

The Women Against Rape in War Collective's protests against ANZAC Day in Sydney, 1983 and 1984¹

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To begin with, I am not a feminist theorist with expertise in violence or masculinity. At the time I became involved in the Anzac Day protests I was a feminist academic, more interested in wage fixing systems and issues around equal pay than I was in issues to do with violence against women. However because I agreed to talk to this conference about my activity in the Women Against Rape in War Collective and our protests against Anzac Day I have obviously begun to think about our actions and have tried to put them into context.

At the start of second wave feminism, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, women began to look seriously at the issue of violence against women, particularly what we then called domestic violence. Of course the seventies was the time of the establishment of the first women's refuges in Sydney, most famously the occupation of the site that became Elsie Women's Refuge in Glebe.

So we were thinking seriously about violence against women. Also, our general political views were very informed by our earlier opposition to the Vietnam War and to the build-up of nuclear weapons. These anti-war sentiments and our interest in male violence coalesced.

¹ Memoir delivered at 'Women Against Rape in War: Gallipoli to Coniston' Conference, Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney 29 August 2014 and published here as a non-refereed contribution.

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Citation: *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* 2014, 6(3): 4222,- <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v6i3.4222>

As far as Anzac Day went, those of us active during the sixties and seventies were just totally opposed to it. The famous play, 'The One Day of the Year', had premiered in 1960 and it pretty much reflected our view, that Anzac Day was about old guys sitting around reminiscing about the glories of war.

Although there was in fact a clause in the Geneva Convention which outlawed sexual assault on women in war, it was not widely known and had never been invoked in legal cases or judgements.

Our opposition to Anzac Day was not specifically about rape in war. Speaking for myself, I hadn't really thought about the issue previously. The Union of Australian Women May Day float in a 1965 carried anti-Vietnam slogans and a plea 'Must Children Suffer?' The plight of women in war was mostly depicted as being that of desperate mothers rather than as victims of sexual assault.

However some of our leading theorists began to read the works of American radical feminist, Mary Daly, particularly her 'state of rapism' material (Daly 1978) and we slowly started looking at the issue of rape in war.

The Sydney Women Against Rape collective was formed with three aims,

- to mourn raped women of all countries in all wars;
- to publicly raise the issue of rape; and
- to oppose the system that creates rape and wars.

As can be seen, these objects were influenced very specifically by the writings of Mary Daly. And those were also the days that we believed we could do anything.

The hub of the organisation was Macquarie University. Macquarie was the most feminised university at that time. It was the most feminised because it began to employ large numbers of staff just at a time when women were beginning to complete their postgraduate qualifications and therefore were able to compete for positions. Also it did not at that time have the large male faculties such as medicine, engineering, agriculture and so on.

The main organisers and ideological mentors for the Women Against Rape Collective were Sabine Willis (later Erika) and Rosemary Pringle. Willis was a really remarkable woman, a Quaker, a total pacifist and a fiercely intelligent academic, she was on the board of the Australian Council of Churches. I had actually known her, since we were at Beecroft Public School together even though she was some years older than me. The other organizer, a politically active sociology academic, Rosemary Pringle, really came to the issue out of a socialist feminist tradition.

I was easily inveigled into being part of the Anzac Day demonstration – I suppose they thought it was a done deal to get me to a demonstration. I greatly admired both these women and would have done whatever they told me.

Now who were we in this collective? Rosemary Pringle says that the Collective was made up of radical feminists, socialist feminists and Quaker pacifists. I think that was probably pretty true. Although never very interested in labels I would have identified with the socialist feminists. Pringle also says that the collective worked as well as it did because of this diversity and I agree with her. Everyone just wanted to have a successful protest and I remember very few endless debates about tricky bits of ideology.

Our Collective was obviously very influenced by the actions of our counterpart organization in Canberra which had begun Anzac Day protests in 1981. We saw ourselves as following on after these actions. The Canberra women had become embroiled in a controversy about a local Public Order Regulation which had been altered in 1981 to make it unlawful to give offence to an Anzac Day participant. This dispute almost subsumed their premier objective and was not resolved until Labor was elected in 1983 and Tom Uren repealed the Public Order Act in December of that year.

In 1983 when we decided to have our protest we applied for permission to march. It was refused. The leadership of the collective challenged the refusal and there was a court case which received extensive publicity because the women were challenging ‘the one day of the year’. The Women Against Rape collective lost that case but the publicity continued. There was a picture in the newspapers of the leaders coming out of court.

The leadership decided to march anyway. We had training sessions at Quaker House, still in the same place – 119 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills, a suburb of Sydney. The training sessions stressed non-violent non-cooperation. To reduce the prospect of violence, we decided to march shortly before the Anzac March took place rather than directly confront it.

We produced a large banner which said ‘We mourn all women raped in all wars’. Our demonstration was different from the thrust of the Melbourne demonstration. The Melbourne Anti-Anzac Day collective had put out a press release after their protest which declared that their demonstration ‘was not conceived as a protest against women raped in war although it was represented as such in the press. Our action was more broadly conceived as a protest against patriarchal war against women which has been most clearly defined in Daly’s analysis.’

So the Melbourne group were much more heavily influenced by Mary Daly. The Melbourne group thought that we were wimps and perhaps we were.

On Anzac Day itself, we all met at the little park in Bridge Street. There were 300 of us, all dressed in black. And we sang the Judy Small song, ‘it’s not only men in uniform who pay the price of war’.

We reminded each other to stay silent and be non-violent. We didn’t really need much reminder of that. Most of us were very nervous about what we were about to do. We marched down Bridge Street into George Street, and started marching up George Street, Sydney’s original high street and one of the busiest streets in the city. We were totally silent. We were met with a phalanx of police and eight paddy wagons. We then sat down in the middle of George Street.

At this stage those of us who for various reasons had decided that we didn’t want to be arrested, moved to one side and stayed on the footpath. The remaining women, all 161 of them were arrested silently and, they hoped, with dignity. All the women who were sitting down in the street were removed by the police and charged.

There was much publicity about this action. And my memory is that a lot of the publicity was about the fact that we had disrupted the march, which of course had not actually happened.

That is still the perception even after all these years. After I delivered this talk at the conference I was having a chat, to a man called Jeff Bagnall, who at that stage was a photographer at the Sydney Morning Herald. He told me that journalists were coming back to the newsroom from our dignified sit-down protest and were saying how disgusting we were and that we had disrupted Anzac Day.

When Sabine [Willis] and I turned up at our work in the Department of History, Philosophy and Politics at Macquarie University the next day we were told we were disgraceful by our head of school – Professor Bruce Harris. He was mainly angry because Macquarie University had been mentioned in the media. Sabine was very confident about this and was prepared to take him on. I must admit I was a bit more anxious about being roared up by our boss but we certainly didn't back down about the action that we had taken.

Even some Quakers were opposed. One Quaker said to Sabine, 'People are mourning lost relatives. They don't want to be confronted by a bunch of angry women.' We were accused by the media of attacking Anzac veterans and elderly servicemen.

The women were all charged with causing serious alarm and affront and Sabine's was the test case. Those arrested were represented by a woman barrister, an academic at Macquarie University, Deirdre O'Connor. She was later to head the Industrial Commission. We were able to prove that the police were not alarmed and affronted. The police ran in to some difficulty over faulty evidence and eventually no charges were successful.

The following year we marched a different route. We were not interfered with. We ended up at the War Memorial and we threw flowers into the Pool of Remembrance. It was really rather calm and peaceful.

Did we think our protests were a success? There was considerable publicity about the issue, both before and after the actual protest. Between the court case about the right to march and the actual march itself, some of the collective took part in a phone-in at a Rape Crisis Centre and a man even rang up wanting to march because his daughter had been raped. And so he marched ... along the footpath beside the women. This probably would not have happened in Melbourne with their more hard-line stance. 'This Day Tonight', an ABC current affairs

program, made a program about the protests but there was continuing vitriol from men for some time to come.

I remember having a discussion with an older relative, a very non-violent nice man – who simply couldn't believe that rape in war happened. It was a very uncomfortable conversation to have with a close relative. He had been a soldier in Borneo during the war and he couldn't understand why anyone would want to rape *those* women.

I believe there is a real loss of the whole story of our protests about Anzac Day. Amy Way's article (2013) indicates that young women do not know the whole history of protest about Anzac Day, let alone the rape in war protests. Anzac Day now is perceived very differently. I see the new perception as not so much glorifying war as sentimentalizing it.

Christina Twomey in 'Trauma and the Reinvigoration of Anzac' writes 'historians have advanced various theories about the reinvigoration of interest in Anzac Day and the embrace of Australia's war heritage: the 'memory boom,' the 'new nationalism' of the 1970s and 1980s, a need for sacred ritual in a secular society, the immense popularity of genealogy, a bridge between the generations, more inclusive commemorative practices, the parochialism that has been the strange bedfellow of globalization, the wanderlust of the young, pump-priming from government and the 'politics of nationalism in the 1980s'' (2013, p. 86).

I think all of those elements have a bearing on the situation. I believe another contributor to this giant sentimentalizing of Anzac Day, leading up to 2015 is the proliferation of history documentaries, particularly on cable TV channels such as the History Channel. Late at night there are endless documentaries about war. While they might not necessarily be glorifying or sentimentalizing war, young people are certainly seeing much more about the two world wars, than we ever saw as we were growing up.

In conclusion, how do I view our protests of thirty years ago? In retrospect, we were amazingly intrepid and actually quite brave. Of all the protest movements I have been involved with it was certainly the hardest to explain to outsiders. Despite our courage, we didn't properly set out our issues about Anzac Day but what protest movements ever do?

However it is salutary to document that only fifteen years later in 1998 the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda made landmark decisions defining rape as a crime of genocide under international law. This was a hugely significant decision. To quote Judge Navanethem Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who stepped down on 1 September 2014, 'From time immemorial, rape has been regarded as spoils of war. Now it will be considered a war crime'.

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