

ON THE BLANKET

(The following article was smuggled out of H-Block 5, Long Kesh Camp. It was written on a tiny piece of paper and tells the story of conditions for men "On the blanket".)

"ENGLAND, YOU HAVE NOT ONE THING IN YOUR ENTIRE ARSENAL TO BREAK ONE SINGLE MAN WHO REFUSES TO BE BROKEN."

It's Sunday the 23rd of October and it's tea-time here in H-block 5, Long Kesh Camp. It's one of those depressing days with the wind howling and the rain lashing against the windows. The lads in the adjacent "A" Wing are up at their windows. I can't really make out their faces, but I can see the white forms with long beards gazing out into the yard.

They are watching the food containers being unloaded from the lorry (or as it is known here 'the happy wagon.!) We don't receive any food parcels here so we are completely dependant on the gaol food. The screws are on their way round the wing now with tonight's tea. Someone further up the wing signals with a loud YA-HO! YA-HOO! It's an event here when a meal is served. But a good hot tea will go down well tonight.

The cell door opens and the Screws hand us two salads -- a freezing October evening and they give us a leaf of lettuce, a slice of spam and a slice of beetroot, with a piece of cheese hid somewhere underneath.

The door opens again and a smiling Screw hands us eight rounds of pan bread with enough margarine for four, one-third of a cup of soup and a cup of lukewarm tea. I hear someone joking that the red insects usually found on the lettuce will be frozen to death today. But I suppose it couldn't last, we were going too well, for we received decent hot meals for four days in a row. But it appears we are back to the usual attempts to harass and frustrate us, to break our 'jolly old spirits'. They're good tryers, I'll give them that.

We were at Mass this morning, the highlight of a lone week. It's the only time that we get together. It's definitely an amazing sight to see one hundred half-naked men, attacking each other in frantic conversation before Mass begins.

I myself am not long sentenced, but I was on remand for almost a year, therefore I know most of the lads here, or at least I should. But it's very hard to identify those who I haven't seen for sometime! Everyone here with the exception of the latest arrivals has a beard of sorts. When I first arrived here I noticed that a lot of the men's eyes seemed to be sunk into the pits of their eyes, and everyone's face was a pale yellowish. I've seen a few men whose eyes looked glassy as if they were drunk. The reason that these men are in this sort of condition must surely be because there is no exercise period here, therefore no fresh air or sunlight. I suppose being locked in a small 8'x 8' cell for 24 hours a day, everyday would make anyone look ill. Of course it doesn't help much when one has nothing to do to pass the time. We have no newspapers, books, games or radio or tv because we are not allowed them.

The only things we can get is a Bible or religious material. There are only a few of us here who take visits. You are allowed one visit a month. But you must wear the prison uniform when you go out to the visiting room. That is the reason 90% of the lads here don't take visits. A lot of men haven't seen or spoken to their families for almost a year. We are allowed to receive two letters in per month and send two out. But if you take the monthly visit your quota is cut to one letter. Receiving a letter from home is a tremendous boost. But more times than

enough the letter is mutilated by the censors' pen. Many letters never reach you, as is the same case with those going out to your families from in here.

Every piece of news is eagerly welcomed as it is a very alien feeling to be cut off from the outside world without knowing what is happening. Sometimes we'll hear a bit of news which might be several week old because of the total black-out of news. Rumours are rampant. But most are in good fun as no matter how ridiculous they may sound no-one can prove different.

It's seven o'clock now and the supper has arrived: half a cup of lukewarm tea and a small slice of cake. That means no more food until breakfast at 8 a.m. tomorrow morning.

The Screw (or as they are known here, "Bears") will be leaving soon and the night guard will be coming on.

There's a quiz tonight; it helps to pass the time. But then again it's like the sing-songs we hold now and again. You can get sick listening to the same songs and answering the same questions. It's a bit difficult singing through a quarter-inch slit between a steel door and a wall, but it's done.

I suppose between 8 p.m. in the evening and midnight is the liveliest period with everyone shouting to their neighbours, etc. But it's not the same as talking to the person's face.

We are doubled up now and have a cell mate to talk to. But when both of you are never out of the same cell, there's nothing really to talk about except the same old worn out conversations. It can get depressing just staring at four walls all day.

I'll be seeing the Governor this week, whereupon I'll be charged with refusing to wear prison clothes and to do prison work. The Governor will rhyme out three or four sentences which he does two hundred times a fortnight. He will sentence me to three days confinement to cell, which means my bedding will be taken out for three days. I will also lose two weeks remission and loss of privileges. Of course there is the usual harassment -- any excuse is used to send men on the boards (that is, the punishment-cells.)

A few days ago a man was given three days on the boards for just lying on his bed.

We don't get any cigarettes here, but the Bears usually open the doors with a cigarette in their mouths. Sometimes a Bear will say to you, 'if you put on the uniform you can have cigs, radio, tv, etc. etc. Things like that are indeed inviting when you're living in a day to day life of depression, boredom and complete nothingness. But it would be a very poor price to sell oneself as a criminal.

We are all Republican Prisoners-of-War here, and there is nothing that the Prison Authorities, the Northern Ireland Office or the British Government can say or do to change this. They can keep us incarcerated and naked, they may use everything and every means at their disposal to try and break us. But they have already done this for 13 months and have failed to break us. We have lived in terrible conditions under constant harassment, through a freezing winter and a sweltering summer locked up like animals. But there is one thing that we remember always, and those who torment us would do well to listen: "You have nothing in your entire arsenal to break one single man who refuses to be broken." I'm away to listen to the jolly quiz.