

FIFTY-FIVE years ago, 17 Claremen were released from prison under the Cat and Mouse Act, after having undergone a gruelling period of forcible feeding from which a fellow prisoner, Tom Ashe, of Kerry, died.

They had been on hunger strike in Cork, Mountjoy and

Dundalk gaols.

It was the first time that Irish political prisoners experienced the horrors of forcible feeding. In this article, Austin Brennan, of Meelick, near Limerick, describes the terrible ordeal the prisoners had to endure when being forcibly fed by doctors.

DURING the Clare election of 1917 efforts were being made to organise the Volunteers throughout the county.

At that time Clare was one unit and my brother, Patrick, was in charge. Volunteers drilled openly and at close of polling on election day parties of Volunteers escorted the ballot boxes to Ennis Court-house.

Orders were issued by Patrick to continue organising Volunteer units and to drill openly. A short time later Patrick, Michael and I and Peter O'Loughlan of Liscannor were arrested the same day and handed over to the English military, by whom we were courtmartialled to Victoria (Collins) Barracks, Cork.

All four of us refused to recognise the right of an English court to try us. We were found guilty and sentenced to two years hard labour for public drilling.

While awaiting trial, Peg Duggan, her sisters and other girls brought us meals every day. Peg played a noble part in Cork's fight for independence. God rest her soul.

Removed to Cork Jail, acting on a pre-conceived plan, we went on secret hunger strike. On the eighth day the chief warden, who seemed to be a decent chap, said to Michael: "You chaps are looking thin. If you want more food ask for it."

When he was told, "we have not eaten food since we entered this jail," the poor man nearly collapsed and had us removed to the prison hospital.

During the eight days we were allowed out for two hours exercise each day. A Dr. O'Connor, who was doing locum for the prison doctor, treated us very kindly.

On the afternoon of the 10th day of the hunger strike Dr. O'Connor, accompanied by a tall, burly man, came into the room and examined each of us in turn. The tall man said to Dr. O'Connor: "He is the strongest one of the four."

Replied

He then said to me: "You refuse to take food?"

"Yes," I replied.

"How would you like to be removed to an institution to be forcibly fed?" he asked.

"You can do that," I answered.

When he had left Dr. O'Connor told us he was Dr. Flynn, a member of the Prison Board, Dublin Castle.

Dr. O'Connor then gave us a very valuable piece of in-

Forcibly fed, at five bob a head

BY AUSTIN BRENNAN of Meelick, nr Limerick

formation, namely, that on account of our action all Volunteer prisoners in Ireland were on conviction to be housed in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, and that we were to be moved there that night.

We decided to go off hunger strike until we had a large number with us in Mountjoy.

At the time we were heartened to know many Claremen were following us to prison.

We travelled by night mail from Cork with an armed guard of R.I.C. and arrived at Kingsbridge about 4 a.m. We were conveyed to Mountjoy by a horse-drawn Black Maria.

Placed in hospital, we were given the ordinary food. We had been on ten days' hunger strike in Cork Prison, but no effort was made by medical people to give us a diet appropriate to our physical condition.

After days of constipation I was given a draft of what was called "Black Jack." Its ingredients were seemingly strong enough to break up solid concrete.

A few days later we were transferred to ordinary cells. The following day we were taken to a woodyard where, with blunt hatchets, we chopped firewood and tied it in bundles. We were given sacking needles and twine to make mail bags in our cells at night. The output was very poor. At this stage extra Volunteers (prisoners) started to arrive.

Among the first was Austin Stack from Kerry. It was agreed to appoint him O.C. and my brother, Patrick, vice-O.C.

A plan was drawn up to start hunger strike on September 30, 1917, when it was expected there would be about 30 Volunteers. On September 18, we stood around in groups in the woodyard and talked. We refused to do any more chopping.

That evening we were all concentrated in the wing of the prison. After breakfast the following morning we were taken out for exercise and when three other Volunteers emerged from the prison hospital we cheered them, jumped over the dividing chain and shook them by the hand. Finian Lynch and J. J. Walsh were among them.

Punishment

After lunch we were locked in our cells for punishment. At this time we numbered 40, and 17 were Claremen.

The following morning, September 20, we refused to take breakfast, and started to wreck cells. This included smashing window panes, eye and lamp glasses in prison doors, breaking of shelves and removing plaster over hot water pipes, thus getting direct communication with comrades in adjoining cell.

We kept on shouting "hunger strike."

At about 10 a.m. three war-



The 17 hunger strikers from Clare pictured with President de Valera after their release. Mr. de Valera had been elected the Sinn Fein M.P. for East Clare, while the men were on hunger strike. Front row (from left)—Bill McNamara, Ennis; J. Liddy, Cooraclare; S. Murnane, Newmarket-on-Fergus; J. Madigan, Ennis. Middle row—J. Minihan, Corofin; Mick Murray, Newmarket-on-Fergus; Paddy Brennan, Meelick; Eamonn de Valera, H. Hunt, Corofin; Michael Brennan, Meelick; Frank Gallagher, Meelick. Back row: P. O'Loughlin, Liscannor; J. Breen, Cooraclare; Tom Browne, Ennis; Austin Brennan, Meelick; Michael O'Brien, Ruan; M. Murrinan, Corofin, and Frank Shinnors, Ennis.

ders raided my cell, removed my boots, plank bed and bedding. The strike was now on in earnest.

At about 3 p.m. our leader, Austin Stack, declared a hunger strike. We took no food on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and no bed the first two nights.

Mr. Larry O'Neill, Lord Mayor of Dublin, visited the prison on Saturday and found Joe McDonagh unconscious in his cell. He was removed to prison hospital and all beds and bedding handed back.

At about 4 p.m. Saturday (22/9/1917) forcible feeding started.

My cell was an end one on the ground floor close to the stairs. I was about the seventh called for feeding.

Standing outside the feeding cells I saw a big man in civilian clothes emerge. After a few seconds I recognised him as the man who in Cork Prison threatened me with forcible feeding.

He was Dr. Flynn of the Prison Board. I make no comment on his presence at the start of forcible feeding.

It is of interest to recall that Maxwell Green was chairman

of the Prison Board at that time. He was a son-in-law of John E. Redmond, M.P., the leader of the Irish Party.

Among the hunger strikers were two Corkmen, Denis Murray and Cronin.

They were doing a short sentence and were released on the first day of October.

They unhesitatingly threw in their lot with us and went through hunger strike and forcible feeding.

They were a credit to the county that gave Michael Collins to Ireland. Afterwards Murray gave distinguished service in one of Cork's brigade columns. Cronin's health broke down and he spent a long period in hospital.

On Sunday, September 23, we were forcibly fed once, twice on each of the following six days. Fourteen in all.

Ingredients

Doctors who had no connection with prison service forcibly fed us for 5/- per head. Each meal consisted of one pint of milk with two beaten-up eggs. The meal was put in a container.

A hand pump with rubber tube attached was placed in the latter. The tube was placed in the mouth and forced down the gullet to stomach. The food was then pumped through the tube.

As the doctors were in a hurry to earn their 5/-, very little care was taken, and as a result tubes were vomited. One man collapsed and one died.

When the feeding was on, some of us stood behind our doors and through broken spy holes could see our comrades as they passed on their way to the torture chambers.

Death

On the afternoon of Tuesday, September 25, 1917, I saw Thomas Ashe step off the stairway. I gave him a cheer. He turned towards me and waved his right hand.

About five hours later he died in the Mater Hospital due to the incompetence of a doctor.

Thomas Ashe, a Kerryman, was tall and fair. He was Commandant of the Fingal Battalion, Irish Volunteers,

who during Easter week, 1916, won a great victory over the R.I.C. at Ashbourne, County Meath.

After his death the forcible feeding went on, and on Wednesday, September 26, a doctor in a hurry forced the tube down my throat. I vomited it and while I gasped for breath he again forced the tube down my throat. Vomiting it for the second time, I nearly collapsed.

A sympathetic warden felt my pulse but the "butcher" said: "Brennan, you had better drink it. Several of the prisoners are drinking it."

I gasped: "If thirty-nine of them drink it you will have to feed me."

He promptly forced the pump through my right nostril and pumped food to my stomach.

I was carried back to my cell and as I lay on the bed I could take only short breaths as stabs of pain shot through my right chest at each intake of air.

Fifteen minutes later a warden came to take me to a basement cell as punishment for cheering my comrades. Seeing I was in a distressed

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state and only able to speak in whispers, he withdrew and in a few minutes the prison doctor came and begged me to go to hospital. I refused and he left me.

Three of my comrades were removed to basement cells that night, where they had rats as neighbours.

And so the strike went on to Saturday, September 29, when the Lord Mayor of Dublin and Prison Governor negotiated a settlement with Austin Stack and Patrick Brennan.

At midnight it was agreed to call off the strike as Dublin Castle gave acceptable terms.

Funeral

After a chat with my comrade, T. O'Loughlin, in the next cell, we agreed that some pig's cheek, cabbage and potatoes would be a grand meal. Then we went to sleep.

The following Sunday we were allowed out of our cells and from the second or third storey cell windows we were able to glimpse a small portion of Tom Ashe's funeral cortege as it passed on its way to Glasnevin Cemetery.

I believe the Volunteers marched in military formation and a number wore uniforms.

The inquest on Tom Ashe had opened and Tim Healy was notified to appear for the next-of-kin. A brief paragraph in the "Irish Independent" stated that Dr. Flynn of the Prison's Board had retired.

It is understood he was against forcible feeding.

One can draw one's own conclusions. At any rate he left the prison doctor to bear the brunt of Tim Healy's eloquence.

Shortly after the inquest we were moved by train to Dundalk and our party had been augmented by 20 young Dublin chaps who were charged with public drilling in the Dublin Mountains.

When we arrived in Dundalk Prison the Mountjoy agreement was broken and promptly went on another hunger strike. After some days Dr. McCormick (who replaced Dr. Flynn), accompanied by the prison doctor, started to examine and release us under the "Cat And Mouse" Act.

Of the 17 Claremen who participated in the Mountjoy hunger strike, six are still alive: the Brennan brothers; Sean Murnane, Stonehall, Newmarket-on-Fergus; and William McNamara, now of Clooney, Quin.