



Courage and Sacrifice

Imagine yourself as a prisoner of war (POW) struggling to survive in a disease-ridden prison, sometimes in aching isolation, sometimes in filthy, overcrowded conditions. Imagine the day-to-day uncertainty when all you can think about is food, water, freedom, and death. What was it like to be, as one soldier wrote, "dead and yet, breathing"?

Would freedom ever come? How? When? Could you escape? Should you try? Questions like these tormented POWs. For some, freedom came in a matter of days; others waited torturous years. Too many found freedom only in death.

Andersonville prisoner George Tibbles, 4th Iowa Infantry, recalled, "No one can imagine the agony of continued hunger unless he has experienced it. I have

felt it, witnessed it, yet I cannot find the language to adequately describe it." POW experiences connect soldiers from one generation to the next. When William Fornes, held as a POW in Korea, visited Andersonville he said, "A feeling came over me that I had something in common with these people, and I feel that way about all wars."

Since the American Revolution our soldiers have marched off to war, defending our country, families, and liberties. Some have given their lives. Some have been captured and held as POWs, subjected to torture, starvation, inadequate medical care, and unspeakable conditions. Some have returned home but have been forever changed.

I had an undying faith that my country was not going to forget me. No matter how long I stayed there, no matter even if I died there, my country was not going to forget me.

—Col. Tom McNish, USAF, POW Vietnam 6½ yrs.

Andersonville National Historic Site is the only national park serving as a memorial to all American prisoners of war. Once filled with desolation, despair, and death, Andersonville now offers a place for remembrance and reflection. Here we remember POWs and honor their courage, service, and sacrifice.

Walk the grounds of Andersonville—the **Prison Site**, where nearly 13,000 Civil War soldiers died in 14 months, mostly from disease and starvation; the **National Prisoner of War Museum**, dedicated to American soldiers who suffered captivity in all wars; and **Andersonville National Cemetery**, a final resting place for our veterans.

Illustration of Camp Sumter, above, drawn from memory by Andersonville prisoner Pvt. Thomas O'Dea, 16th Maine infantry. NPS

Exhibit items, left to right: stockade lock and canteen, Andersonville, Civil War; radio and headset, World War II; "blood chit," Persian Gulf War; Holy Bible, World War II; returning soldiers pamphlet, Korean War; toothpaste, toothbrush, and rubber sandals, Vietnam War. NPS

These images depict POWs of various wars supporting one another. The years changed and each war had a different name, but the suffering endured by these soldiers forged a common experience across time. NPS / KEITH ROCCO



Civil War Prisons: A Cruel Legacy

In 1901 and 1911 Emogene Marshall traveled from Ohio to visit the grave of her brother, Edwin Niver, buried here in grave 2,183. In the decades following the Civil War, Americans were haunted by the deaths of their loved ones in military prisons. Although Andersonville is now the most infamous Civil War prison, some 150 others were set up across the country. In 1863 the Union and Confederate governments adopted laws of war to protect prisoners, yet some 56,000 soldiers died in captivity. How and why did this happen?

When the Civil War started, neither side was prepared to hold thousands of enemy prisoners. Although no formal exchange system existed early in the war,

both armies paroled prisoners to lessen the burden of providing for captives. Prisoners of war were conditionally released, promising not to return to battle until officially exchanged.

A formal exchange system adopted in 1862 failed when the Confederacy refused to exchange or parole captured black US soldiers. In the South, captured Union soldiers were first housed in old warehouses and barns around Richmond, Virginia. As the number of prisoners increased, prisons were hastily erected in Florence, South Carolina; Millen and Andersonville, Georgia; and other locations. In the North, Federal training camps were converted into prisons at Camp Douglas, Illinois; Camp Chase,

Ohio; and Elmira, New York. Other Confederate prisoners were held at Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Fort Warren in Boston Harbor, and other coastal fortifications.

Confined soldiers suffered terribly from overcrowding, poor sanitation, and inadequate food. Mismanagement by war-weary governments worsened matters. Most prisoners died from disease, starvation, or exposure. The end of the war saved hundreds of prisoners from an untimely death, but for many the war's end came too late. For the men who survived, the memory of the atrocities they witnessed was the cruel legacy of all.



Andersonville Prison, Georgia, south end view of stockade (detail), August 17, 1864, by A.J. Riddle. CHRYSLER MUSEUM OF ART, NORFOLK, VA



Camp Chase, Columbus, Ohio, ca. 1861-65. NATIONAL ARCHIVES, 111-SC-108817

Prisoner of War Camps — North and South

Civil War Prisons' Death Toll

Whether held in the North or South, a prisoner of war was more likely to die than a soldier in combat. Prisons were overcrowded, short on food, medical supplies, shelter, and clothing, while disease and death ran rampant. How many prisoners died is not known. Surviving records suggest some 30,000, or 15 percent of Union prisoners, and about 26,000, or 12 percent of Confederate prisoners died.



