Interview with Baron Norman Sylvester von Feister (Norman Feister)
Date: March 30, 1999
Interviewer: Rick Tejada-Flores, Judy Ehrlich
Camera Rolls:
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 Baron Norman Sylvester von Feister the Third, conducted by Paradigm Productions. on 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—00:00:26:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, so, let's just start off. Tell us your name, and, and where you were born, and where you grew up.

Norman Feister:

Norman Sylvester von Feister the third. I come from a family called the plains people. Born in Paradise, Pennsylvania, close to Harrisburg, Gap, Intercourse, and Blue Ball.

00:00:27:00—00:00:48:00

Interviewer #1:

And you grew up, you grew up in an Amish community.

Norman Feister:

Well, my father broke away in the early stages because of the Depression that was caused by the, the First World War, and so therefore I know the, the ways and means of the Amish, and they are conscientious objectors to a certain point.

00:00:49:00—00:00:53:00

Interviewer #1:

But tell, let's talk a little bit about—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hold on, hold on one second...

Interviewer #2:

Wha—

[cut]

00:00:54:00—00:01:57:00

[whispers]

Interviewer #1:

OK, so tell me about your own, how you felt when the time came for you to serve your country during World War Two.

Norman Feister:

Well, that takes me back a, quite a few years, especially into my teenage, and even before that, when I was small. And the government was in a depression. It needed to—money, the country didn't have money. So therefore they sold the crops to the European people who were involved with that situation. And so what happened, the government finally found a way to overcome the farmers, or the plain people, by taking and splitting their families. And I was one of the so-called orphans on the orphan train. I ended up going to Thaddeus Stevens. Thaddeus Stevens was in Lancaster, which is no longer there on King Street. It was an orphanage. Originally it was the estate of Thaddeus St-, that was the founder and the, former, of the constitution, fourteenth constitution—

00:01:58:00—00:02:18:00

Interviewer #1:

We need to talk, we need to talk about—

Norman Feister:

But—

Interviewer #1:

—that moment in 1941—

[production discussion]

Norman Feister:

[interrupting] Right, I'm going into th-, I'm going into that. So, after I graduated—

Interviewer #1:

Vicente, what are you doing?

Interviewer #2:

He's just—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Well, I think we are mic-ing him, no?

Interviewer #1:

Well—

Norman Feister:

Mm?

Interviewer #1:

—tell me.

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible] Go ahead.

Interviewer #2:

OK. So, you guys are happy?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

OK, so let's—are we still on?

00:02:19:00—00:02:34:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

OK, so after, talk about after you graduated.

Norman Feister:

OK, then I graduated. Then, course, same way. I received a letter, and next thing you know I am on my way to Sampson Air Force Base, in the Finger Lakes in upper state New York.

00:02:35:00—00:03:33:00

Interviewer #1:

How did you feel about, about responding to that letter, when, when the time came when you had to serve your country?

Norman Feister:

Well, I talked to my aunt and uncle, and some of my kingfolks [sic], the Amish and the Mennonites. Course, I had broken away, or, my father, grandfather had broken away after the Civil War. And I was told that President Grant gave them the proclanation [sic] to become conscientious objectors, and allow them to stay out of any fighting wars, 'cause they had a great deal to do with settling our thirteen colonies, going back to 1752, when my family first arrived here. So, I had grown up and left the family, and under the, so-called, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as an orphan—and there was no way that I could refuse. So I went on to Sampson Air Force Base.

00:03:34:00—00:04:06:00

Interviewer #1:

Did you feel—I mean, Chuck was saying that, that his position was that he felt he owed his country something, and that, if his country asked him to do something like that, he—how did

you feel about your, what responsibility did you feel towards your country?

Norman Feister:

Well, like I said, when I talked over with my kinfolks, the plain people, they decided that I was no part of the antibaptist [sic] regine [sic] anymore, and so that was considered an outsider. And so I took up arms.

00:04:07:00—00:05:26:00

Interviewer #1:

But, but, but I'm not trying to press you too hard on this, but this is what they felt. What did you feel? What was your—I mean, you're, you, you get that letter, you open it up.

Norman Feister:

Well, it [stutters]—

Interviewer #1:

Greetings. It says, greetings, right? Greetings.

Norman Feister:

[stutters] Greetings. Well, it was a shock to, to pinpoint our name Feister, but before I received that, my two other brothers also received, and my oldest brother is Dr. Clarence Feister, who lives in Lakewood, Colorado. And he was the one who went first. And my second brother, Paul, who is deceased, he went. Then I was in line next. So... that's hard to say, how you felt at that moment. You knew you had to do something. And it's better to go off to service than starving [pause] in a job. And I did. After school, I went to work in tobacco where they made cigars, then cigarettes, and ugh. It's terrible.

Interviewer #1:

Ah.

Norman Feister:

And later on I went to a place where they made propellers for light aircraft. But, but there was, it was not there. There—

Interviewer #1:

So—

Norman Feister:

—was no wages—

00:05:27:00—00:06:03:00

Interviewer #1:

So you, you really took the decision to serve your country, you responded.

Norman Feister:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

During that period did you hear about these people who said, I'm not prepared to go in the army and called themselves conscientious objectors—

Norman Feister:

Oh yes. Of course—

Interviewer #1:

What did you, what did you think of people who made that decision in World War Two?

Norman Feister:

Well, knowing how the conscientious objectors came about, and I'm from the plain people. It, it goes back to the Holy See, which, they named it Hospital after the third crusade.

Interviewer #1:

But...

Norman Feister:

This is where it starts.

00:06:04:00—00:07:05:00

Interviewer #1:

But, but not where it starts. They're, you, you've gone into the service, your two brothers have gone into the—

Norman Feister:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—service before you.

Norman Feister:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

There are people who aren't going into the service. Do you think they're patriotic, or unpatriotic? How, what do you think about it?

Norman Feister:

Well, it depends on how religion [sic] they are. Religion is the part. It's the, it's the faith, the religion in the individual. If a person's pledged to the Lord, his whole mighty [sic] God, that I will never raise arms, it's, it's bled into him. It's part of the genes, the inheritance in him. So to consider him as a conscientious objector... every soul has a purpose. Either you can be a soldier, you can be a scholar, a doctor, or work in a hospital. So it, it is those who choose that life. But they can't help themselves. It's religion. It's antibaptist [sic] religion. This goes to fifteenth century.

00:07:06:00—00:08:22:00

Interviewer #1:

So, so if someone has that deep religious faith, and they've, they've learned that teaching and their church teaches them to do that, that doesn't necessarily make them cowards, or unpatriotic, does it?

Norman Feister:

Oh no. Oh no. Many of the conscientious objectors became top, Medal of Honors on battlefields. Like Ernie Pyle. I told you about, the story was, a Japanese general—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Feister:

—raised his flag, and Ernie Pyle came out of the trenches to take his story. And if you want to know more about it, you can look into Tokyo, and the Ernie Pyle Theatre was named after him. I closed the Ernie Pyle Theatre in 1954 with Mitchell Ito, the very famous, he, he was the one with the Japanese sword dancer—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Feister:

—with Martha Graham in the group. I closed the Ernie Pyle Theatre, as it was named. And there were writers, there were hospital—see, just because, they were conscientious objectors, but they put their lives out to save lives by wearing the cross. And the cross they wore did not represent the cross we talk about today. The cross is the holy cross that Charlemagne saw.

00:08:23:00—00:8:30:00

Interviewer #1:

Well, you know, let me just interrupt for a minute, because, you know, you talk about people in World War Two being very religious...

[person interrupts interview]

Interviewer #1:

What is—

[cut]

00:08:31:00—00:09:18:00

Interviewer #2:

Someone's about to walk out.

Camera Crew Member #2:

But, come here...

Interviewer #1:

Well, what I, what I...

Camera Crew Member #1:

No, the stand. Move the table.

Interviewer #1:

Well, she doesn't know what you want her to do, so I'm gonna wait, because...

Camera Crew Member #1:

Lower. Lower. There you go.

Interviewer #1:

OK. OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

More.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Thanks.

Interviewer #1:

Just, the question I wanted to ask you is... America's not as religious a country now as it was in World War Two, was it? I mean, do, there, people felt religion as more, as part of their lives then than now, do you think?

[background discussion]

Norman Feister:

At that time religion was the law.

[people enter room]

Norman Feister:

People coming. [pause]

00:09:18:00—00:10:32:00

Interviewer #1:

Let me just switch gears for a bit—

Norman Feister:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—'cause we've gotten a little distracted. When you look back at the war, you served in it, your two brothers did, your family did their part. You know, I was talking to Chuck about this idea that some people, some people look back and say it was a horrible experience, and some people look back and say, well, it was horrible, but I helped my country, and we all fought through it, and you know. So, when you look back what do you feel about World War Two? Was it a good experience for you, or a bad experience?

Norman Feister:

Well, Wor-, World War Two—the end of, I came into the end of—after being in intelligence, and also assigned to APO226, on the B-29 cloak and dagger outfit, finding really what it was all about.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Feister:

It, it was, in those days, the B-29, the cloak and dagger, if you were shot down in Manchuria, you were considered as a spy. We weren't like ordinary soldiers. We were spies. We were actually rendezvousing with Ravens, B-47s, to pick up different signals on the ground—Russian sites in Siberia and Manchuria.

00:10:33:00—00:10:35:00

Interviewer #1:

But, but I—

Norman Feister:

Mm?

Interviewer #1:

—don't want to talk about what you did during the—

[cut]

00:10:36:00—00:11:11:00

Interviewer #1:

—looking back—

Norman Feister:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—you know, those are, that was an important period of your life, it was an important period for the whole world. Was it a good time for you, or a bad time?

Norman Feister:

Well... that's a good question. What we were, fighting men were considered as pawns on a chessboard. The Second World War was strictly a political war—power—so that we could exercise today our Social Securi-, not our, our Social Security, but SEC, Security Exchange Commission, and form 100 banks that now, the Federal Reserve. It was a chessboard. We were pawns on a chessboard, Chuck—the whole group.

00:11:12:00—00:12:58:00

Interviewer #1:

Well, but that, that would make—you know, if I was listening, I'm, I am listening to you say that, and I'm thinking, well, if you feel you were just a pawn on a chessboard, then maybe you feel like you were used, and it was not a great experience. Was it good for you, or was it—

Norman Feister:

It was not a good experience. If—

Interviewer #1:

Wh-, why? Why was it not?

Norman Feister:

If, if you see, and your mission is to kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, God did not put us on this earth to kill, kill, kill. And that's it. I mean, when you have a mission and you're sent out to do a job, you do it. Right, Chuck? [looks to his right] You do it. Right?[turns back to camera] He'd service the B-17s, he does it. We fly, we fly. Our sorties are not set by us, our targets are not set by us, but we have to do it, defend our glory, our flag, and the people, to make freedom, that we are today. But we are also considered as pawns. We do not make our own maneuvers. We're not bishops and knights and rooks.

[siren outside]

Norman Feister:

We are pawns, and some of us eventually get out of the pawns into a higher position. But it's all political, political, political. War is political. And religion. Now, some people say it's strictly religion. No, it is not. It is power. Power. Just like I say, I like those glasses you're wearing, I want 'em. You say, no, you can't have 'em, see. Power. That's what war is. So it did not leave a very good thing in my mind. And even the Cuban crisis...

00:12:59:00—00:14:22:00

Interviewer #1:

Because, you know, when, now it's like, I mean, I guess it's because it's so, we tend to not want to remember the really painful, horrible stuff. It's, it's too horrible, we, we want to put that behind us. So now when people talk about World War Two it's sort of romantic, and it's beautiful, and it was the music—

Norman Feister:

No.

Interviewer #1:

—and the styles, and...

Norman Feister:

No, no. I mean, every war, good things come out of. New languages, new types of food, new communications, new education, new universities, new colleges, new thoughts, new ways. Every war. So war does leave something for everybody to benefit. But yet certain people must suffer for that benefit, to pass that legacy on. See? There's not one war hasn't been fought that has left something, from the, from the crusade to the Revolutionary War; Spanish-American War, Civil War. It's always left something. Every war leaves something, and every war leaves memories that will remain as long as you live. And if you pass it on to your grandchildren, they can talk about it, but their grandchildren, eventually they forget about it, and it all narrows to one thing: grandpa was out there, but I don't know what grandpa did.

00:14:23:00—00:15:52:00

Interviewer #1:

And how do you really tell someone, if you lived through something that's that important? How do you, there's no way you, they can ever feel what you felt when you went through that. Is there—

Norman Feister:

You keep it as a secret.

[background discussion]

Norman Feister:

You keep it as a secret, see? You keep that pawn, which is you. You're not just one pawn, you're among other pawns on the chessboard. You keep it a secret, OK? But if you continue in religion, and be an antibaptist, [sic] then you're gonna parade, you're gonna march, you're gonna show banners and s-, everything, see? But no.

Interviewer #1:

That's a...

Norman Feister:

The true heart keeps within the heart. [pause] And that's the meaning of the Holy See, and how the Amish, in the fifteenth century, with their, like the King's, Arthur's round table, and the Mennonites, broke away and came to a free land. Very mysterio-. Very religious, they are superstitious. They brought Easter to us, they brought Christmas to us. And they still, today, Easter is a big thing for the young children, girls and boys. And Christmas? You know, they go out and they cut their own Christmas tree, a little fir tree, which you don't, —know what a Christmas tree looks like today. A spruce, but it's not. It's a crude little Christmas tree. We

made the little tikents [sic] and put things on that tree that we made, and then after Christmas we took it back to the snow fields and planted it—

Interviewer #2:

Hmm..

Norman Feister:

—so the birds could build their nests.

00:15:53:00

Interviewer #1:

That's wonderful.

Norman Feister:

See? That's what religion's all—but still, the family was strong. The family was very strong, and knew how to protect itself. See? Now, President Grant recognized that when he went through Gettysburg. He saw, through Pennsylvania, how the Amish lived, and how peaceful they were. So he gave them the proclamation. And Roosevelt could not take away f-, a, a presidential order—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Norman Feister:

—even though he hated their guts, and said, OK, fine, you're gonna have to defend your country, so you're going in as conscientious objectors, you're going into hospitals, you're going in as reporters, and so forth, see? So many a good man, a conscientious objector, has died on the field. But there's no glory for him. There's no flags and rallies for him. Only thing is the sorrow around the table at Sunday, when papa says, we lost our son. We could not put a gold star in the window, 'cause, after all, he wasn't recognized as a soldier. For all little villages and towns along the way, they lost a son, a gold star in the window. No, not the Amish, because they broke away, from religion. And they had to have a lot of courage from their families, the plain people—that's why they dressed in black and wear the black hats; that the son is going out, and he's going to be a reporter. So they're not denying him, but there's no glory for you. Your bones must lie, and be, never be woken. And no bugles will craw, because you have not spoken. That's as clear as you can get.

00:17:40:00—00:17:44:00

[groaning noise]

Interviewer #1:

Thank you. Oh, that was... OK, let's cut on that.

Interviewer #2:

I was, I—

[cut]

00:17:45:00

Interviewer #2:

—from his heart at that time.

Norman Feister:

I would've, I would've gone, which I did. But one thing I'd like to say. A part of, a missing part of the Cuban crisis—

Interviewer #1:

OK, but this isn't what—

Norman Feister:

No, no, this is terrible, because what I was sent out—

Interviewer #1:

Cut the—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:18:01:00