
The FOUR PLOUGHSHARERS

"DISARMING FOR LIFE AND JUSTICE"

A work of hope

At dead of night on 29th January 1996, three women, **Andrea Needham**, **Joanna Wilson** and **Lotta Kronlid** broke through the perimeter fence that surrounds the British Aerospace factory at Warton in Lancashire. They slipped past security guards, ran across a frosted runway to the hangar containing Hawk jet number ZH 955 and forced opened the door. Then, using household hammers, they smashed the £12m plane's sophisticated electronics.

By the time the security guards arrived at the scene, at 5:00am, the three women had been in the factory for more than two hours and had caused, it is alleged, damage to the aircraft to the tune of £1.7m. They were arrested and taken to the Risley remand centre. While waiting for their trial, scheduled for July, the women prayed and prepared their defence.

East Timor is a long way from Lancashire. A small former Portuguese colony, it was forcibly annexed by Indonesia in 1975 and since then its people had suffered the most brutal persecution. Amnesty International estimated that no fewer than 200,000 people - a third of its population had been killed. The women believed that British-made Hawk aircraft were being used by the Indonesian military to wage war against the people of East Timor.

The women decided to take this action because they were determined to prevent the plane from reaching Indonesia in case it was then used against the people of East Timor.

Dancing with joy

In July 1996, they were summoned to Liverpool Crown Court, charged with causing, and conspiring to cause, criminal damage. Accused of conspiracy with them was **Angie Zelter**, who had been arrested a week later than the others after announcing she was going to the factory to continue the damage her friends had started.



The three women explained that when they had finished their "work" that night they danced with joy. *"It was such a feeling, dancing in the night outside a hangar where we had disarmed the plane,"* claimed Andrea.

Joanna Wilson explained: *"We are pleading not guilty on the basis that we had lawful excuse as we were acting to prevent British Aerospace and the British Government from aiding and abetting genocide."* The focus of their concern was a £500m arms contract that Britain had signed with the Indonesian government in 1993, involving the sale of 24 British Aerospace Hawks. Andrea,

"I believe that above all else in life, we are called to love and to be human. I can therefore not stand aside and allow the Hawks to be delivered without doing all that is in my power to peacefully resist. I believe that to be silent in this situation is to be complicit with injustice. I pray that what we do today in disarming these planes will be a small ray of hope for our sisters and brothers struggling for peace and justice in East Timor." (Statement from Andrea Needham)

Joanna, Lotta and Angie argued that the deal was extremely bad news for East Timor.

The women had made no attempt to escape and had draped the aircraft with banners bearing the slogans "*Swords into Ploughshares*" and "*Peace and Justice in East Timor*." They had also left a video in the cockpit explaining the reasons for their actions. They had then used a telephone in the hangar to call Angie Zelter and a press agency and to alert security. Vera Baird, counsel for Joanna Wilson, said that the attack was not a publicity stunt but an act of last resort by women of principle who had so far unsuccessfully campaigned against the sale of the Hawks. Although David Pickup, for the prosecution, had told the court that the women's "genuine and sincere" beliefs were irrelevant to the issues in the case, the jury of seven men and five women cleared them of the charges.

"Battle of the doves and hawks"

This was the title a *Guardian* reporter, Neil Godwin, used to describe how peaceful protesters had attempted to stop Britain selling lethal jets to the Indonesian regime. "*So four women took matters into their own hands*," he continued. But who were these women? Joanna Wilson, was a tutor in further education and an independent borough councillor. Angie Zelter, a widow, supporter of the Green Party and founder of the Trident Ploughshares movement. Andrea Needham, a physiotherapist and nurse. Lotta Kronlid worked as a gardener and as a cleaner. These four women came from very different social backgrounds; however they share the same great desire to work for justice and peace. Not all of the women were Christian but because they needed the support of other like-minded people, they joined the Ploughshares Movement, a predominantly Christian movement, whose members do not hesitate to take direct action to create a more peaceful world once all other means have failed.

The Four Ploughsharers' act of disarmament came from a knowledge of injustice and from making a deliberate, reasoned decision to resist the injustice. It was also an active expression of heart-felt conviction and of courage to be true

to this conviction through their action. This meant facing up to fears about their personal safety, arrest, court appearance, prison and disruption to their lives - particularly relationships, home and work.

Witnesses of solidarity

Catherine Scott of the Catholic Institute for International Relations, and Pat Gaffney of Pax Christi's British Section, visited East Timor in April 1996, a few months after the battle of the "doves and the hawks". When they told East Timorese women about the four women who were detained in the Risley remand centre, awaiting their trial, they were overwhelmed with the support and encouragement of the Timorese women who then wrote to Joanna, Angie, Andrea and Lotta to express their feelings:

"We are aware of your suffering, and thank you with all sincerity for your action and your spirit of solidarity. Dear sisters, we wish you courage, spirit and determination in your trial. We rely on your passion and strength."

The Battle of Doves and Hawks ended with an acquittal. It was a triumph of justice, a victory for disarmament and, above all, an amazing day for the people of East Timor. The careful disarmament of weapons such as the Hawk war-plane with hand tools is a step towards preventing potential acts of violence and senseless destruction. Before July 1996 no activist from the 55 previous Ploughshares actions has been found "not guilty" in a court of law. On that day new "Seeds of Hope" for humanity were planted and have already begun to germinate.

Read:

Protest for Peace, by Bernadette Meaden, Wild Goose Publications, 1999

Swords into Plowshares: Nonviolent Direct Action for Disarmament, ed Arthur J. Laffin and Anne Montgomery, Fortkamp Publishing, 1996