

Why Was I a Soldier? Why Am I Now a Peace Activist?

Ellen Barfield

Ellen Barfield served in the U.S. Army from 1977 to 1981, finished college with Army money in 1984, and has been a full-time nonviolent activist since 1988. She was born in Georgia, grew up in Texas, and now lives in Baltimore, MD with her husband and fellow peace-and-justice activist, Lawrence Egbert. She stood trial in February 2002 and was jailed for an October act of civil resistance to the war against Afghanistan, committed at the Maryland Air National Guard base.

I had expected something like the atrocity of September 11th for quite a while. After all, I have seen long, drawn out atrocities—like the horrific economic exploitation and impoverishment of Central America, which is maintained by murderous SOA/WHISC-trained government troops; and the genocide by starvation in Iraq, maintained by U.S. domination of the United Nations.

I decry ALL of these atrocities and call them all terrorism. My government calls the first by that name—but commits, helps, or encourages the others. I am horrified but not surprised at the tremendously violent response my government is perpetrating on innocent Afghans after 9/11. In a unipower world, only the powerful clutches unto its breast the “right” to use force—and in doing so makes its own citizens targets of the fury and frustration of others, those who disagree with its policies but have no legitimate and effective way to object.



Ellen Barfield, US Army

I have traveled a long path to get to the understanding I now have of U.S. policy.

I joined the Army to get the money to finish college. Though my parents and I never discussed the matter, after I married I did not believe I could ask them to help me any more with college money. My husband Kurt had joined the Army before we married, and when he later got overseas orders for a tour without dependents, I decided to join as well.

I had no intention of making it a career. I come from a rather militarized family (with my mother's father an Air Force officer and my father's four brothers all Navy officers), but I did not feel any particular patriotic fervor to serve. Not being a male, I guess patriotism always felt like school spirit to me—wearing the colors, cheering the players (soldiers) from the sidelines, being told God was on our side (in Texas football is nearly a religion). That idea—that God wanted one set of people to defeat another set of people, on the football field or in war—always rang false, but the issue seemed remote to me. I just wanted to do my time and get my money for school.

I did not question the military mission in Germany, my first duty station, but that is where I began questioning western life in general. I had the tremendous good fortune to have a book store on my base run by an officer's wife who was quietly progressive. I wish I could find her now and thank her for making good periodicals available to me then.

Through magazine ads, I joined the Sierra Club, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women, and the Union of Concerned Scientists. Reading their literature, I got an education about the environment, energy usage, civil and human rights, feminism, and nuclear weapons. I began to want to do something about these issues, so the seeds had been planted, though I doubt I knew the word “activist” at the time.

A 1980 assignment to Korea provided my first close up exposure to real poverty. Even cheap electrical items (like toaster ovens) from the store on base were highly regulated because of their black market value. When I went off base I saw swarms of raggedly clad people—some begging, some prostituting themselves, many just working far too hard for far too little. I also saw a growing middle class producing export goods for the U.S., and occasionally the very wealthy Koreans who owned the factories. It was a real education for a young, sheltered and naive, middle-class woman from the United States.

During my year there, Republic of Korea army troops perpetrated the Kwang Ju massacre of over 2000 Korean civilians. My unit, along with all 40,000 U.S. troops in the country, was placed on high alert and began anti-riot training. We got through several days of lectures about controlling supposedly deadly crowds of civilians before the crisis blew over. I did not think much more about it at the time.

I have since learned why Kwang Ju happened. There had been a coup in South Korea in 1979, and the U.S. installed a more compliant

puppet regime. The city of Kwang Ju had a history of independence, so not just students but the whole city demonstrated against the illegally installed government. While it was Korean troops who did the killing in Kwang Ju, we U.S. troops were right behind them, and our mission was to crush any ideas the Korean people had of running their own country.

I got out of the Army, went back to college and got my degree, and began being a good little wage earner and consumer—though I continued to read the literature of those progressive groups I had joined earlier. But my home, Amarillo, Texas, was too small and conservative to support many branches of national organizations, so my progressive membership was solely through the mail.



Several years later some courageous folks started holding activist peace camps at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant outside Amarillo. I attended a few camps and began learning about nuclear weapons and militarism. I finally joined the Red River Peace Network of camp organizers and became a full-time volunteer at the Peace Farm, the intentional community Red River established across the highway from the Pantex plant. All this activism caused Kurt and me to grow apart, and we divorced. I moved to the Peace Farm and was its director for about a year.

I met my current husband, Lawrence Egbert, in the Red River Network. He and I traveled with a Pastors for Peace caravan through Central America in late 1995, and lived in Leon, Nicaragua for seven months. That was where I got my real education on Central America issues. (Coming into peace work in the late '80s, I had missed the height of the U.S. solidarity movement.)

While Korea provides low-wage workers to assemble U.S. consumer goods, Nicaragua is part of the U.S.' self-appropriated resource base, which is the whole western hemisphere. To a large extent the U.S. sees Nicaraguans as just being in the way: a few of them grow bananas or coffee for export, but about 70% are surplus to the current labor

force. In fact, Korean poverty is nothing compared to Nicaraguan poverty. Nicaragua was unlike other Central American countries in the 1980s, in that it was not SOA-trained government troops but U.S.-backed rebels (or *contras*) who carried out their long nightmare of slaughter and destruction—but the purpose and result were the same.

The analysis of western culture which I began by reading those magazines in Germany has helped me see the way U.S. power works. The number one U.S. export is militarism—by weapons and training when that will suffice, as in Central and South America; and by troops when the U.S. public screams for obvious blood, as in Afghanistan.

The U.S. government is willing to do whatever it takes to keep the world's goodies disproportionately flowing in, so that U.S. citizens can eat strawberries in January and pumpkins in June; drive behemoth gas-guzzling SUVs and live in huge, overheated, suburban mansions; and most especially so a few U.S. citizens can get obscenely wealthy, and the rest of us can dream of doing so. There is, of course, poverty in the U.S. (and I am not in any way blaming the poor here), but our culture grotesquely overconsumes.

One way I have chosen to practice the real patriotism of challenging my country to rise above its baser instincts, is to risk arrest by trespassing and speaking out at places which embody U.S. abuses of power. I have lost track of the number of my arrests now, but it is around thirty. Many of these actions—like numerous times at the Nevada nuclear weapons test site, and several years at the SOA/



Ellen Barfield and Brian Barrett protest the war against Afghanistan at the Maryland Air National Guard Base near Baltimore, October 15, 2001.

WHISC—have been highly choreographed dances between the activists and the authorities, where they let us make our point and carry us away, but avoid allowing us to speak out at trial by declining to document our detentions.

My first jail time was served after resisting at the Pantex plant by simply kneeling in front of the gate and singing a song decrying the Hiroshima bombing. It was four days before we three protesters got released on several thousand dollars bail, which was set by the vindictive prosecutor of the small, Texas panhandle county which hosts the Pantex plant. At the trial for that action, expert international law witnesses for the defense testified only before the judge when their testimony was ruled inadmissible for the jury. The jurors must have resented that exclusion, because they gave us a small fine and probation.

I have served a few short sentences for other actions, and expect to incur longer sentences as my record lengthens and I commit more serious actions. For instance, I plan to break the ban-and-bar that I finally got at Fort Benning for taking political discourse onto the post, and likely will face six months in a federal prison for that. I also anticipate doing a Plowshares action involving the disarming of some horrific weapon.

Jailhouse witness is only a part of what I do, but I think it is important. Gracefully suffering what society thinks is the worst it can do to a dissenter, while living in solidarity with the people society wants to throw away, and simply *being* a dissenter after having supported U.S. policy with my body as a soldier—all these send powerful messages.

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