

Sheila Eschle

What made you decide to join Greenham common, Sheila?

Um, well, I was already a member of a very active peace group in North Devon, a place called Combe Martin, a very quiet, sleepy little village. I can't remember, I think it was the fact that cruise missiles were coming, but there were lots of other things as well. We were writing to political prisoners with Amnesty International. Um. We did, we helped the miners during the miners' strike, we did fundraising for them. We did an annual fundraise for Oxfam every year in the village, and it was a real village effort. So it was a very active peace group - men and women, all different political and religious persuasions. Um. We, we had visitors over from Russia to stay with us. We were also involved with Pensioners for Peace. So that gives you an idea of just all the sorts of things we were involved in, because we wanted a more peaceful world. And at the heart of it was the fact that we were developing these huge weapons, which could wipe out the world. So what's the good of having an ideology, if you've got to kill for it? And I certainly, right from the word go, thought no, cause is worth the death and destruction that would ensue. So I felt very strongly that when cruise missiles came, and there were other American bases in this country, there was one at St Morgans, and I used to go there quite a lot, and in-fact, got arrested and then they dropped the charges. So I was quite active from the word go. And not all members of our peace group would deliberately break the law like I was trying to do, because they were teachers, or they already had jobs and that would mean them getting the sack, but they would come along and support whoever was trying to make a statement by being arrested.

How long were you at Greenham?

Um, I never stayed there any longer for, than the 2 weeks. There was a period of 2 weeks when I went with my friend Janet, and she still lives in Combe Martin, and we put up our tent. She had three children, four

children at one time, but sadly one died. I had four children. We were both in situations where we, if anything happened to us, we had that time because, you know, Janet worked, she was a nurse. I worked - I, I was partner in our restaurant and hotel, in Combe Martin and did the cooking. So while I was away it meant my husband had to make extra arrangements, plus look after four children. So it wasn't easy for him. And it certainly wasn't easy for me to leave them all at home. So I never went any longer than 2 weeks camping at a time. And on the other occasions I went, I used to go up for the day. You take up food, toilet rolls, things like that - for the women, because there were women there who stayed for years. And they'd set up the peace camp. I was there when we encircled the base. I used to organise coach trips, along with another woman who I think she was based in um, Barnstaple. And we could fill up a coach easily, women to go up there - but that was then for the day. Sometimes we'd take the children. Um, but I was always a bit concerned that it might get too rough, or too threatening. And certainly my youngest daughter can remember being very intimidated by the er, perimeter fence with the razor wire. And there'd be um, military police the other side watching us. So she found all that very frightening, you know.

What facilities were there for children?

Nothing much that I can remember. No. So you have to keep them really close to you. I never felt, she, that Tamsin - she was the youngest one, um would be at risk. I did take up, I'm sure I took up one of my sons - Brendon, only the once, because again it didn't seem appropriate. I may be wrong there - such a long time ago. Certainly, um, Catherine and Tamsin came with me on a couple of occasions. But thereafter I always thought it's better if they stay at home.

And did you stay at a particular gate?

I've - there were different gates, but I can't remember. I can remember us once blocking, blockading the main gate and just singing songs. And the police being there, and it was all very good natured - I was never

involved in any direct violence, confrontation with the police. I can remember Olga Maitland being there. She was from the opposite point of view. She thought nuclear weapons were a marvellous idea. So she used to bring parties down, and they would be setting up their opposition to us. Um. No, I can't, I can't remember the gate. Yellow seems to spring to mind, but I do love the colour yellow, so might be that. I know when we camped for 2 weeks, Janet and I, we just camped in the woods. Again, there was some structure, because there were places where it was best not to go, because we had to go to toilet, and we menstruated, so we needed some privacy. So there were areas in the woods that we had to make sure we kept clean and tidy, but just were for a bit of privacy, you know.

And so when you first went to the camp, was it what you expected it to be?

(Becomes emotional). Well, it was very powerful, because, you know, I was missing the children. And I know Janet and I decided - we'd been warned that we knew we had to travel light because we could be moved on. We could have been attacked by people who were opposed to what we were doing. Anything could have happened. And you go there, and I can remember just like my daughter Tamsin being so affected by it - these huge fences, and the wires, you see them around detention centres now in this country when we treat people so badly. Um. It, it's a shock to see it when I like to think nice things about people. And um, to think there are these horrible weapons and people were prepared to um, attack us for daring to say 'Well, you know, these weapons are wrong.' seemed the wrong way round to me, but also, I'm a bit of a softie, as you can tell - I do cry easily. Um. That was a shock, I can remember I had a profound shock on me. And that's when I thought, oh my children. And I've subsequently thought they've always known of my fierce opposition to nuclear weapons. And I think they were made aware of it when they were young. And it's quite a burden for children, I do think that, you know, they knew I felt strongly, they knew that after work, I'd be writing letters to various people, and things like that. And I would go off and I'd

do this, and I'd do that. It's very hard for children who just want to play and have a nice time, you know?

Yes. And how and why do you think the decision was taken for Greenham to become a women only camp?

Well, I suppose it's a space for women. Um. Men, well, they want louder voices. Um. We still live in a patriarchal society. And it was space for women to be on their own. I think my husband felt that it was, it was okay. But he didn't like the more strident voices, like the Wages for Housework. Um. And there were the (inaudible) Sisters, I can remember them being there, but I thought they did very good work.

So he used to come up to the camp?

He, he went, he came up a couple of times, but thereafter, you know, I said 'I'll go', because you want to respect what women are doing. Men have done things their own way for ever, haven't they? So it was our time. Um. But I mean, I certainly couldn't have taken part in the process, the whole process without my husband, supportive me, you know.

So what sort of relationship did you or the other women have with the men around - with the military or the police?

Yeah, it was fine. It was fine. I mean, I'm always, you know, by nature, like quite a respectful person. I, I respect a uniform, even if I don't agree with them. I mean, I met Conservative candidate for the district council elections today. I said 'I'm sorry, I won't be voting for you. As much as I think you're a really nice person, but I don't agree with your government's policies.' So I think you can, you know, behind the uniform, there's a person who's trying to hold it all together and keep his family together. And I think you've always got to give people the benefit of the doubt, even if there's some people that you really wouldn't like at all (laughs).

What was your relationship with the local residents?

I can't remember there being much um, abuse from local residents. You know, maybe it was because of how we behaved, because we were everywhere. I mean, when we were up there, we must have been, we must have disrupted their lives. Um. But I was just, well I was there, and you see all the women together - it's very euphoric, you know, and you did feel very powerful, and you just thought oh, you know, maybe we can make a difference. And even if we didn't, I wanted to be there to say 'No, not in my name. I totally disagree with these weapons of mass destruction,' and I shall soon be demonstrating against Trident. I totally support the SNP for wanting a nuclear free country, even though other countries have it, you have to set an example and say 'No, we're not going to. Whatever you do, we're not going to do it.' Because it's this tit for tat, especially at the moment, that gets us nowhere.

So what about the day to day running of the camp, when you were there for 2 weeks at a time, how was it organised?

Well, Janet and I were very self sufficient. I think I said before, you know, we thought, well, we have to move - and I think we did move a couple of times. Just in case. I think, I mean, we used to walk around the perimeter fence and talk to everybody. I can't, I think there were some main meetings, and there were some main demonstrations that we knew about before we went. We'd all have training in non-violent direct action. So we would get up, we, you know, we were totally self sufficient with our food, we bought tins and dried things, and as much as we could for 2 weeks. And then, when we'd finished, when we'd had our breakfast, we'd tidy everything away. And then we'd be looking to see what we could do - if anyone else wanted food, that sort of thing. Um, and there were these other meetings, like I say about the Wages for Housework, and they seemed to be very strong. um. But I don't think either of us went to that. We thought no, we just got to concentrate on this one thing. We're not saying what you want isn't a good idea, but it didn't seem appropriate for, you know, our opposition to nuclear weapons.

So, paint me a picture then of how did you spend your day?

Gosh, I mean, I just don't know, we were talking, we sang. People were coming to see us all the time, and then going away again. There were some major blockades. I should have taken some photographs, shouldn't I? But I don't think I've got any of when we were at Greenham - we, we were at other demonstrations when pictures were taken, but not at Greenham. I think we felt very strongly, Janet and I - let's make sure we don't get into any trouble, because we've got to get back to our each of our four children. I couldn't afford to be arrested at time - although I did get carried away and took part in a blockade of the main gate. I remember that - loads of policemen, and really them not knowing what to do with us. Because um, we were laughing, we were very happy, you know. It was a tremendous feeling of female solidarity, you know?

Do you remember any of the songs?

Oh, yeah!

Do you?

There was one Peggy Seeger song, who - I won't sing it because I shall cry again. 'Here we sit, here we stand. Here we claim the common land (becomes emotional), nuclear arms will not command. Bring Greenham home,' and on and on. I think it's in that book there. Yeah, we sang loads of songs. Lots of songs that Joan Baez would sing. Pete Seeger, that, you know, Bob Dylan although you know, he may sing these songs of protest, but he's really quite a conventional person - writes lovely songs, but I always remember the Peggy Seeger song.

So were there any medical treatments at the camp, if anyone was overwhelmed by what was going on?

I think there must have been, it did seem really well organised. Um. When you went to see the women that had been there all the time, they seemed to have everything there, everything set up. And I know some of them, like Rebecca Johnson, have gone on to do some great things in Europe with the anti-nuclear campaign. Um. Yes, I mean, we just took paracetamol, ibuprofen, that sort of thing, plasters. But we always felt that we would be well catered for should we need any support, but I mean we were okay, we were fine.

So how do you feel about the way Greenham has been represented in popular culture?

Well, it's gone really, hasn't it? It's just sort of disappeared really as we did, because um, cruise missiles were removed. Um. The permanent camp was disbanded. And um, yeah, life went on. We had to do other things. I mean, I never felt the type - I know there were some women there who gave up everything, and they must have been there with their children as well. I didn't do that. I know there's a peace camp up at Faslane where people stay there permanently with their children, and given up their work, and they just stay there in quite bad circumstances, you can appreciate. Scotland isn't - hasn't got the best of weather, but um I never did, no. As you can see, I like, I like my comforts. I'm just going to get a tissue.

So how would you have liked to have seen it represented?

Well, there's never been respect for another point of view. Um. Especially a point of view that says 'No, we can't have these weapons of mass destruction,' were treated like a bit cranky, misguided, patronised, really for feeling like this. Um. I think the world's gone so far to the right now, I have to say and this Brexit time is terrible - Brexit time, that's brought out such extremism on all sides. Um. I mean, at the time, in a way nuclear weapons, and the conflict with Russia seemed a little bit easier to understand than what's happening now. The Cold War - it was very clear, you know, Russia's bad, we're good. Whereas now, there are so many conflicting messages, extremism. And I suppose a lot of

people would say I was an extremist, but I've always thought well, I've got to do it in a non-violent way, to absorb some of the violence that I feel is out there in the world to sort of um, set, I mean, it's probably the way I was brought up, but to have respect for other people. But to also want to, you know, I feel another world is possible. I mean, we are at the brink of destroying our world, irrevocably. And um, we've got to do something about it. So I'll probably get involved in that shortly. Just can't believe it, you know, if you just let the status quo um, go on you, we don't get anywhere. Any major change has come about by people saying 'No, you know, we want the vote. We shouldn't have slavery. They shouldn't be apartheid.' And people have to make a stand, and that's when things change. But it doesn't change overnight. You have to keep plugging away.

So what's the one thing from Greenham, that you would like to be remembered as the...?

Oh gosh!

Piece of wisdom?

Well, I was there, um I was prepared to stand up and be counted, and I want a better world. And now I'm a grandmother. I get just as sentimental about my grandchildren as I do about my children. Now I do worry about their future. I think there's lots of positive things in life. But as a society we seem to be hell bent on destroying everything that's decent.

So what effect did going to Greenham have on your - was it your youngest daughter?

Yeah. Tamsin, yes.

Yes. What effects has that had on her?

She was frightened. Oh, you need to talk to her - she's busy working now full time, and she's got four children. But I don't think she's ever forgotten it.

No. So how has it influenced her life?

I think, I think she's, she would have - support, well she didn't like me going away, but she was perfectly happy with her daddy, I know that. But I suppose I missed her. I probably missed her more than she missed me. I missed them all terribly. But she has said to me since, how frightening she found it. And she never told me that when she was a little girl because she was just, she trusted her mummy to look after her, you know? But she said afterwards that she felt very frightened. So that's what made me think. And like some of my grandsons now, they're very troubled by world events and everything, so it's how you shield the people who are vulnerable, try and protect them.

Yes. And that experience for your daughter at Greenham went on to influence the rest of her life by the career she chose?

Well, I think it certainly affected um, Catherine, who's my oldest daughter, because she wrote in her doctorate some words of thanks to us, and how my husband and I had influenced her, and guided her - um, not deliberately by any means, but um, yes to a career in international relations, but from a feminist perspective. And she says it's very hard in academe now for people who have a different view of economics, and a different view of international relations, to be respected and understood. Um. So again, I think what's inspired her is the fact that, well, yes, Greenham wasn't understood at the time. Um, but there are certain things that have to be done. And she's still there and I'm just so proud, well, I'm proud of all my children. But um, I know Catherine's line of work has has been influenced by um - by her mum! (Laughs).

By her mum and Greenham!

And Greenham, yes!

So what tactics from Greenham do you see um, still at play in activism and politics today?

Well, I mean, you could say the extermination rebellion. The bits I've seen on the television, I thought yes, look at them all, they're sat down. They're smiling. Um. They know exactly what they're doing. Um. Some people may go too far, too far as far as I'm concerned. But I haven't been - I haven't seen any violence reported or anything, they all seem to be very respectful of - even the police seemed to be. It was rather nice to see the policeman standing back, rather than charging in there tackling these people, because there are men there as well. And I, but I think it's influenced more peaceful form of protest, a good natured form of protest, because they turned it into like a festival, didn't they? And they brought their families and they had picnics on the - I thought it was absolutely, I thought it was really inspiring. And there was one bit on the news where they were protecting, I think it was the Ministry of Defence, and suddenly a woman breaks through. And she superglued her hands on the floor. And um, her husband was there with her son, and she's an academic, this woman, I forget her name, but she is a climate change expert. And her son was able to talk about the issue more than her husband - because he was interviewed. And um, he couldn't speak - he's a bit like me, he got emotional. He had this wonderful moment to talk about the problems our climate's facing, and yet he was in tears because of what his wife had done. He was so profoundly affected, and I know just where he came from, really. Um. So I think Greenham certainly has influenced that, the good natured aspect of it.

And you also felt that the police had learned something from Greenham as well?

I don't know. I mean, I know there's bad apples everywhere. And I mean, when you think of the miners' strike - what happened in Orgreave, but that was all men - testosterone fuelled. I don't know. I thought that was terrible, though. You know, that was a violence. That was economic violence metered out by Mrs. Thatcher and her very right

wing government, destroying, prepared to destroy communities. Um. When we became involved with the miners' strike with our peace group, we were helping the women, who, and they became very influenced by Greenham. A lot of the miners' wives, went on to education, got involved in local politics, that sort of thing. And developed a much louder voice for their communities than they would have previously had. So yes, it's like sort of chipping away, isn't it? I mean, I'm sure some of the Suffrage, Suffragettes, the Suffragists and the Suffragettes, they had different ways of dealing with their struggles for the vote. But on the whole, well, the Suffragettes have influenced Greenham as well, haven't they?

Yes. So why do you think that the Suffragettes seem to have more publicity than the Greenham women?

Well, I suppose it went on for longer, probably. Um, er, the women that the Suffragettes were forced fed, and I've read horrible accounts of just the effect that had on women, you know. As far as I know, I mean, I was always treated very respectfully um, by the police when I was at Greenham. Um. But yes, it's interesting to - when you think now, I suppose it is the anniversary - well, last year was the anniversary of some women getting the vote. So there were some very good films that came out about women's suffrage. Be interesting see if there was ever a film about Greenham, because there could quite easily, couldn't there. About - for women to even get to Greenham common, to arrange for child care and all that sort of thing. To get the funds together and all that sort of thing. It was, it's quite hard. And some Suffragettes were quite wealthy, weren't they? But some were very poor, some had their children taken away from them because they were involved in the Suffrage movement. So I'm sure some relationships suffered as a result of Greenham 'cause some men would think, oh it's getting too strong, get over it, you know.

So whilst you were there, did you ever experience any conflicts between the groups, and about how they then made decisions about what was to happen and when?

No, no, because we weren't, we weren't involved in that way. Um. We weren't there all the time. So um, yeah, I can't remember any conflict at all. We were just, um, maybe I'm a bit of a sheep, but we knew about some of the demonstrations, and we just headed for that. And I mean, at the time, that was all I was prepared to do. That's all I could do. Because I had to behave responsibly for later on, when I got back home.

So tell me about one of the demonstrations that you attended then, what did you do?

Well, I think we just, we just went to the main gate, and there were thousands and thousands of us and I can remember the police just sort of backing off to allow us all in, and we were going to sit down, and we stopped. I mean, we were - people did when they were going by, yeah, you did get people shouting out. I just blocked all that out. But yeah, we just sang songs. I can't remember - well people were moved to do whatever they wanted, really. Some women stood up and talked. There was one occasion when we pinned um, items from home to the fence - pictures, pieces of writing, artefacts, anything we thought, anything to do with our home. Um. What we felt was important, we pinned to the fence. I remember that.

Do you remember what you pinned?

I think there were some pictures from Tamsin and Catherine. I think it was Tamsin and Catherine, it might have been from Brendon. Our oldest son wasn't particularly interested - he may of - I think it was mainly pictures. But I can't really remember in any detail.

Do you have a question that you'd like to ask me, or a question that I haven't asked you and you think ah, I've been really burning to tell this story or...?

Well, I think it would be really good - you started asking me about it, is I never really thought until you contacted me, that it could be part of

history. But um, well history is written in the name of the people who succeed and triumph over others isn't it. Her-story would be totally different, wouldn't it? It would be their lives of the unsung, more social history. Stories of struggle, always stories of struggle, you know. To get our national health service, it was a struggle - needed war, didn't it, to get that through, to get decent homes. Um. You know, those were built after the Second World War and all that's at risk now. 'Cause this present government's austerity programme. So um, I think there's a greater need for Greenham than ever, really, that the spirit of Greenham that inspires people to get more involved in the lives of ordinary people.

How would you reach out?

Reach out - you know, we're, you know, I may live in Willand in Devon, in England, but I'm not, you know, I'm a citizen of Europe and the world and, you know, I want to protect it. You know, there's so much in this world to love and cherish, and look after, and we have to act responsibly. And I think to have nuclear weapons is totally irresponsible, and a waste of public funds, when we could be spending our money on better things. I feel that very strongly.

And to close with, how would you then describe the spirit of Greenham?

Well, I suppose even though I haven't given it any thought until you approached me, you know, when it was done, it was done, and I move on to other things, it has inspired me to challenge other injustice - well what I think are injustices. So there's the power of women, you have to say, to say 'We want something better.' I don't really, I don't think you can exclude half of the population. But I think there certainly should be more women involved in politics in world affairs, because I think they do bring - or they should bring a different perspective on some of the most important issues facing us. So Greenham has been in inspiration. It was like, um, at the back of my mind this beacon, this belief, you know that I was there. And um, maybe I was part of changing it. I've never really thought of it in that way. My husband said, when he knew that you were coming, he said 'Well, they're not there now. So...' Ooh, maybe I

did have more power than I thought! So it's inspiring. It's very inspiring, and as part of history, in the history of struggle, um, well it should be on the curriculum, definitely.

(Edit in recording).

Sheila, you didn't have any photographs of your time at Greenham, but you have a very special souvenir that you took with you. Tell me about it.

Well, I've got a job to remember. Um, I've got about 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 little objects - all tied together by a piece of wool, and I did take this to Greenham with me, because I just wanted something from all of my children to carry with me in my pocket, that I wouldn't lose, wasn't too big. And you know, you're asking about the legacy of Greenham, and I suppose, this is a very important outcome for me because it inspired me - like when we left the restaurant and hotel, I went on to study at university, and became very inspired in social policy, really, and how, how one could be part of making the world a better place. Um. On this piece of wool I've got a little harmonica - it must have come from a cracker or something - but my husband gave me that, he is a harmonica player, so I took that with me. I've got a little red train that Brendon gave me. And a 'B', like a thing that you hang from a chain on the neck, because that's 'B' for Brendan, so two things from him. I've got a little shoe from Tamsin, because she was about 4 when I went, that must have been off her dolly, so a greatly treasured red plastic shoe, that's tied there. And then from Catherine, who's now an academic at Strathclyde, um, and says that my activities have influenced her - which is a lovely thought, I hope for the good, and so I've got that attached. And I've got several buttons, and I really can't remember who gave them to me. It may have been Robert, that's our oldest son. And some of the - there's a penny there with a hole punched through it. It must be one of the treasures the children had. And they gave it to me to um, take with me. So it's very precious to me.

It's lovely. Thank you for sharing that.