

MASONIC POWs

War is a terrible thing and when it involves fathers, sons and brothers it is even more terrible. Such was the case in the American Civil War. Perhaps the best account of Masonry's involvement in the Civil War is Allen Robert's book *HOUSE DIVIDED*. Much less has been written about Masonic involvement in military prisons.

Conditions there were indescribably bad. Food, clothing, basic sanitation, medical care and housing were sadly lacking. Various diseases, including small pox were the greatest killers.

Michael Halleran 32° KCCH and a Mackey scholar, recently wrote an article *GENTLEMEN OF THE WHITE APRONS: MASONIC POWs IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR* that was published in the *HEREDOM*. The following is a summation of his article.

Approximately 410,000 soldiers were taken prisoner in the American Civil War and about 56,000 died in prison. Much has been written about Civil War prisons, but only small fragments show the influence of that Freemasonry made inside the prisons. Evidence shows the Masonic tenets of brotherly love and relief were to be found inside the prisons where food, shelter and compassion were in short supply. There is considerable evidence to show that Freemasons went to great lengths to care for their own. This fraternal concern was present on both the Confederate and Union side.

Freemasonry was a life line to prisoners of war, nearly all of whom were confined to appalling and unsanitary conditions. The Fraternity provided not only moral and spiritual consolation, but also

the actual necessities that sustained life under the bleakest of conditions.

Just as in actual combat, many Freemasons resorted to appealing for aid when captured or to avoid capture. For example, a rebel officer took pity on a collapsed union soldier and allowed him to ride in an ambulance. The rebel officer commenced his Freemasonry on the driver. He responded to the signs. "As a Mason" he said "I'll feed you; share the last crumb with you; but as a Confederate soldier, I'll fight you till the last drop of blood and the last ditch." "I hardly know which to admire most," the Union officer replied, "your spunk or your milk."

While chances of a modern soldier meeting success by "commencing his Freemasonry" is slim, but in nineteenth-century America, the Fraternity, and its reputation for solidarity between Brethren was well known. There were many instances of a soldier giving the Masonic sign of distress and a member of the enemy force who was a Mason who gave the order that no harm should come to him

Sometimes confusion resulted from all the secret signs and gestures. In one such incident an Odd Fellow gave signs of distress of that order which his captor believed to be clumsily given Masonic signs. When further tested the Odd Fellow said he was a Odd Fellow and not a Mason and that he could be trusted just as though they both belonged to the same order.

Not all appeals for Masonic aid had the desired effect, however. Belle Boyd, a famous Confederate spy, issued a Masonic appeal to

President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton "as a Masons daughter" asked for a furlough from Fort Monroe to attend her father's funeral. Lincoln was not a Mason but Stanton was; despite this her request was refused.

These prison camps were grim places indeed. New arrivals at Andersonville reportedly vomited at the stench and sight of the inmates. Approximately 13,000 of the 45,000 Federal prisoners housed there died. Federal prisons such as Camp Douglas, Alton Penitentiary and Elmira were examples of Federal barbarity and criminal mismanagement. Inmates on both sides described wretched conditions rife with disease and reeking of death.

The want of proper clothing and shelter was a constant concern of prisoners. The gravest danger facing prisoners everywhere was disease. In 1846 small pox broke out and prisoners were quarantined in the 'pest house'.

In response to these hardships, Freemasons in prisons on both sides relied upon one another, irrespective of rank or allegiance. Masonic prisoner shared rations, lived together and held meetings through out the war without a charter or dispensation. Considerable evidence exists that Masonic prisoners associated freely and openly.

Andersonville prisoners erected quarters known as 'Masonic tent'. Union Masons in Libby prison a sent a formal declaration of sympathy to the family of a deceased Masonic comrade who died in prison. Through this association individuals increased their chances of serving the war.

Numerous instances of: Masonic charity were witnessed and written about. Masonic lodges in Elmira and Ivy Lodge appointed committees to raise funds and ask for contributions of money and clothing which were given to Masonic prisoners. Many Masonic funerals were held by these lodges.

Prisoners frequently made Masonic jewelry and trinkets from items at hand such as bone. These items were used as identification and to get money for food and clothing.

Some accounts suggest Masonry responded to the needs of non-Masonic prisoners. Complaints that favorable treatment was, in many cases reserved for Masons is almost certainly true. The Masonic emblem worn by prisoners and guards reflect this fraternal bond.

In summary Freemasonry was not practiced in military prisons of the American Civil War. Lodges did not meet nor were men initiated, but its tenets were applied there. This practical application provided Masons and non-Mason alike with an inoculation of civility in an otherwise barbaric setting. Freemasonry was a lifeline for many prisoners, as they were deprived of proper medical care, basic sanitation, clothing and food. Masonry's influence in prisons was perhaps its greatest contribution to ameliorating the suffering of the war. It is for this reason that Masonic emblems, trifling objects in ordinary times assumed an importance far larger than mere decorative appearance or vanity. These emblems were passports to a physical and spiritual support system that was sorely needed. In these direst of conditions, affiliation with the Masonic Fraternity in a prison

compound could quite simply literally become a matter of life and death.

One can not help but be appalled by the terrible conditions that we put these prisoners in. Now the question is have we learned anything from this terrible past?

In the future I will certainly look at the Masonic emblem and the value of Masonry in a new and respectful light.

Source:

Halleran, M. A., *GENTLEMEN OF THE WHITE APRON: MASONIC CIVIL WAR POWs*, *HEREDOM* vol. 15, p 275, 2007