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THE REACTION TO LONG KESH BURNING BY THE ARMAGH WOMEN PRISONERS

WHEN WE HEARD THE NEWS THAT THE KESH WAS ON FIRE AND OUR MEN WERE BEING BEATEN AND INTOXICATED BY GASES WE WERE ANGRY.

We had been locked in our cells at 8pm as usual; Armagh jail was bleak at the best of times dark on the outside and always cold on the inside. In the cells, republican POWs, some sentenced, some on remand others interned like myself. It was on the 10' 0 clock news on the radio we heard about the burning of the kesh and as the information of what had taken place reverberated throughout the wings we were all in a terrible emotional state. To many of us it was a double blow, afraid for our comrades fearful for our kinfolk too. Bernadette O Hagan an older mother-like prisoner started saying a decade of the rosary and we all joined in. Armagh Jail was an eerie place that night.

Most of us had relatives imprisoned then, husbands, brothers, uncles, fathers even grandfathers, we were distraught no one slept that night, next morning we put on the news and we decided we needed to do something to show support or even highlight to the world what had happened. The women prisoners in jail at that time were all very young most were in their teenage years; I was interned at the age of 17 although in October 1974 I was 18. There were many girls aged 15 or 16 and they should not have been incarcerated in an adult prison but there was nowhere else to put them.

At 8am the cell doors were opened and our O.C (officer commanding) called a meeting of the staff. I was the I.O (intelligence officer) at that time and I like the others met in our O.C (Eileen Hickey) cell. There was little official information and no information coming out of the kesh from the prisoners but everyone agreed that we had to do something to support our POWs in Long Kesh.

We knew the camp had been destroyed and the British Army had been deployed in force and in such a scenario, injuries would have been inevitable, fatalities possible but for the moment no one knew. What the POWs in Armagh did know was they would have to act quickly and decisively.

At mid morning, the prison governor Hugh Cunningham accompanied by two female prison officers was on the wings for a routine inspection. Rioting had been dismissed by us as "futile" our numbers would have been insufficient to hold the British Army at bay for long, we would have been thrown back in our cells and locked up and isolated very quickly. "Desperate times required desperate measures" I informed Eileen that the Governor was coming up our wing and the decision was taken we would take him and the others hostage and it went very smoothly. I and another prisoner were instructed with this order. For your information Hugh Cunningham was 6'4 in height and I was 5'3 and Bridie was 5'5 so there was a noticeable difference. I had a Stanley knife in my possession and as we approached him and the others I informed him that we were taking him hostage as a protest against the treatment of our comrades in the Kesh. I informed him if he offered any resistance I would cut his throat. To tell you the truth he said, "ok Angela here are the keys". I was very glad he did that, as I did not know how I would reach his throat. I am only

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joking of course. As there were only a few of us that had prior knowledge of the kidnapping it was now vitally important to mobilise everyone swiftly. The other officers had been allocated different jobs to each group of Volunteers under their command. The main gate leading onto the wings had been barricaded to stop the alarm being raised too quickly. On each wing, the cell doors were smashed to impede the authorities regaining control of the jail. Loyalist prisoners on wing A1 were invited to participate the UVF prisoners refused to join us but the UDA prisoners were concerned about their prisoners in the kesh and agreed to join in. We all made our way to A3 as there was only one stairway entrance therefore this wing would be the easiest to barricade and hold. We used everything, beds, chairs, blankets, lockers anything that was available to block the stairwell. I locked the governor and his two officers in one of the cells. We treated him with respect, I was the only one that had to deal with the hostages and if they needed to go to the toilet I was to accompany them to the bathroom if it was required.

The Armagh POWs demanded confirmation that their injured comrades in Long Kesh had access to proper medical treatment. Meanwhile, the prison administration at the Kesh had battened down the hatches, refusing to release any information to even the families of the injured prisoners.

We could hear the troops gathering outside the wing, shouting at us, threatening what they were going to do to us when we would come out. They were going cell to cell wrecking our stuff ripping up our photographs and destroying all of our personal items. The prison authorities sent for our prison chaplain Father Murray to start negotiations with Eileen Hickey for the governor's release. We told Father Murray what we wanted and he left and went to talk to our Leadership outside to see what information he could get before he came back to see us. There was great comradeship on the wing that night we felt we had shown solidarity with our comrades and we were prepared to take whatever the Brits would do to us when we came back out to the wings. We sang republican songs all night we heard the Television crews outside, we heard our family members shouting support and we could only imagine the bedlam we had started.

It was late into the night when Father Murray returned and assured us that the prisoners in the Kesh were receiving medical treatment and that the seriously injured ones had been taken to hospital in Belfast and they too were receiving treatment. The governor was released and we all returned to the wings, a guarantee had been given that would be no retaliatory action taken against any of the protesters.

Widely covered in the media, the protest in Armagh Jail highlighted the treatment of the POWs in Long Kesh, breaking the blanket ban on coverage sought by the authorities and sadly we had to return to our mundane lives but we were happy we had taken action.

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