

POWs in American History: A Synopsis

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Freedom has not come free. No one can attest to this better than the men and women who have served in the armed forces of this great nation we call the United States of America. No one knows better what it is like to have that freedom suddenly snatched away than those individuals who, in the process of serving their country, have found themselves prisoners of war. It is an experience neither asked for nor desired.

Most Americans who have been prisoners of war are ordinary people who have been placed in extraordinary circumstances by no planning of their own. Americans have been held captive as prisoners of war during many wars and in many places. Still, there is a common bond that is shared by all. Their story is an inspiring chapter of our history as a nation.

Revolutionary War

During the Revolutionary War, an estimated 20,000 Americans were held as prisoners of war and 8,500 died in captivity. Some were subsequently released as part of an exchange system between America and Great Britain. Many, however, were not that fortunate. Some were kept in British jails, but for many, life as a prisoner of war was spent in the damp, musty holds of vessels. These prison ships were anchored in Wallabout Bay (New York), Charleston Harbor (South Carolina) and St. Lucia (West Indies). For those who died, their bodies were tossed overboard, or taken ashore and buried in shallow graves. After the Revolution, although America was no longer at war, many American sailors became captives at the hands of the "Barbary pirates" of North Africa and were used as slave labor until ransomed.

War of 1812

Renewed hostilities with Great Britain in 1812 meant war and, consequently, prisoners of war. Initially, American POWs were once again kept in prison ships until 1813, when they were taken to England and held in prisons, such as the infamous Dartmoor. The stone walls of Dartmoor, located in Devonshire, enclosed 400 barracks and, according to prisoner of war Charles Andrews, "death itself, with hopes of an hereafter, seemed less terrible than this gloomy prison." In 1815, more than 5,000 prisoners of war left Dartmoor. At least 252 did not return to America, casualties of the hated prison. One of the most celebrated arts of this war was the composition of *The Star Spangled Banner*. Francis Scott Key was aboard a British vessel in Baltimore harbor attempting to win the release of a prisoner of war when he penned the famous words. America's national anthem is the only one in the world written by a prisoner of war.

Civil War

During the Civil War, an estimated 194,000 Union soldiers and 214,000 Confederate soldiers became prisoners of war, more than in any other conflict in the history of the country.

Approximately 30,000 Union soldiers died in Confederate prisons while the death rate was almost as bad in the North with approximately 26,000 Confederate soldiers dying in Union prisoner of war camps. Since both sides predicted a short war, neither prepared for large numbers of POWs during the four years of conflict. As prisoners were taken, commanders usually worked out exchanges among themselves. Soon an exchange system was accepted by both governments, but failed to work due to a variety of disagreements that arose. The number of prisoners of war increased and prison facilities on both sides became severely overcrowded. Mismanagement, lack of adequate planning, retaliation and many other factors led to suffering by prisoners on each side. By the end of the war, camps such as Andersonville suffered from a lack of supplies and experienced extremely high mortality rates, as well as death and desertion by many of its guards. During the 14 months of its existence, Andersonville accounted for 43 percent of all Union deaths in Civil War prisons.

Spanish-American War

The Spanish-American War only lasted for three months and less than a dozen Americans became prisoners of war. These POWs were exchanged in about six weeks. By contrast, United States soldiers captured approximately 150,000 prisoners.

World War I

During U. S involvement in World War I (1917 and 1918), approximately 4,120 Americans were held as prisoners of war and there were 147 confirmed deaths. Rules for the fair treatment of POWs had been set in place some years earlier. Still, each prisoner of war had to face days without enough to eat or without adequate clothing. There was also the uncertainty of tomorrow and the loss of freedom.

World War II

In the largest war of the Twentieth Century — World War II - thousands of Americans were held as prisoners of war. In Europe, nearly 94,000 Americans were imprisoned as POWs. Many of these had been shot down while flying missions over Germany or had fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Conditions for POWs worsened as the war drew to a close. Malnutrition, overcrowding and lack of medical attention was common. As American and Russian forces closed in from opposite directions, many American POWs were taken from camps and forced to march for weeks as the Germans tried to avoid the Allied forces.

In the Pacific Theater, nearly 30,000 Americans were imprisoned by the Japanese. Most of these men and women were captured after the fall of the Philippines and suffered some of the highest death rates in American history at nearly 40 percent. Prisoners of war suffered a brutal captivity and many were crowded into "hell ships" bound for Japan. Often times, the unmarked ships were torpedoed by submarines. Those POWs who survived imprisonment in the Philippines and the hell ships were forced to work in mines and other locations in Japan. Most worked seven days a week with minimal food.

Korean War

Treatment of American prisoners of war during the Korean War rivaled that of prisoners in the hands of the Japanese during World War II. The American's captors did not abide by the Geneva Convention. More than 7,100 Americans were captured and imprisoned and just over 2,700 are known to have died while imprisoned.

There were 8,177 Americans classified as missing-in-action (MIA). The United States in February 1954 declared them presumed dead.

Life as a POW meant many forced marches in subfreezing weather, solitary confinement, brutal punishments and attempts at political "re-education." Here prisoners received their first systematic dose of indoctrination techniques by their captors. This was a relatively new phenomena and resulted in the Code of Conduct that now guides all American servicemen in regards to their capture. Many Americans were the victims of massacres. After an armistice was signed in 1953, a major exchange known as "Operation Big Switch" finally brought Americans home. More than 8,000 Americans are still listed as missing in action in Korea.

Vietnam War

During the longest war in American history, the Vietnam War, 766 Americans are known to have been prisoners of war. Of this number, 114 died during captivity. Unlike previous wars, the length of time as a POW was extensive for many, with some being imprisoned for more than seven years. Torture was common and the Geneva Convention was not followed, as the North Vietnamese claimed the Americans were political criminals, not prisoners of war. Americans gave nicknames to many of the prisoner of war camps: Alcatraz, the Hanoi Hilton, Briarpatch, the Zoo and Dogpatch, the latter located only five miles from the Chinese border. After American forces raided one camp, Son Tay, the North Vietnamese moved POWs from the countryside of North Vietnam into Hanoi. American POWs were released and returned home as part of Operation Homecoming in 1973. More than 200 Americans were reported as MIAs. Perhaps more than any other war, Vietnam continues to illustrate the complexity of the POW/MIA issue.

Persian Gulf War

The United States and a coalition of allies declared war on Iraq in 1991. During the one-month conflict, 23 Americans were captured, including two women. American POWs were eventually taken to Baghdad. The Iraqi government declared its intent to use the prisoners of war as human shields to thwart bombing missions over the city. Bombs did partially destroy a building which held the POWs. Threat of torture and actual physical abuse were common. Beatings with pipes and hoses, bursting eardrums with fists and electrical shocks with volts from car batteries were experienced by the prisoners. Fortunately, all 23 of the American POWs returned to the United States.