

“Divine Strake” Stopped!

By Will Parrish, *Youth Empowerment Director at the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation in Santa Barbara, CA.*
May 2006

From May 27-28, they camped by the dozens. Nearly 200 people gathered outside of the Nevada Test Site, located in the occupied Western Shoshone Nation, for a weekend of workshops, ceremonies, rituals, a peace camp, and a rally and march to the Test Site main gate.

The “Stop the Strake!” gathering, called for by Western Shoshone spiritual leader Corbin Harney, was originally conceived as a demonstration against the US federal government’s planned 700-ton nuclear weapon simulation bombing of Shoshone land, using Ammonium Nitrate and Fuel Oil. It turned into a victory celebration on the morning of the 27th, when the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) announced that the test was “indefinitely postponed.”

Remarkably, the gathering was cobbled together by the organizations involved - Shundahai Network, the Western Shoshone Defense Project, Citizen Alert, Nevada Desert Experience, and others -- within perhaps less than a month. I personally only decided to make the trek out to Nevada, from my hometown of Santa Barbara, on Thursday, May 25. I arriving at the Amtrak station the following day just minutes before the departure of the train on which my trip depended. A sense of rushed anxiety, which no doubt characterized the event for many of those involved, was very much alive inside of me for most of the trip.

Upon getting to the Peace Camp outside of the Test Site, located about 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, the anxiety turned into a mixture of excitement, determination, and joy -- in short, a sense of community. Shortly after arriving, I was given a pink "Lovarchy" (love and anarchy, or the Rule of Love) t-shirt by Marcus Paige, a member of the Board of Directors of Nevada Desert Experience (NDE), whose "affinity group" I joined, not in part because it also included my good friend Chelsea Collonge and several other NDE members.

The gathering was an interesting mix of veteran Test Site opponents and first-timers -- I was in the latter category. Not surprisingly, even the vast majority of the first-timers, myself included, are already committed activists. I only met a small handful of people the entire weekend who aren't already strongly involved in nuclear disarmament or a related cause. The people hailed from all parts of the western United States, including Nevada, Utah, Arizona, California, Oregon, and New Mexico.

There hasn't been any kind of mass protest movement at the Test Site since the late-'80s, though NDE, Shundahai, and the Western Shoshone Defense Project maintain consistent opposition on a smaller scale. Citizen Alert has been strongly involved in the effort to prevent the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste depository from being sited on the Western Shoshone's land. Corbin Harney in particular devoted many of his remarks at the gathering to reviewing the impressive history of activism at the Test Site, including recalling his 1987 global speaking tour to bring awareness to the Western Shoshone struggle.

There were a series of workshops throughout the weekend, including presentations by most of the indigenous activists present, including Corbin Harney, Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous

Environmental Network, John Wells of the Western Shoshone National Council, Blue Thunder of the Eastern Shoshone Nation, and multiple others. There was a non-violence training on Saturday night, which got excellent reviews from virtually everyone who participated, along with a presentation on the Vandenberg Air Force Base by MacGregor Eddy and one on current US nuclear weapons programs by Andy Lichterman of Western States Legal Foundation.

Despite persistent government denials that “Divine Strake” (or "Hellish Strake," as many of us call it) would have had anything to do with nuclear weapons, one of the Department of Defense’s own planning documents acknowledges that the test was designed to simulate the conditions of a tactical nuclear weapons bunker-buster, as part of a program to “develop a planning tool that will improve the warfighter’s confidence in selecting the smallest proper nuclear yield necessary to destroy underground facilities while minimizing collateral damage.”

In the media coverage, there were few mentions of this connection, or of the fact that the Test Site has been the site of over 900 nuclear tests since 1952, 100 of them above-ground. I imagine that many of the people who followed the media coverage came away not knowing that the NTS was strictly created to be a nuclear weapons testing facility, is a nuclear weapons testing facility, and that everything that’s done there is in some way relates to creating and refining nuclear weaponry.

Nevertheless, the local media of Nevada and Utah did some good reporting during the lead-up to the event and regarding the event itself. Peggy Johnson of Citizen Alert remarked in the Las Vegas Sun on Monday, May 29 that "It isn't often that we the people win against the behemoth called the United States government, but it happened." It would be nice if such empowering messages were broadcast in the media more widely.

Following a powerful and spirited rally on Sunday afternoon, the march to the Test Site gate was led by Western Shoshone and other indigenous activists, culminated with mass civil disobedience and the arrest of over 50 people on charges of Trespassing. The protestors were detained and released after little more than an hour. While at the Test Site gate, Western Shoshone National Council member John Wells and Indigenous Environmental Network founder Tom Goldtooth served notice to Test Site guards from the Nye County Sheriff Department that they are in violation of the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley, obligating them under both Western Shoshone and United States law to evacuate the premises.

I had the privilege of driving home part of the way with Father Louie Vitale, a legendary Test Site demonstrator who was fresh off a six-month jail sentence for protesting at the School of Americas, and he remarked that he had never seen the indigenous leaders so animated or assertive during a Test site gathering.

The demonstrators conveyed a near-universal sense that the government is likely to attempt to revive the "Divine Strake" plan soon after public opposition dies down. So while the protest marked a major victory against the US nuclear weapons complex, most of us left feeling determined to remain vigilant and keep the pressure on. Moreover, the struggle for Western Shoshone liberation and closure to the Test Site, as part of the simultaneous struggle for nuclear abolition, goes on.