

**Ailsa Johnson**

So yes, tell me - let's start off with your general experience with Greenham and how you, how you came about becoming a Greenham woman.

**I, it was when the place was set up in the 1980s. And I had young children. And I lived in Surrey, so it was easy for me to go to Greenham for the big demonstrations, and also to visit. Um, I stayed there overnight one night when the convoy came out, and that was a very frightening and surrealistic experience. But mostly my visits were for the big demos and to visit during the day.**

And when when was? When were you, when were you at Greenham and how long were you there for?

**I was, this was during the 1980s that I was, I was visiting.**

Okay. And how many times did you visit?

**Um, quite, I would say several, several times as well as the big demonstrations. My local CND group used to go up and take things for the women.**

Okay, so is that how you came came about Greenham?

**Yeah, I think the visits to Greenham and the CND group locally grew up together really. It was really, the local CND group was reactivated by Greenham I think - it was an existence and had been in existence since the first marches from London to Aldermaston, and Aldermaston to London, but this, but the Greenham women revitalised, I think, the local CND group in Surrey.**

Okay. And did you know anybody um who lived at Greenham?

Yes, I know, several people that lived at Greenham, and I'm still in touch with quite a few of them. Because they were we're all members of Aldermaston women's peace camp, which, after Greenham went back to being a common, we had the peace camp continue at Aldermaston and Burghfield. Um, the weapons were gone from Greenham common, but the research and the maintenance of the weapons was being done at Aldermaston and Burghfield. And that's why we have a camp there every month, the second weekend of every month, and we have the right to camp there. We went up to the High Court to get permission, or to get recognition that camping is a form of protest. And we won the case so that we can, we can have a - it's recognised that we can do our peaceful camp every month at Aldermaston and at Burghfield. It's a camp where we just go and camp for one night usually, and we're a vigil to, to acknowledge, to find out what's happening at Aldermaston. It's very much linked in with Nuke Watch - Nuke Watch is an organisation that monitors convoys coming out of Aldermaston and at Burghfield on their way up to Scotland with warheads. And these warheads are sent up to Scotland for refurbishment and brought back down again. The convoys are on the motorways going up through population centres such as Glasgow on the way to Cullinstown and they're huge convoys that have got military accompaniment on the motorways. It's usually four warhead carriers, great lorries, and there's usually a lot of support vehicles for breakdowns and for emergencies. And these are travelling on our motorways, in amongst all the heavy traffic on our motorways, and accidents have not - could easily happen. So Nuke Watch is very much linked in with Aldermaston women's peace camp. Another organisation that's linked in with the peace camp is Nuclear Information Service. This is an academic research body that tries to find out what is happening at Aldermaston and at Burghfield. It's based in Reading, so it's handy for knowing what's happening at Burghfield and Aldermaston, and it alerts the media and speaks to the media about what the developments are at Aldermaston. So very much all these things are very much carried on from Greenham. Greenham has been, has become a common again. But the research, the nuclear weapons factory is still alive and well at Aldermaston and at Burghfield. So this is why we are still protesting, and it's a women's only camp. And because

**it's in, it's in the spirit of Greenham, and it is a continuation of Greenham.**

Okay. I mean I was going to ask, how your fear of nuclear weapons compares, you know, compared then to your fear of nuclear weapons now....?

**Yeah, I think the political situation in the world is very dangerous. Um, we've always thought that proliferation was a big threat. And with the very unstable political situation worldwide, I think the threat is as great as it was in the 1980s. In the 1980s we were, at Greenham, trying to stop the weapons coming to Britain. And we failed. And, unfortunately, the need to protest is as real now as it was then. Unfortunately, Britain has not signed the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. This was passed last year at the United Nations, and um, the people campaigning for it were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of the fact that the nuclear weapons are such a big threat still. And we were hoping that Britain would sign up to the treaty, but unfortunately, they have not.**

I mean, going going back to to Greenham, I mean what was your - what detail or moment sums up um, your experience of Greenham?

**I think the night when um, I was up there and the convoy came out. I think it was a very surrealist experience to actually see that these weapons were coming out onto our roads. Greenham was closed - they finished at Greenham because they took the weapons off the roads in that way, and put them onto submarines. And were updating the nuclear weapons and were able to put them onto submarines. So Greenham was um, er, ceased being a nuclear place. On the other hand, Burghfield and Aldermaston are where, is where the research, the maintenance, and the keeping of the nuclear weapons is now and that is why we're continuing protest at Aldermaston. Only last October, Trident Ploughshares, which is also linked to Greenham, and the legacy of Greenham -these are a group of people that blocked the access to Burghfield for a whole day. And their case is coming up in April 2019.**

**So people are still campaigning vigorously for - against nuclear weapons because the need is still so great.**

And in terms of um, your relationship with um, you know, the local residents, did you...

**Yeah, we had the camp. When we were at Greenham, there was a lot of people that didn't like the peace women. There was obviously some people that supported, and took food to the women, but a lot of people were threatened by the women, and thought they were wrong and that nuclear weapons are a deterrent. But recently we had a um, there was an open day at Greenham common. And we had - we set up a camp just like it would have been in the 1980s, and the locals were coming onto the common with their children to go cycling, and to enjoy the open air, and they said 'Oh, yes, we remember the women at Greenham, and we have our children here today'. So it has been passed down from generation to generation, that the Greenham women were very much a focus of life when you live near Greenham, and that lots of people actually did remember the Greenham women with gratitude, really - not, not because we got rid of Greenham - weapons from Greenham common particularly, but because they got they've their Greenham common, common land back.**

Yeah. Can you can you give me some - do you remember any examples of you know, any peace protests happening. You know, I've heard people talking about songs they used to sing...

**Yes. I think songs are a big feature of the, of um, the campaign really. I mean, it is really quite frightening on a personal level to, to demonstrate and to protest. And I think the songs that grew up from Greenham and since then, so made good use of sort of like keeping morale up and giving us a united feeling that what we were doing was the right thing.**

Yeah. And do you remember, or do you have knowledge of the different gates at Greenham, and...

**I haven't got too much knowledge of that because I just went up, um, as a day - on a day and just went to a gate which we, we thought we would go to that day, not particularly because we were involved in that particular camp.**

Do you know which gate that was?

**I think I was at Green Gate.**

Green gate.

**And Blue Gate. I'm not quite sure what all different ones are.**

But do you have memories of the other women who were who were at that gate as well?

**Yes. In fact, there are some women that were at Greenham that are still involved in the Aldermaston women's peace camp. And so we do have a continuity. And these are women that have been campaigning since the 1980s. And I have a lot of respect for them.**

How much do you think the camp was politically infiltrated or sabotaged?

**Yes, yeah, I think it was. Yes, I think the security services knew. Um, it was definitely infiltrated. There is evidence coming out now that there were police undercover people there. There's going to be a big revelation quite soon about how it was infiltrated. Like other environmental campaigns, um, the police thought that they were, that we, that they needed to keep an eye on us. And I'm sure that at one time our phones were tapped.**

Oh, really?

**Yeah.**

And what sort of relationship um, did you or any of the other women have with the men around you? So going back to the military, and the police?

**I think the women always tried to behave in a non-violent way. And this is NVDA - nonviolent direct action, has therefore grown up and the police and the protestors have sort of like grown together in this. What, what's happened is because the women - the police can can rely on the fact that we're not going to be violent, and therefore their attitude to us is different from say, them treating hooligans or something like that. They have a respect for us, because they know that we're non-violent. And this deescalates the confrontation. We're non violence, therefore, they don't have to treat us with violence, and it doesn't escalate into a terrible situation. So, I think the campaigns and protest movements now are benefiting very much from the fact that this nonviolent direct action grew up in this way, that the police can rely on us to be not violent, and therefore, they treat us better. And there's been studies to show that non-violent campaigns have a much greater rate of success than violence does. Um, it's, it is the basis of a lot of campaigns now. For instance, the climate change campaigns now are making use of the fact that the peace movement developed this non-violent way of protesting, and I think this is the way forward - that violence only creates violence, and that non-violence is a much better way to to protest.**

What do you, um, what do you think the police and law makers learnt at Greenham?

**Um, I think, um, I think they, they learned that it's a lot easier to to, to police a non-violent demonstration than a violent demonstration. That it won't get out of hand. They can rely on um, the protesters not to be violent and therefore, the violence doesn't escalate.**

And when you when you left Greenham, or, you know, were obviously sort of actively following it. I mean, what was your opinion on the way that it was, you know, shown in the media, do you have any memories of..?

Well, like in all things, the media are looking for sensational stories, and they were - they would concentrate on, not on the issue of the fact that the women were protesting against nuclear weapons, but trying to find things that weren't um, relevant really to the movement. It doesn't really matter if you're a lesbian or, or straight or black or white. The people that were protesting there were protesting because of nuclear weapons. And unfortunately, the media probably picked up on some, whenever they could find any bad behaviour, they would concentrate on that - not on the actual issues. But that's the problem of our media these days anyway, that they think that people only want to know about sensational things, and not the issues. And I think it's symbolic of the fact that our media is not informing people. It's just entertaining people, and using people for - to sell their papers, or television programmes and ignoring the real issues - the real issue being the fact that nuclear weapons are an abomination, and the pinnacle of war and weapons.

And we were speaking earlier about how the Suffragette movement um, is, you know, widely known um, and educated. What do you think the reason is, um, for that, you know, the Suffragette movement is celebrated, whereas the peace movement has, you know, sort of been ignored and isn't, you know - I hadn't heard of Greenham, for example. So, you know, why do you think...

I think it's totally culturally acceptable now, for women to have the vote. Obviously 100 years ago, it wasn't culturally acceptable. Now, it's not - a lot of people these days think that nuclear weapons are a good thing because they think that they're a deterrent, and therefore, it's not so - sometimes it's not socially acceptable in certain spheres of society for people to demonstrate against nuclear weapons. We need to have a cultural change, just as we did with the Suffragettes. We need to all recognise that nuclear weapons are a terrible, terrible thing. And that the future of the world, especially in this political climate, is at risk because of nuclear weapons. Um, it's, we've always been against proliferation of nuclear weapons from spreading to other countries. And so not only do we have a horizontal proliferation, we also have a vertical

**proliferation where they're developing new weapons these days. And so, um, we will continue to protest against this.**

I was going to ask, you know, how did um, being, you know, an activist and campaigner affect your personal life, but it's, you know, it's ongoing and actually since Greenham you've, you've been heavily involved in activism. I mean how has that impacted?

**I think um, it's been sort of like part of my DNA really. I grew up in Barrow in Furness, and they're building Trident submarines there. And in the 1980s I had a young family, and I think that was a very pivotal time in my life, a time when I was developing, and it was a time when Greenham was in existence, Greenham peace camp was in existence. And I think this all fed into the fact that this, you know, became part of my personality, really. And I think I shall always be protesting against weapons of mass destruction.**

Yeah. I mean, is there anything - you've obviously learned from Greenham because you've carried it on, you know, the peace movement and, I mean, is that still happening today? I mean, have you taken Greenham to now? (Laughs).

**Yeah, because yes, Greenham was a very formative experience and I continue to do the work through Nuclear Information Service and through Aldermaston women's peace camp, and through Campaign Against the Arms Trade and through all the other issues I'm involved with.**

And is there anything else about Greenham that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to perhaps say?

**I think I would like to say that a very formative experience for forming my views was when I read a book called Children of Hiroshima. It was written six years after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. And it's the accounts from children of what it was like in Hiroshima when the bomb fell. And this is - it's such a striking, poignant read that I've carried this**



**all the way through my life. And it reminds me of why I'm continuing to campaign because of the suffering of these children.**

Yeah. So yeah, well, thank you so much. That concludes our interview unless there's anything you'd like to add?

**I just, I just want to highlight that um, the armed forces are hoping to have a thanksgiving service in May. I think it's at Westminster Abbey for the 50th anniversary of Trident, and of course, we will be there to demonstrate.**

Well, thank you so much, Ailsa. You've been great.

(Edit in recording)

**I was just wondering whether they could, they could include this somehow. This is one of the stories - this is one of the things that, and it's something you know, whenever I've been asked to give a talk or whatever about CND, or whatever, I've always referred to this book, this particular account of what happened. So I don't know whether, um, whether we could record it onto that?**

Yeah.

**I just read it, it's quite long, but they'll be able to cut it?**

Yeah, that's fine. We could do that now if you like?

**Yeah. Okay. This is an account that was written six years after the dropping of the bomb. And the person that wrote it, Yoshiaki Sawasi was 17 years old when he wrote this, but he was 11 years old, when the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. And he's writing a letter accounting what happened on that day. "It was the morning of August the 6th, I just left home with my mother when we heard the sound of airplanes. We looked up thinking how strange that there were planes when there had been no air raid warning. The sun was shining brightly, and the sky was**

so clear, it was almost eerie. Three B29s flew over reflecting the sun against the background of the clear blue summer sky. It was just about the time we reached the railroad crossing that there was a blaze of light, and we were thrown to the ground by the blast. When I opened my eyes and looked around, it was hazy and dark because of the clouds of dust filling the air. So it looked as if we were close to some sundown. Pieces of wood and all kinds of fragments were falling onto our heads. A large ox, which had been pulling a loaded cart just a moment ago was now writhing about, and all the houses which lined the streets were crushed. Then I saw the streetcar. Passengers covered with blood were fighting their way off the streetcar. I could hear the cries of children and the groans of adults. Suddenly, we became concerned for the safety of the three members of our family back at home. And so we both started running back to our house. The voices crying for help from under the crushed houses seemed to pursue us. We became more and more anxious as we rushed back towards our house. But street after street was blocked by collapsed houses, and those on the verge of collapse. Given no other choice, we ran over the roofs of the crushed houses. I felt as if my heart was being torn apart as I kept running on, in spite of the sounds coming from below - the sounds of crying children and their parents yelling for help, but we finally made it back to our house. What a sight greeted us when we stepped into our house. The straw mats were heaved around and turned every which way. The windows had been blown out, and furniture was scattered all around. I heard the sobbing voice of my 6 year old sister crying. She was buried underneath one of the mats. When I got the mat off her, I found her covered with blood from the cuts on her head and face. I can picture that heart rending scene even now, as if it were right in front of my eyes. My 3 year old brother was wailing loudly - buried together with my grandma, who was holding him under a pile of furniture and sliding doors. He was also bloody from a cut on his head, and grandma seemed to be in pain from her back, where she must have been hit by the blast. We heard the voices of the firemen who were themselves injured, and bleeding all over. They strained painfully to shout out their message in short bursts. 'This area is about to be overtaken by fire. Everybody evacuate to Yassoo village. Quickly hurry.' Mum carried my sister on her back and

then grandma by the hand, and I carry my brother on my back. Both mum and I wore air raid hoods and short coats to cover the children on our backs. We hurried towards the designated safety area with some neighbours. In the beginning, I thought that the area around Yuku - the station was the only place hit by the bomb. But no matter how far we went, every house in sight was demolished. Fires had started up in the houses all around, and the road which was about 50 feet across was engulfed in flames. We stopped and soaked our air raid hoods and short coats with the water in the tanks provided for fires, and continued on our escape. Our clothes became bone dry in just 2 or 3 minutes, so we had to stop and wet our clothes over and over again. I was thirsty. And my head was throbbing with such pain that it felt like it was going to split open. I have no ways to describe our feeling as we watched the city of Hiroshima burning like the fires of hell, far to the south. I'll leave that to your imagination. In this way, the conclusion of the Pacific War was sped up by the first atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima, the Russian declaration of war on August the 8th, and the second detonation of an atom bomb over the city of Nagasaki, and the Empire of Japan collapsed completely. That flash of light, which mankind had never before experienced, reduced to ashes the city of Hiroshima on the delta of the Ota River, and it's seven clear streams once lush with green yellow trees. The lives of some 200,000 people came to a lamentable end. The cries that rose up out of this antithesis of world peace was 'Don't ever let this happen again'. It was the last plea welling up from deep in the hearts of those people who lost their lives. Is it not then the duty of us young people to take up the cry of these 200 and some thousands who died so miserably, and making it into a plea for world peace which began a movement to make the date of the tragic day, August the 6th, a memorial day for world peace. Isn't making Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the last cities to suffer from the atom bomb, and bringing permanent world peace the very least we can do for those 200,000 victims? We must all get - we must get all the people in the world to choose the path towards complete world peace, and not the road to total destruction by a third world war. If this isn't done, it would mean that all those 200,000 people died for no reason at all. We, the youth of Hiroshima experienced the tragedy of the atom bomb with our own

bodies. The atom bomb destroys the happiness and hopes of all mankind, and further is leading mankind down the path towards destruction. Those of us who think like this continue to pray for the day when peace will reign throughout the world, and all mankind can join hands and live in happiness. When the last cry of the dying citizens of Hiroshima, the plea to never repeat the tragedy of Hiroshima at-last becomes the basis of a lasting world peace - then, and only then, may our deceased loved ones finally rest in peace.”