

Low-Level Flight Testing

Innu Women Fight Back

by Maggie Helwig

Traditionally, it is women who have borne the effects of war—70 to 80 per cent of the world's refugees are women and children. It is women, as well, who are most often victimized by the militarization of their communities and societies. In Canada, where our military industries—from uranium mining to cruise missile testing to NATO fighter jet training bases—have been located almost invariably on Native people's territory, the women of the Innu people have suffered perhaps the most deeply from the intrusion of the Canadian military onto their land. But they have also led the resistance against it.

The Innu, about 10,000 people, live in the area they call Nitassinan (Labrador and northeastern Quebec). In this relatively remote location, they were spared the worst of non-Native colonization until after the Second World War—one of the last of Canada's Native cultures to have extensive contact with their colonizers, they are also one of the last to maintain at least some aspects of their traditional way of life.

But when colonization came to the Innu, it came in force. In the 50s, they were forcibly resettled into villages, compelled to give up their nomadic hunting-gathering way of life. The Churchill River dam flooded their burial grounds and hunting territory. And in the early 80s, the military base at Goose Bay, near the Innu village of Sheshatshit, began to be used by British, Dutch, and West German planes to train pilots in low-level flying.

The training involved flying planes over Innu land as low as 30 metres from the ground; in 1992, there were almost 8,000 such flights in the flying season which runs from April to November. The flights produce ear-shattering noises which cause an uncontrollable 'startle reaction' and have serious health effects in the long term; they have also been observed to cause psychological trauma in young children. There is good reason to believe that the low-level flying is also destroying the environment, weakening the caribou, polluting the sky and the lakes.

But most seriously, the flights are taking place over the traditional hunting grounds of the Sheshatshit Innu, and discouraging many from making the trip "into the country."

The Sheshatshit Innu, like some other communities, still spend up to six months of the year in the hunting grounds, which they call *nutshimit*. This is the site of their religious ceremonies, the 'school' where they hand down the traditions of the people to their children. It is also the source of their livelihood. In *nutshimit*, they can feel a sense of control, of self-determination. But for the rest of the year, they live in the government-established villages, and here the community has collapsed on itself. Without running water, decent homes or sewage treatment, without any means of



Tamara Thieboux, 1992

supporting themselves aside from welfare cheques from the government, the Innu have a suicide rate at least five times that of the rest of Canada—higher, in some of the most desolate communities, such as the forcibly relocated Davis Inlet.

And, of course, the social collapse has the greatest impact on women. Wife battering is an epidemic. Tshuakuesh, one of the most respected of the women of Sheshatshit, tells her story in Marie Wadden's book *Nitassinan*. "My relatives were afraid of my husband...so few people would open the door for me. I was very depressed, saddened, to see my children in that state, watching the fighting and beatings because of my husband's drinking.... He broke all of my facial bones around here. There are metal wires attaching my bones.... It really hurts me to remember all these things." (It must also be pointed out that Tshuakuesh's husband later became involved in the campaign

Over and over, in 1988, 1989, 1990, groups led by women and children would enter CFB Goose Bay. Over and over the women would refuse to sign release conditions promising that they would not walk on their own land, and be sent to prison. In March of 1989, nine women in jail in Happy Valley (near Goose Bay) released a statement to the press: "All nine women have been overnight in a small drunk tank... We have four women with us with health problems and one woman who is four months pregnant. We leave at home 49 children. Considering all of this it is very difficult and painful. There is no reason for us to be in jail. We don't consider it a crime to fight and to protect our culture and land... You won't see us as we once were, sitting back and watching developments take place on our land. We will be very outspoken, active in fighting for our land."

Since 1990, the nature of the Innu resistance has changed

The military are raping Mother Earth, and they are raping our daughters.
—Rose Gregoire, Sheshatshit, Nitassinan

against the military base; through his involvement he was able to overcome his alcoholism and end his abuse of his wife and children, and he was recently elected Chief of Sheshatshit).

By forcing the Innu into the village and away from *nutshimit*, the militarization of Goose Bay contributes in a very direct way to the abuse of the women of Sheshatshit.

The large military presence around the base has also brought the high levels of prostitution and rape that are the invariable companions of armies. "[The young women] have gone to the military base and become prostitutes and alcoholics," says Rose Gregoire, an Innu activist and social worker. "They become pregnant and are then deserted. The military are raping Mother Earth and they are raping our daughters."

"If I had the time," said Tshuakuesh, in court after a non-violent protest at Canadian Forces Goose Bay, "I could tell of all the places our parents took us. We were a very happy people... What does the future hold for my children, especially the girls? There will be all kinds of diseases like AIDS in our land. We will lose our children, they will treat our children with disrespect. They will make fun of our children."

And so, in 1988, the women and children of the Innu undertook a campaign of non-violent civil disobedience, occupying the bombing ranges, blocking the runways, camping at the fence of CFB Goose Bay. Though the whole community quickly rallied behind the campaign—and though the men remained and remain still the ones who most often speak to the media and the 'authorities,' there has never been any question that the women and children were the initiators of the direct action campaign, and always the backbone of the resistance. "It is easier for us to fight back because we are not part of the system," Rose explains.

Yet it is not always easier. The women feel, particularly keenly, the separation from their families, the pain they must cause those near to them. "The children cry for their parents, while the authorities part them and jail them for doing no crime. The women especially who are jailed," says Tshuakuesh, "are broken-hearted to see their children crying for them not to go away."

somewhat. The focus is no longer so specifically on the low-level flight testing; also, an attempt was made to engage in land claims negotiations with the government. The land claims negotiations, of course, were conducted mainly by the men—and finally ended in a stalemate, the Innu walking away from the table when they realized that the government would not negotiate in good faith. But direct action campaigns have also continued, again inspired and carried out primarily by the women. They locked the doors of the local school and kept their children home until they were promised control over the curriculum and education in their own language, Innu-eimun. The community blockaded logging roads until logging companies began applying to the Innu for licences to operate in their territory (so far, no licences have been granted).

And on 'Columbus Day', 1992, a new generation of Innu women activists went back to the base. During a picket outside CFB Goose Bay, Rose Gregoire's daughter Janet saw a gap in the fence, and she and six other young women, along with ten children under thirteen, raced through. "I told her there wasn't enough people," Rose reflected, "But she just said, 'Well, Mom, I'm going anyway'... She was telling all the kids to be good and be non-violent. She did good."

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