

The Alcatraz Story

BACKGROUND

The background on how and why this took place is a reflection on the pressures and anxieties of 6 young men, who in 1957 were wondering about their future. We probably had the right chemistry for such a prank, and we really never thought about how it would go over with the authorities. The origin of the idea occurred one afternoon, after a hard football practice and a discussion of how we were going to get into the college of our future. We looked back at the school with its aluminum window frames and institutional façade and someone said it reminded them of a prison. Someone else said “did you ever see the aerial photo of Alcatraz”, which had its name on the roof, and we were off to the races.

First we had to make a dry run and procure measurements. We wanted the project to reflect professionalism and that meant careful planning. Our first night visit to the roof revealed several obstacles: Getting up on top of the roof (which was three stories high), not falling off the roof, a slate tile at a steep angle, not cracking so many tiles as to attract attention and not being caught by the janitors or the patrolling Ladue police.

Next, we used the drafting class to start laying out the letter blocking across the roof. When we finally did the paint job, the task of spacing out big letters upside down while being tethered to a rope proved very daunting.

We organized our team. Responsibilities included photographing the exercise, sending a story to Life Magazine, procuring the rope and paint, etc. We decided on a water-based paint; but to our surprise, the team member procured an oil-based paint that could not be removed. We debated misspelling Alcatraz to further piss-off the administration; but we were also starting to take a certain pride in our plan, so we rejected that idea.

D-DAY

The careful preparation led to a confident team that was well focused on the task at hand and capable of rapid adjustments in the face of those anomalies that always surface in even the most carefully planned operations.

Access to the building had been previously ensured by making sure a ground floor remote window was left slightly ajar for easy access. We were well familiar with the quiet, minimally lit hallways and quickly made our way with our equipment. Again, careful planning precluded having to stage any of our gear--thus avoiding any premature detection.

In the initial recon visit, we had identified a janitor closet on the second floor which had an access ladder and hatch that opened directly onto the roof very near the site of our planned effort. Here, too, we anticipated access demands and made sure the door could be opened. Equipment was quickly passed up the ladder to a flat staging area.

The night was calm and while cloudless was not well illuminated since we had intentionally picked a night that was ideal for cover operations. It was at this point that we encountered the first unanticipated problem. The roof seemed much steeper than we originally thought. While we had reconned the area, we actually had not been on the peak and over onto the target area side. We, of course, had the ropes but had thought we would not really have to use them. Fortunately, we had a mitigating factor that was to be key in the success of the operation. This was that we were about three-quarters of the way through the painting when we first heard the idling engine in the parking lot approximately 200 yards away. It was a cop car on regular patrol at the school. We immediately froze and remained silent as the car slowly began a sweep of the lot. Their spotlight came on and began sweeping the area. John Garfield or (later) Clint Eastwood in *Escape from Alcatraz*-- the parallels are striking. It seemed like hours before they slowly pulled away.

We quickly finished the job, gathered our supplies and went back down the ladder and out of the building. We left behind a job that was not only well planned but professionally executed. It was not until the next morning that the full impact and scope of the effort was brought home to us as we drove up the hill in the subdivision behind the school and first viewed our work.