
IN PRISON FOR PEACEMAKING

by Cliff Kindy

The people of the small island of Vieques, Puerto Rico are nonviolently resisting the bombing and military maneuvers that have been carried out there for 60 years. In 1999 a civil disobedience presence in the bombing zone stopped all bombs for over one year. That victory has been the impetus for additional forays into the land controlled by the Navy each time there is an announcement of military exercises starting again on the island.

I was privileged to be part of a group that entered the restricted area on the west end of Vieques October 1, 2001. I spent six days in prison as a consequence of that action. Since fear or the unknown of prison can prevent folks from doing what they think is right, I want to share some of my experiences as a way to free people up to act in accord with their consciences.

After the initial arrest it was eight hours before the Navy passed us to the federal marshals for transport to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Guaynabo. That was time for our pictures to be taken three times, to receive two meals of a sandwich and apple, and to spend lots of time waiting in plastic handcuffs. The transport was troubling. From Roosevelt Roads Naval Station we traveled in a corrections bus with two escort vehicles. We obeyed no traffic lights or speed limits, honking and riding the bumper of any vehicle in our way. The escorts even pulled over and thrust a shotgun in the window of a car that was slowing us down as a way of showing support for the Vieques struggle. The spirit of the trip reflected for me the callousness with which the Navy has treated the people of Vieques for years.

In the prison we were processed: we were stripped, had our body cavities searched for contraband, given prison clothes, fingerprinted twice, had our mugshots taken twice, given TB and tetanus shots as part of a medical intake, questioned about our psychological history as a way to clear our entry into the general prison population, and given bedding and toiletries. It was an eight hour process for 37 of us, so we spent some waiting time with all of us packed in a 7' x 18' holding cell.

We were housed in Unit 1-B, primarily for inmates charged with immigration or Vieques resistance violations. It was a mini United Nations. There were two people in each cell with a double tier of cells surrounding the central mess hall that measured 30' x 120'. Additional rooms housed a library (2 short rows of books), barber chair, laundry, a typewriter, a chapel, and a large gymnasium which doubled as a smoking area.

Meals were sufficient and varied, served at about 6:30am, 10:30am, and 4:30pm. There were 4-6 counts throughout the day when we had to be locked in our cells. We were also locked in from 9:30pm until about 6:00 each morning.

Each cell had a bunk bed, toilet, sink, 2 chairs, a desk, and two storage cabinets. There was an effort to place me in a cell with another English speaker. Fellow inmates were very supportive and interested in the Vieques arrestees. When I was by myself for five days, individuals regularly came up to offer toiletries I didn't have, express support and willingness to help in any way.

Interestingly, even prison officials voiced their strong support for the Vieques struggle. I invited one of the federal marshals to consider disobeying orders to prosecute the good people of Vieques. As I was shuffling up the courthouse stairs in chains the next day he said, "Cliff, I struggled through the night with your invitation. I can't do it right now."

I have three observations: 1) The fewer physical and psychological needs/expectations with which one enters prison, the freer one is in a setting of control that is intended to dehumanize inmates. 2) The Navy and judicial system are acting as though they are backed against a wall. Clearly they are losing the battle for the hearts and minds of the people of Vieques. 3) The people within the system who are changing their allegiance are a clear sign of the imminent loss of control by the Navy.

Our ability to maintain the humanity of each person we meet in the process of being in prison for peacemaking is another step for the redemption of the island of Vieques and of each human being.