

Prisoner Exchanges

WAR DEPARTMENT, Washington City, December 5, 1863.

Mr. PRESIDENT: A general summary of the military operations of the past year is furnished by the report of the General-in-Chief, herewith submitted.

In the operations that have been alluded to, prisoners of war to the number of about 13,000 have fallen into the hands of the enemy and are now held by them. From the commencement of the rebellion until the War Department came into my charge there was no cartel or formal exchange of prisoners; but at an early period afterward a just and reasonable cartel was made between Major-General Dix and the rebel General Hill, which, until recently, was faithfully acted upon by both parties.

Exchanges under that cartel are now stopped, mainly for the following reasons:

First. At Vicksburg over 30,000 rebel prisoners fell into our hands, and over 5,000 more at Port Hudson. These prisoners were paroled and suffered to return to their homes until exchanged pursuant to the terms of the cartel. But the rebel agent, in violation of the cartel, declared the Vicksburg prisoners exchanged; and, without being exchanged, the Port Hudson prisoners he, without just cause, and in open violation of the cartel, declared released from their parole. These prisoners were returned to their ranks, and a portion of them were found fighting at Chattanooga and again captured. For this breach of faith, unexampled in civilized warfare, the only apology or excuse was that an equal number of prisoners had been captured by the enemy. But, on calling for specifications in regard to these alleged prisoners, it was found that a considerable number represented as prisoners were not soldiers, but were non-combatants--citizens of towns and villages, farmers, travelers, and others in civil life, not captured in battle, but taken at their homes, on their farms, or on the highway, by John Morgan and other rebel raiders, who put them under a sham parole. To balance these men against rebel soldiers taken on the field would be relieving the enemy from the pressure of war and enable him to protract the contest to indefinite duration.

Second. When the Government commenced organizing colored troops the rebel leader, Davis, by solemn and official proclamation, announced that the colored troops and their white officers, if captured, would not be recognized as prisoners of war, but would be given up for punishment by the State authorities.

These proceedings of the rebel authorities were met by the earnest remonstrance and protest of this Government, without effect. The offers by our commissioner to exchange man for man and officer for officer, or to receive and provide for our own soldiers, under the solemn guarantee that they should not go into the field until duly exchanged, were rejected. In the meantime well-authenticated statements show that our troops held as prisoners of war were deprived of shelter, clothing, and food, and some have perished from exposure and famine. This savage barbarity could only have been practiced in the

hope that this Government would be compelled, by sympathy for the suffering endured by our troops, to yield to the proposition of exchanging all the prisoners of war on both sides, paroling the excess not actually exchanged; the effect of which operation would be to enable the rebels to put into the field a new army 40,000 strong, forcing the paroled prisoners into the ranks without exchange, as was done with those paroled at Vicksburg and Port Hudson, and also to leave in the hands of the rebels the colored soldiers and officers, who are not regarded by them as prisoners of war, and therefore not entitled to the benefit of the proposed exchange.

The facts and correspondence relating to this subject are detailed in the accompanying report of Major-General Hitchcock, commissioner of exchanges. As the matter now stands, we have over 40,000 prisoners of war, ready at any moment to be exchanged, man for man and officer for officer, to the number held by the rebels. These number about 13,000, who are now supplied with food and raiment by this Government and by our benevolent and charitable associations and individuals. Two prisoners, Captains Sawyer and Flinn, held by the rebels, are sentenced to death, by way of a pretended retaliation for two prisoners tried and shot as spies by command of Major-General Burnside. Two rebel officers have been designated and are held as hostages for them. The rebel prisoners of war in our possession have heretofore been treated with the utmost humanity and tenderness consistent with security. They have had good quarters, full rations, clothing when needed, and the same hospital treatment received by our own soldiers. Indulgence of friendly visits and supplies was formerly permitted, but they have been cut off since the barbarity practiced against our prisoners became known to the Government. If it should become necessary for the protection of our men, strict retaliation will be resorted to. But while the rebel authorities suffer this Government to feed and clothe our troops held as prisoners we shall be content to continue to their prisoners in our hands the humane treatment they have uniformly enjoyed.

Respectfully submitted.
EDWIN M. STANTON,
Secretary of War.

[OR Ser II Vol 6 pp. 647-649]

HEADQUARTERS
DEPARTMENT OF VIRGINIA,
Fortress Monroe, August 25, 1863.

Maj. Gen. E. A. HITCHCOCK,
Commissioner for Exchange of Prisoners, Washington City, D.C.: GENERAL: I have just returned from a meeting with the rebel agent of exchange at City Point, and I have the honor to report to you that, in reply to his letter to me, dated August 5, 1863, wherein he claims "that the prisoners captured and paroled by the rebel forces in Maryland and elsewhere prior to the 3d of July should either be regarded as legally paroled or returned as prisoners of war," I made the following proposition, as directed in the letter of the

General-in-Chief to you of August 12, 1863:

CITY POINT; VA., August 24, 1863.

I propose, on behalf of the Government of the United States, that all paroles given by officers and men between the 23d day of May, 1863, and the 3d day of July 1863, not in conformity with the stipulations of the cartel, shall be regarded as null and void, a declaration to this effect to be published to both armies.

S. A. MEREDITH,

Brigadier-General and Commissioner for Exchange.

This was declined, and the following was offered by Mr. Ould:

CITY POINT, VA., August 24, 1863.

I propose that all paroles on both sides heretofore given shall be determined by the general orders issued by the War Department of the United States, to wit, No. 49, No. 100, and No. 207 of this year, according to their respective dates, and in conformity with paragraph 131 of General Orders, No. 100, so long as said paragraph was in force. If this proposition is not acceptable I propose that the practice heretofore adopted respecting paroles and exchanges be continued. In other words, I propose that the whole question of paroles be determined by the general orders of the United States, according to their dates, or that it be decided by former practice.

Re. OULD,

Agent of Exchange.

In reply to my demand for the release of Colonel Streight and his command I was informed that they were in Richmond held as other prisoners of war, and will be exchanged when exchanges of officers are resumed. In relation to Doctor Rucker, Mr. Ould referred me to his letter of August 16, which I have the honor to forward herewith.

To my demand "that all officers commanding negro troops, and negro troops themselves, should be treated as other prisoners of war, and be exchanged as such," Mr. Ould declined acceding, remarking that they (the rebels) would "die in the last ditch" before giving up the right to send slaves back to slavery as property recaptured, but that they were willing to make exceptions in the case of free blacks. He could not exactly tell me how his authorities intended to distinguish between the two (free and slave), but presumed that evidence as to the fact of freedom would be taken into consideration. As their laws put slave and free upon the same footing no comment is necessary.

An informal proposition was made to the following effect: "To exchange officer for officer of the same grade, except such as are in command of negro troops;" which was declined. Mr. Ould expresses a willingness to release all chaplains, provided that one Septimus Cameron, who, he stated, had been in prison for a year, should be released, or indicted for any offense he may have committed. On my inquiring about and urging the release of the members of the Sanitary Commission, I was informed that they would be set free on making a statement in writing that they had at any time been of assistance to rebel soldiers. General Neal Dow has been handed over to the Governor of Alabama. Lieutenant-Colonel Powell is in Libby Prison, Richmond. I have notified the rebel authorities in relation to the two above-named officers, as directed in yours of the 18th ultimo [instant].

The rebel authorities wish to continue exchanging non-commissioned officers and

privates as usual, returning as many as we send.

I have given you, I believe, the substance of all that took place, according to your suggestion. I avoided much discussion. No agreement as to exchanges was arrived at.

I am, general, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

S. A. MEREDITH,
Brigadier-General and Commissioner for Exchange.

[OR Ser II Vol 6 pp.
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WAR DEPARTMENT, Washington, November 17, 1863.

Major-General BUTLER, Fort Monroe:

The whole subject of exchange of prisoners is under direction of Major-General Hitchcock, to whom, as commissioner of exchange, that branch of the service has been committed. He will be glad to have any idea or suggestion you may be pleased to furnish, but there should be no interference without his assent.

It is known that the rebels will exchange man for man and officer for officer, except blacks and officers in command of black troops. These they absolutely refuse to exchange. This is the point on which the whole matter hinges. Exchanging man for man and officer for officer, with the exception the rebels make, is a substantial abandonment of the colored troops and their officers to their fate, and would be a shameful dishonor to the Government bound to protect them. When they agree to exchange all alike there will be no difficulty.

EDWIN M. STANTON,
Secretary of War.

[OR Ser II Vol 6 p. 528]