SARAH ISLAND ESCAPE

OF all the tales of Van Diemen’s Land, the escape by James Porter and nine other convicts from Sarah Island on Tasmania’s West Coast in 1834, has to be the most remarkable.

Porter and his fellow escapees did not just flee the Macquarie Harbour Penal Station in the stolen ship Frederick, they sailed all the way to Chile.

And the tale does not end there. The convicts lived freely in Chile for two years, before Porter and three others were recaptured and sent back to Hobart Town, where they were sentenced to death.

But they then avoided being hanged with a clever and quite funny legal defence.

In 1833 Sarah Island was closed down and its convicts were being sent to the new penal station at Port Arthur.

By 1834 only 12 convict shipwrights remained.

They had been left behind with a small contingent of soldiers to complete the construction of the brig Frederick, and 10 of them had hatched a bold plan to avoid the misery which awaited them at Port Arthur.

Continued Page 2

“Education perhaps more than anything else is a passport to a better life.” - Peter Underwood AC
The great convict escape from Sarah

From Page 1

Londoner James Porter was quite a character. He had been transported to Van Diemen’s Land in 1824 for the crime of housebreaking. After several escape attempts from Hobart Town, and other unruly behaviour (Porter received 300 lashes from 1826-1832), he was sent to Sarah Island, known in Van Diemen’s Land as “hell on Earth”.

On January 14, 1834, the 10 convicts overpowered their guards, who left on shore in Macquarie Harbour with provisions. They then set sail for Chile, with no charts and only four experienced sailors on board. A former whaler, Porter had spent some time in Chile, and had a wife and two children there.

The ship leaked heavily and they suffered terrible seasickness, but somehow they crossed the big seas of the South Pacific and arrived in Chile about six weeks later, on February 25. They allowed the Frederik to sink off shore and rowed a long boat to Valdivia, where they passed themselves off as survivors off a shipwreck.

The authorities in Valdivia did not believe their story, and soon worked out who the convicts were. But the Governor of Valdivia allowed them to stay, despite protests from Britain - and Van Diemen’s Land Lieutenant Governor George Arthur in particular - that the convicts were guilty of piracy.

But as pressure from Britain for their return mounted, the convicts decided they had outstayed their welcome in Valdivia. Three of them jumped on board a departing American ship, while the other seven made plans to leave on a ship they were building for the Governor of Valdivia.

Three of the remaining seven decided to depart a day earlier than planned, leaving Porter, William Shires, Charles Lyon and William Cheshire behind. The Governor of Valdivia was furious, and had the four remaining convicts arrested, before handing them over to the British navy. Taken all the way back to England, the four convicts decided they had outstayed their welcome in Valdivia. But the convicts made a series of appeals against the judge’s decision, and managed to delay their hanging for more than two years.

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Porter used this time in the Hobart Town Gaol well. The story of their bold escape had attracted quite a bit of attention in Hobart Town, and Porter wrote a journal and some of its content was published by local newspapers.

But in a final twist to the story, in 1849 he again escaped, this time to New Zealand, and he was eventually pardoned. But Porter, now in Sydney, kept finding trouble and ending up back in gaol. But the convicts were not a ship at all. As soon as the decision not to hang them was made, no doubt quite embarrassed, the authorities shipped them off to Norfolk Island in the middle of the night.

Porter wrote a second journal while imprisoned on Norfolk Island, and all four men were eventually pardoned. But Porter, now in Sydney, kept finding trouble and ending up back in gaol. But in a final twist to the story, in 1849 he again escaped, this time to New Zealand, and he was never found again. Some people believe he returned to Chile, others suggest he might have spent the rest of his days sailing the world.

What happened to Porter after he escaped to New Zealand?

Your challenge is to write a story, or even a play, about what Jimmy did next. The plot is completely up to you, and it can be as short or as long as you want it to be.

If it is a play, it could be a single scene which reveals what happened to Porter (see the example on page 1).

Children’s University Tasmania members can earn stamps in their passports for this challenge, at the discretion of school coordinators.

What happened to Porter?