



News Update From Ireland 7 August 1996

ANNIVERSARY OF INTERNMENT-25 YEARS

Internment was introduced August 9, 1971. Within the first 24 hours 342 people were arrested as British soldiers raided hundreds of nationalist homes across the North. Not a single loyalist was arrested let alone held. The only two Protestant internees were a member of Peoples' Democracy and a Republican supporter. Within four months the number of internees rose to almost 650. Within the next three years that figure was to reach the staggering 1,500 people held without trial in Long Kesh internment camp alone. In nationalist areas, reaction to the introduction of internment was swift and sustained. Within hours women in nationalist areas came out onto the streets and rattled dustbin lids alerting their neighbors to imminent raiding. Barricades were thrown up in nationalist areas across the Six counties. By August 13, Belfast, Derry and Newry were in a state of open insurrection. 26,000 tenants embarked on a rent and rate strike and 130 nationalist councilors withdrew from local government. August 16, 8,000 workers staged a one day protest strike in Derry and on September 12, over 15,000 people attended an anti-internment rally in Belfast's Casement Park. Internment ended December 5, 1975. To date the British government has not removed the option of internment from current Emergency Provisions legislation.

THE FACES OF INTERNMENT TISH HOLLAND: FINDING A VOICE

In February 1973, "Saint Valentine's Day wouldn't you know," 17-year-old Tish Holland was the youngest women to be interned in Armagh jail. "I wasn't the first, Liz Maskey nee McKee, was interned two weeks earlier." Initially, women internees in Armagh were segregated away from sentenced Republican POW's but as their numbers swelled the authorities conceded to the internee's demand to join their comrades in A2 wing. Now in her early forties, Tish identifies her early experience of Internment as a defining moment in her continuing history as a political and community activist. In 1985 Tish was elected as a Sinn Fein Councillor for Belfast, sweeping to victory with a first count vote of 2,256. A role she was to fulfill for eight years. Today, she works as a community development worker for the Upper Andersonstown area of West Belfast.

The bleak facade of Tullymore Community Center belies the warm welcome inside. Apart from a small area utilized as an office, the soon-to-be renovated building is virtually derelict. Once a social club, the debris of it's former role still litters the two main halls, now dark and deserted. "This will be transformed," says Tish, "come and see us in a few

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months and you won't believe you're eyes." But for the moment we're here to talk about internment.

"I was not only the youngest, but also the longest serving woman internee," Tish laughs, "that's why my credentials out of the way." Tish was also involved in one of the most tenacious escape attempts by Republican women POW's in this century. The only other recorded escape being from four women in October 30, 1920 incarcerated in Dublin's Mountjoy. "There was five of us, Liz McKee, Evelyn Brady and myself from Belfast and two Derry women, Marie Maguire and Catherine Robson." Tish had been interned in Armagh for less than a month when the escape plan was given the go ahead.

In 1973 the British army was stretched to its limit and the detachment of troops deployed to guard prisoners in Armagh jail was insufficient to man the observation tower. With the tower unguarded, the women realized escape was only a matter of cutting through the cell bars, climbing along the walls into the post and from there getting onto the perimeter wall and down to the path below.

"We smuggled in hacksaw blades and made ropes with plaited knitting wool," says Tish, "Liz and I were sharing a cell and on the night of the escape we rearranged the furniture to obscure the night warden's view of the cell." It was Wednesday March 4, 1973. It was Wednesday March 4, 1973. It was a very still night, I remember the silence, we had to move very quietly." The five women cut their way through the bars of their cell windows and made their way along the roof.

"It was so easy," says Tish, "by the time we reached the observation post we could see transport waiting for us on the Mall." Tish was the first to get down onto the wall. Almost immediately she became entrapped in razor wire. "I became more and more entangled and we realized it was only a matter of time before we were discovered and recaptured. We were only a few feet from freedom but the escape attempt was over."

Tish believes internment was harder for women with children. "Madge McConville was a grandmother and Mary Kennedy had five children at that time. I think it was much harder for them. Mary's children were brought to Armagh for visits but that was no compensation." It was difficult too for the families of internees, says Tish. "My own family was very supportive and strong but I know, my mother in particular, felt the loss of her daughter keenly. It was a kind of grief."

Inside Armagh, the structures and self-discipline practiced by Republican internees proved an invaluable experience, argues Tish. It was a case of, if you weren't 'political' when you went in, you sure were by the time you left. "As women, thrown together by history and chance, coming through internment gave us confidence and helped us to find a voice," says Tish, "political debates, education and the disciplined way we approached imprisonment during internment would see us through many hard times in the future." Tish is currently a member of the Slieve Dubh Cumman, Belfast and her role as a Sinn Fein activist continues.

LIAM SHANNON: A HOODED MAN

Plush seating and the smell of newly polished wood at West Belfast's Felons Club provides an incongruous setting to reflect on one of the most brutal experiences inflicted on interned Irish nationalists during the last 25 years. Liam Shannon, now chairperson of the Felons, was one of the thirteen nationalists interned in the 1970's who became known as "the hooded men."

Liam Shannon was arrested by British soldiers October 9, 1971 in the St. James area of West Belfast. He was 22 years of age. Following 48 hours of beatings and interrogation in Palace barracks Hollywood, Liam was taken by Land Rover to Crumlin Road jail in Belfast. "I was accompanied by two plain clothed men, who I took to be military personnel, to the prison governor's office. Here I was issued with a "Removal Order" signed by the then Stormont Prime Minister, Brian Faulkner. I asked for clarification but the deputy governor, who issued the order, said he knew nothing about it either."

The two plain clothed men pulled Liam's coat over his head and tied it under his chin. "It was effectively a hood," says Liam. Liam was dragged into a Land Rover and driven a short distance to a waiting helicopter. "I was pushed into the helicopter from the back of the Land Rover." The helicopter appeared to take off and Liam's captors claimed the helicopter was flying before throwing their victim out of the craft. "It was a form of psychological torture," says Liam, "the helicopter was only a few feet above ground but for a split second as I fell I thought I was a dead man."

The helicopter flew for a further fifteen minutes, Liam estimates, before landing but, "it may not have gone anywhere." Liam was transferred from the helicopter into a Land Rover to a room where the makeshift "hood" was removed and he was confronted by a man in a white coat. "The man was probably a British army medic," says Liam, "I was stripped examined and asked a few general questions about my health." Liam was dressed in a boiler suit, "it was massive, far too big for me," and the number 42 was written in black marker on the back of one of his hands. A canvass hood was placed over Liam's head and tied by a threaded cord onto the epaulettes of the boiler suit and tight around his neck. "It was impossible to remove." Liam remained hooded for seven days.

"In those seven days, I was forced to stand spread-eagled against a wall until I dropped, systematically beaten, denied sleep and kept on a restricted diet of bread and water," says Liam. "I was subjected to white noise and at one point tied to a radiator. Even when I ate, the hood was raised only momentarily to just above my mouth. The only time the hood was removed was during interrogation. I was put in front of two bright lights so even then I couldn't see anything. Nothing more than a shadowy figure conducting the interrogation."

The hooding and interrogation techniques developed by British army Brigade Frank Kitson, were first used by the British army in Palestine and Aden. They were designed to introduce terror and disorientation. Many of the victims also experienced hallucinations and, after consulting medical opinion, believe they were subjected to drugs, most probably LSD. "My memory of those seven days is one of disorientation. There was no day or night, I was fed but I can't remember how often. I was interrogated but I can't say how many times. I couldn't have stood spread-eagled for seven days but I can't remember sleeping. I do remember being taken outside, I could feel the grass under my bare feet and being dragged along a rough, damp stone wall. Apart from the interrogator and the occasional command to sit or stand, nobody spoke."

On the seventh day the hood was removed and Liam was left in a room with a mattress, blanket and a plate of food. "I just curled up and fell asleep", says Liam. He was later taken to a washroom and his own clothes were returned. Hooded again, Liam was taken by Land Rover and helicopter to Crumlin Road jail where the hood was removed and he was served with a detention order. "We were guinea pigs," says Liam. The British government was later convicted by the European Court of Human Rights of inhumane and degrading

treatment. Today Liam, a member of the National Graves Association, remains active on prisoners rights and welfare issues.

Martin Meehan: Martial Law

The well known figure of Martin Meehan, now in his fifties, helping families fleeing from their homes in North Belfast during last month's Loyalist Drumcree offensive, flashed across TV screens throughout Ireland. It was a poignant moment, widely remarked upon in Nationalist areas throughout the city. Captured on camera was not just the personal commitment of one individual but more significantly the continuity of struggle which has sustained these communities over the past 27 years.

November 9, 1971, 25 year old Martin Meehan was arrested by the British army. During the arrest, Martin was so badly beaten that he was taken immediately to Musgrave Park hospital where he received 49 stitches to his head. "It wasn't unusual to be taken out of Hollywood barracks on a stretcher after interrogation but I was carried into the barracks on a stretcher," says Martin. During a series of Brutal interrogations, Martin was beaten, threatened and humiliated. "Stitches in my head were pulled out, I was stabbed in the hand, I was spat at, Urinated on, kicked and rifle butted. I was also denied sleep, food and water.

During interrogation, weapons were continually put against Martin's head and blanks fired. At one stage Martin was "dressed up in a British army uniform, complete with a feather in a cap" and made to dig his own grave. There was even a mock execution by firing squad. "I was told martial law had been declared, the military were in complete control and I was to be executed by firing squad." says Martin. I was marched out in front of a British army officer and a firing squad of nine or ten British soldiers." Martin was tied to a pole and asked if wanted a blindfold. Throughout the ordeal, Martin remembered his deceased father, an old republican. "I was determined not to let him down," says Martin, "but to be honest it was touch and go."

Detained in Crumlin Road jail, Martin led a daring and successful escape, with three detainees dropping down a manhole into a water-filled pit where they remained for over Six hours until nightfall aided their escape over the wall. "I was recaptured on the first anniversary of internment, Aug. 9th 1972." Martin was charged with escaping lawful custody. Back in Crumlin Road jail, a fellow detainee, a teacher from Newry, pointed out that the British army had no legal powers of arrest and suggested internees were being held illegally. When Martin was brought before a court, he successfully argued against the charge on the grounds that he had been arrested illegally by the British army. "This meant hundreds of internees were being held illegally," says Martin, "the British House of Common sat all night rushing through retrospective legislation." No one was released.

On December 5, 1975, mass mobilization and international pressure finally forced the British government into abandoning internment. Martin remembers the day internment ended. "A prison warden named Jimmy Larkin, (he claimed to be related to his trades unionist namesake), first broke the news. He told me to keep it quiet but internment was over. Larkin had hardly stepped aside when I yelled "it's over, it's over." It was a full hour before anyone believed me."

Martin recalls the final farewells between the internees as they gathered their belongings before leaving Long Kesh prison camp. "It was an emotional time," says

Martin, "We held our final parade, proud as peacocks. They started releasing us five at a time until there was only two of us, Bill McAllister and myself, left in the now deserted cage." The Prison Governor arrived at the cage and asked to speak to Martin, the camp OC. "The governor told me Billy wasn't going to be released and asked me to break the news. It was one of the hardest moments of my life." "Don't worry about me, tell my wife I'm okay," Billy responded to the news. "I remember looking back and seeing Billy at the gate, alone in the empty cage. I don't know if there were tears in his eyes but there should have been. There were tears in mine." Martin Meehan is a founding member of the Phoenix Drama Society.

Paid for by the Friends of Sinn Fein, Inc.

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