

TAKING THE PROTEST TO THE PEOPLE...

When we take part in actions for peace, how do we know if they are effective? I sometimes wonder if some of the things I do are mainly to make me feel better, rather than benefiting the wider community. In mid-April, some members of WPJF were involved in an inspiring event which reached a lot of people (thanks partly to the police and others who opposed it) and proved that peace campaigners can make a difference.

We took part in a Peace Camp near the town of Carterton in Oxfordshire, which serves the RAF base of Brize Norton. Brize is the RAF's transport hub and the point of departure and arrival for troops going to and from Iraq. Most of the residents of Carterton are either service personnel and their families or civilians who depend on the base for their livelihood.

Brize Norton has been visited before; during the Iraq War campaigners broke into the base and attempted to disable aircraft and equipment. We learned that this did not get a sympathetic reception in Carterton, as the protesters made no attempt to explain their actions to the local people. The recent camp was held with the explicit aim of discussing the war and continued occupation with residents, and sharing our view that continued intervention in Iraq is wrong and causing harm to British servicemen and women and their families, as well as the people of Iraq.

We arrived on Friday afternoon, and spent the rest of the day meeting the 20 or so other campers, preparing for the events of the weekend and listening to an interesting talk by Gwyn of At Ease, an organisation that provides legal advice to servicemen and women.

Our little camp on common land was at all times "protected" by vanloads of police, (we were in the area of the notorious Thames Valley force - just ask any woman who was at Greenham Common about them) who were clearly expecting trouble. The camp had been trailed in lurid style in "The Sun" a couple of weeks beforehand, along the lines of "hardcore anarchists out to smash up the town and kill our babies" and the airbase itself was protected by new razor wire, camera towers and extra security patrols. So there was one good effect right away - even the alleged threat of Al-Qaeda hadn't got the base proper security before. It must have been a big disappointment to the police to find that we were only "hardcore" in our dedication to sitting around the camp fire and drinking tea!

On Friday evening our thin blue line of police was called on justify its overtime to defend the camp from "50 or 60" (they told us) lads who had been drinking and "armed themselves with staves" to come and sort us out. Of this we saw and heard nothing, but when we did get to talk to the local kids, they told us that they had been specifically warned in school not to approach the camp, and that we were dangerous terrorist sympathisers. Of course to most kids, "Don't do it" is an invitation to go and do it... and we were strangers in a small and closed community. No wonder there was some suspicion about the camp, but a mass attack was never going to happen. It was simply a trick by the police to turn the camp against the town and the town against the camp. The

police, as usual, wanted trouble. So that was another way we made a big impact - if anybody didn't know about us before the police started screaming around in their vans, they certainly did afterwards.

The big event for Saturday was a march through Carterton and rally at the main gate of the airbase, led by a wonderful caricature statue of Tony Blair. The campers were joined by coaches of supporters from Bristol, Reading and Oxford, a samba band and a choir, in all between 100-150 marchers, accompanied by at least that number of police, with horses, vans, motorbikes and, it seemed, the whole population of Carterton who had never seen anything like it before and turned out in force to watch or take part.

The police issued us with notices under Section 14 of the Public Order Act 1986 stating that the march "may result in serious disruption to the life of the community or that the purpose of the persons organising this public assembly is to intimidate..." However, the only intimidation was from the huge numbers of police present. They also imposed other conditions - we were not allowed to leaflet, but they passed on this information by, yes, handing out leaflets!



Overkill policing during the march

The march was noisy, bright and a big success, the statue of Phoney was successfully toppled outside the main gates of the base (only to rise again and go to Sedgefield for the election campaign) and we heard speeches from, among others, Kate Hudson, Chair of CND, Rashad Salim, an Iraqi artist, and Riad El-Taher of Friendship Across Frontiers, who had taken a red London bus loaded with medical supplies to Iraq in defiance of sanctions. Then we marched back to our camp, inviting all, marchers and local people, back for hot food and drink (thanks to, I think, Oxford CND). This was when we really started to talk to people, especially the young people of the town and found they were, of course, just ordinary kids and not at all hostile, and they found that we were amiable hippies, not wild-eyed maniacs carrying fizzing bombs. Rashad, the artist, is working on a project asking people to represent their feelings about war,

...AT RAF BRIZE NORTON

peace and democracy on paper and many of the local kids took part, some very movingly. I remember one girl who simply wrote "I Want My Dad Back Alive".



Blair gives a last interview before being toppled

Later, some of the young people returned, despite the best efforts of the police to dissuade them, and after some initial suspicion on both sides we had a good evening. Many of them had fathers or brothers in the services, some serving in Iraq, and all were very concerned for the safety of their family members. When we got to speak to the people of Carterton most were at the least willing to listen and discuss with us; there was very little outright hostility. We leafleted outside the supermarket on Sunday and found most people to be sympathetic to our approaches. We had no axe to grind with individual servicemen and women, but shared our anger at Bush, Blair and their gang of warmongers with the passers-by. Hardly anyone disagreed with us.

There were lots of great people at the camp, and many fascinating discussions around the fire. I'm looking forward to meeting some of my new friends at the G8 protests this summer. Our camp was greatly helped by the presence of Eddie and Duncan, ex-servicemen who now organise "UK Veterans and Families for Peace". They were able to give us some valuable insights into the minds of serving soldiers, sailors and aircrew and the psyche of a fairly closed military community like Carterton. Duncan made Tony's head, too!

As we packed up on Monday, we all felt we had made a big impact on Carterton. Unwittingly helped by the police, we got our message across to just about all the people of the town and raised important issues that otherwise may have remained hidden in their community. We're sure that there was lots of lively debate going on in the base, shops and schools the following week. We plan to return in the autumn, with the aim of talking to faith groups, public meetings and schools - especially the teachers who spread lies about us!

Links:

UK Veterans and Families for Peace
www.ukveteransandfamiliesforpeace.co.uk

At Ease
www.atease.org.uk

Friendship Across Frontiers
www.fafgb.org.uk ■

DIARY DATES

We won't be doing very much here in Wrexham over the next couple of months, due to holidays and suchlike. Also, some of us will be busy in Scotland at the beginning of July. But we have two planning meetings booked, ideas for an Autumn programme, and thoughts about a more lively web site. Also, we will respond to situations as they arise. To keep up to date with our activities you can subscribe to our egroup, keep an eye on our web site or contact us by phone or email to see what's happening. (All contact details on back page).

WPJF PLANNING MEETINGS

Basement, Peace & Justice Centre, 35
Kingsmills Rd, Hightown,

Monday 11th July, 6pm

Monday 12th September, 6pm.

WREXHAM SOCIALIST FORUM

is organising meetings in the Summer:

Tuesday, 26 July

Stop council house privatisation.

Tuesday, 30 Aug

Make Poverty History -
alternatives to G8.

Both start at 7.30pm in the Miners'
Institute, Grosvenor Rd, Wrexham.

CYNEFIN Y WERIN (COMMON GROUND)

Saturday 1st October.

WPJF will be taking part in the next
Cynefin y Werin Dayschool in Newtown.

We will be planning an all-Wales
campaign against Army Recruitment.