

William Long and Alcatraz

by

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William Long was a native of Mifflinburg, PA, and one of the principal players in the 1962 movie, “Escape from Alcatraz.” In my recent visit to the famous prison, now a tourist site, Bill’s voice and his description of the event is described on the tour tape given to each visitor as they enter the prison. He describes how he tapped the papier-mâché head lying in the bunk, discovering the most infamous escape in the annals of the United States Prison System. In January, 2008, I interviewed Bill about his experiences on the “Rock.” Here is my account from that interview. Sadly, Bill Long passed away in Mifflinburg on July 17, 2010.

William Long and Alcatraz

On June 11, 1962, one of the most dramatic prison escapes occurred from the Alcatraz Prison, which is built on an island one and one fourth miles offshore from San Francisco, California. The prison was originally built in 1858 as a military fortress, and housed military prisoners and deserters during the Civil War. After the War Alcatraz formally became a military prison. On January 1, 1934, the facility



William Long, ID picture on entering prison service

nicknamed “The Rock,” was transferred to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, with a capacity of 250 men judged to be the most incorrigibly dangerous in America. Al Capone, Robert Stroud (the “Birdman of Alcatraz”), Machine Gun Kelly, Doc Barker, Alvin “Creepy Karpis,” and Mickey Cohen were inmates of Alcatraz, and after the modifications completed by the Federal Bureau, was viewed as an inescapable facility. Prisoners made

numerous attempts to escape over the years, but until June 11, 1962, none was successful. Now, no one is sure.

On this date two brothers, John and Clarence Anglin, along with Frank Morris, made their way from their cell to the island's shoreline, boarded a self-made raft from prison issue raincoats, and were never seen again. The following story leaves it to you to decide if they successfully traversed the 50-degree water against a current traveling into the Pacific Ocean at four to five miles per hour, and reached the mainland a mile and a quarter away.

The movie, titled "Escape from Alcatraz" and starring Clint Eastwood, is not a documentary, but it does reflect the story with a considerable accuracy. It begins by tracing the story of John Anglin, brother Clarence Anglin, and Frank Morris from their time of arrival at Alcatraz to their escape. The following information is a brief recap of the escape that occurred on June 11, 1962.



Bill Long at the desk and on the phone while at Alcatraz

Shortly after their arrival planning for the great escape began. These inmates noticed that the concrete around the air vent in their cells wall was deteriorating. They also recognized that this air vent, close to the floor and covered with a metal grill, connected to a utility corridor which contained a ventilation shaft leading to the roof. After close inspection they concluded that if the cell's air vent grill were removed and the hole beyond enlarged, it could be possible get to the utility corridor, climb up the ventilation shaft, remove the shaft's cover on the roof, and escape. With the use of improvised tools, they worked at removing the concrete surrounding the cell's grill cover

and over a period of months were able to create a passage large enough to squeeze through. To conceal their night work an elaborate scheme was developed with other inmates who protected their activity. They placed fake figures in their beds while they worked at the vent hole and then on obstacles in the vertical shaft beyond. Each inmate would return to his cell before the guards made the next inspection round. At the conclusion of a night's work the inmates concealed the hole with cardboard with a painted depiction of the vent cover, made with art supplies secured from other prisoners, making it appear as if the original grill was in place and undisturbed. Hair from the barbershop was brought to the cell over time and stored in the vent shaft. Papier-mâché heads were made from toilet paper and the hair to simulate the inmates.

After some six months of work, the escape began. The look-alike heads were taken from the airshaft and with pillows were placed in the beds to appear as if the inmates were in their bunks sleeping. Frank Morris, John Anglin and Clarence Anglin then crawled into the utility corridor, up the shaft, and unto the roof. They carefully descended from the roof, crossed additional barriers, and reached the island's rocky shoreline. The inmates then launched the homemade raft, which had also been hidden in the airshaft, and set out for the mainland one and a quarter miles away. The raft was apparently made from raincoats secured from other prisoners and sewed and glued together with products smuggled from other inmates or perhaps other shops within the prison.

The following morning at the 7:00 am prisoner count, the Clint Eastwood movie depicts a guard approaching the cell of one of the escaped inmates. Seeing he is still asleep, the officer orders the prisoner to get up. The inmate fails to respond and the guard immediately calls the officer in charge. Lieutenant Long approaches the cell, reaches in to tap the pillow of the inmate and the head rolls onto the floor, a startling moment that alerts everyone that an escape has occurred.

As the investigation proceeds, it is quickly determined that the inmates left from the water's edge sometime between lights out the night before and 7:00 am the following morning. To this day, the only evidence of the escape from The Rock was the discovery of parts of the raincoat life raft, a few papers with personal addresses on them, and a few other minor things, such as a homemade oar. Since the frigid water causes hypothermia and the swift current makes it improbable that one could swim for shore without being pulled out into the Pacific Ocean, many believe they did not survive. But no one can be sure.

Bill Long and Union County

The interesting part of this story is that, in real life, Lieutenant Long, the person who tried to awaken the inmate by tapping his pillow, was none other than



Bill Long fishing, with the Alcatraz employee residence buildings in the background. The people in the photo are employees at the prison. These buildings were destroyed under the Indian occupation of the grounds.

William Long, a 1942 graduate of Mifflinburg High School and a 1948 graduate of Lock Haven State Teachers College. He was a lifelong resident of Mifflinburg. Bill was an employee of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and assigned to Alcatraz at the time, beginning in 1954. His wife, Jean, was also employed on The Rock as its Postmaster while assigned there. Bill Long appeared in several documentaries, including the Fox Network's "America's Most Wanted" program, starring John Walsh, in October 1998, and "Unsolved Mysteries" in 1993.

Mr. Long lived at the top of the hill, 780 Quarry Road, in the stone home overlooking Mifflinburg. Bill's wife, the former Jean Knepshield, Mifflinburg High School "Class of 47", is now deceased.

During the June 11, 1962 escape, Alcatraz was under the leadership of Warden Olin Blackwell. Mr. Blackwell came to the Rock in 1961 and, upon its closing on March 21, 1963 he was transferred to the Lewisburg Federal Prison to assume its leadership during the years 1963-1965. It is also to be noted that Mr. Blackwell's son was married to Miss Barbara Oldt for a brief period of time. She was a 1947 graduate of Mifflinburg High School and its High School Librarian for many years. William Long was eventually

transferred back to Lewisburg and returned to his native Union County for his retired years.

Sources

1. Fox Network Documentary “America’s Most Wanted” “Alcatraz-The Escape.” October, 1998.
2. NBC Documentary “Unsolved Mysteries”, “Alcatraz-The Rock.” starring Robert Stack 1993.
3. “Escape from Alcatraz.” starring Clint Eastwood. Paramount Pictures. 1979.
4. Personal interview with William Long, January 8, 2008.

