



**Walter Epp** grew up as a Mennonite near Marion. While many Mennonites during WW2 refused to serve for religious beliefs, Epp became a pilot and was stationed in Northern Africa. However, following the war, Epp returned to farm near Marion and began to study the doctrines and teachings of his Mennonite religion. He is a conscientious objector and became active in peace and

justice issues.

I sat down to visit with him about his experiences during the war and he came to be a strict pacifist.

### **What were you doing during the at the beginning of the war?**

I went to Seattle and got a job in a truck factory.

### **How old were you?**

I was probably 20, and I worked there for about a month, and then I Got 1-A classification notice, knew he would be inducted soon. I had been doing some considerable reading about what was going on in the war and I didn't want to end up in infantry, so I tried to get into air corps. So I enlisted in Air Corps and sent to CA for basic training. This would have been in fall of 42.

They put through basic training three times, and I was terribly fed up, and one day I saw on the bulletin board that you could apply for cadet training, so I applied, and low and behold they did send me to San Antonio, Texas. and I was accepted for aviation cadet for pilot training, at that point got married in Texas.

### **Pilot training**

I went through the training period and graduated in the December. That would have been 43. We were married in 43 in June and in December I graduated. And after graduation I was assigned to be an instructor, so I instructed for a few months and I my wife was living with me because I was a commissioned officer so I could live off the base and she was pregnant and our first daughter who was due in June of 44. And about a couple of weeks before she was born I was shipped to Reno for co-pilot training on transport planes so I wasn't there when she was born and after I finished that thirty day course I was ordered to report for overseas assignment. They gave me ten days to get to Nashville and I was able to stop in Ok where my wife was and was able to bring her here to SD on my way to Nashville. And then I was overseas for a little over a year. Well the war ended and I came back here and started farming

### **What did you do while you were overseas?**

I was piloting C-46 air transport on there was a route from Miami to Casablanca that was flown with C-54 and then I flew back and forth across North Africa from Casablanca to Cairo and back. This line went all the way to India and flew the hump, supplies to the Far Eastern forces over there. (**so you were flying supplies?**) Right .sometimes passengers, sometimes mail, sometimes Coke One time there were two little kegs and a couple of Military policeman and I wondered what in the world was this about. And I looked at the manifest and it was gold in these kegs that there were flying to the far east to trade for local currency to play the servicemen over there, They had to do that. That all came to an end and I came back over here and started farming here. We attended our local congregation and we were pretty accepted here even though I didn't tow the line as far as the Mennonite doctrine goes. But (and you have grown up

in the Mennonite Church here) Yes until 1991 when they closed the church/ It was a small rural congregation, Average age was over 65, and we thought we better quit because there were other churches around. I was often involved in the leadership of the congregation on serving on the church board and teaching Sunday school and did considerable bible study trying to equip myself to do this the way that it should be done. I had to come to terms with the teachings of Christ and how we relate to other people how we relate to God's creation how we treat our animals

### **What was it like when you first got back?**

Oh that was no problem. There were a couple of other guys that had done the same thing that I had done. There was one man who went to the CPS camps, alternative camps. There was an older man he had a little bit of a problem with me. In WWI he had refused to put on a uniform he was treated pretty roughly no provision for CO. He didn't feel it was right that I was accepted there with out any apology or anything like that and put into positions of leadership in the church. And at the time I didn't appreciate that very much, but in time I understand that man a lot better and respect him for what he said and did. He was on target more that I was. I came around to that in a number of years and I would never do again what I did then. I wouldn't want to do it again. I have five sons and five daughters and have tried to teach my kids. We had a pastor in church that put a lot more emphasis in the fifties about non-violence and how we are to live. He was a strong pacifist. He was very helpful to me and my children.

Two of my sons went to Africa one under the tap program. One under the tax program, he wasn't married. One of my daughters and her husband went there for three years and taught there. This was alternative service. And two other daughters did voluntary service in this country. So the family, I am happy to say that they had a little bit better understanding then I did in my youth. I feel very good about that. I have written a message to my grandchildren telling them my story and hoping that this will be important to them when they make their life choices.

### **What happened to make you change your mind?**

I don't think that there was one particular event. A lot of it has to do with reading. I read history of our denomination. And what Our own grandparents. The decision that they had to make and the struggle they faced when they were in Russia. There were terrible things that happened over there.. There was anarchy for a number of years. ...

### **Was your brother old enough to serve?**

He was drafted during the Korean War. He is five years younger. He and I don't see quite eye to eye on some of these matters. I guess I have gone a lot farther in changing my mind.

### **What about your parents?**

My father faced the same situation when he was young in WWI and I didn't know this until I got a hold of some old letters between my grandfathers. But when dad was draft age, his father tried to get a deferment for him, but wasn't successful. He served in the medical corps. He was stationed at San Antonio. This was the time of the flu epidemic. He was involved in medical care. He came out of the service and as a veteran he felt okay about it, he joined the American Legion and was a member for a number of years, and he told us to make up our own mind about this.

In WWI, there was a choice of noncombatant service, but this other man I was talking about refused to put on the uniform, and they put him in the coup. There were a number of Mennonites that were sentenced to life in prison in WWI, but after the war they were pardoned. But some of the Hutter people west of here died in Ft. Leavenworth, they were treated terrible, they were beaten, starved.

## **Do you remember what the climate was like around here during WW2?**

I think during WWI from what I have heard there was a lot more hostility, towards pacifism. You see we were German descent, we were "suspect." Who ever was governor of the state, they weren't going to allow people to speak German anymore. If you spoke German, you were the enemy, it was a lot tougher at that time to voice any dissent or seek alternative status, it took guts, they were called yellow bellies, but that was a misnomer, it took a lot of courage.

In WWII, that wasn't a problem, there were people in this community

## **When you enlisted, did alternative service cross your mind?**

No, I didn't give it more thought, I had read material, but I just put it on the shelf, it is not to my credit, but that is the way it was.

Were you involved in any combat?

The war was in Europe by the time I got to Africa, I didn't get there until 1944. I was in about 3.5 years. I Got out in September 1945.

## **How do you interpret the church teachings?**

As I look at the way Christ taught, and the things he taught. To me, it has become where do I give my allegiance, when I joined the army, and when anyone joins the army, you take an oath of allegiance it doesn't give any allowance for anything else,. The ultimate allegiance is the US army. You go under the articles of war, you do what you're told, when you are told. I went through that, and then when I read things Jesus saying what we have to do when we follow him. Our allegiance is to God. I cannot reconcile those two positions. To me, there is no way. I have studied theology, to some extent, I only went through high school, but I have done a lot of reading. And I just believe if I am serious about Jesus Christ, he is the one I have to answer to when I die. And I haven't got that much time, I am 79 years old. I am not going to heaven because I deserve, I am going to heaven because Christ has made it possible for me to go there.

And I want to do as much as I can. And I am weak and I fail, but that is where I have put all my marbles.

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The Mennonite teaches they talk about dual citizenship, as Christians, our citizenship is heaven. And our allegiance is there. But we live in a world and we are citizens of a country. In so far as possible, we need to abide by rules and the laws of the nation, but if and when the state asks of us what belongs to God, we have to be able to say no, it isn't always easy to determine where the line is. And the line is in different places for different people.

It has got to my worldview, this thing with violence. Is violence redemptive? When can it not? Those answers don't come that easy.

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I have lived my life on the land with livestock. I raised animals for beef to be butchered and eaten and I think that is okay, I read stories in the Old Testament. But I believe there is truth there, the covenant with Noah after the flood. God told him, all living things you may eat. I believe that, but how do I treat my cattle? Do I throw rocks at them and club them when they don't do what I want them to do? There was a time when I did some of that. When we used to load hogs, it got very mean sometimes.

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**Did you join the VFW?**

I joined the American Legion for a few years, but as I read the legion magazine, and what they promote, at the same time reading Sunday lessons, I had to make a choice.

**But you have kept in touch with the men you served with.**

Oh yes. I have kept in touch with friends that I serviced with, they were good men.

**What about when you read a letter to the editor, or see a memorial thanking the veterans, do feel a part of that?**

It is a part of my history. At the time I did it in good conscience, I wasn't ashamed of what I was doing, but later on, I tried to get a better perspective of what happens. The horrible things that were done by Germany, Japanese and Stalin and what his ilk. But when you fight evil with evil, it has been said, you become the same as your adversary. And I am afraid that has happened. Because when I look at what has happened through the years. At the beginning when Germans was bombing England unmercifully, the cities, this was a horrible crime against humanity, but before the war was over, we were fire bombing German cities so that fire storms started.