

REMEMBER THEM

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30 years ago, a five-year protest of Irish republican prisoners ended in one of the most pivotal events in recent Irish history. It began when the Brits withdrew Political status from Republican prisoners. In July 1972, Political Prisoner Status had been introduced after a hunger strike by 40 IRA prisoners led by Billy McKee. It meant being treated as prisoners of war and not having to wear prison uniforms or do prison work.

In 1976, as part of a policy of "criminalization", the Brits ended Political Prisoner Status. Prisoner's clothes were taken and prison uniforms issued. Refusing to wear convict uniforms and brand themselves and their cause as criminal, they wore nothing but a blanket through the brutal northern Irish winter in a cold stone cell. After men leaving their cells to empty their chamber pots were beaten, prisoners feared to leave their cells and covered their cell walls with excrement. In 1980, it was decided to embark on an age-old Celtic method of redress – the hunger strike, whereby one could force justice from a more powerful adversary by attracting public opinion to their cause by demonstrating their sincerity. There was no lack of volunteers but only seven were selected to match the number of men who signed the Easter 1916 Proclamation of the Republic. The Brits appeared to concede and said they sent a proposal to Stormont; the strike ended after 53 days in December. In January it became clear that the prisoners' demands had not been met. On February 4, the prisoners declared another hunger strike. This one began on March 1, 1981 – the fifth anniversary of the withdrawal of political status – led by former commanding officer Bobby Sands refusing food.

It should be noted that starvation is not an easy end. By the time death comes, starving people are blind, deaf, speechless, and in a coma. Throughout the horrid ordeal, their limbs are bloated, their abdomens swollen, and their tongues are thick and bright red. Their hair loses its color and falls out, their gums ulcerate, and their teeth loosen. They suffer dehydration from constant bouts of nausea and diarrhea; whatever the temperature, they shiver with cold; their skin is shriveled and scaly and they are as dry as old parchment, no longer able to muster enough fluid to even cry. The agony is staggering to imagine. After losing about 1/3 of his body weight, a more serious weight loss begins when the body begins to consume itself. First the brain, which uses 65% of the glucose in the bloodstream and 45% of the oxygen, turns on other organs to keep itself alive when food is denied. The liver, which normally supplies the all-important body sugar, is forced to break down the protein in body tissue and muscle into glucose, leaving the victim light-headed. Next the body consumes its own fat. The resulting imbalance of fatty acids (ketoacidosis) results in nausea, vomiting, extreme thirst, and hunger for air. To preserve energy, the body slows down all of its functions: heartbeat, breathing, metabolism, etc. As protein supplies are reduced and not replenished, antibodies and white blood cells, needed to fight infection, drop in number so that wounds don't heal and there is no resistance to infection. The depletion of proteins from the muscle tissue continues until, in the end, they are pulled out of the muscles which sustain life - the heart itself and the muscles involved in breathing. Near the end, the bones often pierce the skin at the joints.

Fully aware of the consequences, other prisoners joined one at a time at staggered intervals, to arouse maximum public support to exert pressure on PM Thatcher. A sympathetic public even elected Bobby Sands to the British Parliament during the strike, prompting media interest from around the world. Tomás ÓFiaich, Archbishop of Armagh, even visited the prison and condemned conditions there. Other prisoners ran for office and after two were elected, the Brits rushed through an Act preventing prisoners from contesting elections. But neither public pressure, the value of Irish life nor the cause of refusing to be labeled criminals swayed the Iron Maiden from her stubborn refusal to grant the simplest of concessions. Bobby Sands was first to die. Then one by one nine more young men had starved to death rather than criminalize Ireland's fight for freedom; it wasn't just about wearing jeans. Sands' funeral was attended by 100,000 people.

The strike was called off on October 3. Three days later the prisoners were allowed the right to wear their own clothes at all times and gradually all the demands were met, but without formal recognition of political status. Thirteen others who had been saved by the ending of the hunger strike, still suffer from the effects, with problems including digestive, visual, physical and neurological disabilities. In the final analysis, the Brits paid the price of having world pressure focused on what, until then, had merely been an internal struggle that they had been able to conceal from the world. Ireland's 10 new martyrs had made their cause a world issue and verified their sacrifice by paving the way for Sinn Fein's entry into the political arena and the Peace that followed.

They were our bravest and best which is why they had to die, for because of them our cause was made sacred. As we prayerfully remember with love and pride the names of the martyrs of 1916, let us also remember the names of:

Bobby Sands (27), died 5 May after 66 days; **Francis Hughes** (25) died 12 May after 59 days; **Patsy O'Hara** (23) died 21 May after 61 days; **Ray McCreech** (24) died 21 May after 61 days; **Joe McDonnell** (29) died 8 July after 61 days; **Martin Hurson** (24) died 13 July after 46 days; **Kevin Lynch** (25) died 1 August after 71 days; **Kieran Doherty** (25) died 2 August after 73 days; **Thomas McElwee** (23) died 8 August after 62 days and **Mickey Devine** (27) died 20 August after 60 days.

