

UNAC joins “Stopp Ramstein!” Protests

by Phil Wilayto, originally published on **End the Wars at Home and Abroad**, July 1, 2018

It's a beautiful evening here in Kaiserslauten, a city of some 100,000 in southwestern Germany. There's a light breeze blowing, gently nudging the thousands of multi-colored flowers that seem to line every street. Couples, young families and older folks are strolling through this city whose beginnings go back to the time of the Roman Empire.

And tomorrow, thousands of people are expected to gather here and attempt to block the entrance to the U.S. Ramstein Air Force Base. I'll be one of them.

Ramstein is one of the largest of the Pentagon's 800 military bases established in more than 70 countries. South Korea has the largest number (could this be why North Korea is a little suspicious of U.S. intentions?). Japan is number two, and Germany comes in third.

Ramstein serves as headquarters for the U.S. Air Forces in Europe, Air Forces Africa and also NATO Allied Air Command. The military base is really huge, with some 54,000 military personnel, plus their families, which means this U.S. base pretty much dominates this German town. In fact, German officials and politicians are not allowed to enter the base without permission from the U.S. commander.

But, just like with the Navy in Norfolk and Virginia Beach, the base is an important source of local employment, business contracts and trade, which is probably why the Catholic Church where around 40 protest organizers have been meeting this week came under heavy local pressure not to allow us to gather there. But the church stood its ground and there have been no

problems – so far.

The reason the German peace movement has targeted Ramstein is not only because of its massive size, but because of the critical role it plays in the Pentagon's strategy of fighting wars using pilotless drones. These expensive little machines can drop bombs on targets all over the world, with no threat to U.S. lives, and so no risk of stirring up unpleasant antiwar feelings back home.

It's nice, clean warfare, in which the only people who die have brown skins. And if the intended target happens to be at a wedding, a funeral or praying in a mosque on Friday night, then there might be what the Pentagon quaintly calls "*collateral damage*" – a very sanitized word that seems obscene when applied to a lifeless child torn apart by a bomb we paid for with our taxes.

The drones do have human pilots, but they work in air-conditioned buildings back in the States. The pilots send instructions to Ramstein, where they are then routed to the many drone bases around the world. No Ramstein, no drones. And that is why there have been huge annual protests here.

When the base's key role in drone warfare first came to light in 2015, the German government claimed it hadn't been informed about this function of the U.S. base. The reports were later supported by data provided by whistleblower Edward Snowden and investigative reporter Glenn Greenwald from classified documents from inside the U.S. administration.

I'm here representing the United National Antiwar Coalition, which the Virginia Defenders helped found back in 2010. I've been meeting lots of German peace activists, as well as folks from Italy, Spain, South Korea, France, Ireland, the United Kingdom and several from the U.S., including Ann Wright, the former U.S. Army colonel and State Department official now known worldwide for her antiwar activities. She'll be a

featured speaker at the main rally outside the base tomorrow.

Also here are Pat Elder, a longtime antiwar activist from Maryland who has done some incredible work countering military recruitment in our public schools. And Dave Webb from the United Kingdom, who works with the U.S.-based Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space. And John Lannon, a professor at Ireland's University of Limerick, who will be a key organizer of an international conference called to oppose U.S. and NATO foreign military bases that will take place this November in Dublin.

This week's peace activities are being sponsored by the German organization "**Stopp Air Base Ramstein.**" Beginning on June 23, there have been discussions, workshops and a "*peace camp*" that reminds me of Occupy Richmond, with its many small tents and communal spirit. Today there was an all-day meeting at which Ann, Pat, John, Dave and I were among the many speakers. At the end of the meeting the organizers released a statement calling on the European Union to open all its borders to refugees, arguing that it has been the U.S. and NATO wars in North Africa and the Middle East that have caused the refugee crisis in the first place. The right-wing in Europe has seized on the refugee crisis to whip up hatred of immigrants, much like the Trump regime is doing in the U.S.

Tonight there's a large public event held at the Reconciliation Church Kaiserslautern. And then the highlight of the week will be a large demonstration and rally tomorrow, followed by a mass blockade in front of the main entrance to the base, followed by a cultural event with a party in the peace camp. (See <https://www.ramstein-kampagne.eu/.../stopp-airbase-rastein-2.../>)

So what am I doing here, thousands of miles from home, when I could be protesting any number of injustices back in Richmond? Well, it's because all these things are related. Like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat

to injustice everywhere." That saying is featured on the front page of the current issue of The Virginia Defender.

Today the U.S. is openly at war in at least seven countries in the Middle East and Africa: Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Libya and Somalia. It's conducting covert wars in other countries, from the Philippines in Asia to Mali and Niger in West Africa. It carries out provocative military exercises on the very borders of Russia. All this is in the name of "*national security*," although there are no Russian bases in Canada, no Chinese ships off the coast of San Francisco, no joint North Korean-Mexican maneuvers in the Gulf of Mexico.

And man, are these wars expensive! The U.S. military budget is larger than that of the next seven or eight countries combined, and that includes both China and Russia. Military spending sucks up half our federal tax dollars. (They tell us it's only 25 percent, but the Defense Department budget doesn't include nuclear weapons, which come under the Department of Energy; or care for the hundreds of thousands of veterans, which comes under the Veterans Administration; or interest payments on the national debt – largely the result of borrowing money to pay for past wars. Those payments are now nearly equal to the Defense Department budget.

So when they tell you there's no money to fix Richmond's decaying public schools, no money for more bus routes, no money to create public jobs at living wages and that we're running out of money for Social Security and Medicare, please remember where half your federal tax dollars are going. For war.

I'll be on the road here in Europe for the next couple of weeks, trying to learn as much as I can about the progressive movement here and how activists are addressing poverty, racism and war. I'll post my reports here as often as I can.

Meanwhile, if you'd like to help support this work, please think about kicking in a little something for travel expenses.

You can do this at: unacpeace.org.

Until next time,

Phil Wilayto

Editor, The Virginia Defender

Member, UNAC Administrative Committee

Drones and Discrimination: Kick the Habit

Kathy Kelly talks about her recent trial, the action she was convicted for, and her pending jail sentence. She talks about drone victims and the victims she is sure to meet when she arrives at whatever prison she is told to report to.

On December 10, International Human Rights Day, federal Magistrate Matt Whitworth sentenced me to three months in prison for having crossed the line at a military base that wages drone warfare. The punishment for our attempt to speak on behalf of trapped and desperate people, abroad, will be an opportunity to speak with people trapped by prisons and impoverishment here in the U.S.

Our trial was based on a trespass charge incurred on June 1, 2014. Georgia Walker and I were immediately arrested when we stepped onto Missouri's Whiteman Air Force where pilots fly weaponized drones over Afghanistan and other countries. We carried a loaf of bread and a letter for Brig Gen. Glen D. Van Herck. In court, we testified that we hadn't acted with

criminal intent but had, rather, exercised our First Amendment right (and responsibility) to assemble peaceably for redress of grievance.

A group of Afghan friends had entrusted me with a simple message, their grievance, which they couldn't personally deliver: please stop killing us.

I knew that people I've lived with, striving to end wars even as their communities were bombed by drone aircraft, would understand the symbolism of asking to break bread with the base commander. Judge Whitworth said he understood that we oppose war, but he could recommend over 100 better ways to make our point that wouldn't be breaking the law.

The prosecution recommended the maximum six month sentence. "Ms. Kelly needs to be rehabilitated," said an earnest young military lawyer. The judge paged through a four page summary of past convictions and agreed that I hadn't yet learned not to break the law.

What I've learned from past experiences in prison is that the criminal justice system uses prison as a weapon against defendants who often have next to no resources to defend themselves. A prosecutor can threaten a defendant with an onerously long prison sentence along with heavy fines if the defendant doesn't agree to plea bargain.

In his article "Why Innocent People Plead Guilty," Jed S. Rakoff draws attention to the institution of plea bargaining which now ensures that less than 3% of federal cases go to trial at all. "Of the 2.2 million U.S. people now in prison," Rakoff writes, "well over 2 million are there as a result of plea bargains dictated by the government's prosecutors, who effectively dictate the sentence as well."

"In 2012, the average sentence for federal narcotics defendants who entered into any kind of plea bargain was five years and four months," Rakoff writes, "while the average

sentence for defendants who went to trial was sixteen years.”

It's one thing to read about the shameful racism and discrimination of the U.S. criminal justice system. It's quite another to sit next to a woman who is facing ten or more years in prison, isolated from children she has not held in years, and to learn from her about the circumstances that led to her imprisonment.

Many women prisoners, unable to find decent jobs in the regular economy, turn to the underground economy. Distant relatives of mine knew plenty about such an economy several generations ago. They couldn't get work, as Irish immigrants, and so they got into the bootlegging business when alcohol was prohibited. But no one sent them to prison for 10 years if they were caught.

Women prisoners may feel waves of guilt, remorse, defiance, and despair. In spite of facing extremely harsh punishment, harsh emotions, and traumatic isolation, most of the women I've met in prison have shown extraordinary strength of character. When I was in Pekin Prison, we would routinely see young men, shackled and handcuffed, shuffling off of the bus to spend their first day in their medium-high security prison next door. The median sentence there was 27 years. We knew they'd be old men, many of them grandfathers, by the time they walked out again.

The U.S. is the undisputed world leader in incarceration, as it is the world leader in military dominance. Only one in 28 of drone victims are the intended, guilty or innocent, targets. One third of women in prison worldwide, are, at this moment, in U.S. prisons. The crimes that most threaten the safety and livelihood of people in the U.S. of course remain the crimes of the powerful, of the corporations that taint our skies with carbon and acid rainfall, peddle weapons around an already suffering globe, shut down factories and whole economies in pursuit of quick wealth, and send our young

people to war.

Chief Executive Officers of major corporations that produce products inimical to human survival will most likely never be charged much less convicted of any crime. I don't want to see them jailed. I do want to see them rehabilitated

Each time I've left a U.S. prison, I've felt as though I was leaving the scene of a crime. When I return to the U.S. from sites of our war making, abroad, I feel the same way. Emerging back into the regular world seems tantamount to accepting a contract, pledging to forget the punishments we visit on impoverished people. I'm invited to forget about the people still trapped inside nightmare worlds we have made for them.

On January 23, 2015, when I report to whichever prison the Bureau of Prisons selects, I'll have a short time to reconnect with the reality endured by incarcerated people. It's not the rehabilitation the prosecutor and judge had in mind, but it will help me be a more empathic and mindful abolitionist, intent on ending all wars. Kathy Kelly (Kathy@vcnv.org) coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence (www.vcnv.org)