Methods: Living History "How-tos"

CAPTURED! Taking "Prisoners" in Civil War Living History

by Kevin O'Beirne

[Author's Note: This essay attempts to discuss a woeful inadequacy in modern reenacting: the taking of prisoners during "battle" scenarios. It does not attempt to present information relative to the incarceration of captured soldiers in Civil War-era prison camps. While most of this article is presented relative to Federal soldiers of the Army of the Potomac, much of it is applicable for other military impressions of the Civil War.]

Being taken prisoner in the Civil War was both common and easy all a soldier needed to do was not run fast enough when it was necessary, be caught on the skirmish line when the enemy got between him and the main body of his unit, or otherwise be in the wrong place at the wrong time. During four years of war, scores of thousands of boys in blue and their grayclad counterparts were captured and doomed to take up residence in places like Belle Isle, Salisbury, Point Lookout, and Johnson's Island, among others.

The Problem

Despite the fact that the capture of enemy soldiers was very common in most Civil War battles, it is extremely *uncommon* in modern living history. And, on the rare occasion when prisoners are taken at a reenactment, often their behavior in no way conforms to that of most soldiers captured in the Civil War. Examples from 2000, 2001, and 2002 events attended by this writer support this position:

- I participated in a regional event in New York State as a Confederate infantryman. During a heated "battle" I threw myself on the ground in "fear" as did many Northern and Southern soldiers in 1861-1865. When the Federals advanced, I rose to my knees with my hands in the air and cried out, "Yanks, I surrender!" Did a grim-faced sergeant order two men to fix bayonets and escort me to the rear and turn me over to the provost marshal, as I hoped would happen? No. Instead, they smiled, broke ranks, and stood around me cracking jokes until their commander moved them along to rejoin the "battle". The next blueclad battle line that approached simply split and marched around me as if I were an inanimate object (despite the fact that I continued to raise my hands and say, "Yanks, I surrender!"). I next attempted to surrender to a lone Federal captain, who only chuckled, shook my hand, and walked away toward the sound of the guns. I knew most of the men to whom I attempted to surrender; they are fairly good reenactors, but they apparently had no time for taking prisoners. Frustrated, I finally picked up my rifled musket and rejoined the Southern battle lines.
- At a large event in Kentucky I served in the Federal ranks as a Major. In accordance with the scenario and our portrayal, our brigade broke and ran like frightened sheep. While trying to escape by running through a cornfield with a Confederate battle line in hot pursuit, I tripped and fell. I sat up and raised my hands as the "enemy" advanced on me. The line parted around me and kept moving as if I were a tree or rock outcrop...Déjà vu. A second line approached and I continued to hold up both hands. This line also parted around me and marched past, and one of the Confederates gave me a "high five" (this may be commonplace because, around the same time, one of my comrades received a "high five" while trying to surrender on the opposite side of the

cornfield). A third line, with a commissioned officer, quickly bore down on me. I held up my right hand and, with my left, offered my sword to the Rebel officer. He ignored me and kept his line marching—it appeared they never even paused to consider the exhausted Yankee attempting to spare his own life through the ignominy of surrender. It sure can be tough to be taken prisoner, even when one is wearing a relatively high rank.

- At a large event in Maryland, one of my comrades fell out of the ranks to aid a "wounded" man. While doing so he was approached by a group of amiable Confederates who had been milling about behind Federal lines looking for someone who actually carded to receive their surrender. They stated that they felt more than a little ridiculous wandering through the Federal forces fully armed—in view of the spectators.
- During a "battle" at a small, regional event in southwestern Pennsylvania, after expending almost all of its ammunition on the skirmish line in a large, open field, our company decided to surrender en masse. When we raised a white rag on our officer's sword, the "enemy" apparently did not know what to do with us or how to react. Our company commander had to tell the "enemy" officer to order us to our feet with our weapons' muzzles toward the ground, to move forward slowly, then give them our names and unit, and hand over our cartridge boxes. After this, we had to more-or-less form ourselves into a line and ask the "enemy" commander to march us to the rear.
- At an otherwise excellent event in Maryland over 100 Confederates were "taken prisoner" in a short battle reenactment and held under guard throughout the night. During the evening some prisoners ridiculously attempted to escape by hiding in a group of spectators who were passing through on a candlelight tour. The next morning several prisoners got up a ruckus, yelled modern epithets at their "captors", and commenced throwing potatoes, slightly injuring one guard. This was against the historical scenario and had a decided feel of *Hogan's Heroes* instead of the 1862 Maryland Campaign.

Do such incidents sound familiar? If you have not encountered similar experiences, perhaps you have never attempted to "surrender" during a battle reenactment.

This writer has come to the conclusion that most reenactors have neither the time nor the inclination to take prisoners or surrender. Perhaps they are too intent on getting back into the "battle", or perhaps they simply do not care to deal with "captured" men, or maybe they do not want to subject themselves to becoming prisoners, even for a short while. Regardless, the failure to take prisoners in modern reenacting represents a tremendous disservice of historical interpretation, as well as lost opportunities for some fantastic first-person encounters between the blue and gray.

Being Captured in the Civil War

A student of the common Civil War soldier summarized the experience of being captured as:

"First hustled to the rear, the prisoner was disarmed. The unarmed individuals were then collected into groups where each man's identity and unit was recorded. Sometimes while

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near the front the captive might be questioned by an army officer as to his regiment, army commander, or military information, however, 'interrogation' as it is used in today's armed forces, was rare. From the front line collecting points the prisoners were marched further to the rear, and during these movements were usually allowed to keep their canteens and haversacks. Most accounts of men captured in regular battles, with some exceptions, acknowledge that their treatment was normally rough but courteous... Eventually all captives were marched to a railhead, or to a large town or city where transportation by train or boat to...military prison camps was provided."¹

In contrast to most re-created "battles", soldiers in real Civil War engagements often called upon their foes to surrender. During the battle of the Wilderness, a Zouave recalled of the fighting in Saunders's Field,

"The Johnnys were then coming down upon the open plain close on to us, yelling out 'surrender, Yanks.'... They shot down a great many of our boys coming back. But I did not like to register my name in the Hotel-de-Libby."2

An artilleryman in the Army of the Potomac's Second Corps recounted the decision of whether to flee or surrender during the battle of Reams Station:

"There remain to us the ... alternatives of surrender, or an attempt at flight... Our minds are instantly made up, for against the horrors of Rebel prisons on the one hand we have only to balance the chances of being shot while retreating...we hesitate but for an instant ere choosing the latter alternative, and take our departure, amid the hissing bullets, and the touching invitations of the 'Johnnies,' who tell us to 'come in,' or they'll shoot us."3

Soldiers who chose to surrender

signaled their capitulation in a variety of ways. Simply calling out the intent to surrender seems to have been the most common. Confederate General Alfed Iverson recalled another common method: "When I saw white handkerchiefs raised and my line of battle still lying in position, I characterized the surrender as disgraceful."⁴ A third method was the "old fashioned" "hands-up", as recalled by a Rebel who was captured at Antietam: "three, myself among them, are run over by the line in blue, and throw up our hands in token of surrender."⁵ Similarly, another Confederate recalled of Pickett's Charge, "they flung themselves on the ground to escape the hot fire and threw up their hands in token of surrender, while the remnant sought safety in flight."6

Soldiers commonly referred to being captured as "gobbled", as in "gobbled up" by an advancing enemy line; for example:

"[A Vermont soldier] slipped and fell...between two rocks. ... Upon his arrival he found himself proceeded by a Confederate soldier. For an instant, they glared at each other, when the reb burst out laughing saying: 'We're both in a fix! You can't gobble me, and I can't gobble you till we know which [side] is going to lick [the other]. Let's wait til the shooting is over, and if your side wins, I'm your prisoner; and we win, you're my prisoner!' The bargain was made... 'Didn't that reb feel cheap when he found I'd won him!""7

One group of Federals was captured as follows:

"[The Confederate officer] yelled for the Yanks to come in... [and] motioned to the Yankees to come forward into their lines. At last, a few dazed, terrified New Yorkers quietly got to their feet, dropping their muskets and gun belts, and slowly made their way up the gradual slope to the Rebel rifle pits. Within seconds it was all over; after seeing the first few give up, almost the whole mass of [thirty-three] men stood to surrender. Only Springsteed and a few others made any attempt to escape... They made a rush for safety, under heavy fire, having decided 'that it was better to risk the enemy's bullets than a prison.""

Robert Knox Sneden, a cartographer on the Sixth Corps staff, recalled his capture by Mosby's Rangers during the Mine Run

> "I [was]... awakened by a rough tap on the head with a pistol barrel... pressing the muzzle to my head [he] ordered me to 'be silent or he would blow a hole through me.'... Five or six other [enemy] soldiers came in and immediately... [began] demanding silence, then greenbacks... One Rebel seized my pistol from under my pillow.... Mosby himself interrogated me at once."9

A Federal captain serving near Hanover Court House, Virginia in late May, 1862 reported:

"As soon as [the Confederates] saw me they sprang up in a body and called to me not to shoot, that they were willing to surrender. The captain commanding them came forward and handed me his sword and surrendered to me 96 prisoners... with all their arms and accouterments... I then ordered the captain to form his men and have the caps taken off their guns and

their bayonets unfixed, after which I returned with them to General Emory's headquarters."10

Commissioned officers usually preferred to surrender to an officer equal or higher rank. One officer captured at Cold Harbor of attempted to bury his belt and sword-which was essentially a commissioned officer's "badge of office" and a symbol of his honorbut, before the task could be completed he was caught and brought into the Confederate earthworks where,

"A man who was not a soldier, but a citizen...who had come up to kill a few Yanks...grabbed my sword and I wrestled with him for it. While we were twisting and struggling... a tall Confederate Officer took him by his neck, [cursed him, and] and wanted to know why he intended to strike a prisoner.... The officer touched his hat to me and asked the cause of my trouble. 'That man wanted my sword,' I said, 'but I saw no reason for giving it to him. You appear to be an officer and... I will offer it to you, sir."¹

In both the Union and Confederate armies, prisoners-regardless of the color uniform they wore-were placed in the charge an officer known as a "provost-marshal", who essentially served as the chief of military police for a given geographic area or a given command.¹² Provost marshals were typically not used below the brigade level and were often junior field officers (majors and lieutenant colonels),



COMPELLED TO SURRENDER.

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although line officers were also frequently employed as provost marshals as circumstances required. Throughout most of the war, the Army of the Potomac had a provost-marshal-general, who was the top "police officer" of the army.

In General Orders No. 133, dated June 9, 1862, General George McClellan issued the following order to the Army of the Potomac:

"All prisoners captured from the enemy will be turned over to the provost-marshal of division, who will send them, at the earliest practicable moment, with complete descriptive lists

and information as to where, when, and how they were captured, to provost-marshalthe general."13

However, the use of provost marshals as receivers of captured enemy soldiers was in effect before the publication of General Orders No. 133, as evidenced by this March, 1862 communication from а Federal General in the "We Shenandoah Valley: found a small picket of cavalry and a few infantry, several of whom were taken-furloughed men---who probably preferred being captured. I sent them forward this morning to Provost-Marshal

Andrews."¹⁴ Similarly, a Federal cavalryman serving near Richmond in May, 1862 wrote, "General Emory then ordered me to turn [the prisoners] over to the provost-marshal"15

As recounted above by

Private Sneden, after capture it was not uncommon for soldiers to be "relieved" of their cash or valuables, or certain parts of their uniforms or gear. Shortly after being taken prisoner, soldiers were marched to the nearest town or railroad station for transport to a prison camp. The reception that Southern civilians provided for captured Yankees was not always the warmest, particularly as the war dragged on. A New Yorker taken prisoner in 1864 described marching through the streets of Petersburg, Virginia:

"We were subjected to gross abuse-the ladies condescending to hoot at us and spit on our faces... The next morning we were robbed of all valuables, and part of our clothing was taken."16

While the treatment described above was not uncommon, on the other hand, not all Federal prisoners were subjected to such treatment by Southern civilians. Indeed, there were many acts of kindness toward captured Yanks by Confederate locals; however, as the war lengthened, the frequency of acts of kindness toward prisoners tended to decrease.

Conclusions Drawn from the Historical Accounts

The first-person testimonies presented above are merely a smattering of the hundreds of available accounts of soldiers' captures. The following inferences were drawn from the historical accounts of captured soldiers studied for this article:

- Even before the heinous prison camps of 1864, most Federal 1. soldiers feared "being gobbled and taken to Richmond". This should be reflected in reenactors' first-person impressions.
- When opposing battle lines were close, it was not unusual for 2. men of one side to call upon their enemies to surrender, particularly if one side felt it had an advantage.
- Surrender was signaled by calling out, waving a white rag, by 3 raising one's hands, or simply by standing up when called upon to surrender.
 - 4 Men who surrendered did so out of an instinct for selfpreservation. As such, they were often (but not always) more willing to be captured than to be shot while attempting to escape.
 - The first order of business after actual capture was disarming the prisoners. Captors not only removed percussion caps and charges from muskets, but also thoroughly checked each prisoner for knives, pistols, and other weapons and confiscated their ammunition. Captured weapons could be behind or. left more commonly, were brought to the rear with the prisoners, carried either by the captors or the prisoners themselves.
 - 6 Upon their capture, prisoners were generally stunned and depressed, not defiant and surly as many "captured" reenactors tend to be.

7. Prisoners tended to obey the

commands of their guards.

- 8. Men who guarded captured soldiers could be nervous and trigger happy-which was understood by most prisoners, who behaved accordingly.
- 9. It was fairly common for guards to steal money, valuables, and gear (hats, blankets, etc.) from prisoners.
- In the immediate aftermath of their capture and disarming, 10 prisoners were usually marched to the rear and handed over to a provost marshal.
- 11. If prisoners were held for a brief period before being marched to the rear, they were "confined" in any convenient area: a fenced-in farmyard, the center of a large clearing, in a ravine, etc. In short, prisoners were held at gunpoint in any location where they could be watched and warded from escape attempts.

Implications for Reenactors

How can living historians improve the quality of "battle" scenarios through increased attention to taking "prisoners"? Here are a few pointers.

Consider Documented History: Reenactors should endeavor to incorporate the conclusions listed above into living history events.

Confederate prisoners captured at Spotsylvania Court House in

May, 1864, being held in an open ravine nicknamed "the Punch

Bowl" near Belle Plain, Virginia pending transport to Northern

prison camps (Library of Congress)





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- Reenactors Should Add Talk of Capture to Their First-person Impressions: When a "battle" appears imminent or in the aftermath of an "engagement", talk about who was "taken to Richmond" or "gobbled", and other topics relative to being captured. Not every casualty in Civil War battles was a gunshot wound, as is depicted at most reenactments.
- Reenactors Should Think More Often About Taking Prisoners than "Killing" the "Enemy": It was common practice for soldiers in battle to call upon their foes to surrender, and all but the most murderous men typically desired to capture the enemy rather than spill his blood. This should be incorporated into the actions of almost all reenactors in a "battle" scenario, from privates up to the highest ranks, more often than is currently the case at most living history events.
- **Opportunity for First-person Interaction** Between Federals and Confederates: One of the most interesting aspects of the Civil War was the interaction between Federals and Rebels. Such interaction was fairly rare for the average soldier, and generally could occur only on the picket line when commissioned officers were not present, or when a group of men were captured. Such occurrences are altogether rare in reenacting because realistic picket scenarios are uncommon and the taking of "prisoners" at events is rarer still. Unfortunately, events with strong prisoner-of-war scenarios are almost unheard of, outside of the Immortal 600 events at Fort Pulaski, Georgia, the Fort Delaware events, and a few others. Taking prisoners presents a unique opportunity for realistic, intense, and educational first-person interaction between the two sides.
- *Preparing to Accommodate the Taking of Prisoners*: Battalions or larger bodies of living historians preparing to enter a "battle" should consider how to accept and handle prisoners.

If a unit (company, battalion, brigade, or otherwise) intends to take prisoners, it is necessary to have a responsible person who is familiar with period procedures and protocols designated to serve as the "provost marshal". While the "provost marshal" should optimally be a commissioned officer, depending on the size of the living history event, his rank may not matter as long as the job gets done. One alternative for living history events is to simply designate the commander of a battalion's guard detail as the "provost marshal", assuming that at least a portion of the guard detail does not return to the ranks for the "battle" and remains under the direct control of the commander of the guard.

Regardless of who serves in the role, the "provost marshal" must be delegated the authority to handle prisoners. All commissioned officers in the command should be made to understand that the "capture" of prisoners is actively sought and, upon capture, all prisoners are to be sent under armed escort to the "provost marshal".

The "provost marshal" must be provided with a guard detail sized sufficiently to handle the expected number of prisoners; this writer believes that five armed men, in addition to the "provost marshal" himself, are sufficient to handle up to thirty or forty prisoners for up to a couple hours, assuming that the guard detail is not called upon to do anything other than guard the prisoners.

The overall commander, in consultation with the "provost marshal" and the "enemy" commander(s) should determine before the "battle" commences the procedure for handling



If prisoners are to be held beyond the end of the "battle", arrangement for a holding area (preferably with some type of barrier, even if it is only a farmyard fence) is necessary. After a "battle", guards should be prepared to aid prisoners by escorting or providing water details, and escorting prisoners to the sinks if necessary.

While they are seldom needed at most living history events, it

is a good idea for the "provost marshal" or unit commander to have period parole forms, which can lend an added touch of realism to a prisoner scenario.

• *Tips for Prospective Prisoners:* Commissioned or non-commissioned officers in charge of troops that contemplate surrendering in a "battle" should be prepared with a white (or white-ish) rag to clearly signal their surrender or request a cease-fire. Alternatives to the white flag include holding up both hands, holding up muskets in a nonthreatening manner, hollering "We surrender!", and other means.

Upon being taken captive, knowledgeable reenactors may need to provide *subtle* advice to their captors to achieve a first-person experience satisfactory to all.

"Prisoners" should present an appropriate first-person impression: dejected, sullen, morose, and exhausted.

Prisoners should immediately obey the orders of their guards. Escape attempts, if any, should be realistic, limited in frequency, and should be ventured only if there is a realistic chance of success without receiving a guard's bullet in the back. In such instances, remember that you are representing men who were often isolated in a virtual sea of enemy soldiers, who moments before had been busy trying to kill them; therefore, conduct yourself with appropriate trepidation.

How to "Take Prisoners": If one or more "enemy" soldiers surrender to you in a "battle", what should you do? First off, signal to them that their surrender is accepted and order them to advance in a non-threatening manner (i.e., hands up, weapons held with muzzles toward the ground, move slowly, etc.). If the prisoners are taken in the midst of a raging "battle", it is probably best to move them to an area of "safety" out of the immediate area of the "fighting". If the prisoners are captured after the "battle" has moved away, it could be appropriate for the captors to simply order the prisoners to sit or kneel in place.

As soon as possible, the prisoners should be disarmed, even if it means only removing the percussion caps from their weapons; however, other means of disarmament are desirable, including checking each man for pistols, knives, and other weapons. Small arms and knives should preferably be confiscated; if confiscation is undesirable, the reenactor possessing the weapons should be informed that they are "confiscated" and that he is not to consider using them in an escape attempt. If the latter course is adopted, obvious pistols and knives should be immediately concealed from plain sight by the men who carry them. Optimally commissioned officers should surrender their sword (or at least make a show of



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it) to the senior officer in the vicinity; however, an officer should not be distracted from the more serious duty of attending to his troops in the "battle" simply to accept the formal surrender of an "enemy" officer.

After the prisoners are disarmed, the name and rank of each should be recorded by the senior person present, or delegated to a non-commissioned officer if a commissioned officer is present. For this reason, it is important to have writing materials handy, particularly for those reenactors with non-commissioned officer impressions.

Commissioned officers who are "captured" should be separated from their enlisted men as soon as possible after capture to minimize the potential for organized, mass escapes. Captured commissioned officers who conduct themselves as gentlemen should be treated accordingly by their guards.

After disarmament and the recording of names, prisoners should be marched to the rear and turned over to the provost marshal, together with the list of their names and ranks. After this, the captors may rejoin their commands.

• *Tips for Guards Watching Over Prisoners*: At all times, especially during the period before the prisoners are disarmed, captors should be especially vigilant and should maintain their guard. Guards' weapons should generally be held at the ready in the general direction of the prisoners. Of course, there are obvious, common sense safety implications to this, such as not pointing weapons directly at anyone, and maintaining all guards' weapons at half cock (*never at full cock*). The use of bayonets by guards should be carefully considered before the order to fix them is given; similar considerations apply to the use of loaded weapons by men who guard prisoners.

Needless to say, guards should *never* turn their back on prisoners and should *absolutely never* quit their weapons. Guards should *always* be on the lookout to prevent escapes. Within the reasonable bounds of safety (always the highest consideration), guards should endeavor to convey a slightly "threatening" attitude toward prisoners, and should conduct themselves in an appropriate first-person manner.

What to do with "Captured" Gear: One of the inevitable aspects of being taken prisoner in the Civil War was losing some of your gear: muskets, cartridge boxes, belts and bayonets, and—if it struck the fancy of one's captors—hats, blankets, cash, and other items. How can this aspect of "captures" be re-created in the living history context when each man has to purchase his own (expensive) gear?

Unfortunately, because the government does not issue kit to reenactors, often some corners of historical accuracy have to be cut when it comes to confiscating arms, valuables, and other equipment from "prisoners". A few alternatives include:

- Prior to the "battle" all men can mark their gear with their name and group, including placing small tags on weapons and other gear as appropriate. Thus, confiscated items can be easily identified and returned to their owners upon the release of the "prisoners".
- Prior to the battle, a limited number of men from either side can be selected for capture. If the number of men is fairly small, identifying the various items for return to their owners should not be difficult. The drawback is that spontaneity in captures is reduced or entirely eliminated.
- 3. Robbery of cash from "prisoners" can be easily accomplished by distributing reproduction period paper money to reenactors prior to a "battle" scenario.
- 4. As the least-accurate but most reliable alternative, all items of gear can be left with the "prisoners", even to the extent that prisoners carry their own weapons after

capture. For the capture scenarios observed by this writer, this seems to be the most common approach today.

The first three alternatives promise higher degrees of historical accuracy but require advanced planning; in particular the first two scenarios have a small probability of equipment being lost despite the best of intensions.

For all alternatives (especially the first three), the most favorable results will be obtained if capture scenarios are reviewed with the "enemy" prior to the "battle". For all alternatives, the best outcomes will likely be obtained at smaller events where increased control and coordination is more easily implemented.

Conclusion

"Battle" re-creations can be significantly enhanced with increased historical correctness attained through improved planning, preparation, and willingness on both sides to take prisoners and to be captured in turn. Often the first-person experience achieved through a well done "capture" scenario more than makes up for the loss of trigger time during battle reenactments. If you're tired of the same-old, same-old when the powder starts to burn at your next event, consider surrendering or looking to take some prisoners.

Endnotes

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- ¹¹ Fred Mather letter of August 17, 1897, cited in Keating, Richard, *Carnival of Blood*, pp. 192.
- ¹² Kautz, August, Customs of Service for Officers of the Army, J.P. Lippinscott & Co., 1866, pg. 205. Prisoners in confinement for minor offenses were typically held at the regimental guard tent instead of turned over to the brigade or division provost marshal. In contrast, enemy soldiers were typically turned over to the provost marshal fairly soon after their capture.
- ¹³ O.R., Series 1, Vol. XI, No. 3, pg. 222.
- ¹⁴ O.R., Series 1, Volume 3, pg. 517.
- ¹⁵ O.R., Series 1, Vol. XI, No. 1, pg. 690.
- ¹⁶ New York State Assembly Documents, *Fifth Annual Report of Chief of Military Statistics*, Albany, New York Assembly Documents, Vol. II, No. 148, 1868, pp. 280-282, cited in Keating, Richard, *Carnival of Blood*, pp. 275.

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