

60 Years of US Bases Europe. Past their sell by date?

This is a short history of one US Base in one European Country and the ethos and tactics of the Greenham Women against Nuclear Ground Launched Cruise Missiles.

I was involved in Labour Party politics and a Greenham Activist.

I brought some imaginative Greenham anarchy to the Labour Party and some Labour Party responsibility and formality to Greenham.

In 1981 at the time of the Greenham March there were approximately 120 American bases in the UK. . Their presence was a State Secret most of the population were unaware of this presence.

The wilderness of Greenham Common (situated 40 miles west of London near the small town of Newbury) was taken over by the military during the Second World War. In 1941 it became a wartime airfield. It was soon decided that it would be loaned to an American unit of Dakota Aircraft and gliders for the Normandy invasion.

After the war the people of Newbury thought they would get their Common Land back to graze their animals and collect firewood but the Berlin Crisis, the Cold War and the need for US Forward Bases changed that. Britain did not ask too many questions as to how the base would be used.

In February 1951 with the wartime Emergency Powers Act was still in place the Americans were able to move in , to build a longer runway for their noisy B47 Strato Jets. Later the people of Newbury were appalled and petitioned Parliament against their Common becoming a launch pad for NATO's Nuclear Strike Force. They were ignored.

The Americans were secretive about their activities. There were concerns in Parliament. Did we have a veto on their use of Nuclear Weapons based in our country? Once again not answered.

This question was asked again in the 1980's when the Womens' Camp at Greenham was active.

Nuclear accidents at the US Base in Lakenheath in Suffolk, Windscale the British Nuclear Plant in the Lake District and an accident at Greenham Common itself fueled not only their fears bur fears nation wide

Britain had settled into its role as America's unsinkable aircraft carrier. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was active in the 1950's and 1960s. There was a sit down blockade by the Committee of 100 at Greenham Common in 1962. The Committee of 100 was a group of famous people , writers, academics, actors, film stars and philosophers including Bertrand Russell. They were removed by the police and carefully lifted into hired furniture removal vans and taken away to be arrested. There were regular Easter Marches to the nearby Aldermaston Atomic Research establishment.

The Commons Rights were still suspended. They had been promised they would eventually be restored. The Emergency Powers Act ran out in 1958 but other plans were in place. The Visiting Forces Act then gave the Americans immunity to UK Law. NATO lost the use of its French Air fields when De Gaulle partially withdrew France from NATO.

In 1978 The Ministry of Defence announced that Greenham had been chosen to host noisy inflight refueling tanker aircraft. The people of Newbury organised a "Not in My Back yard" campaign as they had 20 years before. The Ministry of Defence backed off and told the Americans they would have to take their noisy aircraft to other bases.

Then in June 1980 word went round Whitehall that two unoccupied bases - Greenham Common and Molesworth had been chosen to house American Nuclear Ground Launched Cruise Missiles.

The MOD adviser to Michael Heseltine said that Greenham was a poor choice but the Government went ahead.

From the government point of view the reaction of the people in Newbury was reassuringly mute. One local Resident, Joan Ruddock, later to lead CND and become a member of Parliament was already telephoning around to set up a Newbury Campaign Against Cruise Missiles

At the same time protests were starting in Wales.

In 1978 Wales was threatened by the dumping of nuclear waste. After a year and a half campaign of direct action Government Minister Michael Heseltine announced in Parliament that Wales was not a suitable place to dump Nuclear Waste. We got every local Authority in Wales to declare itself to be Nuclear Free, then Declared Wales to be a Nuclear Free Country. Winning gave the campaigners confidence and a few saw the bigger picture. They decided we should do something about the imminent arrival of Cruise Missiles at Greenham Common, Berkshire, near London.

Women took action after a large Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament demonstration at US Naval Listening Facility, Brawdy, West Wales in June 1981. There were 12 speakers all men, religious, political and scientific. Women became agitated feeling they should be doing something. Ann Pettitt jumped up and spoke about giving birth, and nurturing babies only to see them killed in wars. With friends she organised the march from Cardiff to Greenham Common, 125 miles. They set out from Cardiff on August 27th 1981. All this was before the Internet.

The March became a Peace Camp. The main ethos was anarchic consensus with imagination and spontaneity. Women were non hierarchical, inclusive, free to do as much or as little as they wanted, to fit in with their life circumstances. The most outrageous ideas were tried and most worked.

Where possible Women built consensus with the military and police at all levels.

In 1991 at the 10th birthday of Greenham as we sat by the fire in the dark a military man appeared and sat with us. He said "Gee folks I've just flown in from the States. I am the new second in command at the base. I've been just longing to meet you all. I think you are heroes and deserve a monument." A little later he disappeared into the woods.

When the police and military male hierarchies identified with the women as mothers, grand mothers, sisters or girlfriends it became difficult for them to carry out their orders.

For example when four soldiers were trying to pull me through the barbed wire fence I angrily

told them if they were my sons they would never set foot in my house again! they dropped me!

The daring actions of Greenham women set the different levels of Military of both US and UK against each other, a culture of blame developed.

In the first weeks the RAF Commander gave us water and firewood, the MOD Police guarded us and gave us warning of drugs raids and infiltrators. Both said Good luck to you

“We are left guarding ground zero, when the balloon goes up the American families are flown out, the American Service Personnel take to their bunkers.”

The attitudes of the local Police the British Military and Military Police were different to those of the US. When the Americans got out their fire hoses to turn on the women blockading Brawdy the UK personnel told them to put the hoses away.

Greenham women learned to deal with the establishments dirty tricks, drugs planted by the police, mentally ill women dumped on the camp, infiltrators vigilantes, and the presence of women security staff under training.

The first wing of Cruise Missiles were introduced to cover the removal of Nuclear Mines from the Fulda Gap they were targeted on German territory.

A Blackbird Spy Plane in the base was spray painted, damaging its expensive surface but as the Government and media had denied it was there no one could be prosecuted

We found it better to be vilified than ignored, at least people knew we were there.

We made our own joyful beautiful humorous public relations world wide with banners and post cards.

We educated the police about Nuclear issues. They spent hours in the woods over summer nights with us women.

Police overtime paid for Caribbean Cruises and many paid off their mortgages.

The cost of policing Greenham became a grave concern to the Government, they announced on the national news that they would shoot us if we entered the base.

We took no notice, nothing came of this but bad publicity for the Government

Women became active, informed and brave.

The whole world knew about these Missiles whose presence and purpose were supposed to be Secret.

Cruise Watch followed them every time the Missile Convoy left the base to disperse to practice Launch Procedures into the countryside.

First strike was irrelevant, as it became public knowledge.

The rest is history.

Womens presence at the camp lasted twenty years, a center for feminism.

Greenham is now a Business Park the Silos preserved as Ancient Monuments to the Cold War.

Greenham women changed protest.

Protest today is more inclusive of gender, class, age and race.

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