

**Alcatraz—the toughest and most feared federal prison in the United States.**

*Built on an isolated island surrounded by the perilous waters of the San Francisco Bay, Alcatraz was used to house the nation's most dangerous criminals. In its 95 years of service, nobody escaped the prison alive—at least that's what the "official" records say. However, in 1962, three men managed to outsmart the incredibly tight security system and escape. Did they make it out alive? Since they were never caught, no one knows for sure. Most believe that they drowned while trying to cross the three miles of water separating them from freedom. But even now, 50 years later, the federal government remains on the lookout for the three men. What happened to them is an enduring mystery...*

**50 years later and they are still searching...**

# Escape From Alcatraz

June 12, 1962, began like any other day in the federal penitentiary of Alcatraz. The guards made their morning rounds as usual, carefully checking each cell to make sure all of the prisoners were where they were supposed to be. It was a routine that the guards performed dutifully, even though no one believed it was really necessary. Alcatraz was the most secure prison in all of America, after all. Escape was impossible.

Or so they thought.

At a certain instant on that foggy morning, an unexpected event took place when a startling shout was heard. Prisoners who turned around fast enough to see what was going on caught sight of a guard sprinting down the corridor. In minutes, dozens of guards along with the chief warden converged on the area. Soon the prisoners learned the meaning of the commotion: three inmates had mysteriously disappeared from their cells. How, nobody knew.

At 9:30 the previous night, June 11, the guards had locked each of the cells. Throughout the night, they kept tabs on all the prisoners and they did not notice any suspicious movement. All of the inmates appeared to be sleeping soundly.

But now, three of them had vanished into thin air. In their beds were dummies fashioned from plaster. The night guard had seen these fake forms during his rounds but

in the weak lighting thought they were real. Now it was clear that the escapees had left sometime during the night. How did they get out and where were they now?

## The Rock

Its name speaks for itself. For decades, America's worst criminals felt a chill down their spines at the mere mention of Alcatraz. It was home to such gangsters as Chicago underworld leader Al "Scarface" Capone (see *Zman* #30), George "Machine Gun" Kelly, Alvin "Creepy" Karpavicz and others. An old military prison, "The Rock," as the prison came to be known, was the only place trusted to hold the "worst of the worst."

Although Alcatraz closed in 1963 after 30 years of service as a federal prison, its legend lives on. A whole constellation of myths grew up around it. Today, the former prison is one of the greatest tourist attractions in the San Francisco area, attracting a million and half visitors per year.

The island was first named by Spanish Lieutenant Juan Manuel de Ayala in 1755. He called it *Isla de los Alcatraces*, meaning Island of the Pelicans, due to the large numbers of pelicans that roosted there. In 1847, the US Army recognized the strategic importance of the island as a protector of the entire bay. This became especially significant after the discovery of gold in California in 1848, which brought hundreds of thousands of treasure-seeking newcomers in 1849. Many of the "Forty-Niners," as these people came to be known, traveled by ship from Panama or sailed around South America. They arrived in the San Francisco Bay. As news of the gold spread around the world, the US government became concerned that foreign powers might be tempted to lay claim to the territory by force.

The government sponsored a series of studies of the site and in 1853 army engineers began building a fort and lighthouse on the island. The fort was armed with over 100 powerful long-range cannons and

four massive, 36,000-pound super-cannons. These huge guns were capable of sinking ships from a distance of three miles. In all, Alcatraz' cannons could fire 6,949 pounds of cannonballs in one salvo.

Only once in history were the island's armaments called into action. This occurred when a single, 400-pound cannonball was fired on an unidentified foreign warship. The shot missed the target, but it was sufficient to convince the would-be invader to reconsider his plans and turn away.

In 1861, the US Army decided to take advantage of the isolated location and also use it as a detention center for prisoners of war. Confederate soldiers who were taken captive in the Civil War were held there first, followed in 1898 by prisoners of the Spanish-American War. After the catastrophic earthquake that destroyed San Francisco in 1906 (see *Zman* #5), hundreds of the city's prisoners were brought to Alcatraz for safekeeping.

In 1912, the Army built a prison on the island for soldiers who had been court-martialed and sentenced to serve time in a military jail. The prison earned a reputation for harsh treatment. The internees were divided into three classes according to the severity of their offenses.

Third-class prisoners were not permitted to access the prison's library. They were not allowed any visitors or even to send and receive letters. They could not even talk to each other. They were forced to perform hard labor, had to carry a 12-pound stone around their necks and their feet were shackled. Some were imprisoned in small cells and were fed only a bit of bread and water. All classes of prisoners were barred from remaining in their cells during the day, except those sentenced to these smallest cells.

Most of Alcatraz' military prisoners were deserters or soldiers guilty of minor offenses. They were generally incarcerated there on a short-term basis. Those convicted of burglary or murder, however, were sent there to serve long sentences.



The Prohibition Era saw some of the most violent gangs in operation. Here: Federal agents dispose of confiscated illegal moonshine.

For the city of San Francisco, the bleak prison was a stain on the beauty of their city. They were upset that it was the first welcome that arrivals to their ports would see. But there was nothing they could do about it.

With the onset of the Great Depression in the beginning of the 1930s, though, the army was forced to shut down the facility. It was too costly to maintain. Instead, the prison and control of the island were transferred to the Justice Department. To its new owners, the grounds were a valuable gift at the perfect time.

## Most Secure Prison in America

The Great Depression also brought with it a wave of crime. Although many blame this on the failings of Prohibition, evidence does not back this up. Whatever the case may be, the federal government had a large number of violent and dangerous criminals to deal with. Many of these had a history of escaping from other prison facilities.

To make matters worse, organized crime was operating at an all-time high. Law enforcement agents often engaged in shoot-outs with heavily armed thugs, and just as often the police were not only outnumbered but outgunned. Law-abiding Americans demanded that their government take steps to protect the citizenry. America



View of San Francisco from Alcatraz Island.