

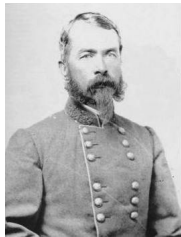
## Immortal 600

On August 20, 1864, 600 Confederate prisoners marched out of the gate of Fort Delaware Prison (see last week's mailing). Nearly all of the 600 were suffering serious health problems of various kinds because of their long confinement under horrifying conditions. Yet these 600 Confederate officers were enthusiastic in their march to the wharf where they were to board the *Crescent City* for a journey south that they expected would culminate in their exchange for northern officers. Chosen from an officer population in the prison of 1,500, they were going home.

A hundred eighty-five of the prisoners were from Virginia in this select group. Among those was Captain J. Ogden Murray of the Seventh Virginia Cavalry (photo at right). He had been incarcerated since November of 1863. He waited with great anxiety for his name to be called and would write, "When the M's were called I could have shouted for joy; and I really felt sorry that all my comrades were not included in the list." Some of those not selected offered up to \$250 to anyone that would trade places.



As they began their journey aboard the steamer *Crescent City*, all their thoughts and conversations were on their amazing delivery from captivity and on their homes. As the journey continued their excitement began to wane and there were increasing clues that they had not been told the complete truth by the Union folks at Fort Delaware. Eighteen days after departure they landed at Morris Island in Charleston Harbor. The Union would use them as a shield in retaliation for the Confederates doing the same to union prisoners.



The events that led to the Immortal 600 being in this position began on June 13, 1864 when Confederate Major General Samuel Jones, commander of the southern coast, informed his Union counterpart (photo at left), Major General John G. Foster, that 50 Union officers held as prisoners of war had been transferred to Charleston where they were being held in a civilian portion of the city where the Union guns were shelling. Jones hoped this would cause the Union to stop shelling non-combatants.

Rather than stopping the shelling, Foster (photo at right) requested and received an equal number of Confederate officers to place in areas under Confederate firing. Neither side would cease the firing and a stalemate was formed. The two commanders decided that it would be better to exchange the prisoners than put the officers in harm's way. Despite the fact that exchanges had been stopped in April of 1864, the exchange was approved and made on August 3, 1864. Among the Confederates held as prisoners were Major General Edward Johnson and Brigadier General George Steuart, captured three months earlier at Spottsylvania Court House; Brigadier General James J. Archer captured more than a year earlier at Gettysburg.



Thinking that they had a chance to reinstate the exchange program that the South badly needed to replenish the dwindling size of their army and to reduce the number of

prisoners they would have to take care of, Jones informed Foster that an Additional 600 officers were going to be transferred to Charleston for exchange.

Union General Foster was angry that the Confederates would place more of his fellow officers in danger so soon after the August 3<sup>rd</sup> exchange. On August 15 Jones was notified that 600 more Confederate officers were being transferred to Morris Island and stationed in the path of Confederate firing, and that exchanges would not be considered until the Union officers were transferred out of Charleston. The Immortal 600 began their transfer five days later.

The day after the Immortal 600 left Fort Delaware, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant suspended all prisoner exchanges and sealed the fate of the 600. This also meant the 600 would be held on Morris Island longer than had been anticipated. Union engineers immediately went to work constructing a stockade between Forts Wagner and Gregg on Morris Island.

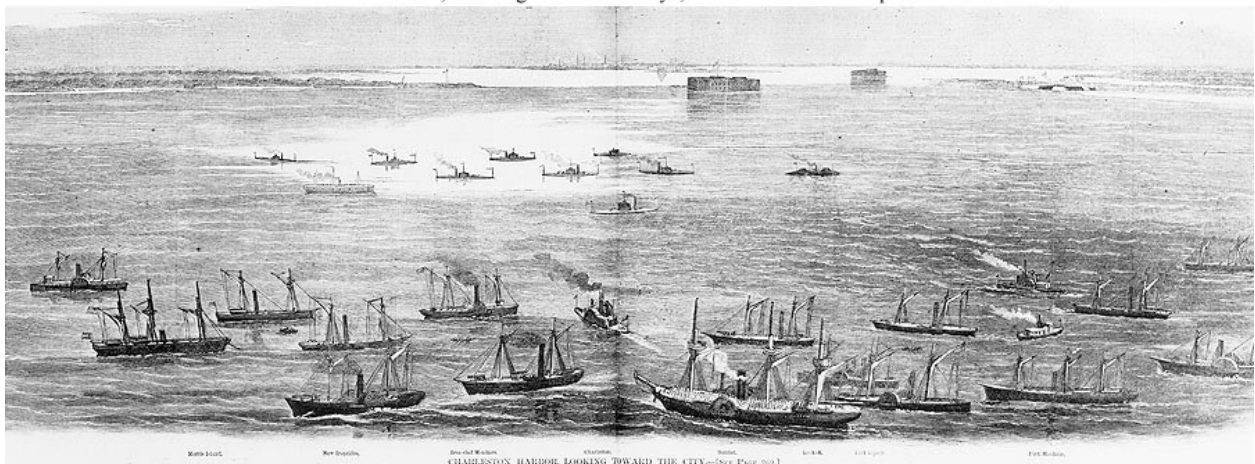
Meanwhile on board the steamer *Crescent City*, life for the Confederate officers was a nightmare. They were placed in the poorly ventilated hold of the ship and not allowed above deck for any fresh air. The beds were narrow, rough pine planks attached to the bulkhead. They were designed to sleep two people lying head to foot. The latrine was in another location on the ship and not designed to handle that number of people. They had to wait in line, if it was possible.

It was not long before conditions became unbearable. Captain Murray later wrote of how they suffered, “all the tortures of heat and seasickness; no rations, and the worst drinking water possible given us, and the stench from the hole we were confined in became almost stifling. Our men had been made seasick by the motion of the boat, which made our quarters filthy. Beg as we might, we were not allowed on deck.”

Colonel Abram Fulkerson of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee infantry, remembered that “before the vessel reached Cape Hatteras the floor of our department was a loblolly of vomit, ambier, etc...”

As the *Crescent City* was very near the Charleston Harbor on a very dark night, the ship was piloted by a southern sympathizer who was aware of the destiny of the captives. He evaded the gunboat escort and headed the ship to the protection of Confederate guns on the coast. Unfortunately, the *Crescent City* ran aground outside the range of the Confederate guns.

Photo # NH 59298 "Charleston Harbor, Looking toward the City", at the time of the 7 April 1863 attack on Ft. Sumter





Colonel Vannoy Manning (Photo at left) of the Third Arkansas Infantry led a group of the officers in an attempt to take over the ship. They demanded that the ship's captain surrender the ship and the men. Manning was surprised when the captain readily agreed, under the terms they would be exchanged in Charleston.

While the Confederates and the ship's captain were discussing the details of the surrender, one of the escorting gunships found the *Crescent City*, fired a shot and steamed into view. The captain was emboldened by the sudden appearance of assistance and regained control of his ship and ordered the captives to lighten the load by dumping coal overboard. The ship floated free and continued its southward journey.

The captives were not officially informed that they were not to be exchanged until they were about to leave the ship on September 7, 1864 and at the same time informed them that they would be under fire from their own guns. The captives had become suspicious of the Union's intent, but this was devastating news. Murray recalled how "every man seemed crushed."

The first two days on Morris Island was spent in the remains of two dismantled, rat-infested ship hulks. Then they were marched past Fort Wagner to the just completed compound where they would remain until October 21, 1864.

The stockade was built of pine logs that would project fifteen to twenty feet above the sand, enclosing about one to one and a half acres. The stockade stood about 30 or 40 yards from the ocean. The stockade was covered with artillery guns from the west, north and south sides by guns from Forts Wagner and Gregg. There were also two monitors in the harbor to ensure that any insurrections would be quickly shut down.

At the gate to the compound the captive officers were counted off by fours and each group was sent into the compound and assigned to a tent that had barely room for two men. On the outside of the stockade, armed sentries were stationed on platforms. Most of the prisoners had greater resentment to their black guards than to the conditions under which they existed. Along the inside of the walls a rope was stretched about ten feet from the wall. This was a no-man's land and if crossed was sudden death.

There were two other rules that, if broken, could also result in sudden death. One was that no more than ten men were allowed to congregate. This was made difficult by the number of prisoners and the size of the yard. The second rule was that if the sentries saw a light in any tent after taps, the tent would be fired into.

Lieutenant Richard H. Morgan of the Eleventh Virginia Infantry would write of the rations given them on a typical day. "For breakfast, we had three crackers, sometimes two and sometimes only one and a half, and a very small piece of bacon, about two ounces toward the last, five crackers per day were issued. For dinner, we had soup made of some kind of dried peas, about one pint, very unpalatable-for supper, one pint of very thin mush or rice. The mush was made of stale cornmeal full of worms. One prisoner picked out and counted 125 small, black-headed worms from a cup of this mush.

It did not take long for the Federals to entice the Confederates into firing into the gun emplacements on Morris Island, putting the 600 in mortal danger. The day after the stockade became occupied, the Federals put every gun to firing on the Confederate targets. To the distress of the prisoners, their fellow Confederates began to return fire. Colonel Fulkerson (photo at right) wrote: "Shells from the Confederate batteries were thrown with great precision into Fort Wagner,



passing immediately over our pen, and others exploded to our left and front ... The storm of shot and shell created some consternation upon the prisoners, and at first caused something like a panic, but we soon became satisfied the Confederates knew what they were doing and that there was no real danger.”

During their time in the stockade, Fulkerson reported that “not a single shell fell within our stockade, and but one shell exploded immediately over us, and while several pieces fell in the pen, no one was injured.”

They may have been safe from friendly fire, they were in danger from the inadequate medical care and nutritional food. Most all suffered at some point with acute dysentery, cholera and various other medical problems caused by the lack of sanitary conditions on the *Crescent City* and in the stockade. Captain Murray recalled, “Our medical treatment was the acme of cruelty, rendered by a red-headed cow doctor, whose only remedy, no, matter what your complaint, was an opium pill or dose of Jamaica ginger.” Despite all the horrible conditions, lack of medical care, inadequate diet, lack of clothing and blankets and poor sanitary conditions, it was remarkable that only three men died during their time on Morris Island.

It was six weeks before Federal officials realized their plan to stop Confederate shelling was a complete failure. On October 20, the prisoners were told they would be leaving the next day. Thinking they were finally going to be exchanged, they departed Morris Island on two old schooners almost as enthusiastically as they departed Fort Delaware. Two days later they realized their future remained in Federal hands.

On October 22, the prisoners landed at Fort Pulaski on Cockspur Island, Georgia at the mouth of the Savannah River. Fort Pulaski was a large brick structure surrounded by a moat. The prisoners were placed in barren casements on the north end.



**Fort Pulaski during the Civil War**

Upon arriving at Fort Pulaski, the prisoners were treated a great deal better than at Fort Wagner by the Commander and his troops. Rations were ample and they were told that blankets and clothing had been ordered for them. Before these new supplies would arrive, their treatment took a downward curve when two Union soldiers escaped from Andersonville Prison. The Union escapees both told horrid stories of starvation and extreme suffering in Andersonville. From then on, the attitude toward the Confederate officers underwent a change. They were immediately placed on a daily ration of ten ounces of wormy, four-year-old cornmeal and a half-pint of acid onion and cucumber pickles. When the captives found the onion/pickle combination was thinning their blood, they limited their intake to the cornmeal only.

Again, the Confederates were attacked with many cases of scurvy and dysentery. To ease the overcrowded condition of Fort Pulaski, the Union authorities transferred 222 of the prisoners to Hilton Head, South Carolina on November 19, 1864. To combat the deficiency in rations the Confederates turned to their own wits and determination. The Union troops had a large number of cats and dogs for pets. Come nighttime, the prisoners would catch, kill, dress and consume the pets without detection from the guards. The troops learned what was happening to their pets when carcasses began to turn up in the moat. The prisoners grew to like this substitute for conventional fare. Captain Murray wrote, "I do not commend dog meat as a daily food, but ... you will find in your hunger that dog meat is excellent indeed." Colonel Fulkerson added, "The flesh of the cat is white and tender as spring chicken, and to us it was delicious." When the dogs and cats were gone, the men turned to rats which were harder to catch and much less palatable. Hunger gave them the motivation to catch and consume the rodents.

At Hilton Head, the prisoners found the conditions no better than they had been at Fort Pulaski and Morris Island. Their first week was spent in tents with scanty clothing and few blankets to protect them from the cold November winds from the ocean. They were then marched to a large building in town. This provided some protection from the cold, but they continued to suffer for the lack of clothing and blankets. Their diet was the same as that at Fort Pulaski and out of determination, they also turned to rats and cats. Fortunately, in late December the rations in both camps improved.

During their long months of imprisonment, many escape attempts were tried, but only six were successful. The most ambitious of these attempts was a plan from Captain Murray. After a successful escape from Fort Pulaski, one of their members, Private R. C. Gillespie of the 45<sup>th</sup> Virginia Infantry panicked and gave away their hiding place. Returning to the fort still wearing their wet clothes from swimming the moat, they were placed in a dark, isolated cell. Three days later their isolation ended and all prisoners began their return trip back to their original starting place, Fort Delaware.

Private Gillespie did not want to face those he betrayed, so he took the oath of allegiance to the Federal government. Only sixteen other prisoners took this oath and became Galvanized Yankees in order to escape their captivity, even though it meant a drastic improvement in living quarters and provisions.

On March 3, 1865, they were once again told they were going to be exchanged within a few days. It had been six months since they had first been made this promise and then they had suffered many disappointments and deprivations. But, they so ardently wished to be home that most of them believed again.

The following day Captain Murray and the other officers left Fort Pulaski on a small steamer. They stopped at Hilton Head to pick up the other prisoners and began their journey north. They didn't get far when the captain of the overcrowded ship refused to go any farther. The prisoners were transferred to the larger steamship *Illinois*.

This trip was in stark difference to their trip south. The prisoners were given the run of the ship. Some were even allowed to use the state rooms, if they could afford them. The prisoners now had little doubt that their ordeal was about to end.

On March 7, the *Illinois* dropped anchor at Fort Monroe, Virginia. The captain told the prisoners that the ship was going to proceed up the James River the next day to the place of exchange. A few hours later the prisoners were totally unprepared to hear the captain say he "had received orders to return the prisoners to Fort Delaware; that active operations had commenced at Petersburg that morning by an attack upon Fort Steadman by General Lee's army, and that no prisoners would be exchanged on the James as long as active operations continued." Colonel Fulkerson related the feelings of his companions when he stated: "This was disappointment's greatest shock." The Federals on the ship had an immediate change of attitude toward the prisoners. They were ordered below deck and closely guarded the rest of the trip. Again, there was great suffering in these quarters. Three died and were buried at sea and seventy-five had to be taken ashore and placed in hospitals.

On March 12, 1865, the Immortal 600's odyssey came to end as the *Illinois* docked at Fort Delaware. Seven months before they had left this dock with great expectations to soon be free. Now those same men, less escapees, those exchanged, those that died and those in the hospital, now returned broken physically and mentally and most not caring what the future held for them. The returning men were in sharp contrast to those they had left behind who would have given anything to be one of the "lucky" chosen. Now they could only look with horror at the fate they had escaped.

It didn't take long for the mental and physical conditions to improve, in spite of the fact the food was not a whole lot better than they had on their journey. They also knew the war was about over. The fighting finally ended in May, but it was not until July 25, 1865 that the Confederate officers were released. Captain Murray went on to a distinguished career in journalism and Fulkerson as a lawyer and legislator. The other surviving members of the immortal 600 carried bitter memories toward those who had used them as pawns in a game without winners.

**Reference: *The Immortal Six Hundred: Their Long Journey to Freedom, Civil War Quarterly, Volume X, by Martin F. Graham***

***The Immortal 600: Surviving Civil War, Charleston and Savannah, by Karen Stone***