AUSIE ACTIVIST ON TRIAL

Committed Christian Moana took on the US Air Force for her beliefs, and now faces internment, trial and, possibly, a long prison sentence.

A blue moon was shining when Moana Cole last saw the night sky; the first blue moon to shine on the US east coast on New Year's Eve for 19 years. The sky was so bright that she climbed over snow-covered hills and through barbed wire to pour her blood onto the runway of Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, New York State.

When The Weekly spoke to Moana several weeks later, she had not seen the outside world, not even a ray of daylight or a spark of moonlight, for more than a week.

The tall, slim 25-year-old Australian spent 23 of every 24 hours in a tiny, windowless cell in the Syracuse Public Safety Building in New York State. Through the bars of her cell door she watches the war news.

"At this particular time, I can't think of a better place to be in this country, if you have any integrity, than in jail," she said. Moana and three companions from the Catholic Worker movement have been charged with destruction of government property and conspiring to destroy government property at Griffiss. They were first arrested by US Marshals on New Year's Eve, Ciaran and Moana poured blood on the runway and then began to dig it up.

During the following day and night, they eventually chipped two holes, one of them two metres in diameter, before they were found by guards. Susan Frankel and William Street were broken into Griffiss last New Year's Eve, Ciaran and Moana poured blood on the runway and then began to dig it up.

"People who have had to make a living in the world of work, like to be free because our conscience doesn't allow us to be free," Moana said. Moana's cell in the Syracuse prison measures 2.4 metres x 1.2 metres. It opens to a barred corridor around which another 20 cells are situated. Every cell has a view, through its bars, of one of the five television sets in the cell block.

"The news we see on television is coming out now saying let's get back to business as usual, let's give the appearance of normality," Moana said. "I think the times we live in aren't normal and getting back to business as usual is denying things that are happening. Normality, for most of the world, isn't happening and the lifestyle we're living isn't normal or admirable or one that we should be living."

Moana's restricted life behind bars is a huge contrast to her childhood when, as a sea captain's daughter, she spent the first six years of her life travelling the world. She was educated in New Zealand, Thursday Island, Cairns, Bundaberg and Brisbane, before enrolling at Griffith University in Brisbane in 1986. In her final year at university, she joined Ciaran O'Reilly and other members of the Catholic Worker movement in protests against visits by US Navy ships. This resulted in her first arrest for peace activism. Her parents now live in credibly tough, particularly now, as she and Susan are in a sort of watch-tower rather than an actual prison facility. There are no windows. We just have lots of TV broadcasts, 24 hours a day, almost," she said. "Watching television is the way prisoners have of knowing whether it is night or day. To get out of your cell you have to ask someone to open your door and to get back in you have to ask someone. You're in a very confined space 23 hours a day. And we've had a lot of problems getting vegetarian meals. We're allowed outside, onto the roof, for one hour a day, but that's impractical at the moment."


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Sue Frankel and Moana Cole in the visiting room of the Public Safety Building in Syracuse, NY.

"I think prison speaks to people's conscience very strongly and it speaks to ourselves as following a whole tradition of resistance within the Catholic Church, with the saints and martyrs. We see ourselves following people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King. Thereau and all sorts of non-violent resisters around the world, in jail for the sake of peace and justice. "I have no regrets about the action we took," Moana added. "I'm proud of what I've done."

LIZ JOHNSTON