

'RETHINKING PACIFISM CONFERENCE' DUNEDIN NOVEMBER 2017.

'Peace Witness in a Time of Endless War' By Liz Remmerswaal

(This talk was originally illustrated by a selection of 20 slides.)

There was an image that haunted me as a child-it's a graphic painting of soldiers fighting close up during the South African Boer War in 1899, now seen as a terribly unjust imperial war. In the middle of the picture, shotgun at his shoulder, is my grandad, Jackie Hughes.

Jackie was declared a hero and became a permanent soldier in the fledgling New Zealand army for the next 20 years. Dad was a newborn when his Dad went to Gallipoli. Jackie's health was destroyed in that disastrous campaign, and he spent the next six months recuperating before being allowed home when my dad was two.

Despite feeling very bitter about how Jackie was mistreated after the war, when the second World War broke out, Dad immediately signed up to fight the evil Hitler

But it never made sense to me why people went to war-surely there was a better way? I think I was a pacifist from a young age.

After I served six challenging years as an environmentalist on the Hawke's Bay Regional Council, and solitary opposer of the Ruataniwha dam, the kids had left home and my husband and I went cycle touring in Europe. A friend had told me about the centennial congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, or WILPF, at the Peace Palace in the Hague, and so we went there. We spent six days talking peace and freedom with a thousand women from 33 countries.

ANZAC DAY AT THE HAGUE

And while we were there, on 25 April 2015 a small group of us 'gatecrashed' the Anzac Day centennial commemoration put on by the New Zealand ambassador. We brought an olive tree symbolising the peace that women have been working for for 100 years, and laid formal wreaths presented by the military and embassies.

Later we got permission to plant that same olive tree permanently at the Peace Palace, at a function blessed by our ambassador, as well as the Australian one.

Thus, quite naturally, I found myself promoting Pacifism. When we got home I joined WILPF, the women's peace organisation, and got busy.

First we put on a ceremony for Hiroshima Day in the Napier Cathedral. It was nearly 30 years since New Zealand became officially nuclear free, and we were proud.

However in Australia things weren't so good. It's a highly militaristic culture and very close to Uncle Sam.

PEACE CONVERGENCE AT PINE GAP, ALICE SPRINGS, AUSTRALIA.

Next I joined a long convoy from Melbourne to Alice Springs in the heart of the continent. It was the 50th year of the Pine Gap American military communications base, and there was a national peace convergence.

From all over Australia they came, Greenham common women, quakers, grannies, unionists, anarchists, activists-everyone supporting each other in the different actions they chose to undertake at this gathering, including locking themselves onto the gates of weapons

manufacturers and biking to the base, singing songs at the gates under the watchful eyes of the police and God knows who else.

Six 'Peace Pilgrims' broke into the base and were arrested and charged and are currently going through the court process in Alice Springs, facing up to seven years jail for lamenting the cost of the war on the children who are killed in it.

These folks are prepared to risk their freedom to make a difference, but it is a high price to pay.

WEEK OF WAR, WEEK OF PEACE

Last November there was a big party to celebrate the 75th birthday of the NZ Navy and warships here from all over were invited.

There was also a peace rally where we listened to the famous campaigner Dr Helen Caldicott, of Physicians for Social Responsibility warning of the continued dangers of nuclear war.

We also organised a peace picnic on the waterfront, where we Made 'Tea Not War' with Grannies for Peace, and again sang songs with an old peace band resurrected for the occasion.

We made our point I think without alienating or upsetting the public while they inspected the warship, and we got media coverage for our cause in the Herald as well as an online video clip and interview. This was followed by a blockade of the arms expo

The protest movement is alive and well in this country, but the nature of protest is changing.

You need to be clever and dramatic, colourful and playful to gain media attention and promote your cause.

This was followed by a successful blockade of the arms expo. The Defence Industry Association conference was shut down for a day and the business of war interrupted. I watched closely but I wasn't brave enough to sit in, unlike some of my older friends.

The Auckland blockade was remarkable because it went on for seven hours, like a sit in, and no-one was hurt by the very disciplined police, unlike the violence the nonviolent protesters experienced in Wellington this year.

WELLINGTON

This year's venue, the Westpac Sports Stadium was much harder to manage because it was large and circular with many entrances, but Peace Action protesters had blocked vehicle access with a rope attached to two brave mountaineers strung from lamp posts so that if the rope was cut, it would have sent them plummeting to the ground. In contrast to the previous year, the police were not neutral this time and actively shepherded the weapons expo attendees in via the back gates, alongside the busy traffic of Waterloo Quay. Over a dozen protesters and bystanders were injured by police as they engaged in their non violent direct actions.

Meanwhile disinformation was being circulated by the expo organisers, claiming they weren't selling guns, while a TV report clearly showed munitions on display.

Meanwhile quakers and others stood in silent vigil outside the railway station alerting the public and sharing our concerns.

The Mayor Justin Lester also said publicly that he didn't support the weapons expo being held in a city of peace.

Later one of our number attended the AGM of the Westpac Stadium, got an item on the agenda and spoke to trustees for four minutes asking them not to glamorise defence by hosting the weapons forum in a stadium owned by the citizens of Wellington.

We need more people to speak up on this so that our public venues aren't hosting these events.

WAIHOPAI

Earlier this year I was again part of a protest which has been going on for 30 years at Waihopai spy base in Blenheim organised by the Anti Bases Campaign.

From the road you can see the two huge plastic domes sheltering the satellites, part of the international 'Five Eyes' network which are feeding information about all of us into the American military machine, and contributing to the suffering of innocents who are drone bombed overseas, for example the children who have been hurt and killed by our soldiers in Afghanistan. Earlier this year journalist Nicky Hager and war correspondent Jon Stephenson published a book, 'Hit and Run', which described about the deaths of civilians caused by the NZ army. It's crucial that we are kept informed about what is happening overseas in our name and our country needs to make amends for mistakes that happen. Unlike previous times, the current wars are far from heroic, and likely to be based on a thirst for oil. They cause civilian casualties of up to 90%, use remote drone technology and result in many returning soldiers who suffer trauma for the rest of their lives.

Quakers have been actively peacemaking for over 300 years and at the Whanganui Settlement in May hosted a three day workshop of 45 peace people from all over the country where we could educate ourselves, talk about actions and what we wanted to do, and how groups work together. Quakers also support a range of peace actions at home and abroad.

TRUMP COUNTRY

In July I received the Sonja Davies Peace Award and went to Trump country to study 'Peace Literacy' with the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation in Santa Barbara

I learnt a lot. Essentially people are not designed to make war, we need to be trained to dehumanise our enemies. The question is- why can't we train ourselves for peace? How do we care for ourselves to become resilient enough to continue doing this work for the long time it is going to take to end war? And when are we going to set up a Ministry for Peace?

Recently I was asked to serve as the first national coordinator of the global peace group, World beyond War. Its three themes are divestment from weapons, education and closing military bases. Divestment is a major driver in current movements for change, such as divestment from fossil fuels and towards a green economy. Other organisations such as 350.org are already reporting success and anecdotally I have heard the financial advisors are noticing a change in culture re investment.

It's not something yet that is perhaps well understood, but is a work in progress and many many collaborations are taking place around the world with organisations such as Code Pink, Don't Bank on the Bomb and World Beyond war to name a few. These collaborations are so much easier with global communications so accessible.

Recently two divestment conferences took place in Washington DC and they were both live streamed and recorded so anyone can watch and learn. I did, I learned that recently the for example Nobel foundation fund has pulled out of several companies who are involved with nuclear weapons manufacturing.

Another group 'Don't Bank on the Bomb' publishes online information about organisations that have implemented a policy that comprehensively prevents any financial involvement in nuclear

weapon producing companies, for example the NZ Superannuation fund, which has an exclusion policy but one which could be improved upon.

This information is freely available on Don't Bank on the Bomb's website.

Former politician turned film-maker Andrew Feinstein has spoken publicly about the impact that divestment had on ending the apartheid economy in South Africa. His new film, 'The Shadow World', looks at the dark side of weapons investing. But sometimes it seems like an uphill battle

After the huge global anti war protests against the Iraq war in 2003, when 20 million people worldwide got out onto the streets, it seems the peace movement gave up.

Australian '(Swords into) Ploughshares' activist Ciaran O'Reilly says that if one per cent of those who protested had gone into non violent resistance and the other 99% had supported them, we would have an buoyant anti-war movement today.

Pope Francis speaks of the absurd contradiction to speak of peace, while at the same time promote or permit the global arms trade. Is the purpose of war to solve problems? Or is it a commercial war for selling weapons in illegal trade and so that the merchants of death can get rich?"

And our youngest new MP, Chloe Swarbrick champions of rich history of political protest: 'Change won't come from the top down. Those who are profiting from the status quo are more than comfortable. Positive, inclusive change has to come from the grassroots – from people, connecting with each other, sharing ideas and empathy. There's a peaceful, compassionate, happy revolution waiting in building community.'

WORLD BEYOND WAR

There are plenty of examples of success we can look at and take heart from, and there is strength from doing the right thing. As new national coordinator for global network World Beyond War I am committed to this work and invite you to join

Please sign up online and join me to embody peace in the world, for the sake of ourselves, our families, and our planet.

Liz Remmerswaal, World Beyond War national coordinator, New Zealand.
lizrem@gmail.com