CHAPTER 7

Blockade: Standing in the Way of Bombs Headed for Nam

My five years as a Capitol Hill lobbyist were extremely stressful. An encounter a year after I arrived made that time survivable and changed my life for the better. I was helping to serve food for a Quaker Leadership Seminar at William Penn House. Among those who received a dollop of the apple cobbler I was doling out was Jan Talcott, a graduate student teaching high school social studies in the Anacostia section of Washington, DC.

Our conversation that night led to walks through the National Arboretum and canoeing adventures on the Potomac River. I was living and breathing the Vietnam War in those days, giving every ounce of my energy trying to end it, so our talks, our forays into nature, and Jan's loving presence were a great gift and antidote to the stresses I was encountering on a daily basis.

I invited Jan over for dinner at the apartment near Union Station where I was living then. My roommate Stan cooked that night—chicken gizzard soup or some such culinary calamity. Jan wasn't exactly impressed. And it didn't help that on one of our early canoeing escapades, when we capsized in the Potomac, I put my rescue efforts toward the canoe while Jan floated down the river.

I think Jan got the idea that being part of my life would involve excitement and some risk. But she was used to that. She had been in the Peace Corps in Pakistan, and she liked adventure. When she went to Vermont for the final quarter of her graduate program, I made many long-distance calls to her to stay in touch over the summer—a rare extravagance for me.

When she finished her program in Vermont, I convinced Jan to travel with me to Wyoming's Grand Teton Mountains, which I considered my spiritual home. Ever since my family visited them when I was a teenager, I have loved those snowcapped mountains rising out of the plains, with their gorgeous lakes and stunning waterfalls. Jan and I camped by Jenny Lake and hiked my favorite trails.

When I proposed near the top of a mountain on the Indian Paint Brush Trail, to my delight, Jan said yes—though later she would wonder if she had been affected by the high altitude and its low oxygen level. We drove on to Seattle where I met her family. All of our parents blessed our marriage in October 1967.

Our son Peter was born on January 16, 1969, a day after the birthday of my hero. I wanted to name him Martin Luther King Hartsough, but Jan objected. Wise woman. We had trouble bringing Peter home from the hospital because of all the roadblocks set up for President Nixon's inauguration. Once again, politics got in our way.

I was very busy in those days, and our friends were amused that among Peter's first words were "Daddy gone to meeting." In fact, when he was in the fourth grade, his schoolmates were all talking about how there was going to be a nuclear war, and Peter piped up, "I don't think there's going to be a nuclear war, because my dad is going to meetings to make sure it doesn't happen." He occasionally answered the question "What does your father do?" with "He goes to jail."

Our daughter Heidi was born on October 12, 1970. We drove directly from the hospital to spend a sabbatical year at Pendle Hill, a Quaker study and retreat center near Philadelphia. It was a perfect place for recovering from the exhaustion of my Washington years.

Our year at Pendle Hill offered me the opportunity for spiritual and physical renewal, as well as more time with my family, which I cherished. While there, I participated in a weekly economics seminar in which we did a lot of reading and studying, trying to understand the deeper causes of U.S. war-making around the world and the increasing gap between rich and poor at home. Many of us also began laying the foundation for what was to become the Movement for a New Society.

Our children had their first experience of nonviolent witness when Peter was two and Heidi was six months old. Our family participated in a Quaker Meeting for Worship in front of the White House in the spring of 1971, trying to encourage Nixon to end the Vietnam War. About 250 Quakers converged on DC for the witness from all over the Eastern United States.

With my wife Jan and children Peter and Heidi before being arrested at a White House Quaker protest against the Vietnam War (1971). [Photo: UPI]

Over a bullhorn, a police officer warned us that we had to leave, but nobody did. We just continued our silent worship, so the police started arresting people. They arrested everybody except Jan and me and the children.

So we were left sitting there on the sidewalk, while everybody else was loaded onto buses and hauled off to jail. The police chief approached and crouched down in front of us, trying to "reason with" us. He told us that Peter and Heidi would be taken away from us and put into Juvenile Hall, where "God knows what could happen to them."

"Don't you love your children?" he asked us.

We tried to explain as best we could that we appreciated his genuine concern for our children, but that we were also concerned about the children in Vietnam, who were dying and were going to continue to die. "We're here, and we're going to keep praying for an end to this tragic war," I said. "We've done exactly the same thing as all these other people, so if you have to arrest us, we'll take the consequences."

The police roped off the area so nobody else could come anywhere near us, except some media people who were there with their cameras.

For half an hour the chief pleaded with us to just go home. When he saw that we weren't going to leave, he asked us to go to his police car. I said that if he put us under arrest, we would walk to the car, which is what happened. He then drove us to Georgetown and let us out behind the police station.

A photograph of us went out over the UPI (United Press International) wire service and appeared in the *Washington Post*, showing the police officer crouching in front of Jan, with Heidi in her lap, and me, with Peter standing by my side. Friends from all over the country sent us copies that appeared in their local newspapers. One went into each of our children's baby books: their first arrest.

I am eternally grateful that—as we watched so many of our friends embrace different values when they had children—Jan and I were together in our resolve to continue living out our commitments to nonviolent witness as a family and our belief in the unity of the human family worldwide. And also that we shared a commitment to living simply.

We had bought our first house in Washington, DC, in 1969 for $13,000. I had accepted a yearly salary of $3,000 from the Friends Committee on National Legislation when I returned in 1966—half of what they offered but enough to put our family over the taxable level. I requested that FCNL honor my conscience and not withhold from my salary and turn over to the federal government the approximately 50 percent of my taxes that would go for the Vietnam War and preparations for future wars.

Both FCNL and the American Friends Service Committee had employees who took this position, and both Quaker organizations wanted to honor our consciences, but the law required that employers withhold taxes. So together the two organizations filed a lawsuit to get exemption from that law, so they would not have to take the war portion of our taxes against our consciences and give it to the government. In the meantime, they took the money out of their own resources to pay our taxes, rather than take it from us. They held our resisted tax money.

Jan and I have written a letter to the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) every April since then, explaining why we won't pay the portion of our taxes that funds wars and preparations for killing. I've written about Jesus's command to love our enemies. I've quoted the Nuremberg Principles, developed out of the trials of members of the Nazi Third Reich after World War II and later adopted as both U.S. and international law, which declared that individuals must not obey the

laws of their government if they involve crimes against humanity. The Vietnam War, I asserted, was a crime against humanity.

In 1969, exactly three months before the launch of Apollo 11, I wrote, "We are almost at the point of landing a man on the moon. But we have not yet learned how to live together peacefully and resolve our problems by other means than war." I registered my dismay and sorrow that individuals "in the prime of their youth" were being sent to Vietnam to become "corpses to be gathered up and buried."

In 1972, I included quotes from Vietnamese refugees who had fled to the Plain of Jars in Laos: "Our village was filled with bomb craters, the land made barren. I grieved very much to see my village in ruins, my animals vanished, my crops destroyed, more and more dead and wounded." . . . "There wasn't a night when we thought we'd live until morning . . . never a morning we thought we'd survive until night. Did our children cry? O, yes, and we did also. I just stayed in my cave. I didn't see the sunlight for two years. . . . I used to repeat 'Please don't let the planes come, please don't let the planes come, please don't let the planes come.'"

Before we had moved from DC, an IRS agent had paid me a visit at the FCNL office. We had a most interesting conversation. He told me that he agreed with my position on the war and that he supported my decision to follow my conscience. But, he explained, it was his job and responsibility to collect the money for my unpaid taxes.

He expressed concern about my family's safety in the neighborhood in which we chose to live, and I assured him that we were fine. He had many questions about the work of FCNL, and he asked for some of our newsletters and other literature. He insisted on paying for them. He gave me a dollar for about forty cents' worth of material and told me to keep the rest as a contribution to FCNL. It seemed ironic to me that this man who had come to collect my money ended up giving me some instead.

He told me that our interaction was "off the record." Then he returned to the subject of my taxes and said, "It's my job to get this money from you in any way I can. I don't like to do this kind of thing, but I can take any property you have—your car, or your house . . ."

I told him, "Well, I do have a bicycle downstairs."

"Oh no, no," he insisted. "I wouldn't take your bicycle."

"I have this suit that I have on," I said.

"Oh, no, no, we wouldn't take your suit." He left without accomplishing his mission.

While our family was living at Pendle Hill, an IRS agent came out almost every week to harass us. The IRS had repossessed the car of someone else at Pendle Hill for unpaid war taxes, so we parked our car far from our little home.

One day the couple who were living in our house in Washington, DC, came home to find a notice on the front door: "WARNING—U.S. GOVERNMENT SEIZURE. This property has been seized for nonpayment of Internal Revenue taxes, by virtue of levy issued by the District Director of Internal Revenue. All persons are warned not to remove or tamper with this property in any manner, under severe penalty of law."

I made a trip back to DC with Quaker friends Colin Bell and Vint Deming, to meet with two IRS agents and discuss the lien they had put on the house Jan and I owned, for nonpayment of $31.90 in taxes. I had explained our position in a letter to the IRS, and also made clear that FCNL had already handed over the money for my refused taxes from the organization's own funds. One of the agents explained that the IRS does all its business by computer, and "the computer does not read letters."

The agents also insisted that we owed $15 in "phone tax," an excise tax that had been added by Congress to all U.S. long-distance telephone communications specifically to fund the Vietnam War. I refused to pay it, and I also refused to give the name and address of our bank, which they demanded. They told me that I needed to call my wife to make sure she was aware of the jeopardy I was putting us in.

I called Jan back in Philadelphia. She, of course, agreed with my position. One of the agents joked that he would add the excise tax from that phone call to our bill. Eventually, after meeting for almost three hours, he signed a release on our house. But he warned, "This does not mean we will not come back and seize your house again in the near future." We shook hands as we parted.

We never again heard from the IRS about those taxes. And Jan and I have continued our war tax resistance for more than forty years. Our most recent letters reflect the same concerns and commitments we raised in our earliest ones—with Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan mentioned in place of Vietnam.

The IRS usually succeeds in getting the money eventually—often through liens on the accounts we have had with Oikocredit, which offers microcredit loans in the poorest parts of the world, and Chicago's South Shore Bank, whose mission before closing in 2009 was to support America's poorest neighborhoods. But Jan and I take comfort in knowing that we have not voluntarily given our money to support war.

If someone appeared at the door asking for a $5,000 contribution for the war in Vietnam or Iraq or whatever war comes next, I believe that most of us would not hand over the money. But the wars continue because the vast majority of Americans continue to pay their taxes without question. As former Secretary of State Alexander Haig said so famously when he looked out over a sea of war protesters at the White House, "Let them march all they want, as long as they pay their taxes."

Jan and I contribute the war portion of our taxes to humanitarian causes that we believe in. The amount that we submit to the federal government we send by check written out to the Department of Health and Human Services, explaining that we want our taxes to support education, low-income housing, and other critical needs. Sometimes the government returns our check marked "Wrong Addressee," and then we resend it with another letter explaining our position.

After our year at Pendle Hill, our family helped to found the Life Center Community in Philadelphia, which was part of the Movement for a New Society. Several of us in the community had ties to A Quaker Action Group, and two had worked closely with Martin Luther King through the Poor People's Campaign and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. We realized, as King had expressed so eloquently, that tinkering with this or that problem in the system was not enough; that we were facing a problem that was much bigger than racism and civil rights.

We came together out of a shared desire to go deeper in challenging our society and building a new one. We were particularly moved by Martin Luther King's naming of the scourges of militarism and materialism alongside racism. He declared that the triple menace of racism, militarism, and extreme materialism was not only devastating other countries and our nation's international reputation, they were "destroying the soul of America."

The United States was devouring the world to perpetuate a lifestyle of comfort and greed, and we had become, according to King, "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world" in our efforts to protect it. Those of us in the Life Center Community wanted to experiment with ways to bring about nonviolent transformation of our society, continuing the work of building a movement that King had begun.

We knew that lowering our cost of living would free up time to work on justice and peace issues and be consistent with our beliefs about just sharing of the world's resources. So we moved into shared households in the same neighborhood in west Philadelphia. Our household included six adults and four children. We shared the cooking and the

cleaning and kept our expenses to a minimum. Our family of four was able to live on less than $200 per month.

We started a food co-op and worked on local issues such as community safety and neighborhood policing. We also held seminars on the overseas impact of the American Way of Life and our nation's global domination. Our community became a training center, where people came from all over the world, spending from a weekend to several months learning about nonviolence and social change.

We had what we called a "floating Quaker meeting." Once a month, we went to be in solidarity with someone taking a stand—for example, a young person who had refused to become a soldier and go to Vietnam and was taking sanctuary in a Quaker meetinghouse, or a doctor who was receiving death threats for his work among vulnerable patients. We would go and spend a weekend offering presence and support.

The horrible news about the war was relentless. Just before Christmas in 1971, U.S. forces began bombing Hanoi and Hải Phòng and the surrounding communities in North Vietnam. Up until that point, our military had been bombing mostly the Ho Chi Minh trail, supposedly cutting off the movement of arms along it. The bombing of cities with large concentrations of civilians was a massive escalation of the war, leading to the death, wounding, or displacement of three million Vietnamese in Nixon's first three years in office.

When this bombing started, we called the community together for a meeting for worship in the Quaker tradition. We tried to comprehend the pain of the families in Vietnam that were underneath our bombs, contrasting that with the spirit of Christmas that was enveloping our own nation. As we grappled with the scriptural challenge to overcome evil with good, we acknowledged that the Vietnamese people were our neighbors and children of God, and we tried to discern how to respond to their suffering and do something to stop this madness.

The meeting lasted for more than four hours. It remains the most powerful worship experience of my life. Hearts were heavy, and a lot of tears were shed. We knew we had to do more than wring our hands and send another letter to the president.

We had heard of a few instances in the early 1940s of Europeans lying down on railroad tracks to try to block trains and prevent the Nazis from shipping Jews to concentration camps. We imagined the impact if thousands had taken such action. Out of our silence and prayer, we began to feel that we needed to put our bodies between the bombs and the people of Vietnam who were getting killed.

We decided to act together, as a community, offering concrete mutual support to one another, particularly to those who were willing and able to take the most risk. We realized that not everyone could participate in the same way. Jan and I had two young children, and others had similar responsibilities. We began working out the details of who would care for the kids, help to pay rent if breadwinners were hurt or detained for a long time, and visit people in jail if needed. And who would care for loved ones left behind if someone got killed.

A committee researched where we might physically place ourselves. We considered going to Hanoi and Hải Phòng, to live in those cities with the Vietnamese people, or perhaps on a boat just offshore. But the logistics and expense of such an action were daunting. We turned our sights to U.S. military bases involved in shipping bombs.

We discovered that the Earle Naval Ammunition Depot was about an hour and a half by car from Philadelphia, in Leonardo, New Jersey. A few of us went on an exploratory mission. We parked our cars, adorned with bumper stickers advocating peace, on a street by a beach near the base. We walked to a place where we could see a very long pier, with tracks that carried trains filled with arms for loading onto ships. We knew we had our answer.

When we returned to our cars, we found that we had been issued traffic tickets, and some of our tires had been punctured. We took these actions as signs that the surrounding community didn't view our bumper stickers or our commitments favorably. They certainly weren't going to be happy about what we were going to do next.

When we got home, we called everyone we knew who had a canoe, a kayak, a rowboat, or anything else that floated. By April we had twenty-six canoes lined up, with at least two people for each, and the news that a ship named the USS *Nitro* was on its way to the base.

We left from the beach early in the morning and paddled in a flotilla out to the pier, where crates of munitions were stacked. We got close enough to read cartons labeled "Napalm" and "Anti-personnel weapons." Seeing those really tore me apart. They meant sure death for people in Vietnam, and I felt even more strongly that we had to do everything we could to stop them from reaching their destination.

The deck of the *Nitro* was being loaded very high with munitions, in addition to the arms that were already in the hold. We paddled our canoes within a hundred feet of the ship, trying to get in front to block it. Military Police yelled at us from the pier over bullhorns, threatening us with a charge of criminal conspiracy and sentences of up to twenty

years in prison if we didn't leave the restricted area. It didn't escape me that the police in Moscow's Red Square had issued an identical warning in response to our protest there.

The badges and Navy uniforms made it clear that these weren't just idle threats. I sensed that the police were going to do whatever it took to stop us. That felt very scary. It gave me pause to realize that if their warning came true, my children would be in their early twenties before I would be out of prison.

But I also felt deeply at peace, and that peace outweighed the fear. When we had considered going to Hanoi or Hải Phòng and making ourselves vulnerable to our nation's bombs, we knew such an action could well have meant the end of our lives. This was less of a risk. I remember shouting to the police, "Thank you for warning us, but if these bombs reach their destination, the people in Vietnam will suffer far worse."

We knew we had the support of our whole community behind us. And the feeling deepened during that action that we are all brothers and sisters around the world; that not just our blood relatives, but the whole human race, is our family, and we have a responsibility for the well-being and safety of one another. We were clear then, as I am now, that this madness of wars and killing each other because people happen to speak a different language, or are of a different color or nationality, or embrace a different religion, is totally against everything we believe and completely contrary to the kind of world in which we want to live.

The spirit of mutual support and determination, and the feeling that we were putting our love for our fellow human beings into practice, was powerful. It was one of the strongest feelings I have had in my life that I was in the right place at the right time. The other people who were part of that blockade were, and still are, some of my best friends. Doing that action together bonded us in life-long friendships.

For six days we paddled around in our boats, as the mountain of weapons on the *Nitro* grew and grew. One canoe was sunk when a police boat revved its engine nearby to flood it with water, and another when an MP pushed its prow underwater with a grappling hook. Not much else happened. We did some singing to pass the time, because a lot of the time it was actually pretty boring. But we were learning the truth that in peace work in risky situations, a boring day is a good day.

Police often harassed us at the end of the day as we put our canoes back on our cars. We discovered more punctured tires, and sugar in some of our gas tanks. The parking tickets mounted, and a few times our cars were towed away from legal parking spots.

One night a few in our group ran into some of the sailors in a bar. They were young guys who had been drafted—eighteen and nineteen years old—and they weren't in the Navy because they liked the idea of dropping bombs on people. They shared that they weren't happy being on the ship, which had been rushed out of a repair dock in Rhode Island for the trip to Vietnam's Tonkin Gulf. They believed it was very unsafe and in violation of regulations limiting munitions on the deck.

Our group invited the sailors to a potluck dinner one evening at a nearby Quaker meetinghouse, where we had a good sharing of concerns. That was one of my first interactions with active-duty military personnel, and hearing their questions about what they were being ordered to do really opened my eyes. I realized, perhaps for the first time, that it was possible to have a heart and a conscience underneath a uniform.

That night the sailors told us that the *Nitro* was going to be leaving for Vietnam at six o'clock the following morning. We thanked them for this critical information. Taking a circuitous route suggested by a sympathetic local resident in order to avoid police blockades on the roads, we showed up at the pier at 5:00 a.m. We shared the harbor that morning with a launch full of CBS cameramen and reporters, while an NBC helicopter and a small airplane from *The New York Times* hovered overhead.

Members of the Coast Guard also showed up that morning. They had orders to grab our canoes with grappling hooks and were instructed to haul us away from the ship. We had gotten to know some of them on a first-name basis, and we felt like we had some secret supporters. They dragged our canoes only about fifty feet away—technically following orders but making it easy for us to go back and reposition ourselves in front of the ship while they went after someone else.

As the *Nitro* lifted anchor and began to depart, we paddled frantically trying to block it. I looked up on the deck and saw a crowd of sailors cheering and giving us the supportive "V" sign of peace with their hands. Then, to our utter amazement, seven of the sailors jumped off the ship into the ocean and began swimming toward us. That moment made the whole effort more than worth it.

We clapped and beamed very big smiles and then paddled toward them. We were trying to hoist them into our canoes when the Navy police zoomed over, picked them up, and took them back out to the *Nitro*, which was by then moving out toward open sea.

The sailors who jumped ship spent some time in the *Nitro*'s brig. The story of our protest—and theirs—was widely covered in the media in the United States and around the world. We learned later that when

Twenty-two canoes in a People's Blockade action block the departure of the USS *Nitro* loaded with munitions headed for Vietnam from Leonardo, NJ. Seven sailors jump ship into the ocean to join the protest (1972). [Photo: William E. Sauro, *New York Times*]

the *Nitro* went through the Panama Canal on its way to Vietnam, sailors on other Navy ships flashed fists of solidarity in honor of those seven sailors. One of those who jumped, William Monks, later wrote his testimony about his action:

> I jumped from my ship because of my beliefs against the war and the killing in Vietnam. I also jumped to support the antiwar protestors who valiantly tried to keep *Nitro* from leaving for Vietnam. I also jumped for the many oppressed people in the military that think like myself . . .
>
> I see no reason why I should have to fight in Vietnam. I didn't start this war. I have nothing against the Vietnamese people. They never hurt me or my family. Why should I have to bomb them?

Monks spoke of the military as a "huge machine whose purpose is to kill people for something they call peace." He saw himself as an unwilling and unnecessary cog in that machine, who like others who tried to resist, was hammered into obedience.

Though the Navy threatened the resisting sailors with courts-martial, they were instead tried on their ship by the *Nitro*'s captain. Denied the opportunity to speak on their own behalf, call witnesses, or have legal representation, they were found guilty of unauthorized absence

and protesting in uniform, with charges of conspiracy dropped. They were fined and reduced one pay grade.

"Our beliefs remain the same, if not strengthened," Monks continued. "But still we are being dragged onward to Vietnam—despite the fact that we've made known that we would take no part in the mission of this ship. I hope and pray that soon someone will listen to us, and accept the fact that we are no longer a part of this ship."

Navy police confiscated our family's canoe, presumably as evidence of my crime. One evening a few months later, on a visit to Washington, DC, our family was driving down North Capital Street toward the Capitol Building, which was brightly lit. I commented to Peter, then three years old, "That's where our government is." He asked, "Are they the ones who have our canoe?"

When our family relocated to California a year later, we had to go without the canoe. When it was finally released from federal custody, friends on the East Coast picked it up for us. They drove it to the mountains of Colorado, where we met up with them and camped for a week, and then we carried the canoe on top of our VW Bug to our new home in San Francisco. The Navy had kept it for more than a year, and it appeared that they had used it while they had it.

Walter Cronkite of *CBS News* called our witness at Leonardo "a nonviolent blockade of an ammunition ship by land and sea." Our actions in the water were augmented by a parallel witness on the train tracks over which the weapons were shipped to the *Nitro* and other ships. Singing "Praise the Lord and Block the Ammunition"—a popular World War II song with a nonviolent twist—a group was kneeling one day on the pier tracks to stop the train carrying weapons.

My good friend Richard Taylor of the Life Center Community was praying for the strength to do God's will when he heard a police officer shout, "Douse 'em!" A blast of water from the hose on the front of the train caught him full in the face. Then he felt a thud as the train hit him in the chest and rolled him over on his back. He grabbed the hose, slid underneath the locomotive, and was dragged along for a few yards before the train stopped. Thankfully uninjured, he joined his fellow blockaders in a police bus headed for jail.

The idea of a People's Blockade of arms ships and trains began picking up steam. Actions were launched at military bases and shipping points on both coasts of the U.S. While the blockades continued at Leonardo, some of us went to Norfolk, Virginia, to block the aircraft carrier USS *America*.

The *America* was a massive ship, and we had only a nine-foot sailboat, a raft, and a few canoes. Our protest felt very much like a biblical David-and-Goliath encounter. As it was leaving for Vietnam, we paddled underneath the *America*'s deck, which was laden with F4 Phantom jets and other warplanes, as well as blue missiles pointed toward the sky.

To our amazement, we also saw hundreds of sailors up on the deck. When eight Navy tugboats appeared to escort the *America* out to sea, some of the sailors began pelting them and their crews with eggs. One of the tugs unfurled a water cannon, and those of us in canoes braced ourselves to be the targets. But instead it was aimed at the sailors, in an effort to clear them all off the deck.

The Navy wanted to avoid the kind of publicity that involves sailors appreciating and supporting peace protesters. We learned later that nearly fifty sailors went AWOL (Absent Without Leave) from the *America* before it left port, including two that abandoned ship just ten minutes before it sailed. These two surfaced at a press conference three days later, asserting their refusal to participate in the *America*'s mission of death.

The response of the authorities at Norfolk was definitely a step up from our experience in Leonardo. When large Navy and Coast Guard boats filled with armed guards pursued us and turned over all our boats with grappling hooks, we knew just how serious and angry they were about our determination to get in the way of their war effort.

After dumping us in the water, they sent frogmen to capture us. They dragged us to a Navy boat, handcuffed us, and forced us to lie face down on the deck, where the Navy men held their guns at the ready. We didn't know how trigger-happy these guys were, and it was a frightening scene.

We tried to engage our captors in conversation, asking them how they felt about the ship and the bombs and the people who would be on the receiving end, wondering aloud how they would feel if it were their families in the bombers' sights. The Navy men remained silent. They kept us in their custody until the *America* was on its way and out of sight. The next day's headline read, "America Defeats Peace Flotilla." So, America was still standing tall!

In Bangor, Washington, protesters camped out at a strategic spot along the Hood Canal, where they could see ships leaving for Vietnam laden with bombs. Stationed there day and night, they were able to paddle quickly out to blockade whenever a ship was sighted. One fellow

People's Blockade with canoes blocking the aircraft carrier USS *America* headed to Vietnam. Sailors on ship supporting the protest were fire-hosed. Norfolk, VA (1972). [Charles Meads, *Virginian Pilot*]

in a small boat was hit by a large arms ship and pushed a quarter mile before the ship stopped. He survived and continued to blockade other ships. Other blockade actions took place at bases near San Francisco and at Seal Beach in Southern California.

This all began because we felt the horror and pain of the war, and our hearts were breaking over what our government was doing to the

people of Vietnam. By following the leadings of our consciences, we tried to speak truth to power and say clearly that this could not continue in our name and with our consent. We were speaking out as powerfully as we knew how, and we felt a deep peace about following what we believed was right.

Our actions touched other peace people, who began to blockade in other places. And our witness also moved people in the military to feel more deeply the consequences of what they were doing. I like to believe that we helped to free those sailors who jumped ship to do what they really wanted to do in their hearts as a result of listening to their consciences. And that their courage inspired many others in the armed forces to refuse to participate in the war without questioning, and to openly resist.

The abiding lesson for me from the People's Blockade is that courage is contagious. When we do what we feel is right, other people will be touched. And what they do in response can touch potentially thousands—even millions—of others.

Individually we can feel powerless, and small, and overwhelmed. It's easy to believe that there's nothing we can do to stand up to war and weapons of destruction. But together we can support one another—emotionally, spiritually, and physically. And the bonds that we forge can last a lifetime.

Soldiers in the military develop a deep sense of comradeship that is necessary for survival in war. We learned through the People's Blockade that when we do that in the peace community, the results are powerful. I find great hope in believing that if we are willing to apply the same kind of discipline and determination to do risky and sustained nonviolent actions for peace as soldiers do to fighting wars, we might see remarkable transformation in our society and world.

I have had to remind myself of this truth again and again through the years. It was especially difficult to remember a decade and a half later, when another dear friend had a confrontation with an arms-carrying train that ended far more tragically than the encounter at Leonardo. I'm grateful that several years of nonviolent resistance helped to prepare me for that day.