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Interview with Dorlan Bales

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Transcript of interview with Dorlan Bales

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends
September 17, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Dorlan Bales 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 September 17, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Dorlan is the son of George Bales and Elenita Bales, who we've known around here for a long time. George was coach way back when I was a student here. Can you tell me, tell us, when you registered for the draft, what was your—how did you register, in terms of 1A, 1AO—1A, 1AO, or 1O?

Dorlan Bales: Well, I registered as a conscientious objector, and that was just as I was graduating from George Fox College. I graduated in 1969, and I was—it was probably the year before, 1968, when I registered. I think the main reason I did was that the committee that you talked about just now, that the yearly meeting set up to deal with war and with young people and their decisions about war, had an impact on me, having grown up in Oregon Yearly Meeting (now Northwest Yearly Meeting). There was very good attention paid to teaching young people about Quakers' testimony about war and peace.

And my father's example was good, too. He, he registered as a conscientious objector, too, in World War II. He didn't have quite as easy a time as I did. My dad was a Quaker pastor at the time I registered, in Kelso, Washington. My mother was a teacher in the high school in Kelso, Washington. And so the draft board that assembled to receive petitions knew the Bales family, and had respect for my parents. So when they, they had kind of an unusual approach to me. They basically said, "We understand that you would want to be a conscientious objector, that you are a conscientious objector, and you want to do alternative service, tell us what you'd like to do." [Laughs] This was not like in some places and times, where draft boards were very much large and in charge and, if they granted a CO position at all, they would assign some work that was as dangerous and odious as possible, just to make sure the person was sincere about his claims. (Of course, they weren't drafting women.)

So I, I count myself fortunate to have grown up in a yearly meeting that cares about peace, and were clear about that. There were written materials, there were speakers, there was a Friends youth organization that included peace as part of what was talked about in those circles, so I did have a choice of going on to graduate school instead of asking for CO status, and I pondered that one for a couple of months, y'know: "What's my call here in this kind of a situation?" But I came to clarity about that, that other young men my age were being called to serve their country, and for me to evade that in some way because I had the educational or class

or financial ability to do so when so many did not, that that was, seemed to be acting out of privilege, and not out of conviction. So I decided to, to do two years of conscientious objection alternative service.

So, getting the OK to do pretty much whatever I wanted to do, I started investigating what was possible. I didn't want to go to Vietnam as sort of part of my reasoning process kind of led me to that. If, if that's, if that's what others are being asked to do, I should not try to do less, and I found two organizations that had work going on in Vietnam. One were Quakers, a Quaker group, who had a, a prosthetics fitting, making and fitting clinic down on the coast of Vietnam; unfortunately they were not needing anybody at that time. I also checked with the Mennonite Central Committee, so I guess there were three possibilities. And Mennonites did not have a place that I could apply for, either. But there was another organization called the World Relief Commission, that was a branch of the National Association of Evangelicals that I heard about, and in—inquired about and they said, "Oh your timing is great! We are going to be assuming control of a hospital for Vietnamese children just north of Da Nang in the little village of Wakong. Now, you might want to know that this, this 100-bed brick and tile hospital is on the corner of a marine supply base, and you will be living on a marine base." So I'm going, "Hm, well that's not exactly the way I would have drawn it up!" [Laughs] And in fact, another young man from Northwest Yearly Meeting who went there with, with his wife, we went, went together and—

Ralph: And what was his name?

Dorlan: Um...

Ralph: Well that's alright.

Dorlan: Newell was his last name, uh...

Ralph: Oh, sure!

Dorlan: What was his first name? Anyway, it's not coming to me. He, he was there for two months, and the first, the first month we were in country, we were in Saigon, and getting all of our paperwork done, and staying with Christian Missionary Alliance missionary guesthouse. And that's a little longer story than probably we have time to tell today, about how I found out about the attitudes toward war by that denomination, which was, let's just say, much different than Quakers.

Ralph: Tell us a little bit more about that.

Dorlan: OK, this big guesthouse where missionaries would come in from the field and spend some time and maybe go back out to do some more work in the capital city of South Vietnam. And so, the, the Newells and my wife and I were staying there for a month, like I say, to sort of get all the details of being in country and all the paperwork that was necessary for that. And so, ate meals with, at a large table with

mostly missionaries around there, and the four of us. And there was a, a, a missionary woman, white woman, who was kind of in charge of that, and she would sit down, and she would ring a bell, and servants would come scurrying in and start serving us, which made me feel a little squeamish right off the bat. It seemed like this was too much of a colonial kind of a setup to suit me, but we were guests there, and I of course was, I just needed to listen and observe, and so I didn't make any comments about that.

But, some of the missionaries I talked to, I was sitting next to at meals and struck up conversations, and I, I soon got a, a feeling for this group's attitude toward the war. And to boil it down, was, in maybe too harsh a way, "The United States is making, is bombing these people to give us a chance to stay and preach the gospel. And so, this must be God's will for that to be happening, because the long range, the only thing that matters in the end is saving souls, and having people go to heaven, and so if we're not here to bring the message of Jesus, these people in this country, are doomed." So, I was, I was kind of, again, taken aback by, by this, this support of the war by Christian people here.

I wasn't so naive to think that there were a lot of other Christians who had the Quaker or Mennonite or Brethren or radical Catholic understanding of peace and war, but still, to come up right against it face-to-face in the place where the war was going on, that, that was something that took a bit of reflection for me to kind of digest. Like, how, how can this be? How can people see people being injured and killed and napalm being used on the, where they were living to destroy the ground cover so that we could see the enemy more clearly and they couldn't hide...it just seemed like something I, I could never be a part of.

And I, I, I was reinforced in my conviction that I was doing what I was called to do. And that being a, a medic, was, would not have been the right choice, and I didn't really even consider that very long because it seemed to me that this was part of an operation that was against the teachings of Jesus, and of the early Quakers, and of the not-so-early Quakers—the Quakers I knew! And I was convinced that this was, was the truth, and was God's will. So in the next month, we went to Da Nang, y'know, up on the northern coast of Vietnam, South Vietnam, and there we studied Vietnamese for a month intensively, y'know. It was morning and afternoon, and y'know sometimes after dinner awhile too. This was pretty intense, and so I learned enough Vietnamese to have simple conversations and as it turned out enough Vietnamese to teach a, a Vietnamese man how to run a dispensary in this hospital that we were going to start the phase-in of civilians and the phase-out of corpsmen and medical military doctors.

I was kind of fascinated by the different culture, and also a bit awed by it. I, I had not been off the West Coast of the United States at that point. I, I had an aunt that lived in Southern California down in the Mojave Desert, and I had been down, with family, had been down to see her a couple times, but other than that, my travels were limited to maybe Seattle-Tacoma occasionally, but more often down to Portland as

the closest metropolitan area, and out to the coast, the Oregon coast, that was my world. And, there was not much racial diversity in that territory, and there are, y'know, historical reasons for that. R. A. Long, who was a lumberman from Kansas City, Missouri, who founded the town of Longview to be a, for a lumbering center, he made sure there were no non-white people that came there. He would send his employees to the train station every time there'd be a train coming from the South, bringing people looking for work, and anybody who was black or brown or anything other than white was told to stay on the train and go on up to Seattle, y'know, "You cannot get work here." So, I did not grow up with people of color there, all of my classmates were white.

I went to George Fox College, but it was kind of the same situation there. We had a few people mostly people from Africa, who were there, which was a little different than African Americans, and, and that culture. So, suddenly, here I was in Hong Kong on the way to Vietnam, get off the plane, walk down the tarmac (it wasn't a jet way), and it was 10:00 at night or so. I'd, y'know, flown across the Pacific, and here were the aromas of this jam-packed city and the humidity and the heat of it just hit me like a wall, it was just like, "Woah! Where am I? What is this?" And I spent, we spent, I think, three days there as part of our acclimation process, going west. It was British colony still, it hadn't been turned over to China yet, and all the driving was on the wrong side of the street, from my perspective, and cars whizzing around, and, I was sort of ducking most of the time in the cars in which I was riding, wondering how long I was going to live in Hong Kong.

The other strong memory I have from that stop on the way was that we were taken up onto the hillside up behind the city, because the city itself was down pretty much on the sea level, but there, fairly soon there was an abrupt rise, and there was a hillside above there, and the government had built concrete apartment buildings all along there because of the influx of refugees. Nothing too partic—nothing that at first struck me as strange about that, I thought, "OK, that seems reasonable," but when we got there and got to go inside one of these apartments, we found out that each apartment was one room, a little shorter and a little wider than the room in which we're sitting now, maybe 10 x 15 feet, and an extended family would live in that room.

Ralph: Oh boy.

Dorlan: There was not enough room for everyone to sleep at the same time, so they would sleep in shifts. They had to go out to a spigot to get water. It was certainly better than no, no shelter at all, but it was a very challenging living environment, from my perspective of course, too, as an American, being used to having a house to live in with lots of rooms and a bathroom for our family only. [Laughs] So, this was my introduction to Asia—kind of an extreme introduction. But then we flew from there to Saigon, and I, I told you the story about, about that. So, anyway, this was a huge learning curve and experience for me, and for all four of us who traveled together to work at the children's hospital in north of Da Nang in Wakong.

Ralph: Tell us again, who were the other three?

Dorlan: My wife Eunice—we had married just right after graduation, and we had the summer together, in which I sold Collier's Encyclopedias. It was the only job I could get for three months. Then we got on a plane for Vietnam. So this was kind of an interesting way to begin a marriage. It had its challenges. So...

Ralph: And who were the other two?

Dorlan: Uh...

Ralph: OK, that's alright.

Dorlan: My mind is drawing a blank. The other two people that I went with, they, last name was Newell...

Ralph: Oh yeah, OK, and they were conscientious objectors, of course...

Dorlan: Yes.

Ralph: But it's interesting that you both got to bring your wives.

Dorlan: Yes.

Ralph: If you'd been a regular soldier, if you'd been a soldier, of course, you wouldn't have been able to.

Dorlan: That's right.

Ralph: Yeah.

Dorlan: That's right. The relief agency saw it as a plus, because they had in mind for the women to do, also, it turned out that that was not as well planned as it should've been. But yes, that is certainly a different scenario than being in a CO camp somewhere.

Ralph: When you first registered for the draft, you, you registered 1O, probably, straight conscientious objector?

Dorlan: Yes.

Ralph: I, for example, registered 1AO, which meant that I would go into the military but not carry a gun.

Dorlan: Mmhmm.

Ralph: So there's, basically it's the same, either way it's conscientious objection, but I would be in, but as it turned out, they never did draft me, so I managed to avoid that. Well, tell us, you were, it was 1969, you were drafted?

Dorlan: Yes, actually, I wasn't even drafted.

Ralph: Or, when you, I mean, when you went.

Dorlan: I, I, yeah, it's when I went. But I, I sort of volunteered to go. They didn't, didn't draft me.

Ralph: And, because you were 10.

Dorlan: Let me tell you a little something about that. I think I told you a minute ago that I did consider that noncombatant form of the 1AO route. When I got there to Camp Books, which was the marine supply base where the children's hospital was, once I learned my way around a little bit, I found the medical clinic, just—and there was a big sign in front of the clinic, and it said, "The medical corps motto: to keep as many men at as many guns for as many days as possible." And I said, "Oh, thank you, Lord!" I mean, I would have been in serious trouble...

Ralph: Conscientiously?

Dorlan: Inwardly. If I had been given the job to help patch up injured men to go back out and do more of what they had been doing. Being part of that process to that degree would have been, I think, intolerable to me, and I probably would have ended up in jail.

Ralph: Yeah.

Dorlan: Yeah.

Ralph: Can you go back and tell us a little bit more about how you originally made the decision to become a conscientious objector? What were the main impressions or influences on you?

Dorlan: Well, Quakers taught me about Jesus [Laughs]. And—although, Jesus had an edge to him. I mean, he could have some dialogue with Pharisees that was not too gentle, and he called them some pretty ugly names and, but... And he even took some Zealots into his group of disciples, at least one, maybe two, as I understood it. There was definitely a difference between his teaching and his revelation of God and God's will than the Zealot option, to take on the Roman occupation with a guerrilla-style attempt to throw them out of the country, not by head-on force, but by harassing them to the point that they decided that they didn't really want to be there.

So, I, I was convinced by Bible study and just by reading the Gospels, and the early church history that I read more of later, that part of what it meant to be a Christian was to not use violent means to get one's way.

So, and I was kind of shielded in a way, I mean I was, I went to Quaker churches all my, all my life, and so I, I never, I never really had to battle through that, that, that question in a way that I might've if I had been a, say a Presbyterian or, or some church that was just—Just War oriented. And so, since I came up being taught and believing that being a pacifist was what Jesus had in mind, and what Jesus was... I mean, take admonishing Peter y'know: "Put up your sword!" [Laughs] And healing the servant that got his ear lopped off...

A little aside: My dad told me that Peter was left-handed, and I said, "Well, Dad, how do you know that?" And he said, "Well, it was the servant's right ear that was cut off. Now if Peter is swinging at this servant, trying to cut his head off, it would have to be coming from Peter's right, and so that meant that the sword was in Peter's left hand." [Laughs] So anyway, that's the sort of little detail—that's a pacifist kind of fun fact. [Laughs]

So, I, I've, I think, I did, I did come to my own conviction about pacifism, and about the Gospel, but—what it meant—but I think I was fortunate in having a, a church family environment that, that taught me what that option was about. And so, I didn't have to go along, really, unmindful of that tradition, like most Christian young people do. And they have to, when they, when they begin to consider pacifism, they're starting from a whole different place than I was starting from. So in a way, I have a great, I have more admiration for folks who weren't raised that way, and who come to that conclusion, and make a break with a religious tradition that is more favorable toward war and nationalism. So I don't, I don't really take a lot of pride in, in having come to that conclusion.

Now, I, I could've taken the easy way and gone to, gone to seminary, that's true. I could've done that. So, if there's anything I'm, I'm a little bit feeling like, "OK, y'know, that was faithfulness," it was kind of at that point where I, I felt like I was being led and I was obedient to that leading. So I'm not, I'm not sure where we go from here, but...

Ralph: OK, let me, let me go back. You were—what year were you born?

Dorlan: 1947.

Ralph: '47. So in, and, you mentioned in '69, I think you mentioned, did you? So you were 22?

Dorlan: That's when I graduated from college...

Ralph: Yeah, and then went right in...

Dorlan: And went in in the fall.

Ralph: Yeah. And '69 was a time that there was a big, for me, a great deal of frustration in terms of the, well, the war in Vietnam...

Dorlan: Mmhmm.

Ralph: And all of that, of course, and a lot of pressure, not that I, I mean, I'd been a conscientious objector for a long time, so that was not an issue in that sense.

Dorlan: Mmhmm.

Ralph: But there was a great deal of pressure just, in terms of acceptance of the war, and I don't know how it affected people like you, but, but I would think would be considerable pressure, or considerable feeling, not just [throat clear], excuse me, how you were raised, how you, how you grew up, but here's an issue that, you know, you're a coward if you don't get out there and kill those "dirty yellow commies."

Dorlan: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Ralph: And so I think that, that there probably was some pressure on you at the time.

Dorlan: Well, being a George Fox College student, I think, shielded me from a good bit of that.

Ralph: Yeah.

Dorlan: Because even though not everybody at George Fox was a Quaker, obviously (that's never been the case, y'know—people from town and other people who wanted to come and get an education at George Fox), I think that those who did come, even if they had another opinion, had enough respect for the institution that they did not particularly want to go on the offensive, attacking other students who were, who had a position consistent with the college's ideals and goals.

So, that, that kind of pressure was something I read about in the newspaper, or saw on television, about that kind of thing, but I, I was, I was remote, really, from that. A lot of things I was remote from. Civil Rights Movement: I mean, there wasn't much in Portland. There was a fairly small population of African American people there, so what I heard about was in the South, and while I was aware of it, it's, it's, it didn't have the same sort of impact as being at a place where I was out at rallies or that sort of thing. So, I kind of went from George Fox College environment, immediately with a summer in between selling encyclopedias, to Vietnam. And I did not personally have to battle with that. Now when I came—then when I came back, I

went to Earlham School of Religion for my seminary work—same sort of thing. So I, I was, y’know, I, I know that I was shielded from a lot of stuff that other people were not. And so I, I, I don’t feel guilty about that, I’m grateful for that, but I, I do, I do know that I, I was privileged as a Quaker, who was within a Quaker environment—until I went on to graduate school in Chicago, and was not in a Quaker environment, particularly.

Ralph: Yeah. Mmhmm. It’s interesting to compare your experiences with my own. Of course, I was born in ‘32, so I was somewhat older than you, but during the ‘60s, well, first, first I would tell you my own family, my father was in World War I and my oldest brother was in France in World War II, and I just, somehow, was the first one in our family that just, became a conscientious objector. I can’t really know exactly why, but during the, during that whole period of time, it just, the, the things you mentioned awhile ago, about Jesus, and my family were strong Christians, and there was no question, no question in my mind that my brother could shoot somebody and still be a Christian, and I still recognize that. It, in one sense it doesn’t make sense, but, but it is a fact, and there were a lot of Christian Germans who were shooting at him, and they would still go to heaven. I mean, if they shot each other, they’d both wind up in heaven at the same time, and I wonder what they would be thinking as they, as Jesus approached them and asked why did they kill each other, but, so, I, I, in my opinion, they, being a conscientious—being a Christian doesn’t require being a conscientious objector, although I think it should, but it, I don’t think it does, and lots and lots of people got—went through some really tough things. I think George Fox went through a lot of this, struggling and struggling, but that’s probably a little too far off our subject. But what I just want to end up with is to ask you to, is there anything else that you, that you want to add to this? Any things that were important to you that...?

Dorlan: Well, I do want to mention the fact, of all that I learned in those two years while having gotten settled on, on this base, living in a building like the soldiers did, eating with the officers in the mess hall, and having conversations, playing volleyball at the officers—see, I had a civilian rank of about a major, I think, as a 21-year-old kid, just out of college, which was a really kind of a strange thing. But I had a, a card to use the PX and I, I, like I say, ate at the officers’ club (not that it was real fancy—expect on Saturday nights. We had steak and lobster every Saturday night!) [Laughs]

So, then there was the interaction with the corpsmen and with the navy pediatrician in the hospital, who was a lovely guy. I felt very fortunate to get to know him, and felt that he really had the children’s wellbeing at heart, and wasn’t bucking for some kind of a promotion—unlike most of the chaplains! [Laughs]

There was only one chaplain that I felt very close to at all. They, they were there for a year and gone, so I think I had maybe three that I, that I knew, but the system was set up for chaplains that their job was to sort of pacify the troops and keep them on point and ready to go out and fight, and if they, if they had troubles or, y’know,

family problems back home, they were just told, "Suck it up," y'know, "You're supposed to be strong and do your duty, and don't worry about that."

But one of these chaplains had a different kind of approach. He couldn't ultimately defy orders that came from above, but there was a lot that he could do in the grey areas that made a difference, and he would listen. And the, the, the ordinary soldiers who weren't officers who... When he was, when he was there doing the services on Sunday morning, the place was full of all kinds of marines, y'know, lowest to the highest. Other times, the enlisted guys were absent. They did not come. They didn't want to hear what the other chaplains had to say, because they were such company people, y'know. They were there for a different purpose, not for their spiritual welfare.

So that, that was quite an eye-opener, to me, to see the range of people, and also the, in other situations I would go out and find, go to different medical stations around the area to look for medicines that we needed—that's the way that the hospital operated, by what was called "scrounging," y'know, finding stuff, trading stuff. It wasn't like you could put in an order to your local pharmacy and they would mail it to you—no, you had to go find the medications and stuff you needed. So, in that process, of making contact with all levels of, of the marine corps, from the camp commander, who was either a general or a bird colonel, y'know, fairly high up person, down to the lowest grunt, it was a real education in human nature, and learning not to judge a book by its cover. [Laughs]

But there were all kinds of attitudes, willingness to take various kinds of action, or not take those kinds of actions, in military society, just as in non-military society. So, my, my overall feeling about military people grew. Y'know, I saw the corruption by the people at the top, I saw the carloads of prostitutes brought in to—for the officers, because everything came right by my door at the hospital on the way into the camp. I saw the trash contractors who had gotten those contracts by bribery coming in to pay off the camp commander for the privilege of hauling away the trash, which was very valuable, relatively speaking, in that kind of a poor society. So I saw, I saw the whole range.

I saw the whole range of missionary activity and work, too. We'd go in and worship with the Christian Missionary Alliance church there in Da Nang sometimes, and experienced the whole variety of people there. So this, this was a, a real growth experience for me, a real eye-opener, and gave me a lot to think about, as I returned back to the United States.

I was, I was certainly glad to get back. I didn't realize how much stress I'd been under for two years until I got back and could sort of relax again, because even though there wasn't a military threat, per se, driving back and forth from the base to Da Nang was kind of a harrowing experience. There were all kinds of vehicles and pedestrians and pushcarts on this little strip of pavement, and there was no line

down the middle—that would've been a waste of time, because wherever there was space, that's where, that's where people would go. [Laughter]

And it was just, it was just crazy! And I was driving [Laughs] a little Morris van that had been brought in from Hong Kong, and so it—the steering wheel was on the right side of this van, and I was shifting with my left hand, on a, four on the floor kind of a shift or gear changer, and the brakes weren't real good, so it, it, I was always grateful to get back from town in, having escaped being hit or hitting someone, because when something like that happened, everything stopped. This was the main road from Hué to Saigon. This, this would be like one of our interstate highways in our situation. Everything stopped—stops. Everybody gets out, says, "OK," y'know, "here's what you did. This is how much you owe me for what you've done. I'm not moving and the police are coming, and nothing's moving until we're all square here." [Laughs] That could take a couple hours.

Ralph: Wow!

Dorlan: So I know when the head nurse of the hospital came to visit the United States on a tour with the, with the relief agency to do some fundraising, and she spent a few days with my parents in, in Kelso, the first time from the airport and they got in the car and started, y'know, up Interstate 5, and Gwen said, "Oh, people are driving in rows! We need to learn how to drive in rows in Vietnam!" [Laughter]

So anyway, it was, it was a great learning experience for me to spend those two years there, and if I had to do it all over again, that's, that's what I'd do again. It was not always easy, not always comfortable, but it, it was a time of great learning for me, and I think it was able to have some conversations with some soldiers, at their initiation, y'know, "What are you doing over here?" So that sort of led, one thing led to another, that was an opportunity to talk about the Kingdom of God and what that was about, and what Jesus came to teach, because most people, certainly back then, knew about Jesus (less and less can you assume that now—about half the people in the country are un-churched), but it was, like I say, a, overall a very positive experience.

Ralph: Well, thank you so much, Dorlan. I appreciate it, and I would like to lead in a word of prayer as we close. Lord Jesus, I thank you so much for Dorlan. Thank you for his sharing of these experiences. I ask, Lord, that as I put this together with others, that it might have real meaning. So bless us. Thank you, Lord, for being our savior. Amen.

And thank you, Joel!

Joel: You're welcome! Glad to do it.

[Joel Bock was running the audio equipment that day. Cherice Bock was not present, but recorded the introduction to the interview at a later time.]