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## Documentary tells dramatic story of Maze prison break 25 years on

By Allison Morris

20/09/08



Escapes: Bobby Storey, left, Brendan 'Bik' McFarlane, centre and Gerry Kelly stand outside what remains of Margaret Thatcher's breakers yard – the Maze prison

ON September 25 1983 republican prisoners staged a mass break-out at the top security Maze prison. Now as the 25th anniversary approaches some of those who took part reveal the dramatic events surrounding the escape for a new documentary. Allison Morris reports

Described as Margaret Thatcher's breakers yard, the Maze prison on the outskirts of

Lisburn was hailed as the most secure detention facility in western Europe.

Such was the scale of the security operation at the prison, situated inside Long Kesh British military base, that it cost a whopping £42 million a year to run.

Movement of the 400-plus loyalist and republican prisoners was strictly controlled and the level of security and location of the site was all geared toward making

escape impossible.

That was until September 25 1983 when 38 IRA prisoners housed in H-block 7 put in motion an escape plot that had been months in the planning.

After taking over the wing by overpowering the guards with handguns smuggled into the prison, the break-out – the biggest since the Second World War escape from Colditz camp – began in earnest.

Using an internal food lorry as transportation, the would-be escapees made it as far as the jail's final gate

before a miscalculation in timing scuppered plans to simply drive to freedom unhindered.

The IRA men, some of whom were now dressed in prison warden's uniforms, ended up in a violent struggle with Maze staff who were coming on duty.

During the fracas one prison officer, James Ferris (43), was stabbed with a chisel and died after suffering a massive coronary.

With the 25th anniversary of the escape approaching this week, three of the IRA's most senior members have relived the events before, during and in the years after the escape in a documentary Breakout produced by Hotshot films.

Out of the 38 prisoners who broke free, half were recaptured within two days.

Bobby Storey, now Sinn Fein's Belfast chairman, was one of those captured within hours.

He said that regardless of his personal status he felt "euphoric" at having achieved what was previously thought to be impossible.

Nineteen inmates made it to the Republic and four eventually got as far as the United States.

One prisoner has never been seen or heard of again.

Brendan Byrne, executive producer of Hot Shot Films, said he had been wanting to make a film about the escape for a number of years but felt until now the timing wasn't right.

"I suppose the 25th anniversary gave an opportunity to tell the story in an historical context.

"What took place at the Maze, regardless of political beliefs, was a remarkable human achievement.

"Had this happened anywhere else in a different political climate it would have been the subject of a best-selling book and a Hollywood blockbuster by now.

"As it is I don't think it has

received the attention that such an event deserves and I would hope that we have portrayed what

happened in an accurate, fair and balanced manner."

North Belfast republicans Gerry Kelly and Brendan 'Bik' McFarlane spent over two years on the run before being captured and extradited from Holland to the Maze in December 1986.

Following the escape Gerry Kelly spent two weeks hiding under floorboards before being transported across the

border and then on to the comment.

“It was a huge event politically but from a personal point of view it was me gaining freedom after being in jail for ten years,” he said.

“I was doing a very long prison sentence at the time, so escaping and seeing a big section of the world was an enormous event for me.

“In Margaret Thatcher’s words it was the biggest crisis in British penal history – she was boasting of this impregnable fortress.

“Ten people had died during the Hunger Strike, there had been six years of protest and she had stated the only way to get out of the prison was in a box.”

Speaking of the changes since the 1983 escape, the now Stormont junior minister said: “I think it puts in perspective the role that prisoners have played politically.

“I had two priorities while in jail, education and escape.

“You can go into jail and come out worse or better and I believe that most republican prisoners chose to use the time to better themselves.”

- Breakout can be seen on BBC1, September 22 at 9pm.



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