

Jury finds activists guilty in Washington state nuclear weapons protest

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Susan Crane and Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Montgomery hold a banner outside Naval Base Kitsap in Washington state during a vigil Nov. 2. (Photo from disarmnowplowshares.wordpress.com)

WASHINGTON -- Five longtime peace activists were found guilty of a series of federal charges stemming from an All Souls' Day demonstration in 2009 at a U.S. Navy nuclear weapons depot in Bangor, Wash.

A 12-member jury convicted Jesuit Fr. Bill Bichsel, 82, Jesuit Fr. Stephen Kelly, 61, Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Montgomery, 83, Susan Crane, 65, and Lynne Greenwald, 61, of conspiracy, trespass, destruction of property on a naval installation and deprecation of government property Dec. 13.

The verdict for the defendants, who called themselves the Disarm Now Plowshares, came after a four-day trial in the courtroom of U.S. District Court Judge Benjamin Settle in Tacoma, Wash.

Settle set sentencing for March 28. Each activist faces prison terms of three to five years and fines of \$50,000 to \$250,000 on each charge.

Crane, a member of the Jonah House Community in Baltimore, told Catholic News Service by phone shortly after the verdict was announced that the group faced an uphill battle in establishing their defense after Settle determined that no witness would be able to discuss whether nuclear weapons existed at the base.

U.S. policy prohibits the confirmation or denial of the presence of nuclear weapons at any particular site.

"The judge said we couldn't use our defense, (that we acted out of) necessity and about humanitarian law or military law. So it was an unfair trial right from the beginning," Crane said.

"The jury had nothing to hang an acquittal on," she added. "They could see we didn't have malicious intent in our hearts. They could see what we were doing was legal (under international law), but there was no way for them to consider it in a way the judge would allow."

Kelly said that although the verdict was expected, he still was disappointed.

"I really felt that all of this has to be done," Kelly told CNS. "We have to do our part. It's people who rise up, against slavery for example, who awake the sleeping giant."

The prosecution maintained that the defendants caused malicious destruction to Navy property when they entered the Naval Base Kitsap's Bangor complex, 20 miles west of Seattle. The base is the West Coast home of the Trident nuclear-armed submarine and the Strategic Weapons Facility, Pacific. More than 2,300 nuclear warheads are believed to be stored at the site, according to the National Resources Defense Council.

As the trial unfolded, the group attempted to establish that nuclear weapons are weapons of mass destruction, that such weapons are immoral and illegal, and that all citizens have the right and duty to attempt to stop war crimes from being committed if such weapons are used.

They also told the court that their faith called them to act out of respect for the dignity of all human beings because such weapons, if used, would indiscriminately kill innocent civilians.

The defendants admitted that they cut through a chain-link fence surrounding the base during the night of All Souls' Day in 2009. They said they walked undetected for hours nearly four miles inside the base to their target, the Strategic Weapons Facility, Pacific.

Once at the weapons bunkers, the five told the court, they cut through two chain-link fences, poured their own blood on the ground, hammered on a roadway and fences, scattered sunflower seeds and unfurled two banners that read: "Disarm Now Plowshares, Trident: Illegal + Immoral." They said they prayed until dawn, waiting for military personnel to arrive.

Prosecutors said the government would neither confirm nor deny the existence of nuclear weapons at the naval base and maintained that the presence of such weapons at the site is irrelevant to the charges.

Before Judge Settle dismissed the jury, the five activists offered a final blessing to the jurors. Kelly said he faced jurors and was joined by the four others in raising their hands in blessing as the Jesuit said, "May you go in peace and have a safe, happy holiday." He said he made the sign of the cross before jurors filed out of the courtroom.

"One juror was in tears," he said.

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