

Peace Camp on a Distant Shore

By Joan Williams

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Five hundred women from all over Australia set up a peace camp on a sandy, windswept site overlooking a beautiful island lying off the western coast of the continent.

From the sparkling white beach below, a humped causeway stretched to the island and beyond, the Indian Ocean's vast blue distances reached almost uninterrupted to the coast of Africa.

For many years, Garden Island was an unspoilt place for the working people of Perth and Fremantle to picnic or holiday. In the early seventies the Australian naval base of Stirling was constructed, facing the safe anchorage of Cockburn Sound. Why did the women come there? Because in the last few years Stirling has become a de facto base for American nuclear-powered and undoubtedly nuclear armed warships and submarines, bringing enormous danger to the whole metropolitan area.

The use of Australian ports by US nuclear warships has given rise to a rapidly growing protest movement demanding that the federal government should follow the example of New Zealand and ban such visits.

The Sound Women's Peace Camp aimed to focus attention on US bases in Australia and the violation of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, as designated by the United Nations General Assembly.

"The goodwill media coverage of the ships' visits masks the military significance of the US presence," the Peace Camp handbook said. "US warships come to Cockburn Sound for rest and recreation direct from theatres of war in the Middle East. The US ships are in this ocean to protect the United States 'vital interests' in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Ships have come to Western Australia directly from Lebanon and also after being engaged in Central America. It is also possible to attack the Soviet Union from the Indian Ocean with sea launched missiles."

-- The links between US bases in Australia and Subic Bay in the Philippines, Yokosuka in Japan and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean were seen as part of the US Rapid Deployment Force network. The women wanted to join with women everywhere taking a stand for nuclear disarmament and global peace.

Local arrangements for the Peace Camp were made by Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament (WAND) which has campaigned for a year about the unwanted social effects of the visits. There is growing antagonism among thinking women to the use the naval forces make of local girls, who are portrayed as being "available." The

holding of the camp was opposed by local businessmen who gain financially from ship visits and by broad sections of people who still believe that Australia is protected by the military alliance known as the ANZUS Treaty.

But the organisers overcame all obstacles: a permit for the site was obtained the day before the camp was to open. The dusty cavalcade of chartered buses that had crossed Australia were greeted with spontaneous cheers from shopping crowds in Perth and Fremantle. Soon peace banners were flying over a colorful ring of tents and peace workshops and activities were under way. Fruit, vegetables and bread were sold at cost, a healing tent was set up, the media group handled a constant stream of journalists and well-wishers with gifts. A helicopter from a TV channel hovered constantly overhead. Women were on watch day and night to fend off small groups armed with bottles, eggs and rocks. The vigilance of the women finally forced police patrols to act against such intruders.

Messages of support began coming in from all over the world: Greenham Common, the All-India Women's Federation, the Japanese and New Zealand peace movements, European countries, Australian trade unions. Politicians came to see for themselves.

From the beginning, the monopoly-owned media was generally hostile. TV and newspaper headlines presented images of the women as man-haters. Concentrating on issues of appearance and sexuality, they obscured the real aims of the women for peace and friendship between nations, for an end to Australian involvement in US nuclear first strike plans.

They ignored the very real sacrifices the women made to come there, their courage in the face of enormous difficulties, their humour and ingenuity in demonstrating against nuclear war. They ignored the creativity expressed in catchy peace songs, inventive banners and slogans.

They did not report the touching 85th birthday party given a leading peace and equal rights campaigner, Dr. Irene Greenwood, who had been awarded the Order of Australia for her work.

However much newspaper proprietors wanted to smear the Peace Camp, many of the working journalists, male and female, could not help being impressed by the sincerity of the participants, their courage in demonstrations that led to the arrest of more than 70, their solidarity in the face of senseless violence used against them.

Leaflets from the Australian Peace Committee branch supporting the women were widely read. Sympathetic articles began to appear, mainly by women journalists and radio commentators. Politicians came to see for themselves. The State Government resisted pressure to dose down the camp.

Sudden brutality by Federal Police was exposed when they opened the gates of the causeway leading to the base and rushed a peaceful demonstration of women and

children to make an arrest. People hitherto silent began to speak out in favour of the camp.

Undoubtedly some mistakes were made. The majority of women were taking part in peace action for the first time. Ultra-feminist, separatist, anarchist and individualist ideas at times gave rise to faulty tactics.

But the camp caused discussion, focussed national and world attention on US bases in Australia, made the ANZUS Treaty the subject of debate and showed the danger of being tied to America's military apron-strings. Solidarity with Indian Ocean and Pacific nations against the latest increase in armaments-submarines armed with Tomahawk sea-launched cruise missiles-was intensified.