

*Irish Political Prisoners in British Jail*

# **H BLOCKS**

**A LETTER  
FROM A  
BLANKET MAN  
TO THE  
ASSOCIATION  
FOR LEGAL  
JUSTICE**





## A Letter to the Association for Legal Justice.

In January 1977 I was arrested by armed British soldiers at my home. I was taken to Castlereagh interrogation centre and after several days of ill-treatment at the hands of my RUC interrogators I was charged with possessing explosives and sent to Belfast's Crumlin Road Prison to await trial. In September 1977 I was tried by a Special No Jury Court and sentenced to five years in prison. Next day I was transferred to the H Blocks and I too joined the ranks of the Blanket men. At that time, after over one full year of protesting, the lot of the Blanket men had not improved at all. We were kept locked up 24-hours per day, every day, two men to each small 8 ft. square cell. We had nothing at all. We were denied our own clothes and instead we wore a grey blanket. We received no exercise. We received no letters, visits (except one half-hour per month) no parcels, papers, books (only religious magazines). We were denied education facilities, T.V., radio, cigarettes, fruit, sweets, the right to meet other prisoners. We were kept without any source of recreation. Every fourteenth day a prison Governor came round and took all the 'privileges' from me, plus the loss of 14 days remission and ordered that for three days I be kept without a bed in the cell. Every fourteenth day they held a sham 'court' which justified these deprivations and eased their continuation, a total loss of all rights.

This situation brings us up to March 1978. By March 1978 the prison warders, on the orders of the Northern Ireland Office (N.I.O.) were carrying out assaults on the naked Republican P.O.W.'s on a regular basis. Through cell searches or any other excuse men were being sent more and more to the Punishment Block (P. Block) a block in a separate part of the camp where solitary confinement, loss of beds and special diets were used to inflict extra punishment for the simplest of reasons on Blanket men. We began realising that some way or step would have to be taken to highlight our worsening plight since no-one, except our families and friends, had any real idea of the hardships of the H Blocks. So on March 20th 1978 we began a different form of protest. Firstly we stopped cleaning our cells and washing, and a short time later we also stopped 'slopping out' (emptying our urine pots - the cells have no toilet facilities except for this plastic pot!) The cells soon became very dirty and we were forced to throw the daily human waste out the cell windows, as the warders were coming into the cells throwing our bedding into the excrement and urine. For a time they also came into the cell emptying the pots of urine, but this also gave them an excuse to throw urine about our cells. To prevent this we began pouring the urine out below the cell doors each night - an action which, over nineteen months later, is still being carried out. While returning from my monthly visit in April I was stopped and searched by the warders. Although I don't smoke myself I was trying to smuggle back a few cigarettes for some of the other men who do smoke. These cigarettes were found during the search and I was sent to the P. Blocks. For the serious offence of having six or seven cigarettes I was given three days solitary, three days without my bed and three days No. 1 Diet. What this diet meant was for the next three days my meals would be as follows: Breakfast: 4 rounds of dry bread with a mug of black tea. Dinner - a small bowl of soup and tea - 4 rounds of dry bread with a mug of black tea. During those 3 days I was very hungry as you can imagine. When I returned to the H Block I was in for another shock. While I had been in the P. Block the warders had begun removing all the furniture from the cells, so rather than just be deprived of furniture for no reason, the Blanket men smashed what furniture they could before it was removed from the cell.

From that time, mid-April 1978, we have been kept in cells with no furniture at all. We have a sponge mattress, filthy and damp from lying on the floor, three filthy and torn blankets, a pillow, a water container (between two men, changed each morning and evening by the warders) and two pots which hold the urine throughout the day. In those days the authorities began pumping large amount of ammonia, bleach and Recason disinfectant. This particular disinfectant has an effect like tear gas, you can imagine the suffering its use caused in our confined surroundings.

On 27th April we received one more shock. It was in the middle of the night and we were lying sleeping on the floor. Suddenly a jet of water from a fire hose was directed into the cell through an inspection peep-hole, soaking all our bedding and ourselves. The heating pipes had been turned off the day before and we had no way of drying our blankets. In those early days of the "Dirt Protest", as it has come to be known, I along with several other Blanket men began seeing a solicitor with a view to court action regarding what we felt was breaches of prison rules and regulations. This case has become known as "The Strasbourg Case" since it is now due to be heard by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. This case deals in great depth with much of what is contained in this letter. To get out to see my solicitor, as with any visit, I had to temporarily wear the prison uniform. All other prisoners receive visits wearing their own clothes. Blanket men must wear the uniform. These uniforms are kept in a special cell at the end of each wing of Blanket men. We walk from our cell wearing a small white towel and then after being searched (I'll describe the search later) we put on the uniform and go to the visiting rooms.

In June 1978, while returning from one of these solicitor's visits, the search procedure at that time was as follows: When I had taken off all my clothes, I was ordered to bend over and touch my toes. Obviously I refused and immediately I was grabbed by the arms while the screws tried to bend me and visually search my privates. During the scuffle one of the screws or warders claimed that I had assaulted him, and once again I was sent to the Punishment Block. Like the previous time I received three days solitary, three days loss of bed, and three days No. 1 Diet, which I have already described. Throughout the following weeks the harassment by the warders continued, and more and more Recason ammonia and bleach was poured and sprayed round the cells. Finally in August, so much was pumped into the cells that we were forced to once again step up our protest and smash the cell windows to get air. Throughout the months which followed we lay in unprotected cells open to the elements. Many times we were hosed through these broken windows by orderlies cleaning outside the Block using 160lbs p.s.i. fire hoses. In November these windows were replaced but once more the fumes and lack of fresh air forced us to destroy the windows. This time we burned the unbreakable glass using crude "Tinder Boxes" made from flints and pins or splinters of glass. That night the warders again hosed us down through the open windows.

On every occasion that our protest was increased to counteract some new punishment technique by the screws some new reprisal was launched against us. In many instances the medical authorities allowed themselves to give legality to the various tortures. In September and October 1978 the doctor in charge of the Block authorised the use of disposable paper plates and cups,



with plastic knives and forks. The only difficulty was that these were not replaced after each meal. One set of knives and forks per day, and one paper cup per day for tea was all we were allowed. During this particular period of harassment, we were allowed only one full meal per day while the authorities tried to break our will. After several weeks they gave in and once more we began to receive our usual plastic utensils with the usual amount of food. Within two months the doctors once more used their position to inflict torture on the Blanket men. On this occasion they ordered that hundreds of Blanket Men be forcibly bathed, shaved and have their hair cut. These acts resulted in hundreds of men being injured by the warders dragging defenceless men from their cells. When these injured men went out to have a medical examination afterwards, the doctors ignored the injuries.

In the continuing repressive campaign, the authorities now introduced a new search procedure, the same procedure which is still in use. At this stage of the protest (Christmas 1978) we were already being moved from wing to wing on a weekly basis, while the special crews of cleaners, using steam hoses and compressors cleaned the Blocks in a wing rotation basis ensuring that once per week every Blanket man is put into a "clean" cell. These cells were perpetually damp from the effects of the constant hosing and the wing movements have become a main source of ill-treatment to Blanket men. We are brought from our cells usually around 7.30 a.m. wearing only a small towel. We were taken through the wing lined with warders, two naked men at a time to a special area left aside for searching us. Our towel is removed and four or five warders move in to search us one man at a time. On the floor is a mirror lying face up and we are forced to stand over this mirror. At this stage the warders begin kicking the backs of our legs to try to get us into a squatting position over the mirror. Can you possibly imagine that search? Can you imagine how degrading it is, or how often men are injured during it? On one of those searches my leg was so badly kicked that I was left lying for months as my knee was so badly swollen. Every single week we are put through one of these searches and the same search is used before and after every visit.

By March 1979 after what was reckoned to be the coldest winter in 16 years, during which we lay in the unprotected and windowless cells, the authorities began erecting new windows to close in our cells. At times in that winter we grew so cold our

drinking water froze solid in its container. But even the new windows were to prove a source of torture. The windows were made from frosted perspex built into a wooden frame, and the whole structure sitting about one foot from the wall on the outside. Then came the window bars, made of reinforced concrete, again almost 1 foot thick with five spaces between them - 4" wide to let in light. On the inside is a metal grille, a dehumanising piece of work which lets light in but prevents any view out. When it was erected we could no longer throw the excreta or waste out the window and so, once again, the authorities forced us to step up our protest. We were forced to spread the excrement on the cell walls to prevent the screws from putting it in our food or round our bedding. It is in these horrible conditions that we now lie. In small eight foot square cells, two men to each, with a permanent stench from the filth on the walls, the pile of rotting food in the corner and the damp mattresses and blankets. The cell is used as a toilet, sleeping room, eating room, in fact for twenty-four hours per day we lie in this hell-hole.

We have tried two channels to stop the brutalities, through the Courts and through the doctors. In the answer to the first route, the Northern Ireland Office who control the gaols have refused us access to solicitors in any brutality case. Regarding the doctors, these men blatantly refuse to give us any medical treatment unless we first wash and come off our Protest. As a result many men are suffering from a variety of illnesses. About one in five suffer from worms. Almost everyone is hit by regular bouts of vomiting and diarrhoea, pains, 'flu or colds, headaches, but more serious is their disregard to men with old gunshot wounds, ulcers, and even missing limbs. Our bad state of health is not helped by over a year without being allowed to comb our hair or clean our teeth. The bad food we are served up here, mostly inedible, badly cooked, cold and of a low quality and quantity leaves us in a permanent state of hunger. Daily our conditions grow harder and harder, as the authorities mete out their revenge. How much longer it will continue, it is hard to estimate, we believe it will continue until enough people are prepared to push for an end to the torture. Each and every part of the H Block system is wrong, and each and every part must be destroyed before justice will return to our country. The H Block system is representative of a corrupt form of Government illegally occupying our land and by resisting the H Block system we resist this occupation.

John Hunter



