

Greenpeace strikes back

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On 4 July 2001, Greenpeace mounted a peaceful occupation of the Memwith Hill communications and electronic monitoring base in North Yorkshire. This facility is controlled by the United States National Security Agency (see Spokesman 70 pages 26-27). It now forms part of the preparations by the United States for its national missile defence or 'son of star wars'. Memwith Hill is one of the most secure military bases in Britain.

This project was three months in the planning, and I spent the weekend in the office making last minute preparations. As many as 130 people – around 20 Greenpeace staff and the rest were supporters from around the country – were to invade the base.

My team of 40 were to break in through three main access gates, and on Monday we had a run-through in a field. It felt like a scene from It's a Knockout. The Ministry of Defence claimed that we had developed amazingly technical equipment to gain entry, but in fact we used household ladders.

We woke up at 3 am on Tuesday and sat on the coach in silence with our adrenalin pumping, travelling to one of the most secure military bases in the United Kingdom. We feared we'd get arrested before we even got there – even if we did get in, we had no idea what would happen next. Luckily we had a completely clear run at it. It was only when we were inside that we saw a guard but, alone, all he could do was ask us to stop, and track us as we went further into the base. About 25 of us climbed on to a roof, about 35-40 ft high, near the two star wars infra-red missile tracking systems, armed with snack bars, fruit, sun cream, a first aid kit and chains (to make the action more sustainable). We also had short wave radios to keep in touch with fellow protesters, and mobile phones.

It was incredibly odd sitting on a roof in a high-security base, talking to a radio station in south-east Asia. I spent a good deal of the day doing interviews with people all over the world, including New Zealand, Australia, Denmark, Canada and even British Forces Broadcasting.

The guards were fairly light-hearted as they knew they weren't in any danger. The guy circling us with a dog looked up periodically to check we were OK, and to make sure we had sun protection. It's a tough situation for them as they have to take into account our safety and their own when removing us. They decided to

get a rope access team in, but having first dealt with the water-tower team, they didn't get us down until about 1 am. They built scaffolding, climbed on to the roof, brought us down one by one, put us in the back of an Ministry of Defence van, and dumped us outside the front gate.

We could have been done for trespassing or criminal damage, but only the six they caught painting were actually arrested. We piled into our Luton van and arrived at our hostel at around 3 am, trying to find empty beds in the dark, until someone woke up and pointed us in the right direction.

On Wednesday I was back outside the base doing support work for people who had managed to get in again. This mostly involved sitting around drinking lots of coffee. We liaised between the protesters and police when they tried to negotiate with demonstrators. The protesters eventually had to come down at 10 pm because they had run out of water.

That night, exhausted, we found a hotel and slept well. I spent Thursday morning sitting in the sun recovering before returning to London for a planning meeting. I think I'll try and take a long weekend.