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January 18, 2018

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The subject of this interview has been identified as Finbar Cafferkey, who died fighting in the Battle of Bakhmut on 19 April 2023.

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An Interview From The Front

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Jamie Goldrick chats to an Irish volunteer who traveled East to volunteer with the YPG in the fight against ISIS. He chats about his motivations, life in Rojava and the realities of day-to-day life on the front-lines in Syria.

Can you describe your immediate surroundings right now as you type this?

I'm sat on the veranda of a building that's being used as a hospital, in a town just east of Raqqa. The staff come and have the craic when they're not busy, and it's quiet now most of the time. The tea keeps coming. About half of the buildings across the street are flattened. There's a constant drone of generators, and the fumes mix with the smell of burning rubbish. Civilians are moving back into the town so the streets are busier than when I arrived here first.

What (and why) made you want to head over to fight with the YPG?

I'd known about the history of the Kurdish people, and I'd long admired their resistance to the violent states that control their territory. When I learnt that the Islamic State was being facilitated financially and militarily by the Turkish state

in its attacks on the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, I realised this was only made possible by the connivance of its NATO allies in the EU, who turn a blind eye in return for Turkey stopping Syrian refugees reaching Europe.

As an EU citizen, this made me complicit in the horrors perpetrated by the Islamic State in the territory it controls, and I wasn't happy about that. When I researched the efforts being made in Rojava to combat sectarianism and misogyny and promote a form of democracy with a far greater depth than we know in Europe, I saw that the fight here was not just about the current emergency situation.

After that, it was just a matter of deciding how I could help. I thought for a long time about that.

How are you (or foreign volunteers) received generally?

Generally well, sometimes very much so. People are happy that others think enough of what they're doing to want to come and help. Some have told me that seeing foreigners coming to give a hand was a factor in deciding to ratchet up their own involvement.

Can you recount the exact moment you made your final decision to head over?

I was repairing fencing in some fields overlooking Clew Bay, sometimes working with others and sometimes by myself. This was a particularly isolated and beautiful spot, and I spent a lot of time turning the question over in my head when I worked alone.

Finishing up one day coming toward the end of the job, I found myself wondering what I would work at when it was finished. Then I realised I knew already, and sent the email that evening.

Had you told anybody in Ireland?

I told a couple of friends. I was wary of parting from my family on bad terms so didn't tell any of them. I regret that, I should have taken that chance.

What did you pack?

A good pair of boots, my Home Sweet Home t-shirt, Ursula Le Guin and Robert Fisk.

You mentioned a HSH tshirt ,have you been involved in politics before this, and had has this had an impact on your decision to head over?

Very much so. Being involved with Shell to Sea was a real eye-opener for me, regarding how the country is run and on whose behalf. What I saw happening in the rest of the world started to make a lot more sense when I realised that state/corporate collusion and violence is more the norm than the exception.

No state, whether Irish or Islamic, is fond of being told no, and the people of Kilcommon know as well as the Kurds that citizens' rights don't count for much when there's coin involved.

There's a good chance that what's on offer here in Rojava allows us a way out of the global ecological, economic and political mess of a system we've inherited; enough of a chance to make it worth fighting for.

How did you get there?

After my application was accepted, I flew to Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan, where I rang a number I'd been given. I met my contact, stayed a couple of days there, and then I and other international volunteers were driven to the mountains near the Syrian border.

How did you get to Iraq?

I flew from Ireland, via Germany.

Can you describe your journey into Syria? How did you get over the border?

We arrived at a secluded spot in the mountains. We then joined a larger group of people, some of whom were civilians and others who were also joining the YPG, or returning to it after a break. After dark, we set off walking west through the hills. It was a busy route; all the governments surrounding Ro-

java are blockading it, so people have to walk. It was mostly easy enough going.

After a few hours, we arrived in Rojava and soon we met the pick-ups waiting for us. We were all taken for a bite to eat, then the civilians wished us luck, and we were driven to the Academy just before dawn.

Was it dangerous?

The biggest danger was arrest by the Peshmerga, the soldiers of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). They're allied with the Turkish state, so are helping enforce the blockade by preventing people moving across the border. Occasionally they catch some of us, but we had no bother that night.

Is the YPG not allied with the Peshmerga?

No. Although they cooperate sometimes (eg against the Islamic State), for years the policy of the KRG has been one of cooperation with the Turkish state and thus hostility to Rojava.

This has to do with the battle for the hearts and minds of Kurds in all parts of Kurdistan, between the democratic confederalist model (Rojava) or the Kurdish nationalist version of your typical Middle Eastern kleptocracy, run as always by a pliable strongman (the KRG).

What were your initial feelings when you arrived?

We were all on a high, as well as wrecked.

Did you engage in training? What did this involve?

Our basic training lasted a month. We had an hour of physical training every morning at dawn, followed by Kurdish lessons until lunch. Afternoons were either lectures or military training.

Was it tough?

The physical training could be tough at times, as could the more realistic of the military exercises, but the pace of the rest of it was more relaxed.

Where there many other Westerners there?

A lot more needs to be done in Ireland to give women a level playing field, starting with education.

There are different YPG training academies; ours was solely for foreigners, so the only Kurds around were our instructors.

What reasons would you say most Western Volunteers are in Rojava for? i.e for support of YPG and Rojava/ for ideological reasons/ purely to fight ISIS?

Most of us are some combination of all of these. A majority have been involved in political activism in our own countries and are well aware of and supportive of the aims of the Rojava Revolution.

The main focus of a substantial minority who come is simply to fight the Islamic State, although many of these become strong supporters of the social revolution when they learn more about it.

What countries were they from?

Most international volunteers are from Europe, although the US is probably the single biggest source country. My classmates were from China, Australia, France, England, Belgium, Denmark and the US, but that's just a fraction of the nationalities in the YPG.

Was there many drop-outs during training?

None. A handful have to repeat the training cycle because of sickness or injury, but everyone's warned about what's expected of them so it's rarely an issue.

Do your posts and positions vary?

There's a lot of variety.

Can you describe your typical day in the YPG?

Lots of waiting, lots of tea. It can be impossible to know what the day will bring, but these two are constants. Most nights I take a turn on sentry duty, maybe the day too depending on where we are. Sometimes we train or go over our drills. I deal with the waiting by reading books on my laptop. I've no problem with the tea.

How do these days vary?

The Raqqa operation involved much more people than the previous operations in Tabqa and Manbij, stationed in many

lines in-depth at and directly behind the front. These lines became concentric as the city was encircled.

This was to avoid the frequent Islamic State attacks behind the front line which marked the previous campaigns, either by infiltration or stay-behinds.

In practice, for those of us on the ground this involved simply occupying and holding a position as part of one of these lines, and thus a lot of waiting. Occasionally they would attempt to push out near us and we would go to high alert, less often our position would be directly attacked. So mostly it meant a lot of waiting, and very occasionally pushing forward into the city.

Can you describe any events in combat?

The last operation I was on in in Raqqa reminded me of what I've read of the latter stages of the Easter Rising. It involved pushing forward through wrecked buildings and then through holes in the walls of more intact ones, which often felt like being a rat in a hole. The jihadists were waiting at one point and ambushed our unit, killing one of our number.

We retreated back through the building, held them off through the night and were brought back to the rear the next day after handing over to an Arab unit of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

I can admire the Islamic State fighters' courage, but given the kind of people they are and what they've done to their victims, that's rarely to the forefront when I think of them.

Have you lost any comrades?

Yes, *Sehid Gabar* from my unit and lads I knew in others.

Raqqa has just fallen, what is the mood like there with the YPG?

Pride, tinged with sadness.

How have the last number of months been for you mentally?

It can be tough mentally. The deaths of friends hit particularly hard.

Raqqa had been compared to Dresden after World War II in the media here, is this true?

Almost. A lot of the buildings that haven't been flattened are now just concrete shells because of blast. The blockade means that necessary building material can't get in, so hopefully pressure will grow to end it.

What next for Raqqa, are people returning to the city? How are people coping with the blockade?

Civilians are returning en masse, but mines are still claiming victims. As regards the blockade, people are just making do. It's difficult to plan around, some goods are allowed in and then not. It often seems spiteful, e.g. there seems to be a tendency to allow in consumer goods but not the machinery that would allow them to be produced here.

This is more or less a continuation of the regime's policy for the region, which prevented industrial development and enforced a colonial economy, simply as a producer of wheat and oil. Much of it reminds me of what I've read of the Israeli blockade of Gaza.

From your experience, can you describe how society is organised in Rojava?

My exposure to civilian society here has been limited so far, but the strong emphasis on female empowerment is obvious. From what I've seen, much care is also taken to involve members of ethnic minorities in both military and civilian contexts.

Have you had much contact with the YPJ? Could Ireland learn anything from the Kurdish women's experience and their position in Kurdish society?

We work with the YPJ all the time, most of those I've come across have been snipers. Seeing the level of of female empowerment here has brought home exactly how much the token efforts being made by the Irish state, supposedly to help mitigate institutionalised sexism, are very much of the dishwater variety.