

Nov '82

GREENHAM COMMON PEACE CAMP1/1  
NOVEMBER 1982

We got to Greenham Common about fifteen minutes late as we were directed the wrong way by a non-local policeman controlling Newbury race traffic. We saw the vast mesh fence with outward facing strands of barbed wire on top, and thought we must come to the main entrance soon. Inside the wire was short grass, buildings every now and then, many obviously not in use with broken windows and a neglected appearance. Others were neatly painted, drab, and rather ominous. Then there were odd pipes and what looked almost like chimney pots sticking out of the ground, with huge notices on the perimeter fence, warning 'No naked flames beyond this point'. The narrow road followed the fence for miles (later we learned 9 miles), but really there was nothing to see. The contrast between the stark camp on one side, and on the other, the rough heather, clumpy grass, bracken and trees, with a golf club, two private schools, one for boys, one for girls, large private houses, small farms, all typical, pretty English countryside, was overpowering. Once or twice we lost the high fence, but kept turning right, and soon came back to it again. We didn't see a runway, planes, people or anything tangible, just the short, tidy, undulating grass. We could rarely see inside more than a hundred yards or so, sometimes much less.

Eventually we turned right again onto a much busier main road. Soon, on the left, pulled onto the common amongst the trees and shrubs, we saw the Peace Van, various piles of things in polythene bags, and bedding hung on bushes to dry in the October sunshine. I pulled in next to the Van and when we got out and looked across the road, we saw huge piles of granite which had been dumped by the authorities to stop the women camping on the grass verges on each side of the drive leading to the entrance. Over on the left people were wandering around, just quietly



wandering around, leading their own lives. We looked in the Van which had untidy piles of bedding, clothing etc, all over the place, and was still obviously being lived in. The back doors were wide open, to try to dry out the interior.

We walked across the road, and looked at the peace signs painted in letters all over the granite blocks. The smaller stones were arranged in CND symbols, and there was string in a cat's cradle sort of arrangement in a couple of places. (The women had done the string thing only the night before as we were told they like to do something different every Friday night.) By this time our presence was noticed and a couple of the women came towards us. We explained we had come for the Van. Norman showed them the letter he had received from Newbury Council saying that the van would be removed forthwith as parking was not permitted on the common. They were not particularly perturbed, just glad that they had had the use of it, and remarked that the battery was flat and they had not finished clearing it out. By now we had reached their actual camp site which was on a small piece of ground just to the left of the entrance, almost next to the guard who controlled the huge gates, right up against the fence.

I must explain this is not like a camp site where you have a pleasant two weeks holiday in the sun by the sea. The authorities allow no vehicles or tents, therefore there is no privacy or protection from the weather. The materials most in evidence are mud, granite blocks and stones, and most of all polythene and plastic. In some ways it is rather like the worst type of gypo encampment, but it is not. It is permanent organised chaos. The camp fire was burning briskly, and round it were women sitting on stones, chatting quietly, eating a flan and drinking tea or coffee. Blackened pots, pans etc, were hung up neatly on nails on a board, and there were other boards and tables covered with food and utensils. One plastic dustbin was labelled 'plates and another



'veg', and round the camp fire granite stones had been packed into the mud to make a kind of rough drying walking and sitting area. Women were preparing food, peeling potatoes, washing up, just wandering around, or sitting quietly. Two children were playing on a patch of grass with a coloured ball. The whole place had an air of quietness and almost lethargy. We realised that when we said we would arrive at 4pm and were twenty minutes late, nobody had noticed, because time meant absolutely nothing to them. They looked fit, well and clean. Well washed hands and faces, clean, tidy hair, and trousers, sweaters and various types of boots were certainly no dirtier or scruffier than our own. The children were pink cheeked and obviously healthy, and we were told that they had adapted to the life well.

All round the camp were piles and piles of polythene bags, covered with rather muddy layers of multicoloured polythene sheets. When we were looking for a missing tent and trying to sort through those piles of bags, gradually the wet in and round them from days of rain, seeped, dripped, and then ran down through the piles, round our feet. Everything was damp, some things soaking, but this was just accepted by the women as part of their lives. They told us when the rain was at its heaviest, someone provided huge umbrellas and they just sat under them round the camp fire for hours on end.

After a while two women came back to the Peace Van with us to help clear it out. Luckily I had some jump leads in my car so it started OK and we took it over the road, up the drive, along a short narrow, muddy track, where there were three old dormobile-type vans parked. We took some time to unload the Peace Van; blankets, clothes, food crockery, one old cider bottle, bits and pieces of rubbish, etc, etc. We put as much as we could into one of the already completely full dormobiles, which was so packed out I couldn't get inside it. I asked one woman where everyone slept,



and she vaguely pointed to the vans and said, two here, two there and two more there with the children, and the rest under polythene in the main camp by the gate. As there were at any one time between 12 and 20 women, it seemed quite ludicrous, but again as with answers to any question, all was low key, just a slight shrug and a feeling that nothing was impossible, they managed, coped.

Another strangeness I found was while this hard but peaceful life was going on outside the gates, these gates themselves were being constantly opened and closed for the Base traffic. Large cars with American number plates, vans, general noise, bustle and men. Both parties pretty well ignored each other, but as an outsider I was very aware of the internal activity. The sound of a bugle being blown inside, while outside three or four women had come back to the camp carrying a marvellous Chinese lantern which they were trying to string up rather ineffectively on some poles. When Norman and I parked our vehicles on the entrance road, straight away I was asked by the guard to move mine. I said I would and then took some more pictures of the camp before doing so. I knew I was no real threat to them, just a visitor, and although someone probably took note of my car registration number, and perhaps photos of Norman and myself for the files, we were no more than a slight irritation. Actually when we did try to go, the van wouldn't start again and to get my car battery near to the Van's, I pulled right across the road blocking it completely, and nobody said a thing.

As to the women themselves. Well, this is not easy. They were all young, in their twenties and thirties, except for an older one who had arrived that day from Derbyshire, and a couple of teenagers. They had been there for varying times; one in her early twenties with punk yellow hair who had been there over six months, was obviously rather extrovert and friendly. Others were



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quiet, ordinary young women, hard to describe, just nice, but very dedicated. Mind you they would have to be to live at Greenham Common. I wonder what their families think of them? Somehow I felt I wanted to organise them better. Sort out those piles of 'things' lying around and chuck out the useless stuff. Get word round to peace groups, CND members and all who want to help, and say that they need money to buy the things they want, not food or clothes that they don't really need. I don't think the authorities who try to move them on really realise what they are up against. These women will not be moved. I asked one (actually I felt a fool as soon as I had), what will happen next? She looked surprised and said of course they would stay, nothing would happen, nothing could happen. Their faith in themselves, in the closed community that they have created, almost shut out outsiders like Norman and me. They were polite and friendly to us, helpful in finding mugs and plates from the Peace Van, but <sup>we</sup>weren't even a diversion as far as they were concerned. We weren't offered a cup of anything, although we told them we had driven 150 miles there and were going straight back. They thanked us for the use of the Van, but weren't all that upset that it was going. They would manage. Only three of them talked to us, the others just smiled politely. Obviously friendships and loves are very strong there, there is no way one could be alone. It is a community of like minded women who would certainly welcome others to join them. One would become as dedicated as they are, or quit within a few days. I think I would like to join them, but on second thoughts I know I am not strong enough in body (I like my creature comforts) or spirit (I'm not totally sure they are doing the right thing for peace), to live as they do.

Ginette Leach.

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12th-13th December, 1982

We left Deal in the Peace Van at about 7.45am and made good time to Thatcham where the rendezvous was to take place. We drove round the village until we were sure our coach was not there, then stopped and made coffee. Eventually it arrived and followed us the last few miles to Newbury and Greenham Common Air Base. This took an hour or so, as the roads were totally jammed with coaches and cars all covered in anti nuclear stickers. There was a great feeling of relief that we were not the only ones to have come on this day, and I think everyone felt this, as there was a lot of talking between vehicles, with drivers and passengers wanting to know where we were from and about the Peace Van itself. By this time we were joined by hundreds walking to the Base, so before long we pulled on to the side of the road and walked to Gate 8. The whole drive had been in rain varying from drizzle, bucketing, to sleet, but as we reached Greenham it cleared and I saw no more rain there.

Norman had prepared 8 gallons of soup for the women, so he took the Van off to Gate 7 where it was needed, and in small groups we wandered round the perimeter fence trying to find room among the women already there, to link arms and tie our personal mementoes to the fence. There was a great air of friendliness, goodwill and peace, (this is what Christmas should be like!), everyone talking and saying that if they moved up a little there was room for us with them. Coffee and sandwiches were passed round, and the mud underfoot was forgotten. Some women were singing, and the songs got passed on down the line. As the fence is 9 miles long, and it was completely surrounded, sometimes with women two or three deep, I'm not sure how the estimate of 30,000 was obtained, but I personally never saw more than a few hundred at a time, although at one point as we came up a rise and looked across the bleak short cut grass of the Base, there was the fence in the distance, and a mass of women behind it. Again the feeling of solidarity, it wasn't just us where we were, we really were surrounding the Base.

Elizabeth's bag with the nappies had been left by mistake in the Peace Van, so a few of us strolled on slowly through the mud to find it, meeting friends from Canterbury and other places on the way. Norman was doing a fantastic trade in soup. He was giving it free, but saying that any donations would go to the Women at Greenham Peace Camp. He and his son Robert worked for



hours, taking £44.85 in donations. They were much too busy to stop and talk, so I went off to see if anyone could advise me where to park the Peace Van for the night. The only advice I got was to choose a spot and stay there. Masses of tiny tents were already being erected, as well as a few much larger ones which were sort of information places, but the organisation was so low key that really, you could just please yourself and be welcome anywhere. I felt very responsible not only for the Peace Van, but also for the four others, Hilary, and Pam, Rose and Bev from Dover who were staying the night in the Van.

By this time it was getting dark and all round the fence candles were lit and left stuck in the ground at the foot of the fence. We felt it was time to be heading back to the coach which was a couple of miles away. I arranged with Hilary that we would meet at Gate 7 where Norman had been serving soup. We walked slowly round the fence, but when we got back to the main road we realised there was no way Norman would be able to drive the Van down and turn it over to me, so I walked back, to find him clearing everything up. To cut a long story short, eventually he, Robert and I drove back to as near the coach as we could, then they left and I took over the Van. Fine, all I had to do was retrace our steps. The trouble was, apart from the road being jammed with walkers, the police would not let me turn up the correct road, and I was directed to Thatcham, Newbury, then the village of Greenham. I was assured that the road I wanted was completely blocked by cars, (this was a complete lie, it was empty), so I had to do this huge circle round. When I finally reached the perimeter fence at Gate 4, I had to persuade a friendly copper to let me drive against the flow of traffic down my road. By this time it was totally dark apart from candles, torches and camp fires at Gates 5 and 6, both of which were crowded with women plus a few policemen.

At last I got to Gate 7 but there was no sign of Hilary or the others, so I parked, opened a bottle of wine with the help of a friendly policeman, who accepted a quick slurp after his efforts. When his colleagues weren't looking, and set off peering at faces and calling 'Hilary', 'Pam', 'Rose', 'Bev', and asking various women if they had seen the crowd from Deal and Dover. I decided to walk on down the hill a bit in case we'd got our wires crossed. It was very strange, quiet and spooky, but the candles shone brightly in the absolutely still air, so that on the fence the peace symbols, pictures, banners, spiders webs of wool, toys, clothes, ribbons, grass woven into words, photos, balloons, and



messages, could all be seen, but the mud and Base itself were hidden.

We all met up eventually in the right place, drank our wine, had some food and went to the main tent to make plans for the morning. It was all a bit of a muddle and low key, so although we were very welcome to stay with them and their 5am start, they felt we might be of more use at Gate 8 where there was more organisation. So we went there, found the right tent, were given various instructions as to briefings and signing on in the morning before 9, and told that we should talk out among ourselves who was prepared to be arrested, and who to be legal observer and driver. The ideal number for a group was 10, but there would be more to join our group. We went back to the Van, had another drink and sat and talked and read the information carefully. We soon agreed what each individual within the group should do, and got into our sleeping bags.

I don't think any of us got much sleep, but at least we were dry and apart from the two in the back of the Van, warm. I found it hard to switch off, so many sights and people. Someone earlier had remarked that they had no idea that there were so many drop-out, unemployed, lesbian, commie women in England!

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The next morning we roused ourselves at about 6.45. Getting up had to be in strict rotation, so Pam was the worker and I was last up. After coffee I decided it was time I tried the loos rather than a very skimpy leafless bramble bush beside the main road. On the way there I passed Gate 8 where about 10 women had been since 6am. They looked very cold indeed, one particularly who had gone very white and said she felt sick. The others persuaded her to go and get warm, and when I offered tea they said they really needed it. On the way back to the Van which was quite a way, I met Julien, a lad whom I had seen the previous week at a vigil outside Canterbury prison in support of Gus Hutchinson, who, like the Greenham Common women, had been sent there for 14 days for refusing to pay his fine for obstructing vehicles at Molesworth Air Base. Julien was in quite a state having hitched to Greenham the evening before. I don't think he'd realised this was a women's demo and he told some tale about losing his sleeping bag, so he'd spent the night sitting by a camp fire. I took him back to the Peace Van to thaw out, gave him a vast breakfast which stopped him shaking and looking blue, while Pam made up flasks of tea. Hilary and I took these back to the grateful women on Gate 8.



As soon as we got back we all went to the information tent. Inside we squatted on muddy straw and were soon joined by a woman from Leeds called Wendy, two Londoners and two Quakers from Birmingham. This was an ideal number and we called ourselves the Peter Darlington Group. Our instructor asked us a few questions about what we were prepared to do, and told us how to go limp when arrested and various other encouraging things at 8.30 on a cold damp Monday morning. At that moment the BBC TV camera crew came in to film us, and a short excerpt was shown on the box that night. (Isn't it odd how the people you don't want to see you, do, and those you do want to, don't?)

We finished our briefing and were leaving when an urgent call on the walkie-talkie asked for more women to go to Gap E. In the perimeter fence there are eight official gates, but apart from these there are five gaps, where the internal roads on the base come to the fence, and the overhanging barbed wire can be unwound, the chain link plastic covered fencing unbolted from a concrete post, the two posts alongside it pulled up, and there you have extra exits. The Greenham Common Women knew that if these gaps were left unguarded they would be an excellent way to get the American personnel in and out. We set off to Gap E in the Peace Van, but as suspected found the police wouldn't let me drive up the right road, so everyone piled out and I took the van back to Gate 8, and followed the others on foot. By the time I arrived, it was about a mile away, there were 50 or 60 women there, sitting and standing round the fence. We decided we would also make a road block to stop the police passing in their vehicles, so some plastic sheeting was put on the ground and women sat on it to block the road completely. This was our rather negative task for the day, but many incidents took place, and although ~~it~~ was pretty chilly waiting from about 10 to 3.30, I hardly felt the cold.

About every hour a Land Rover came down the internal road, stopped for a few minutes, and two military policemen had, I guess, a rough head count. The country road was much busier. The police obviously had to let the local people through, so varying from sympathy to hatred, vehicles were driven up to the seated women, who got up, pulled back enough polythene sheeting for the vehicle to pass, then put it back and sat down again. We were novices at this game, and got badly caught out early on, when a woman came tearing down to us, yelling that she was urgently taking her child to hospital and we must let her through instantly. Of course we did so, and just as she was starting to pass us, three police



cars tore down after her, so close that there was no way we could prevent them coming through inches behind her. We were all furious, so after that some of us stood a few yards up the road, slowing vehicles and checking identities. That in itself could be pretty unpleasant, as I tried to stop one car and he just came on at me. I held my ground (actually I was quite mesmerised) and eventually he screamed to a halt not more than six inches away from my legs. Early on a lot of the cars were for the Press, but after a while the police banned them, so they had to hump cameras etc up the hill on foot.

We were able to hear what was happening in other areas as every Gate and Gap had a walkie-talkie. We heard that there was trouble at Gate 4 where arrests had been made, so we held an impromptu meeting to decide whether we should help them or stay where we were. A few went to help, but as it was about 3 miles away, most of us felt that we could do more good by not making Gap E too vulnerable. It wasn't an easy decision for our group, but I think we were right.

Police cars would often be seen on our road, and at once we all positioned ourselves so they had to turn round and go back. Once two policemen walked up and although we were right across they pushed and shoved until they got through, and there was nothing we could do about it. Perhaps we should have tied ourselves together with string, but one always thinks of things like that too late. Many foreign as well as British reporters passed us, many stopping and talking, but we didn't see the much publicised Russians. We were a bit irritated by the private plane which flew round and round with a banner declaring 'Kremlin Sends Kongratulations', but somehow it was irrelevant and not worth bothering about.

All day at our Gap we had three Bhuddist women in their saffron robes beating and chanting a steady rhythm. Their inner strength and dedication was remarkable and they hardly stirred all day. The only time they moved was when they had some food, and for a few minutes then they walked around to stretch their legs.

At 12.55 there was a co-ordinated 5 minute silent vigil round the whole Base. Soon after we had another meeting. It appeared that someone had suggested that we ought to make a gesture by pulling back the fence at the Gap going inside it and leaving some item inside as a peace symbol. We went into a huddle in our own groups and discussed this. Our group felt that it was rather useless doing this just at Gap E, and it ought to be done at all the Gates and Gaps. Most of the other groups were in agreement.



By then it was about 2 o'clock, and as we had masses of food back in the Van, I volunteered to go back and get some, and Bev came with me. We made three flasks of coffee and took all the food we could carry back with us. Hilary greeted us with the news that some of the women had gone inside the fence after all, and there was the evidence glowing brighter as darkness fell. Two candles burning away. I was glad they had gone inside, but sorry I missed being there to witness, and probably participate.

The women were starting to drift off by this time, so once the coffee was finished, we decided to go back to the Van. It was getting very cold now, and we had a long way to go, but not nearly so far as some. Edinburgh, Cornwall, Wales, Leeds, the Midlands, even a group from Dublin, so Deal and Dover didn't seem so bad.

I heated up the soup while the others went off to the loos. Soon Hilary came back and said that they all wanted to stay until 6 when the women would leave the Gates. I agreed, and we took the last bottle of wine back to the others. There was a big camp fire burning, the bottle was passed round, and we sang and danced and yelled, all linking arms and behaving like a lot of school girls on the last day of term. There must have been about 70 of us, shouting, whooping, praying, doing our own thing, and the few police and men who were clearing up the camping area, looked surprised and were perhaps a little envious. Men don't behave like that. Women don't often, either, but these two days had been our days.

Eventually we went back to the van, had our soup, met up with Carolyn from Canterbury who wanted a lift, and set off for home just before 7pm. It was a very long drive, and I think the others enjoyed their sleep! I got back at 11, but although I was exhausted, couldn't get to sleep for ages.

On that drive and since I've had plenty of time to think about those two days. The media have given it a lot of coverage, but the impressions and feelings will last a long time for those who were actually there. The main thing was, it worked. 30,000 women did turn up, and with very little organisation they all put mementoes on the fence, lit candles, talked, shared ideas, food, drink and the experience. When we arrived it all seemed chaos and muddle, but we sorted ourselves without the aid of a single steward. The strident banners and slogans and newspaper selling and leaflet giving of other rallies were out of place at Greenham, and the few men with these faded away quickly. On the Monday when



we asked what should we do, it was always just suggested, but it was up to us as a small group to carry out that suggestion or not as we felt. The meetings in the middle of the road, the shared fear of speeding cars and police, the argument with the military officer who was not let down our road even after he took off his uniform jacket, the soggy bit of field through the barbed wire fence over the road where in turn pretty well everyone had to go for a pee. The only way to describe both the good and the bad is solidarity and a greater strength to stop cruise missiles and all nuclear weapons from being based in this country, and the Women of Greenham Common Peace Camp led the way.

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