Elsie Locke: anti-nuclear arms veteran

By KEN COATES

She has the front door of her cottage from the Avon River already open. It is typical of her. There is no porch, and she does not want me standing in the breeching rain while she comes to the door.

Elsie Locke at 79 is as sharp as ever. She should be declared a national treasure. She has done that a dozen times lately. But her eyes light up as she steps into the room of peace activists and responds with vigour on how she feels about the possibility of New Zealand going back into the ANZUS alliance.

New Zealanders would go as voluntary supplicants, she says, with the US demanding that the country not only let American warships visit but that it also sign the anti-nuclear legislation.

"That's absolutely appalling, and if we went on in those conditions, we would be saying: 'No matter what you ask, we'll do it.'"

"No fear... not for this chick," she says, using a phrase that strips back the years. "For me it would be both frustrating. I can't bear the thought of it!"

Opposition to militarism and nuclear arms has been much on Elsie Locke's mind for two decades. She has been working on her interest in "Peace People", a history of New Zealand peace activists. The book will be published in February.

She is in the little book-lined den in which she has written dozens, maybe hundreds, of letters to "The Press" on this and many other subjects, as well as her well-known children's and other books with New Zealand social history themes.

"She lives with her husband, Jack, in the same condo as she has lived in for 47 years in the Avon Loop, the quiet, neighbourly character of which she values highly. They still support each other's causes.

"What makes Elsie Locke so interesting is that it is so clear she has insights based not only on her experience, but on her own informed and experience in many of the events about which she writes. She is adamantly opposed to New Zealand giving up nuclear-free status by 'siding the side with the hawks' over the world."

"She helps people's organisations rather than governments, and New Zealand's anti-nuclear CND has been an inspiration to them, too." ELSTER

Elsie Locke moves a little stiffly as she gets off the telephone. She had a double-knee operation for arthritis more than a year ago, and she says she has not been as successful as she had hoped.

She takes morning swims in the Centennial Pool, rides her bicycle and walks, although not on the same scale as her beloved tramping of former years.

She is a small woman, alert, perceptive, and well informed. She raised a family of four children and among other things is the successful author of 20 books, both children's and adult.

She is a long-time activist on environment and nuclear weapons issues and a member of the Communist Party (this is another subject she is not prepared to discuss).

Elsie has plenty of natural stamina, according to those who know her. She gives the impression of a person strongly motivated by the desire to continue writing what she feels deeply has to be written.

She travels around the country, visits schools, gives addresses, and follows a carefully planned routine with little concession to age other than taking a short rest now and then.

"Why has she spent a lifetime opposing armed conflict?"

Childhood memories include that of her parents in the small town of Wairau, near Auckland, standing down the long line of war dead in the newspaper.

At war parades there were always people crying, she recalls. "I would say it has been most successful."

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Elsie Locke cites evidence that in the Gulf War information was controlled to a greater extent than has ever been the case in any other war.

She describes as very frightening the power of the United States to control public information. The Gulf War had been represented as a UN war dealing with aggression.

"But she says, there have been other aggressions, the most notorious of which was Indonesia taking over East Timor. Even more recently, what right did the US have to invade Panama?"

"The soybeans this was a naked aggression, and we must send our message: 'Of course we didn't,' she says. "The Gulf War was over oil and if it had not been there, there wouldn't have been all that action.'"

As a long-time campaigner for nuclear disarmament, Elsie Locke says she has always regarded nuclear weapons as worse than Hitler's gas chambers — "a complete stupidly."

"All attempts since 1945 to internationalise nuclear weapons broke down, and the problem compound."

"And yet when someone comes forward with a measure to partly dismantle them, generally people are pathetically grateful. We should never have had them in the first place."

Elsie Locke considers that President Bush's announced reduction in nuclear arms has less to do with a desire for disarmament than with finance. A third of the world's arms spending is American, she says, and far too heavy a burden for any nation to carry for a long time.

One reason why the Soviets are in
such a bad economic position is because too much expenditure has gone on armaments. They just cannot afford to, she observes.

This woman, who, when quite young, was shocked by the realisation of what horrific damage war could do to humans, maintained that most people do not realise the enormity of the threat posed by nuclear bombs.

"They think of them as just worse weapons, not as weapons in a totally different category," she says.

She asked a simple question which she said should stand in judgement on Iraq over its nuclear weapon project: "What other nation would be in the same position?" she asks.

"That's one side of it. The other is where did Iraq get all the materials from to build these things?" she says. "The whole question of the arms trade comes into it."

Of course, the question of the arms trade comes into it. But she was concerned about the arms trade as a world military power, and the end of the Cold War.

But the threat that as long as nuclear weapons exist, there is the danger they can be used. The Americans threatened to use them in the Korean War, and they had them on vessels facing Hong Kong in the Gulf War.

One of the saving graces of the US, she says, is that it still has freedom of publication.

"Most of the information we have on these things comes from the US, so we don't know whether the Soviet Union has been doing the same."

At first it comes as a surprise to hear Elsie Locke say she has never been a complete pacifist, but it soon becomes clear that even-handed views and understanding people and their rights underlie her stance.

"I have never said there are no circumstances in which you would not fight. For example, the Maori would have been a lot worse off if they had not resisted in the colonial wars."

While she opposed conscription, she does not object to voluntary service. "We don't oppose armies and navies on principle, but thinks they should be purely for home defence."

"I don't like it when they're trained for jungle warfare," she says. "We haven't got any jungles to be war footing in."

"Most people say: 'Let's have peace talks and have an eye on people reaching our shore, and let's have planes ready for search and rescue."

"There's a strong current thought that says we would be available for peace-making or mediating efforts'"

Elsie Locke says the war with Hitler became unavoidable although it could have been stopped earlier. But New Zealand should never have been involved in Vietnam or Korea.

On the other hand, what were the Natives to do if she asked. And the people in the Philippines who feel their lands are being taken from them, she says, are fighting back.

Whatever one thinks about Elsie Locke's views, they are always sincerely held and cogently put. The spirit that prompted her, as the youngest of six children in a family that was far from well off, to go first a secondary school and then a university education, is still very much alive.

She retains a strong sense of optimism. Campaigning for peace brought her flak in the early days, "but not recently; it's a feather in the cap now."

She says: "I really think there is a groundswell of revolution against war, in general everywhere, though there'll still be people who'll say we can't avoid it and we've got to be ready for it."

As for what is happening to New Zealand and the welfare state, her views on that are literally another story. But here, too, she describes herself as "the incorrigible optimist."

She says that most New Zealanders have been brought up to support and help one another. Co-operation has been a big part of national life.

"Now the ideal put forward is that it's every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost."

Will that spoil the national character? She does not think so. "People are finding new ways to work with each other in the 'underground economy' in line with the old saying that it is the poor that help the poor."

"I don't think we will lose out in the end and be reduced to a totally greedy society," says Elsie Locke. "I think there's enough resilience in the ordinary population for this not to happen."

A knock at the door precedes the entrance of a woman with a packet against widening leafy Avondale Drive. It seems to be a worthy cause and I sign.

"Have you given enough consideration to the proposal and the implications to sign?" asks Elsie. Again, it is so typical of her.