

Karmen Thomas and Ann Pettitt

Ann, would you like to go first?

My name is Ann Pettitt.

Karmen Thomas.

Great. Before we actually talk about Greenham, maybe you could give me an idea of the backgrounds that you came from - school, work, that sort of thing, and then how you came together and met each other?

You go.

What, schools. Born in Manchester moved up to North Riding near - where was it? Near Whitby, between Redcar and Whitby, and about the age of 10, moved down to Hertfordshire, where I went to - so I went to a convent, for most of my um, um, childhood I was in a girls convent, an Irish convent. And then when I moved south, I was at a little...

Were you?

Yes. There were a few women at Greenham that were convent girls.

I'd forgotten that.

And then when I moved south, we were, I was at a little village school, where for the first time I encountered sort of boys and girls all having, running around together - didn't happen up north. And then I went to girls' grammar school where I, which I hated, and sort of left before they threw me out. And then I got onto a course in London in Whitechapel, um, at the London College of Furniture doing early instrument technology, which I was rubbish at, but it was good fun. I was squatting as well.

So you were living in London for how many years?

Squatting in London.

And you, Ann?

The East End wasn't it?

Yes.

Um, I was born in Ulverston, which is a town in South Lake District. Um, my mother was French, and my dad met her at the end of the war. He was a soldier stationed in her town. They didn't stay there long, I was about 2 and a half, I think 3, they moved to live in various places and then East London, Ilford, for a while. And then, and then they move to a rather posh little place called Reigate. Um, between London and Brighton. So I spent from the age of 7 until I went to University of Bristol, I spent my life there. Went to a classic kind of girls' grammar school.

What did you read at university?

English. And then I ended up squatting in London as well. Um, partly for lack of housing for young people, flats for young people, and partly for political reasons - I was quite active in the movement to sort of help homeless people get housed and that kind of thing. And then ended up housing myself in the process, with a group of friends who I still am friends with, and that's how I met Karmen.

Ah, so you met in London?

Yes, we met in London. Briefly, didn't we?

There was a block called Fieldgate Mansions.

Yes.

And it was a block of three roads, um, which, they were mostly tenement, Victorian tenements very Dickensian with a - down our block there was still the debris from when a bomb had dropped there from the Second World War, and a fractured sewage pipe, which haven't been seen to I mean, the East End was very poor then. And there was lots of Bengali families who were living there, who'd been sold their places and they thought they owned them, but they didn't own them.

This was late '70s, presumably?

No, late '60s, early '70s.

It was about 1974/75.

Well I got there about '70...

3?

No. '72, something like that.

Yes.

And again nowhere to, I mean, I did at one point live in rented accommodation, which was appalling. And then I'm - people, the college I was that was just around the corner, and most of the people at the college were living at Fieldgate Mansions. And so they used their skills, their carpentry skills to do bits to them, and do them up and it was very much a community, and we got involved with sort of anti, the racist at that time, BNP, and also the squatting movement - helping people who were being forcibly evicted and things like that.

So when did you move to Wales?

'77.

We, no beginning of '77. I met Ann because we were both pregnant, and I'd just given birth, and my midwife - our midwife who was...

We didn't know each other.

We didn't know each other, no, because there was a lot of people living there back and forth. So you had your own little circle you know? Where was she from - Jamaica?

Grenada.

Grenada, that's right. Madge. And she was brilliant - had all these homemade remedies and stuff, very supportive midwife, and she sort of recognised that there was sort of alternative um, rice, lentils that sort of thing on my shelves in my tiny little kitchen, and she said 'Oh, I know somebody you need to go and have a chat with,' and she sent Ann round. But I'd only just had Ben, about a few days old.

Only just brought him home from hospital basically, he was about a day old.

Yes. So we had a chat - sort of a chat.

We hardly did.

Because of...

I can imagine.

First baby. I was really young.

You were like this, your hair coming down, could hardly see your face, you were feeding the baby. And it was very fragile and precious feeling. And so I didn't stay very long, and all...

I was moving, I said I was moving we were moving up north.

So I thought oh that's a pity, there's not much point pursuing this relationship because um, you know, she's moving up north, I'm moving to Wales, so that's not going to happen.

So I lived in the north for a few years. Couple of, a couple of years up in Pendle, up in the Pendle area, and we moved back down - we moved to Wales. It was either Wales or Southern Ireland - cheap housing that we can do up. So we came down looked at a place, two places in Wales, and bought one.

Was that Mid Wales?

No, South Wales, near Amerford.

But then we met again. (Laughs).

I thought so.

We met again, well, well, when I had this idea about organising a march to Greenham I couldn't get anybody else interested um, to help me with it, but I was quite obsessed with the idea. And my then - my partner Barry um, was going to West Wales CND meetings, because there was a lot going on - a lot of meetings, and a lot of activity going on around CND and all that. Um, he went to West Wales CND meeting. And he came back and he said 'I think there's a woman called Karmen, I think you ought to contact. She seems um, sort of down to earth. And I think she'd be a good person for you to see if she'd be interested in your idea.' And so I, I had tried various other people - names that had been given to me and got nowhere, really. Um, and was feeling quite down hearted, and about it. And then I when I phoned Karmen, she just said 'Oh, that's a good idea. I'll help you with that. Come over and we'll talk about it.'

Were you, Karmen involved with CND, or peace movements?

Um, we set up a local CND group in in Wales, but in a strange sort of way. Wales CND, sort of had a, was a sort of, a whole entity of its own, really. Although it was sort of connected with national CND, in Wales there was all this business about setting up nuclear free zones. Um, we had our own congo - our council that used to meet in Aberystwyth every 3 months or something, which had Plaid were very involved in it. So we, I used to go to those. And it was a cross section of Labour, Plaid, activists, um, alternatives. It was this sort of cohesion of people who, in a way that wasn't happening in England, that was different. It was set up very differently. In Wales, you met the same people again (laughs). 'Oh, hello!' You know, go to a meeting up in North Wales...

Smaller communities?

Smaller communities, and, um, and some of the communities at the time were very radical to with um, sort of, they've set up their own newspaper - Rebecca, there was quite a lot going on.

But we didn't, it wasn't until I'd been over to Karmen's with the other two, who then - two other women, Lynee and Lyn came on board quite quickly. Um. And so there were four of us, and the four of us used to go to Karmen's to meet because you didn't drive.

I didn't drive. And neither did my husband.

I'd just learnt, I'd just passed my test. So I used to give us a lift over there. And we'd meet there. It wasn't until we had met in Karmen's house for two or three times, that I began to wonder whether we hadn't met before. And because there was something familiar about the room, even though all the furniture was different...

The furniture was the same.

Was it?

The wooden stuff that we made and things, because both Paul and I were carpenters...

Okay, well, I must have...

And we had the fire in London, we had a little open fire, and we had a little open fire in the cottage.

There was something that sort of seemed familiar. And I remembered that Karmen had told me the story of when her son was born, when Ben was born, and so, and I saw this little boy, about the same age as mine. And I thought well, and I called my son Ben as well. And I thought, I wonder if this is the same woman as I met in London? And it was, you know?

Amazing coincidence.

Yes. Did you did your neighbour get in the bath?

That's right, at a friend's house...

Over the road, and were you wheeled into London hospital about to deliver in a wheelchair? Yes.

Squatting!

Yes. And then we put two, we put two and two together and realised that we had met before. (Laughs).

So we have to do it, really. It had to work.

Yes.

So what was um, the main purpose of the march? When you put your heads together and started organising? How were you thinking about it?

We wanted to debate, wasn't it?

We, we wanted - the whole issue about nuclear weapons. Focusing on the installation of cruise missiles, the point, you know, we had reached, we wanted it to be rather than a sort of smooth transition into the next phase of nuclear modernisation, which was how it was being sold and no big deal. We wanted it to be a very big deal. We wanted it to be um, talked about everywhere. We wanted it to arouse alarm of the highest degree, (Laughs).

Which is what it was doing with us.

Yes, it's how we felt.

We wanted to convey the alarm we felt at this dangerous time.

Which was very different from the government's 'Protect and Survive' leaflets and all those things.

Well, well also, things like 'Protect and Survive', in a sense heightened it, because if you read it as a relatively intelligent individual, you'd realise how ridiculous it was. And also, things like 'Protect and Survive' were being discussed at council, at council levels as well - with like, how do we protect our livestock? How do we protect our, our crops? Oh, you've got sort of so many minutes and somehow you get the black sheet - it was all so ridiculous. So that in a sense, with your government policy being so ridiculous, heightens your fear that these people really did not know exactly what they were doing. You know, that's how we that's how we felt, I think.

Yes, I remember us saying that we wanted this place Greenham common to become a household word.

Yes. A name.

Yes. We wanted everybody to be talking about what was going to happen. So really it was a media campaign to break through the kind of, oh, this isn't news. This is, you know, this is just something normal - modernisation.

And it was going on in within the news setup, it was going on, it was almost - it was happening underneath.

Yes.

In a way these little articles would appear. But there wasn't a really big deal about it because cruise were coming in in a couple of years. But it was how cruise would change our position as well. It was upping the threat wasn't it?

Yes, well because it made, because of the nature of it, E.P. Thompson explained this brilliantly, in that wonderful pamphlet he did - 'Protest and Survive'.

Yes, yes.

Because of the nature of cruise, the idea was that these smaller nuclear weapons for use in the European theatre, it was called, you know, which is where we live. But, you know, it's a sort of acceptably smaller nuclear war because it's contained in the European theatre.

It was feasible, made it feasible.

That's better than the big nuclear war, obviously. (Laughs). And so, the idea was, it's a response to the SS20s, which were mounted on lorries, big trucks, and cruise would likely, would be mounted on big trucks, and then at times of international tension, when everybody's very nervous because there's some sort of crisis going on between the USSR and the US, or NATO. Um, the cruise missiles would be trundled out on the backs of those trucks, ready, and dispersed around southern Britain, ready for, in readiness for firing. And you think, well, what's the

psychology of this? You know, you think, a nervous Politburo - cut off in fact from reliable sources of information, but having satellite information, 'Oh, you know, the cruise missiles are being, are being distributed, you know, they're going down the A-roads of Britain. Do we wait and see whether they will fire, or do we fire first? You know, or shall we wait and see, comrades?' It put really, it seemed to me it puts them into an impossible position. And so it was real brinkmanship, um, and extremely risky as a, as a strategy, really.

And also we, they didn't have, we didn't - the British government didn't have control over them because they were American. So can you imagine...

Was it part of NATO, the whole?

Yeah, yes. But they'd be under American jurisdiction because they were in American bases. So can you imagine if that had still been around when we have Trump? You know, a president like Trump? I mean it was, the whole setup was just very, very, um, I don't know - nerve, it just made people, it made me very, very frightened.

It was terrifying. Yes.

You know, with small children.

So there was a real fear of nuclear holocaust?

Oh yes. There was an urgency, there was a real urgency as well - that it wasn't like when? It wasn't like if, it was when, wasn't this?

Yes. I think that coupled with the fact that, that, that the government took, you know, were giving out all these silly nuclear preparations. Yeah. And of course in America and Russia, I mean, kids were having nuclear drill - weren't they? Rehearsals for nuclear war. We weren't here, but we had those ridiculous leaflets.

So you've got your idea, clear in your mind. And you had to get people together. How did you do that? And did you have the media - did you have much media coverage before you set out on the march?

No, no.

We only had 3 months, 4 months?

3 months, yes, went very quickly.

Because we decided it had to be like August bank holiday time.

Yes. That was the earliest we could do.

And it...

We started out at Easter.

Yes.

We didn't have many months. No money.

So it was sending letters?

Yeah, we got a grant. We got a loan from CND.

A loan.

Which we have to pay back. Because we had no money we, you know, no credit cards in those days.

Did anyone else give any funding?

No, just, just that, and, and it was all through letter writing mostly, and waiting for the letter - personal contacts. It wasn't like the situation today where you email people, or you put up a Facebook thing.

We did have a little free ad, I think or notice we had a little notice about it in Cosmopolitan magazine.

And in the Welsh magazine as well - Rebecca, there was a little thing, so, to ask for people, if women were interested.

Why did we choose it to be women?

I don't know, really. It wasn't a, it wasn't a sort of...

That's my next question!

It wasn't a sort of set..

But it was the key decision.

It was a sort of decision. I think it was about mums, really, and the fact we were all - no, three of us had small children.

Yes. You, me and Lynee...

Had small children. And I think it was about women making their protest, but it wasn't done as sort of - there was not that much discussion about it, really.

I remember Lynee. I remember it was in my house. I remember Lynee saying she didn't disagree with it. But I remember her saying 'Why do you think it should be women? I mean, bombs fall on everybody. They're not just there to discriminate, you know, and men care about this as well,' because her partner then, you know, he was like Barry, he was very anti-nuclear, you know.

And when we had our meetings, it was, I mean, Paul used to do all the cooking for the kids.

Yes, he did, you know, he was very supportive.

My husband.

Um...

But it wasn't a decision made on one particular day?

It wasn't a big radical decision.

You just thought that's what you were going to do. It would be women. And that's it.

We said it'd be we said...

Women led.

It would be women led, it would be women, we wanted women's voices to be heard, because we felt that - we knew, it's not a feeling, it's a fact that nearly all these decisions about nuclear weapons deployment, armed forces and so on are taken by men. I mean, there's, you know, I know NATO's absolutely overwhelmed with women members, but um (laughs), it's, you look at the people taking these decisions, they're all men.

But also in CND they were all guys at the time, it was mostly men, you know if you had somebody...

Mostly.

Mostly. It was Bruce Kent, it was individuals. When did you - at that time - when did you have a woman giving her point of view from CND? Or actually from the left, generally, on the TV, or wherever?

I want you to see a different kind of voice, didn't you?

Yes.

I mean I remember seeing interviews with CND spokespeople. And they'd be talking about 'Well, numbers of weapons' and how it was not really rational for us to be claiming that we - this was a response, and they would, you know, you could hear people just switching off after 10 seconds - this is so boring. And this is...

What's this about?

Yes, I just wanted to hear somebody putting the - screaming, really putting the kind of absolute common sense view that 'Well, are nuclear weapons going to be used? Where? On who? What's going to be the result of this? This is crazy. How on earth can we talk about this at all? Where does this fit into defense? Blowing yourself up? Oh, (laughs) what a good idea! Let's self immolate and take half of the rest of the world with us, oh great!'

But things like the letter, the pamphlet we produced to give out on the march, um, on the walk, because it was a walk really, wasn't it?

Yes.

You know that in a sense, was to appeal to women really, in a very sort of traditional way. In the fact, it was a deformed child - baby born you know that still being born in, in Japan. Um, it was that sort of, there was no facts and figures. It was just this image, which some people found very disturbing. And some people didn't like, and there were all these discussions later on about people didn't want to see it. And then just this is why we're walking, showing where we've walked from, but there wasn't the facts and the figures, it was just very, something very simple.

Why are we walking 110 miles?

And then turn over and there's this child.

This is why.

The simplest form is usually the most effective.

Yes.

To get the messages over.

And also it was the new unique effect of nuclear weapons. It's not just blast. You know, that, and flash that kills you - it's radiation goes on killing, and affects the unborn and the youngest, the worst.

Yes, yes.

And hence, their mothers.

So you're all ready to gather in Cardiff. You set out from - was it outside City Hall that you set off from?

We met, we got, we had response from about 40 odd, didn't we?

Yes. About 40.

About 40. But, you know, again, it's that uncertainty.

None of whom we knew.

No, I knew I knew we knew - we knew, I knew Eunice, and I knew Sibs from the valleys.

And Lynee.

And Lynee. Um, but we thought there's maybe just going to be about a dozen people will turn up - we didn't know, we were on the train and it was like you said 'What if nobody turns up?' I said 'We're just going have to do it!'

On your todd!

Do it on our own, see who we can pick up. And so it was - Cardiff CND had been very good at putting together a sort of support group, hadn't they?

Yes.

But we met the night before, didn't we?

In Friends' Meeting House.

In the Friend's Meeting House, and suddenly women were turning up with, you know, a backpack and stuff and we thought, oh, my God - and then I actually got quite scared, in the sense of, we've asked all these women to come along, and how here they are, they're coming along - like oh my god, we're responsible. We suddenly realised, I realised it, and I think Ann as well, we sort of looked at each other like, we are now responsible in one sense for the welfare and everything. What if we get to places and there's nobody there? And the food's not done?

I was in a cold sweat.

How had you organised that previously?

Through letters and stuff, phone calls, and...

And contacts, you know.

And a lot of those were like Christian groups - we weren't. Labour Party, CND, Quakers.

And they'd say, we couldn't - maybe the Labour group would say 'Oh well, we aren't big enough, or we can't sort of organise that. But the

local vicar from so and so, they're very supportive and they've got a hall, and we'll sort it all out. Don't worry.' So there was...

There was Mr. Who Are You Really?

Yes! (Laughs). Oh, that's when we come up with the name wasn't it? Who are you? I got fed up me, and you did as well of you'd ring somebody up and they'd say 'So who do you represent?' and we went, well, who do we represent? Well, me, and Ann, and you know, all this sort of stuff. And then we decided we'd have to have, we didn't want to be an organisation as such. We wanted to just, you know, be a description. (Laughs).

Is that when we called ourselves 'Women for Life on Earth'. Nothing if not ambitious! (Laughs).

You know what I mean, talk about like arrogance. Well, there we are then, love it. But it wasn't an organisation, we were just Women for Life on Earth. Simple. And that could be 1 or 5000. It could be just 2 - didn't matter.

What sort of women - I mean, it's probably impossible to sort of typecast...

It was.

Yeah. Very varied?

We couldn't have had a more varied - in a group of women in their ages, their professions, where they came from. If we'd have hand picked them all. It was just so brilliant.

Politics?

Yeah.

Well, we didn't really discuss...

What was her name - the woman who was very grumpy, and just sort of walked on the outside trying to sell the Morning Star every day?

Oh, yes! (Laughs). Yes, can't remember.

So she represents the sort of far left, you know, um, contingent.

Eunice?

Eunice, yes.

Far left of the Labour Party through and through. There was people with...

Helen John was completely new to politics.

Yes, at the time. Yeah. There was people who just maybe hadn't thought much about it. But were, you know, they just had their kids and felt they just to do this. Some of them brought their children. Some of them didn't.

There was a lot - I remember there was quite a lot who'd never done anything like that before.

We had some wonderful characters as well - Effie, Effie, who was, was she our oldest?

Maybe, yes. She was 68.

Yes.

And Marjorie was 65. And Barbara Doris who - Barbara Doris had a, who was from the Wirral. So she had a marvellous kind of Scouse accent, and she had a great history because she had taken part in the

mass trespass that opened up the Pennine Way. So she, she had clouds of glory really. She was great. Wasn't she.

Different sorts?

Complete different um, sort of personalities, you know, because you'd have somebody like a walker in that sense like Barbara and then you have glamorous Liz.

Yes.

The teacher.

Yes, very glamorous, glamorous Liz.

Yes. You know.

Margaret, who was also very glamorous.

Yes.

Were they still glamorous by the time they got there?

Oh, yes, wonderfully glamorous. And that, Ann organised having a scarf made, so we all identified with something.

I didn't.

Was it you?

No.

Who did the scarf?

One of the ones that -there was a couple from, mother daughter was it from the West Midlands.

Oh, I know. And they did a scarf, didn't they?

Yes. And they offered to do a scarf in Suffragette colours, and one woman drew herself naked, shaking her fist in the air on the scarf. It was absolutely beautiful. We had 100 made.

And so women...

Have you got yours?

Mine's in the archives in Richard Burton archives at the university, because it was just yellowing. So it's gone.

Yeah, needs to be...

It's kept as a...

I've still got mine in a draw.

Comes out when people do research - I love the fact it's being researched. But the way people wore their scarf, you know, like it would be the practical ones would have it around their neck or whatever. And then they'd be the glamorous ones would have it...

As a mini skirt! (Laughs).

As a mini skirt or things.

It was hot weather at the time, wasn't it?

We had one of the hottest summers.

It worked as a mini skirt, you know, or or as a little sort of thing. Boob tube.

Yeah. It was brilliant. The way people just used their...

So the end of the first day, when you went to bed that night, did you think yes, we're going to make it all the way to Greenham?

Yes, yes, but just fear, a bit of fear about we are responsible. I just felt really responsible, and hoped that wherever we went - and I think I can't say, I enjoyed, I enjoyed little moments of the, of the of the walk. I enjoyed little moments. But I think there was this overwhelming thing for both of us at the end of each day, as we were approaching our destination, that it - the arrangements were happening.

Everybody had to be fed and slept somewhere.

I mean, today, you'd have your credit card, and if you were really desperate, you could just go and stick it on on a credit card or whatever. There'd be that at the back of your head, but we didn't have any money (laughs). You know, and we had a few - most of it worked well, didn't it? Bristol was a disappointment.

Did you stay at Bristol?

Yes. Yes.

For the night, and did...

Church hall.

...EP Thompson's wife...

Yes. Dorothy Thompson.

What did she talk about?

God, I can't remember.

Can't remember.

Remember, we were busy trying, because also people have things like there was one lady was a diabetic. She left her diabetic stuff at one of these spots, because we had little spots on the way where we'd stop, you know, little stops for um....

Oh, and Silver drove a van.

Yes, with all our stuff. But we was like having to go back, find this, hope it was there - there were sort of like mini emergencies along the way which we had to do deal with.

Yes, it's a lot of logistics to sort out.

Helen Johns was with you, wasn't she?

Yes.

She was, had been a nurse, I think, hadn't she?

Yes, yes.

Yes.

She must have been useful?

She was, yes. We had to submit to foot inspection every day.

Some people had really bad problems with their feet because of the heat. You know...

Yes, I was trying to think back and remembering the summer of '85...

Very, very hot.

Very hot, lovely.

August.

So what sort of reception did you get as you moved through small towns?

Bewilderment, mild curiosity.

Support?

Not that much, no I don't think so.

People took, we had this discussions - in the evening we would meet together. Oh, can I just bring in about the lads?

Umm.

That when we left Cardiff - the lads - when we left Cardiff, and the first day we went to Newport, there was a lot of people who walked on that first day with us to Newport. And there were three young students who wanted to continue and they came and asked didn't they?

Two of them were bathroom fitters.

Yes. Were they? I thought one was a student?

No. Steve, and whatever the other one was called. Um, they were bathroom fitters, posh bathrooms.

One of them was doing - one of them was a student.

I think there were four of them, actually, four lads.

But they ended up with three, and they asked if they could come along with us, and we'd have to have this discussion and think, well, why not?

And they turned out to be very useful, because in the evenings, we'd have these, like a discussion about anything that had happened during the day, how we felt, any situation that had occurred, and they either looked after the children, or sort out, they'd sort things out. They used to do stuff.

Yeah they were very good.

The practical stuff?

Which was normally associated that women do in, in, in situations.

But the bathroom fitters, the two, the two who worked in this posh bathroom place, they just give up their jobs after the first day, they said, they said 'We want to leave our jobs and come, and come with this.' So we thought oh.

And if it hadn't been for one of them, we wouldn't have had a record of it, a photographic record, visual record, because none of us - we hadn't thought about taking cameras, there was all the other stuff going on. Not one out of the four of us had thought about taking a camera and taking a record of this. Because it wasn't sort of an event, if you see what I mean in that sense - where you do an event a day, and you sort out the um, the media and all that sort of thing. So if it hadn't been him, we wouldn't have had that lovely set of photographs, which some of us sort of have bits made.

Did the other women find it easy to be part of the decisions and group discussions and things, because...

Once we started on the walk, we didn't make decisions as such. It was made by the group.

And did they find it easy to participate?

Yes.

I think so. I think we were a very tolerant group of each other, and everybody had, um, without it being stated right, without being asked, everybody listened to everybody, and didn't talk over anybody. So there was this quietness while it went round. And everybody said their piece.

That was particularly so when we were discussing um, Lynee and Lyn's proposal to chain ourselves at the gates when we got there. Because the feeling was that we were not really achieving the kind of impact that we'd expected, that we'd wanted. So they said 'Let's', they said 'Well, the Suffragettes had to', they said 'We need to up the ante, the Suffragettes had to do more and more kind of striking, daring things. So let's do what they did and chain ourselves when we get there.'

So where did you buy the chains?

Marlborough! (Laughs). But that discussion was crucial, because we felt that whatever we did, we didn't want a small group to do it and then the rest of us feeling nervous or unhappy with this, you know, I, I very much felt we all had...

...to say what we felt.

And be part of this. Some were opposed. Do remember that meeting?

Yes.

Some were opposed. And the majority, in fact, sort of said 'Well, this', they were saying things like 'This, this wasn't what I came for.'

Eunice, Eunice sorted it out.

It was Eunice who was right halfway through and there was sort of like feelings of misgiving seemed stronger than the feelings of support for this idea, and Eunice just...

In her strident Welsh...

Yes, she said 'What are we all, what are we all...'. Somebody had said 'Oh, it'll turn violent,' that was Talia.

Yeah.

Talia had said 'Oh make no bones, make no mistake this will turn violent. Policeman's heads, policeman's helmets - not heads, policeman's helmets will roll, they will react with violence,' and she was not saying this as a reason for not doing it. She was saying it as a kind of...

Warning, really.

Warning. 'I'm an activist I know about these things. This is what will happen.' And so when it got to Eunice - so Talia had spoken, and that made people, the women who were nervous, even more nervous, and then I was sort of, (laughs), I was wanting to kind of shut Talia up, really, because I wanted there to be unanimity.

Because we had just sorted this out between us. We thought this is what we have, we have to do a stunt.

We have to do something.

We have to do something.

But we all have to be behind it. It can't divide us.

Yeah, we decided on that.

It can't divide us. So somehow we have to get all on board with this. And then Eunice said, do you remember, she said, she said (adopts Welsh accent) 'What are we all so afraid off? So what if a few helmets roll - what's worse than a nuclear war? I'll do it.'

Was that it, then?

Yeah.

It was so strong that was so decisive.

And coming from an older woman - coming from, in a sense she was 65, but 65 back in the early '70s was quite a lot.

She was glamorous. She had white hair.

Yes. But she was like, you know, she wasn't a young, a young activist saying this, this is one of our older members. Our older sort of group saying this, um, and that people thought that we are then.

Every person who spoke after that just said...

Fine.

Fine, I agree with you. There was just two animal rights activists who said 'We can't be part of this because of our animal rights stuff. It would um, we don't want to - we might get arrested, and we can't risk that because of our animal rights.'

Well, because they'd be recognised and whatever else, which is fair enough.

Yeah.

And um, how, you have a police escort most of - all of the way?

Yes.

How did you get on...

Oh they were bonkers, half of them.

Presumably it changed from county to county?

Yes, we have the county border. And we'd have like the border sort of meeting, and quite often it'd be like, well, we were really bolshy, I think.

You were.

No, I just think, you were as well.

No, you were.

It was like, we're going - 'We went, you know, we're concerned for you ladies. And you know, for the road situation. This is a busy road, and we're concerned for you ladies. So we'd like you to walk down this bit.' And we'd go 'Sorry, mate. We're walking down this bit.' And we just walked down where we wanted. We didn't listen, did we? We just walked where we wanted. The way we said.

Yes we did, we did.

Did they receive that with good nature?

Well, I think today, they, the fact that you're a female have would have nothing to do with moving your way. I think there was still this almost wariness maybe of these women with pushchairs. Are we going to have a confrontation here? And what's that going to look like? Well today public image is irrelevant. So you know, they, that was part of it. So we got where we wanted. We had one strange, well, he was quite funny really, police bike rider whose backpack was full of - he signed our petition thing, because we had a petition thing going as well. And we signed his, and he had a whole load of them about everything to do with North Devon, you know, from roads being...

Was it?

Yeah, he had a whole load of in his backpack, and he had all these serious ones, it was 'Oh yeah, that's an interesting position, I'll sign that.' Odd. But there we are. He obviously drove around his patch getting petitions about a trunk road or something. But anyway, um.

So it took how long? 9 days or 10 days?

10 days. And then the night before we were due to go there, a few of us went up in the van to Fleet Street, as it was then, that's where all the papers were. Um, to try and get some sort of 'Look this this stunt, this action's going on at Greenham common', and nobody wanted to know.

I'd been ringing them up - I was spending - the march would leave, and I was spending the whole morning feeding coins into - because pre mobile phone - feeding coins into call boxes, or on some kind supporter's phone in their house, phoning newspapers and TVs, you know and BBC and ITV and stuff, um trying to get them to give us some coverage, and they just didn't want to know. I remember someone...

Why do you think that was?

Oh, peace. Boring. We did that last year.

We had good coverage in Wales, because - I'll show you afterwards - because we had some good coverage in Wales from the Western Mail, and anything going on in Wales, Welsh newspapers give them coverage, which - I'm not undermining, but they do you know. But once we crossed over into anything, there was nothing. We had an East German, they turned up. These Germans filmed it.

So how did they know?

I don't know. You tell me! (Laughs).

Don't know. They - ah, I'll tell you how they knew about it. Exactly. Because we did have excellent coverage in the Morning Star.

Oh, yes. We had - yes. Yes, that's right.

Because it was against American cruise missiles.

Yeah.

So good coverage in Morning Star. So that fed through into USSR, which fed down into East Germany. Yeah.

So we sat in the back of the car, wasn't it? The back of these...

So did you arrive in the morning or?

Well we arrived, what we did - the following day a group of us, who was it? Me...

It was you, Helen.

Lynne and Lynn.

Yes.

And we turned up. They went and - it was quite early, wasn't it?

Very early, 7 o'clock.

Yeah. And they went and chained themselves up by the front gate. And I read, we wrote between us all, we wrote the...

I wrote, I wrote that at the pub, the night before.

Oh that's right. But it was agreed by everybody. There was a few things changed.

Our declaration.

We had a declaration of what we're doing, why we're doing it, and it was changed a little bit. I know, because we have these bit discussions. In the end...

It was quite good.

I thought it was excellent. And um, we, I went up to the policeman at the gate to, to read this (laughs), and he thought, at the same time...

He said 'You're early'.

He said 'You're early', and I thought, and paranoia, I thought Jesus, they knew we were coming!

Because of Talia again...

Because of Talia...

Had suggested, she said 'Oh, there'll be around the corner.'

Because it's a military base.

'There'll be buses full of riot police waiting around the corner. They're bound to know what we're up to. This is the state we're dealing with here. They're bound to know what we're up to. They'll be - they'll be ready for us.'

So when he said 'You're early', he took me totally aback and I thought, oh my god, they did know we were coming. And then he starts talking about and I said 'What?' 'Well, you're not normally here at this time.' 'I've never been here before'. So we had this ridiculous conversation right, about - 'Well, what you're talking about we have cleaners.' I said 'I'm not a bloody cleaner!' You know, sort of, look at these women, they're chaining themselves to the railings, and he had a real sort of Berkshire slow, accent, and he said (adopts accent) 'Oh, that's interesting.' And then at the same time as this is happening, behind me

a car screeches to a halt, behind me on the main road, and these women get out and start making the most god awful noise. And they were a bunch of cleaners.

Yes. Keeners, not cleaners.

Keeners. Yes, and it was like...

They were meant to be supportive.

Supportive, but it was like were keening at highest, and I turned around and said...

They were mourning, it was a mourning cry for...

Yeah. So I turned and said 'will you bloody shut up, will you, I'm trying to read this!'. Very peaceful.

Wonderful farcical thing.

Farcical thing, you know.

The one policeman - the women chained up looking on, the keeners, and I'm saying 'Shut up, I'm trying to read this.'

So what happened next, you read your declarations?

Well then...

PC Plod is stood there, you're chained up.

Well then he says 'I'll let you - I'll let the American authorities know.' 'Yeah okay', well they're not doing, but I said 'Well you know, you won't be able to get them off because they're chained to the railing.' He seemed to find this as like, well normal. Maybe he'd read up on the Suffragettes and thought this is what women do?

This was his moment?

This was his moment!

The rest of the march...

Then turned up.

...which I was with, um, you know turned out later. And one of the police escorting us came up to me and he said 'Just to warn you that I think there's a group of people trying to supplant what you want to do. And there's some women there have chained themselves up, I just want to warn you that this has happened, you know.' He was entirely supportive of what we were doing. And I said 'Oh. Okay. Good!'

Did anyone come out to the base to talk to you?

Well, later on these soldiers, later on they sent a car down and got in. They sent a car down from the commander, so I went in.

Was he British?

No, American.

He was American?

Yeah. And I went in thinking oh, my god, you know, and, and he was very like, um, you know, very courteous as Americans in these situations can be you know 'Can you sit down, madam' and so 'What's you know, what are you and your friends doing?' So I sort of explained this. Then he says 'So what would you like? What? What sort of...' What did he you say? 'The domestic arrangements? What domestic arrangements do you need?' And I thought what on earth is this man talking about? And he said 'Well, you know, you've got lots of people there.'

Got children.

'You've got children.' I said 'Oh, well, we could do with a standpipe for water.'

But we didn't know at that point that we were going to be staying longer than a night.

So did you have tents with you? Or were you just going to sleep...

No, we slept open.

We slept out in the open. We had sleeping bags.

Because I remember waking up next to - what's her name, with a little baby, the little baby woke me up, came crawling over and poked me in the nose.

Jan Tills?

Jan Till's little one. Yes, we slept out in the open. But he did put the standpipe up for us to have water, because we were staying overnight and things. You know.

Yeah.

So how long did each of you stay that time?

Well, the thing is a lot of the people on the march, what they had, some of them were working - in fact most of them were working.

They had jobs.

And they'd taken their holidays to do this. So they had to get back for jobs, they had to get back, you know, we had left our children, and we had to go back home and sort things out. And there was all this sort of...

So how long did we stay? I think I stayed on for about a week to see what, just because the situation seemed so unresolved.

Must have been pretty fluid?

Yes, it was. And it was very uncertain. We didn't know what was going to happen.

Because what we wanted a debate. That's all we asked for was a debate. Yeah, sort of four way or two way, can't remember, a debate between us the, you know...

Civil defence?

Yes, sort of people who are responsible, you know, in a media situation. So it's, you know, like you'd have today, you know.

A public debate on the media, yes.

And if they'd have just given us that, we'd have gone home being quite happy, I think and then just gone home.

Did they respond at all?

No, no.

Not even a no? Just didn't respond?

No, no, ignored it.

I think a reporter did contact the Ministry of Defense, and they said 'Oh well, they can stay there as long as they like.'

Weren't interested.

Famous last words!

Exactly!

Considering how much it cost them to police the place at one point.
Yes.

I remember - was it after a week, and we had very little interest from the press, from the media. And I remember after a week we went, and we'd been taking turns to be chained up all this time.

Oh, that's right. Yes.

And I went, there was a jumble sale in Newbury, organised by Newbury, CND, and we went to it and we got a whole load of clothes, and stockings, and tights and things, and dressed up, because I was getting fed up with this business of people being, women taking turns I thought, well, there's no point there's no...

Oh that's right, yeah.

We dressed up four dummies. We made four you know, life sized, drawing up, stuffed, you know stuffing, tights and clothes, you know, we made four kind of Greenham women dummies, and chained them up to the railings, and the next um, because what we couldn't get was any - the few um, reporters who turned up just wanted pictures of women in chains. As was silly. They just wanted a picture of a woman in chains. And it didn't you know, that wasn't really the point. So the next one, this was a lovely actually - the next one he wandered up and he said, I forget which paper he was from, I don't know. He said, he said 'Okay, where are the, where are the chained women then?' and I just pointed to the fence and I said 'Oh they're over there.' So he came back and he said 'Okay, very funny'. And I said, I said 'Well, you want dummies in chains? So there you are.' And he said 'Fair enough. So, why are you here?' 'Well, thank you for asking. You're the first one who's asked.'

That's right.

Incredible.

They just wanted that little image and then a little bit 'Women, peace women protest' - not the actual discussion about...

Why are you here? Just let's have an image, you know, yeah.

Out of the group of women who did the walk to Greenham - I mean so much has been written about Greenham and feminism, were, did you think of yourself as a feminist at the time, when you were all, or at all?

There were two women who were, who belonged, who were self identified as feminists, who belonged in a feminist um, group. Um, and they were the two who suggested that format of just when we were sitting around in circles, and the proposal to chain had come, and everybody was arguing about it, and talking in fact over each other, and not listening - and they said 'This is what we do in our group when there's dissent, everybody just goes around and you, one after the other you say briefly what's in your mind, but you don't comment. Nobody responds, you just say what you're thinking. And there's no argy-bargy or come back. Just one after the other.' That was how we got that, and they gave us that really valuable...

But it had worked, it had worked earlier on, I think it had worked earlier on.

But they introduced it earlier maybe, yes.

But they did suggest that,

And it was absolutely invaluable.

Yes.

Did you think of yourself as a feminist?

I did not consciously think of myself as 'I am a feminist'. But my, the way I behaved in my general life, or what I thought I wasn't - not untitled to, and what I thought, I didn't see any difference between me and guys. You know, what was between my legs was irrelevant, as far as I'm concerned. So therefore, I'd worked in a workshop where I was the only woman, but I was treated as one of the boys, as one of the lads. So not the lads, I was treated as one as the group within - in the college. We all went, had a drink together, we all were very supportive of each other. And I, and then I think, I think because of that, and yeah I was still very young as well. Because of that, I think I just felt myself as if I want to do something just because I'm a woman doesn't mean to say that should be a barrier. Didn't want any special attention. But I had the right to go for that job. I had the right to do this or I had the right to do, and later on, when I'd worked within the union set up in Ammanford as the trade council secretary, I spent an awful lot of my time in the company of guys at trade union conference in Wales, and meetings where you just have one or two women. And so you get - I didn't have, I never used to stand there say I am a feminist. It was just like, I'm entitled to speak so listen to me just like we just listened to him.

Just got on with it?

That's how I sort of operated you know.

What about you, Ann?

I had belonged in um, in women's groups in London. Yes. A women's group. Yes, it was a group run by Sheila Rowbotham, I say run by - started by, really. Um, but then I became quite put off the direction that feminism took when it became very kind of militantly separatist.

I was thinking about the decision to make it an all women, um...

Yes. Well, it wasn't an all women...

Oh, the decision later?

Yes. I mean, we decided to make it a women led thing, rather than um, a kind of women only thing, because we wanted support from women and men along the way. We just didn't want their voices to be, to drown out, we wanted it to promote women's voices, and women's point of view on this, on this topic, topic, topic sounds the wrong word.

Issue.

Issues. Yes.

So later on when they made that decision, were you at Greenham?

No.

Well we were going back and forth.

We were going back and forth.

And I was into I was still in charge of the money.

Oh were you?

I was still in charge of the money until we had that explosive meeting at the Charter House, the Quaker House. Where I said basically I just don't want to get, I just don't want to be involved with the money. And I disagree with what you're doing - is because I just, I've taken with me about £200, I think it was about £230, which back then was a lot of money. And I'd got that from going to the mine in, in Ammanford at dinnertime, all the miners are there and they're all reading The Sun and whatever else and things and like 'Right I'm going down to Greenham. Would anybody like to donate anything because we need this that and the other.'

Is this when you're going to do the walk or...

Afterwards, afterwards when there was the camp set up.

So still 1981?

This is, this is like...

Maybe 1982.

Coming to Christmas time. Um, when, oh hang on a minute, yes, it was about Christmas time because it was cold, and they needed money and everything else.

Was it after Embrace the Base or before?

Before.

Right.

And um, I managed to raise about £230 from these guys, took it down and then they start talking about, I think it was about making arrangements for Embrace the Base and things like that. I can't remember exactly. But it was about are we going to allow men here? and I said 'I don't know how you can say that', a) because you can't tell people where they can and cannot demonstrate. You can't do that. That's just like the government coming along and saying you can and cannot demonstrate, and b) 'I've just got this money', so I put the money down. I said 'It comes from a load of beer swilling, probably misogynists or whatever'

Sun reading.

'Sun reading miners, but they support you, and you're going to say to me - shall I take it home and say your money is not wanted? Or are you going to take the money, but you can't come and demonstrate?' And

for me, fundamentally, this was a this was an issue of you can't make that decision. You know, because it's up to people to come down and demonstrate if they feel like it, and if somebody told me you can't demonstrate there, that made me want to demonstrate there.

That's 'cause you're ornery.

Eh?

That's because you're contrary, you know.

Well, maybe, but it's like...

You see, I agree with you about, I agree with you about very much about that when we're talking about when CND wanted to hold the demonstration instead of in London, they wanted to hold it between Greenham and Aldermaston. And the Greenham women said 'No, because there's going to be men there'. But I actually think that making Embrace the Base a demonstration by women was the right decision.

But at that time, they were talking about splitting up...

And it was powerful for that reason.

But it was about picking. Yes, I agree on that. I agree on that. And men were very respectful, our supporters were very respectful. But I think when it comes to like, you start owning the area, and like this, this gate is not, you're not welcome because you're a guy.

You've got a demonstration rights over this particular bit of British public road?

And stuff, yes. It's just like outrageous, really, because people didn't - most of the people when we took coaches down from Wales, most of the people from Wales were very supportive, you know, and you take people, and there was a real cross section of the community too, who

were very involved. And yet, when they got down to places, down to Greenham, quite often they'd turn up at the wrong flipping gate. And then they'd have all this abuse from young separatists feminists.

We got shouted at, you know.

What, what year was this going on? Sort of Embrace the Base - first one?

This is after, this is later - about 1982, 1983.

Yeah, but there was that thing, it was starting really early on that sort of change to...

What do you think instigated that change?

I think it became - because also at the end of the day, this was a human problem. Nuclear War is a human problem. And I think that got taken out - I think the whole nuclear issue for some women, some, was it wasn't about that anymore. It was about a safe woman space in what they saw was an increasingly - maybe aggressive male world. So it was all like men's fault. And I was always uncomfortable with songs like take the Toys from the Boys, because it's like, how patronising is that in many ways? And it's wrong. There's lots of women who want to join the military. There's lots of women who want to go out there and fight and stuff.

Mrs Thatcher for a start.

Exactly. And yet, all these guys are really aggressive? I mean, I lived with, my husband was a very passive individual, very quiet. Barry was very peaceful. We knew lots of peaceful guys who didn't want to go in the military, we had sons. So that, that, songs was like to me - I had no time for them. So I was becoming increasingly distant from why it was going down there. You know, like, and you can't, you know, all men are potential rapists. Okay, right. You know, I can't deal with it. I can't, I

can't deal with that. I just think it's a, this is a human problem. And it's, women have regularly supported wars, the white feather during the First World War, try going back to your village and say 'Actually, I don't want to fight.' Who were the first sometimes to have a go? So the thing is men are evil, women saintly and wonderful and we'd make a better world. No we wouldn't make a better world. We'd make a shittier world in some, to some extent, and I feel, I feel that we've been proved - lots of women in politics now. Are they making great decisions that affect us for the good.

I think it's many who left the Tory party made the right decision!

(Laughs). But for us, but she voted...Oh, that's another story. But, but for us the issue of Greenham was the issue of a nuclear war.

Yes.

The issue changed, didn't it? As you said for lots of women.

For lots of women, there were issues, yes.

I remember Fran De'Ath went down there for a meeting and was told 'It's not about nuclear weapons anymore. It's not about nuclear weapons we moved on. It's about, it's about women's space.'

Going back to Embrace the Base, did you leave anything on the fence?

I think I did, actually, but I can't remember what it was. I know I did.

I took a sack of daffodils from Pembrokeshire and planted them around the fence.

I know I put something. I can't remember what.

Spare Rib was a bit sniffy?

They were.

I read the coverage of Embrace the Base.

Very, sniffy.

Yes. It was sort of too much emphasis on the maternal.

That was not, not, not right on at all.

At that time. Feminists at that time.

On the other hand, one of the women who ran Spare Rib, I remember seeing her at Embrace the Base, walking around organising things with a walkie talkie. They weren't all sniffy, some of them were there! (Laughs). Yes, I thought well this is, I thought one of the good things about this is it's actually driven the bus through their kind of introspective sort of feminism, really. Because all these women, all these women from all walks of life, and don't think of themselves as feminists with a capital F are getting involved, and making a statement here, and experiencing incredible kind of uniquely female solidarity here - demonstration unlike any other that there ever has been or ever will be. Are you, are, you know, really uniquely powerful, I thought and it's...

And it obviously sparked something in people because so many turned up.

Yes. Yeah.

From everywhere. I mean, they came down from Scotland and things I mean, you know.

And getting, and having, I suppose a lot of women who went to the peace camp after that, and having the opportunity to do something new and individual, and something for themselves. I'm trying to avoid cliché words like empowerment, but that's what I'm talking about.

The confidence?

Yes. Yes. Gaining hugely in confidence. Yeah.

And going around and seeing what people have put on there - very personal stuff as well. You know, like, wedding dresses. Maybe you kept for years.

I mean, oh, dear me how, how, how politically incorrect that they actually got married in a wedding dress. You know.

In white!

But actually think about that the statement of actually putting up your wedding dress and leaving it?

Yeah.

Walking away and leaving it, you know.

There was some very personal stuff up there.

Yeah. Whole sets of beautiful best china just pinned to the fence and left.

Yeah.

I'm keeping an eye on the time because you have to leave at 4.30. Is that right?

Yeah.

Could we talk about Russia?

Okay.

Yeah, that's fine.

And your trip there.

Okay. Quick segue.

So idea comes about between the two of you?

We sort of got the idea individually, and then...

We do that.

Yes.

And then we both said it at the same time to each other.

Yes.

Yes, yes. Right.

I want to talk to you - that was on the second - that was on the march the following year. We did a march from time Cardiff to Braudy, which is, and people were saying 'Oh, tell it to the Russians. And you know, we're all right. But we should tell the Russians are the aggressors and stuff', and then Ann thought about it, I thought about it. We said 'I need to talk to you later, okay I need to talk to you.' And then we both went, 'We need to go....

...to Russia!' (Laughs).

That's how we did it.

And your prime purpose was?

To, to sort of engage, to engage with people, to engage with women really, wasn't it, to engage with women, to find that maybe these people aren't the enemy - they have the same views. I mean, we sort of knew that anyway. But to go and sort of in a sense say we'd done it, really.

Also, we wanted to see if there were people like us concerned about the nuclear threat...

In Russia,

...in Russia, independent to the state.

And we wanted to arrange - the idea was to go and arrange different groups, little groups of women...

Arrange a bigger visit...

... different parts of the Soviet Union to have discussion.

Have a dialogue.

Yeah. Have a dialogue.

So grassroots?

Yes.

Which we hoped would be filmed by something like then World in Action, or something like that.

Yes. Because there was a lot of 'Oh, it's the Russians, the Russians' - it was like demonising. It's like, I suppose going to Afghanistan today to find out how nice Afghans are, you know. Russians were demonised, you know, very much. Well, I suppose they're starting to be now again, but we wanted to sort of break into that.

So did you have to go to London to get your visas and things like that? Or did you have, how did you, the practicalities of entering the Soviet Union.

We were pretty - we do, we do, actually, when I look back, I'm quite amazed at how we used to do our research. Because when we went before we did the Greenham march we really read up. I mean I went to talks by a physicist, and stuff about radiation. So we sort of knew our stuff. With Russia we went to we came to Swansea to see a Russia-file didn't we, and discussed with him about what you might expect.

We talked about Gilbert.

And we even went and did Russian classes in the Aberfan comp, which you were great at, and I was rubbish at.

We talked to um, we talked to the Russian correspondent of The Guardian, we talked to Jill Tweedy's daughter, we talked to a lot of people, and we found Jean McConister, didn't we?

Yes, you found her.

Yes, because we'd heard, we heard about the trust group. We'd just heard little whispers about the trust group. Moscow Trust group, independent peace group started. Um, produced a proposal for dialogue, sounded very sensible. But people were being blocked by the KGB from seeing them. And, and I remember the Guardian correspondent, I remember her saying 'Look the likelihood of these people being genuine is remote. They're either a CIA front, or they're a KGB front, but they're very unlikely to be just genuine ordinary people. Genuine people, you know'.

But we, we...

But then Jean McConister...

Had met them.

Had met them through her friend Kathy Fitzpatrick, who worked for Helsinki Watch which is a human rights organisation based in America. And so, and, and, also the Scandinavian women who organised the march from Copenhagen House, they'd had another march, so they'd been in Moscow or something...

And they've met them.

And they'd - well they hadn't actually met them.

I thought they had?

No, the KGB were at the door barring them and they talked over the heads of these guys.

Well alright then, they'd spoke to them.

They'd spoken to them. The Mevekovs (spelt phonetically) had spoken to, through a sort of barrier, a physical barrier of beefy men. And so there was, there was you know those two, there were four people in the west who had met these people - Jean Kathy, and the Scandinavian women.

About paying for the trip and funding. Did you - did Greenham?

Well...

Yes.

The first one...

Greenham did.

Our trip - me, you and Jean.

Yes, but we had to have, a we had a big tussle.

We had a big tussle with Helen.

With Helen about getting that. But we - they funded that and we got our visas. Funnily enough, we got on intourists.

I was going to ask that - blast from the past.

We were on intourists, which was really peculiar, because this intourist woman used to turn up at places, didn't she? Remember at the train station said 'You're without', yes, there was a woman had to trace the intourists. And we said, because we'd booked the train to go to Leningrad and we said 'Oh no, we're on our own.' And just got on the train.

And no one stopped you?

No, no, no. And we had meetings, and different, with different groups, women's group,

Our actual trip - your's, mine and Jean's. That trip was organised by a little tiny outfit called Progress Tours. And because people normally stay in the intourist hotels.

That's right, we ended up staying in the Metropole.

We ended up staying in the Metropole

Yes.

So you were out of sight a little bit?

Only for the first couple of days.

Then we were very much in sight.

Yes.

So you met the Soviet peace woman committee?

Yeah.

Yes.

What was that like?

Okay. It was very, they have this - the thing is that these committees, like the peace committee, and the women's committee, you know, the people who are at the top of these, the chairperson or whatever, they're normally given, they're given these positions as a sort of an honorarium in a way.

A sweetie.

Really, for their services, and whatever. So they're quite, these people are very...

They're rewards allocated by the state.

Yes. So it's like, in a way, going to see somebody in the Lords.

Yes. Because you get perks, you get perks and perks being mostly the chance of some foreign travel, and going shopping.

So they're quite, you know, they're quite formal meetings, and they were very polite, weren't they? They were very polite, the women's committee - but we met the women's committee after we met the peace committee, and all the fuss with the peace committee.

But the point about the peace committee meeting - we took, because we had met people in them.

And they tried to they try to use us as well.

And we took Olga McVicker with us.

KGB internal?

They asked us, the people in the trust group, organised a peace picnic...

In the park.

In Gorky Park, and...

Which - you could see KGB, because they were following them, and we had this thing and it was decided that we, they asked us if we'd take one of them in and we said, well, we're Greenham women, so it's gonna have to be a woman, and one of them just had a baby. So it was Olga, said she'd come in with us.

Yes, Olga said she would come in with us.

But that meeting was sort of a setup for, for like Greenham heroines who are being welcomed by the Soviet state, because we are these heroines against the American oppressors. So they had this, they had the camera crew in the corner and stuff, who were busy filming away the polite shake of hands, and then it got...

And it all got very tense didn't it, because they said 'We were expecting three', and we said...

You know, we grow quickly.

'Now. You are four.' We grow every day.

This is our Russia latest thing, so and then she was taking notes.

At which point the cameras were shooed away.

Yes, no. They were shooed away when she started speaking in Russian. And they - and he stopped, and the cameras went out. And everybody went very quiet on the opposite - there was a long, long table opposite, and they just all went very quiet, looked down.

They were terrified.

I was terrified.

You were terrified. I was terrified, we were all terrified.

And then he just freaked at the end.

The interpreter sitting next to me, I remember this so clearly, he had a big, thick pad. And when Olga started speak, we all introduced ourselves and said something, and then Olga started speaking. And when she started speaking, um, he, he stopped taking notes, and I was sitting next to him. And I said (whispers) 'I want you to write this down, write down what she's saying'. And he was shaking, and his hand was scoring like this. With his pencil . It was pen, whatever it was, it was scoring through several thicknesses of paper. (Makes sharp sound). Bloody hell, because...

But then he shut her up didn't he, the guy...

Shut her up, whatever she has to say will not...

And then he proceeded to freak out completely, didn't he about...

'You have received our hospitality, this is how you treat us.'

'Is this how you behave in your own country?' And we went 'Well yes, otherwise you wouldn't have had Greenham common, you know, Greenham women, this is how we behave,' and various other things were stated. You said a bit. I said a bit in...

As for hospitality, if it hadn't been for these people, we would have starved.

Yeah, we had to bribe, we had to bribe the Metropole.

Yes. Which was a terrible thing to say, do you remember the two at the end of the table from the US Canada Institute, who along for sort of another boring run of the mill meeting between British peace activists - the Quakers were always sending delegations over, and then the peace committee. Oh, god heard it all before. And they - I remember when I said that about 'If it hadn't of been for these people we would have starved in your country.' Because actually getting food, we had to bribe the waiters just to serve us food in the hotel.

So you insulted him on hospitality.

When I said that I remember, they just sort of went (gasps), and put their heads down like this on the table, and then you can see their shoulders shaking. They had this uncontrollable fit of the giggles.

Fear mixed with...

They were just moving up and down like mice!

And then I insulted him by, because he was saying about it - he said something about the great, you know, great - I can't remember he was saying something...

(Adopts accent) 'Peace movement in Soviet Union is 230 million strong'.

And I said 'Well you know, the way you're behaving.'...

Why do you occupy your time with these worthless, tiny group of marginal individuals. Yeah.

So I basically said 'Well, this is exactly that, you know, this is how - why people in the west, this is why they have attitudes to you like they do, because you're - this is what - you're playing into their hands by sort of opposing - if they're so worthless and useless and not worth thinking about, why you, why you're giving them all this grief? Why do that? Why are you - this is exactly the sort of sort of scenario that the West loves.

What was his response?

Well, they didn't really - they mumbled and that one, he just at some point, he said something and he went out, didn't he? And it all went quiet, and then we all started chatting to the people opposite.

They all relaxed, and they said it's okay 'We will speak English here.'

Yes.

And they just - we started talking.

And then we said 'Look, we hope we haven't...' and

Olga left because he left, and then um...

Because we wanted to arrange a trip.

He was very threatening, wasn't he?

Very.

This was 1982, wasn't it?

1983.

So Olga left at that point, because she knew that we had, we wanted to organise this bigger trip.

We'd made the point, she'd made the point. These are our counterparts and this is who you're dealing with, you know, and you may have manipulated us into being shown on newsreels all across the country as being pro, pro-USSR and anti-US but actually, we're not. We're not aligned.

Actually, with the Groofer Trust, thought we were so organised and stuff at, Greenham common protest was so organised, it had to be organised by the KGB. So they were very wary of us. And it took a lot of discussions, while they wouldn't actually talk to us, but they talked to Jean and stuff like that, while we...

They didn't think we were for real.

They thought we were like sort of stooges in a sense, and we said 'How could you operate - how could you organise this if you say you're just...', I mean, I was in my early 20s and looked about 15.

Yes.

Yeah, sort of. We were both very young. And I suppose to them, they thought how do you, how do you organise all this?

They said 'How did you tell people about this march then?' I said 'Well, we made a leaflet and we gave it.' 'Don't be stupid. You can't do that.'

Because from their perspective, of how you could do things here.

'And you didn't get arrested?'

We went 'No'. So a complete misunderstanding of how different countries worked.

Did you ever feel you were going to get arrested?

Yes, we did after the after the march.

Did we?

After the after that meeting, which was really fraught.

The peace committee?

The peace committee.

The peace committee meeting, yes.

And then when we came out, we'd met The Times correspondent Richard Owen, on the on the flight and he was like...

He arranged to meet us father the meeting.

And we went in...

Do you remember he said, he said, he was a very dapper guy, very cool. He said 'How'd it go? And I said 'We took Olga Medvecker with us.' He said 'You did what? What? Okay, we've got to go and talk about this.'

What happened to her after the...?

6 months later in November, my husband Barry went over, because there was no other way of contacting them, or finding out what had happened to any of them. And on the last day of his visit, she was arrested. And on a trumped up charge of assault on a policeman - she's tiny, and would never obviously, it was completely trumped up. And she

was put on trial for assault on a policemen and the trial - we created and other people built up, not just us, I mean, other people built up a lot of...

There was a lot in the press, like The Guardian and The Times.

There was a lot of support for her, a whole support group - UK Trust Builders built up.

Yes.

From all over the country. There was a lot of support and demonstrations at the Soviet Union Embassy, and so on. By this time some of the women at Greenham like Sarah Hippison were becoming very, very, very supportive and very, very militant. You know, in fact, Sarah conducted a silent vigil inside the Soviet Embassy. And um, so the trial as this reaction grew, kept getting postponed as they sort of obviously hesitated...

Well they were having all these letters turning up out the blue, you know.

As to what, what to do. You know, it was obviously becoming a bigger and bigger political embarrassment to them. It kept getting postponed and eventually they gave her, um, they sent her to prison camp and suspended the sentence.

Which is unheard of.

So basically, they let her off, but saved their face. And eventually, she she emigrated.

They all emigrated.

They all emigrated. Some went to Israel, because most of the people in the Trust were Jewish, or they went to America. And she went to America.

I wonder if any of them have gone back?

I very much, doubt it.

I very much doubt it they would be allowed back in. I think they went - it was like, go.

I don't think so.

But, um, but we managed to get the next - the whole idea of going, what we wanted was to have all these groups everywhere going. That happened. That happened, you know a bit of difficulty.

You went with that, they wouldn't give me a visa to go.

They cancelled all the visas to begin with right near the last minute, because we went to the embassy. We went to straight to, we went to the embassy, stayed overnight in Oxford, then went to the embassy and complained. And then the Quakers did a little bit of, um, you know, putting the ointment on. And um, they gave - we all had our visas but you. And I had a pretty rough time when I went there, so.

How long were you there?

I wasn't allowed - we went for 10 days, wasn't it? I couldn't go where I wanted to go, I had to stay in Moscow and Leningrad.

So they put restrictions on your...

On me, and just generally followed me around.

They were ready for you?

Yeah.

And when you say rough time, you should explain what you mean.

On the underground I was with friends, Annie Tunnicliffe and a group of, the group I was with - Annie Tunnicliffe I think.

Yes, and other women.

Other women, and then these two big guys turn up, and I'm talking to Annie, and he just stands in front of her and they just pushed me to the door, and stick his - one of them stuck his elbow right into my chest and just pushed me, and it was quite frightening actually. I was on the underground. I thought these doors open. I'm just gonna go flying. It was just intimidation generally, you know?

That's what they do.

And when I came home, I just, I was you know, I thought I'm not doing this again.

You were quite shaken.

I can imagine.

You were very shaken.

Some other Greenham women went out for conference that was in Moscow. I think it was '87 or somewhere around there. Did anyone contact you ever to...

No, no.

Ask your advice or anything?

No, no.

It had become very fragmented by then.

We had a lot of opposition to our - 'cause we got quite a lot of KGB involvement the first, when we were there the first time. And we did have that freak out bit - you wanted to stay and support Olga. And I said I wanted to go home. And then we both met again, we had a big round in the middle of the street, which we do have these odd rows, and then we both went away, and then we came back and both agreed with the other. So we were still having a rough - so it's really funny and then we just left.

Do you remember we came in, we'd both gone out and we'd both bought gladioli that were being sold on the streets as a present for Richard, The Times correspondent, because he had given us a lot of support in fact, a lot of tea and sympathy, but you know. And we'd both been out and bought - after this row, bought gladioli, and you came in one end of the, the restaurant door with your pink gladiola, whichever they were, and I came in with the yellow ones or vice versa, and we met in the middle. 'I bought some flowers for Richard.'

But we both said- I said 'It's all right, I will stay' and you went 'No, no, you're right. We should go home.'

Yes. I said 'I've thought about it. You're right.'

So anyway, there was the press coverage about that because we were delayed, the plane was delayed and everything else. We had opposition to that from people at women at Greenham and also women in, people in CND about like, you shouldn't make comments, you shouldn't, we just played into the Americans hands by opposing by, and we said 'No, no, no. If something happens, you say it. You know, if we upset everybody, that's fine.' You know, I mean, you can't just sort of say that they're all great, you know, in case - do you know what I mean? It was ridiculous. So there was a bit of fragmentation about it.

Also because there was a there was, we discovered a very kind of pro Soviet element within CND. Um, yeah, there was a strongly pro Soviet element within CND.

We went to that meeting, Bruce Kent and a few others...

They were very disapproving.

Yes. And it was like, 'Well, look, if that happens, then you say it, you don't just - have openness, have openness about things', you know.

And Helen was very pro Soviet. And she was very, she was a Stalinist, in fact, wasn't she? She used to say Stalin did a good job.

That was Helen...

Johns. Yes.

So, you know, by that time, why would they contact us? Because, you know.

That didn't I mean, there were other women who, who were very supportive of the Trust group, and Olga when she was in - going in prison. Particularly I remember Sarah Hippison, but the other UK trust builders were - there, I mean, EP Thompson and the European Nuclear Disarmament...

He was very supportive.

Yes, because his whole concept was the, the dissolving of the blocks. And so it was that the Warsaw Pact has some, has also has responsibility for the arms race, they're not just innocent victims being dragged into this. There is an active support of hardliners for the arms race on both sides. And the way to address this is with a kind of dialogue, and inevitably means actually dissolving the system of the iron curtain. Yeah.

So we did have Gorbachev.

Yes, yes.

Yeah. Yeah.

Gosh, amazing days.

Yes.

Can you imagine going off to North Korea?

Yeah.

Can you?

Yes.

What a doddle.

Are you ready?

Come off it.

Yes, it'd be a doddle!

Is amazing. I've never - it's something so different, I think, very, very difficult place.

It did give us - it give us an insight into a fully functioning, or actually teetering on the brink, really of breakdown totalitarian state. You know the way people you'd arrange to meet people in Leningrad, do you remember the contacts of Jean's - there was a guy who was into research into environmental problems in the USSR. And of course, he was being followed and watched because there are, there are no

problems in the USSR, you know, we do not have problems. Or if we do, we don't talk about them to anybody else.

But they're very, they're very...

And he had to keep rearranging his meeting with us, and then he wouldn't turn up, and there'd be, you know, guy and leather jacket instead. (Laughs). He was very paranoid - 'Meet you here, oh no, in an hour's time, here.' Wasn't he?

Yeah. But I think I just think that things happen like that here as well. But just in a much more, we're just more clever, we're cleverer. Soviet state wasn't that old. Ours was sort of set up, our state is much older and they're very clever at sort of like Wind, the Windscale Disaster, you know how they manipulated the press 'You do not cover this, the story - you do not cover it. End of story. There are consequences if you do.'

But we know about it now.

No, there's still stuff that's not covered. I got an amazing book out by a guy who actually um, worked there and was a nuclear, you know, he worked within the system all his working life, and you still can't - you still can't get the true picture of what happened at Windscale. And I'm, I'm worried. Not I'm worried about that, but I was a tiny, I was a year old baby when that stuff floated down from Windscale, where they said it only covered up to a certain point, but actually it came right the way down the southwest, the northwest, right the way down, you know.

I think about Chernobyl, the other day, which was what 20 something years ago. Land couldn't be sold and all the rest of it, who knows statistically if you look at cancer figures, and things. Show a spike on that.

Yeah, well, there just seems to be so many people around with cancer of a certain age, and you just think, right, you know, and then they just lied. They lied and lied about Windscale. They lied what particles were in

the, were exposed, they lied to the villagers. They didn't care about the villagers. Um, like the people within the the plant had to close all the windows and put masks on. And yet down the road, there's kids in school and stuff all taking this stuff in.

Yeah.

Crazy.

And I've got to go.

Can I have just one last thing. A bit of a soundbite, I suppose. But what would you say Greenham's legacy was?

Um, I think it had big implications for, I think it, yeah, it gave a lot of time. possibilities to a lot of women. And it - I can't say that Greenham stopped the arms race, because I think it was one of many factors, which made it imperative that leaders take disarmament seriously. I think the leader who really pushed for this was Gorbachev, but he had to have a response from Reagan that would look okay. You know, that Reagan, I think felt under pressure himself to respond. And so it was what - it fed, it changed the atmosphere in a way. Sounds fuzzy wuzzy, but sometimes that's what it needs for change to happen. It's many, sort of factors going on. Um. Yeah.

And you, Karmen?

I'm not sure actually. I think it was, it was a protest of its time in a way. It - I just don't think it would happen today. I think it'd be moved and moved quickly.

Yes.

The way we were treated, though there was some pretty physical, um heavy-handedness by the police. But generally there was a sort of

almost, sort of, um, more kindness in a way, because we were all women and stuff. I think today they would just sort it out.

They're all pretty calm when we did the day after Embrace the Base.

Oh, yes.

You know, yeah, that's what I'm saying. Let me finish. There was, I think it was still today way the way that, that, that demonstrations, massive demonstrations are not reported. Um...

There's kettling.

There's kettling, which can be horrendous. There's lots of ways that it wouldn't happen. But I think it's more of an individual thing. I think for lots of women - I mean thousands upon thousands of women, sort of connected with women in other countries. Um, and I think it did - it gave them, maybe it changed the direction of their life.

Yeah.

But I don't know, I can't say how much of an impact it had on - because we still got, we've still got, it's still a massive problem.

Yes, we have less nuclear weapons, but we still have nuclear weapons. And it's as much a sort of on the back burner, really? Well no, it's not it's developing.

It's developing.

To new smaller weapons, that whole thing. Oh, let's make them small so we can use them. It's reared its ugly head again.

Depressing.

Yes.

Yes. And it's still the same, still the same structure - until you have a different, until you have a different sort of structure within the world of where you spend your money? What is important? Why do we spend our money - we haven't gotten money for so many things, apparently. But we have got lots of money for any increase in, in technology and that sort of technology, then it won't, it won't come to an end. It's the money. There's too many - there's a few people making big money out of it. A few people with their companies making money out of it.

It's horribly corrupt world.

Yes.

The world of nuclear technology and nuclear weapons.

Yes. So, but I think it was inspiring for lots of women, and if it like you say, empowered them, made differences when they went back to their communities. I mean, I came back to my community and it was the miners' strike next. You know, it gave lots of women, wives of miners who may be in previous strikes wouldn't have taken part - they were on the front line.

Yeah.

And they'd been to Greenham.

They would have been in the back room making sandwiches.

Yeah, but they'd been to Greenham.

Yes.