

WILLY

2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2015

*If you could just introduce yourself...*

I'm Willy Bach and I was born in Reading, England. My father was a refugee from World War II. His mother was Jewish. He was lucky to have a friend who was a Nazi who warned him that he was going to arrest him the following morning, so he left for Switzerland and finally ended up in London. He was lucky because he had an uncle who worked in the Bank of England, I think. And of course, managed to save his mother from being taken away to where horrible things would have happened.

When I was six years old I went to Germany on a visit and visited the town of Essen, which was a very sobering experience because if you've seen any of the pictures of Gaza from the destruction by the Israelis that's how the city of Essen looked. They were the city that hosted the Krupp weapons factory so there were military reasons for attacking them. But one of the places that was in Essen was actually the I.G. Farben factory where they made the Zyklon B, which was the fluoride poison that was used to gas Jews in concentration camps. That didn't get bombed. Mostly, they bombed working class people's houses. They were trying to, as I've learned later, destroy the morale

of the German people rather than cripple their military capability. So, they were looking at the will to fight. There was all this psychological stuff going on you know.

I was invited to go out on the back of a bicycle by one of my father's friends' children and we rode around. And I said, "Can we play in the rubble?" He said, "No, you can't, there's people living in there". So, we met a group of his friends and he pointed to me, and he said, "Das ist ein Engländer". And I watched their faces and there was no look of hate in their faces, just amazement that they could come face to face with somebody from a country that had done this to us. I mean, they didn't really know anything about Nazis and Hitler and all that. They were kids.

I was six , of course I was starting to learn about Hitler and the Nazis and all that. Anyway, that definitely started me thinking quite a lot about war. You know, what we actually learned at school was that we were the goodies and we were on this side and they were the baddies and they were on that side. We never talk about anything bad that we did, but we can tell you lots of things bad that the other side did. So I started to think.

Well, actually, both sides in the war do horrible things to each other and to each other's people of course. If they get the opportunity, if they're evenly matched.

*So, from this six year old childhood experience, how did you end up in the army?*

Well, actually you see this sort of thing is still going on today. The people get told, "If you join our army, we are doing good things in the world. Bringing peace to the world." I'm sure if you join the Australian army you get told about the ANZAC tradition, you get told that we do good things, and "Would you like a job where you're doing something technical?" Told that your primary job is about building things and making things better, and not about killing people. And I thought, well I did a bit of work with some surveyors when I was labouring on a building site on my holiday, so if I was going to join the army then maybe I joined to be a surveyor. Actually, I got to the age of 17 and my parents were telling me that they couldn't afford to keep me at home. They were arguing constantly about money, shouting matches, so I had to leave. Going from being a school boy to being out there on my own, fending for myself, I didn't quite feel ready. My step-mother

was constantly telling me, "You should join the army". So anyway, I went and applied and accepted. It took them a long time because they were suspicious of my Germanic name and whether I was a suitable person. I finally got accepted and I went to the School of Military Survey, and I also went to Germany. Then I asked for a posting to Singapore because I thought that sounded interesting, and I got it. I was living in Singapore and Malaysia for three and half years - and I was married there too.

They found out that my eyesight was not good enough for looking at aerial photographs of the rainforests of Sarawak where they were fighting the Indonesians (the Konfrontasi). So they decided they would take my trade away from me and send me to a field squadron to do labouring work, so that's what I did. Very soon after I got to Melaka I was sent to Leong Nok Tha in Thailand. I spent three months there and I was wondering, "What on earth are we doing here?" Thailand has never been a British colony. This is suspiciously close to where the Vietnam war is going on". I flew in to the US air force base at Ubon Ratchathani and saw all these rows and rows of jet planes and they all took off while I was having

dinner there. I realised that they were off to bomb North Vietnam, possibly Laos. So again we were told that we were building this airfield to enable the impoverished people of the North East of Thailand to be able to sell their agricultural produce in Bangkok! Some of us could see that was an obvious lie, so we worked out what was going on.

Later on I started writing letters to the British Medals Office saying we know that this was part of the Vietnam War, we know that this was dangerous as there was insurgency going on there and we know we were building an airfield that was to be used by the United States, so why don't we get a medal for doing that? I should point out that the Australian's and the New Zealander's eventually got a medal, but not the British. It took them a long time, from 1965/66 through to 2009 to campaign to be recognized. So there were reasons why they didn't want to do that.

*When did you leave the military?*

I left the Military just as they were getting involved in Northern Ireland. That was 1970. By that time I had come back to England, that was 1968. I had been to Kenya for 3 months and then I was

a clerk, doing clerical work. I made the Quartermasters Clerk, which meant I was involved with stores and logistics and things like that.

*And did you go straight from the army into peace activism?*

Yes, I did. Before I was out of uniform I had already joined the War Resisters League. They were also concerned about security issues and I wrote to the so-called Intelligence people and said, "Well, I'd like you to know, I never was a communist and if you'd had enough nous to come and interview me, you'd have been able to ascertain that for yourself. While neither would I fight for the Soviet Union, would I ever fight for you again, and, by the way, the six years of Reserve Service I'm supposed to be serving? Well, you can whistle for that, because I'm off to Australia and I have no intention of ever getting in a military uniform again". I never got a reply to that letter.

Then the Australian government took two years to approve of my then-wife and myself, and then-baby daughter, who's now 46 in January, to come here. They wouldn't give us the ten pound POM ticket so we had to pay our way. And because of the white Australia policy, we were regarded

as a coloured family, my wife was Arab/  
Indian you see. The Australian government  
actually required a passport photograph  
of my daughter when she was a baby and  
the photographer said he had never taken  
a passport photograph of a baby before in  
his life. I thought the White Australia  
Policy was an appalling thing.

I went quiet for a while. I was working as  
a hairdresser and I had my own business  
in the city (Brisbane). I spent 30 years  
doing hairdressing. I'm out of that  
profession now and I don't do it any more.  
But then I had this strange thing happen  
to me really. While I was teaching English  
to some Vietnamese people, something  
kind of hit me in the face. These were  
really lovely people and they're full of  
initiative and extremely hard working and  
I need to know more about this. I started  
remembering about things like the airfield  
at Leong Nok Tha and I was doing things  
like getting up in the middle of the night  
and writing poetry at the kitchen table  
and doing a lot of crying.

*Eventually processing everything you'd  
been through...*

I'd been suppressing it. I wanted to completely dissociate myself from the military, and didn't even tell people that I had been in the military until about 1987, 88, 89, around that period. Then in 1991 it actually broke up my marriage, so then I was on my own. But I continued writing poetry and I continued campaigning about war.

Once, another activist friend and myself, borrowed Brisbane City Council's PA system, plugged it into to the power-point for King George Square, pointed these big speakers right at Jim Soorley's office and hurled abuse at him because they were entertaining the Chinese delegation that were actually selling weapons. They actually had an arms exhibition at our City Hall! And I went in there and I talked loudly about Tiananmen Square.

*What is peace to you?*

In 2002, I went to the Earth Summit in Johannesburg in South Africa. We were already in Uganda and we decided to travel overland, which meant going through Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe to get to South Africa. And when we got to this huge

corporate conference, UNDP (United Nations Development Program), they were asking people to put ideas together about human security. As someone who studies war, I think about human security quite a lot. And you know, I had got to meet some of these kids who were starving in Africa. These were the children who were eating mangoes that were still green. That was a school where we held workshops with a Danish Aid organization, people from the EU and local NGOs. Where we talked about human security and what did it mean. It meant that these children could get an education, that they could go to school, that they could actually feel safe walking home from school or walking to school. And that their minds could be cleared to thinking about having some kind of a future, growing up and having some job to do. I interviewed some of the former child soldiers, there were some girls there as well, and I said to one of the girls, "What would you like to do now that you are no longer having to fight for the LRA?" and she said, "I want to be a scientist." She was a Muslim as well!

*Wow, wonderful - good on her - to even have the thought in her head.*

So, what does human security mean? It means you can live life, not be worried, imagine that you have a future and plan and enjoy living, have a childhood. You know there's a long list of things that make peace. Now with quite a lot of these components, if you went to suburbs in Brisbane, you'd find people ticking all the boxes. But of course, they don't get to experience a war that's going on in Iraq where they've never even heard the names of any of the people who are there or even any of the Australian soldiers that are there. So the war doesn't seem to affect them very much. And of course, that can lead to them being uncaring about people who are having to experience all sorts of horrible trauma like that.

Human security is what it's technically known as.

*Do you think Australia is a peaceful country?*

Within, yes. But there are dark wounds. There's the Bush war. There's our involvement in Vietnam, for example, that most people know practically nothing about. But some of our people have been

given titles like 'war hero', who were involved in the CIA's Phoenix Program where they actually killed between 20 and 30 thousand people. Basically by bursting into their homes at night and cutting throats. This is covert war where you don't actually give the other side opportunity to retaliate and instead, catch them by surprise, you see. And if you want to insure that your assassins are safe so they can go back the next night and do the same thing again, then you've got to do things like that.

On the surface, Australia is a very peaceful country. But if you want to see a more peaceful country go to Costa Rica, where people celebrate not having an army.

What I have noticed, especially from the time of John Howard, is that they we're militarising our society. Basically they're trying to normalize war and militarise education. Children go to school and they learn about war, ANZAC day. Instead of learning about the wonderful feminists and the trade unionists working at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, who managed to make Australia stand out as a leader in the world, the first country to have votes for men and women in the world. Those things that actually gave Australia a place in the world, and allowed us to

stand straight as a nation and be proud of where we came from. Of course, we couldn't be proud of the Bush war because that was darkly hidden. But the idea that ANZAC gave us our identity as a nation, I really reject that whole idea. I've written about it. I have a poem about it.

*So you think equality is linked to peace then?*

Definitely. Very unequal societies generate conflict within, and they may even generate conflict without as well. As, of course, we are employing a form of capitalism, which is neo-liberal economics, and it is producing increasingly more and more inequality. The greatest exemplar being the United States, where you could be working for \$7.50 per hour for one of the major corporations, particularly fast food, and never be able to get on your feet.

*Has the significance of peace changed for you over time?*

Yes, I think so. If anything I've probably come to understand that it's much more difficult to achieve. Why? Because it's a deeply embedded system, which Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex, which I think we could now call the

military-industrial-security complex. And basically, the people who have got money invested in huge armament factories and technology companies that supply the government with weapons, computers and jet planes and all the rest of it that they need to wage war, those people have got enormous political influence. They lobby politicians and basically they are always advocating for war. And then you have also got three and four star Generals who leave the military and then go and head up these sorts of organisations. And there are the think tanks and all the rest of it.

*So, is there a difference between personal peace and social peace?*

Yes. I love to be in nature and I go bird-watching and walking in forests and things like that, I really revel in beautiful places. When I was in Monteverde, for example, that was one remarkably beautiful place. Just gazing into a load of moss growing on a log can be enough. There is just an intense experience you can get from that. I don't do any religion, meditation, and things like that. I don't find it easy to find personal peace because I'm constantly thinking about the peace that we're constantly not having. There were people living in Monteverde who were trying to shut themselves away from

thinking about war, politics and all the rest of it. Some of them were Quakers and some of those people had actually experienced standing between the Contras and the Nicaraguan villagers, saying, "You must not attack these people, you mustn't bomb them". And some of them were doing yoga and things like this - a lot of that is escapism. The Quakers had actually been bearing witness, which is a very Quaker thing, and they had been badly frightened by CIA agents coming up to their retreat in the cloud forests and saying to them, 'Now, I want you to tell me if you know anyone who has a short wave radio, we're looking for these things'. They were very frightened, they were very frightened of their government because they're still North Americans, some of them were Costa Rican citizens as well.

*Can you describe any moments of intense peacefulness that you've experienced?*

Yes. Lady Musgrave Island, going snorkelling, even Magnetic Island. We went on a snorkelling excursion where we were shown corals that were nine hundred years old. And you say, "Hmmm, you can't move that to Sydney, Mr Abbott, if you don't believe in climate change. It's going to die and it's going to take nine hundred years to return, if it's fortunate and it

gets replicated further south.” So clearly we were looking at something we are about to lose. I can’t really look at beautiful things without thinking, “We’re about to lose this”.

*Do you think that art and peace are related - through your poetry?*

Well, I think that art can serve many purposes and I think that art can draw attention to either the horrors of war or the beauties of peace. I think George Gittoes is quite amazing and wonderful. He’s a force of nature, quite unlike anybody else and he’s thought-provoking - that’s the thing.

And there’s a helluva lot of art that isn’t about anything much.

*Oh yes, but I was talking about your practice, for you.*

Well, my art is all-purposeful. Yes.

*And does it help you find that inner peace?*

Well, it helps me express what I want to say.

*And do you think the experience of peace  
is best found on your own or with others?*

That's hard. That is very hard.