

RECOLLECTIONS OF JOHNSON'S ISLAND

by Colonel John David Weeden

Some evil genius had suggested the removal, while in front of Atlanta, of General Joseph E. Johnston, that gallant soldier who "lacked nothing in scholarship, except good fortune." The disaster at Franklin, Tennessee, soon followed and the morning of December 15, 1864, found our Army under General Hood in front of Nashville vainly resisting an overwhelming force of the enemy sweeping down our left flank and driving our gallant little army from its entrenchments. The close of the next day found our Army in retreat, much of the fighting that day have been done with the enemy pressing us on the flank, in front and in rear.

Numbers were killed, wounded, and captured

in these two days fight. Those captured were carried back to Nashville and confined that night in the old Penitentiary, and the next morning were sent on the way to Fort Warren,¹ Johnson's Island, and other Prisons of the North. The greater number of the officers were sent to the U.S. Military Prison on Johnson's Island.

When we reached Sandusky City, Ohio, we found Lake Erie frozen over--the ice being about thirty inches thick, with the thermometer twenty-five degrees below zero. We marched three miles over the ice to Johnson's Island, many of the men with only the short coat round about, and their feet almost on the ice. The



boots of the writer were frozen to his feet and had to be cut off. It was thought he would not be able to walk again, but a day or two after a clever Yankee Sergeant of the 128th Ohio Regt. brought him a pair of heavy brogan shoes a size or more too large, but after that he never missed a roll call while there, and he has never suffered from this terrible experience. This is attributable to the fact that for an hour or more after reaching the prison he stood in the snow to his knees waiting for his turn to be examined. When the Sergeant brought the shoes he offered an apology, saying he knew it was the same that we issued to our slaves in the South, but was the best his poor Government could do. It was the only time while there that the writer knew of Quartermasters

stores being issued to a prisoner, and he suspected they were smuggled in at the instance of his comrades. The morning after reaching there, Gen. Sam Moore² of Huntsville, Alabama, brought the writer a suit of heavy under clothing which was most acceptable, as we came in with only what we had on.

Johnson's Island, consisting of about 300 acres of land, is at the mouth of Sandusky Bay, overlooking Lake Erie, three miles from Sandusky, Ohio. The prison grounds included three acres enclosed by a fence twelve feet high, with a platform on the top for the sentinels guarding the prisoners. On this the guard walked day and night. Sometimes they were relieved every half hour on account of the severe cold, as was the case in the winter of 1864-65. There were from first to last about fifteen thousand prisoners there, and in



the winter of 1864, there were four thousand there. The buildings were weather boarded on the outside, but neither sealed nor plastered on the inside, and during severe winds would rock like a ship in a heavy gale. On one occasion, I remember the wind was so furious that many, fearing it would turn over, left the building in their night clothes--and that was one time, at least, when they showed the white flag fluttering in the breeze. There were thirteen blocks for the prisoners, each two stories high--guard house, kitchen, and Sutler's store, where those who were fortunate enough to have friends on the outside [who] could deposit money for them at Head Quarters, might purchase what they needed by paying high prices. No money was allowed to be in the hands of the prisoners, though sometimes they managed to smuggle it through.

I remember to have seen a young officer from Tennessee while on the cars, just before reaching Sandusky City, with his coat off and busily engaged in sewing in the lining of his coat a lot of greenbacks, which he had picked up on the battle field. He had a good bank account, if in searching him it was not found, but if he was searched as carefully as the writer was, it certainly did not escape them. In the small room where each was taken to be searched, Confederate money was thrown on the floor several inches deep--the greenbacks, the Federal officer appropriated.

At one time prisoners were allowed to have a limited supply of money in their possession. A friend of the writer from Huntsville, Ala., who has been several times Mayor of that beautiful city, for the time being, became an expert at handling



cards. It was not long before he owned the greater part of the money in the prison. Afterwards the authorities became stricter and reduced the amount of currency to two postage stamps to each man, and it was not long before the clever gentleman³ from Huntsville owned all the stamps, and correspondence was done only by his permission.

The food of the prisoners consisted of pickled beef and salted white fish with but little bakers bread--the very kind of food to produce scurvy, which was making terrible havoc among them. Once a week one Irish potato would be issued to each man, which was eagerly eaten as an anti-scorbutic. I may have seen men cry from hunger who had braved death on many battle fields. An officer who called the roll at one of the blocks would sometimes bring

a little rat terrier, which was instantly seized by the prisoners, taken to the mess hall, and made to catch rats which were made into pies, which they seemed to relish. The U.S. authorities issued orders forbidding any boxes of supplies to be received by the prisoners, and forbade Sutlers to sell other articles than combs, soap, tobacco, and writing material. No healthy man can well subsist on less than thirty-eight ounces of food per day, but our prisoners received less than twenty-eight ounces.

The Masonic fraternity among the prisoners did much good. The hospital within the grounds was made comfortable for the sick and wounded. The writer several times aided in the last sad duty to deceased Masons. Neat head and footboards were placed at their graves with name, rank and date of death cut in the boards.



The Northern papers were at this time publishing such harrowing accounts of the alleged bad treatment of their prisoners at Andersonville, Georgia, that they were using retaliatory measures on us--forgetting that Andersonville was getting the same rations as were issued to Confederate soldiers.

The per-cent of Federal deaths in Southern prisons was under nine, while the per-cent of Confederate deaths in Northern prisons was over twelve. This shows where there was most cruelty. Judge [Robert] Ould, our Commissioner for Exchange, offered to purchase medicine in the North for Federal prisoners paying therefor in gold, cotton or tobacco, but this offer was not accepted. In his book, "The War Between the States," Mr. [Alexander] Stephens says, "Had Davis' repeated offers been accepted, no

prisoner on either side would have been retained in confinement a day."

Near the large gate of the prison, artillery was planted which could sweep the prison grounds, and a block house with loop holes for the Infantry. The 128th Ohio Infantry was on guard that winter with Colonel Charles W. Hill commanding the post, and a gunboat on the Lake.

One bright morning, April 15th, 1865, the writer and an Officer from Virginia were exercising in the grounds. As we approached the large gate we saw the artillery run out, and the guards standing on their posts ready. Soon an officer came in and announced that President Lincoln had been assassinated the night before, and the orders were to shoot down any man who should cheer or make any demonstration showing gratification at his death; further announcing that we



were shortly to have been exchanged, but that he could not then tell when, if ever, we would be released. A few nights before there had been speech-making, drinking and carousing among the guards on the outside over the surrender of Lee's army, and they were at the time the above announcements were made, in an exceedingly angry mood.

At nine o'clock each night the Sentinels on guard would order "Lights out!" -- and if not instantly obeyed, would shoot into the rooms. One night a young Lieutenant from Virginia, while lying asleep on his bunk was killed instantly when a shot from one of our sentinel's guns pierced his heart. A short time afterwards a shot was fired into the same room and went through a candle box on which a prisoner was seated. Sentinels were generally promoted for these wanton acts of cruelty.

Under such circumstances, it was not to be wondered at that prisoners would sometimes make the effort to escape-- though successful escape was next to an impossibility. As soon as a prisoner was known to have escaped, a cannon was fired as a signal to the Home Guard on the mainland. This Home Guard searched the country for miles; and telegrams were sent to all Marshals on the Northern border. The prisoners attempted to dig tunnels and by this means to escape, but invariably were betrayed by informers who were placed to act as spies, dressed though they were in Confederate soldier garb.

Early in January, 1865, Colonel D. R. Hundley⁴ of the 31st Alabama Regiment, who had been in captivity since the



fall of Vicksburg, becoming tired of the restraint, determined upon a plan of escape. He procured a blue uniform and one morning, feigning sickness, was absent from roll-call. The officer visited his room and found him in bed. As soon as he left, Colonel Hundley put on his blue uniform and carried a book under his arm--looking, for all the world, the image of the roll caller. He appeared on the scene thus; and by pre-arranged agreement, a sham fight was started among his friends. When the attention of the Yankee guard was directed to the sham fight, Colonel Hundley boldly walked past the sentinel at the gate--and the "fight" ceased.

We watched Colonel Hundley's progress from an upper story window,

until he had safely crossed the Lake. He was out of prison about one week, and during that time underwent much suffering--walking by night, and sleeping in hay lofts during the day. He was but one time warmed by a fire while he was out, and that at Fremont, Ohio, where driven by hunger and cold, he went to a hotel, registered, and was assigned a room. He was soon asleep, and when he awoke next morning a Yankee guard was seated near him. The guard said, "Colonel, if you have finished your nap, we will go back to prison." Colonel Hundley was a *handsome*, intelligent man, and he must have favorably impressed Colonel Hill, for he was returned to prison without punishment.

A short time after this episode, Adjutant [John U.] Shorter⁵ of the same



Regiment, seeing that his Colonel had escaped punishment, concluded to try the stunt himself. Procuring a blue uniform, he stationed himself at the Mess-Hall, where a wagon came to deposit wood. Getting on the wagon he went whistling, as he rode out. The sentinel at the gate challenged him, and demanded to know what Company he belonged to. He stopped whistling only long enough to reply, "Company C." The guard said, "Oh, you come down from there. I belong to Company C myself." The guard took him to Colonel Hill who sent him back to prison and placed him on the head of a barrel near the gate, where he was required to stand all day (one of the coldest of that very cold winter). This punishment put a stop to all efforts to

escape for a long time, at least, though there were several men who did--during the entire imprisonment--escape, including Captain [Robert] McKibben⁶ of Alabama. The Captain was one of five--all told--prisoners who made a successful escape. He reached Canada with frosted feet and untold hardships.

One of the prisoners suspected unjustly by the authorities of complicity in the assassination of President Lincoln, upon learning the night before we were released that he was not to be among the number, escaped from the prison and went to the Lake shore. There he procured a plank and threw himself on it and attempted to swim across the Lake, but the waves beat him back time and time again. Exhausted, he returned to the prison, and the next day when we marched out, we left



poor [Charles H.] Cole⁷
in the Block House with
a ball and chain
fastened to his leg.

On the 25th day of
July 1865 one General

officer and 115 Field
officers were released,
and Johnson's Island
ceased to be a prison
for Confederate
soldiers.



¹ Fort Warren, sometimes called the "American Bastille," was located on an island in Boston Harbor, Massachusetts.

² First Lieutenant Samuel H. Moore was the adjutant of the 26th Alabama Infantry Regiment. He was captured near Atlanta on July 20, 1864, and sent to Johnson's Island prison. Moore was fortunate enough to be exchanged on February 20, 1865, for a Union adjutant--Lieutenant J. Howard Jenkins. Moore was paroled at Meridian, Miss., on May 12, 1865, at the war's end. General was a postwar title. Source: Compiled Service Record, Samuel H. Moore, 26th Alabama Infantry.

³ The card-playing gentleman evidently was 1st Lieutenant Edmund Irby Mastin (1841-1894), who served as Huntsville's mayor for three terms between 1883 and 1889. A cadet at Lagrange College when the war began, young Mastin was first assigned as a drill-master. However, he was soon commissioned as adjutant of the 8th Arkansas Infantry Regiment. Mastin was captured at Charleston, Tennessee, on December 28, 1863, while serving as adjutant general of the 4th Division Cavalry under Gen. Joseph Wheeler. Mastin had the misfortune to be one of the 600 Confederate prisoners sent to Morris Island, South Carolina, and placed under fire. The South had protested the North's shelling of civilian targets in the city of Charleston, South Carolina, and had moved Union officer prisoners into Charleston to draw attention to the situation. The North responded by sending Confederate officers to Morris Island and placing them in the line of fire. Both sides eventually removed their prisoners, and the North went back to shelling the civilians. See the entry on Mastin in North Alabama Historical and Biographical, Birmingham: Smith & De Land, 1888, p. 280.

⁴ Daniel Robinson Hundley (1831-1899) was Colonel of the 31st Alabama Infantry Regiment. A native of Madison County, Hundley graduated from both the University of Virginia and Harvard Law School. He began practicing law in Chicago, but returned to his family home at Hundley Hill, near Mooresville, when Alabama seceded from the Union. Although Hundley fought at Vicksburg in 1862 and was wounded at Port Gibson in 1863, he was actually captured at the Battle of Atlanta in the summer of 1864. Hundley describes his escape attempt in some detail in his Prison Echoes of the Great Rebellion. Published in New York by S. W. Green in 1874.

⁵ First Lieutenant John U. Shorter had been appointed adjutant of Colonel



Hundley's 31st Alabama infantry Regiment on May 3, 1863. He was captured at the Battle of Baker's Creek (Champion Hill), Mississippi, just two weeks later. Colonel Hundley wrote that Shorter had "displayed signal gallantry, charging into the enemy's lines and being taken prisoner." Hundley wrote that Shorter "will be twenty years of age in January next [1864], and his present place of residence is Columbus, Georgia. He is a Cadet of the military, University of Alabama..." Col. D. R. Hundley to Gen. S. Cooper, Camp on Lookout Mountain, November 22, 1863. Hundley's letter can be found in Shorter's Compiled Service Record. Shorter was fortunate enough to be sent from Johnson's Island for exchange on February 25, 1865. He surrendered in Florida at the end of the war.

⁶ Captain Robert McKibben of Company F, 31st Alabama Infantry Regiment, had been captured at Baker's Creek on May 16, 1863. McKibben escaped from Johnson's Island on Christmas Eve of 1864, walking out of the prison in a Federal uniform. His success encouraged Colonel Hundley to attempt the same feat. "The Yankees are very much puzzled to learn how McKibben escaped," Hundley wrote in his diary on December 26, "but they seem to be entirely unable to discover anything about it. It is circulated pretty extensively in the prison that he was taken out in a barrel at the watergate, and as one other prisoner is said to have actually escaped thus recently. I think this story will be likely to obtain credence outside. At least I hope it may until I can get off." Hundley, Prison Echoes. pp. 194-195.

⁷ Captain Charles H. Cole was captured in the unsuccessful September 1864 attempt to seize the Federal gunboat Michigan and use it to free the Confederate prisoners at Johnson's Island. Transferred to Fort Lafayette in New York harbor when Johnson's Island was closed down in September 1865, Cole was not released from captivity until February 1866. Weeden is probably mistaken about Cole's being suspected of involvement with Booth. Cole was apparently regarded as a spy.

