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Headed to prison, activist explains nonviolent witness

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Mark Kenney (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

A young sailor walks through his nuclear submarine, headed for the engine room. As he winds through the tight, crowded corridors he suddenly finds himself standing next to a nuclear missile launch hatch.

He reaches out an outstretched hand. Tentatively, he places it on one of the warheads.

Click. Something changes. The destructive power of a thermonuclear detonation is no longer an abstraction. It?s real. His hand is touching it.

Over the next few days, the sailor heads to his chaplain. He asks the same questions, over and over: What are we doing? How can we justify this?

Fast-forward thirty years. That ex-sailor, Mark Kenney, reports today to Duluth Federal Prison Camp for a six-month stint for an act of civil disobedience at Offutt Air Force Base. He walked about ten steps onto the property of the complex with three others after a vigil there Aug. 6.

The prison stint is the third Kenney?s served for protests at the base, which is the home of U.S. Strategic Command and responsible for the planning and targeting of the nation?s nuclear weapons.

It?s a reality that is a far cry from what Kenney thought he?d be doing when he first enlisted in the U.S. Navy?s nuclear propulsion program in 1977. Yet, in a March interview at the Omaha, Neb., Catholic Worker, the 51-year-old didn?t express any regrets.

Holding a thick, well marked copy of the Bible in his hand as he spoke in a deep, slow voice, Kenney said he thought peace actions like his are ?the only way out? from the threat of nuclear destruction.

Following is *NCR*?s interview with Kenney, which covered his journey to nonviolent resistance, how he views his upcoming jail time, and what it means for his wife and family. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

NCR: **What happened to you when you touched that nuclear warhead?**

Kenney: I had this moment of bizarre, human acceptance. I came to realize there?s no justification for nuclear weapons except for the fact that we?re afraid somebody else is going to use them on us, so we?re going to do it to them, and better. To me, it just didn?t seem to be what the Sermon on the Mount taught.

That didn?t come about overnight, it?s just I knew it bothered me. I tried to go back to studying for the program. But then I started thinking about it more and I came to a point where I was getting behind because I couldn?t concentrate on my studies. t

My superiors began to ask me why I was falling behind. I told them my doubts about nuclear weapons and they responded: ?Well, everybody goes through this. You just have to go talk to a chaplain or something to get through it.?

I said back: ?Well, if everybody goes through this, why are they doing it?? I could never get anybody to answer that question for me. Everybody accepted the fact that it was bad, even immoral. But it just had to be done. The United States, being more righteous than the rest of the world, had to take the responsibility of doing it. That was the mentality. It was a bizarre twist for me and I could never make it work, so eventually I opted out.

You just left the program? How did that come about?

Well, I didn?t just opt out. I went AWOL. That?s the only way I could get out of the program because then you lose your top-secret clearance. You couldn?t just say you wanted out because they had already invested so much money in my training.

So I bought a Greyhound bus pass. I didn?t know what else I could do. I asked my superiors if I could change positions or do something else. They answered: ?No. We invested too much money into you; you signed on the dotted line.?

Somebody mentioned to me that if you go AWOL, you lose your top-secret clearance and then you?ll be out. So that?s what I did. I came back in a month, turned myself in, and it happened immediately.

What?s going through your mind now as you?re getting ready for this next jail sentence?

You can do stuff in federal prison camps that you can?t do anywhere else. You can have great conversations in jail that you can?t have anywhere else because everybody there is a little eccentric to start with.

It?s been a great place for me to be able to talk to people about why I?m a Christian and what I believe about scriptures. I couldn?t do that if I never went to prison. You?ve got all day to talk about it, for one thing, but for another, people just go back and forth trying to pick at you and pull your arguments apart.

For the most part, you?ve just got to be really convicted. It builds your conviction when you have to maintain it. The other thing is you get to practice the Sermon on the Mount in prison a lot more than you do on the outside. Stuff does happen at those places that doesn?t happen on the outside, how you handle it, how you deal with it.

What are some examples of that?

Sudden breakouts and fights or riots or you get a bad roommate who?s kind of crazy.

What do you do in that situation, where somebody is beating the crap out of somebody else? Do you call them out or do you sit down? There are real consequences.

You get in situations that you don?t get in on the outside. Mostly, the question is: Is this stuff about nonviolence really true? Does it really work? Well, I?m not sure if it always really works, but I think it?s the only way out of this stuff in the end.

The bible doesn?t say all your problems are going to go away. It doesn?t say you?re not going to get the crap kicked out of you. It actually says, ?By golly, you might get the crap kicked out of you, but somebody?s got to.? Who?s going to take the first step in stepping down a violent confrontation?

What does going to jail like that mean for you practically? How does it effect your job or your relationships?

I?ve probably had more jobs than you?ve got years. There?s no career. I?ve always been a laborer. Usually I?ve gotten pretty adept at doing temp labor or picking up odd jobs or working out of a truck. Sometimes I?ve mowed lawns. I can?t even remember all the jobs I?ve had.

You have to be honest with people. The last job I had up to August when I did this action, I explained to them what I was going to do and then they let me go. I said, ?Well, I?ll let you know, there?s no guarantee that I?m going to be around much longer,? so they accepted my resignation.

Usually I?d save up, try to get rent paid for my wife. We moved close to where she worked so she didn?t have to drive if she didn?t want to. She just has to come up with rent money and we?ve got probably four months of the six I?ll be in jail covered right now.

Have your wife and family been supportive of your witness?

My wife?s been absolutely supportive. It?s not really about what I do. If I was a military person overseas, she?d be supportive of that. I really don?t know why she?s stayed with me.

It?s funny. Just in the last couple of weeks, some lady at work told me her nephew was going to federal prison for drugs. Marie, my wife, told her how to keep track of him once he was in the system and how to get on the visiting list. So she gets to help other people go through this process.

She gets to travel and visit me and do more traveling than she normally would. We have more different experiences than probably most people. It?s been really an interesting life. I don?t have any regrets about the lifestyle at all. I?ve never really been in want of anything.

If you were to look back, what kind of impact do you think you?re having?

Not much. Those things, how do you know? There?s no mass movement of people wanting to get in line to even consider this. For me, it?s what I was put on this planet to do. I have no doubt about that, whether I see any result or not.

Sometimes I ask myself, what is our responsibility? If God is really influencing your life, you?re going to make some really interesting decisions.

There is a God. Jesus did die for us. We?re going to die some day, that?s just a reality, and what?s important is how you?ve lived your life. Are you just living to comfortably retire in Arizona?

Why would people do anything like this? I think it?s really important that somebody has to say, ?No, these weapons are just not right.?

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