

An interview with Evelyn Silver by Jim Donaghey, 18th March 2015

Evelyn Silver was involved with the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp for several years from 1981. She joined the march from Cardiff which culminated in women setting up a campsite at the US Air Force base near Newbury, which housed Cruise nuclear missiles. Evelyn never lived there full-time, but was an active supporter of protests at the camp, and was involved in dramatic interventions and performances. Her account is one perspective amongst the thousands and thousands of women who were involved throughout the camp's existence, which sheds light on a vitally important moment of resistance, and highlights Loughborough's connections with that.

Evelyn had previously been involved in both the peace movement, through Loughborough Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and the women's liberation movement. Her reason for being involved in feminist politics was simple – 'sexism.' Evelyn recalls that women 'were second-grade citizens! When I first got involved in a Women's Liberation group... the Equal Pay Act didn't exist, equal opportunities didn't exist.'

Y'know, I applied for jobs and I was told 'no sorry, you're a woman...' There was nothing you could do about it, there was nothing in the law to stop people doing that. 'Sorry we don't take women.' It is hard for people to understand, and it was innate in society, the sexism.

The heightened Cold War tensions in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 were the backdrop to Evelyn's decision to join CND. 'I was... really frightened, I realised. And then I saw a poster for a CND meeting... and that was it, I was off.' Evelyn saw that Greenham, as an intersection of the peace and women's struggles, 'just sort of brought it all together really.' 'It was a sort of spontaneous peace camp, and it just touched a nerve.'

Evelyn was one of the very few feminist activists on the peace march from Cardiff, but even though 'the women who were first there on the march weren't feminists... it just became clear to them... as time went on when they were camping, that it needed to be women only.' Some of the men who had been supporting the march found this difficult to accept, and Evelyn recalls one man who 'nearly tipped a cauldron of boiling water over one of the women, he was so angry.' 'It was a battle to make it women-only at the beginning, like anything women-only, it's still a battle.' Evelyn described the chairperson of Loughborough CND at the time as 'a really horrible bloke.' 'He was just obnoxious, and couldn't cope with it at all,' and his wife was the only woman who didn't join the coach loads of Loughborough women who went to Greenham. However, Evelyn pointed out that 'men did come and support and bring food and donate money and stuff, and mixed camps started up at a couple of other bases which was really good.' Greenham Common quickly became a magnet for women from all over the UK and beyond, drawn from a wide range of

backgrounds. 'Women flocked to Greenham, because it was women! So they felt safe to be able to come to Greenham, or it felt [like] somewhere they could connect with.' 'There was all sorts of different women, with all sorts of different agendas there.' Some were already involved in the peace movement, some were Quakers or from other faith groups, some were feminists, and 'a lot of women went who were mothers, who really were scared stiff for their children.' 'A lot of ordinary women went actually.' The women-only aspect was a huge part of what made Greenham so important, as Evelyn put it, 'there's something amazing when women get together without men.' Many women at Greenham were exposed to feminist politics, and there were also many 'who came out as lesbians when they went there.'

There is definitely different energy when it's just women. A lot of women who don't feel they can speak when there's men there, feel able to speak. One of the things I absolutely loved about Greenham was that each woman there was treated absolutely as an individual. She wasn't just half of a couple, or even if there was women who were in relationships with each other there, they were very much treated as an individual. And that was probably the first time a lot of women had experienced that. A lot of them came down and left their husbands with the kids or whatever, and had various sort of support, or not, from their other halves. It sort of shook up relationships and things.

Evelyn also noted the importance of the ancient sites near to Greenham Common, such as Silbury Hill, which Evelyn describes as a 'very magical place.... There's a lot of evidence that it's there as the womb of the great goddess... and women used to go and nip up Silbury Hill when we wanted a bit of a spiritual boost.... A lot of women from Greenham used to go there.' The Common itself also provided a connection to the land. 'It was beautiful land, wild land, with beautiful things growing and y'know fantastic for fungi in the autumn and all sorts.' 'And to be on the land was something amazing, to be camped on the land... it was very special.' 'You're so into the earth, and nuclear weapons are there to destroy the earth and life on earth.'

The camp highlighted the threat posed by US nuclear missiles sited in the UK, which, said Evelyn 'would have left us a prime target for nuclear attack.' The initial march was 'largely ignored by the media,' but 'on the way there, some women decided they wanted to do some direct action and chain themselves to the fence when we got there. And we even got on national Radio 1 news 'cause there was nothing else going on that day, which was brilliant.' Direct action and non-violence were key principles for Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, with 'constant actions going on... blockading gates.' 'Women going onto the base, trying to disrupt what was going on there really.' 'Quite early on there was a big gathering where there was the first blockade of the base where women lay down and y'know, sat down and blockaded.' 'I never did any direct action while I was there, for various reasons. You had your choice, what you wanted to do.' So, while some women

were engaged in direct action, others were able to provide a supporting role, or were involved in other creative forms of protest. Some women used wool to knit 'a sort of web... across the main gates,' which resulted in the capture of a poignant image 'of the security guy with a sledge hammer [laughs], who could not get through this wool.' Prior to Greenham, Evelyn had been involved with street theatre as part of Loughborough CND. 'We had a show we toured pubs with, and 'cause it was right at the beginning of CND, there was a lot of people discussing it in every pub.' Evelyn continued to be involved in dramatic protest at Greenham, including a performance with Shirley Cameron called 'Brides Against The Bomb,' in which Evelyn was one of the 'brides' who took it in turns to 'marry' a collapsible model of a Cruise missile. Evelyn was also 'involved in a group of artists and poets called Sister Seven, and we produced a feminist anti-nuclear art exhibition. And we accompanied it with performances and poetry readings. And we opened at Newbury Arts Centre. It was sort of very Greenham connected, the whole of Greenham came there, and... we'd made printed copies of each of the images in the exhibition, and it went to about 80 venues all over the country and internationally actually as well.' 'That was one of the ways I contributed quite a lot to the women's peace movement.' The USAF base was nine miles in circumference, with several gates, which became the sites for various camps 'named after the rainbow colours.' Evelyn recalls that 'different gates had different sort of feels. Yellow gate... which was the main entrance to the base, was I think fine for visitors. I might be making this up! Orange gate there was loads of room for sort of parking and stuff, was where a lot of people used to go. Blue gate was the absolute vegan anarchist [laughs] "no men near here." Actions were generally organised on a gate-by-gate basis, but there were major events which required massive levels of coordination. 'You have to remember there were no computers, there were no mobile phones.' 'Word got round. It's amazing when you think of social media now.... We had telephones trees, so... if you got phoned up, you had people who you'd phone, and they all had people who they'd phone.... There was a lot of printing going on. And post. It was cheap to send things through the post then.'

Embrace The Base saw 18,000 women hold hands around the base:

Which was the most fantastic creative action ever, really. It didn't just happen, it was a lot of work. Getting the word out round all the groups, and masses of work. Coach loads of women came from all over the country. It was fantastic. And women put photos and... hung ribbons, anything on the fence, so it became this massive artwork. Absolutely fantastic. It was so moving. And there so much creativity there, so much.

Of course, lots of women were arrested during the direct action and other protests, and the trials at Newbury Courts became another site of solidarity and support work. Evelyn recalled the subversive mood in the courtroom:

Loads of women sort of changed their names and stuff while they were there, and there was one woman who'd changed her name to 'Frida Peepul.' And this court

official came out and yelled 'Free Da People!' [laughs]. It was just hysterical, 'cause he'd absolutely no idea at all. So there was this hysterical sort of edge to everything. It was like a lot of imps really. Pixies. It was that sort of energy going on... it was like the establishment just didn't know how to cope with it really.

While places like Greenham acted as a focus for anti-nuclear actions and protests, there were also efforts to spread activity around the rest of the country, including Loughborough. Amey Roadstone, sited just over the M1 from Loughborough University, was targeted by a demonstration, as part of a series of nation-wide coordinated actions against businesses that supplied materials to airbases such as Greenham and Moleworth. Another involved the Home Office Bunker, formerly sited on Burder Street, near to the train station:

And it wasn't just any old nuclear bunker, this is where, in the event of a nuclear war, a minister or somebody really high up would come... and take control of the East Midlands basically. It was a serious bunker.... Oh it was so easy to break into after Greenham. It was just sort of this derelict warehouse, and there was a big mast, and we... climbed up onto the roof of this bunker, and one friend climbed up the mast and put a banner there.... I mean the police were sort of amazed, I couldn't bear to even look where she'd climbed up.... And of course all the traffic was coming past, and everybody saw it, and it was on the news and everything. And the police were shitting themselves because Greenham women were in Loughborough!

Aside from the actions, trials, and support work, 'life was round the fire, really. And a lot of dialogue, and a lot of, well, a lot of arguing and all sorts going on.' 'There was all sorts of politics being discussed.... It was like a hive of sort of everything that could possibly go on. And obviously there were disputes and differences of all the usual stuff. But there was also a general sense of purpose about what it was all about as well.' 'You sort of met women from all over the place, y'know, women came from America and various countries and stuff.' 'I was involved in organising a benefit for the miners' wives in Loughborough.... There was connections with women in the Pacific, where there was nuclear testing going on.' 'So there was a lot of networking, a lot of linking up and meeting different women who might be involved in different politics stuff, it was fantastic really. Anything like that empowers everybody, loads of creativity, loads of sort of artistic... creative ideas going on.' But life at Greenham could also be hard-going, particularly with constant evictions at the hands of bailiffs, and increasingly negative media coverage. Evelyn recalled it was 'very tough when there were bailiffs coming all the time, and of course everything got heavier and heavier. And the public wasn't behind Greenham, as the media changed. It was like "dirty lesbians down there," that was how they were slagged-off basically.' 'Obviously there were less and less women living there as time went on, 'cause it got harder and harder.' 'When women were being evicted every day... [they] often couldn't be bothered, y'know, it was just hard

dealing with visitors and stuff.' Scores of women were also sent to Holloway Prison, including Evelyn's friend Marlena from Loughborough.

But despite the repression faced by Greenham Women's Peace Camp, Evelyn views it as hugely successful. 'There was massive influence, that's been acknowledged, in terms of Cruise leaving Greenham some years later.... Women's lives were transformed from going down there.' 'It affected every woman in the country... whether she wanted to know it or didn't really.' Evelyn said that the feminist and peace activism of Greenham are 'both at the core of who I am, still.' Evelyn has continued her involvement in feminist activism, including Million Women Rise which campaigns to end male violence against women, and in peace activism and conflict resolution, including a Jewish-Muslim dialogue group in Nottingham. Evelyn laments that the situation has not improved much since the early 1980s. The nuclear threat remains, even though 'people have forgotten about nuclear weapons now,' and sexism persists. 'Young women today just, they've got so many struggles.' 'I think it's tragic that most young women have never heard of Greenham.' 'It would be so inspiring to have some big thing that women were doing to be able to go to and be proud to be a woman.'

'It absolutely needs to be in history as something massive that women did.'