

Reclaiming Vandenberg

the January 1983 occupation of Vandenberg Air Force Base

by Jeff Harrison, © 2000 GroundWork magazine

IN OCTOBER of this year, activists will gather at Vandenberg Air Force Base near Santa Barbara, CA to protest test launches of the Pentagon's proposed missile-based defense system [see page 18].

The protests are not the first at Vandenberg. For our History column this issue, RQ looks back to 1983, when over a thousand anti-nuclear protesters were arrested in a series of direct actions at the base. The narrative below is excerpted from a forthcoming novel based on those actions, which were among the earliest to be based on affinity groups, consensus process and jail solidarity. These actions helped lay the foundations for today's protests, from Seattle to Washington DC and back to Vandenberg.

The January 1983 action was organized primarily by Livermore Action Group (LAG). LAG, while based on affinity groups (AGs), also had an office, several full-time staffers, and a de facto steering committee ("Coordinating Council"). The subsequent March 1983 action was organized by the Vandenberg Action Coalition (VAC, forerunner of the October 2000 organizing group), which was based on an affinity group spokescouncil model. Part of the narrative here focuses on the tensions between the two models of organizing.

For more excerpts and photos, visit www.groundworkmag.org/vandenberg

CAROLINE'S AFFINITY GROUP was the first to cross "the line." Vandenberg officials apparently figured that if they discouraged us from trespassing at the gate, we'd just be more likely to do a back country action. So they painted a white line across the entrance road and



ordered the soldiers to remain well back of it, giving us plenty of room to commit federal trespass.

The rain had let up, but the pavement was still wet as the AG strode past the gate and sat down in the road, blocking a couple of incoming cars. A squad of soldiers moved up behind them.

Caroline was seated in the middle of her AG, wearing an army-green poncho. It was keeping her pants dry, but even more, it was making life difficult for the two soldiers who were trying to pry her arms out and make her stand up. Caroline's brow was taut, and she refused to acknowledge the presence of her tormentors. Finally, after a few clumsy attempts, one of the soldiers succeeded in getting a wristlock on her. Caroline grimaced and lurched to her feet. The crowd yelled encouragement to her, but Caroline stared stoically at the ground, ignoring the soldiers as they half-dragged her to a waiting bus.

It was hard for me to watch. I

shuffled my feet, uncomfortable that I planned to acquiesce in my own arrest. But I wasn't up for a sprained wrist, either. Wasn't there some other option?

More arrests followed. Forty or fifty people had crossed the line at the gate by the time Change of Heart circled up for a meeting in the gravel turnout across the road. We started talking about when we wanted to go, but Doc changed the topic.

"We can't just walk into their arms," he said. "They've even got the buses right there, waiting to haul us away."

Karina jumped in as soon as he finished. "I just walked down the road and found this huge meadow, right past those trees there. If we walk down there real casually, then all of the sudden head out into the meadow, it'll catch them completely off guard."

As if Karina's remarks had popped the cork of our pent-up fervor, the cluster erupted in passionate debate. Some people argued that surprising the soldiers was dangerous even in broad

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daylight, while others pleaded that occupying the meadow had far more symbolic value than blocking the gate.

My concern was mostly for keeping my feet dry. I was carrying a new pair of tennis shoes around in a plastic bag, aiming to put them on right before we crossed the line. So naturally, I favored the gate over the wet meadow. But I felt embarrassed about my motive, and didn't say anything.

Back and forth it went, around the circle. No one was giving in,



PHOTOS FROM VANDENBERG 1983

Upper left, lower left, upper right by Bette Lee
Middle, lower right by Ted Sahl



and no comment quite clinched the debate. "Let's do a straw poll," someone finally said. "How many want to do the gate? Seven. And the meadow? Seven." Laughter and applause vented some of our jitters.

Karina reached in her pocket. "Let's toss a coin." More applause. "Here, Walt, you toss it, you're neutral."

Walt, who was working on the legal collective for the action, placed the nickel carefully on his thumbnail and held his arm out. "Heads for the gate, tails for the meadow," he pronounced, and let it fly. The coin bounced off the gravel and landed in some tall grass. "Tails! The meadow!"

"Wait, he has to catch it," someone said.

"No way," Karina shot back. "Come on, let's go!"

Bottling up our effervescence, we strolled away from the gate with a casualness that attracted thirty or forty supporters and several press photographers but somehow evaded detection by the military. I felt uneasy about our change of plans, but I was relieved to be getting on with the action.

A hundred yards down the road, we clustered in front of a large No Trespassing sign. Only a token strand of wire separated us from a huge green field, lush from the rain. Way off across the field was a row of trees, and I felt an impulse to take off running and try to reach them.

Karina looked around our circle. "Here? Now?" No one objected. She ducked under the wire. Cindy and Doc were close behind. I slipped



under the wire after Hank, grabbing his hand as we formed a ribbon and streamed out into the field.

Although we were almost running, it seemed that we were moving in slow motion. Each step sunk deep into the thick sod carpet. It felt like the earth was welcoming our celebratory incursion. Shouts and laughter reverberated in the crisp air, and the field seemed to expand to immense proportions, as if our spirit were permeating the entire base.

Gradually I became aware of three soldiers flying down from another time zone to intercept us. We gamboled further into the field as they zeroed in, then swung the line around to form a circle. We thrust our clenched hands into the air in a victory salute. We were occupying Vandenberg!

The three soldiers conferred nervously, then fanned out and "surrounded" us. Someone started singing "We Shall Not Be Moved." We took it up at the top of our voices, drowning out the attempts of the soldiers to communicate.

Patches of crystal blue were breaking through the clouds. Two other groups followed us into the field. Overthrow cluster got within fifty feet of us before several more soldiers raced down and headed them off. Most of their cluster circled up, but Tai got up on Lyle's shoulders and the two of them came galloping over toward us yelling "Overthrow! Overthrow!" When two of our soldiers ran over to corral them, Change of Heart took off again. Arms linked, we chorus-lined another fifty feet onto the base before the final soldier grabbed Karina's arm. We stopped and circled up.

Reinforcements rushed down, mostly young battle-helmeted privates ordered around by a few officers in black berets. We sang "This Land Is Your Land" as two soldiers gingerly took Doc by the elbows and led him away, beginning the arrests. Daniel and Cindy soon followed. Nearby, the first couple of people from Overthrow cluster received a similar escort.

But Lyle from Overthrow didn't fare as well. When they came to arrest him, he sat down. Frustrated, the two soldiers grabbed his arms and tried to twist them behind his back. Lyle stared intently ahead, refusing to budge. Finally one of the soldiers removed his gloves. He seemed to take a long breath, then bent over and jabbed his thumbs into the soft spots behind Lyle's ears.



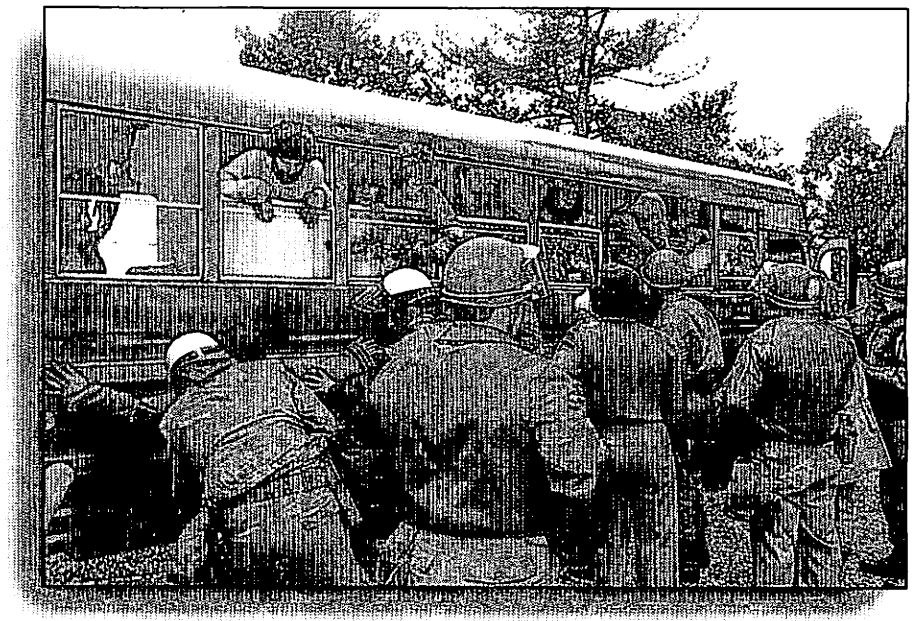
Lyle stared straight ahead, his jaw set firmly. As one soldier twisted his arm and the other jabbed at his ears, I felt unsteady, and gripped Karina's hand for support. At that moment, a private fastened onto my elbow. I didn't resist, and he led me away from our circle. As we passed Lyle, who had risen to his feet but was refusing to walk, the nervous private started twisting my arm. My elbow twinged in pain, and I looked around at him. "Hey, I'm not going anywhere," I said. He eased up, but wouldn't look at me.

Emboldened, I vented some of my turbulence from watching Lyle's ordeal. "Is this why you enlisted? How does it feel to arrest American citizens?" He yanked my arm forward to let me know that he wasn't interested in discussing it, but it seemed like it got under his skin. And sure enough, a moment later, when I

proposed veering out of our way to avoid a marshy area, he silently acquiesced, as if to show that he had a heart.

The soldiers took us back across the meadow to the main gate where the buses were parked. After a quick pat-down they handcuffed us with the usual white plastic bands. Then

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they carefully wrote a number on each arrestee's hand.

Most of Change of Heart and Overthrow wound up on the same bus. People were yelling to each other, leaning out the windows to holler at the soldiers, and laughing up a storm. We had survived a confrontation with the U.S. military, even out-maneuvered them for a few minutes! The nail clippers came out, the plastic bands were cut off, and people bounced around the seats. Secret stashes of fruit and nuts and even a few candy bars were passed around as the last protesters were loaded in.

We finally sat down and the decibel level dropped as the bus pulled out and headed into Vandenberg. "They're keeping us on the base," I speculated, settling into a seat next to Hank.

He shook his head. "Naw, they're just taking a back road out, I'll bet."

"Remember what you see for the occupation next time," Karina put in. "This is our chance to scout it out."

We rolled down a two-lane road, passing an occasional nondescript little building. Without discussing it, a number of people began industriously rubbing the numbers off their hands. Hank went a step further, obliterating his number and then inking a fresh one in its place with a pen I loaned him: "4Q-U812."

I laughed, even though I wasn't sure it was such a great idea to mess with the system that way. But I didn't want to be the only one not doing it. I rubbed out most of my number "56."

The bus pulled up in front of what looked like a little classroom complex. I turned to Hank. "We're still on the base, I told you!"

An officer with an unnecessary bullhorn leaned into the bus and barked: "Everyone out! Single file!" Through the windows we could see a pack of guard dogs straining at their leashes, snarling at the first people stepping off the bus.

They herded thirty of us into the first building and through a doorway so low you had to stoop to enter. We found ourselves in a twenty-foot square room with a high ceiling, painted entirely white except for a few lines around the walls.

"What's this," I said to Hank, "The brainwashing chamber?"

"No, it's a squashball court. See, up there's the cage for spectators."

"Or to spy on us!" I said.

"It's pretty convenient for them," Doc said as he joined us. "They can watch us without having to be in the room. They don't want the soldiers around us, they're afraid we'll corrupt them."

People were milling around, unsure whether to bother getting comfortable. We could be here for five minutes or five hours. I figured the feds were in no hurry to deal with us, so I sat down and unlaced my new shoes. The canvas was wet, but amazingly, inside, my socks were dry.

GRADUALLY WE drifted into small conversations. Some people took seats against the white walls, while others paced the floor. Karina, not content to pace, did a mock-ballet around the perimeter of the room, using people's bodies as props and balance beams.

I took a seat in the corner by Doc, who was rubbing again at the back of his hand. He held it up to the light, rotating it to see if the number showed from different angles. I looked down at my faded "56," still hesitant to efface it completely.

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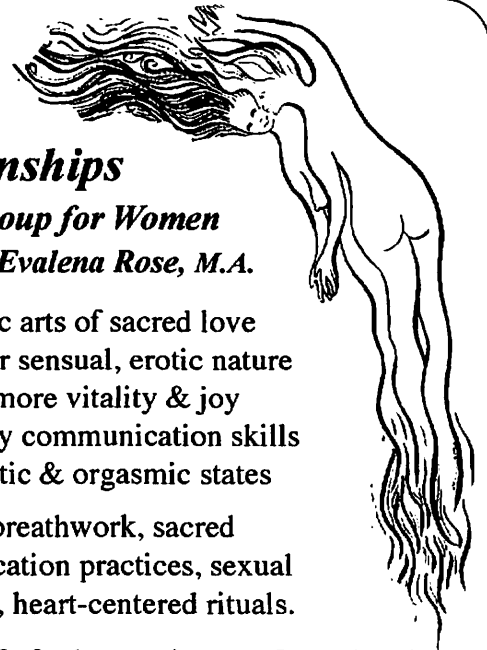
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It was the first time I'd really had a chance to talk with Doc in a while, and I was curious about his motives for getting busted in the January action. "I'm glad you're here," I told him. "But this turned into such a 'LAG' action. I thought you would be more interested in the VAC action in March."

"Well, I am," he said. "I'd prefer an action organized by affinity groups instead of an office staff. But this protest will set the tone for March, so I knew I had to be here."

I leaned my head back against the wall. "Do you really think VAC can get the March action together without LAG?"

He stopped working on his hand and looked at me. "It's not a question of 'VAC' getting it together. It's going to be organized by AGs. And a lot of this action was too — look at the kitchen, look at the whole encampment. Those are done by affinity groups."

I crossed my arms and nodded. "But LAG wound up co-ordinating all the publicity, getting the rally together, and paying for posters and mailings. Plus, the media collective is all LAG people."

"That doesn't mean AGs can't do it," he said. "The problem is, as long as the LAG office is involved, people will assume things are getting taken care of. If there isn't a central organization, it would be clear that AGs have to take it on."

"That's too idealistic," I said. "If the organizing gets decentral-ized, who's going to have an overview? Who is going to make sure that pieces don't fall through the cracks?"

"That's what the spokescouncil is for."

"But every meeting it's different people," I argued. "The spokescouncil is as transient as a lot of affinity groups. Someone needs to provide the continuity."

Doc paused and knit his brow. "What you're describing is a traditional, top-down power model," he said. "It may be efficient, but

is that our highest goal? A central office and staff just reproduce the dynamics of the system we're trying to change."

A large paperwad being used as a soccerball bounced off his leg, chased by two guys kicking at it. Doc shuffled around as if collecting his thoughts.


I tried to anticipate him. "People on the office staff or Coordinat-ing Council aren't trying to control the action," I said. "They're committed to not being leaders."

"It's not that simple," he answered. "It takes more than good intentions. An organizational staff is an inherently hierarchical func-tion. It's only natural that they'll be seen as leaders, and start to act the

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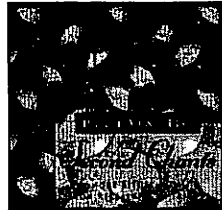
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part."

I was thinking about my friends on the LAG staff, and I must have looked uncomfortable, because he tried to reassure me. "This isn't an attack on them as people," he said. "But we need to organize differently. Building LAG into a strong organization shouldn't be our goal. Suppose we succeed. The government would just know what to sabotage. With a decentralized network of affinity groups, we'll build a community of resistance they can never destroy."

I liked the image, although I still felt like he was evading the question of overview. But at that moment, the door opened and a soldier stepped in. All talk stopped as he methodically counted us. Without a word, he backed out of the room and locked the door.

"Maybe they're going to bring us lunch," someone said. Suspecting that something was about to happen made it hard to concentrate on conversation. Doc went over to talk with someone from his affinity group, and I sat by myself, feeling restless. People were quieter, the earlier hyper mood giving way to a subdued tension, an impatient desire for some change. Anything, just to be on with it.

After a few minutes, the little door opened again. Two soldiers ducked in, followed by an officer. "Line up by your numbers," the officer ordered us. "You're going next door to be booked."

I looked around to see what others would do. There was some shuffling around, but no one lined up.

"We're not moving unless we all move together," someone called out.

"We want to see a lawyer," Karina piped up.

The officer tried to assure us that we would all end up back together. "You won't be separated. We just need to process you one at a time. Now line up by your numbers."

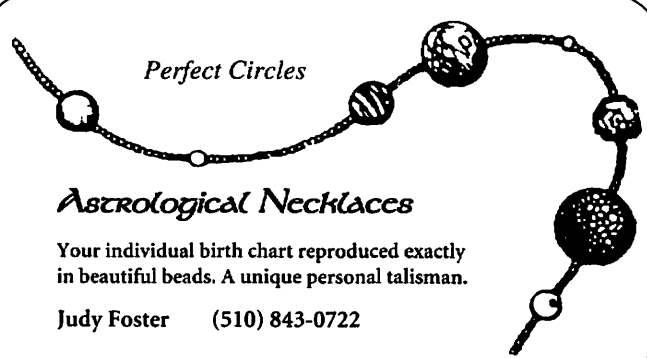
This time his command set off a ripple of half-suppressed laughter, which perplexed the officer until someone explained the situation to him. The officer turned and barked at one of his aides, who ducked out of the room. "Alright then," he pronounced, "Everyone line up along this wall." As he spoke, the aide ducked back in with a magic marker and six more soldiers.

"Line up!"

Faced with the six soldiers, we slowly made our way to the wall. One of the soldiers came down the row and renumbered us. When he got to me, he labeled me "A-17," then scratched out the rest of the "56". I felt embarrassed that I hadn't erased it entirely myself.

We decided to go ahead with the booking, but everyone would make sure that they could see the person ahead and behind at all times. If anything went wrong, we would all sit down and refuse to move. A couple at a time, we were ushered out of the squash court.

The booking was held in a gymnasium divided by partitions into a series of little cubicles. Being back in motion raised our spirits, and many protesters mugged for the polaroid photographer. The



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only downer was when they took away the paper and pen that I had smuggled in. So much for keeping a journal.

As each of us finished the booking, we were steered to the other side of the gym and put into a small cage — the gym was only as big as a basketball court, and to save sideline space, the team benches were enclosed behind wire mesh.

I joined Cindy, Hank and about fifteen other people in the cage, followed soon after by Doc and Karina. Karina seemed unusually subdued. She gave me a faint smile as I caught her eye. I wanted to ask her how she was doing, but she went and sat with a couple of people from her AG. Her voice was low, and I could see the stress in her gestures.

I wasn't feeling especially stressed myself. Bored was more like it. I wished I had a book. They hadn't searched my shoes, I realized. I should have smuggled in some pages of a novel. Or maybe Trotsky's autobiography, which I'd been reading lately. That would make good prison fare.

Daniel was put into our cage, but before the next person could be brought over, the calm of the gym was rent by the sound of stomping boots. A squad of men in khaki fatigues came marching across the floor, and the racket echoed off the concrete walls. We stared through the wire mesh as the squad came to a halt in front of our cage. "Hright, Hace!" The column snapped around to face us — the U.S. Marshals.

Someone called out in a shaky voice: "I don't think we should move again unless we all move together." People nodded, but no one took their eyes off the Marshals.

The commander finished briefing his men. He pulled open our cage door. I pressed my back against the wall.

"Cindy Davenport!" he bellowed.

Cindy didn't answer. We stared back at the commander, motionless.

"Move it! Davenport!" No one budged. Cindy was hunched behind two people in the center of the cell. She held her head down, her hair hanging across her face.

The commander glared around at us, then stepped out to confer with two of his men. The three of them came back into the cage studying a small piece of paper — Cindy's polaroid photograph.

"That's her, over there!" The three Marshals charged at her, knocking other people aside. They grabbed Cindy by the arms and dragged her out the cell door. Then, as she staggered to her feet, they flung her headlong into a partition. She hit it with a thud and dropped to the floor.

I froze in my seat, but as the cage door slammed, Karina leapt up against the wire mesh. "Shame! Shame!" she screamed. Her broiling rage sparked the whole cell. In an instant, everyone was up and shouting, "Shame! Shame!"

The Marshals gawked at us. The commander hollered at his men. "Get her out of here!" Still shaking, Cindy was hauled away. "Shame! Shame!" The shouts rocked the gym. An Air Force officer ran up and talked heatedly with the commander of the Marshals, who kept making sweeping gestures with his arms. "Shame! Shame! Shame!"

Suddenly the Marshals snapped to attention. "Left, Hace!" The column bristled as the commander strode to the

front of the line. And with a step so quick it made us jump, they marched straight out of the gym.

We gaped after them. Were they really gone? Had we shamed them into leaving? Before we could get our bearings, a short man in an impeccable suit stepped up to the cage. "Legal Counsel," we started yelling. "We want to see a lawyer!"

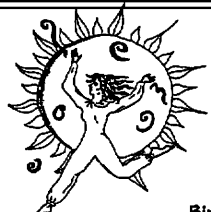
He waved for quiet, a hard tight gesture that belied his cool exterior. "I'm the assistant federal prosecutor for this district. You'll see your lawyers."

"Where did you take Cindy?" people demanded. "We're not moving till we see our lawyers!"

He set down his briefcase and pleaded with us in a terse, polished manner. Gradually, by various arguments and reassurances about us all ending up together again, and getting to see our lawyers, and not having to deal with the Marshals, he persuaded us that it was in our best interest to move back to the squashball court.

A gauntlet of soldiers with riot clubs and helmets lined our path as we were led out the back of the gym. I tried to make eye contact, but they stared blankly away. Behind me, Hank jived at some of them: "Protecting national security, huh? Feel good about working in a

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prison camp?"

We were steered to another small wood-floored exercise room. It wasn't the squash court we'd been promised, but no one felt like fighting over it. We ducked through the low doorway.

What's with all these four-foot doors?" I asked Karina.

"Teaches you to stoop," she said.

A few people sat down. We were arguing over what to do about Cindy when several soldiers ducked in, grabbed Hank, yanked him out, and slammed the door behind them.

Everyone sagged. We'd been had. I felt totally naive, duped by my trust of authority. And what about Hank. What was happening to him? A loose circle formed, more of a horseshoe, really, since no one wanted to sit with their back to the door.

Karina was the first to speak. "We can't let them drag us away. Next time the door opens, we should all get in that corner and pile up on whoever they're looking for. At least make them work for it!"

Next to her, a big guy named Tim seemed shaken up. He hung his head dejectedly. "Why fight when we know we can't win? They can move us if they want to."

A woman named Aurora from Spirit affinity group nodded. "I don't feel good about fighting them, either. They're not my enemies. Noncooperating only escalates the confrontation." When she finished, she looked around. "We need a facilitator."

"No," someone said, "A facilitator will get singled out as a leader. Each person call on the next one. It's safer."

Aurora called on Doc. His voice cracked as he spoke. "We've got to make some basic solidarity agreements," he said hurriedly. "There's

no guarantee that we'll end up back together if we leave here separately. This is the federal government. They can ship us all over the place if they want to." Several hands went up as he paused, but he waved them off. "Wherever we are, we should all keep demanding a mass arraignment, so we can meet before we go to court. If you get isolated, don't go to arraignment till you've seen one of our lawyers."

A woman across the circle kept her hand up insistently, and Doc finally called on her. "The question is," she said urgently, "What are we going to do when they come back again? Are we —"

"Process, process," I called out anxiously. I knew it sounded formalistic, but the scattered energy was hard for me to handle, and I really wanted us to stay focused and make some agreements. "Doc made a solidarity proposal. We should stick to that."

Karina groaned. "We're never going to reach consensus on this."

The woman across the circle spoke again. "We shouldn't be wasting time trying to reach consensus. We should break into small groups based on what we want to do, so people who want to resist can plan it."

But the idea of splitting the group got a cold reception. Daniel spoke next, in his deep, measured tones. "We have to stay together. But that doesn't mean we all have to do the same thing. Solidarity means respect and support for each person, not identical responses."

More hands flew up, but at that moment, the door swung open. "Tim McCormick," a soldier called out. "Come with us."

Tim looked sheepishly around, then stood up. The soldiers latched onto his arms, led him out, and relocked the door.

Karina threw her arms up in exasperation. "This is so disempowering!"

"Process," someone yelled over the rest of us. "Let's do a go-round and see what people plan to do when their name is called. It'll give us an idea where we are."

It sounded good to me. I was back in the right-hand corner, next to Daniel and Doc. Probably they would both non-cooperate. I pictured twisted wrists and sprained elbows. Was it worth fighting, just on principle? But if the rest of my cluster resisted, how could I not do it? Hopefully they wouldn't call my name right away, so I

DINNER WITH THE DEAD

A SAMHAIN FEAST

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 28

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could see what the others did.

The go-round had just started when the door opened again. "Aurora Elkhart?"

Aurora rose from the floor, but as the soldiers approached her she knelt down. "I would like a moment to pray." The soldiers stopped and put their hands on their hips, waiting like patient executioners. At last they beckoned to her. She nodded, crossed herself, and slowly got to her feet. Taking her lightly by the elbows, the soldiers ushered her from the room.

Her response lowered the tension, but it quickly rose again as we went around. Daniel spelled out his plan: "I'm going to tell them, 'I can't co-operate with you because of the way you have treated people before me.' Even if they drag me away, it's important that the soldiers understand the consequences of what they do to us."

When the guards returned, it was Doc they called for, and he adopted Daniel's tactic. "Because of the way you yanked Cindy and Hank out of the room, I cannot co-operate with you." The soldiers looked at each other, then bent over, grabbed him by the upper arms and dragged him out of the room.

A few minutes later, Daniel followed in a similar fashion. I decided that I would do the same when my turn came. It felt good to declare solidarity with Hank, and it made me feel personally stronger to join in a common response. But it was dejecting that there was nothing we could consense on as a group that was more effective than each of us acting individually.

The door opened again. Was it my turn? Two soldiers stepped in and flanked the door. Instead of calling a name, though, they stood at awkward attention, staring at the back wall and pretending not to notice that we were in the room. A minute passed. An unhelmeted head ducked in — Walt!

He surveyed our grim circle and burst out laughing. "Haven't they told you what's happening?" We shook our heads, disbelieving. "They've charged thirty people with misdemeanors," he told us, "and given them three-day sentences. Most of them have already pled 'no contest,' and they aren't asking for further solidarity. All of you here are getting tossed off the base with ban-and-bar notices. You'll be out in an hour."

My initial response was stunned silence. I wanted to believe it was true, but I couldn't quite summon the faith. After all of our preparation, after all we had just been

through, we were getting out the same day? People looked around at each other, dazed. Was it a trick? Or was it really a victory?

Karina finally broke the ice. She clambered to her feet and let loose a loud whoop. "Yeah! I knew they couldn't handle us! We're free!"

A few others joined her celebration, but the rest of us were still recovering from the shock. Karina caught my eye. I wanted to jump up and hug her, but my body didn't respond. I just smiled at her and shook my head, as if to say, "It's unreal, isn't it?"

Walt stuck around to answer a few more questions. Both Cindy and Hank were already free. "They just dragged them right on out to the bus," Walt said.

That was a relief. But what an irony — the people who got jerked around got released first! And here we were, getting out with a slap on the wrist. Well, why not? In a way, I felt like we deserved the break, that we'd earned it by our months of preparation, by our willingness to travel halfway down the state to protest a missile that the Pentagon couldn't even get it together to test.

But it was hard to feel too glib. Our half-baked jail solidarity hadn't exactly forced their hand. It felt more like we'd escaped than that we'd actually won anything.

Still, we had occupied Vandenberg Air Force Base. And for whatever reason, the government had backed off from a confrontation. Score round one for us.

The subsequent March and June actions had dramatically different outcomes. For details, visit www.groundworkmag.org/vandenberg

"Jeff Harrison" is the pen-name of an activist and journalist who has been involved in Reclaiming, the defense of People's Park, and protest organizing for almost twenty years. His work regularly appears in the Revolutionary Pagan Workers Vanguard [see page 64]. The novel from which this narrative is excerpted, "Direct Action," will appear in 2002, published by GroundWork magazine. For more information, visit www.groundworkmag.org/directaction

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