

Drone protesters convicted of trespassing

Joshua J. McElwee | Jan. 28, 2011



Members of the 'Creech 14' pray at the gates of the Creech Air Force Base near Las Vegas, Nev., April 5, 2009. (Photo courtesy of Voices for Creative Nonviolence)

Fourteen peace activists who oppose the U.S. military's use of automated attack drones abroad were found guilty of criminal trespass Thursday for a 2009 act of civil disobedience at a Nevada Air Force Base.

The sentencing came four months after activists' hopes for acquittal had been raised when, during their initial September trial, the judge said he would need "at least three months" to study the issues of international law surrounding their trespass.

The activists, known together as the 'Creech 14,' walked onto the grounds of Creech Air Force Base near Las Vegas, Nev., on Holy Thursday 2009 and offered the Air Force personnel they met there bread and water as a sign of peace as they started a prayer vigil. After about an hour at prayer they were arrested and taken into custody.

The 14 spent a night or two in jail following their arrests. Judge William Jansen of the Las Vegas Justice Court sentenced them Thursday to time served.

"I was disappointed," Judy Homanich, one of the defendants, told *NCR* of Thursday's verdict. "I really hoped during the trial that the judge was listening. I thought that he really listened."

During sentencing, Jansen told the activists that the peril of immediate danger was necessary for acquittal from a trespass charge and he saw no immediate peril, said Jim Haber, the coordinator for the Nevada Desert Experience, which organizes prayer vigils and actions at the bomb testing site.

Jansen said "he had no other choice" but to find the defendants guilty, Haber said.

The verdict came on the 60th anniversary of the first nuclear bomb test at the Nevada National Security Site outside Las Vegas, then known as the Nevada Test Site

During the activists' September trial, several notable figures testified as expert witnesses for the defense, including former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark and Center for Constitutional Rights legal director Bill

Quigley.

The trial gained media attention -- [it was even mentioned in a January issue of the U.K.'s *Guardian* newspaper](#) [1] -- during testimony Jansen seemed moved by witness accounts and said he would need to "think about" Clark's argument that the activists' action was protected by international law.

Speaking to *NCR* Thursday, one of the defendants claimed the impact of the drone attacks involved immediate danger.

"The war is 7,000 miles away and the war is 18 inches away," said Terrell. "7,000 miles, the distance from Creech to Afghanistan. 18 inches, the distance from his face to the screen. This distance is an illusion. And it's a very dangerous illusion. Our purpose behind our action was to dispel that illusion because it is very close and the danger we were addressing was and is imminent."

Homanich, who retired as a family advocate with Catholic Charities in Binghamton, N.Y., said she was compelled to take part in the action -- her first -- because of her experience of losing her son at age 21.

Said Homanich: "I know how it turns your life upside-down and I can't stand by and allow U.S. drones to kill people across the world and call them collateral damage because that's not the right way, not only are we killing people and destroying them, but also we're damaging all the soldiers who are fighting and the ones who are operating the drones. We're losing our humanity."

Terrell, who is a member of the Strangers and Guests Catholic Worker farm community in Maloy, Iowa, said his experience on a recent humanitarian trip to Afghanistan humanized the effects of the U.S. military's drone attacks.

"I saw the victims," said Terrell. "I met a nine-year old girl whose arm was blown off in a drone attack, whose family was left in a very squalid refugee camp in Kabul."

The defendants on trial included Jesuit Frs. John Dear and Steve Kelly; Dennis DuVall; Renee Espeland; Judy Homanich; Kathy Kelly; Mariah Klusmire; Brad Lyttle; Libby Pappalardo; Sr. Megan Rice, of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus; Brian Terrell; Eve Tetaz; and Franciscan Frs. Louie Vitale and Jerry Zawada.

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