft notice, so I went down to Portland to the navy and signed up for the navy, and that was in late '40s: 3 October, 1943. And—but they still didn't have room in the school, and they told me at that time that they would take us in, but we would not go to boot camp, and go directly to school, because they were short on radio and radar technicians. So I did that. I went back home. A month later when I got my draft notice, I went down and signed up for the navy, with a navy school, and they told me to report back on January the 26th, I believe it was, in 1943. So I went back—now, at that time, it snowed fifteen inches here in the valley, and we lived out here about two miles north of here on a farm, didn't they have a telephone, and so I couldn't call them. I walked into Newberg, called them on the telephone. And they told me, well, I couldn't get there in time for it because of the snow, and they said, "Well, it don't make any difference, because nobody's going anywhere today anyway, but be here tomorrow at 8:00." So I went out to my brother's, a place in Gresham, and stayed overnight, and early in the morning at 8:00, and at that time it was—I noticed a thermometer on the building as I walked up to the navy building said zero in Portland. So I went in and they said, "Well, we had a change. We got a call in yesterday that they were now had enough that we could go to—we'd have to go to boot camp." So they put me on a train and went to Farragut, Idaho in January. It was 20 below and four feet of snow on the ground. It snowed every day for about a month. But they had drill halls and so forth, and so I spent until April in Farragut, ID, on Lake Ponderay.

Ralph: And this was '43?

Elmer: Forty...yes, January '43 to April '43. And then they sent me to Bremerton and said, "Wait 'til we have an opening at school," which was another month. So I spent a month in Bremerton, then they shipped me to Treasure Island, San Francisco, and I took a pre-radio class there for a month. Then we had a choice of going to two or three different colleges for three months, and I chose Texas A&M, and so I got down to Texas A&M in summertime, and it was 100 degrees there every day for about a month.

Cherice: Wow!

Elmer: And so I went to school at Texas A&M for three months and managed to pass their classes all there—to begin with it was—didn't look too favorable, but finally I was able to grasp at what they were doing, so I graduated from there a radio technician second class, which wasn't quite what they told me it would happen, but that was the best they would do at that time. So anyway, went back to Treasure Island and spent six months in school at Treasure Island, and when I graduated from there, they shipped me to they said to San Clemente, California, but I was able to go home on leave. Well, in the meantime, my wife—we had gone together in high school and we had agreed to get married sometime in the future, didn't know

when—but at that time it seemed to work out, so in January of '44, why, we were married, well, can't think of what I want to think of. But anyway, it was by a Salvation Army Post in San Francisco, and then I was there until the end of that school term and then I was—said I'd go to San Clemente after that. So I brought her back up here and I went down there to see what I could find, and found out when I went to San Clemente, California, there wasn't any naval base there. So I checked in to a Coast Guard Station, because I knew I had to do something, and they says, they checked around and they finally said, "Well, we'll send you to San Pedro Naval Station, and your station will be San Clemente Island, California, which is 90 miles off the coast from San Diego." So they flew me down to San Diego and I caught a ship out to San Clemente Island. It was an air station for marine fighter pilots. And I stayed there for nine months. Then they got a call to ship they said for a radioman second-class, that must have been two years since I joined the navy, and two years was a limit for land duty, so I had to go to sea. So I was put on an LST, which is a Landing Ship, well, we called 'em "Long Slow Targets," [laughs] because they were slow.

Ralph: Yeah.

Elmer: And we shipped out on Christmas morning of 1945, and went to Hawaii first, and then they loaded us up there with ammunition and tanks, amphibious tanks, and a group of marines, and shipped us out, we had no idea where we were going. They wouldn't tell us that until we—

Ralph: But the war was over now.

Elmer: Well, the war was still going on, sort of. We weren't supposed to let anybody know where we were, and they pretty well controlled that. So we shipped out, went from there to Enewetak, which is 11 degrees north of the Equator. And then we went on up to Guam, and worked our way around 'til we went into Iwo Jima on the...

Ralph: Oh, you did?

Elmer: ...landing—first day landing—which they said would take about a day, they say—well, it was three days before we even got to land up there because they didn't realize how many Japanese there were there on the island.

Ralph: This was before the invasion, then, that the—

Elmer: Well that was the invasion...

Ralph: This was it.

Elmer: ...of Iwo Jima. That was the invasion.

Ralph: And were you—you were involved in that, were you?

Elmer: Yes, on the very first invasion.

Ralph: What, what did you do?

Elmer: I was a radio and radar technician, which meant that, that's all I done, was took care of that. And then, in spare time, the captain—whenever we went into the landing, why, they called me up to the—with the captain on the conning tower and manned the radio up there between ships.

Cherice: So you stayed on the ship, or you went on to the land with the radio?

Elmer: No, I was on the ship all the time. And so we landed there the third day and unloaded, well, we, we unloaded the marines at sea just off the beach, and we had what they called an amphibious alligator, amphibious tanks, which we called alligators, and they took them onto the beach and they, the marines, landed. So we were just off the beach far enough we could see everything that was going on.

Ralph: Reminds me so much of, "When the Yanks raised the stars and stripes on Iwo Jima Isle, there were tears in her eyes to"

Elmer: I actually saw that.

Ralph: You actually saw that.

Elmer: I actually saw it happen.

Ralph: Yeah. Well, um, did you ever get in a situation where you had to carry a gun and shoot at anybody?

Elmer: Never carried gun. The only gun I ever carried was at boot camp. They took us out on the rifle range to practice shooting.

Ralph: What was your faith background at that time? Were you in a Quaker church?

Elmer: I was a Baptist.

Ralph: And so you were, let's see, you, okay, that's, if you were a Baptist... Did your Christian and Quaker faith ever...I mean Christian faith, excuse me, Baptist faith, ever raise any questions about military service?

Elmer: No, not for what I was doing it didn't, because at that time the Japanese had attacked the United States, and I felt that if we hadn't fought them, to win, who knows what we would be today. And I didn't feel like I wanted to come back home, I didn't want to, at that time, I didn't want to come back home, and when they asked me what I did during the war, to say, "Nothing." Only, you know, because I had the

opportunity. My dad sent a letter to the navy declaring he needed me at home on the farm, and it came to me when I was still in boot camp, and they brought it to me and all I had to do was sign it, and I could come back home. But I wouldn't sign it. And of course, it didn't make my father too happy, but in the long run, I felt it was the proper thing to do, and I don't know—I still do, I still do.

Ralph: And of course, you took the position that the United States was, was right in this. Do you think, can you imagine, had you been born in Japan, were you a Japanese, would you have fought for Japan?

Elmer: I don't know that. You know, I, I'm sure the Japanese were brainwashed enough, from what I've seen, that they would do anything to win. And...

Ralph: I suppose the Japanese would say the Americans were brainwashed.

Elmer: Well, I'm sure they did. I don't know what they planned on doing after Pearl Harbor because they never got the opportunity. But we do know that they didn't shell the United States in a couple places, had a balloon over Southern Oregon to try to start a fire and stuff like that. So they meant business.

Ralph: Sure.

Elmer: And if I had been Japanese, I'm not sure, I suppose I would have been believing what they were believing. I don't exactly... And I feel That we treated them fairly after the war and helped them get back on their feet

Ralph: Yes.

Elmer: So I think that in the long run they were better off, but I don't know that, you know.

Ralph: Well—

Cherice: Do you—do you know why your dad tried to get you back to the farm? Did he really legitimately need you for a farm service or was he trying to get you out of it?

Elmer: Well, he could have used me, yep, he could have used me on the farm, but I had another reason: I didn't want to be a farmer. I'd made my mind up to that.

Cherice: Yeah.

Elmer: And I knew that if I went back, to save face I would have had to have been a farmer, and I didn't want to do that. And so it was hard on him, and it was hard on me to say no, but I had the opportunity to go back on the farm when I came home and I turned him down again. So...

Ralph: Do you have any opinion or impression of how, or any feelings toward those folks who, those men, who were conscientious objectors to fighting in the war?

Elmer: No, I had a lot of friends that were that, you know. And I, in my own opinion, I didn't feel it was right that they did that but then that was their opinion and so I, I never held it against them when I came back and I still had a lot of friends.

Ralph: And your church didn't have any particular teaching on that issue, I suppose?

Elmer: No, I can't say that the Baptist church had that.

Ralph: Yeah.

Elmer: You know, so... And I didn't become a Quaker until 1957. And probably the only reason I did at the time was my wife was born in a Quaker family, and her family was all Quakers back in Indiana and been, ever since, come over on the Mayflower, I guess, but you know, anyway! [laughs] So, our children started to school in Sherwood. And one, Steve, our oldest one, was in the sixth grade, he went to school, and then he didn't want to come to church in Newberg, because he didn't know anybody that well here, which we still did, bring him to church. And, and at that time I was just home—we'd bought a place, I was building house, I had two brothers, and we were all working on our houses, I was working six days a week, and, you know, in the church's eyes, I probably was not too good of a Baptist or Quaker or anybody else, because I was working seven days a week, one place or the other. And when Steve started in school, he met Gary Lewis—I don't know if you know Elmer Lewis?

Ralph: Oh, yes, I know him.

Elmer: Well it's his son.

Ralph: Ah, uh-huh.

Elmer: And right away they just made friends like this, and he, and he invited him to come to Sunday school in Sherwood, and Gordon St. George was minister there at the time.

Cherice: At Sherwood Friends?

Elmer: Yes. And he was a worker. He got out to see everybody, and I'll say that. He came out see me and wanted to know why I wasn't coming to church with the kids, and I said, well, I told him why, you know. Well the first thing I said was the wrong thing to say to him, because I said I didn't have time! And he says, "You don't have time not to."

Ralph: Yeah! [laughs]

Elmer: And I got to thinking about that, and then about two weeks later, Steve said, all the rest of family were going to church—well, they weren't because another son, Terry, at that time had rheumatic fever, and he wasn't able to do that, he had to be kept quiet and so forth, and—for about a year. And so, anyway, Steve says one morning, "Oh, I don't think I'll go to Sunday school this morning." And I said, "Why?" "Well," he says, "you don't go, how come I gotta go?"

Cherice: [laughs] Good point!

Elmer: And I says, "That's a good question. That's it." Of course, they were ready to go and I wasn't at that time, and I says, "You go this morning and I'll go next week." Well, next week I started and I never quit. And, and then, I don't remember, well that was probably end of October or something like that, '45, '46? Yeah, '46. And so we started going—my wife and children had been going, and then...I'll have to refer to my notes! [laughs]

Yeah, actually they started in September of 1956, and April 28, we both gave our testimony in church at the morning service at Sherwood Friends. Gordon St. George was pastor, and then we were recognized into the church on Sunday May 5th, 1956, and been there ever since.

Ralph: Great! Well I just have one more question. What, suppose that you were drafted today, or had to sign up, had to register. Would you register as a regular 1A, or...?

Elmer: Well, that's a hard question because it kind of depends on the situation. If I felt that somebody was gonna take us over that would come in and maybe murder our people and rape our women and all that, yes, I would sign up, because I just don't—if it was one that I thought we could live with, that'd be something else.

Ralph: So, essentially you're saying that you would not be a full conscientious objector, but you would conscientiously object if it was not a just war. If, if, if the war was not a just war.

Elmer: Yeah, right.

Ralph: Then you would not fight. But if it was just, in those terms, then you would go ahead and fight. Yeah.

Elmer: So that's, that's kind of still my feeling, you know, it depends on the situation.

Cherice: Yeah.

Elmer: If I felt that the families and people were gonna be jeopardized, I'm afraid I'd think it was the right thing to do.

Cherice: I have a couple more questions—

Elmer: When I look back on it and think about, you know, in the Bible, God allowed wars to happen, and even promoted, and they killed thousands of people, according to the Bible, as they moved from one country to another. And he allowed that to happen and even encouraged it, it sounds like to me, from what I read in the Bible. And so I, I just feel that it would not be against God's will for me to do that.

Ralph: From my, from my perspective it would be, all those things happened, and then Jesus said, "No, that's wrong, and so you shouldn't act that way."

Elmer: Well, I believe what he says, as far as that's concerned.

Ralph: So I'd see a difference in the New Testament.

Elmer: Yeah, but I, I just don't know, because we've had a lot of wars since, and we've had both—Gina's father was a conscientious objector. And he was sent to France and did, I don't know what, you know, whatever they did. And, well he was brought up as a Quaker, so that's probably the difference.

Ralph: Yeah.

Cherice: I have a couple questions, too. So, it sounds like you I grew up in Newberg, is that right?

Elmer: Did which?

Cherice: Did you grow up here in Newberg?

Elmer: Yes I did, I was born up in Washington, but...

Cherice: Okay, so you probably met some Quakers before, before you became one?

Elmer: Oh yes, oh yes, I went to Springbrook Grade School, right beside the Quaker church.

Cherice: Yeah?

Elmer: Uh-huh.

Cherice: Yeah, there used to be, what was it called? Springbrook Friends?

Elmer: Yeah, that's where Denver Hendricks was a scout leader there for a bunch of us for a long time, so I knew him well. In fact, we bought our house from him.

Cherice: Oh really? That's great. And then, did you notice any sort of difference between your Baptist church and Sherwood Friends when you became a Quaker and gave your testimony there, or was it pretty similar, it was just a more convenient location?

Elmer: Well, yeah, as far as the church was concerned, it was very similar type of service, and the only thing was that they baptize with water, which I was baptized with water. I don't say I don't believe that's right, but I've been baptized with the Holy Spirit too, so, yeah, anyway.

Cherice: So the differences didn't bother you, is what you're saying?

Elmer: No, it didn't change—didn't bother me a bit. I'm still glad I did it.

Cherice: Did anybody give you any trouble about having served in the military once you became a Quaker, or was it just part of your life?

Elmer: I've never had anybody...

Cherice: Yeah?

Elmer: ...complain about it.

Cherice: Yeah. That's good.

Elmer: So, I've been accepted over there just as well as I was before. In fact I was born as a Methodist.

Ralph: Yeah?

Elmer: Became a Baptist when we came to Newberg. And...

Cherice: So, your family just went to the church that was local? Is that what happened?

Elmer: Well, that and the one that seemed to be sociable to us. I know when we came to Newberg, of course, my dad bought feed and stuff from a staunch old Baptist down here. He invited us to that church. We went—I guess they went, I don't recall going to the Methodist Church, but I know that they said they went there and they didn't feel like they really accepted that well there because most of them were business people in town. So when they got invited to the Baptist church, they went there and they were accepted, and so that's what I grew up as.

Ralph: Well, thank you so much.

Elmer: Yeah, sure.

Cherice: Yeah, thanks for sharing.

Elmer: Oh, you're welcome.

Cherice: We appreciate hearing your stories.

Elmer: Good luck with your book, or whatever it is you're having done.

Cherice: Yeah, thank you.

Ralph: Thanks.

Elmer: Appreciate it.