Reverend Dr. George Armstrong

Interviewed by Ruth Greenaway on 21 July 2003, Photos by Gil Hanly

Ruth: What things were happening in the world or locally that formed an impression on you as a young person?

George: Well, I can remember many things but perhaps one of the most important for the purposes of these memoirs would be the war time experience. I was a high school boy during the Second World War, 1939-45 and I was the youngest of the family, the baby of the family and had been a bit spoilt in a way and had a gentle passage through my early years, unlike my older brothers who had had a fairly rough time. But by the time the war came my older brothers were off to war, and my father re-enlisted and became a warrant office or flight sergeant in the air force and served at Teary near Dunedin. During the 1940's I began as a schoolboy at Otago Boys High School. What was happening there of course was that young men were going off from the school straight into the armed services and being killed over seas. Their names were read out week by week, month by month in the school assembly hall and these boys were often know to the teachers and had been their pupils just a few years before and sometimes the teachers would breakdown when they'd hear names read out. So, the whole gloom of the war and the whole seriousness of it and the whole idealism of it were very powerful and ANZAC was a very powerful day and the whole idea of loyalty and the honour of king and country and so on.

During those years also I became a Boy Scout and I took all that very very seriously. I had always been quite idealistic. But alongside this kind of war-like spirit that prevailed, there was also naturally in me an instinct for peaceful solutions and harmony and friendship, well that was a big thing in boy scouts too. I remember being influenced by small things which made actually quite a big impact on me, like a song from the Oxford movement. The Oxford movement, the moral re-armament movement, which is still going in some quarters, was a general spiritual movement which was trying to create peace in the world by a stress on values and morals and spirituality and so on. There was a little song I remember *"The trouble with the world, is that folks that live in it, they all want to get and they never want to give in it. You'll never build a world, you'll never build a world, you'll never build a world that way."* I must have been 9 or 10 I suppose when I heard that and I still can remember, the impact it made on me, thinking yes, that's absolutely right. Those ideals are absolutely right. The ideas didn't come to me through the church, I wasn't a great church member until I was about 15 or 16 yrs, but then with the church and religion in my later teens of course that all became far more important. The whole thing came to a kind of a climax for me in the religious sense when I was about 21yrs. That in a way is another story but, thinking of the earlier years, my mother was an idealist as well. A

very gentile woman from a kind of upper middle class I suppose. My father came more from a working class, well he himself was kind of condemned to working class existence all through his working life, although he was quite capable of function in any professional setting I'm sure. He was deeply dyed in Trade Union politics and Socialism. So, he and my mother were quite different, but actually they were both idealists in their own ways. My father hated war, he just believed, even though he'd fought in one world war and he'd served in another he just felt quite cynical and sceptical about wars, they were just opportunities for armaments manufactures to get rich and all that sort of thing. So that's the sort of experience, I grew up in the midst of all that, the boy scout movement, which was a kind of a moral sort of a movement, flowering into what I would say is a more sort of spiritual movement in the church, where one thought more in terms of the feelings of love, fulfilment, friendship and those kind of deeper things, and communion with that which lies beyond and a sense of perhaps the mystery and the beauty of life.

Ruth: So, that's maybe, I better just stop there and see where that's leading. I quite like where that is leading because I think what's quite significant in your story is the spiritual side to your involvement in the peace movement, because people come to peace education, activism and peace work from a number of avenues and maybe I could ask how you got ideas of peace and what peace means for you developed alongside your spirituality.

George Armstrong, credit to Gil Hanly

Well, I think I've never been able to bear injustice or people being harsh to other people, or being grossly unfair to them, even though I was quite unfair in my own way as a young boy towards one of the other boys, who I treated really badly. I can still remember and I feel very bad about it even today. But I couldn't bear to see people treating other people harshly, without justice. It's one of the strongest emotions in me. My feeling is always for the one who is being denied equity. That explains a lot of reactions to life today. So, that manifested itself quite early, it was tied up with these feelings of love and well being in the Universe itself. I can remember travelling in a tram with a whole lot of older people than myself and

looking at them all and thinking you wonderful grown up people you are shining with some sort of maturity and I'm looking forward to the time when I've got wrinkles with this smooth face of mine as a young boy and I'll be kind of wise and happy and I looked around all the people and I thought I really like you really love all of you and I feel good that it's that way and I am happy that I am feeling that way. Almost like that and when religion really gripped me, later, or when God really, or the Spirit really took possession of me, in my late teens I felt exactly the same way about people. I just loved people, I just enjoyed them, instead of being perhaps a bit afraid of them or a bit tense as to how other people would react to me I just felt full of good will and appreciation of people and in a way accepting of people's foibles and faults as well. So, that kind of desire for the well being of people and that sort of enjoyment of seeing justice and that sort of intense hostility I've always felt towards injustice when it's displayed, those factors are very much a matter of religion for me.

As I went deeper in Christianity and read the Bible more carefully and studied theology I realised that there was a huge amount of struggle against injustice present in the whole story in the whole Christian story, the whole Jewish story. When I became a Priest or a Minister in the church I found myself in a church that institutionally could actually be quite harsh on people and could be unjust in its dealings with people and I was quite shocked by that when I first realised it. When I first became closely involved with the Anglican Church as I prepared to be ordained as a priest, I could see that the church was in a way a little bit sluggish and dead and not full of the spirit that was filling me. The spirit of happiness about other people and just delight to be part of the human race, more or less and desire to contribute and to be a recipient of being a part of the human family.

In just thinking about that, that yes you were entering into life as an ordained minister in the church but because as we move on with this interview we will look at some specific things and times when you actually took a leadership role, but maybe also as a young person did you feel that there was still a place to be fully who you were and to explore you own spiritual growth even as you were faced difficulties where ever you were along the way?

Yes, I think so it was formulating so slowly in a way, I think the church was sort of like a museum in a way. But a very rich museum and if you like museums they are marvellous places, they've got all this incredible stuff in them. If you can appreciate what's there, it's a rich treasure of wisdom, all these human beings stories of struggle and they have expressed themselves in prayers or in telling stories of their lives and so on in the Bible and so on. In worship people get together and they kind of recite some of those things and so I was exposed to all of those things and gradually I was realising that this was a great strength to me, it was a shock to find that the thing that was a great strength to me that in the same place there was a lot of brutality and harshness and injustice. When I came to the Theological College I was shaken to the

core by the fact that there was injustice within the educational processes. I was trying to get a bad situation corrected as I thought. I came hard up against the authorities. This was an orphanage where I felt that the leadership was in bad hands. So, we interfered in the politics of the place and we got into all sorts of trouble over it. We felt that the rules of the Theological College were far too strict and inhuman. It was a kind of semi–monastic institution and really not a good space, especially for married people because it was all men in those days and the men had to live apart from their wives and come and live in College and weren't allowed to see their wives more or less or co-habit with them except during the holidays. You know the more I sort of realised this the more outraged I became at the whole situation and yet it was, myself and the others who were critical, it was we who were being thumped for daring to criticise this thing even though shortly after I left the Theological College the whole thing was changed and it became a family oriented kind of institution.

So, when you say you were being 'thumped' what you mean?

Oh well we were kind of formally denounced as people who had done wrong and had interfered into things that we shouldn't have interfered into. We should have been playing quietly with the 'orphanage children' but here we were interfering with the way the place was being run and governed and all this sort of thing. Which perhaps is quite an image of things. The church wants you to do things quietly and peacefully with human beings, you know, but don't upset anything. Don't worry about politics, leave that to somebody else. Leave that to the leaders or leave it to the government, or something you know, but don't you interfere. But to me I hadn't linked in my mind that fact that the church was pretty dead for me, even though there were good numbers in the churches at that stage, it was still the baby boomer time and everybody was sending their kids to Sunday School and Bible Class and the churches were full and if you preached a good sermon, or even if you didn't they still came along in great numbers. So, it was quite encouraging, but I felt they were sort of spiritually dead some how. I suppose I was linking that up with gradually, I suppose, the fact that the church was in many ways an unjust place. I found that in the parishes when I began to work in them and I came into very harsh conflict with my first affluent parish. That was Cashmere in Christchurch. Very severe conflict there.

What years were you there in Cashmere?

About '63-65, a fairly short time because I always felt my vocation was in theological teaching and when the opportunity came to go into that I took it eventually, although I felt it was unfair to the parish giving them such a short time. We were getting on quite well together even though there was this fairly severe conflict with us over the location of a handicapped children's home in the parish. A lot of the people who objected to this formally were named in the newspaper as the objectors to this home,

were some of my leading parishioners. In a sense I rebuked them publicly. Challenged them to withdraw. Which none of them of course did, but I realised what a hard nut I had to crack if I was to really work in this establishment, so when I finally did go to the theological college as a teacher I went with the feeling that I've got to warn these students what they are in for, so that they know a bit more than I knew. That they are dealing with some pretty tough people out there who aren't going to welcome a leadership that cares about justice and lesser mortals…but Cashmere in Christchurch were quite a story in themselves for me as a young vicar.

What age would you have been then?

Oh, I would have been about mid thirties I suppose, 34, 35yrs which seemed to me to be quite young at that time.

You were married to Jocelyn?

Yes, Jocelyn and I were married with no children and then we had two children so we were very bright new young ones. The parishioners had no idea of what they were getting when they got Jocelyn and me, but they were thrilled to bits when they knew that Jocelyn was as the daughter of the Bishop of Dunedin and such an elegant young woman who was keen on the church and we were the model kind of young clergy types you know, obediently having a couple of babies and so there were four of us. Simon our youngest wasn't born until we came to Auckland but the other two were born in Christchurch. During those years it was a great parish, it was a very affluent parish, it probably still is reasonably well off. You can tell by the buildings and so on and it's a lovely place to live up there. I was very attracted to it, partly by that fact. I mean I won't deny it; I like the middle class kind of orderly affluence and success, and all those feelings that go with that kind of community. Of course geographically it was a lovely place. We were just above the fog line and so on. It was completely new and the people were eager to have us so we were wanted and so on. So that was great, but I gradually realised that I'd come into the midst of some pretty tough customers who were used to command and they were used to being leaders and they expected a fairly tough kind of process of decision making. Which often went the way that I didn't want it to go and I wasn't prepared to go the way that some of the decision making was going. I was very disappointed with it but, I kept at it sort of figuring out what to do about this and tried out various things, some of which were quite successful.

That's something I'm quite interested in. You said something about that you realised that interfering was important and that being prepared for public confrontation was something that you felt that you needed to be, so thinking about peace and justice and also in thinking about your spirit, how you said that

you were disappointed in seeing that the church, the injustices that were going on and …and I'm just trying to gauge a picture of you as a young person and also about how did you then think that you were going to be alright or that you would get through this by interfering? And having the courage to do that.

I never thought about getting through it, I suppose most of my thoughts were well I'm going to have to do this and I'll do it. I never even thought of the consequences too much, I mean I knew it was going to be difficult. But the greatest satisfaction for me came from doing what I thought was right. Even though it was a bit rash sometimes and I mightn't have always done the best possible thing in the circumstances, but one of the things I hated doing was hurting people in the process. I knew I would hurt people and to see the disappointment in them and to feel I had been the cause of great pain for them even though they were perhaps in the wrong and some what anyway. No, I couldn't, I suppose I never did quite realise what it was going to cost and whether I would get through it or not. Because it just seemed the right thing to do, it seemed utterly appropriate. But I was thinking my way through it all the time so that when I was critical of the people, or when I was challenging the people who wouldn't have this handicapped children's home there in their midst. When I was challenging them I realised that I had support in that one or two people who said we support what you are doing. But then I looked at them and I thought now would they support me if they actually had the home being built right next to them?

I sort of thought, now you're not too different to the people up the hill a bit further where the house is going to be and I thought I don't know, I'm just a little bit concerned in case you are self righteously… And I kind of switched round a bit and I was thinking quite hard about that and when I had to preach a sermon and I knew the guy from the newspaper was there and that was quite flattering in a way because I mean I like the public noise that I was able to create and it's quite gratifying, maybe a small boy likes doing that but and older small boys do too. But then as I came to the sermon and preaching that night and all the people knew I was going to preach so there was quite a crowd there. I was very concerned to figure out the right, so what I said was what I ended with a sermon about not judging one another. Strange really when I think about it and the reporter when he came out said thank you very much for that, that must have taken a lot of courage he said, and you haven't given me really a story but I'm impressed and I was very disappointed because I wanted him to have story. I thought well I hope he publishes some of this. But he never did I don't think. I wasn't creating division amongst the people. I was trying to say well even though we have a very sharp disagreement here and some people may have done something really bad in rejecting these people, because we had a full scale court hearing about the whole thing. Oh, it was terrible. Even though we had all that I was saying to them you know we've just got to live together and not sit in judgement ultimately on one another because we might not be all that different if it really impacted on us. So, there was that kind of learning going on all the time and I think the people probably

accepted me because they could see I was trying hard to work my way through it personally. Even though some of them, they were deeply hurt by what I'd done.

I was just thinking, taking a step like that and bringing an issue to the public's attention even beyond the parish you just said that it was learning experience that you didn't know what was going to happen but you had the courage to say what you felt was right to say, then so in seeing what does happen, what did eventuate, did you have any surprises in terms of connections with people, after something like that? With the people that maybe had been in opposition with you, were there any surprises there?

No, we managed to stay on reasonably good terms with one another, that's what I would say. We weren't even tense with one another we just managed to live through it and I think I was a bit surprised at that. But I came to feel very clearly that these people were not exactly my kind of people. Not that I wasn't prepared to work with them and learn how I could relate to them really well but they seemed to hard to me and I suppose I was re-thinking what is this Christian faith all about anyway, why are these people coming to church? Why am I doing this? There was a whole lot of things that were happening at the same time like, we did have a very effective programme that we were running called the group life laboratory programme which was sort of working out the death and resurrection of Christ in the life of the local community. There was a whole pattern of pedagogical sort of package that, by which you could do this. Devised by the American Church and then picked up by the Australian Church and then bought to NZ by Americans and Australians. These were Anglican Episcopal people. It was miles before its time but it was a brilliant way of offering people a form of Christianity that would be meaningful to them so all of this was happening at the same time it was all packed into two or three short years. It was like that actually right through. When I came into the Theological College, I mean what we packed into those few years, between 1965 and 1980 was simply amazing. Those 15 years, three of them were in America anyway but …

Side two, Tape one.

(St Johns' Theological College)

And now I'm really doing what Wordsworth talked about in terms of poetry, he described poetry as *"Emotion recollected in tranquillity"*. Well there was heaps of emotion here, very quickly after we arrived at St Johns'. We arrived. I think middle to late one year. That would have been 1965, I think. I had to apply myself to this teaching work which was fairly intensive. The pedagogy puzzled me greatly as to how to teach and I didn't really quite believe in standing in front of a group of people and just speaking for about ¾ of an hour. So, I was sort of working my way through that,

but in the middle of all of that, came the first challenge to the whole question of justice and injustice. It didn't come in the first instance internally from within the church but it came from the political environment at the time. We were just well and truly engaged in the Vietnam War controversy, and I was asked to take Ted Johnson's place, he was quite a pacifist I think. Ted was to chair an anti-Vietnam war committee meeting or something, and he asked me to do it, he couldn't be there. So I went along not knowing very much about things and feeling a little bit out of my depth, but I chaired this and gradually I became a little bit drawn into the Vietnam situation and gradually became aware of the Buddhists in Vietnam and the fact that some of the opposition to the war on Vietnam was coming from within Vietnam from the Buddhists who were saying things like they are our brothers whom we kill. So the whole sense of humanity in Buddhism was welling up from within Vietnam and I could identify with that very quickly. A small group of us went to the Peace, Power and Politics conference which was a major event in the organising of the resistance to NZ's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Where about was that held?

That was in Wellington in 1968 – it was a really, tremendous conference. It was the first of those sorts of things that I'd been to and there were all these quite spectacular, analytically minded people who were good speakers and also very steady measured people like John Male the diplomat. A whole range of excellent people, including a lot of religious people who were there and quite prominent. I came back from that very moved by it and feeling that this really was a cause that was thoroughly unjust and that our whole country was involved in it. About that time, the regular Good Friday procession took place. The Anglican Church, the Anglican Diocese here which I always regarded as being a bit stuffy as a church a bit high church and a bit caught up in themselves and not really outward facing all that much, but they had this Good Friday procession when we marched up Queen St in our cassocks and had a religious procession and every now and then we'd stop and somebody would preach a sermon, theoretically anyway. It was all rather a gloomy business, as befits Good Friday, in that particular tradition. The media usually covered it but it was rather a dull affair really. Some of us were puzzled about Good Friday because you were meant to spend it in sort of doom and gloom and reflecting on the passion of Jesus and so on and that's quite appropriate but some of us felt that this was a bit disembodied and religious and not quite related to this world in a way that it could be. For some reason or other we decided we'd spend some of Good Friday studying and discussing critical world situation in terms of, I think it was in terms of development, you know economic development in the third world. So, we got into this and we were quite steamed up about it really and we thought well we'll go to the Good Friday procession which was in the evening of Good Friday. We'd spent the three hours from 12-3pm on this studying and reflecting together. We'd decided more or less we'll go to the procession, but we'll give it a bit of real contemporary feeling because here's

the Vietnam War going on and there are people dying out there. This is all about people dying and people being victimised and resurrection being possible despite all this injustice and so on. So we tried to figure out a few slogans and we thought of ones like "*Christ died for the Vietcong*", which was the enemy of course in the North. "*Christ died for ANZACS*", "*Christ died for all"*. So, we made up some placards with these sort of statements, and then *"Christ talks peace",* because there were all sorts of discussions about peace talks and we painted up these banners, maybe about half a dozen of them and about a dozen students and myself, we all trooped off down to the procession, to the assembly point. It was only as we drove down to the assembly point that I realised that we would not exactly be welcomed, I hadn't even thought about that, that's where this business of not thinking about the consequences comes in. I had sort of perhaps thought that we might not be welcome, but we certainly were not welcome. Some of the substantial church leaders in Auckland were very offended by the fact that we were going to come into this procession and gate crash with our banners, even though we thought we were saying exactly what Christianity was all about and what Good Friday was all about, in terms of that present situation. So, we joined in and we were all assembling there and suddenly the Bishop appears, who was against the Vietnam war himself, but some of his weighty church men had said look, those fellas joining the procession they have no right to be here, they are hi-jacking our procession, you know, they are interfering, this is supposed to be, what the Bishop told me later a quiet contemplation of the crucified. I'd never forgotten the phrase he used. But he said to us, well I'm asking you to withdraw from the procession and I looked at him and I had to figure out what am I going to say because I had to answer him. I said well I really can't answer for the students but as far as I am concerned I'm really going to have to do this and I'll tell you what bishop we'll keep a bit behind the procession so that it will be separate tai, you know, to this dog, I didn't put it that way, and people will be able to distinguish between the procession and us. That was as far as he was able to get to. Some of the students pulled out but quite a lot of them stayed in there. One of them, I'm pretty sure was David Coles, who's now Bishop of Christchurch. It's quite interesting because David was a very thoughtful chap and also, one man who came and stood along side me and I found it immensely helpful at the time was, Rob McCulloch. His support at that time, I've never forgotten.

Who is Rob McCulloch?

Rob was in Christchurch was caught up in a very unfortunate case, subsequently, but I mention his name because I want to honour what he did on that occasion because he fell into some dishonour later on and I'm certainly not ashamed to say that I was profoundly grateful for his strength there.

This procession did it go right through the city?

Right up Queen St yeah. There weren't many people in town of course on a Good Friday night I mean it wasn't like now days with cafes…

What was the point of it?

Well, it was to be a public witness I mean it was meant to be a witness anyway but with hardly anybody around. But what we didn't bank on of course was the television cameras. They were churning away there; this was the early days of television. But when they saw us coming they were delighted because here was something with a bit of statement and a bit of colour and they could also smell that there might be some dissention. And by this time the police, because we'd joined the procession. Because of the traffic flow we needed to stick with the procession to get around while the police were stopping the traffic for us to get there, what little traffic there was. So we were to all intents part of the procession and the police came back and said well the bishop has asked us to remove you from the procession, he says you are not part of the procession and you've got to go and I said oh well we'll leave our signs here if we are being that offensive and we'll just carry on and they said no, no you've got to be out of here personally, which was exceeding their brief really, they didn't need to do that, and I was quite offended by that but never the less we fell out of the procession and we put our signs in a bundle and we trundled up and joined in the service at the end of the occasion as well.

Was that the first time that you'd ever had interaction like that with the police?

Probably yes. Though they didn't loom very large on my horizon there except it seemed odd to me that a bishop should be getting police to remove some of his clergy or one of his clergy out of a position that belonged to both of them but I knew I'd probably be talking it over with the bishop later on. He was a very nice man actually Bishop Gowing he's one of the finest bishops I've known – the gentlest and most thoughtful and most engaged in society actually. So you know it's talking about hardline people and I didn't want to be seen as a hard-line person myself. But of course this got the TV news that night or whenever it was that it came through and they made a big thing of it and the New Zealand Herald carried some big stuff on it as well.

What did they say about it?

Bishop Expels Protestors From the Procession and they had a picture of us with the banners so that was really very good because I realised what I didn't realise until I thought about it later, but we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams in conveying some sort of message about this thing whether it was right or wrong we'd succeeded in breaking right through into the public arena in a staggering way. I still am amazed

to think about it because suddenly from trying to raise Christian issues publicly in small places or even in the Christchurch event in Cashmere, we were precipitated into this major issue concerning a national and international question in the most kind of dramatic sort of way. We were actually using a liturgical event to express what some people might have thought was a political message but I saw it as a profoundly Christian message. So that was very hard I think once I'd done that I could face anything and we both really had to face the fact that if I was going to do something like that we weren't going to have a quiet life. It wasn't that I could pull back from any of that then because I did know quite a bit about the Vietnam war and I was reading more and more and I was becoming more and more aware about the Buddhist point of view which seemed profoundly Christian to me. It was, but I can still remember saying to one of the enthusiastic left wingers, look I'm joining in everything but I don't know that I really know enough to be absolutely convinced about that and he just looked at me and he said oh you will, and I thought well that's an amazing answer he didn't try to convey information he was just so sure that the evidence was strong that I'd come to my own conclusions. So that was very good actually that the procession took place before the Peace Power and Politics Conference because we tried to sort of build up the idea of praying for peace in Vietnam but I always felt that prayer had to be somewhat active and demonstrative in a way I thought that part of prayer needed to be that anyway so I was always looking for the angles on that. We did have sort of retreats and prayers and that sort of thing but we it wasn't a very substantial apart of the thing it was much more joining in with the political event it was following the politics rather than leading them. I was much more satisfied later with the Peace Squadron because we were leading the politics and not following them we were actually taking the initiative that's what really pleased me about that and I really feel that's where the church should be is giving a bit of a lead trying to detect what the right lead is and giving it and seeing if people will respond to that or will be pleased to associate with themselves with that, so that was our introduction to Auckland.

Well that makes me think when you say about taking a lead you say that that was the first conference of its kind that you'd been to and also when you said you were reading a lot about the Vietnam War was reading up on thing really important for you to know what it was that you were responding to or needing to talk about and also the other side of it was when you would hear people talk like you said at this conference that they were wonderful people and when you would hear what they had to say there were things that you grasped onto and you said yes I can use that that's what I've been thinking was it like that?

Most of my intellectual ideas came from my reading. Most of the general stimulus came from listening to some of those speeches but I wasn't reliant but I get my best intellectual material from my reading and from my doing something and strangely enough , thinking about them. But listening to speeches, although it was a great event

I'd quite happily walk out of a lot of the speaking, because I knew that I don't listen to speeches very much. I did occasionally but I wouldn't want to miss somebody who was quite spectacular as a speaker, but I think it was just a general conviction of the whole great body of people, not a mob conviction exactly, but a very intelligent conviction. Here were the people really working away at these things. They knew what they were talking about – they were exploring them, they were teasing them through, they were trying to figure out tactics perhaps about this, and there was a whole 'mobilisation' going on. I remember thinking about this word – what do they mean mobilisation? But looking back of course I knew what mobilisation meant. It was sort of mobilising the whole of society against this war and you know the Vietnam War protest built up to something quite enormous and actually if we went on and on I could give so many more instances too. It was all tied up strangely with development aid and the third world and of course the Vietnam War was the fault line between the country's desiring liberation and the imperial countries that wanted to keep them in sort of subordination really in the old imperial way of it the French wanted to keep hold of Vietnam when they moved out. The Americans moved in to pick it up and then tried to get all the rest of us to join in as well which is typical sort of behaviour as you can see from modern Iraq but so but you know the aid stuff there was the liberation of the park that went on that was kind of astonishing.

What was that?

Well this was Tim Shadbolt this was the end of the sixties now there was an orator you could listen to he was a fellow just was amazing and he still is I think you know him?

Yes

He's just an amazing man and still is but he was at University or he was within the University environs anyway and I got to know him quite well. So, the idea was there was a big hullabaloo about Victoria Park and Albert Park just by the University. People weren't allowed to have sort of parties in there or demonstrations or something. Some silly ruling that the city council made so Liberating the Park became the great programme. It was amazing what happened. All these kind of people in their late teens and in their twenties turned up and put on Tim Shadbolt's idea and he got it through to people. He says don't wait for someone else to do something. Do it yourself I mean don't wait for someone else to put on a drama for you to watch you perform a drama lets all perform dramas and we'll go around watching one another's and that's what actually happened there were some phenomenal kind of little dramas going on all over Albert Park. Everybody tried to bring along some symbolic gesture or some skit or something and we made a great big papier mache cake and took it along with idea that the rich world kept most of the cake and allowed some tiny little

slices to the third world that was the idea and we had little pamphlets and stuff. Geoff Steven who actually made the film of the land march later on Geoff and his partner had just come back from Sweden and we bumped into them so we teamed up altogether and a whole bunch of young people and all of this went and that was quite a spectacular incident that one because we ended up by a group of them having a fast and down in one of those seats down in the Civic area just below Albert Park there we took over this corner and they held their fast there because we invented this idea of thin Santa Claus instead of a fat Santa Claus. We had a thin Santa Claus and so we tied this in with fasting and Christmas time and all that. This fast caused quite a furore in a funny sort of way because the city council forbad us to do it and refused to give us a permit and then when we went ahead and did it they complained to the bishop (laughs). Tim Shadbolt was hugely impressed by our doing this and in his little book called Bullshit and Jellybeans he's got a description of what we did. It's a wonderful one page description in there and so all of this was quite fun because wherever there were young people something would start to happen. I'd often go to try to get young people to help me with some project I had in mind and I'd end up having to help them in some project that they had in mind which was not what I'd intended at all. It got me into a lot of trouble but we managed to put on some great visuals that caught public attention and we used the thin Santa idea was fabulous we got a lot of mileage out of that

And media coverage as well?

We did actually but not as much as we'd have liked but I think it was very good because what we did was we made thin posters that would go on lampposts and stuck them all over the place and nobody was worried about you pulling a poster on a lamppost and they lasted for ages and they were very simple just a thin scraggy looking Santa Claus.

And did it say something?

Perhaps thin Santa or something like 'thin Santa doesn't have anything to give his children' or something like that. You didn't need to say anything because I think we managed to get the idea out and we had the thin Santa Claus going around shaking hands with all the Fat Santa's in the stores (laughs) of course fat Santa didn't know quite what to do. But we gate crashed the Farmers Christmas Parade which perhaps wasn't such a good idea actually (laughs) it was a really zany so all of that happened I must say I was utterly exhausted by 1970 this was all this started around 1965 and we had five years of non-stop of this sort of stuff

Lots of zany activities?

Zany and difficult stuff and very unpleasant stuff really sometimes.

And did you surprise yourself that you were getting involved in some of these things?

Well, I couldn't keep out of it. I was longing for a break in away and I don't know how Jocelyn felt about it she had to look after the household but …

And was it because people were just asking you all the time to come?

Well I'd go and ask them and then it would turn around it happened quite a few times with young people and that was usually meant quite a long commitment because you didn't do things easily you'd usually be meeting week after week for a few months and then you'd do something and then lead to somewhere else and all that and I'd built it back into the College. I'd bring all these interesting people back into St Johns to meet the students and talk with them. At one stage we had that fellow Barry Crump because Barry and his mate were Bahai. So we bought them back to talk about what this was all about and how it was quite intriguing and I'd always try to bring interesting people back and expose the students to them.

The students at the College must have loved it?

Well they did of course. They came into religion and the church for different reasons you know not the kind that would have brought me in or your Dad in. So some of them were rather pious and it wasn't too bad. But the Vietnam War was tough because that one was a deeply divided society and so I felt that was really hard, It wasn't like the Peace Squadron that was a fun thing in some ways but that comes later. In some ways in 1970 I felt utterly exhausted and I was so glad that we got a three year sabbatical basically or a year's sabbatical and off we went to the United States. We sailed away on this ship from Auckland Harbour and we had nineteen glorious days and landed in America and then went up to Princeton to this ivy covered sort of place and it looked absolutely heaven after all that sort of stuff. So we settled in there quietly the five of us – the three boys and Jocelyn and me so we can have a pause there maybe.

Side two tape one.

You were saying a Commission for Society…

Yes, I've been so concentrating on local initiatives and so on that I haven't paused to say that we realised quite early that we were part of a world wide spirit you might say that was operating in the ecumenical church that is right across the churches. The ecumenical church was not simply a collection of churches that decided to get together after having been arguing all these centuries it was a body of churches that were actually committed to doing something together, doing justice, seeking for peace, looking for disarmament, looking for a form of development that would give equity to third world and oppressed and excluded people. All this sort of thing that was very strong in the ecumenical church and it was from that inspiration. That's the document we were studying on that Good Friday that started us off. They were ecumenical documents and very shortly after that I think 1966 this was there was a church and society conference which blew things apart. Particularly the American church leaders were complaining bitterly about their own nation and its behaviour over Vietnam, much to the annoyance to some of the conservative American church leaders, but it was very clear that the church needed to interrelate intimately with its society. Our own national church set up a church and society commission and D T Niles who was a very prominent leader of the Christian Conference of Asia which was the Asian part of the ecumenical movement. DT Niles offered to us Yanam Sundabam from Sri Lanka and he became the first salaried secretary of the Church in Society Commission in New Zealand and this is part of the official history in the ecumenical movement in the National Council of Churches. That was a tremendous event actually. We had to fight quite hard to get this because Ted Buckle came to Auckland about the same time that we did and Ted was vicar at St Matthew in the City and was a very prominent church man – very strong chap, very strong willed man and an Australian. I admired him tremendously and he made a big impact on the city and we did a lot of work together but he was instrumental in some of this and the Presbyterians were strongly involved in it as well. The Presbyterian pastor Norman Gilkason was very effective and active in this too, and also Joan Anderson who was a key figure who was a wonderful ecumenical leader at that time – very active. So, we got the Church and Society Commission going and they were very interested in what I was involved in. Yanam was very supportive. Yanam couldn't get over this 'liberation of the parks' idea. It happened just about the same time he arrived and he was so pleased he wanted to come out with me when I left a meeting to go to the park, just so that he could be there and find out what was going on. It was interesting because Yanam had been a prison governor and had been through some really harsh times. Imagine a governor in a jail in Sri Lanka which was part of the English imperial system but anyway that's the ecumenical background. It's not background so much as foreground – it was an immense strength to us. It stimulated us, it stimulated me, and it provided support and encouragement for me.

And I guess it would have also made you feel that you weren't just working for New Zealand for the sake of New Zealand but that what you were doing here in New Zealand was part of an international context?

Very much what I felt was that we had to pull our weight it wasn't we better not lag behind we better get in there and take some initiatives and of course that's typical New Zealand that's even Rogernomics. I mean the idea that New Zealand could not only make sure it kept up with the world but actually surged ahead and offered something new it's like being the All Black team that wins. It's a similar sort of spirit and it worked well with the Peace Squadron because nobody had ever seen things like that before, although I knew there had been things like that before that's where I got the idea from.

But had there been anything like that from New Zealand?

No, I don't think so no but as with most things you've got a great history that's buried away there and sometimes the real originators don't get the credit for it. I always want to give those people plenty of credit because they had to do it on their own, whereas we had all the luxury of being a public movement that was acclaimed and was spectacularly successful in the case of the anti-nuclear. So that's in a sense saluting the ecumenical movement before we went off to the States. What I haven't touched on you might think weren't you a theological teacher when did you do any teaching when you were doing all these other things? As a matter of fact, I was really very busy on the teaching but I was very unhappy with the pedagogy the classroom method. I just didn't believe that worked in some ways. I believed in activity that you reflected on afterwards very intensively. I still believe that's the best way of learning to be actively involved in trying to sustain or change the world to be actively involved in that and then to intellectually and with great power and discipline reflect on it well using all the sacred writings and other traditions at your disposal and I still would base teaching on that and I think the universities have gone backwards on that one in some ways.

When you said earlier that reading was really important to you drawing from what you were reading what were you reading at that time?

The theology that I was reading but some of the other things I was reading was more just straight out history of Vietnam for example. Not that I read any great fat tomes of it but some of the basic histories of particularly what had happened just before the war 1939-45 war – the history of actually Ho Chi Minh and his fight against the Japanese. When the war was won they confidently expected what they had been promised that they would get self-government they would be able to cast off the imperial yoke and become an independent country. That's indeed what they assumed and when they found the French were not going to do that and do what the French had promised it was clear that they had to decide what were they going to do. They just decided to take up an armed struggle as they call it and liberate themselves and that led to the

partition of Vietnam in the same way as you had the partition of South Korea. All the roots of the present problems reading all that and reading the ecumenical literature which was very substantial – there was a lot of writing being done then.

Where was that coming from?

Some of it was coming out of Geneva – they had a well-financed World Council of Churches set up by Rockefeller money at the end of the second world war and they had some very good people there.

You were reading up about Vietnam and you talked about the ways in which people were dealing with struggles of the time and a movement of people. Was this something which you were interested in reading about – were you interested in reading about the mobilisations of people and how they responded to the struggles they were facing?

Yes, that's absolutely right particularly the common people and their struggles – whether against dictators or within their own outfit or imperial sort of forces that came from outside and crushed them the struggles of peoples. I was well aware that those struggles of people had gone terribly wrong as in the French revolution when the mob turned, or in the Stalinist revolution where the power had all gone and all you had was a new bunch of tyrants at the top. I was well aware of that happening and the problem of what happened when the oppressed got free, when they created a new kind of oppression is one of the major things I wanted to study when I got to the States was something like that.

What were things that you were reading that you felt were effective ways of making a change?

I felt that in the third world there was some sort of struggle starting. It was fairly obvious, but it wasn't until the seventies for example. We came back from America in 1973 and that was the year that Paulo Friere visited New Zealand.

Who was he?

A Brazilian educator who turned things upside down in a way he had a whole theory of education which was education for liberation he called it 'The Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. That's his famous work and he wanted education he felt came with the struggle against oppression and he had that all worked out. He visited New Zealand not long after we got back and this was an amazing visit. It was organized by the Church in Society Commission and the Education Department of the University of

Auckland so it was quite a prestigious kind of thing. He was working for the ecumenical movement as well and he went into other parts of the country as well.

What was amazing about it?

Well, what was amazing was that everybody else had heard about him except us white middle class people. I knew about him of course but when we had the seminar well every Maori radical in town turned up and the Samoans and Black Power. Anybody who was anybody – they knew about Paolo Friere and we had no idea that this man's kind of influence had gone through the world like a dose of salts. As he explained to us when he finally got around to saying anything which he refused to do to start with for hours and hours and hours – he wanted to hear about we had to say and he didn't want to be poking his great theories. That's not what he was here for to educate us how to get liberated we had to liberate ourselves he said and he couldn't tell us what to do. But what he said was amazing. His books were prohibited in his own country in Brazil. He was kicked out of Brazil. They were prohibited in a lot of other first world countries too but they were translated into Lord knows how many languages and sold on street corners and found their way into every where. They're not easy books to read. I don't find him easy to read but so we were aware that this phenomenal thing was going on. No sooner had he arrived than he was thrilled to bits because 'The Theology of Liberation' – the great book by Gustavo Gutiérrez – had just came out about the very same time that he arrived. I discovered later that the professor I'd studied with in Princeton was responsible for a lot of this stuff because he'd translated it and encouraged these theologians. He'd come from South America he'd got kicked out of Brazil. He's about ten years older than me – Richard Shaw. So, I suppose what I'm describing is that going off to these leafy bows of Princeton what I was privileged to come in contact with was the one white man who'd had an awful lot to do with South America and it was just astonishing.

For you, how was it when you realised you already knew about him? How was it to realise that here in this country that Maori people and other Polynesian people knew of someone like this? What did it mean at that time in terms of Pakeha relations with Maori and ideas around it honouring the Treaty?

That was all just beginning then too. It was very interesting because once the Vietnam War was over I can remember thinking well what do we do next, because obviously that was only one thing. It was a terrible thing and it was great that it was over but what was it next. Then the nuclear thing – that's what really started to come up into the headlines. But at the same time the whole question of Maori Pakeha bicultural treaty and so on that came up too. All of those gradually from about 1973- 1980 all of those things started to come together with apartheid in South Africa. All of those issues started to coalesce and for me the nuclear was the main vehicle for

understanding all of that because it was such an expression such an abuse of physical power to create and use one of these damn things, to stockpile them and to be engaged to produce as many as you could as accurately as you could, and to be preparing for massive intercontinental exchange of all this unbelievable nuclear power all of that stuff.

From the time that you spent in the United States was that influential in your wanting to do something about the nuclear issue when you came back to New Zealand? Did you start thinking about it from that time in the United States?

The nuclear issue didn't come up so much when we were in the United States I don't think.

But were you aware of the nuclear arms thing in the US and how that was building up?

Yes, but not so vividly. I think what generally staggered me about the United States was the savagery of the culture . I felt it was savagery, the people were savage with one another, and they were savagely imperial, and all this in the midst of the nicest kind of American middle class success and comfort and all that. America was a huge disappointment in many ways. We were situated in one of the most loveliest places on earth in Princeton and most privileged too. It's just beautiful and it was lovely to be there with the family and there was Einstein's house just around the corner. You could feel that you were in, and here the man was teaching there that had translated all of Nietzche's writings. I was a great admirer of Nietzch at his best and there was all this scholarship, and there was all this scientific brilliance, and there was all this wealth, and there was all this countryside beauty, and there was New York city just up the road, and there was Philadelphia just down the road and a bit further down was Washington DC. All our friends were coming through and so we were completely cut off from all the worries and troubles of New Zealand so we could just relax and enjoy ourselves and meet the other international students and so on.

Was it while you were there you witnessed this event in Philadelphia which was an action by the Quakers?

Yeah, I watched it on television and the image just stayed with me.

Would you like to just explain what that was about and what you saw?

It was the war in Pakistan was going on what do they call it now Bangladesh the war I've forgotten how they described the war at that stage.

Bengal?

Yeah, well the war was a division of the country. Western Pakistan sent its armed forces over and it was incredibly brutal to East Pakistan and there was shipments of arms going out from east Philadelphia and the Quakers down there had just got a couple of canoes and sailed down in front of the freighters that were carrying off the armaments. Of course, the wharfies weren't at all unsympathetic to that either and neither were the shipping people, so it was all kind of rather added up to something quite powerful because it was a brutal kind of event. Here were the Quakers just putting their little canoes and bodies in the way and I remember seeing these boats in front of these big cargo ships and thinking 'Oh hell' and also thinking what a great idea. So, I carried it back and two years later it certainly came straight back into my mind as soon as we knew we were going to have nuclear warship visits. I saw the man who wrote a book called 'Blockade' – Taylor was his name and he wasn't very interested in me when I first met him until I told him that it was their ideas that had started our Peace Squadron off. Then he became more interested. He was a very quiet Quaker unsensational sort of guy thorough going.

Had you had much to do with Quakers before you saw that on the news?

Yes, in the anti-Vietnam War years. Oh yes, they were tremendous people

Is it through the Quaker tradition or had you already been thinking about non-violent direct action? Or was that a time when you started to think about it?

I didn't have a theory about it. I could just see that this was a good idea to get some more justice into a situation to just sort of get in front of something and say well over my dead body kind of thing. I mean it's just a very basic kind of idea like that I didn't have a non-violent direct action you know there's a lot of stuff been written about that now and Martin Luther King – that whole campaign there. It was all in the air and Gandhi and so on .I didn't theorise about it, it wasn't part of my theoretical intellectual it never has been really. I've been interested in that kind of theoretical work and I've been closely in touch with the people who are very interested in pursuing that very zealously but my own interests lie in slightly different directions.

Do you want to just explain that?

Yeah, I think I was always interested in ideology actually because of theology to me is a kind of ideology. I was interested in the ideas by which people justified their actions. The thing about the Vietnam War was the politicians. The arguments they

used was that by us having troops in there that was an insurance policy we paid the premium by sending our troops. So when the time came if we ever needed the Americans to come here and help us against the Australians or who we had to pay the premium to make sure the Americans would come in and kick the Aussies out. You know that kind of theory was there it was a insurance premium. The other idea was a domino theory that if South Vietnam was allowed to fall then what would be next? And the dominos would fall and suddenly we'd find a bloody great domino falling on top of us in New Zealand. I used to look at these ideas and think these newspapers are seriously putting these forward as a kind of sort of strategic discussion. I thought that's absolute nonsense but it's an idea that the media can use and repeat and repeat and repeat and the politicians use it to justify something. It's exactly the same as the Iraq War. This weapons of mass destruction stuff which is perhaps a more telling argument where it actually turns out to be wrong, inaccurate, or a lie, or it seems to be. So it's the ideological. What is the rationale? What is the logic of the mind that persuades people even though it may be a crazy logic, or a logic with no real substance to it at all, which actually does capture the minds and thoughts and emotions of people? You know I can immediately see that theology was just like that. Religion was like that because it has ideas and themes and symbols and stories that capture the imagination and hearts, or used to, of people and so that's where my interest in a sense lay – not only in understanding how this ideology business worked but also in being a practitioner of good redemptive ideology but ideology expressed more liturgically expressed in some symbolic action. So that was what was taking shape in my mind. I've written a chapter precisely on that theme where public action is liturgy or something like that or theology is public liturgy with the idea that all these things that I've been engaged in I prefer to see as public worship really than anything else.

Did you feel that there just wasn't enough out there to counteract this ideology being put forward in the media just accepting the domino theory accepting this as a predetermined fate of how things could occur? Did you feel that actually we needed to put into practice or into the public arena the alternate ways of creating new ideologies?

Yeah, you had to sort of erode these rather farcical logics that were being used and you had to come up with something more substantial but something just as colourful. But at that point it's not a question of ideology it's a question of a whole corporate sort of planning. Really I can only say we'd done pieces of that planning and pieces of that strategy. I suppose creating images of a happy and peaceful and just world and that sort of thing.

So, that's interesting when you talk about images, do you operate in a way that's quite visual? Do you think that engaging people is also through a way of putting

something in front of them that they can see to then engage with and take something from it is that important?

Very much so. That's why like drama and the latest thing that has really driven me has been Tolkien and the Whale Rider. These two rather epic type tales which have gripped the popular imagination. I love that I'm really interested in what grips the popular imagination especially when it's something good like both of those are brilliant. Now the CS Lewis stuff that's going to be produced I don't regard them as very good in fact I regard them as quite dangerous you know now they're going to be producing those and I'll be interested to see what happens.

Tape two side two.

If we move on to recordings and stories about the Peace Squadron, one thing that has really struck me is that it really attracted a whole range of people who were coming from quite different areas of focus. Some were environmentalists, others were Labour Party supporters, Values Party people, people with different political allegiances, church people, boaties a whole range of people how did that sort of start to come about the mix of people?

The first thing I noticed was the boaties of course because that was the great unknown. the first real indication that we had a Peace Squadron was the meeting of skippers that was held just before the Longbeach arrived. We had very little notion of who was going to turn up to the meeting of skippers and we had the meeting around at the big Methodist house around in Glendowie where Katie Dewes and John Boanas and the others were living and Peter Glensor. There was a great bunch of people/ students living there. They had a big living room and we crammed about ninety people into that living room. I can't believe that we had ninety in one room but it maybe my figures aren't exactly right, but it was a huge body of people and all jammed in there like sardines and most of them had boats so we could see that something was going to happen the next day. Some of them were crew of boats but a lot of them were skippers of boats. So I realised that I had a tiger by the tail in a sense that I'd convened this thing and as far as I could see I was going to probably have a leadership role in this although I was open to whatever developed. By the end of the meeting we'd ranged over tactics and stuff and I thought now how on earth can we have some sort of coherence out this and I took my courage in both hands and I said well listening to all that it sounds like – and then I summarised as quickly as I could – it sounds like this and this and this and the room fell quiet. Then they all said yeah that's right that's it. That was the end of the meeting and by that time the media were panting outside the door. We hadn't let them in and they'd come up from Wellington it was the TV people and everything. But what was clear then and what I was most concerned with was the boaties and the boats and the skippers but what I'd realised by

this time was that this tiger by the tail was a fantastic tiger. They were a wonderful group of people of every conceivable strip the boaties themselves and you're quite right it was a very broad range of people.

How had you advertised so that people knew about it?

To come and find out and be involved? Well I kept the media on a string. I kept saying we've got five boats and they'd ring up the next day and say how many have you got or we've got a few more now that's eight boats and I kept building the number up and I it wasn't entirely imaginary I did have various people I knew you know but I was thinking well we don't really know how many we're going to get there because I knew some of them were leaky old tubs up creeks somewhere and I could have them for publicity purposes but not quite sure about anything further so at that I managed to keep the media interested and what we did once we had a kind of launching of the Peace Squadron and then we had a picnic of the Peace Squadron then we had manoeuvres of the Peace Squadron so we kept inventing events that we would send press releases off to the media.

So how did you launch the Peace Squadron?

We just had a few boats down there under the Savage Memorial. We were having a communion service at the Savage Memorial which was very moving actually early in the morning just had a communion service out in the open and then we went down and pushed off a few boats with sails and things on them it was a very small event but it was enough in fact being smaller it was more effective in funny ways and I couldn't get the motor of my boat started but I think it eventually started but there was a couple of students in a little dingy with a square sail and Terry Wall was one of them a guy who is chaplain at the University of Auckland now and Alan Upston and Terry sitting in one of these little boats and that was the launching.

Just back to when did it come back to you the idea that this boat thing could happen you said it had been two years previous that you'd seen on Television the Quaker protest and so this was two years later how did you in fact recall that idea and think ah ha we could do that?

I don't remember when the exact moment came but it stuck with I have visual memories of that sort are very strong with me and I'll never forget the image on the TV that night and that I saw it in the States so it must have just stayed with me but I thought very long and hard before announcing that we would have a blockade because I had to make the decision. I talked with all sorts of people but in the end I realised we're just going to have to say we're going to have a blockade and so I then had to work out how to say that to Mr Rowling who was still the Prime Minister at that time because it was the Labour Party who was under pressure. So I sent him this telegram

and a whole lot of the members of the College signed it even just whipping it around quickly and it was a telegram saying we will support you saying absolutely no to nuclear – we intend to arrange for a blockade of ships or something like that and sent off the telegram. So that was that – I mean exactly when or how that image came back into my mind it always seemed to be there.

Do you think the timing was really crucial for the establishment of the Peace Squadron? Was there any other think taking place? Were people talking about actions to do at that time?

Well people were thinking that the nuclear issue was coming back onto the agenda after the Vietnam war and of course the environmental movement. That's really the main thing. I think we go back at really the time of the whole question of how electricity was going to be produced and whether it was going to be nuclear and whether we were going to have a nuclear power station. It seems unlikely now at this stage but that whole environmental movement was gathering. There was a dam built for the aluminium smelter they were going to raise the level of Lake Manapouri. They were really going to do something absolutely dreadful and then somehow I've got that linked in my mind with the nuclear power and an instinctive horror of the nuclear is part of the environmental movement. So, the fact that nuclear power could sort of suggest itself into a situation by saying well if you're not going to be willing to raise the level of the lakes for power we might have to get it by nuclear power the whole of the environmental movement was just coming through.

And at that time in the background there'd been already French nuclear testing?

Of course I think that's the biggest thing of the lot as a matter of fact the nuclear issue was coming through in the testing of course it was and the first thing that happened to me when I got back here to College was that a bunch of students grabbed me and said come on you've got to come with us and they took me down to some of the small yachts that were going off to Moruroa and the students had taken up a collection and brought some harness gear for one of these yachts so we took it down and presented it. I thought Lord these students are really on to it because that would have been around 1973 I suppose.

And the Greenpeace took a ship out to Moruroa.

O yes, that whole movement the Greenpeace movement and the Peace Squadron were very close all the same people were involved in that Anna Horne who came on deck she'd been on the Greenpeace Three that had got boarded by the French and savaged by them.

I'd just like to read you one thing here. This is the essay that John Boanas wrote and just wanted to get your comment on what he says here 'The Peace Squadron under the leadership of Rev Dr George Armstrong was not completely pragmatic nor lacking in coherent planning but it was a unique mixture of spontaneity pragmatism and planned resistance'. Would you agree with that how would you describe it?

Yeah, it was it felt unique in the middle of it there was a lot of hard planning work went into it. A huge amount depended on the spirit the spontaneity of it. You never knew what was going to happen. But after the first two ship visits I just knew that every time that something would happen that would create a good image – well hopefully a good image – like the first one – the Long beach – what happened with that.

Well talk about a good image that photograph of you in the paper of you looking across your shoulder and the Long beach was right there is amazing.

Well there were lots of good general images like that but some of the ones that were kind of the media created themselves you see "Hot Welcome for Yellow Submarine" was the most notable one per se. What happened with the Haddo was that yellow paint got splattered across the front and radiation coloured paint so the media linked it up with the song 'yellow submarine' and the guy Steven Sherrie riding on the bow of this submarine. You look at that and you think you can have a whole army of Saatchi advertisers and they'd never dream up a better image than that. It just composed itself. So it's more than spontaneity it's just a coincidence of everything including that guy who never intended to jump onto that submarine and who'd been reaching over to pull somebody else off the submarine who'd got jammed there in his canoe and he pulled him off alright onto the other boat, the rescuing boat, but then he changed places with him and jumped onto the submarine himself, Oh Boy!

Can you maybe just tell me what it was like? Was Long beach the first that was the first one to come into Auckland? Can you remember what it was like, like the night before and the morning on the day when you were hoping there would be numbers of people out there? Did you have a feeling of what it was going to be like or did you have some worries?

Reverend Andrew Beyer and George Armstrong, 1979, credit to Gil Hanly

What I felt was cold loneliness that's what I felt even though I was surrounded by the boats and but I was cold and nothing was happening as yet. We all knew something was happening – and lonely – because there was no other leader but me. In fact there wasn't any leader because I wasn't a leader but I was going to have to carry the can in a way and a lot of them thought I was a much greater leader than I was – which to my mind was sort of nothing.

How do you describe yourself do you see yourself taken on a role or how would you describe it?

I saw myself as being directed by the whole of the Peace Squadron. They would direct me especially the inner circle of people who did some of the planning. They would tell me what they wanted me to do and they would tell me if I did it wrong in no uncertain terms. They would not give to me any authority that I didn't earn and they would not give me any honour that I didn't deserve. That was the feeling I had all through and I thought this is perfect.

So you felt really supported and lifted up by the people?

Yes, in a way but in another way very, very lonely because there were responsibilities there that I wouldn't be able to duck and they weren't things that I was in control of exactly.

Did you feel responsible for people's safety?

No, I don't know that I did. No they were responsible for their own safety really.

Had that been talked about at the gatherings?

Oh, a lot, a lot.

I know in reading through this that you actually read up on the international sea regulations or something like that.

That was a tactical thing as much as anything. The whole thing of wearing life jackets and all that and not overloading your boats and following the rules of the sea we didn't want to be found wrong. We didn't think that anybody was going to run over us or anything.

But I think that was good planning because it made you realise you could keep going rather than being arrested for breaking the law. You worked out that whole tactic of slowing down the ships so it had to stop.

That was those cunning fellows who'd been sailing boats since they were out of the cradle. Really, they knew it all and they just figured out the tactics especially three or four of them who had big sailing boats.

In terms of leadership or non-leadership this is what John Boanas says – he says that you offered intelligent leadership at a time in Auckland when there were few people able to take such a strong initiative you blended a prophetic absolutist religious position with a conventional political call for resistance against the militarisation of the South Pacific that you attempted to decentralise decision making and that generally you created a friendly and informal organisation this was particularly successful and the Squadron developed a feeling of group solidarity from early on.

Yeah that's right and my whole instinct blended in with what they wanted. My instinct was for a communal thing. In fact I knew there was no power in it unless it was a communal thing and none of those people would have accepted a leader who tried to push them around anyway. They knew far more about sailing than I did. I didn't know a damn thing about it really. The assumption of a lot of people is that I was a good sailor you know and experienced but that's not true at all.

But did you have your own boat?

Oh yes, yes, but I was just a novice really and it was a motorboat which people who sail boats don't think much of anyway. You rather look down on those things. Yes, we had some superb sailors there. People with a long history of doing all sorts of amazing things like sailing their own little tiny boat out from England to migrate here and a guy who'd been building nuclear submarines did that.

And there were also people who did quite whacky things or risky things like people that went out on surfboards and then in the newspaper cuttings there were two students who made a raft just out of packing cases.

Yeah, there was quite a lot of that. That was what the ingenuity of people and we regarded people as responsible for their own safety and that was it. We weren't going to be policing anybody.

Do you want to just talk about a sense of solidarity amongst all these people?

It was sort of loose. We didn't know everybody who was out there. What we did well. We had after a couple of events anyway we had a picnic tea afterwards or picnic together and people brought along a bottle or something to eat and we were up in the Theological College and we sat together and debriefed a bit. People didn't know one another personally and we didn't have an organisational land base of any sort. The only kind of meeting place was out there in the water which wasn't the most ideal place to fraternise but there was loyalty. People would watch out for one another. I think that's certainly there and everybody was immensely proud and chuffed by what was going on. We seemed to be so successful.

And being out there on the water it must have been quite exhilarating?

Oh it was and it was all over in a moment and it hardly lasted. You didn't have time to get scared or anything and then when it was all over we could just come home and have a beer or have picnic. What a delightful way of protesting. You'd go out there and do it yourself and create an image and make a fuss and then come home again. I think a bit like Dunkirk only much, much, much easier. You'd go over and get people and bring them back and then that's it – you're back home by your fire that night.

And it was all on the news?

Yes, well it was. It was but we often did a lot of very hard work with the media I knew that.

What do you mean by hard work?

Like press releases, like making sure we were first for the news if we had a conference with the police, we'd get out there before the police, and tell the reporters what went on, or with the harbourmaster we'd get out there and tell him what happened at the meeting.

Did you find that you had reporters that were really sympathetic?

Oh yeah, the media liked it, the television was just delighted in it. They weren't at all sceptical or cynical – not in those days – they'd probably be a lot tougher now. This was the early days of this sort of stuff. The Maori participation is the big thing as the decade went on and not so much the Maori participation but the joining the making of common cause between Maori and Pakeha on the issue of the nuclear that was one of the big issues. So Nuclear free Pacific and Independent Pacific which was in a sense the word Independent is code word for sovereignty or equity or bicultural honouring of the treaty that sort of thing all of that was also in a sense it was foreshadowed already in that the Bastion Point protest was going on when the first of the ships came in. I knew from some of the Maori that told me afterwards that we were up there watching them and boy we felt good about what we saw. That was great – they recognised a certain kindred spirit but also the Maori had a saying and deep feeling about the nuclear and deep sort of dread and the importance of this thing. Titewhai Harawira had that too and she in a sense put herself out on a limb by taking on the nuclear issue because a lot of the other Maoris said what are you on about we're on about independence we don't want to go and do things about the nuclear issue. But she felt it deeply and so that added a whole new dimension to things. In 1980 when we really started to organize hard really solid organizing on a Pacific regional basis and on a New Zealand wide peace movement basis you know to renew the national Peace Movement. All sort of things came into play then and that was really solid organising which I didn't want to do. I wanted to support both of those things strongly but I didn't want any leadership role in them. There would be no point in being a leader in the nuclear free independent movement because really the leadership belonged to the Maori and to indigenous people. That's what I felt strongly at the time and I still probably feel that way about anything like that. But the leadership of the Peace movement as well required a certain degree of bureaucracy and continuance which I'm not very keen on or good at but it has to happen and also the Peace Movement as it developed was not able to be a bi-cultural movement.

Why was that?

It was too early for that. I think we were almost too early for anything to be bi-cultural. I mean the College up here tries to be bi-cultural but its almost too early for it we don't realise it took two hundred years to get us into this mess and it's going to take two hundred to get out of it into something more human. It's something like that that we're trying to unravel skeins of violence – it's like putting uranium back in the ground you know it will take a while.

So that makes me also think that when you started with the Peace Squadron did you think, Oh this is something I'm going to be doing for a few years yet.

Yes, I thought hard and long about it. But that was before the Peace Squadron. That was after I saw the War Game by English producer Peter Watkins. I don't think it was ever shown on the BBC. It was too powerful. It showed the social break up following the dropping of a nuclear bomb on Britain and it was so powerfully done it was the social consequences of it rather than the sheer destruction and seeing looters being shot on the spot by the police or the military and the padre saying the Lord's prayer over them before they were shot. It was sort of stuff like that that was so powerful and it was shown a lot and I still remember seeing it down in the Lido here one day one afternoon. There were not many in the audience and I went out afterwards and I thought I don't care if it takes my whole life to make some contribution to making sure that doesn't happen but that's what I'm going to do. I remember thinking am I just being melodramatic – you know having seen this thing. I'm not even sure what year that was but it was a moment which I didn't go back on in a way because I felt that the nuclear really had that potential to absolutely destroy to what we'd laboured patiently to build up for generations in terms of social any sort of social confidence in one another.

Tape three Side one.

George I just wanted to read to you a few things that came from the newspaper articles about how you had described what it was like to be involved to participate in the Peace Squadron and to be out there at sea. In particular these quotes came from when the Long Beach ship came in 1976. You were quoted as saying that the Long Beach was a death ship in the harbour full of life.

Yes, that was the basic ideology that was driving me that Auckland harbour was so full of life and activity of a good kind and a life giving kind whether it was people there for pleasure or for commerce or for other purposes in getting from one place to another it was so full of all that life there was no room in it for a ship that was with such a monstrous capacity to deliver death as that ship and that's the message I kept hammering that this is a harbour of life and there is not room here for a ship of death as simple as that I tried to keep on and on with that message and Mat Rata symbolised it because when he went out on Rangi Walker's boat he took a fishing line with him so he went fishing while he was out there so that was it.

One thing that I also found was really interesting that you had done was that you had written a letter to the captain of that ship and in the newspaper article you are also quoted as saying that this is not about anger or taking an attitude towards the captain or the sailors but it was about what the nuclear ship symbolised – would you like to explain more about that?

Yes, we were at pains to try to express that to the military people the armed services and the same towards anybody employed in government service you know our own police and so on that we saw ourselves as not involved in any personal entanglement with them -this was not what this was about. This was about a mutual struggle of against this way of trying to solve things this military this last dead end of military might as it were. This incensed the people operating the ships. They were not the issue it was the fact that the ships existed and that they were part of a strategic projection of power system and so on. We saw the operators of the vessels and stuff -basically they were fellow human beings with us, and we just had to work on it together. I think one of my basic images which was very far fetched was that eventually the nuclear ship commander saying 'O well alright, we can't come in here and we do agree that this stuff we've got in here would be better off back in the ground, but we'll need your help and maybe together we could dismantle it and put it all back again. As long as you can find some mode of good employment for me and my ship's company and all that. There's be quite a bit of employment in undoing all the bolts and nuts and things, but this kind of line that we need to work at it together because the military people realise more than anybody else how bad that stuff is and how dangerous it is because they're the ones who suffer directly from it as well as all the citizens and the so-called collateral damage. Trying to retain that spirit and be disciplined by that sort of spirit of a common humanity that's very that's like the Buddhists saying about in Vietnam these are our brothers whom we are killing. That sort of spirit which actually is a tactical thing as well – it's a message that the people they might think that you're not being really sincere about that, but they basically have some respect for it they certainly respect the message even if they think the messengers are trying to be rather clever or manipulative.

Can you also tell me because I read that at the end of the morning protest as being out on the harbour then later on in the day there was something about ringing dial a sailor? What was dial a sailor about?

That was some of the people had that idea and did it. The dial a sailor idea was something run by someone in the city that if you want to dial for hospitality to any visiting service people you could ring up a number and say you know we'd be glad to have someone out for dinner or something like that.

That was amusing.

I never heard any reports on how that went.

With regard to that visit of the Long Beach Ship this newspaper quotes you describing the sense of being a part of this number of people out there in boats

and you said it was a depth of commitment – a willingness to follow through the warmth of friendship and a sense of right spirit. Do you remember saying that?

Well not all that all together like four different things but that certainly describes what I've just described in a way. Yes, we did try for all of those things and largely achieved them I think because the sailors themselves were a brilliant lot. I mean the Peace Squadron sailors. You got them all together and you got a wonderful variety and they gradually reminded one another of what we were on about so you got a pretty good spirit in it. Occasionally you'd get a flare up and they certainly weren't very good on bicultural matters to put it mildly when they came up but however those were the days.

And how was it when it came to religion? Obviously that's what you were bringing to it and those of the Peace Squadron involved who didn't go to church or didn't consider themselves religious, how did they respond to that?

I think some of them who hadn't been to church for ages told me that they slipped into a church to have a prayer before the Peace Squadron event. A lot of them one way or another said to me 'well, I'm not usually religious but I feel pretty religious about this'. That's basically what they were saying and from that point of view I felt this is better than being vicar of a parish. This is what my job is. I'm quite happy to be doing this. I don't feel there's anything different about this than being a kind of parish priest of some sort, even sort of without all the fanfare and high liturgy, and all of that. But there was plenty of liturgy in it and there was plenty of explanatory stuff that had to be done to the media. You had to have a theology. You had to have worship. To me it all seemed like that and to me that's what the church is. It is in a sense stating the obvious but people don't see it that way largely because they've had a bad experience of the church perhaps or they're just pigheaded about it. I don't think that was true of the Peace Squadron. I think some people can get on very well. They're self made people and that's end of it. There's no mystery in life you know it's all worked out and we all know everything about everything. There are people a bit like that – very secular people – I don't know New Zealand is a very secular country so but I think they were very happy with the association with the church. A lot of them certainly to start with they felt a bit uncomfortable about having things on church premises. After a while we had things in other places but not much.

You'd meet in other places?

I don't think the Peace Squadron was the sort of outfit that wanted to become a permanent committee of some sort. They just didn't want that. I used to try to get them together and say well how do we organise ourselves? But one way or another they were saying thank you very much we don't want to be organised. We want to go

sailing (laughs) and so the organisation had to come somewhere else. That's why the revival and creation of a national peace movement and the development of the Nuclear Free Independent Pacific Movement and this whole idea of nuclear free zones – you know, declare your house and your dog and your cat and your school desk all of that came from that, and was tremendously successful sort of organisation stuff. That came from 1980 on and we put a lot of energy into that. A lot of ingenuity went into it too and it took off in a big way once you linked all those zones together. Whether they were people or city councils or borough councils or harbour boards or whatever, you kind of built up the level of support for a government that was willing to put through some legislation which was what eventually happened. So all of that and Helen Caldicott's visit helped with that enormously. She came and stirred everybody to the depths about 200 people there in the YMCA one night and she stirred them to the depths. But I'd known I'd said to the organisers what are you going to do with all that emotion? Where's it going to go and they said 'Oh, we haven't thought about that'. I said well, you'd better think about it, so let's have an organisational meeting three nights later and we'll work it out. Blow me down 400 people turned up to the organisational meeting. Some superb people. So, we split up into groups on education, religion, and stuff and how we would do this, how we would sort of accomplish things to follow up from Helen's visit and that was tremendous.

And you kept going in that way for several years?

Yeah, that started off a whole raft of things that looked after themselves. We only needed the one organisational meeting. Four hundred people. I was staggered because these were people who actually wanted to organise and usually people don't want to organise, like the Peace Squadron didn't want to organise. They do a little bit of organising but they didn't want to organise a movement or a programme or a project. But these people did. When we gathered for the NZ wide peace movement Maori came along to that too so we got something going. I didn't keep up with that that particular thing but a whole group of excellent people came up from Dunedin and of course out of all of that came Kate Dewes, and that kind of initiative that she's taken since then. Kate's probably the most spectacular of a whole number of people who picked things up and ran with them. Kate's just kept on going and built it up to an institutional level that's utterly global. One of these days that will be fully recognised too. That tremendous achievement will be recognised here the way I'm sure it is internationally.

Would you like to just tell me a little something about the Home Base Pacific Pilgrimage?

Well, we had the idea that people had said – it's all very well to stop nuclear warships coming here but they'll just go somewhere else. and where are they coming from

anyway? So we developed the idea of a Pacific Pilgrimage which would trace the nuclear warships back to their lairs as it were. Go after the dragon you might say. So a bunch of Australians picked that idea up and they sailed the Pacific Peacemaker over there and it came through New Zealand and it caused quite a stir and went up there where they home quartered the first nuclear submarine in Puget Sound in Seattle Washington up in the Northwest of the United States. Terry Wall went and participated in that for us, and some of our people went on the Pacific Peacemaker. That was the Pacific Pilgrimage we had an idea of going back out across the Pacific. The 'home base' one was declaring your own immediate outfit nuclear free and if you had to go through a process of decision making to do that that was all to the better because education would be involved in that. Because if you've got your local community committee or if you've got getting St John's College to declare itself nuclear free if you wanted the Board of Governors or the Board of Trustees you had to go through a whole process of education and political action and strategic formulation for that. So the home base was that and we put out a magazine and stuff and we got it going and Andrew Beyer and Elaine Shaw (she's dead now wonderful woman) and one or two others too they were tremendous people and they did a tremendous job. Celine Kearney and there was another wonderful woman who did a lot of work on that. We were all set to keep going hard with that but in the middle of that Andrew Beyer, who I was working very closely with (he's a very artistic chap excellent guy) said look I'm not going to be able to continue because they want me to be convenor of the Auckland organizing committee for the Springbok Tour 1981. I said well you've got to choose what you're going to do. Gee, I didn't envy him that job. Terrible because we were on the edge of the 1981 tour by then so all of that lay ahead. That was just about civil war really and I knew it would be.

And that's another place where you were quite an example.

And I didn't want to be and if there's anywhere I'd rather have been than there. That was just terrible. It was back to worse than the anti-Vietnam war I mean war between nations is something but civil war within a country where you're divided horrible but fortunately that sort of worked its way out anyway.

I think you were quite courageous there just in terms of those images of you going on to the field with the loudhailer speaker and offering a prayer and trying to talk to the police I can remember seeing you trying to talk to the police and the protestors to try and prevent the violence you could see that would ensue.

I hadn't realised it until the very moment but of course the real danger of the violence came from the spectators especially if any'd been drinking and were a bit young and stupid and violent those were the ones who were going to cause the trouble and they

did too they really knocked people about horribly some of the police might have been very badly behaved they certainly were on some of the other protest paths.

I was wondering in terms of the protests against the Springbok Tour, was it a matter of time? Did it feel quite scary that you had to just keep putting yourself out there to be a presence and be a voice?

Yes, and it was the worst possible experience of that and yet it was the thing in which the St John's College came together as never before in my experience, solidly willing to stick its neck out really. In a sense it almost broke the Anglican Church I think when I look back on it because the Anglican constituency was so angry about what we'd done they gave the church leadership such a hard time over it that the church leadership came back on us a bit and wanted to be reassured that we'd done the right thing. I wasn't quite sure it was, as though the church leadership lost it's own nerve at that point, and we were carrying the church's leadership, I've never thought about that before in saying this sort of thing but there was something like that. It was a kind of horrible time because it was just absolute black disagreement between the people of an impenetrable kind and there was no alternative but to be really disobedient and to a point that was incomprehensible to other people. But of course it all eventually came right with Mandela and it was their struggle and we knew fairly quickly that it had succeeded beyond our dreams, that the blacks saw it back in South Africa and were immensely heartened by it and of course the Maori here had then had all the leverage in the world for saying, well okay what are you going to do about the thing here? There's something else too about that thing is that the people who paid the price in that Springbok tour paid a huge price. I mean I was scared stiff. I didn't feel it was my issue in a sense of offering leadership. I'd had to do leadership in several other things and I felt this is a time when I don't have to do it. I'm not going to do it. But I found that the Christians, the Quakers in particular, and the Christians wanted a lead and it wasn't going to come if I didn't give it which I don't like much. Perhaps that's unfair to them. I mean the students were magnificent from the College. What they did was simply amazing. It's not that they needed a lead in that sense.

What were they doing?

Like carrying the cross on you know (laughs) that in particular I think.

Do you think the students maybe had been quite influenced by you?

It's possible. Well they certainly were in the Peace Squadron. In the Springbok tour they really took the bit between their own teeth. The Methodist students came through very well. Of course the Springbok Tour had a long historical build up. There were people there who'd made up their minds long ago about this and they saw this as the

absolute end point of this game and it was clear that a huge section of the New Zealand population felt that too so it was a different order of magnitude altogether. I still don't know what to think of it really, but certainly from the point of view of what South Africa was I think that's what New Zealand is and I think the population ratios are the other way around, like eighty twenty percent you know in their case it's the black majority there in South Africa. In our case it's the white majority so it's strange. I think probably needs even longer time than this to figure it out. Something was going on in New Zealand. You see from the eighties you'd have to think of 1984 Rogernomics or the end of Muldoon of course and the Muldoon issue was a big one. I mean his behaviour on that one was a big factor in it. In some ways I felt he brought out the worst in all of us. His leadership – not him himself personally – but his style of leadership. I'd want to give him his due I suppose so there was the end of that Muldoon thing.

When you say his style of leadership brought out the worst in all of us, but do you also think that it brought out the best in people in terms of that they channelled their energy through into action? Some of the Peace Squadron people, some of their motivation might have been that not only anti-nuclear but anti-the Muldoon government at that time, and that energised them and then with the Springbok tour again the combination of things it offers energy to then go and do something about it?

Yes, it's quite possible I think. It's like anger as an emotion needs to find an outlet and it's quite possible that anger can find a very positive outlet and you've got all that energy there. In fact I've seen that happen in most amusing ways in that the anger becomes positive. But it's all too much in danger of going the other way but I think if you offer people an opportunity to fulfil what it is they're deeply concerned about, that maybe there's something in that. I haven't thought too much about that by doing. It's certainly true that one of the things that the protest people taught me – the ones who were very experienced in it – was that where you create all that energy in a march or in a protest action it's got to go somewhere. You've got to have something for people to do and that usually means marching on an embassy or going round an delivering a letter somewhere, or something that the people will feel has actually achieved some end that their emotions are being focussed on. I know there's some quite wise sort of social psychiatrists amongst the protest movement know that that's so and that's part of the reason that was stirring me to figure out a follow-on to the Caldicott visit because she was obviously going to stir people to the depths and there were a lot of excellent people there who needed an outlet and anyway we needed to organise.

Tape three side two.

You were just saying that with all that energy people needed something practical to do with it and then from doing something they have a sense of accomplishment, maybe just to wind up this interview, would you just like to maybe offer what your reflections are in terms of do you view that you've had some accomplishments along the way from your involvement?

Yes, I think I've had a lion's share of the sense of accomplishment that anybody could reasonably expect to have. I mean having been part of the anti-nuclear movement at a spectacular moment of achieving a nuclear free New Zealand and even a nuclear-free Pacific who could wish for anything more as great as that to have had a part in that and to have had a visible part in it in that people kind of congratulate you absurdly you know for your particular part in it. I mean one or two people get that and they're very lucky perhaps if they like that sort of thing, but it certainly makes you quite sure that you've made a contribution. So, I feel that very much but it's like everybody says who has some visible achievement that you know really you're part of a whole operation really. I think the most marvellous thing about it is that we did seem in the last part of the last century to be moving towards quite a new sort of world. I think what's happened in the first part of this century is to sort of make us wonder whether we really are at all or whether we're going backwards.

What do you think?

Well, I'm never going to believe that when we're going backwards, I mean if there was such a thing. But no I think already it's clear that making war is not working. It's not working in Iraq and I can't see what other kind of war the major super-power could possibly wage than that one. They must know that it hasn't worked in any way that's really satisfactory so the kind of hardliners who manipulated the state of affairs of this absurd invasion they will loose their persuasiveness. I think that's just my intellect playing with the idea though I hear a lot of commentators saying that one way or the other. So it probably will play itself out and maybe quite quickly – its like rerunning the whole of the twentieth century in the first couple of years of the twenty-first and we'll find that a rerun will bring us to the same conclusions as in the twentieth. You know that it just doesn't work already. They've had a war that they've lost a minimum number of American lives and they've caused an awful lot of extra suffering in Iraq to add what was already there, but in terms of figures, somehow they've kept back from some of the most ghastly types of brutality and that's not because of the virtue necessarily of those waging war. It might have a lot to do with the restraint of those who are having war waged on them I don't know but it is surprising that the whole thing has somewhat ground to a halt very quickly and although economically you could say well the US is in a very advantageous position I'm not sure that it is economically. We don't know yet. I mean if it's going to pay to have done what they do well maybe they'll think it was worth it, but I don't think so but that's just human logic and I have some amount of faith in human logic but I feel

that the way things work out in history are a lot more inscrutable than that and I don't think I'll ever be persuaded that things are going in a bad direction ultimately maybe I'm wrong.

And just to know finish off with… what would you say in terms of sharing these stories with people of my generation? Do you place a value on the sharing of stories and of encouraging younger people in terms of how to stick with it?

Hugely and I'm sorry not to be in direct action on that right now, but I think yeah, finding ways of telling the stories, I think the fact that you yourself are really interested in this is partly, it's a history that explains your own history, it's a story that explains your own history, so that's what I would hope would come from this sort of oral history or anything I manage to write or something like that. I was very pleased to be able to participate in that TV program on the Springbok tour even though it came out in the most strange way but you can't control that they're making their own programme. I can see that these stories need to be told because they get forgotten. I mean a new generation comes along and maybe they want to react against what the previous crowd did and that's fair enough. They want to do something specifically their own but if the stories are any good and the achievement was any good then they'd be really interested in it. Really you know I think that my boys will be very interested to hear my account of what happened because it probably passed for them like a blur. I don't know but for them they have a lot of faith in what I might write.

So what are you writing at the moment?

Well I think it has to be a straightforward history like I've given you. I've written a couple of chapters for books in the last couple of years but that's not been what I really want to write. I think I've tried to have been a bit too clever in a way. I think I've probably just got to write down what's happened and like I've said some of what's happened now and do it as well as I can and perhaps illustrate it with the information and get it as accurate as I can and put it in as an interesting way as I can.

So, what were the clever things you were trying to do?

I was trying to link it up with for example New Zealand's epic sense of itself, we've got some sort of epic sense of ourselves, and I was linking it up with the fact that Tolkien got produced here. It's almost like Rogernomics, its almost like the America's cup following the Peace Squadron, you know ludicrous kind of parallels but not unconnected. So there's a whole kind of desire to take an initiative that will lead the world – an epic sort of feeling though for me the best kind of epic about that will be a kind of initiative that will regain a world that we've lost rather than lead the world into some brand new spanking sign of successful future. That's why I love the

Whale Rider because it's the sort of succession that is being worked out. There the girl is quite brilliant. It's a succession of history and it goes right back to the whales and they take it right out to the depths. If you read the book, there's that dialogue between the whales which is phenomenal and it reminds me a lot of Tolkien's writing and other parts of his work – not his Lord of the Rings book – but his Silmarillion which is very hard to read. It's got the same sort of character about it as the whale's conversation. I think that epic sense and to me the Peace Squadron is part of that that epic sense. Here we are right on the crest of the wave of some sort but it's a wave of history itself and we're hoping to preserve and protect and love something into persisting and thriving and becoming what it could become, in fulfilment of the history that's already gone before it. So there's that kind of thing. I've tried to write a straight out history of the Peace Squadron but that didn't work too well. I think it's that epic sense that I was stuck with for a few months and I did write a chapter and send it off to Reeds but it's not the book that I want to write. The other thing that I was stuck on was civilisations that what we're dealing with is a clash of civilisations, not a clash of civilisations actually that's totally misleading, dangerously misleading, and it's a very popular scholarly idea that's put abroad by this political scientist Huntingdon who writes text books for political science students. But he has this idea of clash of civilisations and he talks about Islam's bloody borders and it's very clear where his thinking is going, but he's not too explicit about it in a way but what I'm saying is that we're actually moving towards a collaboration or cooperation of civilisations including the most antique civilisations which are indigenous civilisations. I really wanted to bring that out and say that Christian story is the story of one particular form of civilisation. First of all the Hebrew one and then the Hebrew one sort of transmuting into, mutating into a Christian movement, with Paul going to Rome and stuff, and Constantine becoming the Christian emperor and all that and all those rather funny sorts of thing that have happened with Christendom. And now with Liberation theology we've kind of come full circle into something that looks a bit more like the first century stuff but with this curious sort of message and style that Jesus is commending and what he's doing in the New Testament it's not very clear what it means but it certainly isn't leading an armed struggle. So Liberation theology, although it's been very powerful and valuable and all that, it doesn't quite fit the picture of Jesus so what he was on about that teaches us about something else. Perhaps armed struggle is appropriate, I don't know, and quite religious and Christian to some extent but that's not the picture that we're given in the New Testament.

It makes me draw a linkage back to when you were talking about Whale Rider because it's almost like in Whale Rider it spirals back to the ancient times of the myth of the first ancestor that came on the whales, and like the old stories the Old Testament and old civilisations, but then bringing back into present context and the liberation of and the empowerment of the girl to come forward as the new carrier – the new messenger- the new leader, and in a way that's her

liberation and that's the new theology but it's tied in it's linked in – I just got that from what you just said.

That's good because the theology might not look much like theology. It might look more like a sort of super reading of history and myth and that's good yeah we haven't talked at all about the secular for a while. I was thoroughly starry eyed about the secular nature of human life partly following on some of Bonhoeffer's magnificent writing during his imprisonment before he was executed by Hitler. Bonhoeffer's writing was a celebration of the secular in a way, but that's been taken up in quite the wrong way I think in our context. I mean secularity in New Zealand I think by and large has a lot to be said against it. I think we've perhaps lost as much as we've gained by our secularity and we're an extremely secular country and I'm not sure I find it easy to say what that is, but my theology was profoundly secular for quite a period my teaching but I've shifted really right away from that.

When did that shift happen?

It's quite hard to fit it into what I've been saying already. *Honest to God* was published in about the year I came to College and so I was following it avidly for a period but then once I realised that the Vietnam war was really kind of a religious phenomenon and it somehow only religious solution would succeed with a religious phenomenon. When I realised Buddhism was at the heart and soul of the struggle in Vietnam for a better situation I sort of felt well it's ridiculous to follow this secular tack.

End of interview.

New Citizen 14·10·76

Theology afloating under nuclear bows

It began with a telegram, over a year ago, signed by 13 students and staff of the Anglican—Methodist St John's College in Auckland. It climaxed last week, out on the early morning waters of the Waitemata, when a motley quadron of everything rom keelers to canoes, topped a nuclear warship n its tracks.

The original telegram, addressed to the Prime Minister of the day, promised the formation of a Peace Squadron to picket New Zealand harbours against the visits of nuclear warships.

The hundred strong fleet hat lined up in front of the U.S.S. Long Beach last week ept that promise, but it was so longer simply a St John's College exercise. Some 200 Aucklanders of any and all ut mostly of no church connection had signed up to make their stand, along with he founding fathers of the leet.

One of those founders is a lightly built, grey haired, 45 ear old doctor of theology nd Anglican priest called George Armstrong. When he's ot bobbing under the bows of attleships, he's teaching heology to ordination candidates. Contradictory ways o spend your time? Not at all, e says.

ORTHODOXY

The squadron for him is an xercise in Christian rthodoxy.

"You see, most people ssume that it's impossible to nfluence the ruling powers of he day, that it's no use ighting City Hall when justice s at stake. But in Christian erms, it's heresy to argue that ou can't fight sin and that all ou can do is wait for Armageddon to arrive.

Auckland Star photo

Dr George Armstrong at sea, with the electronic packed masthead of the U.S.S. Long Beach looming up behind him.

The biblical message is about a God who wills freedom and peace for us all. This is personified in Jesus Christ. By his actions, he made a great difference. And people who have been inspired by him ever ...ce have been able to prevail against the inhumanity of powerful structures.

"For me, the Peace Squadron has been an important expression of the Gospel, and it's been a real privilege to be part of it."

That's how Dr Armstrong sees it. But he doesn't only look for theological meaning in the dramatic action of the fleet. Membership in the Squadron itself has been a pilgrimage for him.

COVENANT PEOPLE

"I've had the experience of belonging to a covenanted deep about personal growth."

He speaks as though the quality of community in the Squadron has taken him by surprise, as though he's at a loss to explain it. But Kierkegaard's words, "purity of heart is to will one thing", make more sense to him now.

ST JOHN'S LINK

The Peace Squadron is not the only community affected by the protest. St John's College itself has been caught up in the exercise, even though it's not an official project of the College, but rather in George Armstrong's rather formal definition, "the initiative of one segment within a widely varied community."

And while there is no formal approval, the connection with the College, "has given the feeling at least that the Church stands for peace and against nuclear weapons," says Dr Armstrong.

Long Beach confrontation differently.

What the protest provides is a case study for Christians at work in a pluralistic society — free to say why they act, without seeming to explain everyone else's involvement as well.

But that caution shouldn't blunt the wider questions raised by the Long Beach protest. George Armstrong asks some of them in relation to media coverage of the event.

No-one is complaining about the enormous volume of coverage. What can be debated is the editorial policy of the newspapers, reflected in the largely uncritical prominence they gave to naval and police judgements.

Dr Armstrong is disappointed that there was no independent assessment made of the dangers claimed by the authorities, dangers that he believes were greatly overrated.

He's also critical of the way that some reports defined the Squadron in terms of the official opposition it aroused, rather than the nuclear armed ship it was aimed at.

The enemy was not the police, but the balance of nuclear terror that the ship represented.

Which raises another distinction that the Squadron has to make — between the evil of nuclear arms embodied by the ship, and the men who sail her.

"The Squadron's argument is not with the sailors," says **Dr Armstrong, "but with the utterly unhuman, demonic force that the ship represents, and we mustn't let friendly relationship with the people involved obscure that point.**

There is a risk of trivialising the issue: "We could have ended up having dinner with the captain (though we weren't invited!), and having a lovely demo in the midst of all that death."

For a death ship in a harbour full of life, is how George Armstrong describes the Long Beach just one more expression of the inhuman structures that the New Testament calls us to oppose in our struggle against the "principalities and powers".

John Bluck

George Armstrong in *New Citizen*, 14 October 1976.