

# Breakout!

What do you do with prisoners when you want to ensure they never escape? From 1934 to 1963, you sent them to Alcatraz. U.S. officials had created this prison to be escape-proof. Each inmate lived behind bars that were resistant to cutting and bending. Armed guards stood in watchtowers, ready to shoot inmates who attempted to flee. And most importantly, the prison was on a rocky island in the frigid, rough waters of San Francisco Bay. With the nearest land over a mile away, inmates knew they had almost no chance of escaping. Nevertheless, a few still tried to break out.



One of the most famous and audacious of these attempts occurred in 1962. The four prisoners involved spent months preparing. Little by little, each man secretly dug a hole through the moisture-damaged concrete wall at the back of his cell. These holes gave the prisoners access to a narrow hallway. From there, they could reach the roof undetected. But escaping the prison building would only be the beginning—they would still need a way off the island. The men solved this problem by collecting dozens of prison-issued raincoats and using them to build life preservers and an inflatable raft. To buy themselves time on the night of the breakout, they wanted lifelike forms in their beds to keep the guards from noticing their absence. So they created papier-mâché heads with real human hair to place on their pillows. All along, they carefully hid their work and took turns watching for guards.

One June night after lights out, the prisoners finally put their plan into action. One of the four men soon discovered that he could not get through the hole he had made in his cell, so the others left him behind. The three remaining men climbed up to the roof and crawled down a pipe to the outside of the building. Carefully avoiding the bright spotlights that constantly scanned the island at night, they made their way to shore and boarded their raft.

The next morning, guards realized that the men were not in their cells. A massive manhunt ensued, but officials found only remnants of the inmates' escape implements and a few of their belongings. Many people wondered what happened to the prisoners. Did they reach land, or did they drown in the bay?

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## Quiz Questions

1. What is the main idea of this story?

- a. A massive manhunt took place after inmates escaped from Alcatraz.
- b. Alcatraz was a high-security prison that was supposed to be escape-proof.
- c. Some prisoners attempted an audacious escape from Alcatraz.

2. What did prisoners use to make lifelike forms in their beds?

- \_\_\_ a. piles of pillows
- \_\_\_ b. prison-issued raincoats
- \_\_\_ c. papier-mâché heads

3. What does **ensued** mean in this story?

- \_\_\_ a. followed
- \_\_\_ b. failed
- \_\_\_ c. noticed

4. What type of prisoners got sent to Alcatraz?

- \_\_\_ a. people from San Francisco
- \_\_\_ b. people who were dangerous
- \_\_\_ c. people with good behavior

5. List three things the prisoners did to prepare for their escape.

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6. Select the best word for each definition.

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|------------|----------------------------|
| audacious  | tool used for certain jobs |
| ensure     | looked quickly             |
| scanned    | able to be filled with air |
| inflatable | make certain               |
| implement  | daring                     |

7. Move the events into the correct order.

Four prisoners started to dig holes through the cell walls.

Guards realized the prisoners were not in their cells.

The prisoners boarded their raft and left Alcatraz.

The prisoners built a raft out of raincoats.

The prisoners put fake heads on their pillows.

8. How were the prisoners able to avoid being seen as they escaped?

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9. Write three facts from the story that support this statement: Alcatraz inmates knew they had almost no chance of escaping.

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