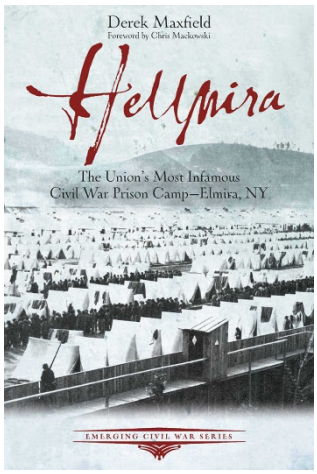

Hellmira: The Union's Most Infamous Civil War Prison Camp – Elmira, N.Y., Derek Maxfield, Savas Beattie, a Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table Review by Ed Kennedy

The history of prisoner of war (POW) treatment was abysmal world-wide until years after the War Between the States. Although efforts had begun near the end of the Napoleonic wars, true reform on the treatment of POWs was decades in the future. Nothing substantive had been done by 1861 so when both sides began taking each other's soldiers as POWs, problems immediately began to emerge. The last major American experience of taking large numbers of prisoners in combat was 80 years prior to the War Between the States and the examples from that war were nothing to emulate.

As the war began both armies fell-back onto the age-old process of exchanging prisoners. The Dix-Hill Cartel concluded an agreement in the summer of 1862 for the exchange of prisoners. A series of different and complex permutations made allowances for the exchange of different ranks and it actually worked for a few months until the Emancipation Proclamation. The Confederates objected to the exchange of black POWs as many were still considered escaped, or freed, property. After this, the system started and stopped largely based on locations and commanders. The end result is that many POWs on both sides were stuck interminably in POW camps until they could be exchanged----or freed. GEN Grant stopped the exchanges in 1864 which was a death sentence to many POWs on both sides.

Neither side was prepared for the huge number of POWs and it caused massive problems that had never been imagined for both sides. Overall, prisoner deaths of Confederates in Northern POW camps ranked at 12% of those incarcerated while 15% of Northerners perished. The difference of 3% is certainly a nominal difference in the big picture, almost within a standard deviation from the mean. The biggest difference is that the North exercised a deliberate policy of retribution and revenge against the Confederate POWs. It was officially called "*retaliation*".

While the Southern POW camps suffered from the massive shortages' endemic in the South, Northern prisons were well-able to provide the necessities for their POWs. They refused to as a deliberate policy.

During the less than one year Elmira was in operation from 1864-1865, more than 10,000 POWs were crammed into the former Union Army mustering camp. Beautiful summer weather soon turned foul as early winter arrived and the POWs, clad in only the uniforms in which they were captured began to suffer severely. The camp was built near the Chemung River which meant one side of the camp was marshy with poor drainage. Poor sanitation led to human waste collecting in low areas with poor drainage. In a move to economize, barracks were quickly erected with uncured and unfinished lumber. Totally uninsulated, the buildings were freezing cold in the winter. No blankets were issued and combined with a starvation diet; a huge number of POWs became sick.

Union Army surgeons assigned to Elmira POW camp were overwhelmed and complained through official channels of the terrible conditions. The camp commanders blocked efforts of the surgeons to fix the problems and Dr. Eugene F. Sanger was finally relieved in December after submitting numerous reports criticizing the lack of care of the POWs.

Maxfield does a very commendable job of chronicling the experiences of the POWs by incorporating the entries from the official Union records as well as from the letters and diaries written by the POWs. The remains of the former Union Army mustering camp and POW camp are virtually gone today. The Chemung River is still there and historical markers note the boundaries of the former camp, now over-run by urban sprawl. What does remain is the Woodlawn Cemetery, about two miles from the former POW camp. The cemetery holds the remains of the nearly 3,000 Confederates who died far-away from their homes.

The book has several appendices, A through G with interesting maps and stories about the POW camp. One of the appendices is about the escaped slave, John W. Jones. Jones' efforts as the cemetery sexton insured the decent burial of the Confederates as well as the marking and recording of all graves. Without his efforts, most of the POWs would have been lost to memory. Another appendix discusses the burial of Samuel Clements ---- Mark Twain the Missourian who ended-up in Elmira, New York. The last appendix is written by the sister of a member of our Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table. Retired LTC Tom Olszowy's sister, Terri, wrote an excellent account of the restoration efforts of the "Friends of the Elmira Civil War Prison Camp". Efforts include fabricating or restoring buildings as historical representations of wartime structures.

Over 400,000 POWs were held during the war. 55,000 died in captivity on both sides, a horrible figure. Two thousand nine hundred and fifty dead of 10,000 POWs produced a death rate of 24% making Elmira aptly labeled as the "Andersonville of the North" (a death rate of 29%) and garnering the name "Hellmira". What everyone learned from our shared American experiences with

POWs during our War Between the States is that man's inhumanity to man caused much needless suffering and left bitter memories for years after the war. A number of changes were instituted just over a half century later, the US military incorporated massive changed to how it kept its prisoners in WWI. Many of those lessons are incorporated into our POW policies today.

Derek Maxfield has done an excellent job telling the story of Elmira. Every POW camp was different and their circumstances led to different outcomes. The one common thread however was the official policy of "retaliation" which the U.S. has since renounced, now practicing humanitarian benevolence to prisoners of war. I highly recommend this book for those wishing to gain a perspective of what prisoners suffered through during the war and the policies that led to their treatment.