

# Walk to the ends of the earth

WALK AS IF THE APOCALYPSE has been underway for some time. It has.

...I set off towards AN/FPS-95, System 441a, Cobra Mist. The other visitors head off in the opposite direction, towards the weapons labs. A flock lines up to face me, fifty sheep stand abreast. I walk two miles down a concrete road. There is something intensely ascetic, meditational even, about concrete roads. For fifteen years this place, this nature reserve, was a major player in maintaining the UK's nuclear deterrent. Here they tested the ballistics of the bombs and the reliability of the trigger mechanisms. Without reliability there was no real deterrent, and the enemy had to know how reliable it was, so maybe the Ness's intelligence vulnerability was useful, intentional even. Bombs, 'duds', were dropped, while tracked by operators using steerable helical aerials mounted on the trials building. To the naked eye, even with an aircraft at 40,000 feet, gleaming white in a blue sky, the open bomb bay doors and the orange painted weapon were all visible. Bombs were 'cans of tomatoes'. The weapon, a Yellow Sun, solar fire, was released well before it was overheard, to the eye far too early, making a rumbling sound as its blunt nose buffeted the air, then a huge splash a quarter of a mile offshore. No nuclear materials were ever on the Ness; always substituted with 'a placebo'... this may not be entirely true. The training crews of the V bombers knew there was little chance of surviving a real raid; they were suicide bombers. Scimitars were also nuclear-armed; top secret until all the details turned up in an issue of the *Eagle* comic. No point in a deterrent unless the enemy knows

precisely what it is; there is little room for misunderstanding in nuclear chess.

First off the boat, I had marched this way in the hope of walking solitarily across the two miles to the remnants of Cobra Mist, remembering how being alone had affected my experience of the wards, operating theatre, cinema and morgue of the German underground hospital beneath Guernsey. And why, as a teenager, I would sneak into the grounds of stately homes and heritage sites after they were closed; not to vandalise or steal, but to experience, to feel, because a curtain was pulled back in these places after the visitors and staff were gone. The places behaved differently on their own; but you had to sneak up on them.

I am less personally unnerved than I was under Guernsey; the dispiriting is general this time. The distant, silent pylons, thin as cotton thread, pin the grey reedy grasses to the grey skies. This is a plane irradiated. I know that the shingle is alive with rare species and that the greys and browns are just as much signs of vibrancy as the greens and yellows on the Orford shore, the brochure says so; but it is all a show, all set aside, things turned out differently on the spit, hinged inadequately below Aldeburgh the land flapped about in history for a while and then went limp. In this displaced place time timed out, the Russians did not read the *Eagle*, the back channels were not used in '62, the enemy was not empathised with, the Cuban Missile baby was never born. I did not walk this walk. The animals act their parts, playing dead, everything puts on a play of silence but the wind. I arrive at a clumsily metaphorical bridge.

Beyond the cheap movie space station of the now silent, stilted Foreign Office funded, BBC World Service transmitter, little remains of Cobra Mist; a dim spread upon the ground like the dusty spectre left by a bird crashing into a window pane. The very thinness of the pylons, barely visible against the grey skies, and the faint shadows of the ground plan all evoke the massive invisible energy resources that once powered a fan of antennae spread across more than one hundred and thirty acres, with a giant broadcast signal of 10 megawatts, designed to detect missile activity two thousand miles away.

But Cobra Mist was not empathetic to its enemies, it was haunted by the ghost of General Curtis LeMay, the architect of a strategic bombing campaign responsible for the destruction of 40% of residential districts in sixty-six Japanese cities and advocate of a bombing of Soviet missile sites in Cuba in 1962 that would have begun a nuclear exchange; his spectre operated as an organising force among the various active elements hung from the eighteen strings of antennae radiating out from the centre on the eastern shore and within the reflective mesh hung beneath them. Wherever the antennae were 'pointed', they found missile launches everywhere. Each time they turned on the system, the LeMay possession started a war. The System was never used operationally, and, closed after months of tests, at a final cost of \$150 million (almost one billion of today's dollars). Having paid my respects to its dubious corpse, I make my way back across the island towards the remnants of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment. Three brown hares go skittering away across the shingle; I had mistaken them for rusty ordnance.

The railings around the Bomb Ballistics building are tuned to C major.

The Lighthouse will be allowed to crumble into the sea.

The pagodas strike me as elegant, their shapes designed to absorb blast. I cannot get admittance to them because they are "too dangerous", though a party who have paid extra *is* visiting them. Rent; even here. There is a very powerful atmosphere at the entrance to AWRE Laboratory One, an ambience of torn souls and troubled thoughts...

