# BISHOPSCOURT PEACE CAMP

1983 - 1986

#### A retrospective broadsheet

PRICE 10 pence

# The strategic importance of Bishopscourt

#### by Brendan Munnelly

The road east out of Downpetrick leads gently into the sleepy farmitant of the Lacele peninsula; bordered to the north by Scengford Lough and to the south by the fishing port of Andglass, an apparently tranquil countryside of rolling drumlins and century old monastic ruins: a place of quiet refuge in a traubled province.

Then eight miles from Diverspetrick and just outside the tiny coastal village of Ballyhornan, it comes into view: an avesume complex of early warning sensits, telecommunications enterms, eincreft nerways and relitary buildings. "Like something out of the film, Clase 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. Unathorised persons entering the area may be ARRESTED and PROSECUTED."

This is the Royal Air Force radar station at Bishopsourt, NATO's main strategic esset on this island and instand's number one nuclear target. RAF Bishopsourt is the most westerly situated of Britain's nine military radar stations; their purpose is to detect, identify and track all encreft 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 Dentre, RAF High Wycombe near London. Direct links also exist with eith British civil air traffic control, with France's Strids 11 air defence system and with NATO headquarters in Belgium.

The County Down station constantly monitors the skies two bundred nautical miles out into the north east Adantic; it is linked to other stations in the UKADGE system through British Telecom microsease radio masts at Ballygomertin in west Belfact and at St John's Point on the Down coast ten miles south of the base.

If an aircraft shows up on the Bishopsourt radar screens which cannot be identified from sixil 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 on route to attack Britain. These Soviet surveillance aircraft 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 Societ air attack on Britain — a feet beyond current Soviet capabilities, according to most independent experts — but in facilitating the passage of US estimay aircraft porces the Atlantic. In the so-called limited year in Europe scenario, NATO central European forces would depend beavily on huge reinforcements by air of weapons and personnal from across the Atlantic. By sintue of its location, RAF Bishopscourt would be vital in detecting the presence of Soviet aircraft seeking to attack this NATO Atlantic Air Britise and in guiding RAF interceptor fighters on them.

Dozens of military arcraft By over RAF Bishopcourt each week, malvely US Air Force transporters commuting between the



As It was - the press spring surprises.

States and NATO bases in Britain and Gurope. They pass slong as air mate 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 transatiantic civil sir routes over ireland can have its problems. One evening in May 1979, RAF controllers at Bishopsoport watched in horror as a Laker Airways DC 10 and a US Air Force CS Gataxy transporter came within less than two hundred yards of each other in the skies above northern Donesal.

RAF Bishopscourt is currently being modernised as part of a £400 million upgrading of the UKADGE system; half the menery is coming from the British Ministry of Defence and the remainder from sentral NATO funds. The modernisation will include the stationing of an additional mobile radar at Bishopscourt and the digging of a "hardened" underground concrete busine. It is not known if the new natur has yet arrived, but the construction of the underground bunker, designed to resist the effects of a nuclear bomberdment raining down upon the RAF base, is certainly and visibly underway, thowever, Wing Commander Stinger (DO of RAF Bishopscourt) was quoted in the "Down Recorder" of 21/6/94 that he expected the new radar installation to be finished by 1980, and centralisation and modernisation of the whole base by

All this makes RAF Bidropecount a high-priority target for Soviet attack, most likely from SS-20 hallietic missiles launched from within the Soviet Union, in the most recent large scale British Civil Defence exercise, Hard Rock '82, Bidropopus't was his in the first wave of a Soviet attack on the British islas; at 0500 hours on September 27th, to be exact. Two other targets in the North were subsequently hit in that exercise the military sirfield at Ballykelly on Lough Foyle and Aldergrove sirport near Belfast.

Bishopscourt Retrospective broadsheet, page I. DAWN TRAIN 6, page elevery.

# A quiet Ballyhoo

by Peter Emerson

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

One important expect of pacifiam, I feel, is respect for the human being whose deeds we don't respect. In the case of Sishopscourt, this involved respecting the police and RAF personner, as well as the Dolf (Department of Environment) officials who tried to get us existed, a tactic somewhat at variance with that of other Dolf officials who acknowledged our existence and awarded us both an official address, and a rates bill.

Respect for the police. The point was emphasized 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 as this link 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 Northarn Instand Office; perhaps it is wrong for those not engaged in violence to fall to see how slotent was end/or is discrimination, emergency legislation, oppression by institutions serious be they government or obunch or multi-national company; and perhaps it is wrong for all of us in the West to live as we do, for "to our consumerism which exacerbates the families in Africal It is also wrong to kill, or so believes the pecifies, no matter what the cause. And the fact was that one man had been killed. In such circumstances, it would have been quite enough if we so called pacifists had not expressed sympathy with those who now mourred. 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 protent, and by what means. We even told 'ex: that we were going to jump over the perimeter ferox, though without telling them the exact time or place....

"....... "cos you'd just come and stop us, wouldn't you?"

"Well yes," the sergrant replied, unilling....and understanding.

The policy paid off. Over a cup of tea and a biscuit, in Downpatrick policy station, the convenation ray at follows: -

"They should be tried and sentanced, because that would act as a determent against the others," suggested the deputy superiotendent.

"No, I disagree. For once released, they'll only go and do it again, won't you?" said the 'super' who also felt that any trial would give the police-core 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 domos, and some of them stayed to take their turn in maintaining the vigil – Toxy, Jim, Phil, Tom and Minam, and others too numerous to mention.

During such denses, we practised peace camp politics. For me, this was a wonderful though at times difficult learning process,

Bishopscourt Retrospective broadsheet, page ii.

DAWN TRAIN 6, page twelve.

purposes in those moments when all were still, and quiet, holding hands, offering no resistance to the police if and when they wished to move us, respecting each other, powerful in mutual support; tense when those like me who are male or others who are not spoke longer than was necessary, or when those like me long in the camp or others of less vintage dominated proceedings; and sometimes, for one at any rate, sad, if and when some — male or female, old hands or newcorters, evowedly Christian or not so — wanted to do things their way, and not perhaps with the consensual support of all present.

On halance, however, I can look back on those days as some of the most delightful of my life. And in the evening, on my own or over a chespboard with Tony, when all had returned to homes and families far, I somehow felt there was a sort of Bishopscourt prace camp community, and that the net effect of our actions was positive.

I'm a firm believer in the collective unconscious, the nocophere, and the collective will. When public opinion is strong enough, then it can indeed bring down the tair, stop the war in Viet-saw, or whatever! What we have to do is just plug away, forever seeking to increase that level of anti-nuke public opinion, forever knowing there is a threshold at which disamment will occur. Back in Sishopsopurt for the seinter, the postmen called; he brought some mail of course, his own Christmas greatings and, a bottle of whiskey.

"I thought you were all head-cases at first. But now I've changed my mind. Cheers."

And despits the fact that Pacitly and I had just recently acted illegally in the bunker in Belfast, infringing laws of trespass and breaking and entry — in a totally pacifist way, of course, doing minimal damage, compensating for whatever breakages they might have considered committed, and reporting conserves to the authorities — one of those servents of the state whom we had respected popped in one day also to wish as a Happy Christmas, and to add, "You're quite right about that Windscale business!" He asked, understandably enough, to remain seconymous. And this, his wish, I will request.

# Why a peace camp?

by Sara Whelay

When I first fell in the deer of the Peace Camp carevar at Bishopecourt, I really hatin't a clue what a peace camp was all about. It was around midnight and after a night's hitchhicing into the "Linknown 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 countryoids seamed more early like a war scene than anything I had seen before. Night-time is when you maily feel the chilly paranoid air of an installation like this—to imagine how the peace campers in residence felt when the car draw up beside the caravan at that unexpected hour!

The sims of the Bishopscourt Peace Camp, established in March 1983, were brightly painted on the outside of the cerasure.

1. To oppose cruise and other nuclear weapons:

2. To oppose the British government's nuclear defence policy;

2. To oppose RAF Sisheposurt as part of NATO. This served to inform passers by, but as Sishopscourt is a fairly quiet backwater of a place, there wasn't a lot of treffic. At least the cheery invitation to "Come in and have a cup of tes" did encourage some curious shikken to sign the visitars book — peace campaigners of the future, one hopes!

Alsout the time I joined the Bishopecourt Support Group in August 1994, one and a half years into its existence, some of the original group were weary, looing anthusiasm, and exoring on to other activities. There had already been a great deaf 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 serier days (particularly the all-night vigil blockade) when the commitment and solidantly seemed stronger, and the alternative to accepting RAF and NATO policy was firmly put forward.

Any endeavoor such as a peace comp requires a new wass of energy now and again, however neive and optimistic it might seem at first to those drained by experience. I was arrande that so few people knew of the radar station at Buhopeouvt, even in Northern Ireland. So I opened my big mouth and proposed holding a very noisy Disarmament Festival at Busopeouvt in the summer of 1985. The reasons for the

"Stay alive in "85" Festival were agreed; to reactivate the proce carrier, whilen sevareness of the Bishopsocort threat; and hopefully form a new focus for anti-nustear protect in the happy aftermath of the Carrisore hous. To place this focus 30 miles incide 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 wire that there was only one big issue in the North. It was always a problem for peace campaigners who came to Bishopcourt from the Republic to deal with their intered instinct to see the RAF as "Brits" first. Equally, the Northerners had a lot to learn too.

In a way, the excitoment idreed 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 Kilberey, Tom Keony, Rob Fairmichael, boin Dinan, Keith Donald and Davey Gobard. The VSI work comp volunteers were fentastic to put up with that last panicky, tense week of never-ending work in terrible conditions. And there were some good follow-up reents such as the Reciaim the Airspace kite-Bying weekand and the recent subroarine protest.

The second aim, to widen assurence, was also achieved to a certain extent. Three hundred people visited this tiny out of the way spot and fait the not as good elbrations of Bishopscourt microwaves in between a cracy mix of punk and folk mustic, which truly attempted to "Nock the Rader"! Three hundred people who would each tell many others of the dangers of this rader has that could drag as all into any future way. The festival site bordered the base itself at the main read junction in Bishopscourt, so the RAF and local population certainly heard us, and RTE and local reexpenses comed 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 new in operation, does not seem to be as immediate a threat as cruise missiles sitting in their slics, but these weapons are made to hit targets like Bishopscourt.

However, the practical problem in keeping Bishopoourt Peace. Camp going is its somewhat leolated location and the resultant difficulty in finding a live-in active operations. The caravan was saffy vanished by FLAF members and taken over by rats and ros, 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 Bishopcourt — why a peace camp? I think the answer must be to draw attention to a dangerous threat to peace in a particular place and provoka 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 organization to give support. Yes, because it means people work at a very personal level, face to face with the local people, the military, and between the activists themselves — affective and non-violent training in a real series.

I am still hopelessly optimistic — on our last action seekend, 2 dozen students achieved the most successful blockade of the base yet, and we had a warm response from the locals when we leaflamed the nearby fishing village of Antiglass. The best opposition to nuclear students is from ordinary people, and perhaps Bishope-court Peace Comp 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 Greenhare Common being dismantled — the harvest of 50 years of the peace movement beginning? Let's hope so.

#### Nonviolent action

- the Bishapstaurt 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

nonviolent 'direct' 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 pisce, 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 us out of the way. We felt some sort of succes if we could even delay traffic for five or ten minutes. Traffic and and out of the base was out 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 processors 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 imading (asses occupied by the camp) kinds — is appropriate as a fairly ever 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 cay that in this it can be safe, sensible and satisfactory. I think this applies to community, environmental, anti-sectarian and other issues where a compalgn is not seen as being sectarian based. There are other provide that will apply locally but the apportunities 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 "spartheld" 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 obscame comments? That is something a furthcoming Christian CND workshop will be looking at in the North. Another, different problem, was that sometimes the police seemed ingratiatingly friendly — factio or reality? How should we deal with that?

The reasons for such small numbers (sometimes only a couple of sloten on a blockade, maximum 100 or slightly over) is outside the scope of this article: a number of factors undoubtestly apply, including feer in the North of confronting any arm of the state lest that he the cause of a cracked skull or you out of a job. But the point I make above is that non-clotent 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 8'shopeonurt was the August '83' slow manch'. As duck began, protecters pathered at the bottom of the appeach road, a flundred yards from the main pates. Candles were lit, and spontaneously a slow, slient march began towards the base. Candles flickered and people moved in the plowest motion, strangth and pride in themselves, their cause. Eventually with the gathering dark the gates were reached, still in silence. The police told everyone to move away; no one receded, no one responded. We stayed where we were all night, in silence. The RAF might have had their guns bound their man made barricades of wire and steel, but that night we showed our strength. And many of the wamen needed it to put up with the communits opening 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 Bishopstosert Retrospective broadsheet, page III. DAWN TRAIN 6, page thirteen.

vigit, a presence of hope and peace in a place that threatened despair and sear. Often the aims of block-ades were not thought out, were we trying to at inconvenience the RAF b) sow seeds of doubt in their minds (conversion) a) gain publicity for the cause st) have a good time in a good cause? Some events, such as a kits flying session, were mainly symbolic and fun. Other times it wasn't clear what mixture of the above we were attempting.

And training was haphasand. Sometimes there was at least discussion before we went to blockade, and others by the time we had ealted for arrivals it was felt recessary to get up and at it or the day would be gone. In those instances important discussions did corretimes take place during blockades, as when issues arose, should an embulance be let out/back in (emptyl? 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 not being an adequate, disciplined ii.e. self-disciplined) structure for seeing that everyone was prepared and a consensual plan agreet. There was also an unwillingness by individuals to be seen at authoritarian, a positive factor — but coupled with an unwillingness or inability to always put the effort into consensual agreements and organization.

We did do come preparation, analysis, and propose 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 electopical persuasions present in a pacifiets and averbiets of the non-anarcho-pecifiet persuasions. Affinity groups were half tried but proude tended to vote individually with their feet; part of it was perhaps the feeling they were unnerped, no consumption of alcohol on blockade, was generally observed.

Different block ades followed different patterns and with slightly different responses from police and RAF, as to whether people were shifted away from the main gets IBAF using a look entrance exc. St Fatnish's Day 1984 was perhaps the most controversial in terms of relations between block aders 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 had walked all the way from Dublin. With police not eround at the gate on the Kilclief mad in May 1987, an RAF member practised driving as fast as he could towards on the road protesters – stopping in contact with one women's foot – to try to instruminate us out of the way the didn't success!

Had numbers been much larger, and it more difficult to get any RAF vehicles through, there might have been mast arrests on blockades (as opposed to temporary moving or holding). Any arrests and charges related to damage to property and the like – lighting a fire in the roadway, gainting graffiti ets. Nobody was arrested or chared for blockading the base and nobody was uharged for entering the base – despite a number of incursions over the three years of the camp; people were handed over to the RUC by the RAF, the former took names and then released them. Remember that the next time someone says nonviolent action isn't possible in Northern Ireland. While I wouldn't try to extrapolate that to all situations, there are many where it is highly relevant.

I have spent a fittle time exploring some of the group dynamics and logistics of involvement. I have done this to concretize the peace camp and blockading experience. Despite some of the problems and difficulties — some of which were growing pains—It was certail a positive, affirmative place to be involved. Many of us received as much or more than we gave. With more proper ation and work it could have been even better; that is the lesson we must take to our other compages, whatever they may be. And, of course, that nonelolent action is possible in Northern lireland.

Bishopscourt Retrospective Irroschheet, page iv. DAWN TRAIN 6, page fourteen.

### Campers speak!

Bob Fairmichael has been leafing through the peace camp visitors took

Locals and metropolitans, Irish and foreigners, young and old, all grace the page of the peace camp visitors book. Plenty of justicle scrawl — "Thanks for the cap of tax, your a kind man and a nice men." Obviously not everyone signed, especially not some members of the RAF who preferred to leave their calling cards of a harder nature through the sarases windows—but some of their children did call, at least a couple for a school project on peace.

All I can do is extract a few comments from the pages. A Northerner commented "Thanks you for your kindness and caring. May we have the world." A German wrote; "Important to see, that people live things they are righting for!". A guy from Glangernsley signed, 4 people from Greenham had knocked on his door (North of Belfast) asking to use the phone — he gave them a lift all the way down to Bishopscourt! One of the Greenham women said. "Thanks and much love & peace to everyone who was here — had an amazing, peaceful time. Be back very soon" — and many Greenhamines did indeed return.

One Doverpatrick woman quoted Dorothy Day — "You are 'Making the world an easier place to be good in "". Sometimes people signed under the reason for their gathering — a workshop, a weekend of action/blockade, or Irish CND national committee meeting. "Deepest live, reary and amiles" came from an frish CND supporter of the camp. The lighter side of camp life is reflected in the comment; "After cooking a 'super' meet, drivining a lot of Suiness, but not being sick like certain other people, I had a manualises time..." Ho, ho!

A Dublin women gave "Hotel Bishopscourt" three stars """; she judged the New Years Eve (1994) vigit. "Tour of racter base very attenuation;" (inside this was). Antiglass comment that "As in 1914, so in 1984 — the treaches are no larger in Flanders fields, but in the milest of men."

Check by jowl then the comment on the same page "Salle balls being benguets & bells," it's / Drac" (Dundalk) and the RUC Chief Inspector's signature. On to a London woman: "The presence of few takes on the conscience of many — lighters for life". More jocularity: "We're the Albanian secret service / come to subsert the system / we like it here it's like Siberia / it's always fucking freezing".

Signatures from the VSI workpamp preparing for the music feetival, 1985. The chairperson of British CND signs in. Another saying "I feet the power of shoar who have come here before me and I know shat we are all signifier in going..."

The local women who kept an eye on the person when no one was there reported "Local broken and window" (a scon familiar story). A Dutch woman survived a winter fortnight on her own. Some punks report on clearing up the mass the carsvan was on, and another report on windows being broken while people were in bed. Dublin stalwart says "Hope the "RATS" duri's miss one" (real roderts were moving in). And so to Nagasaki weekend 1986 — farewells.

Finally, the tranks of those involved must go to the local people, women and men, who supported the peace camp in whatever way they could: for reasons you will appreciate you will remain antelymous hare! Not less because the Ministry of Defence in London subscribes to Dawn. We have not forgotten Bishopscourt or you. We are still working so that the Bishopscourts of this social will be no more, and betimes, we hope to be back in Ballyhorner.

DAWN magazine (the old monthly) reported at length name and analysis on Biologopours. For those searcing to follow it up, there is material in juste numbers 76-77 totrangle situation of best and on the peace carry in all leaves 65 – 107 inclusive with the exception of Nos 95, 100 and 105.

ADDITIONAL COPIES of this broadsheet 10 pence plus portage (10 or more copies post tree) from DAWN, 16 Revenedene Perk, Belfast 6, or DAWN, PO Sox 1522, Dublin 1.