

The Prison Experience – A Loyalist Perspective

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Preface

As Northern Ireland emerges into a new era of democratic government after 30 years of violent conflict, thoughts are focusing on the future arrangements and relationships within Northern Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and on a new East-West concept embracing the United Kingdom and Ireland. Transition takes time, energy, commitment and an ability to see a brighter, inclusive future while reflecting on past experience.

It has not gone unnoticed that former enemies in that violent conflict are now addressing their differences and representing their communities in a non-violent theatre of debate – the new Northern Ireland Assembly. Our differences, political and otherwise, have now a new arena within which they can be explored and creatively accommodated.

While we as a community-based self-help organisation welcome and will continue to give our support to these latest developments at the political level, we are also conscious of the impact and legacy of violent conflict at community level.

It is our belief that many sections of our community have an increasing role to play in addressing the casualties of our violent conflict, in acknowledging and endeavouring to resolve injustices, and in striving to heal the wounds (as best as one can) so as to enable all our people to invest in a new future.

EPIC has taken responsibility to assist in the reintegration and transformation of ex-prisoners who engaged in the violent conflict. As an integral part of this work EPIC has undertaken intensive research into prison-related issues – whether describing the background to the prison experience itself, or cataloguing the many predicaments, problems and concerns which politically-motivated ex-prisoners encounter upon release.

The first results of this research are now being published, aimed not only at our ‘client’ group of ex-prisoners, but also with a view to increasing awareness among the general public about a significant section of our community whose experiences of long-term imprisonment have impacted right across Northern Ireland, and in some cases beyond.

This particular publication, for which EPIC is indebted to the diligent efforts and painstaking research undertaken by Marion Green, presents an historical overview of the prison experience from a Loyalist perspective. It is complemented by another EPIC research document, published simultaneously, which deals with the prison experience from a more personal perspective, focusing particularly on the legacy of problems which that experience has presented for reintegration.

We in Northern Ireland know only too well that to ignore our communities’ ills only guarantees festering sores and fermentation of future conflict. EPIC feels that its practical work on the needs of ex-prisoners, as well as its ongoing research, will assist in creating the awareness and understanding which is the necessary foundation for purposeful dialogue, without which we can never hope to move forward and reconcile individuals, neighbourhoods, communities and our society in general.

Martin Snoddon

Programme Co-ordinator

EPIC

Introduction

This publication is part of an ongoing project into various prison-related issues. For the past thirty years there have been thousands of Loyalists incarcerated in Northern Ireland's prisons and yet very little has been written about the subject. That neglect is all the more noticeable when one considers the number of books and other publications which have appeared dealing with Republican prisoners.

This document is a socio-political history of events which occurred in our prisons throughout three decades of conflict, focusing primarily on Loyalist politically-motivated prisoners. Due to limitations of time and resources, it is very much a general overview of the Loyalist prison experience, and cannot hope to do justice to the numerous individual memories retained by ex-prisoners, or adequately relate the many experiences they have had, some of which differed greatly depending on which prison each prisoner was incarcerated in or the time period during which the imprisonment took place.

The research involved in-depth interviews with numerous ex-prisoners and their families, and, as the author of this document, I wish to express my appreciation for the time and hospitality I was given. If anything, the research and interviews only served as a reminder that the great bulk of the prison 'story' is still to be recorded, and it is to be hoped that this publication will encourage more ex-prisoners, and their family members, to come forward with their personal testimonies.

During the entire period of our present 'Troubles' the conflict which afflicted Northern Ireland was mirrored by constant strife within the prisons, whether that involved fighting for better conditions, political status or segregation. More significantly, however, the politicisation which occurred among many prisoners has been acknowledged by most commentators to have been one of the few really positive products of the Troubles, and the impact which ex-prisoners have made, and continue to make, at community level is now well established.

[Indeed, the 'story' of the growth of prisoner support networks would require a document on its own: from the early days of the Orange Cross, which was a small family-orientated group of people who set about raising funds and making up food parcels, through the establishment of the Loyalist Prisoners Welfare Association (LPWA) which sought to co-ordinate the efforts made to cater for the welfare of the vastly increasing prisoner population, to the formation of EPIC, which concentrates on the reintegration of prisoners, a role which has taken on greater significance in recent days.]

Just as remarkable has been the crucial impact former prisoners and their associates have made upon the political process – a process once kept remote from working-class aspirations and interventions. Within the Loyalist working-class community parties such as the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party have done much to help move this entire society away from the politics of intransigence and violence to the politics of accommodation and dialogue, while proving that no surrender of identity or aspiration need be involved in the process.

With the Good Friday Agreement and the present commencement of the accelerated release of prisoners it might seem that a 'chapter' of Northern Ireland's history is drawing to a close. Such a perception would be greatly misplaced, however, for there is much hurt within this whole society, in different sections of our community, and it will take much patient and sensitive work if our wounds are ever to begin to heal.

It is with the intention of creating a greater awareness of prisoner-related issues – and in the hope that this can assist in the healing process – that these EPIC research documents are being produced.

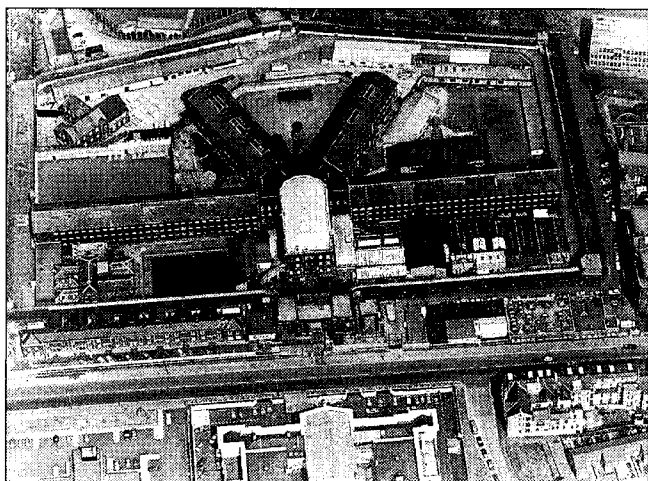
Marion Green

Research Co-ordinator, EPIC

The Early Days: Crumlin Road Jail

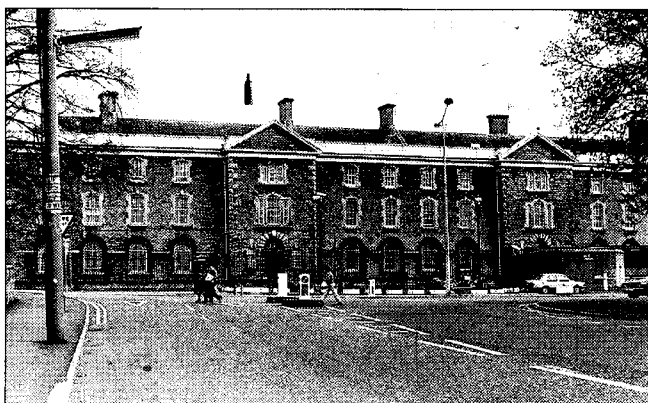
Before the advent of the present phase of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles', Northern Ireland's prison population stood at less than 450, one of the lowest per capita ratios in Europe. The 'Troubles', however, were to change all that. There were two prisons, Crumlin Road Prison in Belfast and Armagh Jail.

Crumlin Road Prison was built in 1845 and was a traditional Victorian prison originally built to house 400 prisoners. Four wings diverged from a central hall, known as the circle, and the wings were known by letters, with A-wing to the left if viewed from Crumlin Road, D-wing to the right next to the Mater Hospital, and B and C wings spaced in between. The design of the prison allowed warders to observe all wings from the central hallway.



Aerial photograph of Crumlin Road Prison

Armagh Jail was built in 1780 and was a 3-storey Georgian-style building. It had two main cell wings emanating from a circle, one 2-storeyed (A-wing) and the other 3-storeyed (B-wing). A wire mesh net to guard against anyone leaping off or accidentally falling over separated each landing. These wings contained 140 cells. It became a totally female prison in 1920 although in the



Armagh Jail, photographed in 1980

1970s male prisoners would be kept there because of overcrowding in Crumlin Road Prison.

'The Wilderness Years'

The first of those who would assert themselves as Loyalist political prisoners were incarcerated in 1966 following the 'Malvern Street Murder' when a Roman Catholic barman was shot dead on the Shankill Road, Belfast. Those convicted were imprisoned in A-wing, Crumlin Road Prison. A-wing was the prison's long-term section, housing men serving sentences of three years or more. There were nine Loyalists incarcerated at that time, their sentences ranging from three and a half years to life imprisonment. They viewed themselves as political prisoners as they felt they had been imprisoned for politically-motivated offences.

One of their number was Gusty Spence, a leading Loyalist from the Shankill Road. Spence was an ex-British soldier who had served as a military policeman in Cyprus and was viewed as the moving spirit of the UVF (formed as a paramilitary group in 1966 and claiming to be the inheritor of the original Ulster Volunteer Force formed by Sir Edward Carson in 1913). Spence's first seven months in prison were spent in solitary confinement as he refused to do any prison work.

The very first interview I had with the Governor I told him that I was a politically-motivated prisoner and he did everything possible to try and break the influence that I would have had with the other Volunteers.

Spence refused to co-operate with the prison authorities until eventually a deal was made whereby he would go up to the tailor shop but not do any work, unless the Governor happened to come along in which case he would pretend to be working.

In prison, as long as agitation is controlled and driven along constructive ways, it can be a catalyst, it can be fulfilling. You can change things as long as you don't resort to violence. We started using our heads as opposed to our fists and it paid dividends.

Spence started drilling the men in Crumlin Road Prison in order to instil discipline.

If you declare yourself to be a political prisoner then you have to act and behave in a way befitting a political prisoner. Some men made it and some men didn't. It all depended on how the person felt himself in terms of honour, patriotism and even truth.

Spence also realised that prison provided an opportunity to complete the education he had missed out on and he tackled it with fervour. With the help of a tutor he began a

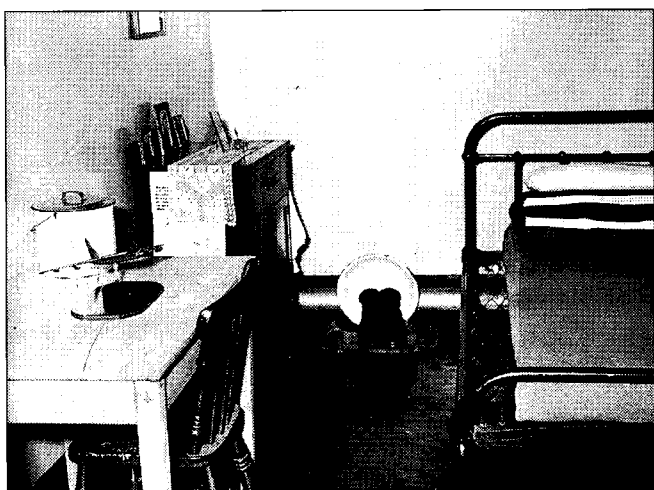
series of correspondence courses. He also took up Irish history and persuaded the Governor to let his family bring books in for him.

Crumlin Road Prison presented me with a real opportunity for education. Aside from sleeping and whatever recreation there was, I believed in filling the time in a meaningful way, something that would be of benefit to myself and the other men.

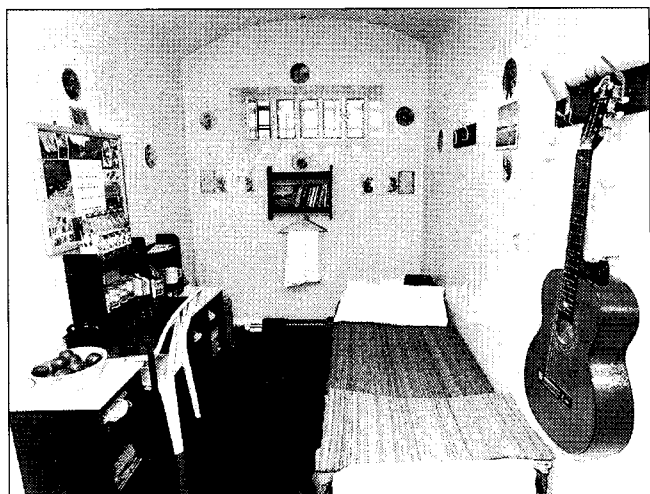
Life for the Loyalist prisoners in Crumlin Road was a constant struggle against a harsh regime. Soon after their arrival in prison they began to organise themselves in order to improve their conditions, including access to information, education and recreation.

Republicans were able to draw on a whole reservoir of tradition within prisons, but there was nothing for us. What we had to do to a large degree was to start and lay the rules and traditions which could be followed by others. It was very difficult because we had an antagonistic regime.

There were virtually no prison reform mechanisms then but there were 'Board Papers' in which the prisoners could put forward ideas for reforms. One example was over the issue of uniforms. The prison uniform was a grey blanket-type material which did very little for the men's



A cell in Crumlin Road (1959)



A cell in Crumlin Road (1992)

morale, as it was shapeless and ill-fitting. A Board Paper was put forward suggesting that the prisoners should produce their own smart new uniforms in the tailor shop, and made from a denim material; these uniforms would in turn present the prison in a better light to visitors.

Strength in numbers

The daily life of the men remained much the same until 1969 and the onset of the present conflict. It was then that Loyalists were imprisoned in increasing numbers and this gave Spence a certain amount of leverage. Prisons are ultimately dependent on prisoners for their smooth running and the Loyalists were increasingly placed in key positions such as in the cookhouse or working in maintenance. As the number of Loyalist prisoners grew, they began to be in the position where they were more or less running the wings.

The increasing numbers meant that Loyalist prisoners were incarcerated in different wings, but there were opportunities for contact:

The only time we would have contact with other prisoners from different wings was in the church. The church was our main meeting place, and it was where all the snout was passed across. Protestants were lucky in that we used to go to three services, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist.

Spence sought to share the studies he had embarked upon with the other men, in particular his new understanding of Irish history. Irish history was not taught in Protestant schools and the vast majority of Loyalist prisoners were unaware even of many aspects of Ulster's history. Prison provided ideal conditions for many men to reflect seriously upon the past and the future and Spence encouraged his fellow Loyalists to embark upon such a pursuit.

Whenever I began to unfold for myself some of the secrets of Irish history, it would have been foolish of me not to impart that information to others so I approached the Governor and asked permission to start up some Irish history classes. At first he was suspicious and insisted on a prison officer being present but eventually, when he realised we were genuine, he let us get on with it.

One of the Loyalist prisoners' other concerns, to improve prison conditions, was also kept to the fore. They appealed to various interested people who they thought would help them to get conditions improved. They lobbied to get a television brought into the prison on Christmas Day and they were instrumental in the introduction of transistor radios into the prison. They were also responsible for getting a football pitch opened up in the prison grounds. These were all minor changes but to the Loyalist prisoners they were viewed as a victory in breaking through the rigidity of the prison regime.

And, of course, the prisoners were concerned about keeping in contact with their families and their communities on the outside. Over the years this would be

greatly developed with the creation of support groups linked to each paramilitary organisation, but in the early days contact was limited to visits and letters from friends and loved ones. Nevertheless, this was a vital necessity to prisoners as it helped them survive the loneliness of incarceration.

Initially, in Crumlin Road Prison the sentenced prisoners were only allowed a thirty-minute visit and one letter per month. The visits were held in cubicles with a prison officer sitting between the prisoner and his visitors. No physical contact was permitted such as shaking hands, kissing or even taking children on their knees. Smoking was not allowed during the visits and conversations were strictly controlled. If the prisoner or his visitor mentioned anything about the prison or other prisoners then the visit was terminated straight away.

Throughout the conflict, Crumlin Road Prison was used to house unsentenced prisoners awaiting trial – kept on C-wing – and for many of these remand prisoners it was an alien experience.

My most vivid memories of Crumlin Road jail are the noise and the clatter of gates closing. It was a place full of contradictions. I remember a screw telling me to go and get a set of 'eating irons' so I went to the store room to get what I thought would be a metal knife, fork and spoon – only to be given a set of plastic cutlery. Everything was plastic, plates, cups and trays.

There was also a Young Prisoners' Centre which housed prisoners aged 18 and under who were first-time offenders. They were held in the annexe. (In later years this annexe would house the 'supergrasses'.)

But it was to be the arrival of their enemies which was to be the real test of the discipline patiently instilled among the Loyalists by Spence and his associates.

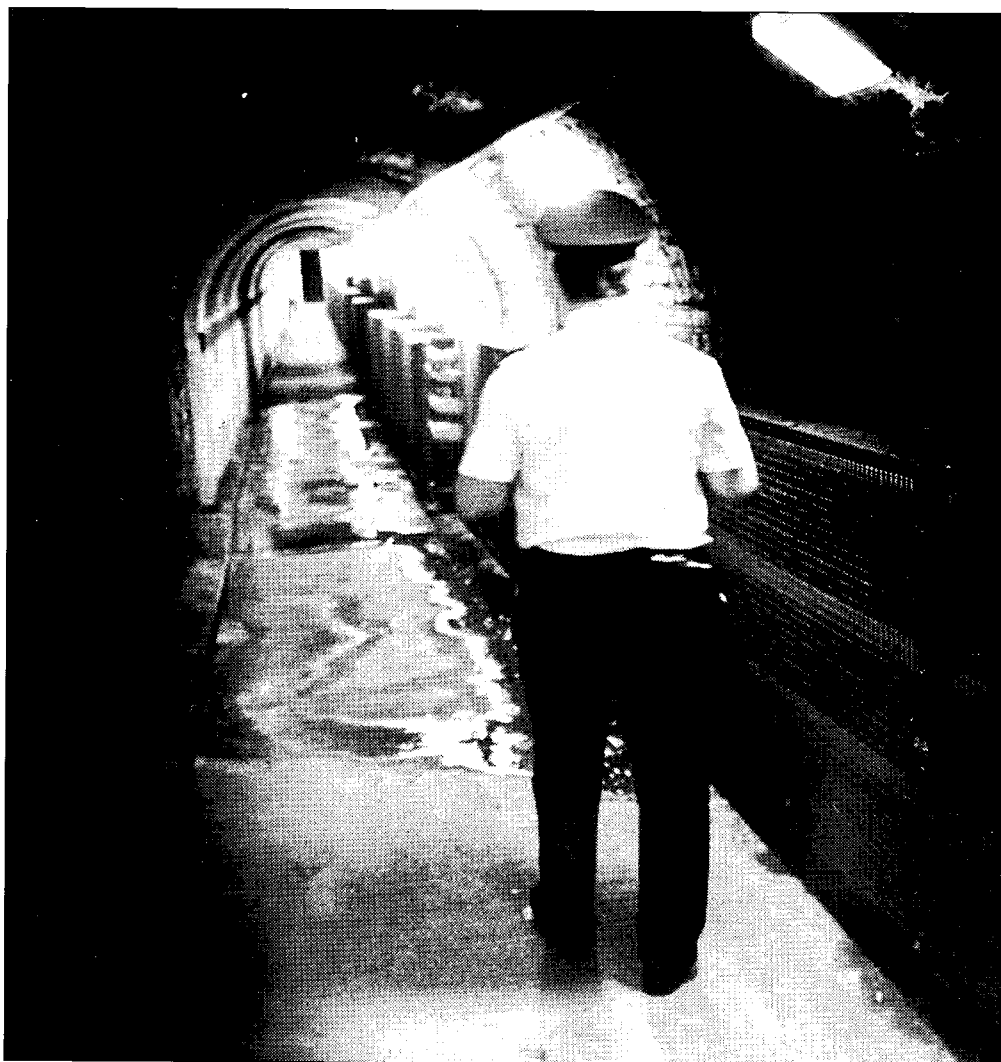
Co-operation

The first sentenced Republican prisoners of the present conflict, members of the Provisional IRA, arrived in the Crumlin Road Prison in December 1970. Official IRA prisoners were incarcerated in the summer of 1971 at a time when these two factions of the Republican movement were engaged in a violent feud.

When the first Republicans were imprisoned, the Loyalists

were in the majority but Spence had the foresight to realise that this might not always be the case. Prison policy was one of non-segregation and both Loyalists and Republicans shared the cellular accommodation of A-wing, which was only 100 yards long and 40 yards broad and had communal working and dining facilities. As more and more people were being arrested there was gross overcrowding, with as many as three prisoners sleeping in cells designed for only one prisoner and in double cells there were as many as six. Tensions began to run very high in the jail and there was a serious incident between Loyalists and Republicans in the winter of 1971 when a fight began in the dining hall. The fight was quickly broken up and only a few injuries were sustained.

However, it served to illustrate the danger of the situation in the prison. Discipline had to be fierce in order to prevent bloodshed, and the prison authorities refused to consider segregation. Peter Monaghan, the Official IRA Commander, Billy McKee, the Provisional IRA Commander, and Spence agreed on a 'no-conflict policy'. As they had to share the same living quarters it was agreed there was to be no form of triumphalism, and any overt manifestation of cultural activity was to be kept to the minimum. Such co-operation was strained at times but for the moment it appeared to work.



The tunnel under the Crumlin Road, leading from the prison to the Court House

Internment and Long Kesh

Internment

Internment without Trial was introduced in Northern Ireland in August 1971 due to the deteriorating political situation and escalating violence. Hundreds of men suspected of terrorism were arrested by the security forces and interned without access to the due process of law. At first it was mainly Republicans who were interned but later on Loyalists were also interned.

One Monday morning, while I was working as an apprentice mechanic, I was sent out to get a pint of milk for the tea break. I was walking up the road when a car with CID in it pulled up and they lifted me under the Special Powers Act. I was taken to Castlereagh Holding Centre and brought into the back of a cloakroom-type place where one of the men started to pistol-whip me. He hit me about the head with a gun and pushed it against my head. I didn't know what was happening at the time; one had me by the neck and the sergeant was hitting me with the gun. Over a period of days I was interrogated about terrorist offences and I pleaded my innocence but they held me for three days. After that they brought me into an office and told me I was to be interned under Section 11 of the Special Powers Act. I was taken to Long Kesh wearing my work overalls and a lot of the men there were surprised and someone said, 'my God, they're even lifting children!' I was only 17 and young looking for my age.

The first batch of internees were placed in the already overcrowded Crumlin Road Prison, but the following month they were moved to Long Kesh, a former air base outside the small village of Maze. The prisoners were housed in high-security, fenced compounds where Nissen hut accommodation had been prepared.

The Government and the Prison Service were reluctant to admit that internees were political prisoners, but those interned were undoubtedly 'special category' prisoners. They had been arrested by the army and not the police; their subsequent detention was without redress to normal courts or appeals procedures; they were held in compounds and not in cells, and within a penal regime having few characteristics of a conventional prison; and large numbers of armed troops guarded the perimeter of their camp, which was surrounded by watch towers and subject to regular helicopter surveillance. To all intents and purposes, the internees were being treated like prisoners of war rather than ordinary criminals. [Internment was to last until December 1975.]

Detainees and Commissioner Courts

There was also 'internment with trial', introduced in 1972. The 'trial' took place in what was known as the Commissioner's Court, which was actually a prefabricated hut in one of the compounds. Here, allegations were made against the men, usually by an unknown person hidden behind a screen. Those held under these conditions were known as 'detainees' and they would have had different privileges to internees and sentenced prisoners.



Aftermath of the fire at Long Kesh in October 1974 when Republican prisoners burned down their compounds. The unscathed Loyalist huts can be seen at the top right-hand corner of the photograph.

[See page 17]

Demands for political status

While those interned in Long Kesh were, in effect, accorded a special category status, this was denied to their fellow paramilitary prisoners in Crumlin Road Prison who, although convicted of terrorist related offences, *were* being treated as ordinary criminals. They were confined to cells, had to wear the standard prison uniform, were not free to associate and were not segregated according to paramilitary affiliation.

Spence, McKee and Monaghan, therefore, began talks on a campaign for political status. A strike was organised and began in May 1972. To avoid the risk of confrontation, it was agreed that no Catholics would congregate in the vicinity of the jail, instead the then legal Ulster Defence Association (UDA) was to engineer mass protests outside the prison. McKee opted to lead a hunger strike inside the prison while the Loyalist prisoners, by throwing their weight behind a prison strike, assured it of success – the Loyalists held most of the ‘trustee’ jobs in the prison and were therefore in a position to bring its administration to a virtual halt.

As far as political support went, it was the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) who were most instrumental in helping to bring about special category status, especially Paddy Devlin and Gerry Fitt. There was no help or support from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) or the Rev. Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). During the strike, Paddy Devlin wrote an open letter to the British Administration asking for ‘political recognition’ for Loyalist and Republican prisoners. He spoke of being a wartime internee himself and never having worn prison uniform.

The SDLP helped us in attempting to put into a political perspective the situation that pertained in Crumlin Road Prison and the situation that pertained in Northern Ireland.

The other people who helped us were the UVF, the UDA and all those concerned women, wives and children. We didn’t get much help from the UUP or the wider unionist population.

The strike ended on 19 June and ‘special category status’ was achieved by 40 Loyalists. They were allowed to wear civilian clothes and moved to A-wing. There were several reasons behind this development:

- William Whitelaw, the Secretary of State, was convinced that McKee was about to die and was alarmed by the prospect of the disturbances which would follow his death.
- The prison was becoming unmanageable. There had been escapes and the possibility of further escapes. It was hoped that the granting of special category status

would ease tensions in the prison, where conditions had become untenable due to gross overcrowding.

- It was also part of a deal between Whitelaw and the IRA, a precondition for a ceasefire and talks between the two sides.

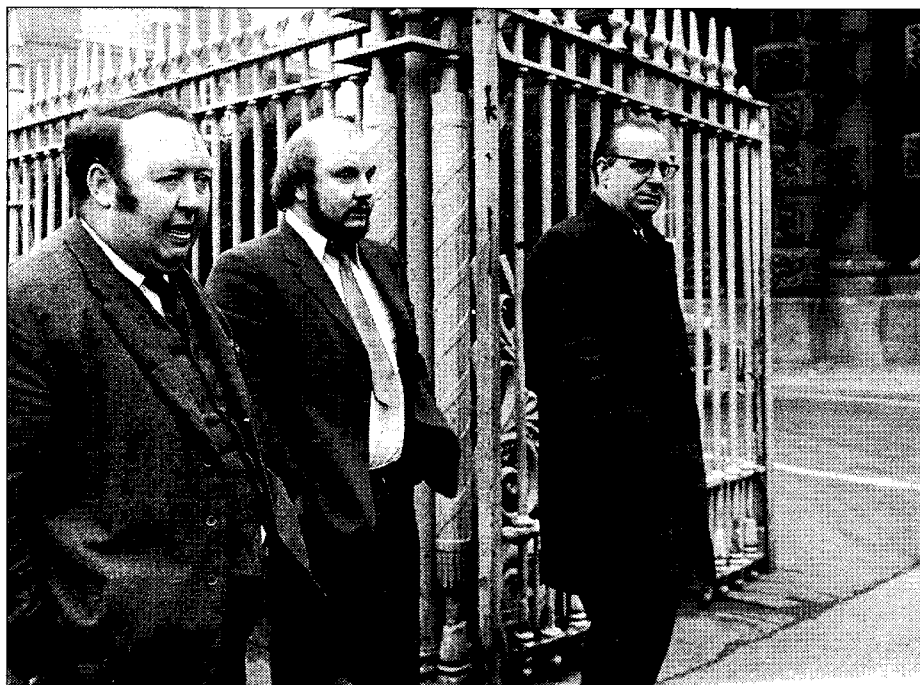
Hence, from 22 June 1972 the Crumlin Road prisoners were granted the same concessions and special category status as their internee counterparts:

- 1 One visit per week
- 2 One food parcel per week
- 3 Unlimited incoming and outgoing mail
- 4 The right to wear their own clothes
- 5 Free association with other prisoners
- 6 No statutory requirement to do prison work

It was Spence who typed up the demands for political status, as he was the scribe and did all the drafting for the different groups.

There was then a mass exodus of prisoners out of A-wing who were not claimed by paramilitary organisations and an influx of prisoners who were claimed. As a result of that we decided to divide A-wing into three different territories. The Loyalists were to get the top floor, A3, as I saw that as a strategic defence position in case things went wrong. The Official IRA were to be housed in half of A2 and the Provisionals were to get half of A2 and all of A1. But at that time there was bitter enmity between the Officials and the Provisionals therefore the Provos welched on the deal and took over all of A2 in the hope that the Officials would be removed from A-wing all together. We took the Officials in with us on A3 and not only did we take them in, there was no treachery, we treated each other fairly and respectfully. A good rapport was built up.

In prison when two opposing factions have to live



Paddy Devlin, Paddy O'Hanlon and Gerry Fitt of the SDLP at Crumlin Road prison

together there needs to be a high level of discipline and toleration, which the Loyalist prisoners appeared to have under the influence of Spence. It also provided an opportunity for Loyalist prisoners to share and explore ideas with Republicans in a relatively safe environment.

You cannot have sets of heavily politically motivated prisoners beside one another without having some exchange of views and I welcomed that as not only had I been attempting to politicise myself, but others as well and this was a subtle introduction for the politicisation of my men from another aspect.

Long Kesh

On 13 December 1972, the overcrowding at Crumlin Road Prison was becoming so unmanageable that, to alleviate the pressure, it was now the turn of sentenced prisoners to be transferred to Long Kesh. Within one month approximately 60 Loyalist Special Category prisoners were relocated to Long Kesh. The prisoners, Loyalist and Republican, were transported there in one of the biggest military cavalcades ever seen in Northern Ireland.

The army came in and ordered us to put all our belongings into black plastic bin-liners. They strip-searched us and put us in handcuffs. We had no idea where we were going. This was about 1am and we were put into vans and taken along Royal Avenue and through Lisburn. They actually sealed off the whole of Belfast that night!

The camp, as already noted, had been prepared under emergency conditions and conformed to a prisoner-of-war camp model. The surrounding landscape was dominated by high watchtowers with mounted searchlights, barbed wire and a high corrugated iron boundary fence. There was an adjoining army camp in control of perimeter security. It was quite different from Crumlin Road but not as different as some of the more naive initially imagined:

When I first went to Long Kesh there were about 20 of us who went together. We were taken in prison vans and on the way we were talking about what it would be like. On the way in, we heard dogs barking and one smartass said he had heard that we were allowed our own dogs into the camp, as there was wide-open spaces. The next day he asked his wife to bring his dog up. So she brought it up, and as you can imagine she was told, in no uncertain terms, to take it back where it came from!

The Compounds

Each individual compound normally consisted of three Nissen huts, with a separate latrine and shower unit. One of the huts was split in two and half of it used as a dining area. The remainder was used for sleeping and living accommodation. The compound itself was bordered by a barbed wire security fence. There were approximately 80 men to each compound. The huts were extremely basic, with bunk-beds and blankets. Within each compound, the

prisoners had completely free association from 8am until 9pm. As far as facilities were concerned, there was even less in Long Kesh than there was in Crumlin Road Prison.

For a number of the long-term prisoners who had been serving their sentence in Crumlin Road, Long Kesh came as a complete shock as it was very different to any conventional prison. There were no cells or privacy, which made it very difficult for many of the men to acclimatise. Furthermore, they had arrived in the middle of winter, and although there were blow heaters, these proved useless in combating the cold. Those who had spent years in Crumlin Road Prison were used to a warm controlled environment and had acquired a distinctive yellow pallor due to the lack of fresh air.

To make matters worse, a bout of depression set in amongst many of the men as there was literally nothing to do. There were no educational or recreation facilities except for one television per compound which was kept in the canteen and viewing was often prohibited. By January 1973, there were even fears of an outbreak of dysentery in the camp as it was infested with rats. The conditions could only be described as degrading and inhuman. The huts had leaking roofs and the prisoners only had one wash-hand basin and toilet for every 30 men. The food was served cold and was of poor quality and some of the food parcels were not allowed in and even warm winter clothes for the men were handed back to relatives in some cases. Newspapers were banned and welfare visits were stopped. Loyalists smuggled out the following statement (which appeared in the *Sunday News* 07.01.73):

Loyalist prisoners expect persecution, Loyalist prisoners expect inhumanity and degradation, but we shall not stand idly by and see our people treated like dirt! As a last resort the men will fight.

Establishing Discipline

With conditions in Long Kesh being so deplorable, the prisoners were forced to manage their own lives and they established a regime based on military discipline in order to raise the men's morale and begin to improve conditions. The Commanding Officer of each compound introduced a daily routine and a military-style life came into being. By setting a strict example, Spence ensured that those under his command acted and behaved as prisoners of war.

The special category prisoners in Long Kesh were almost totally self-governing within the compounds as opposed to being staff or prison governed. The compounds provided a relatively free environment, which encouraged individuality and self-determination within the confines of the overall prison – once the prisoners had acclimatised themselves to the unusual circumstances.

When I first went to Long Kesh, I couldn't get over the openness of it all. In Crumlin Road I had been used to being locked up in a cell for 22 hours a day whereas in the compounds we had the run of the place. Although our hut was locked in the morning and at night, we had the run of the compound all day to do what we wanted. That took a bit of getting used to.

The younger men in particular adapted well to the lifestyle in Long Kesh and enjoyed the camaraderie and the community-type atmosphere in the camp.

Gusty made up a rota of duties which were shared, such as cleaning the shower areas and dining room. It was doing no harm and it kept us fit and gave us something to do, as there was little else to do in the compounds at that time. First thing every morning we went out and did PE, which was compulsory; but again, it was good for your mind as well as your health.

We ran round the compounds so many times, did fitness exercises and then we washed and shaved. After that we cleaned our bed space and huts, folded all our bedclothes and then dressed in the UVF uniform of black polo neck, black trousers, black coat and cap comforter. At one time we got in a consignment of cheap army boots and we put studs on them for the actual drill. We started having marching parades and roll call. As far as the marching aspect of it was concerned, we were probably as good as some of the top drill companies in the British army as we were practising everyday.

Everything in the compounds had to be fought for, from education to recreation. Educational classes were refused at first by the prison authorities therefore the men initiated their own classes. For the first six months everything was totally 'military-oriented', including bomb-making classes, drilling, parading and weapons training.

Command Structure

The UVF operated an autocratic and hierarchical command structure, with no elections and officers in control of appointments. At the top was the Commanding Officer and underneath there was an OC for each compound.

Commanding Officer
Second in Command
Adjutant
Regimental Sergeant Major
Compound Staff
Sergeant Majors
Hut Sergeants
Volunteers

This compound organisation not only gave the prisoners in each compound a high degree of independence and autonomy, but sought to give them a sense of purpose and to serve as a daily reminder as to why they were in prison, as volunteers in an organisation fighting for a cause. The special category prisoners were self-disciplined and self-governing within their own compounds and had very little contact with the prison staff who had a minimal role in the compounds.

The prisoners were responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the compounds. The prison authorities carried out tasks such as plumbing or fixing leaking roofs, as special materials were needed for these. The prisoners did all the painting including murals on all the walls in the compounds.

The CO enlisted men who became OCs of the different



Gusty Spence (front row, centre) and other UVF men on Muster Parade

UVF compounds and they were then able to stamp their own personality on their particular compounds.

You had a strict compound, a not so strict one and then a lax compound. That was alright, as long as the rules and regulations were obeyed then it worked pretty well.

Each compound had a quartermaster who was responsible for all items in the compound and his role was to maintain a complete inventory of tables, chairs, utensils, bedding, etc. and to obtain replacements where necessary either through prison stores or from the external organisation.

A compound administrator was responsible for all requests made to see prison governors and professional staff such as medical, dental, welfare or education. He recorded the nature of requests, frequency of visits and monitored progress, ensuring a close control of prisoners' contacts with the prison world external to the compound.

Each compound also had a welfare officer who dealt with prisoners' marital, social or family problems.

The education officer in each compound was responsible for all library requests. His role included interviewing prisoners wanting to commence classes, undertake 'O' levels or 'A' levels, Open University and correspondence courses. Some form of education was compulsory for the men as this was seen as a way of diverting their attention and developing their minds.

I was interested in education so I became the education officer for the UVF prisoners, but it was an uphill battle. The prison had its own education officer and he liked everything to go through him – it was all about control. We were getting lecturers to come in but they only came in for an hour in the evening, there was no long-term educational process. As we continued to fight, things eventually improved until we were able to have Open University classes.

The UVF rules were gelled as closely as possible with prison rules and regulations therefore the men felt that they were obeying UVF rules rather than prison rules.

Discipline

Discipline was paramount in the UVF compounds, especially under Spence.

It may have seemed totalitarian but whenever you're in jail, believe you me, you have to have discipline otherwise men would be killed and men were killed.

When men had disagreements or differences in the UVF compound, the rule was that they went to the gymnasium with a pair of boxing gloves and a referee.

Spence held court martials although there was no physical punishment; the men would have been given extra duties as punishment. The most extreme form of punishment was to be put

out of the compounds. A small number of men were asked to leave but if someone wanted to leave for other reasons then they had to sign a document stating that they were voluntarily relinquishing their political status and the document was forwarded to the Brigade staff outside.

Communication

The prison authorities tried to prevent prisoners in the different compounds from communicating with each other, but the prisoners established a communication system using Semaphore signalling (the sending of messages by holding flags in certain positions according to an alphabetical code), which was taught by some prisoners who were ex-service men. The signalling was done on top of the Nissen huts, between the UVF compounds – up to Compound 21 and then back down again – and the men were able to decipher the messages. Quite often the Army were seen up in the watchtowers observing through binoculars, trying to decode the communications.

The prisoners were ingenious at finding ways to beat the system and this in turn helped create the solidarity between the men. For example, one of the prisoners was

Ulster Volunteer Force – Compound 21

STANDING ORDERS

Reveille 0900 hours prompt

Before 1000 hours all volunteers will ensure the cleanliness of cubicles: floors brushed and mopped; litter bins and ashtrays emptied and cleaned; all areas dusted. Bed-packs to be made as per regulations. Personal cleanliness will be observed; washed and shaved.

1000 hours – 1200 hours

All personnel will be detailed to duties.

1200 hours – 1400 hours

Dinner and rest period. All cooking and eating utensils must be cleaned before 1400 hours.

1400 hours – 1600 hours

All personnel will be detailed to duties.

1600 hours

Beds may be made down.

Volunteers in respective huts at 2100 hours prompt and will stand by doors for headcount. Noise in huts to be kept at a minimum.

2400 hours

Lights out - No Talking

All lawful commands from officers and NCOs will be obeyed without question or hesitation.

Requests Governor, Doctor, Welfare. Permission must be given from the hut OC before names are entered into request book.

Contact with Prison Staff must be done through Officers and NCOs.

Stores Post, Medical, Papers, etc., collected by storeman and distributed to Officers and NCOs.

All Volunteers will make every effort to obtain UVF uniform for Muster Parades, i.e. black polo neck, black cords, black boots or shoes, black jacket and black cap comforter.

Muster Parade 1 per week minimum, to be followed by Barrack Room inspection – UVF standard will be maintained.

an electronics expert who was able to make a radio which was kept hidden in the bottom of a boiler which had been specially adapted to hold it.

Some of the compounds were close enough for the men to communicate by shouting to each other through the wire as well as being able to throw messages over. Messages were then passed on from compound to compound. The CO had the freedom to go to the different compounds, especially if there were any problems. The prison authorities were relaxed about this as they realised that the paramilitary leaders could settle disputes quickly.

At first Spence was OC of the entire Loyalist prisoners including UVF, UDA, Red Hand Commandos and YCVs. That situation prevailed in Long Kesh for a while but in 1973 there was disagreement over the type of government and administration which existed and a split ensued. The UVF, RHC and Young Citizens Volunteers remained together in their own huts while the UDA moved to separate huts.

Camp Council

From 1972 until 1974 the numbers of special category prisoners increased dramatically and by March 1974 there were 11 compounds housing approximately 1,200 men, including remand prisoners. The camp was divided into two main areas known as 'Phases' – Phase 5 and Phase 6. The Loyalist COs (UVF and UDA) and Republican COs (PIRA and OIRA) were all located within Phase 6 therefore contact was easily maintained. The prison welfare office facilitated what was supposed to be a welfare workshop once a week which the prisoners used for dialogue, especially the Official IRA and the UVF. Contact between Phases 5 and 6 was facilitated through a centrally located football and exercise yard.

The Camp Council was formed in 1974 but it had its roots in Crumlin Road Prison when the leaders of the different paramilitary factions had initiated the 'no-conflict policy'. In Long Kesh there were common issues which affected all the prisoners such as food, laundry, education and facilities. The Camp Council was made up of the leaders of all the paramilitary organisations and

they held meetings to discuss common problems within the camp. They would then have meetings with the prison Governor and senior Northern Ireland Office officials to discuss many aspects of prison life and the improvement of conditions. It needed to be a concerted effort otherwise the authorities would have used the 'divide and conquer' method.

In addition to discussing food and living conditions, the Council also discussed such matters as compassionate parole and visiting facilities.

Ulster Volunteer Force/RHC

PASSCHENDAELE HUT

STANDING ORDERS:

Cubicle Cleanliness

1. Regulation bed-packs to be made each morning.
2. Cubicles to be brushed, mopped out and generally tidied daily.
3. Waste bins and ashtrays to be emptied.
4. Cubicles to be tidied after rest periods, etc.

Volunteers shall be responsible for personal and cubicle cleanliness.

Orderly Duties

1. Centre of hut to be brushed, mopped out and kept tidy at all times. This includes all tables in centre of hut, chairs being replaced after use, radio and record player stands, etc.
2. Area at top of hut beside the boiler and tables, bread shelves and stores cabinet must be clean at all times and to be given regular attention by the Hut Orderlies. All volunteers to ensure that they do not leave tables, cabinet or centre of hut untidy at any time. Clean up after use of tables, etc.
3. Hut store to be kept in order with all mops and brushes, etc. being accounted for. Orderlies are responsible for stores.
4. Indoor toilets to be kept scrupulously clean at all times.

General Standing Orders

1. Noise in huts to be kept at minimum – no whistling or shouting.
2. Only OC or hut Sgt to operate lights, heaters, radio or TV.
3. Lights out at midnight – no talking after lights out.
4. Do not litter floors – use ashtrays or waste bins.
5. No alterations to cubicle arrangements without OC's permission.
6. When any volunteer is ill, it must be reported to the OC.
7. No volunteer is to add or remove anything from hut notice board.
8. All volunteers must keep abreast of any new notices that appear.
9. Beds to be made down before 11pm every night.
10. Beds must not be made down before 4pm every day.

Any volunteer who is in doubt about rules must check with hut Sgt.

Weekend Orderlies

1. Two orderlies will be detailed duties every weekend (Saturday and Sunday) on a rota basis
2. All orderly duties are to be attended just as permanent orderlies do.
3. Any doubts about duties see hut Sgt.
4. Tea bags and sugar rations to be distributed every Sunday.
 - (v) Seven tea bags per man per day = 35 per man per week.
 - (vi) One pound of sugar per man per week = 2 lb bag per cubicle.
7. Centre of hut to be brushed and mopped out last every night.

All volunteers must assist the orderlies in keeping the hut clean and tidy.

Signed:

OFFICER COMMANDING

Camp Council of Grievances and Complaints

LIST OF GRIEVANCE AND COMPLAINT

LONG KESH – SEPTEMBER 1974

- 1 Compassionate parole system to be introduced wherein all prisoners may have a minimum period of home leave following the death of a close relative (wife, mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, etc.). Also that compassionate parole be allowed to persons with genuine domestic problems of an extenuating nature and for the serious illness of a close relative (same as above)
- 2 Detention – that the time lag between the initial detention of a suspect and his appearance at the detention tribunal be effectively speeded up.
- 3 End of collective punishments and block bans in the camp (with each compound standing on its own merits). For example, if one compound abuses a specific privilege it should not be removed from all compounds as a result. I.e. in the case of one man placing himself beyond prescribed rules of behaviour of either the prison or organisation.
- 4 Setting up of a camp committee – (Faction representatives plus Governor) to discuss and remedy contentious problems that may arise and to facilitate the smooth running of the Camp. Camp committee to meet regularly (say, once per month).
- 5 Two decision making Ministry Officials to come into the Camp to negotiate the areas of grievance.
- 6 A negotiated Special Category rule book to be introduced. At present there are no set rules applicable to Special Category Prisoners.
- 7 Inter-compound visits to be allowed to Faction Representatives in order to eradicate local compound problems as they arise.
- 8 Visits to be changed to comply with Stanley Orme's statement in the House of Commons. This had not to date been done. *(Mr Orme had stated that a more humanitarian approach should be adopted on the Long Kesh visiting issue.)*
- 9 Improved conditions for visitors in waiting rooms.
- 10 Speeding up of visiting system (this would follow if our proposals are put into effect).
- 11 Star and ordinary classification of Special Category Prisoners to be abolished. This classification is inapplicable in this situation.
- 12 Vocational training to be introduced.
- 13 A laundry system to be introduced that shall be seen to be effective.
- 14 Severe restrictions on handicraft tools and materials to be eased.
- 15 Restrictions to be lifted on political literature coming into the Camp.
- 16 Restrictions on black clothing, towels, gloves, etc., to be lifted.
- 17 Food shortage problem to be remedied.
- 18 There is no delegation of authority from Governor right down the line, making requests and complaints system a farce.
- 19 Speeding up of remand process. At present it is de-facto imprisonment with one illustration of a remand prisoner being held for 13 months only to have the charges dropped after that time, highlighting the grievance.
- 20 Improved educational facilities (cassettes, projector, etc., to be allowed).
- 21 Education and lecturers to be provided for remand prisoners.
- 22 Organised recreation for remand to be introduced (use of camp football area).
- 23 Dental services for remands to be introduced. At present there is no service.
- 24 End the practice of moving men to Magilligan Camp against their will.
- 25 Increase amounts of money prisoners are allowed to spend in Camp Shop. At present this is still 50 pence per man even though prices have spiralled.
- 26 Disinterest of staff. They are only here in 3 month stints from English and Scottish prisons.
- 27 Abnormal lengths of time waiting on Dental and Optical treatment to be resolved.
- 28 Introduction of evening football or use of both pitches simultaneously.
- 29 Authorities are ignoring flooding in compounds and general lack of maintenance to compounds.
- 30 Remands are left with a legacy of destroyed property from previous occupants of compounds.
- 31 Prison Hospital is regarded as 'punishment'. There is virtual 24-hour lock up and no televisions, hot water facilities, etc.
- 32 Introduction of Prison films once per week. Governor's funds should be able to cope with expense.

This list of complaints and grievances was forwarded to the prison administration appealing for a wide range of improvements.



Early Prison Protests

The remand prisoners in Crumlin Road Prison labelled it the 'Bastille of Belfast' because of the inhuman and degrading conditions. In August 1973, about 100 Loyalist remand prisoners went on hunger strike in protest against alleged brutality by the army and police after a failed escape attempt.

In Long Kesh, in March 1974, a Republican prisoner managed to escape from the Prison's visiting area and the prison authorities responded by introducing stricter security measures. Before the escape incident, the visiting cubicles consisted of small rooms flanked on either side by access corridors and the visitors entered from one side and prisoners from the other. The doors were kept closed during the visit although the prison officers could observe through a glass panel. After the escape the doors were removed from the visiting cubicles and the tables were extended, wall to wall, dividing the room and preventing any physical contact.

Both Loyalist and Republican COs embarked on a unified response to the enforced changes. For fourteen weeks the special category prisoners did not request or receive any visits from family or friends. The tension in the camp was very high and this was also reflected outside in the community with highjacking and the burning of buses, etc., in demonstrations of support for the prisoners. Eventually, the protest was called off after the men were assured that the visiting arrangements would be improved.

The whole of 1974 was a catalogue of protests. Every morning when you awoke, you knew there was something going to happen. From early 1974, there were protests over food, conditions, laundry and facilities. A lot of the protests overlapped such as the food and laundry protests.

In August 1974, for example, protests began following complaints regarding the quality and quantity of the food being served to the men. Complaints were discussed at the Camp Council and the prison authorities were informed that if the grievances were not addressed then the food would be thrown over the wire (the compound perimeter fences).

The men also complained about the lack of laundry facilities – the sheets and pillowcases were only laundered at monthly intervals and even then were coming back still dirty. Consequently, all special category prisoners draped their

sheets and pillowcases over the wire and threw all prison food rations over the fencing on to the roadways outside. The only prison food that was accepted during that period was milk and bread, rations which did not have to be prepared in the camp kitchen. The men were living on the food parcels sent in by their relatives and whatever rations they could buy in the prison shop.

The laundry protest was unbelievable as we threw our bedding over the wire and throughout the camp all you could see was white linen and blankets hanging on the wire. We actually threw our beds out and we were sleeping on a mattress and a blanket for a number of weeks.

On 9 September 1974, the Northern Ireland Office issued the following statement:

No sentenced or remand prisoners in the Maze Prison will be permitted to receive food parcels from their relatives, or be allowed to purchase food from the camp shop.

This meant that the prisoners had no access to alternative food supplies – the prison authorities were attempting to force them to accept the prison food. However, the Camp Council maintained their protest and resistance and the food continued to be thrown over the wire. The hanging of the sheets prevented the authorities observing what was going on inside the compounds and it created an abnormal and threatening atmosphere.

Long Kesh also contained a large number of detainees



Laundry thrown over the wire at Long Kesh

at that time, who were not involved in the protest and therefore had no restrictions on their food parcels. A system was set up which became known to the prisoners as the *Ho Chi Minh Trail*. A pulley system was devised whereby all the prisoners made makeshift ropes from sheets and clothing to form a chain from one compound to the next. High vantage points were selected in each of the compounds until eventually all the compounds were connected to the pulley system and the detainees began to send over supplies of food and cigarettes to the special category prisoners.

It was a sight to behold, all you could see was parcels moving from one compound to the next. Everything was welcome as we were only accepting basic rations of bread and milk.

The men's spirits were kept high during the protest by their determination to improve conditions and the solidarity that existed among the men.

The food protest lasted until the beginning of October 1974 when the prison administration eventually agreed to improve the quality and quantity of the food.

The Burning of Long Kesh

The British Army was frequently employed to search the detainee compounds, which often led to numerous complaints of brutality. Republican prisoners issued a statement from Long Kesh on the 25 September 1974 threatening to burn down the camp.

On 15 October 1974 an incident occurred in compound 13, a Republican compound, during which a prison officer was assaulted and the prison authorities wanted those responsible to be handed over to be disciplined. The OC of the compound refused to comply and was told that the army would be brought in to seize the two prisoners responsible for the assault. The Commanding Officer of the Provisional IRA requested to speak to his OC in compound 13 to try and alleviate the situation but he was refused permission. The Provisional CO, therefore, issued orders to burn the camp. The word was quickly passed down through the compounds, and eventually reached the Loyalist prisoners.

We got to hear about this and we realised that we were in a dangerous situation as in one Phase we had two compounds surrounded by five Republican compounds and in the other Phase we had two compounds surrounded by about five or six Republican compounds, plus all the detainees. The prison staff withdrew and left us to the mercy of the Provisionals.

The Loyalist prisoners decided to gather in one area for safety reasons and so they broke out of their compounds and assembled in compounds 14 and 19.

The night of the fire I was in compound 11. They had started the fire near the football pitch and the men in compound 19 threw their mattresses over the wire, jumped over and came to warn us. It happened very quickly. By the time we got the tables down and broke the legs off to protect ourselves, the Provies had broken

into our compound within minutes. They were armed and a lot of them were hooded. We were well outnumbered and could have been killed. It was a serious situation. They promised us they wouldn't burn our huts when we left but as soon as we did they burnt the whole lot, people's belongings, clothes and everything.

Before the fire had started, the Loyalists had raided the medical centre to gather supplies in case of injuries. However, no Loyalists were hurt that night and that was probably due to the co-operation between the various COs in the camp.

During the confrontation between the British Army and the Republicans Loyalists rescued many IRA prisoners and subsequently set up 'field hospitals' in Compound 14 and Compound 19.

The army had split them up with the helicopters, they had moved in and pushed them right back. Some of them were badly injured so we took them into our compound and looked after them as best we could. It wasn't planned, it was a natural reaction – we saw them being injured and so we took them in.

The army was smoke-bombing the Republicans and they were all gathering on the football pitches. The men from compound 19 were going out and carrying some of them in and giving them medical treatment; some of them were in a bad way.

We used the canteen to tend to some injured people. Some had been hit with rubber bullets and others were blinded with tear gas.

As dawn broke, British troops moved in. The Provisionals and Officials faced superior numbers, gas, rubber bullets, etc. and, in the words of a UVF prisoner, it was 'no contest'.

The next day the army eventually overpowered them using helicopters and gas. Then they started to brutalise them. We saw this first-hand. They made them walk through a tunnel of guards and beat them for hours.

The UVF CO had observed the 'battle' and realising that the Republicans had no chance he approached the British Army officer in charge and attempted to secure from him an assurance that if the Republican prisoners returned to their compounds peacefully, no further offensive action would be taken against them. The UVF CO was then permitted to see the Provisional CO who, in turn, ordered his men to disarm and return to their compounds.

The trouble spreads

The burning of Long Kesh sparked off trouble in the other prisons – Armagh, Magilligan and Crumlin Road. On 16 October, the female Republican prisoners in Armagh prison seized the Governor and three prison officers and held them captive in an attic. The women demanded that assurances should be given to representatives of Sinn

Féin, the UDA, the UVF and the Official IRA that none of the prisoners of Long Kesh would be maltreated after the riot of Tuesday night.

During the same afternoon trouble broke out in Crumlin Road Prison. Then, in the evening, prisoners at Magilligan prison set fire to their huts. Two hours later prison staff reported that the situation was under control but that the cookhouse, the prison shop and another hut had been destroyed in the fire. No injuries were reported.

On Thursday 17 October, in the early hours of the morning, the prison Governor and the three prison officers in Armagh jail were released after two clergymen had reassured the prisoners that the men in Long Kesh were safe.

The reality for the Loyalist prisoners, however, was that they were now crowded into two compounds with no electricity or heating. The cookhouse had been burnt therefore field kitchens were brought in to provide meals for the men.

Conditions become unbearable

The overcrowded conditions, poor sanitary and kitchen facilities, and overall deprivation made life at that time difficult for the Loyalist prisoners to endure. By November of that year, the conditions had not improved much and a hunger strike was planned to protest against the lack of Government action on the sub-human conditions in the compounds. Many of the prisoners were suffering from 'flu' and had been refusing prison food, surviving on food from relatives, friends and welfare organisations.

Loyalist politicians toured the compounds and one of them, Hugh Smyth, condemned the conditions he had found there:

The only difference between Long Kesh and a Nazi concentration camp is that mass graves are not being dug outside the wire. I cannot stress just how bad conditions in the prison are. Many of those men will never return to normal health and I fear serious consequences could follow continued complacency by the Government. There is very little heat in the huts and the bedding and men's clothes are constantly damp. Because of the cramped conditions, between 7 and 15 men are sleeping in cubicles measuring 10ft by 10ft and the toilets have become blocked up and overflowing. Doctors in the prison have told me that if it was not for the cold weather there would be an epidemic in the prison.

Vanguard Assemblyman, Professor Ken Lindsay, added his own condemnation:

The compounds are like the lower hold of a slave ship. Influenza is rife and one steps over victims on mattresses in the passageways trying to keep warm under overcoats and borrowed

blankets. There is no electricity although security lights shine brilliantly around the edges of the compounds. In the ablution hut of compound 14, the floor is under water. The prisoners can choose either to stand in it barefooted or to wear water-soaked shoes for the remainder of the day. Each hut has a single gas ring for cooking. A study hut, which had been partly dismantled in an army search, had been used piece by piece as fuel for cooking. The fire is in the open air wedged between broken concrete blocks. The prison hospital cannot accommodate patients as it has no heat or beds. An X-ray machine ordered eight weeks ago has not been delivered and the once excellently equipped dental clinic was wrecked during the fire.

Although there was a rebuilding programme set up immediately after the fire, the government acted insensitively towards the prisoners by refusing a request by the Loyalist Prisoners Association to allow 200 beds into the prison. Food parcels were also refused.

We felt that we were being punished for something we hadn't taken part in so it was decided that we would take volunteers for a hunger strike. Twelve of us went on an official hunger strike to highlight the atrocious conditions in which we had to live.

Anything that happened in Long Kesh had repercussions throughout the Province as the Loyalist prisoners could call on widespread support in their own communities where feelings were already running high. Bomb scares, hijackings and street demonstrations were held which resulted in traffic chaos throughout Belfast and this put pressure on the Government to act quickly to the situation in Long Kesh. On 21 November 1974, the Loyalist prisoners ended their hunger strike following developments regarding conditions in the prison.

Yet another 'peace wall'

After the fire a wall was built in the camp dividing the Republican and Loyalist compounds. Segregation was implemented and the Loyalist prisoners were put into the newly rebuilt Phase 5. The prison authorities isolated the Loyalist prisoners to ensure that they were never put in such a vulnerable situation again. But what happened in practice was that a sectarian wall was built which inhibited any co-operation between the factions.

Before the fire, I had been learning the Irish language from some of the Republican prisoners. I used to stand at the wire and they would have shouted across to me in Irish. Once they were moved then that was my Irish lessons hit on the head as we no longer had any contact.

Coping with life inside

Education

The prisoners in Long Kesh had asked for some form of education to be introduced but this was refused at first. However, due to the relative freedom inside the wire, the men found they could organise classes themselves with more ease than had been the case in Crumlin Road Prison. One obvious topic for the classes was basic English skills. As there was only one half-hour visit per week, most prisoners relied on letter-writing to communicate with family and friends.

Writing letters was a very important pastime, and every afternoon time was set aside to write or read letters from home. No one was allowed to talk during this period.

English language classes were set up to help people with grammar and were taught by fellow prisoners who had already passed these examinations.

Some form of education was compulsory in the compounds as it was viewed as part of a programme of self-improvement. Eventually, through agitation they got a study hut where they were able to stock their own supply of books. The type of education arose directly out of the experience and needs of the men themselves.

An ethos was created in the camp in which people wanted to get involved in education and they also wanted to keep themselves physically fit. If you didn't structure your day then you would lie in bed and vegetate.

Eventually an education programme was set up whereby tutors came into the prison at nights to teach different subjects. After more agitation, things gradually improved until they were able to have Open University classes for those who had already attained a reasonable standard of education. Some of the men who had arrived in Long Kesh without any qualifications at all left with university degrees.

Handicrafts

Handicrafts were introduced to the compounds in order to occupy the men's minds, as they didn't have to do any form of prison work. Through much persuasion and arguments with the prison Governor handicraft tools such as sewing machines and leatherwork materials were eventually allowed in.

Handicrafts took off in a big way, it was like a cottage industry. People were making things day and night. That is what I did for the first 7 or 8 years of my sentence. Whatever money I earned I gave it to my family which in turn helped them with making up my parcel or buying more materials.

Leathercraft was very popular among the men and there was a big demand for it from people outside. Purses, wallets, handbags and leather plaques were being produced and sold worldwide. Glass picture painting and soft toy making were also very popular and many homes were adorned with prison handicrafts in the 1970s. The handicraft skills were all passed on throughout the camp.

On some occasions handicraft skills were used to outsmart the prison authorities. As there was only one TV per compound and it was locked in the canteen at 9pm, the prisoners offered to buy their own televisions; the prison authorities refused permission. The prisoners decided, therefore, to make a false TV from bits of wood and metal. At 8.45pm, just before lock-up, they removed the TV from the dining area, put it into one of the huts and set the false TV in its place, so that when the prison officers looked in they thought it was the real TV and locked up. The prisoners got away with this for months until one night, while an American boxing match was being televised, the men forgot themselves and began to cheer. A prison officer heard the commotion and reported back that the men had a TV in the hut. When the prison authorities entered the dining area to check if the TV was missing and saw the false TV they thought they had made a mistake. It was only when they turned one of the knobs that they realised it was false! [Items such as the false TV and other handicrafts were often confiscated by the prison authorities and exhibited in their 'Black Museum'. This was used as part of the training of prison officers.]

Entertainment

'Liquid jollification' or 'uisce ca-ba'

Before the fire, when Loyalist and Republican prisoners were in adjoining compounds, the Republicans would have shouted across the wire to each other in Irish. Neither



Gusty Spence holding an education class

the prison officers nor the Loyalists knew what they were saying but they suspected that some of the exchanges concerned the making of poteen, particularly when they saw bottles being passed over. One Loyalist prisoner who spotted this asked for the recipe and the poteen was thus introduced to the Loyalist compounds.

The screws knew this was happening because of the smell. The wash was supposed to be down for three weeks but we only had one week depending on searches. We put the wash in the drying room, which was where we had the blow heaters. It was put in a black bin with water, yeast, sugar and anything else that broke down. It could have been fruit, potatoes, carrots, jam, sugar or anything at all that broke down. The still consisted of a boiler with a pipe coming out of it that was taken from the showers. The boiler was taken out of one of the huts and was originally used for making tea. The trough that we used for cooling the alcohol down was a fluorescent light shield with a hole in each end for the pipe to go through. A jam-jar was placed underneath to collect the pure alcohol. The alcohol was stored in jars but later we got coke tins, cut a hole in them, syringed the coke out and replaced it with poteen and soldered the tins up again. During a search one day, a screw lifted what he thought was a tin of coke and started to drink it but it was full of poteen and we were caught. We had to devise other ways of hiding it. It was a constant battle of wits.

The poteen was only allowed to be drunk twice a year, at Christmas and the July celebrations.

Christmas in the compounds

Although Christmas was a sad time for many of the men because they were away from their families, they tried to make the most of it by organising concerts and pantomimes. Planning for the concerts began around November and it was a good way to pass the time for those involved in the production of the concerts. Usually about 12 men were delegated the task of organising these events – from deciding the programme, making props, sewing costumes, writing songs, scripts and jokes to rounding up potential Thespians and performers.

This was one of the more difficult aspects of the venture because, as I'm sure you can understand, no-one in their right mind wants to climb up on stage in front of almost a hundred half drunk men to make a complete fool of themselves! But with some gentle persuasion, a little cajoling, a lot of coaxing and pestering and, last but not least, some downright bribery (the promise of some extra poteen for the concert party persuades the best of them), we would finally rustle up enough eejits to put on some sort of show.

After identifying what props and materials were needed, the men had to set about procuring them. This may have entailed strange requests to their visitors.

Imagine the looks you would receive when asking

your parents or a brother or sister to smuggle you in a bra, some tights or a pair of knickers. Better still, imagine the explaining you would have to do if a screw on the way back through the search found them! The tights would be easily enough explained because you could say they were used for jogging, but I think the other items would be slightly more difficult to explain.

The stage was made by the prisoners and erected about a week before the show for dress rehearsals. One of the perks for the concert performers was that they were permitted an extra couple of drinks just prior to the concert beginning. This was supposedly to calm their nerves but sometimes they ended up the worse for wear!

One year, after having one poteen too many, I allowed myself to be talked into doing a somersault on entering the stage. The group was performing a medley of Rod Stewart songs as the opening sequence and I was the one dressed up as the singer. It must have made quite an impression on the audience when I came flying in the side of the stage dressed completely in tartan clothes, a blonde wig and platform boots, to attempt a flip only to land on a table in the first row and nearly break my back!

The special category prisoners were allowed musical instruments in for their Christmas parties such as electric guitars, a drum kit, amplifiers and a microphone. These were supplied by the organisation on the outside.

The concerts had to be seen to be believed! There were all sorts of people who could sing and others who couldn't but thought they could! We had plenty of poteen, providing the screws didn't find it beforehand. In the latter years the screws delighted in searching our huts on Christmas Eve, knowing rightly that if they found it there was nothing we could do. This happened in compound 18 a couple of times but the other compounds rallied round and helped out.

Many of the special category prisoners have fond memories of Christmas in the compounds as there was



Celebrating Christmas

much camaraderie and high-spirited fun that helped alleviate the boredom of being in prison.

For me, Christmas was a really good time but then I had no wife or children to think about. I was too young to realise the effect on my parents.

Sports and hobbies as means of survival

The prisoners realised that in order to protect their physical and mental health then sport was one of the best ways of doing this. Physical training was done in a military fashion with the men lined up in ranks of three doing exercises such as sit-ups and press-ups.

It was hectic in the winter, your hands were stuck to the ground plus you might have been half sleeping! You had to do it unless you had a very good reason not to.

Football was the most popular sport in the compounds and there were often many injuries due to the competitive nature of the players. Snooker and darts were also popular sports and in the summer months, volleyball, tennis and even cricket was played occasionally. Weight training, boxing, body-building and running gave the prisoners an outlet for relieving tensions and developing discipline.

One favourite pastime for the prisoners was decorating their cubicles – making as comfortable and homelike as possible. Some men wallpapered their cubicles, some even had carpet laid down. Pets were kept such as budgies or other small birds. These were kept in aviaries which the prisoners made themselves.

Political education

Seminars were organised on political, military and Irish history. Political arguments were presented relevant to the situation in Northern Ireland and lively discussions ensued. One of Spence's favourite ploys was to take a person and ask: "What are you fighting for, why are you here?"

Not all of the men were particularly interested in these debates but for quite a few there was much reflection and deliberation on the circumstances which led them to prison.

While I was on remand, Gusty used to come to our compound and give us talks on Irish history which was mind-blowing to a lot of us younger ones. We were naive, if you like, we didn't know anything about Irish history. I thought Northern Ireland was always there, we didn't realise that there was a Partition at one time, we were never taught that at school.

As more and more young men were coming into the prison with life sentences, they started to question many things, especially the use of violence.

Whenever one finds oneself in prison for a length of time, everything is questioned, your cause is questioned, you question yourself, you question your society. Loyalist violence was looked upon as a necessity. I would say that the purpose of Loyalist violence was to maintain the Union – simple, cut and dried. But then you began to

question whether violence was the best way to go about it.

The men listened to the news constantly and were allowed to have access to radios, television and newspapers so they were far from divorced from what was going on outside the prison. Soon they were debating and judging what was going on in the political arena.

On Remembrance days in Long Kesh the prisoners paraded and a speech would have been read out to the men by the OC. Some of the speeches were remarkable in the fact that they were calling for an end to the violence. As far back as 1977, Spence was advocating dialogue as opposed to war.

Let the rattle of the oratory and the volley of words be heard instead of bombs and bullets. We need the strategy of political policies in place of battle plans. Let us face one another across the negotiating table as opposed to no man's land.

The men began to draw up documents on political issues that were sent to the Brigade staff on the outside. Not all the prisoners were interested in politics, some just wanted to get on with their sentences, but a small number of men *were* interested and they got involved in political debates and discussions, not only with fellow Loyalists but with Official Republicans. The environment at that time was particularly conducive to fresh political thinking as the UVF were embarking on a voyage of self-discovery. Old certainties were changing and a new, enlightened philosophy was being promoted.

However, there were many on the outside who found this difficult to accept.

Proposals for a 'downtown' outreach

The Camp Council, representing the five main paramilitary groups, had reached important levels of accommodation and co-operation in Long Kesh. Welfare was high on their agenda and a document was drawn up by the Loyalist prisoners: 'Proposals for a Resettlement Programme'. The document detailed the many problems facing prisoners and their families, both during and after long periods of imprisonment. They proposed that a central office be set up in 'downtown' Belfast under the management of an acceptable welfare officer. The Republicans also put forward a document outlining a scheme for resettlement and a central office in Belfast.

The Camp Council, therefore, put together a submission to the Northern Ireland Office calling for a Downtown office which would have the function of providing an after-care and through-care centre for prisoners and their families, involving the welfare groups of all the organisations, with professional social work support. At another level, the Downtown office would have provided a channel for contact and communication between the various personnel of the paramilitary welfare groups providing for Loyalist/Republican paramilitary interaction. The Government however, failed to nurture what could have been a focal point. They destroyed any hopes of dialogue between the paramilitary factions by stopping the plans for the Downtown office and then announcing their intention to end special category status.

Fighting criminalisation

Criminalisation

A few weeks into a ceasefire called by the Provisional IRA on 10 February 1975, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Merlyn Rees, said that 80 detainees would be freed, and he indicated that he would also consider the ending of detention without trial.

On 4 November, with violence continuing and the 'ceasefire' becoming ever more meaningless, Rees announced that 'special category status' was to cease. This was to be part of a policy of 'criminalisation', and each paramilitary prisoner, Loyalist or Republican, convicted of offences committed after 1 March 1976 was now to be treated as an ordinary criminal.

A further extension of the new policy was to be a process unofficially known as 'Ulsterisation'. More authority was to be given to the RUC and the role of the army was to be reduced and emphasis put on 'normal policing' and 'normal police procedures' to deal with terrorism. This approach was also to effect the prisons. Previously, if there was a riot in the prison, the army was used to deal with it but as part of the criminalisation policy a riot squad was formed made up of prison officers. There was a huge recruitment drive for local prison staff.

The decision to withdraw special category status provoked outbreaks of rioting and hijacking in the weeks following its announcement, with Loyalist paramilitary groups protesting the loudest. The murder of a prison warden by the IRA on 8 April 1976 marked the start of a series of such murders by the Provisionals.

The 'H-Blocks'

To implement the new policy, Long Kesh prison was divided into what were essentially two separate prisons: the Maze (Compound) would continue to hold the dwindling number of special category prisoners convicted before the cut-off date, while a new purpose-built prison constructed alongside, the Maze (Cellular), would house all new prisoners. Because the new buildings were designed in the shape of an 'H', they soon became known as the 'H-Blocks'.

The criminalisation policy was to have a devastating impact as far as the prisoners were concerned. Without special category status, the prisoners who were sent to the H-Blocks were debased and degraded by prison staff, who were intent on enforcing the label of 'criminal' on them, with all its attendant implications. On admission to the Blocks, as also was the case in Crumlin Road Prison, the prisoners had to endure degrading ceremonies while body inspections were made, and clothes and personal effects were taken away to be replaced by a uniform and a number. All this was designed to reduce any sense of individuality, and to promote a collective identity with extreme dependence upon the prison and its staff.

Following admission the prisoner was put on a

'committal' wing for four weeks while he was processed. The prison officers occupied key positions at that time and were very much in control. Prison work was another way of stigmatising the prisoners as it was usually demeaning, such as sewing mailbags or continually polishing floors.

I was put on the committal wing for a month and the conditions were very sanitary, it reminded me of a hospital. The prison officers were really in control at that time. Prisoners were made to clean galvanised buckets until you could see your face in them. I was moved on to a working wing and was assigned to a job. There were orderlies' jobs but the majority of prisoners went to the workshops such as metal fabrication, joinery or sewing shops. A lot of us resented having to do the prison work so we sabotaged the workshops, smashed things up and ruined the machines.

'On the blanket'

In September 1976, a Republican prisoner, Kieran Nugent, was the first prisoner to actively protest for special category status. He refused to wear the prison uniform and only had the blanket on his bed to wear. All the protesters who followed this example became known as 'the blanket men'. A small number of Loyalist prisoners also went 'on the blanket', likewise refusing to wear the prison uniform. The Republican prisoners were under IRA orders to join the protest whereas each Loyalist joined the protest in a voluntary capacity.

I joined the blanket protest in 1978. I was charged every 28 days and frog-marched out to stand in front of the Governor. When asked why I was on protest the answer I always gave was – 'I am a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force: I've been tried and sentenced in a political court; I am a political prisoner and my motivation for any acts were purely political therefore I want the right to be acknowledged as a political prisoner.'

The protesting prisoners were kept locked up in their cells 24 hours a day, only allowed out to empty their chamber pot and to have a wash. They had no books, papers, radio or TV, no recreation, no association and no exercise except walks up and down the tiny cell. Visits were only permitted if the prisoner donned the prison uniform and they were allowed one visit a month.

I trained in the cell and worked out quizzes to pass the time. I wrote them down on sheets of toilet paper. Sometimes some of the boys on the wing would have left newspapers hidden in places and I would have smuggled them back to my cell.

Whereas the role of the prison officers in the Compounds was confined to guarding, escorting and searching, prison officers in the H-Blocks were in full control of the prisoners. Their policy appeared to be one of instilling fear, 24 hours a day, which in turn filled the Loyalist blanket men with a deep anger at the abuse and injustices that were meted out.

The screws put a fire hose on me for ten minutes in the middle of winter in the freezing cold. They laughed as they did this. The ringleader involved was a man from my own district. As well as the strip searches we had to endure the 'mirror searches' because a lot of contraband was being smuggled in. We had to squat over this mirror while they looked inside you. If we refused this then they beat us! As a punishment I was denied any access to the outside world for three months – no letters or visits!

Double isolation

The Loyalist protesters suffered the deprivations of the blanket protest comparatively unsupported and isolated. They felt badly let down by fellow Loyalist prisoners in the other, 'conforming' H-blocks. The Republican prisoners had the support of their communities, families, and church and when their protest later developed into the

1981 hunger strikes, they gained international support.

The Loyalist prisoners, however, faced a great dilemma. They feared that their actions would be seen as giving support to the Provisional IRA. Excluding a few staunch friends and families of the protesting prisoners, the wider Unionist community offered little support for the protesters, and there was a general lack of interest from their political representatives and clergy.

Nevertheless, in April 1978 a majority of Loyalist prisoners went on the blanket for a number of weeks. However, the leader of one of the Loyalist factions ordered his men off the blanket and the other factions had little choice but to end their protest.

Impact of the 'dirty protest'

The Republican prisoners began a 'dirty protest' in March 1978 when they refused to wash, clean out their cells and empty chamber pots. The Loyalists were not involved in the dirty protest in the H-blocks [although Loyalists in Magilligan went on a 'dirty protest' in 1982: *see page 29*] but it did impact on the Loyalist blanket men.

Integration of the prisoners was a central strategy of the Government's criminalisation policy as it involved breaking up the solidarity and destroying their system of discipline and authority which was prevalent among the special category prisoners. The Loyalist blanket men



Magilligan Prison 1982

were put on the same cell wings as protesting Republican prisoners. During the dirty protest, Republican prisoners emptied their chamber pots out the doors of their cells and the prison officers were responsible for mopping it up.

The screws came round with big squeezie mops and they always made sure that they squeezed it into our cells. I used to get up every morning to find a pool of urine half way up my cell. When the screws opened the door at 8am to give me my breakfast, I just got up and walked through it to fetch the food. I wasn't going to let them see that anything like that annoyed me.

The prison officers in the H-blocks were instructed to view the prisoners as criminals and were brutal in their treatment of them. Inevitably, the inhumane treatment of the protesting prisoners did in fact forge a deep sense of shared grievance between the prisoners. Although the Loyalists and Republicans were bitter enemies, they were both being brutalised, physically and psychologically, by the prison staff who then became their common enemy.

When the Republicans had to go to court, that was the excuse for the screws to give them a forced bath for health reasons. I remember being brought to a cellblock where two lads were getting a forced bath. I couldn't see but I could hear what was going on. I heard the cell doors opening and the next thing I heard was the big intakes of breath, which was the punches in the stomach, somebody was being held down, and then the thumping, the slapping and then the splashing and screams. I knew they were being dropped into a bath of scalding water. The screws had deck scrubbers and I had to listen to the degrading comments while they washed the two lads. I was physically sick and revolted.

Ironically, the prison officers were as much prisoners as those that they were locking up. They lived in fear of reprisals from the paramilitaries and a large number were actually killed because of their jobs.

Contradictions

There were many contradictions for the Loyalist protesters. Unionists on the outside could not understand why Loyalists were on the blanket protest – they were seen as siding with Republicans. Even some of their families did not support them. They did not have the same support or solidarity or publicity machinery behind them that the Republicans could harness.

My mother came to visit me and although my family supported me financially, in a sense, they did see me as

a criminal. I was brought up to respect law and order. I had believed that the police and civil servants didn't tell lies. Republicans don't have that problem; their families and their communities see them as heroes. I was fighting to remain British and yet men wearing the crown on their uniform were locking me up. The Republicans used to hit me with that; they don't want you! But my sense of Britishness is my sense of values, it is my attitude and my whole ethos.

By being on the blanket I lost a lot of things. Because my wife didn't support me it ended up damaging my marriage and things like that, but in other ways it gave me time to think and reflect. I found it easier to cope being locked up 24 hours a day rather than having to fit in with the drudgery of ordinary prison life and accept the fact that the system had you beat. I knew that I had made choices, even though they were limited choices, but I still made the choice even if it was just to say 'no' and then get a dig in the face for it.

On 1 March 1981, five years to the day that 'special category status' had ended, Bobby Sands, OC of the Provisional IRA in the Maze, began a hunger strike. The following day the Republican 'dirty protest' was called off to focus attention on the new confrontation. Following the deaths of Sands and nine other Republican hunger-strikers, the hunger strike was eventually called off on 3 October. Three days later the Secretary of State announced changes in the prison regime: all prisoners would be entitled to wear their own clothes; 50% of lost remission would be restored after a prisoner had conformed to prison rules for three months; association would be permitted in adjacent wings of the H-Blocks; more visits would be allowed.



Magilligan Prison 1982

The struggle for Segregation

Separation

As far back as January 1977, Loyalist prisoners were advocating segregation in Ulster's prison. In a statement smuggled out of Long Kesh and signed by the five paramilitary leaders, they put forward arguments for and against segregation, to explain the issue to the public who were confused by the controversy surrounding it.

It is unreasonable to suggest that prisoners who have had little or no contact with each other in normal life, and have opposed each other in extreme violence on our streets, can suddenly live in peace and harmony with one another, simply because they find themselves in jail. Separate adolescence, separate places of entertainment, separate ghettos, separate schools and in many cases, separate employment environs – and then out of the blue thrown together in jail!

What do the Government expect or did they anticipate the violence between Loyalist and Republican and salve their consciences by thinking it is only the Irish having a go at one another! If integration is to come about it must be sought by the prisoners themselves, and it must be a gradual process, just like what Mr Mason is trying to do with the politicians. Was it not he who declared the people of Ulster must help themselves and come together? Are prisoners not people?

In Long Kesh we, Republicans and Loyalists, have attempted to bridge the gap by engaging in constructive dialogue without conceding principles, but now the Government no longer permits our representatives to meet and discuss our mutual problems – what does the Government want exactly?

In this camp we have a 'no-conflict' policy in operation firmly agreed and reaffirmed from time to time. And for almost 5 years that peace has held despite being firmly tested on several occasions. As a result not one sectarian blow has been struck one upon the other. The prison authorities played no part in making the peace except to accommodate a series of face-to-face meetings. It is the most natural thing in the world for people with different political, cultural and religious philosophies and affiliations to cling together in time of adversity.

Many people had been surprised by the absence of sectarian trouble in Long Kesh but the special category prisoners, through their Camp Council, had made regular and mutually beneficial contact up until 1976 when the British Government decided that there would be no more co-operation between the various factions.

Tension increases

Once the paramilitary leaderships were denied their former mechanisms for co-operation it became increasingly difficult for them to enforce discipline and prevent sectarian hostility from periodically erupting. And the risk of such occurrences were not confined to the Maze.

Unionist MP John Carson highlighted conditions in Crumlin Road Prison in 1978 when four Loyalist remand prisoners had to be taken to the prison hospital after being starved in their cells for 14 days. They had refused to leave their cells for fear of Republican attacks. He asked:

I want to know why the Government is building separate Protestant and Catholic housing estates and at the same time is forcing Loyalists on remand to share accommodation with Republican prisoners in Crumlin Road.

For remand prisoners Crumlin Road Prison was a difficult experience.

When I went to Crumlin Road Prison in 1980 on remand, it was a particularly bad time because the Government at that time had introduced forced integration, trying to get Loyalists and Republicans to co-exist beside each other. The Republicans and Loyalists were operating a system whereby they had 'day about' – one day we were locked up for 23 hours while the Republicans had their association and the next day we would have the association and they were locked up. It was a sort of voluntary segregation if you like.

In the Maze, during the Republican hunger strike of 1980, six Loyalists began refusing food, demanding not only the return of special category status but total segregation from Republicans. This action put their leaders on the outside in a difficult position, for while they felt they had a duty to support their members on hunger strike at the same time they were worried about being seen as swinging in behind the Republican hunger strikers. Unionist politicians were also put in an awkward situation for many of them had repeatedly warned the British Government that concessions to the Republicans would bring hostile and violent reactions. In the event, the fast was called off after one week following appeals from church leaders. The six Loyalists involved in the fast said they were offering the Northern Ireland Office the opportunity to resolve the twin issues of special status and segregation from Republican prisoners.

'Wreck Up'

During the Republican protests, Loyalist prisoners were the majority in the conforming wings of the H-Blocks. Unwritten rules were set up for the benefit of both sets of prisoners otherwise there would have been a lot of friction

and fighting. As the Republicans came off their protest, however, they eventually became the majority on the wings and threats were issued towards the outnumbered Loyalist prisoners.

On our wing there were only six Loyalist prisoners, the rest were all Republicans. It was noticeable that the Republican prisoners, who had been on the 'conforming' wings with us, and whom we had treated quite well when they were in the minority, stopped talking to us and withdrew from us now they were in the majority.

The volatile situation gradually worsened.

Life became very difficult, there were all sorts of rumours, there had been assaults, there was talk of people being killed and the tension was sky high.

By September 1982 the situation inside the prison was extremely serious. Nevertheless, the prison authorities were determined to depict the prison system as integrated, as part of their criminalisation policy.

I was moved along with another UVF prisoner, to a wing with 28 Republican prisoners, we were the only two Loyalist prisoners on the wing. We were both put in the one cell. It was a very tense time as we had to share the canteen and wash room and there was a lot of hostility from the Republican prisoners.

With Loyalists outnumbered on the wings, many of the Loyalist prisoners were locked in their cells for their own safety, unable to eat in the canteen or have association. By October 1982, the situation in the prison had become so unbearable that a concerted decision was taken by the Loyalist prisoners to smash up their cells, wreck everything in them, in order to be moved on to the punishment block away from the Republican prisoners.

We had what we called a 'wreck up' when we began to fight for segregation. There were too many of us for all of us to be put on the punishment wings so the prison authorities took the beds out of the cells, leaving just the mattress on the floor in order to make it similar to the punishment wings.

The situation had become unbearable so every Loyalist in the jail, on one night, wrecked all their cells, busted everything up and the authorities then had to move all the Loyalists out of the wings because the Republicans were essentially the conforming prisoners and we were the protesters. They took us to what was known as the 'punishment wings' and we were charged with the offences and we refused to conform. In actual fact, what we ended up with was de facto segregation but the Government wouldn't admit to it, they said that the Loyalist prisoners were simply on the punishment wings.



Loyalist prisoners on the roof of Crumlin Road Prison, December 1981.

For wrecking their cells in order to achieve a safety that the prison staff could not provide, the men were punished. They lost 10 days remission every month, 14 days loss of association every month, loss of radio, tuck shop, education and restriction on letters and the loss of one visit a month.

Roof-top Protests

In 1981 Loyalist remand prisoners in Crumlin Road jail held a roof-top protest after a meeting between Lord Gowrie, the then Minister of State, and the Ulster Committee for Loyalist Prisoners Rights. The Government had failed to respond to their grievances which were:

- A set of rules governing remand prisoners
- Segregation from a Republican majority
- More association within the wing
- Some access to television and radio
- Proper exercise facilities

The Loyalist remand prisoners took four prison officers hostage along with thirteen IRA prisoners and stated that if there were no moves made towards resolving the situation then they would burn down their wing. When assurances were given that an investigation would be instigated concerning conditions in the remand wing the prisoners, after debate, returned to their cells. No one was injured in the dispute.

Conditions, however, did not improve and friction

between prison staff and prisoners continued with the men being locked up in their cells for 22 hours a day. Many felt that it was only a matter of time before the situation would explode and prisoners would be killed.

Support grows

The demand for segregation attracted a good deal of support outside the prisons. Supporters dug up golf and bowling greens, carving slogans in the turf. Several local councils passed resolutions calling for segregation and senior Unionist MPs and Assembly representatives took up the issue, although there was criticism of the failure of some Official Unionists to back the prisoners. The Committee on the Administration of Justice and NIACRO adopted the view that separation was the proper policy if prisoners were hostile to each other, while arguing that opportunities for integration should also exist.

To most people, it was a matter of common sense that serious trouble would follow if prisoners of conflicting factions were forced to associate in prison.

The Government were intent on forcing an integration policy which was quite ridiculous at the time – when people outside chose to live separately and they were expecting people who had been trying to kill each other a week before, to come into prison and lead a normal coexistence beside each other!



Loyalist prisoners on the roof of Crumlin Road Prison, July 1982.

For the Government, the prisoners' demands ran counter to the objective of criminalisation and control. Segregation allowed paramilitary organisations to act in a more cohesive and effective way and the Government was intent on fragmenting the prisoners' social and political unity.

Repercussions of the Maze escape

In September 1983, there was a mass escape from H7 in the Maze of Republican prisoners and this reinforced the Government's arguments for integration. But it also had other repercussions for the Loyalist prisoners. After the escape all handicraft facilities and equipment were withdrawn from the prison. Five months after the escape, 170 Loyalist prisoners formally ended their two-year protest.

The prison authorities then decided to forcefully integrate Loyalist and Republican prisoners in the Maze. They opened a new integrated block and started to populate it with mixed numbers of Republicans and Loyalists. However, as soon as the men confronted each other they started to fight and the prison officers had to forcefully separate them.

I was on an opposite wing and witnessed what was going on. I never felt tension like it, it was so humiliating, they were putting men in together knowing that they were going to practically kill each other. They eventually had to abandon their experiment and they didn't try it again. We got our de facto segregation.

The worst fears become reality

On 24 November 1991, a Loyalist remand prisoner was killed and 8 others injured by an explosion caused by the IRA in the prison's dining area. A second prisoner died from his injuries 4 days later. In December 1992 there was a rocket attack at an area of Crumlin Road Prison which Loyalists believed Republicans were using at the time but no one was injured. Loyalists claimed it was in retaliation for the bomb which killed their two colleagues the year before.

Asking questions

The ongoing prison protests had only served to worsen the poor relationship which existed between prisoners and prison officers. Ironically, while Republican prisoners took such enmity for granted, it constantly caused problems for Loyalist prisoners, many of whom found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that they were being locked up by the very people they thought they were defending.

When I went into prison I knew why I was there. There was a reason and a purpose to why I got involved and ended up in prison. What I found difficult to deal with was that I had been arrested and imprisoned by a police force that the Republican movement was saying was working alongside Loyalist paramilitaries. Yet I was a Loyalist paramilitary, lifted and imprisoned by that same police force. I was being locked up by men from my own area who were telling me that they were 'SuperProds' and would be there to fight if it came to a Doomsday situation, and yet every night they were locking my cell door.

However, this questioning rarely developed into anything political. The environment in the Blocks was not the same as in the compounds; it was far from conducive to such a development. Most of the prisoners' energies were tied up with trying to find ways of beating the system. Furthermore, there was a constant tension which actually militated against any personal reassessment of the use of violence as a way of solving problems.

I had begun to go through a phase whereby I was reflecting upon my situation and the use of violence. I wanted to move away from a confrontational way of doing things but it didn't work in the Blocks because of the policy that was being enacted by the system. It created a lot of bitterness, resentment, anger and frustration. It seemed to me that the more I tried to move away from violent attitudes the more the prison system undermined it by their policies, their lies, their pettiness and their vindictiveness.

'On the Boards'

Solitary confinement was the usual punishment for breaking prison rules and many Loyalist prisoners would have endured spells 'on the boards' throughout their sentence. They were locked in a cell containing a board which was fixed to the ground and served as a bed, a concrete slab which served as a table, and a concrete block which served as a stool. A Bible and a chamber pot were the only other items in the cell.

I was put 'on the boards' on many occasions! You were only allowed one hour exercise a day. I would have tried to sleep away the hours or meditated a lot. You weren't allowed to wear shoes, you had to leave your shoes outside the cell door. Whenever you were allowed outside the cell for exercise, they gave you a pair of plimsolls with no laces in them. They were always about a size 12 and I only wore a size 7! There was no heat and there was an air vent at the bottom of the cell, on the outside wall, so it was really cold.

Punishment diets were imposed on prisoners for disciplinary offences even though these 'bread and water' diets had been abolished elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Prisoners were often put 'on the boards' without having done anything. Newly sentenced prisoners coming onto the Blocks had to break a prison rule in order to get onto the Loyalist wings. This was regarded as the norm by prison staff and in some cases the prisoner didn't even have to go as far as to break a rule.

To get on the Loyalist wings the usual thing was to throw water on the floor, throw a cup of tea down or maybe you slopped out on the floor. In my case, they put me in a cell until the transport was arranged and they said: 'we'll say you slopped out under the door', and I agreed. So I didn't really have to do anything although I was charged with it and put 'on the boards' for three days.

Armagh, Magilligan and Maghaberry

Armagh Jail

In the 1970s when the number of prisoners increased as a result of the deteriorating political situation, the number of female political prisoners held in Armagh Jail also increased, from two in 1971 to more than 100. In 1976 a third but smaller cellblock, known as C-wing, was opened in one of the prison yards. It was a 2-storied concrete building with 30 cells. C-wing was where the special category prisoners were held. 130 women and 130 men were accommodated at the height of the conflict.

Nationalist women have not only played an active role in community protests from the early Civil Rights days, and later came to play an active role within the Republican movement, but the Nationalist community's legacy of conflict with state authority meant that Catholic women have a tradition of struggle with which they can identify. Nationalist mythology draws on images of the eternal suffering of women, such as 'Mother Ireland' as a metaphor for what Nationalists perceive to be Ireland's oppression. There is no equivalent role for Protestant women who have remained much less visible. Furthermore, there have been a significant number of Republican women prisoners over the years but very few Loyalist female prisoners. Hence, whereas Loyalist men had solidarity in numbers to help sustain them, Loyalist female prisoners had to cope with the prison experience feeling very isolated.

I often wondered what prison was like, it was always in my head that I could be sent to prison. But it is different for a man than it is for a woman because I was entirely on my own. The men had strength in numbers but in Armagh jail I had to stand and fight on my own. I always had to be on my guard as there were about 37 Republican girls over to the right of me. I spent most of the time on my own.

Armagh Jail closed in December 1986 and the prisoners were moved to Maghaberry. [Crumlin Road Prison was also to close, on 1 April 1996.]

Magilligan Prison

Magilligan was adapted as an interim jail from an existing British army camp following the introduction of internment in 1971. The camp was situated on a sandy spit about 75 miles from Belfast in County Londonderry. It was then used to house special category prisoners in the same style as Long Kesh. There were two Phases in the camp and each Phase had 4 compounds, which were known by letters rather than numbers. Although the UVF compounds were run along the same command structures, discipline was not as strict as it was in the Long Kesh compounds.

Magilligan was used to house mainly short-term prisoners, although after the fire in Long Kesh a lot of men were transferred to Magilligan due to the

overcrowding. Magilligan compounds closed in 1977 when the special category prisoners were transferred to Long Kesh.

After the fire there was massive overcrowding and so the prison authorities asked for volunteers to go up to Magilligan camp. I could have written the names down in advance of those who were to volunteer. Some of them only went there to get away from the strict regime. They made a hell for themselves up there; people were knifed and beaten. That would never have been permitted under the regime in Long Kesh.

In 1980 three H-blocks were developed at Magilligan, identical to those at the Maze prison. Magilligan was used to house a mixture of short-term sentenced prisoners and 'medium-risk' long-termers approaching the end of their sentences.

Due to forced integration of the prisoners, tension was always high and physical clashes between the two sets of prisoners were a regular occurrence, often resulting in considerable injury. When clashes occurred the prisoners were punished by the prison administration. The prisoners had weeks or months of remission withdrawn, they were put into solitary confinement, lost privileges such as food parcels, visits, tuck shop and reading materials. It may have looked like an enlightened policy of bringing people together, but in practice it was a single-minded policy of driving them further and further apart.

Magilligan is a remote place and families and friends could not always make the weekly visit. Visiting conditions gave rise to further resentment when, just before Christmas 1983, visitors were no longer allowed to sit alongside those whom they were visiting. Instead, the two parties had to sit at opposite sides of a very broad table which reduced physical contact, something that is very important to prisoners and their families. This was a serious issue for both Republican and Loyalist prisoners and they refused visits for two weeks after Easter Sunday in 1986.

Just before Christmas 1986, open visits were introduced at Magilligan and in spite of the fact that both prisoners and their families found them unsatisfactory, the open visits continued. There was a three-month boycott of these new visiting arrangements.

Segregation protests in Magilligan in 1982 resulted in Loyalist prisoners engaging in a 'dirty protest' and the smearing of walls with excreta. A statement in a Loyalist magazine explained the actions of the Loyalist prisoners in H3 of Magilligan;

We realise that fouling our cells disgusted many of our fellow Loyalists on the outside, in fact we ourselves were sickened and very saddened to have to stop so low as this type of action but at the time the protest began we felt we were being ignored by everyone and had no other choice.

The Prison Governor was determined to force us to the dining halls, yards and wash-houses with Republicans; we had no choice at that time but to refuse the pressure. Republicans had and still have superior numbers. They made it clear to all concerned that any Loyalist who entered the canteen, etc., would immediately be attacked. Our response to this threat was to refuse to leave our cells. We were denied permission to carry our food to the cells and with the exception of one meal every 28 hours we had no food at all. Furthermore, we were denied the use of the ablutions area to empty our chamber pots and rubbish bins. The prison Governor chose to ignore our dilemma and we felt we had to take steps necessary to ensure proper and humane treatment. This resulted in the dirty protest, at that particular moment in time, the only avenue left.

The prison authorities agreed to meet some of their demands and the 'dirty protest' ended. The prison hit the headlines in 1985 when once again Loyalist prisoners claimed to be under threat from Republicans. The authorities were quick to point out that although de facto segregation existed in the Maze, the situation at Magilligan was quite different.

In June 1986 two Loyalist prisoners went on hunger strike to protest over conditions and lack of segregation, with more prisoners joining the fast at weekly intervals. The hunger strike was called off after the Governor said he would investigate the claims, but conditions did not improve. There was a major disturbance in March 1987 when over 100 prisoners began smashing fixtures and televisions in nine of the prison's 12 wings. Loyalists supported the disorder with action on the streets of Belfast.

In April 1987 there was a four-day siege in the prison when Loyalist prisoners held a prison officer and a Catholic prisoner hostage in protest over segregation. In the same month, 3 Loyalist prisoners staged another hunger strike demanding segregation.

Maghaberry

Maghaberry, Northern Ireland's newest prison, was opened at the end of 1985. Maghaberry is situated about three miles from the Maze in County Antrim on a wartime airfield. It was built to the same specifications as Frankland prison, near Durham. The layout can be likened to a brown-brick university, with a series of open quadrangles, surrounded by 2-storey cell-blocks and concrete covered walkways. The prisoners are in four 'Houses' – Lagan, Bann, Foyle and Erne – built on a hollow square plan with 108 single cells in each, divided into six units of 18. It is the first prison in Ireland to have integral sanitation, i.e. a toilet and wash-hand basin in every cell.

The aim of the authorities was to run a 'mixed' conforming prison unlike the Maze or Magilligan. For some prisoners, it was a personal choice to move to Maghaberry from the H-Blocks.

It was great to lock the door at night and know you had your own toilet. It was great to have access to open spaces. I could look out my

window at a vast expanse of football field and grass – there wasn't the corrugated iron and razor wire.

It was a change for me. The H-Blocks were colourless, everything was grey and I felt I was getting 'dis-cultured'. The furthest you could walk in any direction was about 25 yards, the length of the corridor. Maghaberry was like a breath of fresh air to me. For the first time since my imprisonment I could walk on grass.

I was doing an Open University degree in the Maze and I had come to a stage where the prison authorities were no longer willing to provide the facilities in the Maze for me to continue with it. I spoke to the UVF command staff and decided that as I had only one year of my degree left to do, I would go to Maghaberry for the final period of my sentence in order to finish my degree.

It must be pointed out that the prison authorities used the issue of education in a manipulative way. Before the segregation protest a lot of the prisoners at the Maze had embarked on some form of education, from remedial classes right up to A-levels and degrees. Once the protests started, however, the education privileges were withdrawn. And although educational facilities were reintroduced once the protest ended, education was no longer seen as a priority and resources were put into security and other areas. When Maghaberry opened it became prison policy to encourage those interested in education to go to the new prison where educational resources were much better.

If you went to Maghaberry then you had to give up your segregation. There was a policy called 'Light and Dark'. Maghaberry was the 'light' and the Maze was the 'dark'. Maghaberry had computer suites and art facilities. If you asked about courses in the Maze the Governor always said, 'go to Maghaberry'.

Eventually the prison authorities at Maghaberry set up what was known as a 'lifer's block' for those who had served over 10 years. And although both Republicans and Loyalists were integrated in the one block there was little tension.

Once we got a block of our own for the long-termers – the men from a political background – there was very little conflict. You are part of an organisation and the discipline that had been instilled never leaves you therefore we were always able to handle conflict.

Politically-motivated prisoners in Maghaberry tended to stick together and as most of them were there through their own choice, they were able to reflect and debate with Republican prisoners, some of them for the first time.

There were a lot of debates going on. That is probably how I came to realise that I had a lot more in common with some Republicans than I had with 'conventional Unionists' on the outside. I actually made friends with a lot of Republicans when I was in Maghaberry, although I never followed it up when I got out.

Lifers

Lifers

At the end of 1968 there were eleven 'lifers' in prison in Northern Ireland. Ten years later there were 221 life-sentenced prisoners and by March 1987 the number had risen to 449. The overwhelming majority of them have been imprisoned as a result of the political conflict.

A sentence of life imprisonment is the compulsory punishment for murder and it gives the state the power to detain someone in prison for the remainder of his or her life. However, lifers are eventually released on licence which have a number of conditions attached. They are subject to recall at any time, even if they have not committed another offence. A life sentence, once imposed, always hangs over a person and can continue to have a legal effect after release.

Before the Life Sentence Review Board (LSRB) was set up in 1983, the cases of those sentenced to life were reviewed periodically on their individual merits so that the possibility of eventual release on licence could be considered.

Prior to the Good Friday Agreement, life-sentenced prisoners were reviewed by the LSRB. The NIO Memorandum of 1985 on life-sentenced prisoners said they were to be normally reviewed by the LSRB after 10 years. Those convicted of murder who were under the age of 18 at the date of the commission of their crime could be sentenced to detention at the Secretary of State's pleasure and were commonly known as 'SOSP' or 'pleasure' prisoners. These prisoners were reviewed after eight years.

The LSRB was chaired by the Permanent Under-Secretary of the NIO and included other senior NIO officials, a Principle Medical Officer of the DHSS, a consultant psychiatrist and a senior probation officer. The review programme began with the prisoner being advised that his case was to be reviewed and he was invited to make a written submission to the review board. But he could not appear at the review in person and no-one was allowed to appear on his behalf. The prisoner was therefore unable to challenge the reports of the prison officers and prison governors who were usually averse to the prisoner's political and religious beliefs.

When these secret reviews were completed the prisoner was then informed of the outcome. If release was not recommended he was simply told when his case would be reviewed next. No explanation was given as to why the release had been refused. When a prisoner does not get a release date he may have feelings of despair and anger, as his hopes will have been dashed. The families also go through the same feelings of despair and resentment but it is often left to them to console the prisoner.

If the Board decided to recommend release, the case was forwarded to the judge who tried the case originally or the Lord Chief Justice and the Prisoners Minister. The

Minister had the right to overturn the LSRB's decisions without having to explain why. During that period, which could last up to nine months, neither the prisoner nor his family was kept informed as to the review's progress or whether or not it was still taking place. The psychological effects of being starved of information could be devastating.

Nobody knew what to expect. You got people in for the same offences and maybe one would get knocked back five years and the other knocked back two years. No matter what type of behaviour you had in prison or the part you played in the offence it didn't seem to matter.

If a provisional release date was approved by the Minister, it was scheduled for one year ahead and the prisoner was moved to Crumlin Road Prison for the 'work-out scheme' (which many prisoners considered did little towards helping them reintegrate). Leaving prison and ones comrades is a time of conflicting emotions: the possibility of release is what every prisoner longs for but at the same time it is difficult to leave good friends behind.

When I was told I had been granted a provisional release date it was exciting in the sense that I was moving towards release but at the same time I was leaving good friends behind that I had grown really close to, closer than my own family. I can remember them leaving me to the gate, they were only allowed to go so far with me, there was tears inside me but my macho image didn't allow me to show the tears.

As part of the Good Friday Agreement, mechanisms have been put in place to provide for an accelerated programme for the release of prisoners convicted of scheduled offences. The programme is for those prisoners whose organisations have signed up to a complete ceasefire.

Although the Government will never admit to having 'political prisoners', the reality is that in Northern Ireland there are distinctions in law between politically-motivated prisoners and others. Section 66 of the NI Emergency Provisions Act 1991 defines 'terrorism' as 'the use of violence for political ends'. The Act provides a list, or schedule, of offences which, if they are deemed to have been terrorist-related, are tried in non-jury Diplock Courts with altered rules of evidence under emergency legislation. If an offence is listed in the schedule to the Act and is a non-political crime, it can be de-scheduled and tried before a jury. People who are convicted of so-called 'terrorist offences' are therefore recognised in the law as being politically motivated.

On 6 August 1998 applications to the Sentence Review Commission were delivered. More than 400 prisoners have applied for early release, both Loyalist and Republican. As this publication goes to press the first of those releases have begun.

Families

Families and relationships

Loyalist prisoners, unlike Republicans, have had no long tradition of the experience of imprisonment within their culture therefore for many of the prisoners and their families, imprisonment comes as a totally foreign experience and the impact is most profound, particularly for those experiencing it for the first time.

Imprisonment does not only effect the individual concerned; it has a devastating effect on the whole family and the wives in particular. It is important to bear in mind that imprisonment presents a very real crisis for the family involved, and one which begins from the point of arrest and continues throughout the sentence and even after release. Having to cope with the shock of imprisonment can be a very traumatic experience for family members.

For many family members the arrest of their loved one can almost be like a bereavement but even more difficult to cope with as the person is still alive, and although there is a sense of loss, there is no mourning process. For many, it can take years to come to terms with, especially for those whose loved ones are facing a life sentence. The indeterminacy of a life sentence can be overwhelming for both prisoner and his family.

It is the not knowing when he will get out is the worst part. If there was a date in the future then it would give us something to look forward to.

Without a release date it is difficult to make plans for the future and this can give rise to unrealistic hopes as well as fears. Hundreds of families have 'served time outside' the prisons while the men 'serve time inside'.

Imprisonment puts enormous strains on relationships and quite often marriages or relationships can break up. Prisoners' wives can live a long, lonely existence with only the visit to look forward to. Quite a number of marriages do survive despite the many problems involved.

I knew it was going to be hard, he told me on the first visit not to wait for him but I knew he didn't really mean it. I wanted to wait for him even though I realise that I'm giving up 12 years of my life too.

There is always the worry that when the prisoner is released then the relationship will not survive. In many cases the wife has had to change and become more independent as she has been the main head of the household. The wives have the responsibility for keeping their children cheerful in order that visits go well. They feel that they must cheer him up too: he may be depressed and get into trouble within the prison.

The women have had to take on the roles as one-parent families with all the poverty characteristic of such families but at the same time, she still has the prisoner to care for.

[More about the difficulties faced by families is detailed in EPIC research document No.2]

Postscript

The closure of the compounds

By 1988 there were 92 prisoners with special category status remaining in Long Kesh compounds. On 5 June 1988 they were moved out of the compounds into the H-blocks of the Maze. Prior to the move negotiations went on between the prisoners and NIO officials. The prisoners stipulated that they wanted conditions similar to what they had in the compounds and a review process that would look favourably on them. No guarantees were given but they were all given reviews between June 1988 and December 1988. Most of the special category prisoners were released within two to three years. The last one to be released was in 1992.

The H-Blocks

Life in the H-Blocks now is much the same as it was in the compounds before special category status was removed. All prisoners wear their own clothes, they are not required to work, access to visits and letters has increased, and in 1995 telephones were introduced to the wings. Since 1994, cell doors have been left open 24 hours a day and the prisoners have free association within their wings and in the adjacent wings.

The prisoners spend most of their time on their respective wings and adjoining exercise yards, only leaving the wing to attend visits, see the doctor and for access to the football pitches. The prisoners have very little contact with the prison officers. The only time they come onto the wings is at 8.30am in order to do a headcount. Searches of the wings, which were always a contentious issue, have become less frequent due to the ongoing release process.

Although prison conditions have improved steadily over the years, living in an unnatural, harsh environment will have detrimental consequences for many prisoners and their families throughout their life.

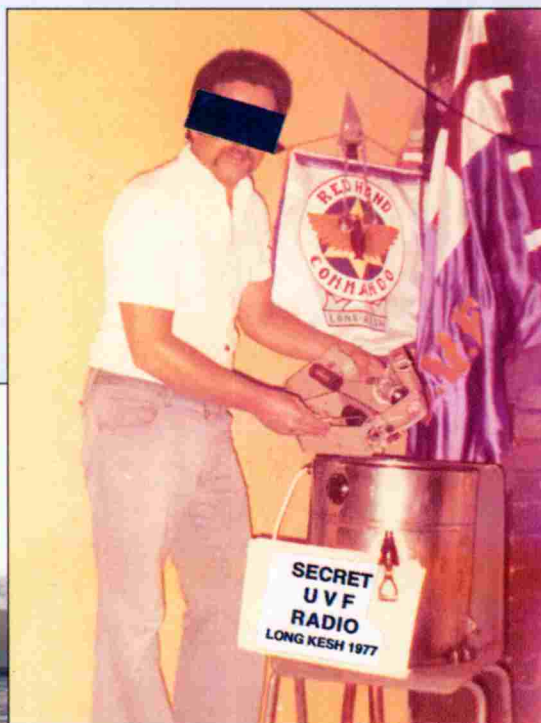
The Maze is the only prison in Northern Ireland in which male prisoners are segregated by paramilitary affiliation. The prisoners still retain a formal command structure, and although the prison authorities do not officially recognise this command structure, they credit the OCs of the various organisations with restoring order and co-operation with the staff.

The OCs and their camp councils are influential men in wider society too. Their views are fed into the political process and their release is seen as a precondition for lasting peace.



During the entire period of our present 'Troubles' the conflict which afflicted Northern Ireland was mirrored by constant strife within the prisons, focusing on the struggle for better conditions, political status and ultimately segregation. This publication is a history of the prison experience from the perspective of Loyalist politically-motivated prisoners, partly based on interviews conducted with former prisoners.

This series of research documents produced by EPIC is aimed at creating a greater awareness of prisoner-related issues among the general public, in the hope that it will contribute, even in a small way, to the healing process which is at last beginning to take place in this society.



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