

The Auckland Star

(AUCKLAND)
Auckland Province
Circulation approx. 150,000

21 OCT 1983

Chongs Press Cutting Bureau
Box 68143, Auckland, N.Z.



Owen Wilkes . . . "The thing is to do everything possible to keep nuclear weapons out of the zone."

Kiwi on the peace trail

By PAUL PANCKHURST

A CHANCE find in Christchurch city rubbish put Owen Wilkes on the peace campaigning trail. It is a trail that has led the Kiwi in and out of court.

He has been branded a spy, accused of espionage and received the attentions of security services here and overseas.

The revelation that Customs had opened his mail and referred it to the Security Intelligence Service returned Wilkes to the limelight.

In Auckland lecturing and talking peace, the 43-year-old beekeeper told how he picked up the peace habit while collecting the rubbish.

It is 1965 and the Christchurch-born grocer's son is not interested in either politics or the news of the world.

That is until, during an idle moment, he glances at a newspaper clipping among some rubbish.

It is a news story about a demonstration against an American VIP who is persuading New Zealand to send troops to Vietnam. One of Wilkes' friends has been arrested in the protest.

Demonstrations? Arrests? Vietnam? Wilkes thinks: "What the hell is going on?" and decides he has some catching up to do.

BY the late 1960s he is heavily involved in protests against an American navigational station proposed for New Zealand.

Protesters say an "Omega" station will aid missile-carrying submarines and make New Zealand a target for nuclear attack.

The station is never established here, but Wilkes is invited to Norway by the Oslo Peace Research Institute when Omega becomes an issue there in 1976.

A supposed six-month stint becomes a two-year job and ends with the discovery of a secret electronic spy base network.

After information on the bases — which eavesdrop on Soviet communications — is published, Wilkes and a colleague are taken to court and fined.

The court says they have endangered national security.

Wilkes says that is despite the bases being listed in the telephone directory and despite information on them being open to the general public.

By the time of that 1981 court decision Wilkes has moved on to Sweden where he works on a catalogue of foreign military bases around the world.

But during a cycling holiday he observes defence installations and snaps off several photographs.

Snap — he has earned a spying charge.

"They said what I saw from the roadway was secret.

"They said: 'If the military want something to be secret . . . it's secret'."

The spy charge is eventually dropped, but Wilkes is banned from Sweden for years. But he now says his Scandinavian court cases were not "a heavy experience."

They were "more like a protracted debate . . . which I happened to lose."

He returns to New Zealand — where, it seems, the authorities are still interested in the information he's dealing with.

So what is the Wilkes' attitude to getting and using "secret" information?

"There's more public information that I can handle without getting into secret information."

And he says much of that information is available in New Zealand.

"The most important source of information in looking into global military activities is the testimony given to the United States Congress when they're considering the budget."

And that testimony, he says, is in our parliamentary library.

Wilkes has been back in New Zealand for about a year, living in Karamea, on the South Island West Coast.

He's planning to spend summers beekeeping and winters researching in Wellington.

Wilkes has two main projects to work on. The first is organising a conference to coincide with next year's ANZUS meeting — it will present "the opposing view."

The other project is preparing a manual of information for the New Zealand peace movement.

He says that while Kiwis are up on Cruise missile protests at Greenham Common, England, they aren't aware of planned missile deployments in the Pacific.

The manual will "put the Pacific in perspective with the rest of the world."

Wilkes is in favour of declaring the Pacific a nuclear-free zone.

"People say we couldn't verify it . . . that we couldn't stop Russian submarines from sneaking into it."

"I don't think that's an issue."

He says: "The thing is to do everything possible to keep nuclear weapons out of the zone."

WILKES IS optimistic about the world peace movements and "I'm a great believer that we (the public) have influence on Governments."

But back to the recent Wilkes publicity — those mail openings.

"I'm determined to get to the bottom of this whole business and see if it's legal or not."

If it is he wants a law change.

If it isn't: "We've got to make sure it's not happening."

To Wilkes the incidents have been an "unforgivable invasion of privacy and civil liberties."

But the man who's been called "spy" also says: "These guys in the SIS . . . I guess we're paying them to be paranoid."