

Burning The Fear In Us

by Jeannette van Loon
Reprinted from the Peak
by Canadian University Press

"We regained a lot of power during our peace camp and ritual. Power lost because we have become separate, and had not been given a voice and power behind that voice. I feel a lot more hopeful for the future now than before I went to the camp. There is a chance to make things better, and all we have to do is work together instead of against each other."

A fire was burning in the centre of the ceremonial grounds, and our new world quilt was spread out in a circle around it.

Two women were at the entrance to welcome us. As we started arriving we walked around the fire in a big circle expanding as more women arrived. We joined hands and formed a circle.

I was one of 80 women who came from all over Canada and participated in the "Women Gathering to Stop the Cruise" peace camp/ritual/action at Cole Bay, Saskatchewan. Cole Bay is next to the Primrose Lake Air Weapons Range, a cruise missile testing site.

Many reasons were behind women's decisions to go. For some, it meant participating in an action rather than watching from the outside. "I went (to Cole Bay) because I wanted a supportive atmosphere in which I could talk about my despair. I get scared whenever I think about the possibility of nuclear war, my stomach tightens, and I pretend that it just won't happen," said one woman as we were returning. "It was a very personal experience for me and for all the women there."

Originally our camp was going to be Cold Lake, Alberta. But two weeks before we left, we changed the location to Cole Bay, at the invitation of the native people there, who were very supportive.

"We were also hoping to have an ongoing camp right next to the testing range, and we would be a whole lot better with the Native people in Cole Bay than with the military people (in Cold Lake)," said Shaw.

Women went to protest cruise missile testing, but there were other reasons. Women gathered to discuss how militarism affects our society, especially the lives of women, and to renew our strength in working towards a peaceful society.

"We were inspired by other women's peace groups," said Jean Bennett, member of Women Gathering. "Our camp in Cole Bay completed the cycle of cruise missile protesting. At Puget Sound, where production of the cruise is taking place, in Seneca Falls, where shipping is

being done, and in our camp, which is where testing is taking place, and Greenham Common, the deployment site."

Monika Gruenberg, who recently visited the Greenham Common Women's Camp, in England, brought back the tail of the dragon—a dragon's head sporting long banners made by many groups in support of the Greenham Common camp.

The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp started in 1981 to protest the scheduled deployment of cruise missiles there. Since NATO agreed to deploy 572 American-controlled cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe, supposedly in response to Soviet build-up of missiles pointed at Western Europe, public protest has been enormous. And everywhere you look, of all the dedicated and energetic people working in the cause of disarmament, the majority are women.

Militarism dehumanizes and even encourages the use of violence to achieve and maintain power and wealth. The military is the most obvious example. But women are well aware of the "militarist" mentality in society as it works so well at maintaining men's power over women's lives.

"We as women have to work in an atmosphere of male domination and are continually discriminated against and kept from getting good jobs," said one woman at the camp.

We participated in workshops entitled "feminism/militarism", connecting militarism and rape, militarism and pornography, militarism and power, militarism and the denial of emotions, and female subjugation. Women spoke of how we all live with the effects of militarism and how we constantly fear violence.

A native woman from the Cold Lake area told us what it meant to live near the testing range. Low flying jets have a shattering effect on the lives of residents, with houses shaking so much that things fall off the shelves.

Tests of the guidance system were suspended recently in the United States because of technical problems. This raises the fear a missile could veer off course and crash in populated areas near Cold Lake.

Canada agreed formally on July 15 to test the American-made missile in Alberta. The Primrose Lake area was chosen for its similarity with terrain in the Soviet Union. It is flat and white in winter and is sparsely populated, explained Jeanne Shaw. "The government conveniently forgot that the area is inhabited very much by natives."

Standing around a fire, each woman brought a slip of paper. On the paper was written what she most hated about militarism.

"... I burn my fear ... I burn my silence ... I banish the control that others have over my life ... I burn my fear that my children may not have a chance to grow up ..."

One woman put her diary in the fire, and with it her past.

Anger and despair descended upon us as, one by one, the symbols were burned.

Finally, we each took turns creating a "New World Quilt", symbolizing our wishes for a new society, and containing contributions from all of us.

Now our mood was positive and hopeful.

We left the camp, each with a package of seeds given to remind us of the experience, and to help us draw upon our collective strength.

Militarism quickly showed its face, in the form of an unmarked police car following our bus to the Cold Lake base. The police stopped us, warning us not to enter the base area. We drove as far as the base border, and as soon as we stepped outside, the Military and RCMP erected a road block, halting all traffic in and out of the base.

Then the brush-cut policemen began to photograph us, which we interpreted as an obvious attempt at intimidation.

The women formed a circle. After a couple of minutes of silence, we sang one of our ritual songs: "We are the flow / We are the ebb / We are the weavers / We are the web."

Two women planted their seeds outside the base, symbolizing their hope for

change in the area. We were followed all the way home.


The gathering has resulted in an ongoing women's peace camp at Cole Bay.

The international chain of women up against militarism will not be broken.



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