

1966: The Blake prison escape



A short history of the miraculous prison break of Soviet double-agent George Blake from a British jail, organised by two libertarian activists.

In 1966, the most notorious prisoner in Britain was sprung from jail. George Blake was a British double-agent serving 42 years for spying for the Soviet Union. At the time this was the longest jail sentence ever imposed by a British court.

For 22 years the truth of his escape remained a secret. Common wisdom held that it must have been a professional operation masterminded by the KGB, the IRA or even the British security services. However in 1988, two radical peace activists revealed that they had rescued Blake from prison and smuggled him out of the country to Eastern Europe.

Michael Randle and Pat Pottle were founder members of the Committee of 100 anti-nuclear direct action group and describe themselves as libertarians and “quasi-anarchists”. In 1962, at the height of the Cold War, they had both been sentenced to 18 months imprisonment for conspiracy to organise the Committee of 100 demonstrations at the nuclear base USAF Wethersfield in Essex. They both had first hand experience of prison and it was their outrage at the “vicious” sentence imposed on Blake that led them to attempt to free him. They believed the sentence was “unjust” and that “helping him was a decent human response.”

Being ex-cons in the same prison Blake was in not only enabled them to empathise with Blake, but also gave them contacts on the inside who could help with the escape. It also meant they had some knowledge of the layout of the prison and the level of security.

They had experience of covert planning from their time in the peace movement in the early 60s, a movement which managed to pull off impressive actions like the Spies for Peace campaign in 1963, when peace activists invaded a secret underground bunker intended for members of the government in time of nuclear war. The “Spies” stole documents from the shelter and sent them to all major national newspapers, revealing for the first time the existence of a national network of these ‘Regional Seats of Government’ and the government plans for an all-out nuclear war.

Randle and Pottle used their experience of direct action in planning the Blake escape. Pat Pottle said, “I was determined that if I was to get involved with the break it should not fail because of silly or obvious mistakes... If we were to be caught it should not be the result of inadequate planning.”

While in prison for the Wethersfield actions, they had met Blake and also Sean Bourke (serving 7 years for sending a bomb to a senior policeman), who plotted the escape with them. After their release they kept in touch with the two longer term prisoners and when Sean was staying in a half-way house, preparing for release from prison, he made contact with Randle and Pottle. He told them that Blake had appealed to him to help him escape, rather than spend the rest of his life in prison.

When the idea of escape was originally raised, Blake suggested that they contact the Russian Embassy for help. But from the beginning Randle and Pottle ruled out any idea of dealing with the murderous Soviet Union. It was their liking for Blake personally and sympathy for his 42-year "death sentence" which motivated them. As Michael Randle said: "It was to be an entirely unprofessional – almost one could say DIY – affair."

Sean Bourke worked out a plan with Blake, exchanging notes via another inmate whose prison job took him between the pre-release hostel where Bourke was, and the long-termers' D-wing where Blake was kept. Bourke set up a small network of helpers to smuggle things into the prison and bought walkie-talkies so they could keep in contact even when he was released from prison. He smuggled one of these in to Blake, choosing a type which could not be picked up by the police radios.

Their plan was as follows: D-block, where Blake was housed, was the block nearest to one wall of the prison. The prison blocks have large gothic windows at each end made up of a number of smaller panes of glass, divided by cast iron struts. Blake was to make his exit from the prison landing through one of these windows. Removing two of the panes of glass and one of the struts would make a hole eighteen inches by twelve – just big enough to squeeze through. Blake had made himself a wooden frame of exactly these dimensions, which he kept in his cell to practice squeezing through. From the window, Blake would be able to drop down into the yard.

The panes of glass were removed from the window a couple of days before the day of the escape and the iron cross-bar was broken and then stuck back in place with tape, so that it could be quickly removed when the time came.

They planned to make the escape attempt between 6 and 7pm on a Saturday evening when most of the inmates and staff would be at the weekly prison film show. The only two screws on duty were normally watching television in a room without a clear line of sight to the window Blake would be exiting from.

Bourke would park a getaway car nearby and throw a specially designed rope ladder (the rungs were made of size 13 knitting needle – sufficiently light to be thrown but still strong enough to hold Blake's weight) over the wall at a prearranged point. There were security patrols that went round the perimeter walls, but Bourke had timed them and reckoned there was enough of a gap for the escape between each circuit they made.

There was a watchman posted in the prison yard who would be able to see the escape, but they figured that if they moved quick enough, Blake could be over the wall before the watchman had a chance to raise the alarm. And even when he this did happen, they would have a few minutes head-start on any pursuing prison officers.

To work out how long it would take a search party to get round the side of the prison to the point where Blake would be dropping over the wall, Bourke took to jogging around the perimeter of the prison every morning, claiming he wanted to get fit before release, and timing his run with a stop-watch.

Bourke also made some dummy runs in the getaway car to work out timings. On the day of the escape he just had to drive a short distance to the near-by flat they had rented under a false name which was to serve as a safe house. He was eventually released from prison and moved into the safe house just round the corner from the prison. Michael Randle raised money from friends, changed it in banks a couple of times to prevent it being traced and then gave it to Bourke to buy a getaway car (for £65!).

The day before the escape they went over all the plans, then burnt their maps and notes (and of course the sheets of paper underneath their notes, to remove the possibility of impressions being traced on underlying pages).

On the night, the escape went more or less to plan apart from Blake breaking his wrist in the 20-foot drop down the other side of the prison wall – a danger that they had failed to consider in the planning.

The ready co-operation of lots of ‘normal’ people in the escape attempt was a key factor in its success. There were many outraged at Blake’s clearly politically-motivated sentence who were willing to help in small ways. For example, Randle and Pottle managed to find a sympathetic doctor who treated Blake’s broken wrist – no questions asked.

Wild speculation began almost immediately after the successful escape – with the newspapers reporting that Blake was already out of the country and safely in Eastern Europe or that he had been spotted on a plane landing in Sydney.

Blake had lots of supporters in prison who sympathized with his predicament and were joyous at his escape. The police met with a “wall of silence” when they tried to get any information from Blake’s fellow prisoners. One lag described the atmosphere in Wormwood Scrubs the morning after the escape as being “like Christmas Day after Father Christmas has been.”

The original plan for getting Blake out of the country was to disguise him by turning him black. While hiding out in the safe house, Blake was instructed to take a medicine called meladinin, designed for the treatment of vitiligo, a disease which causes white spots to appear on the skin. By taking extra large doses, and spending time under a sun lamp, Blake would be able to pass as an Arab, helped by his knowledge of Arabic, which he had studied in prison.

Randle and Pottle forged a prescription to get large doses of meladinin, destroying the equipment used to forge the prescription afterwards, and going in disguise to the pharmacy to buy it. However, Blake never actually took the meladinin because he was worried about the side effects – large doses can cause liver damage.

It all started to go wrong when the boisterously over-confident Sean Bourke became increasingly sketchy. He had talked about getting forged passports from ‘underworld contacts’ but it later turned out he had no idea how to go about doing this. The meladinin idea and the false passports were finally abandoned and they settled for smuggling Blake out of the country instead.

It started to go from bad to worse. Sean Bourke had originally bought a getaway car in his own name. When this was discovered he was ordered to sell the car and buy another one under a false name.

But after Blake had been broken out and was holed up in the flat they had rented, it turned out that Bourke had lied to Randle and Pottle and actually used the original car which was registered to him in the escape. This was soon found by the police and identified as the car used in the getaway.

The ‘safe’ house Bourke had rented for Blake to stay in turned out to be a bedsit with shared facilities and a landlady who came in to clean once a week – not suitable at all for an escaped convict.

It later turned out that unbeknownst to Randle and Pottle, Bourke had purposefully endangered the whole project by sending photos of himself to the newspapers, phoning the police and telling them the whereabouts of the getaway car, and sending a death threat to the cop he had originally sent prison for sending a bomb to.

It appears that many of Bourke's bizarre actions and his blasé attitude to security were driven by a desire for notoriety – a desire to make a name for himself and then be able to make some sort of career out of this. This was indeed what he did in a small way by publishing a book about the escape in 1970 that practically named all the other participants in the escape.

Due to the discovery of the car and the situation with the flat, Blake was moved through a series of 'safe' houses around London, mostly staying with friends of Randle and Pottle's. This proved to be almost as dodgy as staying in Sean Bourke's bedsit. The wife of one friend who agreed to temporarily shelter Blake told her analyst all about it – because of course the analyst "requires her to be completely frank and not to conceal anything from him". Needless to say Blake was swiftly found somewhere else to stay.

The police were looking for Sean Bourke because of finding the getaway car, so it was decided that he should also travel to the USSR to meet up with Blake and stay there until he was able to safely return home to Ireland.

It was finally decided to smuggle Blake out in a camper van. Randle and Pottle got a friend with some knowledge of woodwork to build a compartment into the camper van. Michael Randle took his family to East Berlin in the camper van – with Blake hidden underneath. The wholesome family and the children in the back of the van, cheerfully sitting on top of the most wanted man in Britain, easily fooled the few cops and customs officers who happened to look in the back of the van. They never told the children they were sitting on top of an escaped spy, and managed to keep the whole thing from them.

George Blake was thus successfully delivered to East Berlin in December 1966, the conclusion to one of the most successful and most notorious prison escapes ever.

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