

## Hall of Justice Jail - Escapee Plunges to his Death

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Unlike any other jail in Los Angeles County, the Hall of Justice Jail known as HOJJ, was located in the upper 10<sup>th</sup> through 14<sup>th</sup> floors of the downtown Hall of Justice. Its location high up in the building appeared to be more of a challenge for inmates who intended to escape. If an inmate was able to make his way outside of the building, he had a second challenge, getting safely down to the ground floor. Because the Hall of Justice is located in busy downtown Los Angeles an inmate climbing down the side of the building would be easily seen from the street.



A view of the street below, looking from HOJJ jail floor

From the time the Hall of Justice Jail was opened in 1926 inmates continually escaped. Most escapees found a way to get outside of the building and then tied bed sheets together and slid down to freedom. A very few, used rock climbing skills and climbed down the building exterior. Some inmates escaped as they were loaded off the Sheriff's bus in the HOJJ compound. They slipped their handcuffs and then scaled the huge wall surrounding the bus loading area.

There were many factors that made it easy for inmates to escape from the Hall of Justice Jail. The Jail was built in 1925 so it did not have some of the newer technology to detect and prevent escapes.

The building did not have air conditioning, instead there were many windows all around the building that were opened in order to cool down the inside.

Rows of cells on the backside of the module were close to the outside windows which enabled inmates to drop fish lines out of the open windows. If an inmate was able to get the fish line past the parapet that ran all the way around the building on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor, they could have someone tie hacksaw blades on it and pull it back up.

On each floor, two deputies were responsible for inmates housed in their cells. One covered the modules on the north and east side of the building. The other was responsible for the modules on the south and west side of the building. These Deputies had to open gates to allow inmates to attend visits, attorney room, clinic, and also supervise food carts that were placed in each module to feed the inmates. While deputies were busy, some inmates were busy working on their escape. They used hacksaw blades, brought in by a fish line or a person paid to be arrested who would hide it in their rectum. It would take them days to cut through the bars. When they were finished cutting the bars for that day, they would conceal the cutting of the bars by filling the cut area with a mixture of toothpaste or soap and chips of paint removed from other cell bars.



The side of HOJJ building at street level



Open outside HOJJ windows

Inmates would accumulate numerous sheets and hide them or have fellow inmates hide extra sheets on their beds. When they were ready to escape, they tied the sheets together to slide down the side of the building. They didn't need enough sheets to go all the way down to the ground floor. They knew that once they got past the ninth floor, the building was not secure. Many times they slid down to the eighth floor and then broke out a window, climbed in and made their escape down the interior stairs. Deputies who worked the courtrooms on the eighth floor of the Hall of Justice said when they arrived at the courtroom in the morning and a window was broken out, they knew there had been an escape the night before.

On January, 27 1987, Twenty four year old Dwight Meal was arrested for murder and confined in the Hall of Justice Jail. He became friends with another inmate who was also in on murder charges. Facing life in prison, they desperately searched for a way to escape. They noticed that the windows leading to the outside were very small so they were going to have to lose weight in order to fit through. Both of the inmates went on a strict diet and by September 27, the inmates had lost 30 pounds and were ready to implement their escape plan. Their plan involved convincing a Deputy to allow them to enter an officer's walkway in order to have access to the outside windows. Everything was falling into place when they learned that the Deputy assigned to their 11<sup>th</sup> floor jail module that day was just out of the academy and was not familiar with all of the jail security procedures. The inmates told the deputy that they needed to enter a locked officer's walkway in order to mop the floor. Inmates were never allowed to enter this area. The walkway ran between the bars which enclosed the area outside of the row of cells and the screened outside windows. After the deputy unlocked the gate allowing the inmates to enter the restricted area, he left them to mop the floor as he returned to performing other duties.



HOJJ officer's walkway - the security screen is pried away from the outside windows



HOJJ double mop bucket used by trustee inmates

The Deputy was not aware that the large double mop bucket the inmates were using, contained soapy water which concealed a braided rope made of bed sheets. The inmates began mopping the floor until the deputy left the area. After the deputy left, they pried the top of the security screen from the interior of the outside window. They removed the braided rope from the soapy water and tied it to a water pipe and then climbed out of the window. They were eleven stories up and the rope wasn't long enough to reach the ground.

It was common knowledge among the inmates that they only needed a rope long enough to get down to the eighth floor which was below the secure jail floors. They would then break a window, climb in and down the stairs on the interior of the building and then out an exit door to freedom.

Inmate Meal pulled the braided rope out of the window and draped it down the side of the building. He grabbed the rope and began his descent. The rope made of bed sheets had been soaking in the soapy water so long that it was very slippery.



The braided rope made of bed sheets used for the escape

When Meal grabbed the rope, the slippery surface and the small diameter did not allow him to get a good grasp. He went sliding rapidly down the rope without ever being able to get a good hold of it to even slow him down. Because the rope did not go all the way down to the ground, when inmate Meal reached the end, he went plummeting towards the ground. His girlfriend, who was waiting in a car across the street, watched in horror as Meal plunged to his death. He landed in the bushes along the west side of the building. His girlfriend panicked and immediately drove off. The other inmate, standing on the outside of the building, climbed back inside and untied the rope from the water pipe. He dropped the



The braided rope made of bed sheets where it landed next to Inmate Meal's body



The ledge Inmate Meal landed upon

rope out the window and it fell next to inmate Meal's dead body. Meal's girlfriend went to a payphone and called the Hall of Justice Jail to report his death. A deputy assigned to the jail compound was dispatched to search the area. After an intense search he found Meal's body on a ledge at the base of the building, hidden behind some bushes.

Over the years, there have been many escapes from the Hall of Justice Jail. Inmates who successfully escaped ascended down the side of the building using dry bed sheets that were tied together, a fire hose, electric cord or any other form of rope that was accessible to them. This is one of the few unforeseen accidents where an inmate attempting to conceal a rope created a slippery surface that would not allow him to get a grasp of it, and plunged to his death.

**A Moment in History by the Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum**

Poster designed by Lieutenant Dan Waidner (Retired)