

A world without men

An untold story from Greenham Common

This story doesn't reflect very well on me, or on anyone. But it is a small chapter in the history of the Greenham Common Peace camp, founded 25 years ago this week, which has not yet been related.

In the summer of 1983, I had a holiday job a few miles to the west of Newbury. On most days I would drive past the camp. The women there fascinated me. I was 20 years old, awkward and inexperienced, and I had never seen anyone like them. Some of them appeared to have abandoned all conventions. They dressed in ponchos and rags, they wore no makeup, they had dirt on their faces and knots in their hair. After a few days, I stopped on the way home from work.

No one, at first, was uncivil to me. Men could visit the camp, but they could not stay. I tried to make myself useful, collecting firewood, making tea, winding ribbons through the fence. I made friends with two of the activists – a grave, impressive matriarch with iron-grey hair, and a simple woman, who pushed toy cars around in the dust. Most of the others spoke to me only when they had to. I started visiting two or three times a week.

At first I had only a vague political interest in the camp. Like almost everyone at the time, I was terrified of nuclear war, but I hadn't thought about whether or not US cruise missiles on British soil made us more vulnerable. But no one who visited the camp in 1983, a month or two before the missiles were due to arrive, could have failed to be caught up in the political ferment. Almost every day the tabloids carried lurid and slanderous stories about the radical lesbians camped outside the airbase. I remember the explosions of anger one morning as a copy of the Daily Mail was passed around the fire. The drivers who passed the camp either hooted and waved or screamed abuse and

– occasionally – threw bottles and cans. I think it would be fair to say that my politics began to be formed by that camp.

After a couple of weeks, I came across someone different – a man. He called himself, as quite a few hippies did at that time, Cat. He was slight, nervous, perhaps 25 or so. He wore torn drainpipe jeans and a rainbow jumper. His hair was cropped short at the front but hung down his neck in peroxide rats' tails. He sat by himself some yards away from the women, staring at the fire, occasionally flipping a coin and consulting his I-Ching.

Unlike me, he wasn't just a day visitor. He was the camp's only male resident. The second time I met him, he invited me to stay in his bender. Without pausing to consider the consequences, or even possessing any idea what a bender was, I accepted.

He led me for what seemed to be miles through scrub and woodland, all the way urging me not to trample the leaves or break any twigs: only he knew the paths, and he didn't want anyone to be able to follow him. When we stopped, however, I realised that we were just 200 yards away from the camp. "Here we are", he said. I looked around. All I could see was bracken, birch and hawthorn. He parted the bracken to reveal a clear polythene sheet, stretched over a rowan sapling which had been bent down and tied to the ground. Even after he had shown it to me, when I stepped back a pace I couldn't see it.

"Why are you taking all these precautions?"

"Because they set light to my last two benders. The last time was when I was sleeping in it."

"The police?"

"No. The women."

Cat had slept there, on a pillow made of moss, with nothing but his I-Ching, a candle and an enamel mug, for a fortnight, since he had lost his other possessions in the last fire. Recently, he told me, someone had held a knife to his chest and promised she would kill him if he stayed.

"I know why they don't want me here, and I agree with them. But I have to stay. This is where my spirit lives."

In the morning, unaware of the trouble I was in, I sat by the camp fire, waiting for the kettle to boil. I sensed that someone was standing over me, and looked up. I was surrounded by a ring of women. They held their palms out towards me and their eyes were closed. Slowly and quietly they started chanting. "Go away. Go away. Go away." It was terrifying and extremely effective. I left immediately. I returned only once, a few weeks later, to ask after Cat. My two friends told me he had gone away, or, as the simple woman put it, "disappeared". I don't think anything sinister was meant by this: he had

probably moved to Faslane.

The women were right to throw me out, and right to get rid of Cat, if not by the methods some of them had chosen. Greenham worked – better and for longer than any other camp of its kind – because it was entirely run and populated by women. Its resilience and its success in mobilising public feeling inspired a direct action movement which spread to dozens of neglected causes: the spirit of Greenham Common hovered over the climate camp outside Drax power station last week. And, despite my dramatic ejection, the women’s camp inspired me too: after that summer, everything looked different.