

While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War

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Review

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Sanders, Jr, Charles W. *While In The Hands Of The Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War.* Louisiana State University Press, \$44.95 ISBN 807130613

The Price of Capture

Treatment of POW's in the Civil War

Charles W. Sanders, Jr. has produced an excellent study of the military prisons of the Civil War. Supported by good solid research, his book challenges the conclusions of many reputable historians and lay persons who have stubbornly refused over the years to accept the over-whelming documentation that shows prisons in the North were no better than those in the South and that both sides deliberately and systematically mistreated their captives throughout the war. In dozens of reports, he points out, camp commanders and medical inspectors alerted their superiors in Washington and Richmond to the alarming rates of sickness and death among captives, but neither government took decisive action to reverse this appalling trend. According to Sanders, by the time the war ended, both sides had fabricated elaborate explanations and justifications for their actions.

It remains fascinating to me that after more than 140 years, there are still so many who vehemently deny that the Northern prisons were little different than those of the Confederacy when documentation fully supports that premise. As an example, my experience has found various scholars and present-day residents who, for some reason, take issue with my research into the Civil War's prison at Fort Delaware, near Delaware City. A number have become blindly belligerent over documentation I presented about that facility and how it was run during the war. Yet, the research of Dr. Sanders seems to agree with my original findings as he points out that In no camp was the effect of harsher treatment more evident than at Fort Delaware while he goes on to document the inadequate housing and brutal punishments administered by the guards.

In view of my personal experiences at presenting such research, I have learned that others have experienced similar tribulations. One well-known historian advises that he was contacted by a number of politicians and residents of Elmira, New York when he presented his original research into that Civil War prison. Amazingly, a number of those actually called him names and demanded he retract his findings when his study was presented in the 1960s.

But the fact is, whether a majority can accept it or not, all Civil War military prisons were wholly inadequate and various studies have pointed that out in recent years. In this aspect, the meticulously conducted research of Charles W. Sanders Jr. supports the often argued conclusion that northern prisons were just as bad as the southern facilities, and that Fort Delaware, which for some reason still has present-day defenders falsely claiming otherwise, was actually one of the worst. But the first seven chapters of **While in the Hands of the Enemy** is hardly new or unique. Sanders simply repeats much of the information about the individual prisons that previous studies have presented. There is no newly uncovered information about any of the facilities nor is any of that information uniquely presented. But, as he informs the reader in his introduction, the true focus of his work is to provide a comprehensive examination of the manner in which the scores of Union and Confederate prisons were administered. Sanders manages to accomplish exactly that. He eventually makes some unique observations of his own as he argues that both the North and the South were guilty of deliberately and systematically ignoring, mishandling and mistreating the captives they held, often as a result of policy whether intentionally or unintentionally and he provides some excellent background information that sheds new light on many previously known facts to substantiate of his observation. He concludes that nearly all of those decisions or lack of decisions bordered on criminal negligence by both governments as a result.

Charles W. Sanders, Jr. is a professor of history at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

Lonnie Speer is a regular contributor to Civil War Book Review and has written for a number of historical publications including America's Civil War and Civil War Times Illustrated. He is author of the groundbreaking work Portals to Hell, The Military Prisons of the Civil War (Stackpole Books, 1997) and War of Vengeance, Acts of Retaliation Against Civil War POWs (Stackpole Books, 2002). Currently, a WWII book by Speer was just published and his Portals to Hell is being published in paperback under the Bison imprint by the

University of Nebraska Press. He has two more books, one dealing with Civil War POWs, in various stages of publication.