

# Campaigners for peace

*In a leafy Christchurch suburb Tui Motu recently visited the home of Kate Dewes and Rob Green, also the headquarters of the Peace Foundation's Disarmament & Security Centre (DSC). Kate and Rob have a common passion for world peace and nuclear disarmament. This joint quest has brought them together personally.*

## Rob's story

In January 1991, at the height of the first Gulf War, Rob Green was invited to address an antiwar rally of some 20,000 people in Trafalgar Square, London. Here was he, a retired Commander in the Royal Navy, at the foot of Admiral Nelson's column speaking out against the validity of the nuclear deterrent. It was the climax of a long journey of disillusion and the discovery of a new faith.

Five days later the futility of that deterrent was amply displayed when Iraq launched its first SCUD ballistic missile attack against Israel. The missiles fell on Tel Aviv, Israel's second city. A nuclear state had been attacked by a non-nuclear one. The Americans responded by ordering air attacks on the SCUD launch sites, but the United States could do nothing to prevent Israel going on full-scale nuclear alert. Israeli missile launchers, armed with nuclear weapons, were pointed at Iraqi sites. In the event, the SCUD attacks caused only minor damage; America and its allies quickly defeated Hussein using conventional weapons only. And Israel was praised for exercising restraint. But what sort of escalation might have occurred if the SCUD missiles had caused massive loss of life or had been carriers of germ warfare?

Over his years serving as a Naval Officer, Rob became progressively disenchanted with the effectiveness of the British nuclear deterrent. As a 25-year-old he had been a navigator in the

Buccaneer nuclear-strike jet squadron based on the aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle*. Their assigned cold war target was a military airfield on the outskirts of Leningrad, Russia, now known by its original name, St Petersburg. They had the capability of dropping a 100 kiloton thermonuclear bomb close to a civilian population in one of the world's most beautiful ancient capital cities. "I accepted without question an élite role with my pilot as 'nuclear crew'", Rob writes.

Later he was switched to antisubmarine helicopters. Their role was to defend the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* from possible Soviet submarine attack. Because the latest Soviet submarines went too deep and fast for the conventional homing torpedoes, the helicopters were armed with a nuclear depth bomb, more powerful than the weapon which devastated Hiroshima. It would have caused huge nuclear fallout (as did the experimental underwater explosions on Bikini Atoll in 1946) and, incidentally, the helicopter could not have escaped. Rob was cast in the role of a suicide bomber. "Because I was ambitious and was assured there would almost certainly be no need to use it, I decided to obey."

When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, she was obsessed with the need to strengthen the nuclear



Rob with photo of his aunt, Hilda Murrell

deterrent and opted to replace the ageing US Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missile system with Trident. This was done despite misgivings among the Naval Staff at the huge cost: Trident was dubbed 'a cuckoo in the Naval nest'.

Britain's possession of these horrendous weapons, however, proved to be no deterrent to Argentina when the Falklands War started in 1982. Rob was by that time a naval Staff Officer. He comments: "I know what a close-run thing that war was. If Argentine aircraft had sunk one of the troopships before the landing force had got ashore,

the British might have had to withdraw or risk defeat. What would Thatcher have done?... I later heard a rumour of a very secret contingency plan to move a Polaris submarine south within range of Buenos Aires."

After the Falklands War Rob left the Navy no longer believing in the validity of the deterrent strategy. Although he did not become an active peace campaigner until 1991, his conversion journey had started a long time earlier. He found his political affiliations changing gradually towards the left. "In the Navy", he says, "even to vote Liberal was considered radical. No one would ever have voted Labour!"

"As a young man I felt I had a 'vocation' to be a naval officer, so I became totally immersed in the naval ethos including Intelligence. I acquired the professional skills. But I also experienced the corruption – the covering up of incompetence, the neglect of the deleterious side-effects which weapons use may have. There was blind loyalty to orders, pride in tradition. What I call the *Charge of the Light Brigade* approach – as in Tennyson's Crimean War poem : 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die' – was alive and well."

"At one time we were shown Peter Watkins' film *The War Game*, a black and white documentary on the effects of nuclear bombing in Britain, including live shots of the firestorms. It made a lasting impression on me."

"The British Navy goes back to King Alfred. It has very long traditions, and there is an ethical undercurrent. A noble image was a way of attracting top quality recruits. If you were no more than hired killers you would not attract the right personnel! To change away from this was to break away from the tribe, to lose most of my former friends and colleagues."

Rob was also greatly influenced by his Cambridge educated aunt, Hilda Murrell, who had been an early environmentalist and, in her retirement, an antinuclear activist. She was brutally

murdered in 1984 near her home in Shrewsbury in the West Midlands. The police inquiry concluded that it was a random act by a burglar whom she surprised while he was ransacking her home; but other, more sinister explanations have been suggested.

Murrell was busy at the time of her death preparing a paper criticising the building of a new nuclear power plant. She contended that it was wrong to build such installations which not only were uneconomic, but for which there was no safe disposal of their highly radioactive waste. She was also opposed to nuclear weapons and supported the Greenham Common women's protest.

Under Thatcher's government British security services routinely put anti-nuclear activists under surveillance, and some UK media have suggested that Hilda Murrell was the British 'Karen Silkwood', the US nuclear technician who died mysteriously when she was about to expose dangerous aspects of the US nuclear industry. The police inquiry indicated that Murrell's house had been methodically searched in a manner unlikely from a random burglar.

Another sinister scenario involved Rob himself, suggesting that the intruder was looking for documents belonging to Rob concerning the notorious sinking of the Argentinean warship *Belgrano* during the Falklands War. Rob denies that he was involved in any way with the famous leaking of secret intelligence to the Labour MP Tam Dalyell about this; and his aunt never raised such matters with him. Nevertheless, her violent death had a profound influence and helped motivate him to pick up Hilda's torch regarding nuclear issues.

Chernobyl and the end of the Cold War also influenced Rob's thinking – to move from opposing the peaceful use of nuclear energy to the nuclear deterrent itself. When the first Gulf War started, he became afraid that nuclear weapons could be used, either by the US or Israel, and this moved

him to become active. Rob joined Ex-Services CND, and also a think tank called 'Just Defence'.

In 1991 he became British Chair of the World Court Project. This was a world-wide network of citizens' groups lobbying the United Nations to bring the legal status of nuclear weapons before the World Court. It was while working at this project that Rob met Kate who was one of New Zealand's leading peace campaigners. Later they married, and Rob came to live in New Zealand.

### *Kate's story*

Kate Dewes grew up in Hamilton with a strong Christian background, although most of her family supported New Zealand's participation in World War II including the dropping of the atomic bombs. While she was at University she became aware of the anti-Vietnam war protests. While teaching in Auckland she helped organise the *Peace Squadron* protesting against the visits of US nuclear armed ships. Kate recalls that her very first involvement was religious: communion at Bastion Point followed by a Maori blessing of the water before the Peace Squadron held its first event in 1975.

At the time she was teaching at Epsom Girls' Grammar School, which was quite conservative. That involved some conflict. "I was undergoing quite a shift within myself," says Kate, "because I believed that it was God's will that we didn't kill people and that nuclear weapons were not part of God's plan." Kate became interested in Hiroshima and its aftermath and read up some personal accounts of survivors. At High School she had also seen *The War Game*, which had a profound effect on her.

In 1977 she went with her first husband, John Boanas, to study Peace Studies at Bradford, in England. She discovered that there was a lot of ignorance in Britain about the protest activities in New Zealand, and this made her all the more eager to learn the historical base for the NZ peace movement. "In



▷▷ 1979 I had my first child and began to run the Peace Foundation office from home in Christchurch. I worked with Fr John Curnow and other church people at that time.”

She initiated the visits of Dr Helen Caldicott, an Australian peace activist and paediatrician, who was a key person influencing mothers, doctors and politicians towards an antinuclear stance. “Those early years were very important for building up peace groups and preparing to take our case to the World Court. I become involved with the Quakers, many of whom were strongly involved in the peace movement. We worked with the churches – to reach people who had not been challenged about these issues. There was a women’s spirituality group I belonged to, who were very creative and looking for change. I started teaching Peace Studies at Canterbury University.”

Kate also found herself involved with conflict resolution: *what causes conflict? Where does it all start?* Teaching teenagers to be pro-life in the widest sense was more effective than just shock treatment, using scare tactics. “There was a backlash to Peace Studies in the mid-’80s. I was called a communist because I was pushing peace education in schools. I received abusive phone calls. They weren’t easy times before we got the antinuclear legislation through.

“One evening my parents went to a Concerned Parents’ Association meeting of over 2,000, in Hamilton. At the meeting I was denounced by name as being a communist. My father was so angry that he stood up and said his daughter was not present and therefore unable to defend herself. He demanded that the speaker withdraw what he had said. That night was the turning point for my father. He phoned me to say that he had publicly owned me. And he became supportive of our work.

“My family became concerned for my safety, especially when I became a solo mum with three children in 1991.

In the 1990s when we were taking the case to the World Court, David Lange warned me I was possibly being watched by operatives of the British and US governments. However, we have not let that put us off. I still stand alongside my church. I have never broken my links with the Anglican church, and now I feel at home in a Maori Anglican church.”

### Going to the World Court

The World Court Project (WCP) grew from an initiative of the *Christchurch Peace Collective*. Kate was one of the leaders. She helped organise a speaking tour by US international law Professor Richard Falk of Princeton University, in 1986. He suggested that New Zealand should take the US to the World Court on the subject of nuclear ship visits. The idea of going to the World Court for a judgment appealed especially to retired Christchurch magistrate Harold Evans, who decided to approach governments to sponsor a UN resolution, but with a much wider scope – the legality or otherwise of nuclear weapons.

Among the crucial phases in the WCP process we may note:

- *mobilising citizens’ support* – by lobbying organisations such as doctors and lawyers via their international representative bodies; and by collecting *Declarations of Public Conscience* throughout all countries where there were active antinuclear movements. By 1995 nearly 4 million had been gathered, mostly from Japan.
- *the ending of the Cold War* in 1990-91 took away the excuse which had been offered by the Lange government that the move to the World Court was inopportune.
- a doctors’ organisation IPPNW



Rob Green and Kate Dewes

(International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War) lobbying the *World Health Organisation* on the basis of the indiscriminate medical and environmental consequences of using nuclear weapons. In 1993 the WHO adopted a resolution asking if nuclear weapons use constituted a breach of international law – by 73 votes to 40 (10 abstentions).

- In spite of intense opposition by nuclear states, more and more governments were persuaded to support *a direct approach to the UN*: specifically the 110-strong NAM (non-aligned movement) group of states; Australia and New Zealand, both of whom were incensed by the continuing nuclear testing by France at Mururoa; and many of the Pacific Islands states. On 15 December 1994 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to refer the nuclear issue to the World Court ‘urgently’. The vote was 78 votes for, 43 against with 38 abstentions and 25 casting no vote.
- In October 1995 the case was put before *the World Court at the Hague*. The governments of the US, UK, France, Germany, Russia and Italy defended the right to use nuclear



weapons. 14 governments condemned such policies as illegal and immoral. Deliberation by the 14 judges went on for some months. The climax came on 8 July 1996. The NZ Government delegation, led by National's Attorney General Paul East, stood in solidarity with the WCP holding their huge rainbow banner outside the Court proclaiming 'Nuclear Free Aotearoa New Zealand'.

The World Court findings are summarised as follows:

"A threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law". This latter confirms that the Nuremberg principles apply to nuclear weapons.

However, a caveat was added, that "the Court cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of the state would be at stake". Nevertheless all the judges confirmed that an obligation existed for international negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament.

No distinction was made by the Court between the *use* of nuclear weapons and the *threat* to use them: both are declared contrary to the law. In so doing, it implicitly outlawed nuclear deterrence. The part played by New Zealand in this whole process – notably by the Lange and the Bolger governments – had been crucial.

### Nuclear-powered ship visits

Earlier, under the Bolger government, there had been an attempt to declare that nuclear-powered submarines were perfectly safe and should be allowed to visit. Kate determined to get Rob out to New Zealand to counter these claims. Rob came and spoke in seven cities. At his very first public meeting David Lange was on the platform and was publicly supportive of the WCP.

Rob presented a UK documentary *Polaris in Deep Water* made in 1991, which revealed that nuclear subs had developed cracks in their Reactor Cooling Systems. For that reason British subs were banned by the Royal Navy from visiting foreign ports for fear of causing an incident. The submarines were still running because the Navy had to maintain its deterrent. The cracks were the result of ageing stainless steel coolant pipes being rendered brittle under the constant neutron bombardment. The cracks were not easy to detect, and it was expensive to replace the pipes.

Currently, no British nuclear submarine is allowed to visit even a UK commercial port – for the same reasons.

### Where to today?

According to a leaked document the Pentagon has recently authorised the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons to attack potential enemies who possess weapons of mass destruction. The type of weapon envisaged is a small, tactical 'bunker buster'. The US accepts that nuclear deterrence probably will not work against extremist groups, who are now the principal threat. This new initiative authorises the use of tactical weapons irrespective of their collateral damage. They may be described as 'small' – but in fact they are hugely destructive, and would cause long-term and indiscriminate poisoning of the environment from radioactive fallout. This appears to be a final justification for possessing nuclear weaponry.

Rob has written an updated and expanded edition of his book *The Naked Nuclear Emperor: Debunking Nuclear Deterrence*, to be published in the UK and US later this year, in which he proposes alternative non-nuclear security strategies to deter war and achieve peace. It is vital also, he thinks, for New Zealand to maintain its antinuclear stance, and indeed to export it.

Nuclear propulsion, says Rob, continues to carry a small risk of accidents, but the unacceptable worst

case consequences mean that the ban must be maintained.

Meanwhile the corporate lobby is on the march in support of reviving the use of nuclear energy for electricity generation, exploiting growing concerns about climate change and the cost of oil. Rob warns that the international nuclear energy industry is extremely powerful and ruthless, and has not solved problems of safety and how to deal with radioactive waste. Both nuclear power plants and submarines are vulnerable terrorist targets. There are cheaper, safer and more effective alternative solutions to the challenge of climate change.

Young people need to be told about the extraordinary achievements of New Zealanders in the cause of world peace and nuclear disarmament. As part of their work at the DSC, Kate and Rob publish articles and speak nationally and internationally about the *World Court Project* based on Kate's PhD thesis documenting the history of this campaign. They are preparing an exhibition at the Canterbury Museum in June 2007 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Nuclear Free legislation and the beginning of the WCP. With a team of keen young people, they are working closely with the City Council to implement recommendations adopted by the Council when Christchurch became a Peace City in 2002. These include teaching Peace Studies at Canterbury University; promoting the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Exhibition and a Gandhi exhibition to museums and schools; a World Peace Bell in the Botanic Gardens; hosting Mayors for Peace meetings; and organising a sculpture from New Zealand for the Nagasaki Peace Park.

They believe it is important that they leave a legacy of hope rather than despair and that future generations can be proud of their peace heritage. ■

See [www.disarmsecure.org](http://www.disarmsecure.org) and the Peace City web site [www.ccc.govt.nz/Christchurch/PeaceCity](http://www.ccc.govt.nz/Christchurch/PeaceCity)

Photos: Martin Hunter