

## MY LIFE AND WHY I BECAME A REPUBLICAN

My name is Angela Nelson and one would say that I was a child of the “troubles” in Northern Ireland. The first time I was arrested I was 15 years of age and all of my family were arrested that morning at 5am and we were taken in a Saracen tank to the police station. We were taken to Springfield Road Police Station and interviewed several times by Special Branch agents. My two sisters and I were released after a number of hours but they kept my brother. My brother Michael was badly beaten during his interviews that day and for the 72 hours of his interrogation he was then told he was to be interned and brought to Long Kesh internment camp.

Internment was one of the Special Powers the British government introduced in 1970, which allowed them to hold men in custody without charges or trials. They beat my brother very badly and his case was brought to Geneva to the Courts of Human Rights and he won his case and it was accepted that they had abused my brother. I knew that day that I would resist British occupation of Ireland. I can say that I joined the republican movement not for any romantic notion of a United Ireland but to protect my people from the brutality from the British Army and The B Specials (they were attached to the Royal Ulster Constabulary), which were the Police at that time. I witnessed men and women being harassed on the streets, whole streets of Catholics being burned out of their homes coming up the Falls Road on the backs of open coal lorries with their children and some items of furniture and clothes that they were able to remove from their burning homes. It was tragic to watch and as a 15 year old it made a lasting impression on me and I decided I had to take action. Those times were very hard for everyone though it pulled the community together very closely and every door was open to you if you needed to escape from the army. I had to “go on the run” at the age of 16 as The British Army raided my house every day looking for me. One could say I was a very active republican at that time and I would move from safe house to safe house for my safety. Those were dark days as there were people you knew being shot or bombed or arrested. Families were left without mothers, father’s brothers or sisters. Nearly every one had someone in jail. My older sister and her friend wrote to people in America and asked for Donations of money to raise enough money to supply a bus that would take the families from Belfast to the prison camp in Lisburn. Thankfully the American people were very generous and they were able to achieve that goal. There were 130 men in prison from the small area I lived in and the bus provided a great service to them.

In March 1973 I was arrested at 4 O Clock in the morning and taken by British soldiers to Townhall Police station where I was held and interrogated for 90 hours. During that time special branch agents threatened to rape me and showed me photographs of I.R.A Volunteers who were shot by the security forces or Volunteers that had been blown up by their own bombs while out on active service. Needless to say I never informed on my comrades and they had no evidence to charge me with anything so they interned me. I was the sixth female interned that year and the youngest female to ever be interned. I was taken to Armagh Jail where all women prisoners were held. I would never have seen the inside of a prison if there had not been a struggle in our country. I remained the guest of her majesty’s government for 2 years and made lifelong friends with the many women prisoners who were incarcerated at that time. I have many funny and serious stories to tell about my stay in prison and would tell them to you if you were interested at a later date. After my release in 1975 I was able to return to my own home although the Brits raided us

every week. I was arrested again at the beginning of 1976 from home and charged with Hi-Jacking a car, which they alleged was used to bomb a Police Station. It was a trumped up charge and they had no evidence to support the charge but they held me in Armagh Jail for a further 10 months before the judge released me.

Whilst I was interned in Armagh Jail I had Political Status but when I went in the second time Maggie Thatcher (British Prime Minister) in March '76 had removed Political Status and tried to criminalise our struggle. This led to what is known to in our history as "The Dirty Protest" and two Hunger Strikes. The First Hunger Strike in 1980, which the British Government promised to meet the 5 demands of the men in Long Kesh and the hunger strike ended, then Maggie Thatcher reneged. This led to the second Hunger Strike in 1981 that was led by Bobby Sands and we lost ten men on hunger strike at that time. Our morale was very low at that time when we heard that Bobby Sands had died people came onto the streets crying and screaming, we, as a people could not believe that Maggie Thatcher and the British government would allow our men to die in such agonising pain. There were protests every day of the week in which thousands of people all over Ireland took to the streets demanding that the 5 demands were met. Maggie Thatcher was hated by the Irish people she was determined not to give in and that she was going to criminalise our fight for Irish Freedom. These deaths of our comrades opened the floodgates of young men and women joining the I.R.A.

As each Hunger Striker died thousands of people attended the funerals and we joined as a Nation United in our grief to continue to put pressure by contacting governments from all over the world including the Americans to intervene on behalf of these young men who were dying every 2 weeks. Eventually the British Government agreed but ten men had died and the resolve of our struggle hardened.