

# Burghfield on 2nd March 2015

**Brief Summary of the 3 blockades at AWE Burghfield on 2nd March 2015, taken from on-site witnesses and compiled by Angie Zelter on 10th March.**

The Thames Valley Police Liaisons informed Action AWE at the weekend that there was a green line painted on the MoD road (The Mearings) and that anyone stepping across this would be arrested. On the day it was evident that several hundred police had been drafted in from many parts of Britain, including Devon and Wales. It was also soon evident that the majority of the AWE Burghfield staff had been given the day off and that construction vehicles had been told not to come that day. This was a success in itself.

The official starting time advertised on the website and given out was for a 7am start but of course affinity groups are autonomous and many decided to start the blockade early. By 4.50am both the Construction Gate and South Mearings were blockaded with activities starting at North Mearings by 5.30am. The blockade was effective, good-humoured, and very successful. The blockading sites were all cleared and cleaned up by around 4.30pm. There are various issues that we need to take up with the police including the stop and search of the “internationals” coach at Calais under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act, and the interview of the driver and two passengers. These were completely inappropriate given that people were travelling to an explicitly non violent demonstration and that the police had a strategy of non-arrest. There was also an incident at Construction Gate when the driver of a van unable to pass the Finnish blockade threatened our legal observer and then drove his van directly at the blockading group. The police made no attempt to stop him; when asked to intervene, the police subsequently failed to stop the driver or to take any action against him. These issues are being followed up by the legal team and a fuller report on this will be available later.

Action AWE would like to thank St. Johns and St. Stephens Church & School and the Friends Meeting House in Reading for their wonderful support as well as the Friends Meeting House in Newbury and RISC in Reading. Many local people also provided beds in their homes and generously helped out with transport needs. Local support of this kind is really vital and most appreciated. Thank you.

## Construction Gate

At around 4.50am the first minibus arrived at the Construction Gate where a police van was parked in the middle of the gate way. The Yorkshire group immediately jumped out, along with legal observer, police liaison and video team. Around 5 Yorkshire folk managed to lock-on right in front of the gate to one side of the police van (one set of 2 and one of 3). Other people were manhandled over to the other side of the public road and held there for maybe half an hour and prevented from joining the blockade until much later.

A minibus of Swedish protesters arrived at around 5.20am while the police were still tied up with the Yorkshire group and awaiting re-enforcements. Some of the Swedes got out, but were quickly surrounded. Others were prevented from leaving the bus for a while (though they kept trying!). Those out of the van were already locked together, preventing the police from taking the lock-ons and enabling them to use them later.

Everyone was held on the verge (where the police seemed a little outnumbered – two police holding four protesters, by the arms) for maybe 20 minutes. Whilst this was going on very near the gate, the coach suddenly appeared. They could see police at the gate itself not very far down the road, but then as it became clear that the Finns wouldn't get to the gate they decided to block the road instead. Around 8 of them did this very effectively

indeed. Meanwhile, 4 of the Spaniards in the group got off from the front of the coach, managing to get to the to lock-on near the Yorkshire group, just the other side of the police van. The police did not notice this activity until too late as they were still dealing with the Swedish contingent. This meant that the gate was fully blocked.

The blockade at the gates was soon established and to conserve police resources the police allowed the rest of the protesters stuck on the other side of the road to join the gate blockade. This eventually resulted in 15 people locked on at the Gate itself. Translators and legal observers were allowed to speak to the gate blockaders and a social and good atmosphere was soon established, people given head supports and covered to keep them warm.

The supporters of the Finnish group in the road were cordoned off from their blockaders but the police liaison and translators were able to provide support until a later time when the police relaxed and there was more freedom of movement. It was clear that there was a policy of trying to stop the blockade from getting set up at this gate but that if it was, then there were to be no arrests if at all possible. This suited the protesters as their aim was to shut down the normal activities at the base, which the whole action did very effectively. A brass band arrived and provided a great atmosphere and dancing started up. Later people joining the blockade brought hot drinks and food. As the day progressed those in the lock-ons were replaced for comfort breaks.

The blockade finished at around 2.30pm with a group photo and circle.

## South Mearings

The blockade at South Mearings started at around 4.50am with London and Welsh groups jumping out of their van to blockade. Police were already blocking the road behind the green line and none of them attempted to stop the protesters.

The blockade was between the road junction and the green line on The Mearings road. Some cyclists walked over the blockade to get onto the MoD road (The Mearings) but all vehicular traffic was blocked. The blockade consisted of pipe lock-ons, chains and padlocks. At 7am other groups joined the blockade, including the Bristol group, some dressed in day-glow yellow nuclear waste barrels which were not only very photogenic but also reminded people of the side effects of nuclear weapons. The toilets and tea stall arrived to cheers and were soon put up by helpful supporters.

The Bristol group also managed to set up an "open mic" system that enabled people to talk and hear each other and especially gave a voice to those lying in the road on the blockade who might otherwise have felt a bit left out of the socialising and fun that was helping pass the time. By about 10.30am the protesters began to take breaks, swapping places to allow comfort breaks.

Although it began cold and dark, dawn soon came, the bird song was lovely and the sun cheering. There was a very good atmosphere and the refreshments appreciated. Visits from groups walking around the base provided opportunities to talk together and to enjoy the uplifting singing from the choirs present.

The police presence (mostly MoD and Thames Valley) settled to between 6 and 10 at the blockade.

After communicating with the other 2 blockading places an end time of 2pm was agreed and there was an inspiring circle with singing and in and out "dancing". The crowd at that point was just under 100 strong and they joined hands to sing "Gonna lay down my sword and shield", filling the country lane with a circle of peace.

## North Mearings

The blockade of North Mearings on 2 March 2015 was also fantastic. It seemed that the police were unsure as to what time it would start so they were there by 4am. The legal support and information support women turned up at 5.30am. Shortly afterwards, in the dark, a van pulled up and it was quickly surrounded by police. However, two men were quicker and jumping out of the van, went across the main road with a light lock-on. The police swiftly moved them to the side of the road and a police car blocked part of the main road until dawn broke and it was light enough for passing traffic to avoid the police and the man with the lock on who was still on the verge.

It seemed the police were keen not to arrest people. However, they kept the man on the verge and they did not allow the other occupants of the van out. More police arrived and conducted a brief search of the van then let the others out. More vans and cars arrived, a tea tent was very welcome as it was a bitterly cold morning but everyone seemed in good spirits. A camping toilet was set up, blown over by the strong wind and then set up again. The French group of 12 people blockaded half of the top of the North Mearings from around 8am and this remained half blocked until everyone left around 3pm.

The police presence was heavy. At one point there were 56 police personnel. They did not want a full blockade of the Mearings and they pushed anyone who attempted to blockade the open left hand side of the road or lifted them out of the way. Some workers for AWE arrived by foot, bicycle and in buses, many of the buses dropped them off at the top of the Mearings. There were a very few heavy vehicles which just managed to gain access into Burghfield but essentially only a few police vehicles went in and out.

Lots of banners were put up. There was singing, an uplifting band and dancing. There was a piece of theatre which included a "nuclear missile" which exploded and lots of confetti ('radiation') was strewn around. The faith groups, including Quakers, Pax Christi, Christian CND and the Anglican Fellowship, held the right hand side of the verge (as you enter the North Mearings) with banners, music, and songs. Sue Gilmurray and her keyboard were joined by the local vicar who personally supports nuclear disarmament and our nonviolent actions despite some of her congregation being employed at the base.

The closing ceremony was a circle with singing in French, Japanese and English which was both touching and rousing.

## What Next?

Thanks to everyone that came. May you find the strength and resources to form affinity groups for more nonviolent civil resistance. It is up to us to do all we can to keep the protests going and the public pressure for disarmament high. If you need any kind of training, planning and equipment support then let us know at [info@actionawe.org](mailto:info@actionawe.org)