Disarmament Activists Confront US Nukes in Germany During Flooding: “Stop the Nuclear Catastrophe Before it Starts”

By Brian Terrell

On July 21, I was walking in the forests surrounding the German Air Force Base at Büchel in the Eifel region with three Catholic Worker friends, Susan van der Hijden of Amsterdam, Netherlands, Susan Crane of Redwood City, California, and Christiane Dauzovich of Dortmund, Germany. We were there at the end of an “International Week” of protests against the approximately 20 US nuclear gravity bombs known as B61s kept at the base in a “nuclear sharing” agreement with the United States.

In previous days we had visited the entrance gates to the base with our signs and banners and two days before we participated in a “Digging for Life” action outside the fence, near the other end of the runway, where the German pilots lift off and land their Italian-made PA200 Tornado jet fighters, daily training to drop US nuclear bombs on Russia when the order is given. This day we hiked to the other, less accessible, end of the runway, through a forest of dead and dying trees decimated by recent years of drought, unprecedented heat and a massive bark beetle infestation affected by climate change.

In the clearing near where the runway begins, we noticed a couple of “spotters,” hobbyists who got there before us looking to get dramatic photos of the jets taking off. In their company, while we were scouting and imagining potential future protests at the site, we also knew that some action was imminent.

Beyond the fence that marked the boundary of the base from the forest, there was a high berm of earth that shielded from our view the nearby Tornados warming up their engines for take off. We could not see, but we heard the purr of their engines turn to a roar and we felt the earth shake and we saw and then smelled a wall, a miasma, of acrid black, stinking burnt and unburned jet fuel rising above the berm and over our heads, before the jets screamed off away from us to rehearse for the end of everything.

Not far from where these Tornado jets were spewing out more than 13 tons of CO\textsubscript{2} per flight hour into the atmosphere, cities and towns in the river valleys downstream were clearing up from recent floods and a forest that left more than 177 dead and hundreds more still missing at the time. In some places the rivers rose to the highest in over 100 years, possibly higher than any seen in the last 1,000 years.

Participation in the annual “International Week” in the Covid-19 pandemic was already hampered by the fact that it was held just days after Germany opened its borders to vaccinated visitors from places like the US, and by July 15, the day after my own arrival by air, many railroads and highways were closed by rising water. We heard harrowing travel stories from those few who were able to join us from various points in Germany. Our numbers were much less than expected and the catastrophe of the floods called us to reasseess our plans for the week.

We had planned to have enough people to nonvio- lently blockade the various gates of the base on Friday, July 16, marking the 78th anniversary of the first atomic bomb detonation at Alamogordo, New Mexico in 1945, and the 42nd anniversary of the 1979 uranium mine waste spill at Church Rock, New Mexico — the largest accidental release of radioactive materials in US history. We recognized that even with our reduced numbers, such an act of civil resistance would distract police from search and rescue work that many of them were doing in flooded places in the region. Members of our group met with local police and the commander of the base to inform them that instead of a blockade there would be a simple quiet vigil with signs and prayers outside the main gate on July 16; the planned “Digging for Life” action scheduled for three days later would go on.

The original concept of the event was to be a sym- bolic piece of theater around the base’s new highly armed security fence with surveillance cameras, motion sensors and a deep concrete foundation. The plan that some of us would dig with pink shovels with the impossible aim of making a tunnel under the fortification was dropped. This day we got off the runway while others would cheer them on from a picnic in the adjoining meadow, had to be adapted to our reduced numbers and in recognition of the devastation that had been unfolding around us in the preceding days.

The vibrant pink shovels were mated with black paint or tied with black ribbons. Banners with more light-hearted messages written in pastels were left behind.

Outside the fence at the Büchel Air Force Base July 19, 2021, protesters including US citizens Susan Crane and Dennis DuVall, at center, joined a symbolic “Digging for Life” action. Photo by Dietrich Gerster.

US Plowshares Activist Who Climbed Nuclear Weapons bunkers Tried in Germany for Actions Against ‘Shared’ US H-Bombs

On September 29, 2021, Susan Crane, a Plowshares activist and member of the Catholic Worker community in Redwood City, California, went on trial in District Court in Cochem, Germany, charged with trespass and damage to the fence for go-in actions at the Büchel air base on July 15 and August 6, 2018. Crane’s trial was the second time that a US resident has been brought to court, even though over two dozen US citizens joined nonviolent “go-in” ac- tions during annual protests in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2021. (Dennis DuVall formerly of Arizona was tried and convicted in 2019 but is now a German resident.)

Bench trials and appeals hearings are crowding the calendar in the ongoing campaign of civil re- sistance against the 20 US nuclear weapons, known as B61 gravity bombs, stationed at base.

In her defense, Crane intended to present oral testimony and written documents, including a declaration by international law expert Alan Waxman of Michigan, and a written appeal to the base’s military personnel that was carried by the group on July 15, when 18 people gained entry to the base in broad daylight on a Sunday morning. In prepared testimony provided to Nukewatch, Crane intended to argue that “sharing” of the US thermonuclear B61 gravity bombs with Germany violates the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), among other internation- al laws. We go to press before the trial, but judges in all similar cases in the “Büchel is Everywhere” campaign have ignored appeals to “crime preven- tion” defenses under international law and found the protesters guilty.

Nukewatch staffer John LaForge was convicted on the same two charges May 31, 2021, in the Cochem District court, and is now scheduled for a December 9 appeal hearing in the city of Koblenz, an appeal that Crane hopes to join as a co-defendant.

Before It Begins — Abolish Nuclear Weapons!

As the event unfolded, 14 activists from Germany, the US, and the Netherlands were met at the fence by several times the number of local police, who after an hour arrested four of the most persistent diggers who were soon released without charges. In the coming months, more than a dozen nuclear resisters from Germany, The Netherlands and the UK are scheduled to be transferred to the Dutch judiciary which will try and collect the $1,289 fine.

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