

George Armstrong at the Canterbury Museum Opening of *Nuclear Free New Zealand*, an exhibition and celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New Zealand's Nuclear Free Legislation and the beginning of the World Court Project.  
Friday 4 May 2007

*You'd never believed what happened*  
in 1976.  
In New Zealand.

**What began as a nightmare began to turn into a dream.**  
That nightmare had begun much earlier for me. I watched the film called *The War Game*. It was a fictional documentary of the dropping of a nuclear bomb on England.  
In the film there was an innocuous Anglican priest.  
Just like me.  
After the explosion, British society fell apart.  
A looter was about to be shot on the spot by a policeman with special powers. The priest knelt by the side of the doomed man. All that that priest could do was say the Lord's prayer with him.

I stumbled from the film into the blinding St Helier's Bay sunshine. I sat stunned on a bench by Auckland's sparkling Waitemata harbour. I made my decision there and then. If I spent the remainder of my life stopping this weapon, it would be a life well spent.

Was this some sort of egotistic mirage on my part? Was I just an idealistic ambitious Anglican priest and teacher in my prime?

No.

I was to discover that this was a moment that was for real.

In 1975 the nuclear nightmare was crossing the beautiful harbour that lay ahead of me that day at St Helier's. Robert Muldoon was about to drown Norman Kirk's dramatic nuclear free initiative. As new prime minister, Mr Muldoon was hell-bent on welcoming nuclear armed and powered ships to New Zealand. He trumpeted this at the astonished South Pacific Forum that met in Rotorua that year. I paced the Rotorua streets in those few days feeling the dead weight of the domestic political reversal which would bind us – and likely the whole Pacific Basin - tightly to the massive nuclear navy of the United States of America.

I and many other St John's Theological College members were already publicly committed. We had promised to call together a determined but non-violent and happy-spirited "peace squadron". Our small vessels would so fill the Waitemata Harbour that there "would be no room" for any visiting "death ship".

This visual image would stamp all over the incoming death ship an unmistakable exclamation mark. The squadron would reflect and declare who we were as New Zealanders. It would resonate with the best that was in us and in our history. It would help mobilize people in their permanent affirmation of a nuclear free and independent future for ourselves and for the Pacific region.

Not that there was need to script the exact image generated each time a nuclear warship came in. Each entrance produced its own choreography, miraculously better and more jazzy than anything we could have cleverly contrived. Who would have imagined that Steven Sherie would intuitively leap from his fizboat right onto the hull of the submarine *Pintado*. *Pintado* was already bespattered from Stephen's crew with eggshells of radiation yellow warning paint. Stephen surfed all the way in to port on the hull. The newspaper carried the perfect headline: *Hot welcome for the yellow submarine.*

I had not publicly promised to launch a Peace Squadron lightly wantonly or unadvisedly. If we could not deliver what we promised, we would be a damp squid instead of a soaring rocket. We would have failed the splendid veteran nuclear free New Zealand Peace movement.

St John's theological college members and teachers had already been willing to respond - to gather around the promise. Our strategy had already called for ordinary folk to declare themselves and their houses and dogs and schools and pubs and churches nuclear free. Would they respond?

But what were a few religious dreamers amongst so much nuclear "realism"?

The media were early interested but not convinced. We blessed the waters of the Harbour with a communion service at Bastion Point.

We "launched" the first few boats.

We conducted "manoeuvres" out on the harbour.

"How many boats have you got now?"

I struggled to answer this constant media question truthfully and accurately. We contacted anyone anywhere who had any sort of floating contrivance. The list crept up by twos and threes.

You'd never believe what happened next.  
Peace squadrons began to form themselves all over New Zealand.

Wellington's wild harbour was the site of the first encounter. A band of hardy peace vessels made a brave showing. Committed watersiders refused any assistance to the nuclear armed *Truxtun* in early 1976.

Later in the year the visit to Auckland of the nuclear cruiser *Longbeach* was announced.

A few nights before the *Longbeach* was due, the nightmare began to turn for me.

60 or so tough boat skippers crowded into the lounge of Kate Dewes Auckland house.

Something was on the move - big time.  
We knew it.

The TV film crew, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and all the way from Wellington knew it. Their cameramen were trampling about impatiently in the hallway outside our top secret skippers' meeting awaiting news of our decisions. At midnight they filmed me phoning a bemused Pentagon official to convey our non-invitation to them.

The next morning - as the TV team explained to me - they had hired a launch to inspect the future harbour playing field. But they had not been able to find a harbour guide. Hesitantly I offered my possible services. They fell eagerly upon my innocent offer. You will see that from the beginning we were determined to follow the bible and be as wise as serpents as well as harmless as doves.

You'd never believe what happened next.  
Helen Caldicott arrived electrifying a huge public meeting in Auckland. 400 brought their glowing energy to the Maclaurin chapel a couple of days later. The energy moved swiftly and unstoppably into pragmatic strategic channels.

We made it into the media. We made it into the international arena. We made it into legislation supported by all parties. We made it into the history books.

And now, the final triumph: we have become ..... a museum piece!

That's why we CAN NOW believe what had happened next.

Because it's in the museum.

Long before the rest of us, museums knew that everything is still alive,  
that nothing ever died,  
that our ancestry lives on within and amongst us.

So here's to the Canterbury museum.

And here's to Doctor Kate Dewes who has been more resolute and faithful than  
many of us in pursuing the nuclear free vision. She was a key figure in the launching  
of the Auckland Peace Squadron and she remains a key figure today.

In a little while we'll be raising our glasses. But why not right now give three cheers  
for the Canterbury Museum and for our very own and precious Kate.

Hip hip hooray x 3