

Fifteen.

The village lay in a fold of hills towards the headwaters of one of the rivers in north Wales. It proved a simple task to deport the population and level as much of the village as was required. To the west, the road to the coast was shut to all but authorised traffic. To the east, up into the hills, it was closed by a small unit of Paramilitaries, who manned a roadblock at the summit. Then the deportation began.

It was called temporary re-settlement, and at first the villagers believed this. They also believed that their little valley and its hills were needed for a specialist form of military training. They were further promised compensation for the period of their displacement, and for any damage that might be caused in the interim. The local policeman - who was well-known in the village - displayed official claim-forms to this effect on his notice board: and that had been a comfort to any who might otherwise have doubted the good intentions of the authorities.

After the announcement there was something of a delay, however, and people for a time began to forget the prospect of their removal. But then the old Congregationalist pastor disappeared during the course of a Saturday night: and in the morning his parishioners were welcomed by a replacement - a young chap, said to be a recent licensee of the advisory council on nonconformist preachers. Some days later the police station was closed and its trusted officer shifted to duties in the nearest town. Two Militia men thereafter occupied his house and office, but kept themselves very much to themselves, and people wondered just what they did all day. Then the telephone link with the village was cut, the school

was closed, the headmaster was taken away, and the children - according to a fresh notice in the police station window - would henceforth be taken daily to school down on the coast by Militia bus.

Some mornings later the empty school was occupied by fifty Paramilitaries under Militia command: and that afternoon the weekly food ration was cut by one third for those fit for work, and by one-half for those judged unfit for work. It was also made clear that any infringement of these regulations would be dealt with in a summary way according to law. To underline the importance of these regulations, the Militia confiscated at once all poultry in the village and its surrounding area, while the cattle were herded together through the settlement, and then carried off in open-backed trucks in camouflage colours. And then the men were taken away too.

Here too, everything went smoothly. It was announced that work had been arranged for all of the men down on the coast, building defensive installations against an American attack. Rations would be those allowed to all engaged in heavy labour: and wages would be paid on top. Arrangements were already in place for transport home every second weekend. Accommodation on the coast would be in one of the tourist hotels which had been requisitioned; and any person unwilling to comply with these pressing needs of national interest would be considered in breach of the law. In all, it was much wiser to move to the coast - and that is what the menfolk did, within two days of the invitation.

Three days later, the school bus returned empty of children. It was an old scarlet Bedford, and could be heard grinding up the valley a long time before it reached the village. Usually, the mothers would congregate at the inn, where the bus discharged its cargo of scholars. But on this occasion, three buses came into the village.

There was no sign of a child on any of them. Suddenly armed sentries in steel helmets and heavy boots were standing outside every house. The women were quickly herded together. A Milita officer addressed the women swiftly and civilly. The pace of temporary resettlement had been too slow. That was why the children had not returned from school down on the coast. They had been delivered to the care of their fathers, or guardians appointed by the authorities. The women were therefore invited to join them. There would be three hours before the buses left for the coast. Nothing should be taken other than what was necessary for a stay away of one week. A maximum of two suitcases would be allowed per person. Any person who was unwilling to go would be taken into protective custody by the Paramilitary forces, who would be arriving in some numbers tomorrow.

That put an end to any debate before it could begin. By early evening one bus was packed with personal luggage, and a second loaded with the fifty women of the community. There were some tears, but not many. The third bus carried a troop of Paramilitaries, who would guard the little convoy from any change of mind. Then it moved out of the village and was gone from sight.

That evening, for the first time in hundreds or even thousands of years, the settlement was empty of people and animals, and a strange silence reigned. A small group of Paramilitaries with crowbars and saws made its way quietly around the village removing all signs that bore witness to its former identity: the name boards at each end of the village, the signs above the inn and the post-office, the garage and the school, and the rather grand timber board that was affixed to the side of the church door. Others, with

clubs, silently despatched the domestic pets which had been left in or around the abandoned houses.

Then it got dark, and small groups made their way by foot to the isolated farmhouses and shepherds' cottages up in the hills that surrounded the valley. From time to time gunshots were to be heard in the night: and then there was silence.

At noon the next day the first Regular engineers arrived, in the company of three military low-loaders carrying bulldozers and other equipment. A heavy winch was positioned at the bridge over the river, and in due course a diesel compressor inflated an observation balloon. A basket was slung below this balloon, from which a security detail could observe village affairs from aloft. Then open-backed trucks arrived with more Militia troopers. They were under the command of a senior officer who quickly distributed among these troopers such of the buildings as they needed for their own use. The school became a general barracks for the men, while the officers commandeered the inn. The garage became a Militia workshop and the church was pressed into service as a guard post for the Paramilitary detail on duty. Then on the flat farming land across the river, coils of barbed wire were dragged to form an oblong enclosure, with a prefabricated watchtower at each end: and that afternoon the first consignment of three hundred prisoners arrived.

These men were in poor shape, for they had been in transit for days without food or water. They spent the rest of that day and the following night in the open, within the oblong of wire: but as it was still autumn and an unseasonably temperate night, they did not suffer unduly.

In the morning each man was given a pannikin of gruel, a boiled potato, and a mug of coffee. A Militia officer told them that henceforth they would eat only if they would work. This work would be in two stages. First they would build accommodation and cooking huts and latrines to meet their own needs. Then they would build accommodation to house later arrivals. There would be many later arrivals. An airstrip was to be built where they stood. By the sweat of their brows and the strength of their backs. The harder they worked, the more they would eat. Any slacking would be judged as sabotage, and dealt with accordingly. Guards would enforce these regulations without mercy.

Then the work began. These three hundred detainees worked for the twelve hours of daylight available to them. In these early days of construction much of the work consisted of removing by hand the thousands of yards of stone walls that encumbered the farmland. For this work the camp administration made available slings which were fastened across the forehead. In these a hundredweight of stones might, at first, be carried by a strong man. But there were, of course, many thousands of tons of stone to be moved and it was soon common for a man to drop with exhaustion, usually towards the end of the day. When this happened he was taken away by the Paramilitary guards and did not return. For the clearing of the dense hedgerows that also covered the land, sickles and hand axes were made available to every second man on condition that he worked on his knees. Any prisoner stupid enough to stand up while still armed was at once dealt with according to regulation. Nevertheless, these tools ensured that the work progressed at a good rate, and soon some acres of land had been cleared. It was now time to begin the building of the main camp.

This was a much more substantial project, for the river had to be diverted. With nothing but hand tools for the job, the work was tough. Mortality was higher than expected, and from time to time a fresh draft of detainees (one consisted entirely of university theologians) would arrive to return the workforce to full strength. In a mudslide towards the end of the diversion, twenty or so men were also buried alive: these too were replaced.

When the river was finally diverted and the land cleared, a double chain-link perimeter fence was erected on steel posts set in concrete, for a length of some hundreds of yards, and a breadth of rather less than that. Internal fences were also erected, though they were less substantial than the perimeter fences, and they were then topped with razor wire. Watchtowers were erected at each corner of the site, and two more on each of the long sides: and then twenty barrack blocks, with timber floors and heated at each end by a wood stove, were erected. A prisoner calculated that each barrack could be expected to accommodate something like 250 people: and only at that point did the proposed scale of the camp begin to become evident.

But first the administrative complex of buildings had to be completed, before the bulk of the labour force could arrive on the site. The principal block was in cavity brick - for the winters in the valley were notoriously severe - and this took some time to complete, although a special unit of bricklayers, on triple rations, was brought in to finish the work. A stout and heavily-insulated extension was added to the school, for the camp guard force of Militia and Paramilitary personnel. A central catering unit in the way of kitchens and refectory was built from prefabricated concrete sections; and a commodious sanitation block beside it. There was

also a transport depot and yard, a punishment block (much of it underground), a second vehicle repair station, a communications centre, a security blockhouse in case of trouble in the camp, a transfer enclosure for the rotation of prisoners, a stores depot for food and clothing and fuel, and an imposing kennels block for the shepherd dogs. There was, finally, a post office, for the use of those prisoners who had not been denied the right of correspondence during the course of their detention.

Then the first transports began to arrive. They arrived to an empty camp: for of the original 300, many had died, and the survivors were rotated out of camp that morning, in case they should pass on any contagious disease, or should infect the newcomers with the dangers of familiarity: or sedition. And for these newcomers conditions were going to be much harder than they had been for the original construction detachment. From an administrative point of view, therefore, it was better that they knew nothing of the easier conditions which had hitherto prevailed.

Each transport consisted of ten closed trucks. As the weather was already frosty and as some of the trucks had again been in transit for days, the condition of the prisoners was often pitiful. On arrival, nevertheless, they were driven from the stinking waggons by club and dog, and processed at once. The first little convoy to rumble over the hills contained minor prisoners: teachers and local government officials for the most part, some guilty on account of their professional calling or recreational interests, others guilty of lesser acts of sabotage or counter-revolutionary agitation, yet more guilty of no more than repeated absenteeism or unauthorised possession of a typewriter. Indeed, some of the teachers had been

the subject of no more than a confidential report to the authorities on the part of one of their colleagues, or scholars, or spouses.

On arrival, each truck-load of these men - they were all men in the first transports - was required to kneel in the early frost, until each individual had been questioned, and his details checked and cross-checked with the records in the administration annexe. Then, when a batch of ten detainees had been processed, it was led to one of the huts in the great compound. Naturally, this took time, but by the end of that morning the first convoy had been entered into residence without significant trouble: the men bedded, and fed, and furnished with waterproofs of the coarsest sort, and boots (one pair between two men) of the type suited to very heavy labour.

No more than five of this first load were classified as religious saboteurs. They arrived in ankle-chains, and were quickly taken under close-arrest to the punishment-block where they would be held for special duties at a later date. Someone whispered that they were members of an especially counter-revolutionary sect called the Daniels, but no one was too sure, and in the melee of registration and processing these five men were quickly forgotten.

At three o'clock that afternoon, the second convoy arrived, and it too was duly processed into the camp. At tea-time the third transport of the day arrived, in a shower of snow and under the harsh glare of the newly installed arc-lights. And so it went on for each day of the following week - three convoys of prisoners, entered and processed into the safe-keeping of the camp administration. Some were minor civil servants, others were retired military officers or policemen or trades unionists. Some were dissident clergy, others were educated linguists or technically-skilled operators of radio transceiving equipment, and yet more were cartographers or

airfield personnel or time-served printers and compositors. Other categories included prisoners guilty of having visited the United States or having relatives, friends or correspondents there, or having been caught in possession of forbidden books and magazines, or of having listened to foreign radio stations. Some more had been convicted of very serious criminal activity in the fields of conspiracy, sabotage and agitation: others were held as no more than hostages for the good and loyal behaviour of their immediate families.

Then construction of the airfield began. Some hundreds of prisoners - usually those in especially bad health - were kept for general duties around the camp: but the remainder were driven to assembly before dawn, counted, fed and watered, and marched in fifty-strong batches into the woods that clung to the surrounding hills. There, armed with saws and axes, they began the task of felling trees, stripping the branches, and dragging the logs downhill towards the site of the runway. Absenteeism, malingering and talking, along with any form of conduct judged to be in the nature of sabotage, were punished on the spot, and severely.

Forty of these squads were in the woods at any one time, totalling two thousand men. Measures were put in place to dissuade any of them from flight. It was announced that any attempt to escape would lead to savage reprisals against the families of such runaways. Tracker-dog units were also stationed in the hills. They would hunt runaways and drag them back for trial and probable execution in the assembly area of the camp.

As a result of these arrangements, there was no more than a handful of individual attempts to escape from the camp, either from the great compound itself or from one of the work-parties in the woods. In each case, the runaway was apprehended, and if not

shot on the spot, was returned for instant execution. As a result, it was generally believed by both administration and prisoners alike that the likelihood of any generalised attempt at a mass escape was slim - far less its probability of success.

This general belief, however, was radically overturned on the first day of the new year. The prisoners had been told that that day would be a day of rest. They were also told that extra rations of food would be made available, as well as an individual ration of tobacco and beer. A delivery of mail had also been promised - except, of course, to those who had been sentenced without right of correspondence. Still, the joyful anticipation of news from the outside world was a communal one, for the next man's news was better than no man's news at all: and in this sense perhaps, more than any other, the camp on New Year's Eve was vibrant with hope and good humour.

At six in the morning, however, the sirens for assembly blew, and a doubled guard with fresh dogs stormed the compound and drove the prisoners from their beds. There had been an upset, it was announced by loudhailer. The trucks bringing the special rations had been attacked and destroyed by bandit elements some forty miles to the east. Fifth Monarchist renegades - one had confessed - had stolen all the tobacco and beer. These same anarchist saboteurs had burned all the loving and personal letters, photographs of children, magazines and small gifts that had been destined for those prisoners to whom they were addressed. And as a result, there would be no holiday. The men would be driven to the woods as usual. Nor would they be fed that morning, for emergency supplies could not be brought up from the coast until late in the afternoon.

Five thousand detainees listened to this in a terrible silence: a silence, a stillness, much more eloquent than any disturbance. Around the perimeter of the assembly ground, the guards lowered their rifles and waited. Even in the watchtowers the ominous presence of some new spirit among the prisoners was evident, and the black snouts of their machine guns ranged the ranks of hungry and very cold prisoners below.

But there was no trouble, though they were kept waiting for another hour, while all prisoners detained on suspicion of Fifth Monarchist sympathies were removed from the ranks and taken away under heavy guard. Only then were the regular squads free to march into the hills and proceed at once with their work.

By now, most of the clearance had been completed. Perhaps ten days remained before the hillsides were entirely bare of trees, and the construction of the runway could begin properly. As a result of this clearance, there was less shelter on the hillsides, and in the heavy frost of that first new day of the year, the workforce suffered greatly from the cold. It was a standing instruction, enforceable by immediate rifle fire or bayonet, that any who fell from hunger or cold or illness was under no circumstances to be offered assistance: and that morning, a larger than usual number were left to lie where they fell. In the evening, it was customary for a senior guard officer to inspect these fallen, and despatch them: in the unlikely, but by no means impossible, event that they were still capable of escape.

This casualty-rate in itself may have angered a number of the foresters. But in the afternoon, when it suddenly became very cold indeed, there was further provocation. A guard detachment on the north east section of the valley commanded that a number of trees be brought together, and a great bonfire made of them. To this

roaring fire guard units were brought in rotation, that they might warm themselves and - it was very quickly rumoured among the prisoners - drink some naval-issue vodka which had been sent up to them by the commandant as a seasonal gift and token of goodwill. Soon afterwards, and just as it was beginning to get dark, the breakout took place.

Four squads - or around two hundred prisoners - had been set to work in a remaining copse of scrub oak some few hundred yards uphill from this hot bonfire. Most of them were still in possession of protective canvas smocks, which gave some protection from the sharp little breeze that knifed through the trees. Most also had stout boots: but none had headgear of any kind at all, though some had bandaged their heads with scraps of cloth. Some - perhaps the weakest - were barefoot. By chance, it was these men who had been ordered to drag the scrub-oak logs to their guardians' fireplace.

By now, it was very close to darkness, and at any moment the sirens could be expected to sound down in the camp, summoning the work parties back from the hillsides. Already the camp was floodlit, and prisoner work-parties and guard-units could be seen scurrying in the harsh light about their business. Indeed, twenty or so of the barefoot and ragged foresters were in the process of throwing logs on their captors' fire when the sirens did scream below.

In that moment, the prisoners hurled themselves on the drunken guards with saws and axes and murdered them with exultant savagery. The massacre was completed in less than two minutes - for the sirens were still howling in the valley below by the time it had ended - and in another two minutes the prisoners, having

stripped the bodies of clothes and weapons, had vanished into the night and the hills.

An hour passed before their flight was suspected, and another hour before it was confirmed. A Militia unit was sent to the location on the hillside where the missing guards were known to have been stationed: when this unit returned, it was with a report of bodies stripped of boots and uniforms and weapons, and the additional intelligence that some of these bodies had been tossed alive on the bonfire that had earlier warmed them so, and whose embers could still be seen from the assembly ground, glowing ever so quietly on the distant hillside.

In the morning the reprisals began. At the count, the commandant of the camp made a statement of some importance. He said that a total of one hundred and ninety seven prisoners were missing. As a result, an equal number of hostages would be identified from among the remaining prisoners. At the end of one week they would be executed, unless information relating to the breakout was forthcoming by the end of that period. The commandant urged reason in this respect, asked for sensible assistance: and then ordered that the daily procedure of the camp get under way as usual. Under a doubled and nervous guard force, the prisoners were then marched in their usual units to the site of the airstrip and began its construction.

This was difficult work, for the site - despite the re-routing of the river - was wet and boggy, and extended over a thousand yards in length and perhaps one hundred in breadth. Logs from the mountains of timber which had been accumulated were fastened behind teams of prisoners, which were then required to drag them by brute force to the distant corners of the site. This alone was slow

and heavy work, for the hemp ropes slipped and broke, and in the heavy mud the hauling teams stumbled and fell despite the warm encouragement of the guards with their rifle butts and clubs. But log by log the timber was hauled from the hillsides, and on the bog an army of other prisoners laid them in the form of a lattice base on which - some suggested - a layer of stone would later be laid. No one knew, however, where that stone might come from.

At lunchtime it had begun to rain heavily, and the workforce rested for a time. Food was brought: coarse black bread, for the most part, of the sort that had in recent weeks become the staple foodstuff of the prisoners. And then the terrible work began again; worse than the morning, for it soon began to rain more heavily than ever. At one point a strange rumour swept the length of the workforce: there had been a rising in Scotland. Some miners had seized their village and set off a rebellion throughout their county. Pitched battles were raging in the snow-covered hills of Scotland's mining districts, and the smoke of the burning coal fields could be seen fifty miles distant.

But no one knew where this rumour came from: and anyway nobody knew if there was any truth in it at all. Still, it swept and reswept the mighty workforce, until replaced by a better one: and if nothing else, a rumour such as this took the mind off the rain and the mud and the hunger.

By the evening assembly, no information had been forthcoming about the breakout. The hostage-selections were therefore made, and the chosen group penned without overhead shelter in a small barbed wire compound that had been erected during the day. Then the remainder of the prisoners were fed and driven to their huts in a grim silence.

That night was an extremely cold one, for the privilege of heating fuel had been withdrawn from the prisoner accommodation. When the prisoners were assembled for the morning count, it was quickly established that 17 of the hostages had died overnight, or perhaps killed themselves: it was not immediately clear which was the case. Overnight too, a dozen gibbets had been erected at the eastern side of the assembly ground: and it was supposed by the shivering mass of prisoners that after the count there would be killings.

And indeed the count was nearly complete when the first batch of hostages was dragged from its pen. One scrawny old professor, mad with the cold, was screaming for help when he was clubbed down. A second - a Daniel, people said, from a Cornish commune in the early days of the Protectorate - walked with a stately measure and looked around him with scorn and immense courage. Another eight of their fellows were likewise escorted or hauled from the pen: and when each had been allocated a gibbet, a Militia officer asked by loudhailer for information which might lead to the arrest of the criminal runaways. This appeal lasted for five minutes, and it was followed by a profound silence the length of the valley. Some birds shrieked somewhere, but there was no other sound whatsoever.

But there were to be no executions that day. The prisoners rose in bloody rebellion, and took control of the camp. By that afternoon, it - and nine others on the Welsh-English border - was in the hands of the rebels. Fifty thousand enemies of the Protectorate were at extremely dangerous liberty.

At dusk, a light aircraft flew very low above the camp. It made six passes in all. On each pass a lamp flashed red-green-white. To

this, from the darkened and silent camp below, there was no response. Soon the aircraft went away. Then it began to snow heavily the length of the border.

And that snowfall was to be of a decisive character for events almost immediately to come.