



Breaking Out

The Most Ridiculously Daring Prison Escapes

They had no doubts. The second they were led inside the prison walls they knew they would escape. Even if their confines were maximum security. Even if they had no idea how.

No cell, no facility, was too secure for them. They escaped from isolated islands, from ancient castle fortresses and from the most modern, high-security prisons.

They escaped over razor-barbed fences and under electrified ones. They escaped by foot, by boat... and even by helicopter! Some escaped for their lives. Others for the thrill of it.

Read about some of the most audacious prison escapes in recent memory.

- Moshe Miller

It was the escape of the century. Literally. For the first time in its 100-year history, prisoners had escaped from the Clinton Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in remote upstate New York near the Canadian border. A perfect storm of institutional incompetence, insider assistance and the brazen determination of two convicted killers led to a breakout worthy of a fiction thriller and one of the largest manhunts in New York's history.

At 5:30 AM on Saturday, June 6, 2015, inmates Richard Matt, 47, and David Sweat, 34, were discovered missing. Large rectangular holes had been sawed into the steel walls of their respective, adjoining cells. In a classic prison-escape tactic, each of the inmates had stuffed his bed with sweat-shirts in the shape of a sleeping person to avoid detection by nighttime prison guard checks.

From there, furious guards traced their steps through an inter-wall catwalk to a large steam pipe, which had also been cut open with a hacksaw. Amazingly, from there, they were able to find their way through the plumbing to a manhole 400 feet outside the penitentiary walls. The manhole had been locked with a chain, but using tools brought along in a soft guitar case, the fugitives had sliced through it and emerged onto the streets of Dannemora, New York—and to their freedom.

At first, guards believed the duo was still stuck somewhere within the prison's walls. Only at 8:30 AM did officers notice the opened manhole cover and realize that Matt and Sweat had exited from it.

It didn't take long for investigators to realize that a huge amount of planning had gone into the breakout. In fact, it was eventually reported that the two had actually conducted "dry runs" of the escape and made important preparations, like pre-cutting the steam pipe so it would be cool by the time they needed to crawl through it!

It was also apparent that it simply could not have been accomplished without help from "the inside"—from one or more of the prison workers. How else could they have

gotten steel-cutting tools and other essentials for a complicated escape? Yet, even then it was so hard to believe that Governor Andrew Cuomo said during a press conference, "I'd be shocked if a correction guard was involved in this."

Local, state and federal police swarmed the little town of Dannemora, population 5,000, but Matt and Sweat were nowhere to be found. "I'd like to tell the residents that they're safe now, but I can't," commented one of the officers leading the manhunt.

The townspeople had good reason to fear. Richard Matt, 47, had been in trouble throughout his life and jailed for a series of violent crimes. He also had a record of escape. As a youth he was confined in a group home due to thievery. He escaped. In 1986, he was serving time at Erie County Jail in Pennsylvania for assault when he escaped and avoided recapture for four days until he was finally found hiding out at his brother's apartment. In 1997 he was paroled, but immediately proceeded to cross another line with the brutal murder of an elderly man who had fired him from his job. Then, he fled to Mexico, where he fatally stabbed another American in a fight outside a bar. He was arrested there and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He tried to escape the Mexican jail as well, making it to the roof before guards caught him.

In 2007, he was extradited to the US



Investigators with bloodhounds on the grounds of the Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York, where the escape occurred.

where he was convicted of killing his former boss back in 1997. He was considered so dangerous that snipers were stationed on the roof of the courthouse. He was sentenced to 25 years to life.

His partner David Sweat started out his criminal career as a thief as well and graduated to murder when, one day, a deputy sheriff approached him to inquire about a cache of weapons he was believed to have stolen. Sweat, and an accomplice, shot and killed the deputy. To avoid the death penalty for murdering a law enforcement officer, he made a plea deal and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

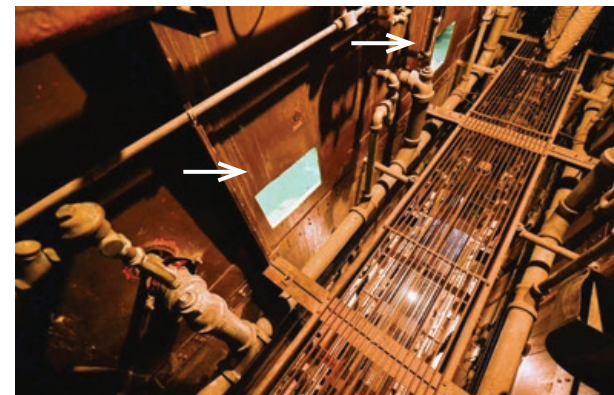
The killers had escaped into a rural area, which posed special challenges. There were very few security cameras scrutinizing the streets of the small town, so there was no video record of where the fugitives might have fled. The maximum security prison had few, if any, security cameras recording the outside of the complex, hard as that is to believe. There were not many cameras inside the prison, either. The catwalk that the fugitives used to get to the steam pipe hadn't been patrolled by guards in years. Additionally, two lookout points were close to the manhole the convicts escaped from—but they were typically unguarded during the hours that the escape happened.

Within days, 450 law enforcement officers from various government agencies had expanded their search from the area immediately surrounding Dannemora, crossing the nearby Vermont border to the east and also heading north toward Canada. Officials were especially worried that the pair would try to cross the largely unguarded international border.

As police mounted roadblocks and combed across northern New York with bloodhounds, the escape quickly became a national sensation. Media attention focused on one particular prison guard, Joyce Mitchell. She worked as a seamstress in the prison and was arrested on accusations of helping the criminals by hiding materials



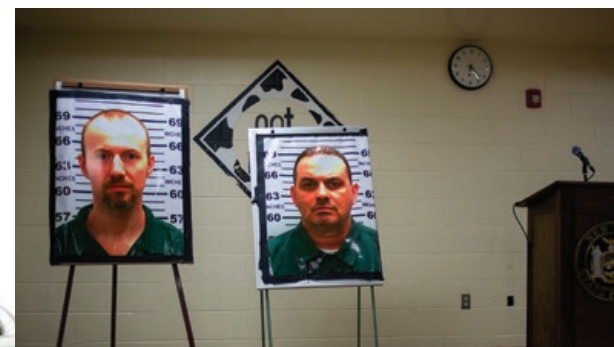
The escapees cut rectangular holes in the steel walls of their cells and hid them behind their beds, stuffed with blankets.



The catwalk behind the cell wall. Note the side-by-side rectangular holes leading into the space, once from each cell.



Manhole used by the prisoners to escape to the outside.



The two escapees' identities are publicized by police. Both Richard Matt (r) and David Sweat (l) are cold-blooded killers.