

PRISONERS OF WAR (POWs) DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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The story of American POWs during the Revolution has got to be one of the saddest and most horrific events in our Nation's history. The story needs to be told throughout the SAR and should be broadcast to the all students and citizens of America. This presentation is not just about American POWs but all POWs of the Revolution. It will show the stark contrast between how Americans were treated and how we treated those we captured.

Eighteenth Century warfare in Europe saw changes in the manner in which POWs were treated. In previous times POWs just went home or changed sides. In the new model thousands were sent to the country of the victors which resulted in their abuse. The result was that international "Norms" were established for the treatment of POWs that prohibited their: torture, starvation, abuse, deprivation and summary execution. Within the British Government the management and treatment of POWs was handled by the Sick and Hurt Board which had been established in 1740 to improve the conditions of POWs. The British considered American captives "criminals" not POWs which allowed them to avoid the international sanctions. If the Britons recognized captive Americans as POWs they would be recognizing American independence. Because the British considered American captives as "criminals" the Sick and Hurt Board had no jurisdiction over our personnel.

To set the stage for this briefing it is necessary right from the start to present the shocking statistics regarding the treatment of American POWs by the British.

Approximately 230,000 Americans fought in the Revolution with an estimated 25,000 captured. It is estimated that 18,000 died horrible deaths as POWs. A patriot who fought had a greater than 7% chance of becoming a POW and 60+% chance of dying a horrible death as a POW.

For comparison purposes:

The notorious Andersonville Civil War POW camp had a 43% fatality rate. American POWs in WWI had a fatality rate 1.5%; WWII 7%; Korea 11% and Vietnam less than 1%

The British POW Policy was systematic and intentional abuse of American captives meant as punishment and a deterrent to those who might sign up for the American Cause. Americans were held as captives in the Caribbean, Africa, Portugal, Britain, Ireland, Canada and other countries. A substantial number of American captives were navy privateers. There were protests in England over the mistreatment of American POWs by anti-war Whig activists to no avail. It was no secret how the American POWs were being brutalized.

The American POW Policy was to give the best possible treatment of British and German POWs to set an example for the British to treat Americans, which was a false hope. The very little mistreatment of British and German POWs by Americans was situational, unorganized and not sanctioned by senior Congressional authorities or American generals. The American administered POW camps for VC and NVA soldiers in Vietnam were as pristine as possible in order to set an example for the captives of Americans to emulate. It didn't work in Vietnam or in the American Revolution.

It was easier for Americans to care for British and German POWs because they continued to receive their pay in "specie" which enabled them to pay for their care. There were some instances of American abuse of British POWs and a small number of British were held in ships in Boston Harbor and the Connecticut coastline but they were not held under deadly brutal conditions. When I was a young teenager I visited an old copper mine in Simsbury, Conn where British officers were held as POWs. Those old mines are now open to tourists. The British called the mine "Newgate" after the infamous British prison in London. While conditions in the mine had to have been "nasty" the actual number of individuals held there was fairly low, the mine was not in any way the kind execution chambers the British had for American captives.

Initially the British flirted with the idea of extinguishing the American Revolution by executing captive American Revolutionary leaders. The first

candidate was Col Ethan Allen who participated in the capture of Ft Ticonderoga with Benedict Arnold on May 10, 1775 which made both men celebrities so to speak. Allen was captured attacking Montreal Canada on September 25, 1775. He was the kind of Yankee the British loved to hate: famous, aggressive, smart, over-confident, brash, arrogant, physically imposing and confrontational. British Military Governor of Montreal BG Richard Prescott wanted to execute Allen on the spot but wisely and with fanfare chose to send him to Tyburn the execution site of the Tower of London. Nearly dying from privation and exposure Allen arrived in London with the 35 Green Mountain Boys who had been captured with him. As luck would have it, Prescott was captured when Montreal fell to General Montgomery's American forces in late November 1775. While the British were contemplating the "decapitation" policy Gen George Washington put an end to the British idea of executing American Revolutionary leaders by sending a note to King George III saying: "Whatever happens to Allen such exactly shall be the treatment and fate of Brigadier Prescott". Prescott was exchanged for American BG Sullivan who had been captured at the Battle of Long Island. Prescott was then promoted to MG and made British Military Governor of Rhode Island. In the ultimate irony, he was captured again in a lightning strike by American commandos, ultimately to be exchanged again, this time for American Major General Charles Lee who had been captured in New Jersey on December 13, 1776.

The horror of the American POW story started with the British capture of 4,500 Americans at the Battles of Long Island, Ft Lee, Ft Washington, White Plains, Harlem Heights and Kips Bay in the fall of 1776. The British did not control the countryside so were compelled to house the Americans within New York City. They chose the warehouses and old decommissioned British ships in Wallabout Harbor in NYC to hold the American POWs. In May 1776 the British Parliament had passed the "Hulks Act" which made it legal to house British criminals in the hulks of old ships in the Thames River. This established the legal precedent of housing the American captives (criminals) in ships. The British "Commissary", individual responsible for the feeding American Army POWs, was Joshua Loring whose wife was British General Howe's open mistress. The British "Commissary" for American Naval POWs was David Sproat. Both Loring and Sproat stole what little money was dedicated to sustenance and care of

American POWs. The American “Commissaries” for American POWs were Elias Boudinot and Elias Pintard who used their personal fortunes to fulfill their duties. The British Provost Marshal (Chief of Military Police) for American captives was Army Captain William Cunningham who was a known sadist who beat American captives for no reason. It was falsely rumored he routinely took Americans out at night to be hanged to satisfy his lust for blood. It is reliably estimated 11,000 Americans died horrible deaths in the prison ships and 4,500 died in the warehouses in NYC. The conditions of their incarceration were so horrific that many were driven to madness and suicide. The majority of survivors showed the symptoms of what is now known as PTSD. Examples abound: 17 young men from Berkley, VA were captured at Ft Washington and imprisoned and only 1 survived. Of the 36 volunteers from Litchfield, CT 32 were taken prisoner and only six survived. Of the 100 men from Danbury, CT captured at Ft Washington, only two survived.

For British, German and Americans POWs there was a three tier status as captives: (1) Incarceration/Camp (2) Parole and (3) Exchange. In Incarceration they remained under guard in a camp or facility. In Parole they were released on their “Honor” under specific conditions, somewhat like loose house arrest. Only Commissioned Officers were released under Parole. A major element of Parole was the prohibition against further combat. It was common for officers to first go on PAROLE and then go on EXCHANGE. EXCHANGES: were called CARTELS: which were composed of two elements: (1) Composition which was the formula for how many of one rank would equal the rank of another rank; for example: how many sergeants equaled a lieutenant. (2) Compensation which was the amount of money included in the exchange; i.e. a major held for two years vs one held for one year.

Civilian POWs: In New York and New Jersey non-combatant civilians were herded up and held as captives by the British even though there was no evidence they supported the revolution. Benjamin Franklin’s son William who had been held as a POW by the Americans for two years (in benign confinement in Conn) was especially cruel in his treatment of civilians who he suspected of Rebel sympathies. Americans did not imprison civilians on the suspicion they

supported the British. Benjamin Franklin during his long duty in Europe played a major factor in securing better treatment of American POWs held in British prisons and other overseas locations by going public about their treatment. Upon Ethan Allen's exchange, after 953 days of horrific treatment as a POW, he publicized his treatment at the hands of the British in a famous narrative which went through multiple printings that helped expose the brutality of the British and helped ease the treatment of Americans.

The first sizeable group of British captives was taken at the Battle of St. Johns in Canada in early November 1775. The nearly 400 were mostly sent in and around Lancaster, PA.

The second sizeable group of captives by Americans came in The Battle of Trenton in December 1776 where 918 Germans were taken. These were sent to Lancaster and Carlisle, PA for captivity where there was a large German speaking American population.

The third sizeable group of captives taken by Americans came from the October 19, 1777 surrender at of 5,900 British and Germans after the Battles of Saratoga, NY. The surrender agreement known as the "Saratoga Convention" called for the captives to be taken to Boston and then evacuated from America back to Europe. The conditions for surrender were not approved by the War Board or Continental Congress. Due to violations by both the Americans and British the agreement was abrogated. After spending the winter near Boston the captives were marched to Albemarle, VA, near current Charlottesville, where they remained for nearly two years. At Albemarle they had horse races, a theatre, games and enjoyed many amenities of a normal existence. Over their objections they ultimately were sent north in late fall 1779 to Winchester, VA and surrounding areas when the British attacked southern Virginia.

The fourth and last sizeable group of captives taken by Americans came from the October 19, 1781 surrender of 7,157 British and Germans after the Battle of Yorktown, VA. The majority of these POWs were sent to northern Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Yorktown signaled the end of the American Revolution despite George III's desire to continue the conflict. Despite tortuous peace talks which dragged on until November 1782 the repatriation of POWs began in fits and starts as early as December 1781. The last American POWs aboard the "Death Ships" were released in April 1782. Due to the lack of a strong Central American Government and its virtual bankruptcy there was little compensation given to surviving POWs many of whom suffered permanent psychological and physical scars from their abusive incarceration. The criminals responsible for the abuse of American POWs were not held accountable and were evacuated to England after the war.

It was only well into the 19th Century that some recognition was started for those who lost their lives as Revolutionary War POWs. Today little remains to memorialize these patriots who sacrificed so much for the birth of our nation.

THE END

PRIMARY SOURCES

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