

Thomas Newton, Co. I, 6th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry

A Private's Story

by

Thomas Newton

Co. I, 6th Wis. Vol. Inf.

In March 1861, I came from Connecticut with my father to the wild woods of Glendale, Monroe County, Wis. In May of the same spring, I attended a war meeting in a little log school house four miles distant. Was there enrolled in L. Johnson's Co. known as Anderson's Guards, being fired with indignation on account of the capture of Fort Sumpter [sic]. The company became I, 6th Wisconsin. We were to receive \$11 per month and perhaps \$100 bounty for three years service, and yet even today some say it was for the money that we went into the army.

On account of my lean condition, some questioned how I passed examination, and predicted I would not endure the service two months; but thanks to a good constitution, I was able to take part in all the actions in which the regiment was engaged, and endure all the marches without even straggling or falling out from fatigue, up to the time of my capture.

About the 19th of June, 1864, I with about thirty others received orders to report to Adjutant E. P. Brooks, who took from his pocket a military map of Virginia and confidently made a proposition to us, we making a solemn promise of secrecy and to obey his orders should we accept his proposition to cut the telegraph wire and destroy a part of the railroad at Burkeville, and burn a bridge over which the bulk of the supplies for Lee's army had to go. He said, being so small a command and well mounted, we could move very rapidly. Thus we were to surprise and overpower the few guards at the bridge, destroy it and make our way to our lines by way of North Carolina.

We of course had all confidence in him as a true and brave officer. So after riding about 75 miles, when we were dismounted, about to get breakfast, a rebel captain rode up to us under a flag of truce and ordered us to surrender. Brooks then stated that he had not slept any during the night; that he had been trying to find some way we might get through the rebel lines, but could find none; that there were two regiments of infantry but a few miles from there and two or three companies near in another direction, naming places; that we were completely surrounded, and fighting would be useless. It was possible that some might get through, but he thought it doubtful, and ordered

us to lay down our arms.

When we were completely under rebel control, we concluded we were sold; bought for a price; but as we could not prove it, all we could do was to suffer the consequences, which tongue can not describe nor pen portray. When first captured our guard seemed to be light, something like eight or ten, so we had serious thoughts of attempting to escape, but were deterred by Brooks assuring us of the multitude of rebel troops that surrounded us.

We were marched to a railroad station, being fed on the way as our new commander could induce the citizens to provide for us, which was not enough to satisfy our hunger by any means; we were assured that we would be well treated because we had not destroyed anything on our trip. And as we were turned over from one officer to another it was with the injunction to treat us well, which was, with some exception, well enough till we got to Andersonville.

We were hurried along till we got to Goldsboro, N.C., in cars and on a railroad that we would say was in a very dilapidated condition. There we were confined and guarded quite closely; I forgot to say that we were deprived of all that was on our horses, including haversacks, blankets, canteens, tin cups, etc. so we had no cooking utensils or anything to get water in. While marching through Goldsboro I saw an oyster can in the street and stepped out to get it. The guard, not knowing my intention, ordered me back to my place, but I requested the next guard to get it for me when he kindly went and brought it to me, and still farther along I picked up a piece of wire to make a bail for it, all of which seemed to be providential, for undoubtedly the little pail was the means of saving my life, of which more by and by.

We were soon sent to Wilmington and confined in jail, there waiting transportation, I suppose. We were fed on corn bread and a small piece of bacon each day, with the washings of the kettle to wash it down. (While there we were) formed in single file and carefully examined, but not stripped. They took everything in the shape of money and valuables that they could find or thought was worth something, with some exceptions. One of the boys had a good watch that he refused to give up. He told the guard he could not have it unless he was stouter than he. Mr. Reb gave it up saying he would see the lieutenant about it after examination, but we heard no more about it.

I had a watch, jack-knife, wallet and two or three dollars in money, all of which I put in my little pail and slid under the cell door, which was open at the time, so he did not find it.

In a few days we were forwarded to Charleston, S.C. They seemed to think we did not need any supper on our journey, we were somewhat hungry when we arrived at Charleston, about midnight. We were there put in prison. They appeared to think we had two or three days rations on hand, or else wanted to prepare our stomachs to relish the food when we did get it, for it was about sixty hours after our arrival before they gave us anything to eat. We then got about a quart apiece of rice and meal mush which you may believe tasted good. We had become so weak it was with difficulty we could walk across the floor; in making the attempt we would be so dizzy that we would almost fall over. I never knew what hunger was before, but thought I knew then. To their credit be it said, we fared better there after that, than at any other place in the Confederacy. When we were leaving they gave us two or three days' rations of "hard tack" to cheer our hearts on the way to Andersonville!

The new arrivals, amounting then to two or three hundred, were formed in the street in four ranks, right in front of Capt. Wirtz' [sic] headquarters. The first time I heard that villain speak I concluded he was a wretch who had cheated the gallows. One of our men had sought shelter in the shade of his office from the scorching rays of the July sun. On discovering him, Wirtz said, "Get out of this, you d--d Yankee son of a b---h, or I will shoot you down as I would a dog." And he flourished his revolver apparently ready to execute his threat.

Being that we were to be well treated they did not strip us to search for valuables, but made a thorough search of the whole person, taking everything they could find that they thought would be of any use to them. A good hat, overcoat, dress coat, boots, shoes, or anything else, they took and replaced them with poor ones or none saying we would not [need] them inside the stockade.

I was terribly puzzled to know how to keep what things I had that were overlooked at Wilmington, but when I saw how thorough the examination was, I thought my chances were very slim, but I finally put most of them in my hat on my head. Fortune favored me in this way. I was the right hand man of the file [rank], and the sergeant was examining from the left. As he got to the file I was in he turned to speak to the captain. As he did so I stepped back in the file [?] that had been examined and one of them took my place, so I escaped examination there. Thus I kept a watch, jack-knife, wallet, two or three dollars in money, a bunch of black thread, and a few other trinkets.

As we looked over into the stockade we were told there were over

30,000 men in there, which we could hardly believe, judging from the size of the enclosure, but on being marched inside we did not doubt the statement. I do not remember dates exactly, but I think this was about the 8th of July, 1864. I cannot describe my feeling on entering Andersonville. Suffice it to say that I felt the most intense agony that I ever experienced. It seemed as though I could hardly breathe, there was such a terrible upheaving in my breast. It seemed as though I [could] not have lived a week the way I felt the first two hours. Then a feeling of bitter hatred sprang up against the rebels, more than I had ever felt before, with a determination to live in spite of them. When I asked myself the question, "Can I live here?" the reply came, "Some others do, and guess I can; at least I will try."

Doubtless you have read descriptions of Andersonville. The prison was longest north and south. We were marched in at the south gate where most new prisoners were taken in. As we passed along there was a perfect jam on both sides of the street, or lane of human beings, eager and anxious to hear the news from "our lines." To show you the value of cooking utensils, I will say I had not been in Andersonville half an hour when someone offered me a dollar "greenback" for my little tin oyster can pail, but I wisely refused, thinking it would be worth as much to me as to them.

Men were literally rotting alive, limbs dropping off with scurvy and other diseases, until death came to their relief. Some were literally naked. Others crazy, many sullen and morose, such ill treatment having a tendency to bring out all the bad qualities of which we were possessed. Think of 30,000 men in any of our best regulated cities being suddenly deprived of all law and order, yet to be well fed and clothed, but no employment, no music or any way to pass the time, only in an idle useless manner, would there not be many quarrels and some bloodshed? Try to imagine how much worse it was for men half starved, nearly naked, confined in such limited space.

They pretended to cook the rations for about half the camp, part mush, the other part corn bread. They hauled the mush in great boxes that reminded me of hop boxes and called for each mess of 90 to come for rations. The sergeant would go with an old coat or old blanket or some such thing, and retrieve it. If he was not there on time, or if he had nothing to get it in, it would be dumped on the ground, when, would you believe it, there would be a great scrabble for it.

When divided amongst us there would be about one quart of mush for each man for a day's ration, with about two ounces of bacon. The mush was very coarse; it seemed as though there must have been some cobs ground with it to make it go farther. It was not mixed nearly as well as we would mix it for our hogs. Some of it would not be even wet,

and sometimes it would be sour. The uncooked rations, which I preferred, were a pint of meal, (very coarse) one-fourth pint of cow peas and two ounces of bacon. This was when I first went there. In a short time they cut off the peas and bacon.

In was a serious question with many of us how to cook our "sanitary cup" of meal, being so nearly destitute of cooking utensils. I kept my oyster can to cook my mush in. I also bought a tin plate to bake on. I traded a gold pen and ebony holder, cost \$4.50, for a water bucket that held seven quarts. That was made in camp which I kept till I came inside "our lines."

Another serious matter was how to get the wood to cook with. I could hold in my hand all the wood that was issued to me while in Andersonville, over two months, notwithstanding the fact that we were nearly surrounded with a pine forest; but there were a few pine stumps in camp and those who bunked nearest to them claimed them. A comrade and I agreed to give half the wood for the privilege of digging them out and we dug down quite deep to get all the roots we could. There were two or three old axes and shovels in camp. For the use of a shovel or an ax when they could be had, we have a quarter of our part for the use of each tool, so we had about a quarter of the stump, which we split up small and sold to others. Rather small business, but it diverted the mind in a measure from our extreme misery.

Our water supply, principally, was a brook, a sluggish stream five or six feet wide, and ordinarily five or six inches deep, running through the camp from the west to the east causing a low swampy piece of ground of three or four acres, unfit to camp on. Some dug holes in the edge of the swamp and the water would ooze up into them; we thought that a little better than the brook—how much better you may imagine when I tell you that in taking a cup full of it we would blow off from one to half a dozen maggots before drinking it. The rebel guard camp was up the stream from the stockade, so the brook received the offal and effluvia of their camp to add to the already impure condition of the water. There could always be seen a filthy scum floating on the top.

When I had not been there but a day or two, not knowing the regulations, to get the water more pure I went to the "dead line," a pole or board on posts about three feet high, about twenty [feet] from the stockade. In stooping over, my head went outside the dead line. I was quickly pulled back by one of my comrades, and I looked up just in time to see the guard taking the gun from his shoulder. I think it was at least a weekly occurrence for someone to be shot in that place while I was in Andersonville. It was understood that the

guard had a thirty day's furlough for every one that he shot, and you may be sure they were on the alert and seemed to gloat over the dastardly act.

We were not provided with shelter of any kind. The early prisoners were allowed to retain their blankets, tents and clothing, but as I said before, it was different with us. Some made mud brick and dried them with which to build a shelter and which were washed down when the heavy rains came. Others dug holes and would burrow in them. Still others had old blankets, old overcoats, old quilts, or anything that could provide shelter, but alas, a large number had not even these to protect them from the scorching rays of that Georgia sun and the cool damp nights. How could it have been calculated to kill men faster than it did?

The wood with which we were provided was a yellow pine which made a black smoke and not being furnished any soap, we could not keep our persons nor scanty clothing anything but filthy. There were serious disputes sometimes whether a person was a negro or white person, which would be decided by the hair, being straight or curly.

The prison was alive with lice, being all over the ground, on our clothing, tents, in fact all over us. Can you imagine the annoyance they were to us? I think not. The only way we could prevent them from getting the complete mastery of us was to take off our clothing once or twice a day, and pick them off till we were tired out, or singe them if we had enough fire for the purpose. It was a serious matter for us if we were unable to attend to them, for it seemed as if they would sap our very life blood.

Such treatment could have but one result, intense agony, insanity, all kinds of disease, scurvy and diarrhea the most common. Hundreds would be carried to the "south side" to be taken to what was called the hospital after being trampled in the hot sun from one to two hours. A large majority would be disappointed, and would crawl or be carried back to their quarters, as the hospital accommodations were too limited for any such number. There were nearly 3,000 deaths during the month of August alone; some days there were over 100 a day.

It was a serious matter to keep order in the camp. Much worse before the time I went there than after, as I was credibly informed that the "roughs" were organized in force, and would take, either stealthily or by force, whatever they saw fit to lay their hands on. If necessary to club or strangle, that was done by them. Besides, there were several cases of murder, the body being in some cases, dissected and scattered about the prison to escape detection.

To counteract this "raider force" the "regulators" were organized, and in a pitched battle the latter came out ahead, and organized a police force to do duty night and day. They tried by military court six of the raiders for murder, who were condemned to be executed the 11th day of July. The rebels kept them in custody till they should hear the will of our camp government which decided to abide by the decision of the court, so a rude gallows was constructed, by rebel permission, on the "south side." When Wirtz came in with the prisoners under guard he said, addressing us, "Prisoners, I bring dese men to you good as I found dem, do with them as you like." It was about my third day in Andersonville when I saw them executed.

By permission of the rebels, the police sergeants of detachments and of messes, had double rations taken from the undivided whole, which was all the pay they received. I asked one of them if that was as much as he wanted to eat. He said if he had one more ration it would be enough of the kind. I asked him how he thought we stood it on one ration. He thought we did not stand it very well.

If one was seen stealing from his comrades, the cry would be "raider," when the police were quite sure to catch him and take him to police headquarters, where he would receive from ten to forty lashes on the bare back that would make the blood run, or be tied to a post several hours, or carry a block of wood till he would be tired out and almost drop in his tracks, and other punishments too numerous to mention.

The one thing uppermost in our minds was when we were to be exchanged. When new prisoners would come in they would be eagerly questioned on this theme of which they generally knew little or nothing.

One day in August, I think about the 23rd, there was a heavy rain storm that washed out the stockade entrance and outlet of the brook. Had we then been united we could have made a grand rush, overpowered the guard and part of us would probably have reached our lines, but we did not grasp the situation soon enough.

The rain was a God-send to us in more ways than one; all of us had a good shower bath; it cleansed the camp wonderfully and lastingly. The next morning we discovered a good spring that had broken out in the side hill between the north gate and the brook, a few feet from the "dead line." We fished it over the dead line a few days, but finally the rebels allowed our men to nail a couple of boards together to make a trough to conduct the water into camp, when there would be such a rush for it with old canteens, tin cups, boot legs fastened together to hold water, and many other contrivances making

such a jam it was difficult for any of us to get any until a guard was stationed to make them take turns, when there would be from one to two or three hundred at a time waiting their turn. It was rightly named Providence for it was truly providential. I read a year or two ago that it was still running and is known by the same name.

To know that the sentinels were on the alert they were required to call the time of night every half hour. Each one would call the number of his post—the hour and "all's well." One night, about fifty feet from where I was, the guard called out, "post number 7; half past eight and Atlanta's gone to h—l." The general rejoicing the call caused I cannot describe. That caused us to removed from Andersonville—that is, most of us.

I was among the number that went to Charleston, they pretending to us it was for exchange. We were kept there heavily guarded, on the race course. Our treatment there was a great improvement on Andersonville, we receiving more rations and better. The citizens showed us a good deal of sympathy, furnishing clothing and provisions, all they could, although contrary to orders. The ladies would come near enough to the camp to throw us from one to half a dozen loaves of bread at a time. I trust they had their reward.

About the 10th of October we were hurried off to Florence prison, which for cruel torture compared to the number there, was not much, if any improvement on Andersonville. The cold was worse to endure for many of us than the heat; we had more space to the man, a little more water, a little more wood, but our rations were more limited than at Andersonville.

They had pretexts oftener for not issuing any for two or three days; would then come and call on any to step forward who desired to take oath of allegiance to the Confederacy. A bunk mate of mine expressed my sentiments and that of many others when he said "he would rot first." A few went out, but the rebels could do nothing with them, and sent them back to camp. We looked upon them with disgust and called them "galvanized Yanks."

There was a camp fever among us that prostrated about three-fifths of our number. I was carried out by my comrades, as they supposed to die, to what bore the name of hospital. The first thing was to cut my hair short, causing me to get a severe cold. I recovered somewhat, so in about nine days was sent into camp. It seemed as if I would starve quicker in hospital than in camp; but caught another severe cold, which caused a severe pain in my right side which has clung to me in some positions ever since.



The 27th of February, 1865, I was among the number to come into our lines, near Wilmington, and, emaciated as I was, I felt almost as if I could jump clear over the flag that stretched across the street.