

## **REBEL WITHOUT AN ESCAPE PRISONER HAD PLENTY OF ESCAPE ATTEMPTS FROM JOHNSON'S ISLAND**

BY RANDY KOCH

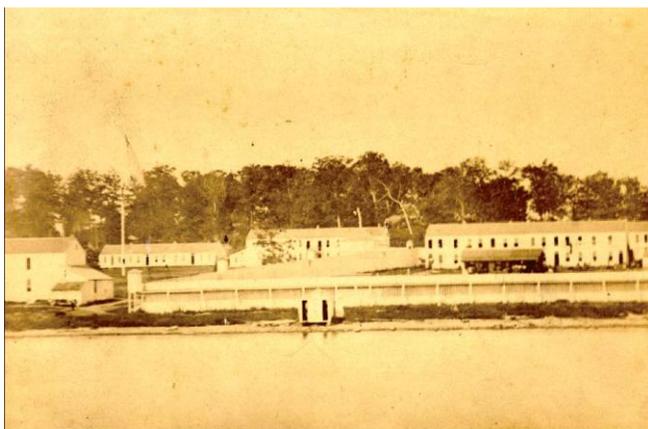
For years, governments have acted impulsively without forethought of the ramifications of their actions.

The first battles of the Civil War brought the unanticipated revelation to the warring parties that they would have to contend with prisoners. Initially, field commanders either informally exchanged prisoners or paroled them. The latter court of action stipulated that a released prisoner sign an oath not to take up arms until after a formal exchange on paper by the proper Union and Confederate agents. Exchanges and paroles carried inherent controversies. If the North negotiated prisoner issues, the South could claim the North recognized her as a sovereign nation.

As the war progressed, the North also realized exchanged prisoners replenished the South's dwindling manpower. When black soldiers entered the Union Army during the second half of the war, the North played a trump card, demanding that black Yankee POWs be exchanged on an equal basis with Rebels. As expected, the Confederacy refused, and received the lion's share of blame for prison overcrowding and the termination of exchanges.

Andersonville's barren, 16-acre Georgia stockade, opening in 1864, was designed to hold 10,000 prisoners. It eventually held as many as 32,000. Camp Douglas, in Chicago, opened in 1862 and would more than double its 6,000 prisoner capacity. And Before the war's end, Johnson's Island's 1,000-prisoner compound ballooned to more than 3,200.

While those incarcerated might disagree, Johnson's Island offered conditions much more desirable than its counterparts. Shortly after the facility opened in 1862, the War Department designated it hold officers only. These men generally possessed financial wherewithal to receive food and clothing from home, and could also purchase goods from the camp sutler. As the war continued and food supplies shrank in the South, Yankee prisoners suffered deprivations consistent with Rebel soldiers and civilians.



In retaliation for the deteriorating conditions in Southern prisons, the North reduced rations for Confederate POWs and prohibited packages from home. With each passing day, overcrowded prisons, inadequate food and a seemingly endless war encouraged growing numbers of men to contemplate escape.

Records indicate only one man attempted to escape from Johnson's Island before late 1863, but the number of attempts increased with worsening conditions. Before the war ended, many more attempted, with 12 men actually reaching freedom from the island compound.

A Louisiana lieutenant proved the most challenging man for federal guards to contain. Born in Cincinnati, Charlie Pierce and his brothers traveled up and down the Mississippi in conjunction with their grandfather's shipping business. By the time war erupted, Pierce's sympathies lay with the South.



The 20-year-old joined the New Orleans 7th Louisiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which participated at Manassas, Gaines' Mill, Malvern Hill, Antietam and Fredericksburg in the early war. During the action at Chancellorsville, Pierce suffered a wound at nearby Fredericksburg, which kept him out of action during the unit's bloody fighting at Gettysburg. A night assault by the Yankees at

Rappahannock Station on Nov. 7, 1863, resulted in Pierce's capture and eventual transport to Johnson's Island.

While many of the officers captured with Pierce threw their swords into the river to avoid the humiliating surrender of their weapons, Pierce chivalrously stepped forward with his sword resting on open palms — before snapping it over his knee and handing the hilt to the approaching Union officer.

Once on Johnson's Island — besides being recruited for the minstrel shows — Pierce found himself in demand when prisoners chose sides for baseball teams. Perhaps the desire to return to battle enticed Pierce to attempt escape, but more than likely his competitive desire to outwit the Yankees provided more motivation.

His first recorded attempt occurred by tunneling under the stockade fence. When he poked through the sod beyond the fence, however, gloating guards with bayonets greeted him.

Pierce's second attempt came spontaneously, when he noticed a drunken Yankee soldier, with his coat and hat off, asleep inside the compound near his offal cart. As the gates opened, a guard discovered the sleeping private and interrupted the escape.

With winter well-entrenched on the north coast on Dec. 13, 1864, Pierce led a group of cold, hungry Rebels to the 15-foot-tall stockade wall. With castoff pieces of wood connected with scraps of cloth, they prepared to scale the wall with their homemade ladders in the early morning darkness. Equipped only with rocks, the athletic Pierce managed to take out one guard with a strong armed strike to the forehead, but not before Pierce's cousin was fatally wounded.

Pierce and several others scampered over the fence and made it across the ice to the mainland, only to be captured and returned by a farmer, much to the Rebels' humiliation.

Pierce's most ambitious scheme the following month culminated after five months of planning. He accumulated discarded fruit cans and scrounged castoff parts, like a broken camp kettle handle, which he meticulously crafted into a replica of a Yankee rifle. At the same time, he accrued bits and pieces of blue Federal uniforms until he possessed a complete outfit.

On Jan. 15, one of Pierce's comrades "leaked" word to a guard of an escape attempt that night. Troops searched the darkened barracks, and in the excitement, Pierce fell in with his "new brothers in blue" as they marched out. Near the gate, an alert officer noticed that one of his men failed to wear a cartridge box. After reprimanding the soldier, he demanded to inspect Pierce's rifle, accidentally foiling the ruse.

Fortunately, Col. Hill, the commander at the time, appreciated the ingenuity, and with a hearty laugh he sent Pierce back inside the compound, where he remained until he signed the Oath of Allegiance and departed on June 13, 1865, as one of the last Rebel prisoners to leave Johnson's Island.

He returned to New Orleans, anxious to develop a shipping business and reacquaint himself with members of the fairer sex he left behind four years earlier. The man who dodged enemy bullets in battle, and survived a year and half of incarceration in a Yankee prison, succumbed to yellow fever on Oct. 17, 1867.

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