

Helen Steel

Talking with Rebecca about Holloway.

Oh yeah.

Was just a good story, it's a bit of background, because it's not all about the camp - people were supporting the women at the camp as well, on actions, making it more kind of national, perhaps.

Right.

So you were telling me you were 17?

Yes.

Was it one of the first...

February 198..

Doesn't matter.

'83.

Oh wow.

February 1983. Er, the women who broke into the Greenham base on New Year's Eve and danced on the silos.

So it was New Year's Eve '82/'83?

Er, yes.

Cool.

They had broken into the base and started dancing on top of the silos, and they were jailed. I can't actually remember if they'd got convicted for breach of the peace or they were, um, accused of breach of the peace, but they'd basically been jailed to prevent them protesting further. And there were a lot of them in Holloway prison - there might have even been all fourth four. I can't remember. And I was one of - I don't really know - a number of women who went to Holloway prison and took part in

a protest outside the prison, just publicising the fact that the women had been jailed for protesting against nuclear weapons. And while I was there, er, somebody suggested, or somebody asked if I wanted to take part in a protest on the roof, er...

How do you get on the roof?

Well, um, early in the morning - long before it was dark, there was some scaffolding on the side of the prison, and we climbed up the scaffolding and then we had to walk along a wall that had at-least a 30 or 40 foot drop either side of it - it was absolutely terrifying. Some of the women just like walked straight along it...

So brave.

...like it was on the ground! (Laughs). As though there wasn't a big drop either side. I think I straddled it...

Yeah, I would have done that.

...and put my hands and arms, and eventually got across. And then we got onto the roof of the, I think it was the gym of the prison.

So you broke into Holloway prison, basically?

We, yeah, we broke into the prison.

(Laughs).

And er, we hid on the rooftop until it was dawn, and there got up and danced on the rooftop and hung up banners, er calling for - well the end to nuclear weapons, and for women not to be jailed for protesting against nuclear weapons.

How cool is that? What did you sing on this roof?

Oh yeah, somebody did invent a song - what was it? I think it was, um, (Sings) 'We're all going off to sunny Holloway, no more Greenham for a week or two. We're all going off to sunny Holloway, no more Greenham for me or you, for a week or two. We're going where the sun shines brightly,'...I don't think that bit's right, actually... 'We're going where the screws are sad, we're going and it's unfair, because the system's mad, bad, sad, mad.' And then it just goes on again. 'Sunny Holloway...off to sunny Holloway, no more Greenham for a week or two. We're all going off to sunny Holloway, no more Greenham for me or you, for a week or two.' Anyway, after hanging around on the rooftop for, I don't really know - an hour, two hours, um, and

some of the press turned up and took photographs, we all got arrested and taken down and put in the police station, and taken to court, and bound over, I think. I can't actually remember - it's a long time ago, I'm getting old.

Well done!

Hang on, there's another song. (Sings) 'Six o'clock Friday morning, the police were warm inside, six women climbed up the scaffold, they didn't even have to hide. The whole system is ridiculous, and that's what we're gonna prove, that's why we keep on dancing, on top of Holloway roof. I don't want to be, be in this prison no more, I never did nothing to breach the peace, oh man the system is bad, the system is bad'. Anyway, and so on! Completely forgotten that one - just came back to me.

Came back to you. Amazing. That's good. And you went to the base a few times as well, didn't you?

I went to the base a few times. I can't actually remember how many times. The one I mainly remember was Michael Hesaltine, who was the defense minister at the time was visiting the base, and so women had called for a mass blockade of the base, and I went and took part in that, and we all sat in the road, in the tipping rain - got very, very wet and then got arrested for obstruction of a highway and taken to Newbury police station, where the police were pretty obnoxious, and I don't know - refusing to let us use toilets in peace, and like, I don't know - anyway - kind of standing right next to you while you wanted to use the loo, and things like that. Yeah. And I thought, I can't remember actually - I remember going to the court case and women standing up and making statements from the dock, but I don't remember what I said. I was a bit shy and retiring then - I probably didn't actually say very much at all.

Well you were only a teenager.

Yeah. Yeah, actually the first time I went to Greenham was the Embrace the Base protest, um, and then I yeah - I would have still been 17, but even younger - could have been 16 actually, can't remember. But I was quite amazed to see two of my teachers...

Wicked.

..On the protest, which was quite exciting. And actually my mum and my sister came as well. So, yeah. It was a massive, massive inspiring women only protest.

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(Sings in a round with Emma) 'I like the flowers, I like the daffodils, I don't like the actors, I think they're evil, I want to live in a nuclear free society, with no plutonium, no plutonium, no plutonium, no plutonium. I like the flowers, I like the daffodils, I don't like the actors, I think they're evil, I want to live in a nuclear free society, with no plutonium, no plutonium, no plutonium, no plutonium. I like the flowers, I like the daffodils, I don't like the actors, I think they're evil, I want to live in a nuclear free society, with no plutonium, no plutonium, no plutonium, no plutonium.'

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(Sings with Emma) 'Old and strong, she goes on and on and on, you can't kill the spirit, she is like a mountain. Old and strong, she goes on and on and on, you can't kill the spirit, she is like a mountain.'