

Let's Celebrate, Then Get Back to Work

by Joel Kilgour

On Sept. 30, the Navy turned off its controversial Project ELF (extremely low frequency) transmitters in northern Wisconsin and Michigan. The move surprised Project ELF's opponents and its employees. As recently as 2002, Navy representative Richard Williamson said the transmitters — which send encoded radio signals to nuclear submarines — would be necessary for another quarter of a century.

Steven Davis, spokesman for the Space and Navy Warfare Systems Command, explained in a recent interview with the Mpls. *Star Tribune* that advances in communications technology rendered ELF obsolete.

For Project ELF opponents, this rationale rings disingenuous. Sen. Russ Feingold has long called the system a "Cold War relic" — it was obsolete even before it became fully operational in 1989. As for VLF (very low frequency) — the new technology cited in a Navy news release — well, it's 30 years old.

Whatever factors led to Project ELF's closure, there is one that the Navy rejects categorically. Public opposition "didn't play any role in the decision," Davis said.

Of course, I would like to take partial credit for ELF's demise. A lot of people would. After all, ELF is part of an aggressive and grossly illegal weapons system. The land that we love had become a giant antenna, enabling U.S. and British Trident submarines — the deadliest weapons system ever built — to lurk undetected in the world's oceans, prepared to launch a nuclear sneak attack. With missiles 38 times more powerful than the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, Trident submarines are able to launch a nuclear offensive that would annihilate not only cities, but nations and continents. Without ELF, Tridents' offensive capability is diminished.

So can anti-nuclear activists hail this as a victory? A quick review of ELF's history offers some perspective: In 1968, the Navy publicly announced its intent to build an ELF transmitter in Wisconsin. The original design, called Project Sanguine, involved burying 6,000 miles of cable in a grid pattern across one third of the state. But public concern for the health and environmental consequences of Sanguine

chased the Navy out. So it looked at a site in Texas, but people didn't want Sanguine there, either.

In 1975, the Navy returned to Wisconsin with a scaled-back version of Sanguine: Project Seafarer. Still, the public opposed it. Seafarer scaled down further to Project ELF. People still didn't want it. The Navy persisted.

In 1984, the state of Wisconsin sued the Navy to stop construction of an ELF transmitter near Clam Lake (the other would be near Republic, Mich.). Judge Barbara Crabb, citing still insufficient human health studies, sided with the state. A higher court overruled her decision after then Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger declared ELF "vital for national security." In 1989, having hurdled the obstacle of public opinion, the Navy completed construction and put both ELF transmitters on full power.

ELF's completion felt like a defeat to its critics, but the timing is noteworthy: Public opposition, including a statewide referendum in Michigan, successfully stalled the world's largest military power for two decades.

In 1991, having exhausted legal measures to stop Project ELF, anti-nuclear activists launched a campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience at both ELF transmitters, resulting in 639 arrests over the ensuing 13 years. On five occasions, ELF was disabled by activists who cut down transmitter poles with hand-held saws. In a story that made international news, an Ashland County jury acquitted Donna Howard and Tom Hastings of sabotage for cutting down three such poles at the Wisconsin site in 1996. The jury agreed that ELF was not vital to national defense.

Meanwhile, the Navy was being dogged by congressional efforts, led by Wisconsin legislators, to de-fund ELF. And in 2001, the Lac Courte Oreilles band began investigating possible treaty violations caused by ELF's negative health and environmental effects on their ceded territory.

Now ELF is closed, a full 23 years ahead of the Navy's schedule.

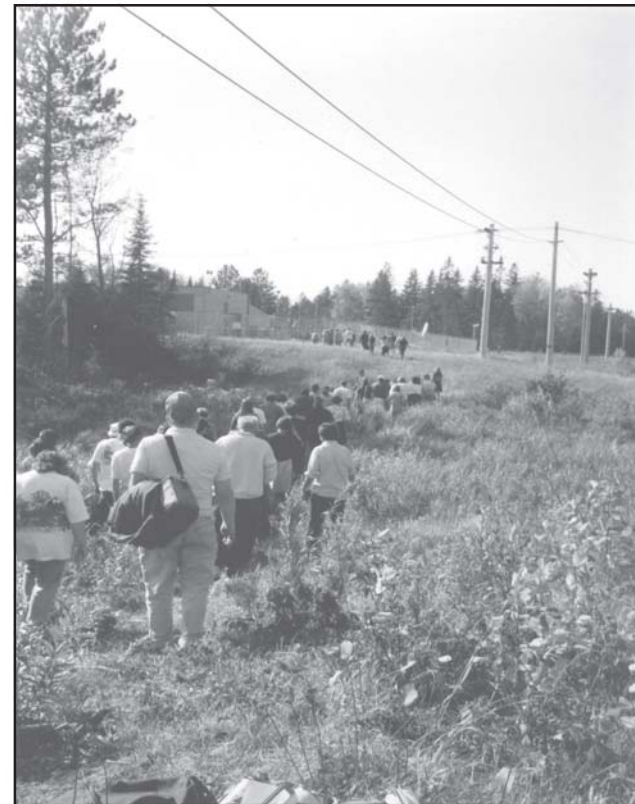
Are we to believe that ELF's critics "didn't play any role in the decision" to scrap ELF? It seems that the Navy is being dishonest with us or is suffering a profound disregard

for public opinion. In either case, the Navy could use a lesson in the democracy it purports to protect.

Whatever the official justification, ELF's closure represents a significant victory. The world is safer, and our nonviolent struggle was unwavering in the face of decades and impossible odds. What the people want, they get ... eventually.

One transmitter site down, 25,000 (or so) nuclear warheads to go. Let's celebrate, and then get back to work.

Joel Kilgour of Duluth is a member of the Loaves and Fishes Catholic Worker Community. He wrote this commentary for the Duluth News Tribune.



Activists walk a clearing to the Clam Lake ELF site Oct. 4, 1992, marking birthdays for Gandhi and St. Francis.



Jane Hosking traces Deputy Sheriff Ed Schlotke's shadow during a Hiroshima/Nagasaki commemoration. The A-bomb blasts left human outlines where people were turned to powder and ash.

Drops of Water Turn a Mill A Coalition to Stop Project ELF



For 13 years, Nukewatch, Anathoth Community, Loaves & Fishes in Duluth, the Wisc. Network for Peace & Justice, Christian Peacemaker Teams in Chicago, the Northland College Peace Club and PeaceNorth of Hayward, Wisc. have carried most of the weight of the campaign against ELF. But for over 30 years, dozens of peace and environmental groups signed on to the effort. The struggle has lasted so long, that some have even disbanded along the way. We are grateful for and happy to acknowledge the hard work and steadfast encouragement from everyone that helped the opposition out-last the Navy:

- Alliance of Atomic Veterans* Las Vegas, Nevada
- American Peace Test*+ Las Vegas, Nevada
- Atlantic Life Community, Baltimore, Maryland
- Campaign Against Arms Trade* London, England
- Center for Defense Information* Washington, DC
- CircleVision, Minneapolis, Minn.
- Citizens Against Trident/ELF+ Ashland, Wisc.
- Clergy & Laity Concerned+ Duluth, Minn.
- Coalition Against Sanguine/ELF+ Madison, Wisc.
- Copper Country Peace Alliance, Houghton, Mich.
- Dorea Peace Community, Turtle Lake, Wisc.
- Justice & Peace Office, Salinas, Kansas
- Ecology Center of Southern Calif., Los Angeles
- Episcopal Peace Fellowship* Washington, DC
- Fellowship of Reconciliation* Nyack, NY
- Grandmothers for Peace, Elk Grove, Calif., & Superior, Wisc.
- Int'l Clearinghouse on Military & Environment* Brooklyn, New York
- Jonah House, Baltimore, Maryland
- Jubilee Partners* Comer, Georgia
- Lakes & Prairies Life Community, LaCrosse, Wisc.
- Lake Superior Greens, Superior, Wisc.
- Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy* New York City
- Livermore Conversion Project, San Francisco, Calif.
- Metanoia Community, St. Mary's, Georgia
- Midwest Institute for Social Transformation, Mpls., Minn.
- Northern Futures Foundation, Port Wing, Wisc.
- Nuclear Age Peace Foundation* Santa Barbara, Calif.
- Pacific Life Research Center, Santa Clara, Calif.
- Pax Christi* Erie, Penn.
- PeaceNorth, Hayward, Wisc.

People Against Sanguine/Seafarer+ Houghton, Michigan
Peoria Area Peace Network, Peoria, Illinois
Int'l Physicians for Social Responsibility* Wash., DC
Pike's Peak Peace & Justice Commission, Colo. Spgs., Colo.

Proposition One Committee, Washington, DC
Rural Southern Voice for Peace* Burnsville, NC
St. Croix Valley Greens, Luck, Wisc.
Shundahai Network, Salt Lake City, Utah
Sojourners, Washington, DC
Stop Project ELF+ Hayward & Madison, Wisc.
Stop Sanguine/ELF Committee+ Mellen, Wisc.
Synapses, Chicago, Ill.
*The Nuclear Resister** Tucson, Arizona
Trident Resistance Network, New Haven, Conn.
Univ. of Wisconsin Greens, Madison, Wisc.
Veterans for Peace, Duluth and Mpls., Minnesota
Voices in the Wilderness* Chicago, Ill.
War Resisters League* New York City
W. Midlands Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, England
Wisconsin Greens, West Bend, Wisc.
Wisc. Resources Protection Council, Tomahawk, Wisc.
Women Against Military Madness, Mpls., Minn.
Women's Int'l League for Peace & Freedom* Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

* A national or international group; + Disbanded



Tromp Trident Trek II participants prepare to leave Ashland, Wisc. for a four-day hike to Project ELF in 1997.