

Chapter XV

Retaliation and Atrocities

As the weather moderated and the men began to spend more time outside, activities to pass the time evolved. Playing baseball was a popular outdoor activity enjoyed by those healthy enough to participate.

On one warm day in May, several of the men in Will's barrack, including Minnich, joined in a game of ball in the avenue between the rows of barracks. Will, who had been fighting a mild case of dysentery, was watching from the shade of the barrack feeling not well enough to participate. The game had also drawn spectators from the post garrison including Captains Graham and Hogendobler, of the Iowa "Greybeards." Hogendobler, despised by the prisoners and dubbed "Hogdriver," seized on any opportunity to abuse prisoners. This day would be no different.

As the heat and humidity, of the late Spring day, took its toll on the players and replacements for those dropping out were needed, the players scanned the spectators looking for men to join the game.

"Hey, Moore," yelled Minnich. "You gonna play or just watch?"

"Believe I'll just have to watch. Don't think I've got the strength to play."

"How 'bout you, Mal, you gonna join in?" This time Minnich directed his question to Mal Thornton who was one of Will's companions when captured and like Minnich, a full ten years younger than Will. "Yeah, I'm playin.' I'll be right there."

The game had continued for only a few minutes when an errant throw by the young Minnich missed its target and struck Hogendobler.

"You S.O.B.," screamed the Hogdriver. "That was done on purpose."

"No, sir," replied Minnich. "It just got away from me." "Bull sh*t," screamed the irate yankee captain. "I say you threw at me deliberately. What do you think, Graham?" "Yeah. He meant to hit you. I'm sure of it." "I swear, I did not mean for the ball to hit you. It was just a bad throw."

As remembered in his writings some forty years after the war, Hogendobler would have none of Minnich's explanations:

"he would accept neither apology nor excuse; but like the coward he was, applying to me every vile epithet that would come to his base mind, while trying to strike me in the face with his clinched fist and then threatening me with his pistol because I would not stand up and meekly take his blows. His foul epithets, with his revolver thrust almost against my face and a threat to blow my 'damned brains out' if I did not stand up and take the blows aimed at my face, were more than I could quietly submit to; and notwithstanding I was looking squarely into the muzzle of his pistol, which just then seemed to have a bore as big as a Gatling gun, I turned by head and caught the blow on my ear. This, coupled with the expression 'notion to blow your damned head off,' was more than human nature could endure in silence and looking him fairly in the eyes, I flung some of his own choice words back at him: Shoot, damn you! Shoot, you coward! I can't help myself. I apologized for the ball having struck you and you will accept neither apology nor excuse. Now shoot! He stared at me a bit after I had relieved myself and then with

another string of curses ordered me to follow him, which I did. Not knowing his intentions and at that particular moment, with my blood boiling, not much caring, he led the way outside to the guardhouse and ordered that I be ornamented with a ball and chain for a month. I was well satisfied to get off so cheaply. We had a trick of unlocking fetters at night, though ostensibly we were never without them."

The arrival of Spring brought with it several significant changes in the life of the prisoners on the island. Unfortunately, the movement of men in the compound gave the "Greybeards" reason to test their marksmanship and begin the random shooting at prisoners which passed to each succeeding contingent of guards to follow. The first recorded wounding of a prisoner had taken place in late April and additional target practice upon them without injury had continued until late May.

However, only a few days before the departure of the old men from Iowa, the first death at the hands of the guards would be recorded. George Ross of the 1st Arkansas and a friend were standing near the wall trying to talk to a visitor on the other side of the wall. Both men had ventured too close to the wall on the south side of the compound, which because of bedrock outcroppings near the surface, was the only side of the compound not marked with a ditch indicating; a deadline which no prisoner was to cross. For this, both would be shot with Ross being the first prisoner to die at the hands of the guards. (Author's note: George Ross lies in plot 1206 in the Confederate Cemetery at Rock Island)

Another of these changes, which would confront the prisoners at Rock Island, came in early June as the 37th Iowa Volunteers were replaced by the first of three one-hundred day regiments, the 133rd Illinois. The Iowa regiment which was organized to release regular troops from non-combat duty had been dubbed by the prisoners as the "greybeards" due to their age which exceeded forty-five. These troops had joined the initial contingent of guards, the 4th Regiment Veteran Reserve Corps, consisting of men physically unable to serve in the field, in early January and who had demonstrated less than distinguished service during their five months at Rock Island.

As advanced in age as the Iowa men had been, the 133rd Illinois were just as youthful, many only seventeen years of age and most not much older. Their period of service had dictated the need for little training and consequently they were inexperienced and ill suited for their assignment. They quickly followed the lead set by their predecessors in firing, often indiscriminately, into the compound, acts that would continue for the remaining life of the prison and are documented by prisoners in their post war writings. These men included Minnich, Rogan, B.M. Hord and Charles Wright, who although an English citizen had been captured while serving in an infantry regiment from Tennessee. The Illinois regiment effectively declared open season on the Rebel prisoners for little or no reason.

The next casualty was the first at the hands of the newly arrived young troops from Illinois. Minnich, who seemed to become aware of everything happening inside of the compound and out, quickly brought the news to the men of barrack 47. Bursting into the barrack out of breath, Minnich drew a crowd of the barrack's inhabitants.

"Good Lord, John, what's happened?" quizzed Will. Gasping for breath, Minnich exclaimed. "They killed a boy from Alabama last night. All he asked was to go to the latrine but the damned cowardly guard shot him in the doorway. They said he laid there all night. No one wanted to approach him for fear of being shot. Best be careful going to the sinks from now on. Seems the damned yankees have scraped the bottom of the barrel for this bunch from Illinois.

If this keeps up, it'll be a miracle if any of us get out'a here alive." (Author's note: Private Samuel A. Frank 5th Alabama lies in grave 1211 in the Confederate Cemetery. His shooting is mentioned in the writings of Charles Wright and Lafayette Rogan. Less than two weeks later Rogan notes the shooting of two more prisoners once again confirmed by Wright.) Minnich's words of caution helped little as the next diabolical act of the newly arrived one-hundred days men was to be the act of shooting into the barracks at night. Minnich wrote that, "their firing into the barracks during the night became a matter of such common occurrence that men in the outer rows, next to the dead line, feared to sleep on the upper and middle bunks and slept on the floor in many instances." The guards were so undisciplined with their weapons that the newspaper in Davenport, Iowa, across the river, reported that men who were engaged in rock quarrying, along the river bank above the town, had been fired on by the guards. Improvement in the weather allowed for the increase in work projects, both within and outside the compound. Many of these projects were accomplished using prison labor, the prisoners being paid a daily wage credited to their account.

These workers also were given a full ration of food equal to that given the guards. One such project was a ditch dug for sanitary purposes through the main street which ran east to west through the center of the camp. The weather during construction was hot and water for the entire camp came from a single pump, necessitating a constant bucket brigade from morning roll call, to six or later in the evening. The long hours were necessary to provide for the population of eight thousand men. Two men were detailed per shift, the shifts lasting approximately six hours each. Men carrying water to the twenty or so men engaged in the digging of the eight-foot ditch, were inevitably delayed making the arrival of water, when it did come, a long anticipated event, usually drawing a crowd around the bucket carrier.

June 22, 1864 would bring rise to another dark moment in the history of Rock Island Prison. Due to a number of escapes during the previous month, the guards had been instructed to be especially vigilant and orders were issued prohibiting the assembling of prisoners in groups of more than two, in the compound's open areas. The guards were instructed to disburse all such groups and should they not disburse, to fire on them with no additional warning required. This is unfortunately, the only excuse the trigger happy one-hundred day men needed. On this particular day as the bucket arrived at the ditch and the cry "water" rang out, a congregation of men around the bucket quickly developed, as it had on other days. Why would thirsty men wait to leave the ditch in "twos" when they were known to be on prison work details and no where near the deadline? This day would not be like other days however. The first sentry to notice the group immediately called for their dispersal. Feeling entirely in the right the thirsty men paid the call no heed. At the opposite end of the street, the call, "disperse that crowd" rang out. Again, the workers desperate to quench their thirst made no movement to return to the ditch. Minnich, who was standing a short distance from the second sentry noticed him raise his musket and called out, "Scatter boys, that fellow is going to shoot."

Looking up to the sentry, one of the men in the group called out to the sentry, "We are workmen." The sentry knew full well the situation and cared not.

Leveling his weapon, he fired into the crowd and three men fell. In his post war writings, Minnich describes the damage done by this single shot. "*Three went down. One, the first shot through the liver, died in two hours; the second, in front of him, was bored through the intestines from behind, the ball making its exit near the navel; and the third was caught near the waistband from the rear, the bullet perforating the body, cutting through the inner wall of*

his right pocket and dropping into that receptacle. Those two were taken to the hospital. One died a few days later and the third was still living but of his ultimate fate I am ignorant."

Rogan, in his diary, simply states: "*Two prisoners shot today without the least provocation. One dead.*" Two of the three men mentioned by Minnich were identified as Bannister Cantrell of Company G 18th Georgia and James Ricks Company F 50th Georgia.

A day or two later a shot was heard during the night and the next day the prison was alive with word that a prisoner had been wounded in the arm while asleep in his bunk in barrack 28. The next day an event occurred which is oddly ignored by Minnich, Rogan and others who wrote of their experiences at Rock Island but is supported by the hospital register.

This incident was reported three days later by the Rock Island newspaper *The Argus*, a newspaper at odds with the prison administration almost from the beginning. The report saying: "*On Friday the Union (a rival Republican paper in Rock Island) published a story of the shooting of several prisoners by the guards and the killing of one. On inquiry at the proper office, we were told that the story was untrue.*"

Despite denial by the "proper office" and lack of conformation from official correspondence or the regimental records, the story was true. The hospital records are the proof. Those documents for June 25, 1864 record the admittance of seventeen prisoners all from barrack 78 for gunshot wounds. Shootings continued during the remaining life of the prison but the incident bringing about the most lasting affect on the prisoners at Rock Island and other northern prisons, came in the form of an inhuman order from the Washington military command. This callous directive from the Federal War Department resulted in the near starvation of hundreds of prisoners during the last year of the war, at prisons all over the north. The daily ration which had been the same as issued to Union soldiers was abruptly reduced on the first of June 1864, reportedly as retaliation for perceived cruelties directed at Union prisoners in Confederate prisons. While it is true that northern prisoners suffered from neglect in southern prisons, it must be pointed out that the lack of food, clothing and medical supplies also afflicted the southern soldier and the average southern civilian. The inability to provide these items was not deliberate but was brought about by the blockade of southern ports and the ravages of war, which had devastated much of the South. This was not the case in the north where the means to provide for the prisoners was available but the "milk of human kindness" apparently was not.

Prior to June the rations that had been provided to prisoners throughout the north had been adequate, if not generous. The standard daily ration had included the following for both Union soldiers and prisoners of war, held by Federal authorities from the beginning of the war until June 1864:

Pork/bacon 12 ounces or beef 20 ounces

Bread 22 ounces of soft bread

or 20 ounces of corn meal

or 16 ounces of hard bread

Beans or peas 24 ounces

Hominy or rice 16 ounces

Green coffee 1.6 ounces

or Roasted coffee 1.25 ounces

or tea .24 ounces

Other items on the list but not always issued were:

Salt .5, sugar 2.4, pepper .25, potatoes 4.8, molasses .33 and vinegar 1.25 all shown in ounces.

On June 1st the following prisoner ration was announced:

Salt Pork 10 ounces or salt beef 14 ounces;

Bread 16 ounces soft bread

or 14 ounces hard bread

or 16 ounces of corn meal.

Beans or peas 2 ounces

or Rice or hominy 1.28 ounces

Vinegar .48 ounces

Salt .6 ounces

These were the amounts officially announced but seldom allowed. Numerous prisoner accounts have alluded to the provision issues actually being less than those published. The elimination of vegetables and soft bread, in favor of an almost steady diet of salted meat, lye-cured corn meal and hominy, led to a scurvy epidemic which claimed many additional lives, the loss of teeth and the crippling of many who managed to survive.

As a further punishment, on June 10, 1864, it was announced that trips into the compound by the camp sutler, who provided items to both guards and prisoners alike, would be stopped thus eliminating the purchase of items of food from him, by men with money on account with the commissary of prisoners. Two months later this ban would expand to eliminate all purchases from the sutler, not just food items. A new ban was placed on all packages received from outside the prison and restrictions on what the prison authorities considered excess clothing. The definition of excess was anything beyond one suit of clothes and one change of underwear.

The announcement of the ration reduction came at morning roll call. When the news came of the change, it also included the news that the rations would now be issued in bulk for a ten day period. After roll call, the men began to gather in groups and discuss the impact on them of this latest injustice. It occurred to both Will and the men in his barrack that this would impact him greatly, as he would now most likely be responsible for seeing that the rations were equally shared by all.

"Well, Will, I suppose we'll have to depend on you to keep us from starving." spoke up Mal Thornton. "Hope you're up to it. Seems that between shootin' us and starvin' us, these people are determined to rid themselves of us." "Yeah," replied Will, "I was thinkin' the same thing myself. Sarge will have to make sure no stealin' of food goes on or it'll never last ten days. Most likely won't anyway." Sickness began to increase as Summer wore on, reaching a low of three-

hundred eighty-three, or less than 5% of the population at the end of June. The poor diet, reduced rations and shortage of good water most likely all contributed to the increase. By the end of October, the number had risen to six hundred twelve of a prison population of just under six thousand, or over 10% of the population.

Men looked for whatever means they could find to ward off hunger and starvation. One way was to join the work details with promise of a full ration equal to that received by the guards. The practice of using camp labor, which had led to the shooting in the ditch in June, was expanded by the promise of the increased rations and payment of a daily wage. The wage was paltry at ten cents a day (about 6% of the average daily wage to hire civilian workers) but the offer of full rations was a convincing inducement to a starving man, in spite of his principals. Some had originally refused to work on the details, holding the belief that prisoners of war should not be made to work. Minnich had been one who held that belief and had paid a hard price for his stiff-necked refusal. In his post-war writings, he describes his punishment for rebelling against a work detail, only weeks before the war's end: *"I was triced up by the wrists to a tree on the main avenue with a clothesline, with my toes only resting on the ground, for four short hours of sixty long minutes each, under a gray, sunless sky, with a sharp March wind blowing across the frozen river and cutting through my scant clothing till my very marrow seemed frozen."*

Those who refused the offer searched for alternative means to supplement their diets. The men in barrack 47, Minnich, Moore and their companions developed a sport that produced both meat for their pots and a diversion from the boredom.

The game, which took place in other barracks as well, consisted of blocking all means of exit, forcing rats and mice to enter and exit at points beneath each window, where men would wait armed with gigs to spear them, as they moved through the opening. A miss meant no meat for the stew and another night of gnawing hunger.

As the Summer dragged on, scurvy became widespread and scrounging for things to supplement the starvation diet increased. As the acorns produced by the many oak trees in and around the compound began to mature, those that could be reached or that fell to the ground early, were quickly added to the diet of those lucky enough to harvest them. The August 10th order, prohibiting the receipt by prisoners of all articles except for clothing, which could be delivered only to those most destitute, added further suffering to the already pitiful inmates of Rock Island, driving them to even more extremes, in the pursuit of supplements to their diet and clothing. This would not be the last of the blows to be delivered against the southern men.