The strategic importance of Bishopscourt

by Brendan Munnelly

The road east out of Downpatrick leads gently into the sleepy farmland of the Lecale peninsula; bordered to the north by Strangford Lough and to the south by the fishing port of Ardglass, an apparently tranquil countryside of rolling drumlins and century old monastic ruins: a place of quiet refuge in a troubled province.

Then eight miles from Downpatrick and just outside the tiny coastal village of Ballyhornan, it comes into view: an awesome complex of early warning aerials, telecommunications antennas, aircraft runways and military buildings. “Like something out of the film, Close Encounters of the Third Kind” as one visitor described it. A large sign at the entrance reads: “This is a PROHIBITED PLACE within the meaning of the OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT. Unauthorised persons entering the area may be ARRESTED and PROSECUTED.”

This is the Royal Air Force radar station at Bishopscourt, NATO’s main strategic asset on this island and Ireland’s number one nuclear target. RAF Bishopscourt is the most westerly situated of Britain’s nine military radar stations; their purpose is to detect, identify and track all aircraft in British airspace and as far out from its shores as possible. The system is known collectively as the United Kingdom Air Defence Ground Environment (UKADGE) and has its controls at the Air Defence Operations Centre, RAF High Wycombe near London. Direct links also exist with with British civil air traffic control, with France’s Strida 11 air defence system and with NATO headquarters in Belgium.

The County Down station constantly monitors the skies two hundred nautical miles out into the north east Atlantic; it is linked to other stations in the UKADGE system through British Telecom microwave radio masts at Ballygomartin in west Belfast and at St John’s Point on the Down coast ten miles south of the base.

If an aircraft shows up on the Bishopscourt radar screens which cannot be identified from civil flight plans and which fails to respond to interrogation on the standard radio frequencies, then RAF Phantom jets are scrambled from their bases at Leuchars in Scotland to intercept the radar contact and identify it. Such interceptions of Soviet aircraft take place on average four to five times per week; far from being nuclear bombers en route to attack Britain, these Soviet surveillance aircraft are “going about their lawful business over international waters”, in the RAF’s own words.

RAF Bishopscourt’s role lies less in detecting a Soviet air attack on Britain — a feat beyond current Soviet capabilities, according to most independent experts — but in facilitating the passage of US military aircraft across the Atlantic. In the so-called limited war in Europe scenario, NATO central European forces would depend heavily on huge reinforcements by air of weapons and personnel across the Atlantic. By virtue of its location, RAF Bishopscourt would be vital in detecting the presence of Soviet aircraft seeking to attack this NATO Atlantic Air Bridge and in guiding RAF interceptor fighters on them.

Dozens of military aircraft fly over RAF Bishopscourt each week, mainly US Air Force transporters commuting between the States and NATO bases in Britain and Europe. They pass along an air route known to civil pilots as Upper Red Three, which stretches from Manchester, over County Down and out to Tory Island off Donegal.

This inclusion of military aircraft on the busy transatlantic civil air routes over Ireland can have its problems. One evening in May 1979, RAF controllers at Bishopscourt watched in horror as a Laker Airways DC 10 and a US Air Force C5 Galaxy transporter came within less than two hundred yards of each other in the skies above northern Donegal.

RAF Bishopscourt is currently being modernised as part of a £400 million upgrading of the UKADGE system; half the money is coming from the British Ministry of Defence and the remainder from central NATO funds. The modernisation will include the stationing of an additional mobile radar at Bishopscourt and the digging of a “hardened” underground bunker. It is not known if the new radar has yet arrived, but the construction of the underground bunker, designed to resist the effects of a nuclear bombardment raining down upon the RAF base, is certainly and visibly underway.

However, Wing Commander Slinger (CO of RAF Bishopscourt) was quoted in the “Down Recorder” of 21/6/94 that he expected the new radar installation to be finished by 1990-91.

All this makes RAF Bishopscourt a high-priority target for Soviet attack, most likely from SS-20 ballistic missiles launched from within the Soviet Union. In the most recent large scale British Civil Defence exercise, Hard Rock ‘82, Bishopscourt was hit in the first wave of a Soviet attack on the British Isles; at 0600 hours on September 27th, to be exact. Two other targets in the North were subsequently hit in that exercise: the military airfield at Ballykelly on Lough Foyle and Aldergrove airport near Belfast.

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A quiet Ballyhoo

by Peter Emerson

In a society as violent as that which exists in Northern Ireland, it is necessary to demonstrate that pacific protest is effective. And in a society as dangerous as that which exists in the world at large, we must all do what we feel we can, in whatever way we feel best.

And every so often, little ‘coincidences’ help us along. When Bishopscourt’s peace camp was first established, I was sort of free and ready for a spell in the countryside; some friends were willing to look after my house and to pay a spot of rent, so to support the peace camp; and Corrymeela was ready to get rid of a surplus caravan for a good cause. An even greater co-incidence was the existence, just opposite the radar base, of a derelict house and an unused field, soon to become a garden full of vegetables and, from time to time, a park full of tents and anti-nuke campers.

One important aspect of pacifism, I feel, is respect for the human beings whose deeds we don’t respect. In the case of Bishopscourt, this involved respecting the police and RAF personnel, as well as the DoE (Department of Environment) officials who tried to get us evicted, a tactic somewhat at variance with that of other DoE officials who acknowledged our existence and awarded us both an official address and a rates bill.

Respect for the police. The point was emphasised most emphatically one day when, during one of our many blockades, while we were sitting in a circle peacefully protesting against that which may lead to a future war, the police were listening to news of an explosion which had just killed one of their comrades in the Irish war of the present.

Perhaps it is wrong for the security forces not to oppose government nuclear policies; perhaps it is wrong for them to support all the dictates of the Northern Ireland Office; perhaps it is wrong for those not engaged in violence to fail to see how violent was and/or is discrimination, emergency legislation, oppression by institutions various be they government or church or multi-national company; and perhaps it is wrong for all of us in the West to live as we do, for ‘tis our consumerism which exacerbates the famine in Africa! It is also wrong to kill, or so believes the pacifist, no matter what the cause. And the fact was that one man had been killed. In such circumstances, it would have been quite wrong if we so-called pacificists had not expressed sympathy with those who now mourned. Indeed, emotions were strong, and we felt moved to do just that. And thus, if only by a little, were they comforted.

And respect for all meant telling them if and when we were going to protest, and by what means. We even told them if and when we were going to jump over the perimeter fence, though without telling them the exact time or place.

“.....‘cos you’d just come and stop us, wouldn’t you?”

“Well yes,” the sergeant replied, smiling.....and understanding.

The policy paid off. Over a cup of tea and a biscuit, in Downpatrick police station, the conversation ran as follows: —

“They should be tried and sentenced, because that would act as a deterrent against the others,” suggested the deputy superintendent.

“No, I disagree. For once released, they’ll only go on and do it again, won’t you?” said the ‘super’ who also felt that any trial would give the police-cum-RAF bad, and CND good, publicity. When such are the thoughts, you know you’re half way to persuasion.

Later on in the year, many were the peaceniks who came from all over Ireland to participate in the demos, and some of them stayed to take their turn in maintaining the vigil — Tony, Jim, Phil, Tom and Miriam, and others too numerous to mention.

During such demos, we practised peace camp politics. For me, this was a wonderful though at times difficult learning process, Bishopscourt Retrospective broadsheet, page ii.

Why a peace camp?

by Sara Whelan

When I first fell in the door of the Peace Camp caravan at Bishopscourt, I really hadn’t a clue what a peace camp was all about. It was around midnight and after a night’s hitchhiking into the ‘Unknown North’, I was lucky to share a taxi with a few girls on their way home from a night out in Downpatrick. As we came near the RAF base, the yellow floodlighting over rolling hills of countryside seemed more eerily like a war scene than anything I had seen before. Night-time is when you really feel the chilly paranoid air of an installation like this — so imagine how the peace campers in residence felt when the car drew up beside the caravan at that unexpected hour!

The aims of the Bishopscourt Peace Camp, established in March 1983, were brightly painted on the outside of the caravan:

1. To oppose cruise and other nuclear weapons;
2. To oppose the British government’s nuclear defence policy;
3. To oppose RAF Bishopscourt as part of NATO.

This served to inform passers by, but as Bishopscourt is a fairly quiet backwater of a place, there wasn’t a lot of traffic. At least the cheery invitation to “Come in and have a cup of tea” did encourage some curious children to sign the visitors book — peace campaigners of the future, one hopes!

About the time I joined the Bishopscourt Support Group in August 1984, one and a half years into its existence, some of the original group were weary, losing enthusiasm, and moving on to other activities. There had already been a great deal of good work and active protest, mostly on a permanent resident basis, by Peter Emerson, Tony Thompson, Jim Maguire and others. I often heard of the earlier days (particularly the all-night vigil blockade) when the commitment and solidarity seemed stronger, and the alternative to accepting RAF and NATO policy was firmly put forward.
Any endeavour such as a peace camp requires a new wave of energy now and again, however naive and optimistic it might seem at first to those drained by experience. I was amazed that so few people knew of the radar station at Bishopscourt, even in Northern Ireland. So I opened my big mouth and proposed holding a very noisy Disarmament Festival at Bishopscourt in the summer of 1985. The reasons for the "Stay alive in '85 Festival" were agreed; to reactivate the peace camp; widen awareness of the Bishopscourt threat; and hopefully form a new focus for anti-nuclear protest in the happy aftermath of the Carnsore hoax. To place this focus 30 miles inside the Northern Ireland border, a very strategic part of NATO territory and yet psychologically distant to the majority in the South seemed a worthwhile challenge to the view that there was only one big issue in the North. It was always a problem for peace campaigners who came to Bishopscourt from the Republic to deal with their inbred instinct to see the RAF as "Brits" first. Equally, the Northernners had a lot to learn too.

In a way, the excitement/dread of putting together a music festival in a place with no water or electricity did regenerate the Peace Camp for a while. There were preparatory meetings and weekend workshops to try and cover all the details. It could not have been done without the help of a lot of people (particularly Miriam Killeney, Tom Kenny, Rob Fairmichael, Eoin Dinan, Keith Donald and Davey Goban). The VSI workcamp volunteers were fantastic to put up with that last panic-y, tense week of never-ending work in terrible conditions. And there were some good follow-up events such as the Reclaim the Airspace kite-flying weekend and the recent submarine protest.

The second aim, to widen awareness, was also achieved to a certain extent. Three hundred people visited this tiny out-of-the-way spot and felt the not-so-good vibrations of Bishopscourt microwaves in between a crazy mix of punk and folk music, which truly attempted to "Rock the Radar"!

Three hundred people who would each tell many others of the dangers of this radar base that could drag us all into any future war. The festival site bordered the base itself at the main road junction in Bishopscourt, so the RAF and local population certainly heard us, and RTE and local newspapers carried reports.

The last idea, to form a national focus for peace protest needs more support and commitment, from central organisations especially, and was not realised. A radar system, even the more sophisticated and deadly variety now in operation, does not seem to be as immediate a threat as cruise missiles sitting in their silos, but these weapons are made to hit targets like Bishopscourt.

However, the practical problem in keeping Bishopscourt Peace Camp going is its somewhat isolated location and the resultant difficulty in finding a live-in active coordinator. The caravan was sadly vandalised by RAF members and broken over by rats and rot, until it had to be given to someone who could make better use of it, and because we were spending too much time repairing and cleaning it.

To return to my initial curiosity that brought me to Bishopscourt — why a peace camp? I think the answer must be to draw attention to a dangerous threat to peace in a particular place and provoke people to do something about it. Does it work? Yes, if there are long-term resident members committed to keeping up a series of actions and providing information. Yes, if there is a central organisation to give support. Yes, because it means peace work at a very personal level, face-to-face with the local people, the military, and between the activists themselves — effective and non-violent training in a real sense.

I am still hopelessly optimistic — on our last action weekend, 2 dozen students achieved the most successful blockade of the base yet, and we had a warm response from the locals when we leafleted the nearby fishing village of Ardglass. The best opposition to nuclear madness is from ordinary people, and perhaps Bishopscourt Peace Camp has played its part in setting the seed of protest in the coast of beautiful County Down. I believe we will see the fruit of it yet. It will take years maybe, but then it's hard to believe we are hearing about arms at Greenham Common being dismantled — the harvest of 50 years of the peace movement beginning? Let's hope so.

Nonviolent action — the Bishopscourt experience by Rob Fairmichael

It is vital that we remember some of the things that happened, and how they happened, because they are extremely relevant to other situations. Above all the Bishopscourt peace camp experience, and the blockades and actions there, show that nonviolent action is possible in Northern Ireland and — given the numbers involved — highly effective in highlighting an issue. While we were often disappointed in media coverage, for one reason or another, there was enough to be "noticeable".

As Peter Emerson records in his piece, an effort was made to have good relations with the police. Generally this held up well even during the blockades with the tension of them shifting our way the whole time. We felt some sort of success if we could even delay traffic for five or ten minutes. Traffic and out of the base was cut down very considerably. Sometimes the RAF closed off the main gate and used back or side entrances. Betimes we tried to cover these too.

There were a few incidents of aggro between some protesters and police but in general the police did not see us as a threat. I would feel that nonviolent action — of the various blockading and invading (space occupied by the camp) kinds — is appropriate as a fairly easy option for other situations in Northern Ireland where again the police will not feel threatened. I am not trying to rule out nonviolent action in other situations but to say that in this it can be safe, sensible and satisfactory. I think this applies to community, environmental, anti-sectarian and other issues where a campaign is not seen as being sectarian based. There are other provisos that will apply locally but the opportunities are enormous!

Undoubtedly the RAF, some of, did feel threatened, individually and collectively. A heavy fine was promised for any member found talking to peace campers. Given the "apartheid" situation of an RAF camp behind barbed wire in a majority Catholic area of the North, we never sorted out as a mass what our strategy was in relation to RAF members and how should we respond when they went in for verbal abuse and obscene comments? That is something a forthcoming Christian CND workshop will be looking at in the North. Another, different problem was that sometimes the police seemed ingratiatingly friendly — tact or reality? How should we deal with that?

Because of the paucity of full-time campers (after the first year it was often or usually a part-time camp) we did not link in with the support that existed locally, and in Downpatrick, as much as we could. Now if Peter and Tony had more full timers early on.... Nor did support from elsewhere always materialise; Coleraine sometimes had more people present than Belfast, which says a lot for Coleraine and not so much for Belfast.

The reasons for such small numbers (sometimes only a couple of dozen on a blockade, maximum 100 or slightly over) is outside the scope of this article; a number of factors undoubtedly apply, including fear in the North of confronting any arm of the state lest that be the cause of a cracked skull or you out of a job. But the point I make above is that nonviolent action may be much easier and safer than it is realised — depending on the issue and the approach taken.

Perhaps the most amazing example of the power of nonviolence at Bishopscourt was the August '83 'slow march'. As dusk began, protesters gathered at the bottom of the approach road, a hundred yards from the main gates. Candles were lit, and Candles flickered and people moved in the slowest motion, to say that in this it can be safe, sensible and satisfactory. I think this applies to community, environmental, anti-sectarian and other issues where a campaign is not seen as being sectarian based. There are other provisos that will apply locally but the opportunities are enormous!

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Perhaps the most amazing example of the power of nonviolence at Bishopscourt was the August '83 'slow march'. As dusk began, protesters gathered at the bottom of the approach road, a hundred yards from the main gates. Candles were lit, and spontaneously a slow, silent march began towards the base. Candles flickered and people moved in the slowest motion, with the gathering dark the gates were reached, still in silence. The police moved out and everyone move away; no one moved, no one responded. We stayed where we were all night, in silence. The RAF might have had their guns behind their man-made barricades of wire and steel; but that night we showed our strength. And many of the women needed it to put up with the comments coming from the RAF men a few feet away.

Obviously the peace camp meant different things to different people. To some perhaps it was most importantly a witness, a
And training was haphazard. Sometimes there was at least discussion before we went to blockade, and others by the time we had waited for arrivals it was felt necessary to get up and at it or the day would be gone. In those instances important discussions did sometimes take place during blockades, as when issues arose; should an ambulance be let out/back in (empty)? In this instance the matter was resolved by reckless, dangerous RAF driving (drive through them and on no account stop, when there was no need); we got out of the way or would have been seriously injured.

But our preparation was often somewhat lax, partly because of the difficulty of different people and different groups arriving at different times, and there being an adequate, disciplined (i.e. self disciplined) structure for seeing that everyone was prepared and a consensual plan agreed. There was also an unwillingness by individuals to be seen as authoritarian, a positive factor — but coupled with an unwillingness or inability to always put the effort into consensual agreements and organisation.

We did do some preparation, analysis, and prepare guidelines (the latter, of September 1983, entailed an hour’s preparation before blockades, including breaking into affinity groups if numbers warranted it, and consensus decision making). Consensus was something generally adhered to, but difficult when there were different ideological persuasions present (e.g. pacifists and anarchists of the non-violent persuasion). Affinity groups were half tried but people tended to vote individually with their feet; part of it was perhaps the feeling they were unnecessary for a bunch of 50 people. Another rule that emerged, no consumption of alcohol on blockade, was generally observed.

Different blockades followed different patterns and with slightly different responses from police and RAF, as to whether people were shifted away from the main gate (RAF using a back entrance) etc. St Patrick’s Day 1984 was perhaps the most controversial in terms of relations between blockers and police, with arguments over antagonism, doing damage to property or not, and getting arrested or not. This was one of the larger events with over 100 at it, including 12 Women for Disarmament who of us received as much or more than we gave. With more preparation and work it could have been even better; that is the lesson we must take to our other campaigns, whatever they may be. And, of course, that nonviolent action is possible in Northern Ireland.

Bishops court Retrospective broadsheet, page iv.

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