

Interview with Charles Owsald
Date: ca. March 30, 1999
Interviewer: Rick Tejada-Flores, Judy Ehrlich
Camera Rolls: 71
Sound Rolls:

Interview gathered as part of “The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors.” Produced by Paradigm Productions. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Interview with Charles Oswald, conducted by Paradigm Productions around March 30, 1999 for “The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors.” Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in bold italics was used in the final version of “The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors.”

00:00:11:00—00:00:28:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're rolling.

Interviewer #1:

Okay this is an interview with Chuck Oswald. Start out by telling us your name and where you were born.

Charles Oswald:

[clears throat] My name is Charles Oswald. I, I like to go by Chuck, and I was born in Waterloo, Iowa.

00:00:29:00—00:00:59:00

Interviewer #1:

Chuck, we're doing a film about things that happened fifty years ago: World War Two, which has been a lot on peoples' minds. You were a young man then. Tell us a little bit about how you felt when you decided to go in the Army. How you made that decision.

Charles Oswald:

Well, it wasn't, it was made for me. I was drafted. And, the day I graduated from high school, Uncle Sam grabbed me the next day. I was living in Sebastopol, California at the time.

00:01:00:00—00:01:10:00

Interviewer #1:

And were you, were you expecting to go into the service? Was it something you figured, it was just a question of when?

Charles Oswald:

It was just a question of, of when that they would pull me in, yes.

00:01:11:00—00:01:31:00

Interviewer #1:

So you were drafted. It wasn't like going down and volunteering, but—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—but you didn't mind being drafted. You felt, did you feel you owed your country something?

Charles Oswald:

Well, I, I felt that I should serve our country because of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, and I felt that it was my duty to serve in the service.

00:01:32:00—00:01:53:00

Interviewer #1:

Now, before—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—before Pearl Harbor—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—a lot of Americans were sort of reluctant for America to get in the war, and then, did Pearl Harbor really change everyone's minds?

Charles Oswald:

No, I believe definitely it did change everybody's mind when, when they were attacked there at Pearl Harbor. That it brought out patriotism in everybody, or most everybody.

00:01:54:00—00:02:09:00

Interviewer #1:

But I mean, you know, before Pearl Harbor people were patriotic they just thought we were—

Charles Oswald:

Well, yes they were patriotic, but they felt that we shouldn't get involved in the war, especially over in Europe. And—

Interviewer #1:

That it wasn't our problem?

Charles Oswald:

It wasn't our problem, right.

00:02:10:00—00:02:25:00

Interviewer #1:

Why do you think they felt that? I mean didn't they, they, they didn't care about what Hitler did over there, or...?

Charles Oswald:

Well, I guess they cared, but I mean it, it's just the fact that they didn't want our, get our

young men involved in, in another war like the first World War.

00:02:26:00—00:02:44:00

Interviewer #1:

Had you grown up with some, some stories in your family about how horrible the w—, first World War was? Did you have any sense of what happened then?

Charles:

No, not really, not really, but—

Interviewer #1:

Because a lot, a lot of Americans were upset about what had happened in World War One—

Charles Oswald:

Oh yes. Definitely, definitely.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm

Charles Oswald:

But—

00:02:45:00

Interviewer #1:

Now, when you, when you said, after Pearl Harbor, most everybody became patriotic and wanted to serve their country, you made a point of saying most—

Camera Crew Member:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #1:

—everybody, but not everybody,

Charles Oswald:

Not everybody, no, no—

Interviewer #1:

Talk about the people who decided that that wasn't what they should do.

Charles Oswald:

Well most of the people that decided were called conscientious objectors in those days, and a lot of them did go in the military, but they refused to bare arms, and they put 'em in, possibly, in the medics or on duty in the mess halls, where they wouldn't have to bear arms.

00:03:24:00—00:04:06:00

Interviewer #1:

And, but I meant I got something from the way you were describing it that, that you felt somehow that they may not be patriotic 'cause they weren't willing to go out and fight.

Charles Oswald:

Well.

Interviewer #1:

Do you think they were patriotic or not?

Charles Oswald:

Well, not really, no, I mean, in other words, they, they didn't want to bear arms and they, they, I, from what I gathered in those days they just, they didn't care about bearing arms and going to war for, for this country period. And I've heard several stories that a lot of 'em were sent to a neutral country, over in Switzerland, and they served over there. During, and what they did over there I don't know, but I did hear that a number of them were sent over to Switzerland during the war.

00:04:07:00—00:04:58:00

Interviewer #1:

And, and then there were a lot of Americans here who were conscientious objectors who refused to go in, in the Army and went into these Civilian Public Service camps.

Charles Oswald:

That, yes, or the, a lot of 'em went to Canada, yeah.

00:04:21:00—

Interviewer #1:

Was that a patriotic choice, if someone refused to go in the Army? I, what would you think about someone who said I'm not gonna go in the Army?

Charles Oswald:

Well, I, I wouldn't think much of 'em, as I say, because this country was drawn into the war, and it was our duty to protect this country, and, and serve it, is the way I felt.

Interviewer #1:

And somehow they weren't doing their duty.

Charles Oswald:

They weren't, no. They, they expected, be treated like everybody else and, but they weren't willing to, to do their duty and serve their country.

00:04:59:00—00:05:38:00

Interviewer #1:

When we were talking the other day, you were, you were telling me about the famous family from Waterloo and that that was a particular reason you felt so strongly about conscientious objectors.

Charles Oswald:

Yeah. That was the five Sullivan brothers that, that were serving in the Navy and all went down together, as I mentioned. I didn't know 'em, my brother did. He was cons—, six years older than I was and he knew the brothers personally, and, and I felt that when, when a family like that felt like they needed to serve this country and they went out and did it, that, I felt that's the way people should be patriotic.

00:05:39:00-00:05:44:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Tamala, could you should that door?

Interviewer #2:

Oh, that must be [unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Is that that noise—

Interviewer #2:

Yes [unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #2:

—'cause I feel like it's the Xerox mach—

[cut]

00:05:45:00—00:07:13:00

Interviewer #1:

But back to the, the Sullivan brothers, and how important that was to America. When, when you talked about that the other day you, you felt pretty strongly that that was one of the reasons you really didn't like conscientious objectors. I want you to say that again, you know, about how, how that made you feel about conscientious objectors.

Charles Oswald:

Well I, I felt that when, when five brothers from the same family wanted to go out and serve their country and they served it together, [clears throat] that any of these people that were conscientious—, conscientious objectors just did not have their country at heart, period. And that, as I say, that some, some of 'em, even though they didn't bear arms, got into problems when they were serving in medics. Sometimes they were up in the front lines, but, as I say that, they did get shot at, some of 'em, but, as I say that a lot of 'em ran off to other countries or hid out. And I say that it just, it didn't sit well with me. And I believe I mentioned the fact that, even though our family didn't believe in the Vietnam War, both of our sons went and served over there. And, there was no hesitation, and as I say that, of course—

Interviewer #2:

[coughs]

Charles Oswald:

—maybe I'm prejudiced, but as I say, I just didn't care for conscientious objectors for they way they, they treated us and treated the country.

00:07:14:00—00:07:26:00

Interviewer #1:

You were telling me before that—

Interviewer #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—during the war you were, you were training flight crews. Right? Training bomber pilots and flight crews—

Charles Oswald:

Yeah, well—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah. Right.

Charles Oswald:

—I was a crew chief on B-17s—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Charles Oswald:

—back in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

00:07:27:00—00:08:01:00

Interviewer #1:

So, so you never actually ran into any COs—

Interviewer #2:

[clears throat]

Charles Oswald:

No, I never did, no.

Interviewer #1:

—but, but suppose, suppose you had met someone who had been a CO, what what you have told him? I mean, I know, I know this is fifty years later, but if you had met someone and the war was going on, and you saw people who you knew dying, and you met someone who said I'm not gonna do that, what would you, what would you have said?

Charles Oswald:

Well, to be honest, I, I don't know what, what I would've said. I, I mean, to really be honest. I don't know whether, how I would've voiced my opinion, really.

Interviewer #1:

But it, it is something that you feel pretty strong about—

Charles Oswald:

Yes, definitely.

00:08:02:00—00:08:28:00

Interviewer #2:

How, well could you just describe what your opinion was, just in your own words, what you felt, how you would describe what your feelings were?

Charles Oswald:

Well, my opinion was that they were, they were slackers. In other words, they wanted all the advantages of the country, but they didn't want to do anything to deserve the advantages of this country, is more or less my opinion of it.

00:08:29:00—00:08:47:00

Interviewer #2:

Could, you know, I think you stepped a little on—

Interviewer #1:

Oh sorry.

Interviewer #2:

Chuck could you just say what you did during the war?

[clattering noise]

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry, excuse me.

Charles Oswald:

Beg your pardon?

Interviewer #2:

Say again what you did during the war.

Interviewer #1:

Talk about what you did and, and the...

Charles Oswald:

Oh, well, during, during the war, I guess I was one of the lucky ones, I got sent up to—

[police sirens in background]

Interviewer #1:

Hang on a second. Oops.

Interviewer #2:

[inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

These microphones are real, real sensi—

[cut]

00:08:48:00—00:09:34:00

Interviewer #1:

So, go ahead and say again what you did during the war.

Charles Oswald:

Well I, like I say, I was sent to the, to the b—, airbase at Rapid City, South Dakota, serving on B-17s as a crew chief which, in other words, was maintenance of them. And training combat crew outfits, and I was there for the, almost the whole balance of my service during World War Two. And, I was always a little upset because I had volunteered to go overseas, and I had a brother that was serving over in Europe, and landed in the Battle of the Bulge, and this and that, and with a wife and child, I mean not, not there in the battlefields [laughs], but, but I felt that he should've been allowed to stay in the states and I'm the one that should've gone over.

00:09:35:00—

Interviewer #1:

So you, it wasn't that you were shirking. You would've been glad to have gone over—

Charles Oswald:

I would've glad, in fact, I volunteered to go over, but looking back at it now, I guess, like I say, I guess I was just one of the lucky ones, that I served all my three years right here in the states.

00:09:52:00—00:10:52:00

Interviewer #1:

And, talk a little bit about how important World War Two was. Was it, I mean when people think about wars they think about unpopular wars now, like the Vietnam War that was very controversial, but was, was the idea of fighting World War Two, of fighting Hitler and the Japanese, was that controversial or did everyone in this country agree that that had to be done?

Charles Oswald:

Well I think everybody agreed, especially the, the, the [clears throat] the Japanese because of them attacking this country in the first place that everybody felt that we should defeat 'em and, and bring 'em to their knees, and then, as, as Mussolini and Hitler and the rest of 'em started moving more and more over in Europe, we felt that we had to help England and, and renew France to being a country again, rather than under the heels of, of Hitler, so...

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

Go ahead and cough for a minute.

Interviewer #2:

Ready?

00:10:53:00—00:12:18:00

Interviewer #1:

When we were talking the other day you were, you were saying that, that after Pearl Harbor, or even leading up to Pearl Harbor, that there was a lot of tension between some Americans and Japanese-Americans. That, that, you know, they ended up being put in camps and, and you were talking about, when you were up in Sebastopol and knowing some Japanese people. Talk a little bit about that.

Charles Oswald:

Well I mentioned the fact a lot of, a lot of people said that it was too bad that they had put the Japanese in the camps, but they were, in, in Sebastopol where I was going to school, there was a dentist there that had a short wave sending and receiving set in his dentist chair. And, so that's why I've always felt that, that, that most of the people they were, they were leaning towards their own country rather than, rather than America, even though a bunch of Japanese did form a, or they formed a, a, a division or whatever it is and they fought very historically over in Eur—, in Italy as far as I remember. But—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Charles Oswald:

—there, there was always a feeling that they couldn't be trusted, I mean the, you know, the normal people around there. 'Cause I'd never been around any Japanese back in Iowa, and it was when I came out here to finish high school up in Sebastopol that I first met the Japanese people.

00:12:19:00—00:12:31:00

Interviewer #1:

So, people were a little suspicious, especially here on the west coast—

Charles Oswald:

Espec—, especially after the, after Pearl Harbor was bombed they, they were very suspicious of the Japanese people.

00:12:32:00—

Interviewer #2:

What did you, Chuck what did you know about conscientious objectors—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #2:

—at the time of the war? Had you heard about Lew Ayres or had you heard about any other individuals, or was there an, did you have any individual thing—

Charles Oswald:

Oh no we, I think everybody had heard, because, being so well known like Lew Ayres, that he was a conscientious objector, but as I say that, I just, the whole time I was in the service I'd never run into any of 'em, so I really didn't have too much of a feeling at the time. It wa—, it was after everything was all over with that I got to thinking, well these people here didn't care about their country really, enough to serve it. And, so that's why I more or less formed a, a dislike of opinion on the, on the people.

00:13:22:00—00:14:50:00

Interviewer #2:

You used stronger language about them when we talked to you last time we were here, about conscientious objectors. I don't wanna put words in your mouth but, but you said that you, you would—

Interviewer #1:

You felt violent towards them, you know—

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—that, that, that you were really outraged, that you felt mad or you would've throttled them, or—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—did it really strike you that strongly?

Charles Oswald:

Well [laughs], I guess, I guess I probably did say that, that, that, that being that, as I say, I felt that they should get, gotten in and, and served their country. If for some religious reason or this and that they didn't go, maybe that would be entirely different, but I mean it, most of 'em were, were plain slackers as far as I'm concerned, and they, they wanted all the advantages of the country, but not to do anything for it. And, so, as I say, that any, anybody like that, or, or draft dodgers or anything that, it just made me very upset, 'cause I mentioned somebody else, maybe I shouldn't mention him right now, but we've got a man sitting in Washington D, Washington D.C. that, that was a draft dodger and went to Russia, and now he's sendin' our boys into, into combat where he was too, well I'll use the word, too chicken to go himself—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Charles Oswald:

—and I feel very strongly about that.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:14:51:00—00:15:23:00

Charles Oswald:

And—

Interviewer #2:

Did you think during World War Two that, that, would you have used that term to describe conscientious objectors. Did you, what were the, what did people call conscientious objectors

during World War Two? What was the slang? What, what, you know, were there things, was there—

Charles Oswald:

I don't know I, I—

Interviewer #2:

—conscience [unintelligible]

Charles Oswald:

As I say, I just, I wasn't out among the public enough to really tell you how they felt, or, as I say, I never served with any of 'em.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Charles Oswald:

And so, as I say, I just—

Interviewer #2:

It didn't come up.

Charles Oswald:

I just, it really never came up, really.

00:15:24:00—00:16:27:00

Interviewer #1:

Let's get back to the war a little bit.—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #1:

—Looking back, you participated, you served your country, do you think what [zipping sound in background] happened in World War Two was good? Are you happy in having

played a part in that? You, how do you feel about what you did, serving your country?

Charles Oswald:

Well I, I feel that we helped bring the war to an end. As I say, I had no, no shooting part or anything like it, but, as I say, I did keep some of the planes flying, and, even though it wasn't in, in combat, it was in training exercises. And, I think that—

Interviewer #1:

But, but I mean, what you said, that sort of makes me think it was, one of the big issues in World War Two was that everybody had to do their part—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #1:

—whatever it was, right?

Charles Oswald:

Yeah, right. Everybody had to do their part and, like I've said, the conscientious objectors, they didn't do their part. I mean they shirked their duty of, to the country.

00:16:28:00—00:16:33:00

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, that's good.

Charles Oswald:

That good enough?

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

That's great, yeah—

Interviewer #2:

I mean, just, just one more—

Interviewer #1:

Oh, hang on.

00:16:34:00—00:16:43:00

Interviewer #2:

—just, cause the other day you said—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[laughs]

Interviewer #2:

—I would've,

Camera Crew Member #1:

We need to change tapes.

Interviewer #1:

No, no don't—

Interviewer #2:

I, it seems—

Interviewer #1:

—you got any left?

Interviewer #2:

—my recollection is that you said, I would've—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Thirty seconds.

Interviewer #1:

What, thirty seconds? Okay.

Interviewer #2:

—I felt like I wanted to—

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

00:16:44:00—00:17:26:00

Interviewer #1:

So I guess the question is what, what you think—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #2:

—should've been done to conscientious objectors—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

—what you personally would've, should've, felt should have been done to people who refused to fight for their country?

Charles Oswald:

Well—

Interviewer #2:

Should they have been punished? Or—

Charles Oswald:

I, I think, like I said, that they, they should've been punished. They should've been put in a camp and, and put under hard labor, really. And, that, that way they, they wouldn't have gotten away with, some of 'em, they way the did, without serving any type of service, period. And, for no reason what so ever, I mean, in other words, a lot of 'em were conscientious objectors for no reason, as far as I felt.

00:17:27:00—00:17:53:00

Interviewer #1:

Well, well some of them were in camps and they just worked for the Forest Service and stuff like that, but do you think that was tough enough? Should they have had to pay more?

Charles Oswald:

Well, if, if they, if they kept 'em, kept them under a tight regimentation, I think that would've been fine, in, in doing things like that or, like they had CCCs and—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Charles Oswald:

—things like that where they were really at, doing a job that, helping the country to some extent. That, that—

00:17:54:00—00:18:12:00

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. That is actually what they did.

Charles Oswald:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

They worked in old CCC camps, a lot of them. And they worked in mental hospitals and—

Charles Oswald:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—as guinea pigs in medical experiments, and as smokejumpers and, but, so—

Interviewer #2:

Are we, yeah, do we have any other questions? I think maybe that's it. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Charles Oswald:

No, I think that's about it—

00:18:13:00—00:19:07:00

Interviewer #1:

When, I mean, but when you look back about World War Two in general, I mean, it was a horrible war, millions of people died, but, but yet people who lived through it have, have a real good feeling—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #1:

—'cause they did something. How do you feel about it? When, when you look back was, was it a good experience or a bad experience?

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #2:

Was it a good war?—

Charles Oswald:

Well I would, I would say it was a good experience because it was one of the only, only old wars actually we've ever been attacked. And that I felt that it, it was a war on necessity,

because of us being attacked like that, and then we wanted to help some of our allies out over in Europe after we did get involved with the Japanese. And that any, any war before, or any war since, has actually been for the convenience of, of the government, I believe, is the way, way I look at it.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:19:08:00—00:19:42:00

Interviewer #1:

There's a, there's a phrase when people think back about World War Two, they call it the good war. Was it a good war?

Charles Oswald:

Well no war is a good war. No war is a good war, but I mean it was a war, as I say, that we were drug into and that we were victorious, and I felt that we, we needed, we needed to fight those people, because they're the ones that started it so. That's my opinion anyway.

Interviewer #1:

Good, let's stop there.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, that's perfect. [inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

Okay we'll, we'll unbutton you now.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:19:42:00