

By Carol Dudek

That's what Martha Hennessy said when asked if she is sad about the possibility of going to prison. Martha is one of the Kings Bay Plowshares 7 who walked onto the largest U.S. Navy Trident Nuclear Submarine base in the world, carrying an indictment charging the U.S. government with crimes against peace. On April 4, 2018, the seven members entered the base in Georgia, cut fencing, hammered a concrete missile monument, poured out their own blood, draped crime scene tape around the area and spray-painted "Love One Another" on the ground.

That day was the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's death, who admonished: "The greatest purveyor of violence in the world is my own government."

In October the group was found guilty of three felonies, including conspiracy and destruction of government property, and now faces more than 20 years in prison. Sentencing will be determined in 90 days. Most of the members are senior citizens: three were detained for 18 months and others were obligated to wear ankle monitors for bail. Why did they do it? These defendants have devoted their lives to working for peace. Martha is the granddaughter of Dorothy Day, founder of The Catholic Worker. She's described the helplessness of being in jail, essentially being buried alive. She's quoted Fr. Delp, executed by the Nazis: "These are not matters that can be postponed to suit our convenience. They call for immediate action because untruth is both dangerous and destructive." In their statement, Liz McAlister (the 80-year-old widow of Phil Berrigan), Mark Colville, Patrick O'Neill, Clare Grady, Fr. Stephen Kelly and Carmen Trotta said they seek to bring about a world free of nuclear weapons, racism and economic exploitation. They came in peace to "beat swords into plowshares" by symbolically disarming the world's deadliest weapon.

How is it possible to understand the courage of these activists and the sacrifice they were willing to make? They entered a limited access area of the base where nuclear weapons are stored in bunkers. Submarines in the base carry 24 Trident nuclear missiles each, and each missile has eight warheads capable of 30 times the explosive force of the Hiroshima bomb. In the deadly force zone, loudspeakers blast out a warning every 15 minutes.

The Plowshares 7 wanted to present a necessity defense, a justification where a defendant acts

under an imminent impending threat of death, where there is no legal alternative and there is a direct relationship to preventing harm - that they acted on the lesser of two evils. They wished to raise a defense under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. However, the judge prohibited any testimony on the illegality of nuclear weapons, the necessity defense or religious motivation. The good news, though, is that some states have permitted the necessity defense. A Washington State Court of Appeals ruled that a defendant who turned off a pipeline valve as a response to climate change had the constitutional right to present a necessity defense.

The Kings Bay action is the latest of 100 Plowshares actions that began in 1980 in Pennsylvania and now include Europe and Australia. Their supporters include Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Angela Davis. Daniel Ellsberg submitted an affidavit to court saying the defendants were justified because they were attempting to prevent "omnicide, the collateral murder of nearly every human on earth in a war in which the nuclear missiles aboard Trident submarines were launched." He says that the civil resistance he witnessed by opponents of the Vietnam War helped him release the Pentagon Papers, and we know the papers helped shorten the war.

As the U.S. ramps up its aggressive stance, The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists states that at no time in history have we been closer to the devastation of nuclear exchange. Although a majority of nations and the Vatican signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the U.S. pulled out of the INF Treaty, continues to violate the NPT, ended the Iran nuclear deal and now threatens to pull out of New START, the only treaty left standing in the way of nuclear annihilation. And we know the devastation of Iraq and Afghanistan as a result of the US's "first-strike" position.

The activists of the Plowshares 7 were motivated by the human right to be free from war crimes. They believe they are required to denounce and resist all those responsible for those crimes. As Martha says, faith without action just doesn't cut it. And Mark Colville knows that "by enslaving the human psyche to the idolatry of power, nuclearism underwrites all other forms of state-inflicted mayhem on the planet." So, Martha is sad that she may miss seeing her grandchildren grow up, but she's had a wonderful life. She is happy that her message got out there. And it's still "better than having everybody blown up."

For the latest, contact KingsBayPlowshares7.org .

Carol Dudek is a volunteer at World Can't Wait. Her activism began during the Vietnam war and she worked in the Center for Constitutional Right's GI rights project in Okinawa. She worked on the Attica lawsuit and currently helps Muslim prisoners serving inhumane sentences.

