



Cpl. George Garman, after his release from Andersonville prison.

Remember the POWs

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By Joseph F. Wilson

As one soldier of our current war returns from captivity, however controversial the circumstances, this seems an appropriate time to remember those whose sacrifices are often not mentioned as we mark the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

These sesquicentennial years from 2011 to 2015 have mostly focused on the great battles, famous generals, and celebrated heroes. Conspicuously absent from anniversary events, lectures, and articles is the tragic story of the 56,000 soldiers who perished in Civil War prisons. The soldier who gave the last full measure of devotion in a prison camp deserves praise equal to that given the gallant soldier who gave all on the battlefield.

Most historians believe the official number of 56,000 prison dead to be low. Many died shortly after their release. Before reaching home, they expired in faraway hospitals, on ships, and in railcars. Many were so ill they didn't last long upon reaching their destination.

A soldier had much better odds of surviving a battle than emerging alive from a prison camp. Musket balls and artillery shells posed less danger than starvation and disease. Food, water, and shelter were often luxuries in the camps. The number of young men who died in Civil War prisons far exceeds the combined total killed at the battles of Gettysburg, Antietam, Shiloh, Fredericksburg, and both Bull Runs.

To die on the battlefield usually meant instant death, or the end came within days or weeks. For captives, death came slowly. To succumb in prison, gradually wasting away from starvation, disease, and exposure, was a painful death, taking five or six months. When it came, death was an act of mercy. Had they known their fate, many would have fought to the death to avoid capture.

The horrible conditions at Andersonville prison in Georgia led to an astonishing 13,000 Union soldiers being carried out to the burial pits. More died at Andersonville than at Gettysburg.

At Camp Douglas in Chicago, nearly 6,000 Confederate prisoners died from squalor and exposure. Unaccustomed to brutal Northern winters, rebel prisoners suffered terribly beside Lake Michigan. Their final resting place, Oakwood Cemetery, holds more dead than were killed at Shiloh.

Civil War prisons represent one of the saddest chapters in American history. The neglect, lack of will, and total failure of the stubborn governments in Richmond and Washington to renew the prisoner

exchange doomed tens of thousands to death. Callous officials saw prisoners as expendable pawns in a high-stakes political game. Ideology trumped humanity.

My compassion and concern for the legacy of Civil War prisoners stems from the capture of my great-great-grandfather, Cpl. George Garman. On May 5, 1864, at the Battle of the Wilderness, George and 250 of his comrades in the Seventh Pennsylvania Reserves Regiment fell into Confederate hands. Half lost their lives as a result of captivity, and George struggled to stay alive in Andersonville. Fortunately, he made it home to Philadelphia, where he ran a tavern and raised a family. And so I live today. He's a reminder of why these patriots need be part of our Civil War commemorations.

Is it the dark matter that elicits today's silence? Many believe the subject is best left alone, but to ignore the needless loss of life is to diminish their sacrifice. We must always remember these prisoners of war and never allow them to be overshadowed by the heroes on the battlefield. When offered a reprieve from the sufferings of prison life by joining the enemy, the majority chose death before dishonor. That's heroic.

So as the sesquicentennial festivities continue, let us not forget the soldiers from North and South who died a lonely and quiet death while languishing in cramped and dirty prisons far from home and loved ones. Those who rest in the many graveyards outside these prisons are no less heroes than those who died in a glorious charge. Their story deserves to be told.

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