

ACCOUNT OF THE ESCAPE OF PRISONERS

FROM

FORT WARREN, BOSTON HARBOR

By

DOUGLAS GORDON

After capture in Tennessee, Col. Douglas Gordon graduated through several Northern Prisons culminating in Fort Warren, Boston Harbor; where he arrived amidst considerable excitement, for there had been an attempted escape by prisoners of rank, and two seamen actually succeeded in reaching Canada.

It seems that Fort Warren was considered by the Federals as as a perfectly safe prison, located on a small island on the sea line of the harbor some five or six miles from the City, and only accessible by Government steamer.

Because of the Ocean, harbor and New England surroundings of the Fort, the commandant thought it impossible for prisoners to escape; and they were therefore allowed the privilege of walking around the parapet of the fortification. Boston Harbor is dotted with numerous small islands, and the principal channel for large vessels along the island is probably three-quarters to a mile wide to the opposite island, and passes under the guns of the Fort. The Confederate naval officers of the iron-clad Augusta captured in Albemarle Sound, coast of North Carolina, and Capt. Reed of New Foundland banks reputation, were among the prisoners in the Fort -- occupying rooms next the sallyport and covered by the parapet, with loop holes through the scarp wall for musketry commanding portions of the dry ditch surrounding the island sides of the pentagon fortification. These openings were about ten feet

3-2

high, eight or nine inches wide on scarp front, and as the granite masonry of the wall, some four or five feet thick, flared inwardly to allow the burning of muskets both ways along the ditch, the loop holes were probably four feet wide in the casements, and at bottom about three feet above the floor of the lower tier of rooms and possibly eight or ten feet above the ditch. Captain Reed and Lieutenants Alexander and Thurston, C. S. N., and Major Reed Sanders, C.S.A., discovering that several fishing smacks were constantly anchored by the island across the channel, determined to try to escape. Neither of the Naval officers were good swimmers and Maj. Sanders could not swim at all, so two English seamen who were expert swimmers were taken into confidence and became parties to the forlorn attempt; to swim the channel, capture and bring over the selected fishing boat and take aboard the officers and then try to escape. The prisoners were served half a sperm candle nightly for light, and those who could be trusted with the secret saved up their allowances until a quantity of candles were obtained; and when everything was ready, on a dark and cloudy night the six men stripped and melting the candles greased their shoulders and breasts, and slipped through the loop-hole slits like rats going into traps and tumbled into the dry ditch with little hurt. They crawled across the ditch and up the steps of the covered way of the counter scarp wall, down through the grass of the glaze to the edge of the island; where the four officers concealed themselves in the seaweed while the two seamen swam over for the boat, one of which they got but they never returned-- the reason possibly being their non-citizenship and belief that alone they might escape (which they did), unhampered by pursuit for officers whose absence would be missed. Consequently, nothing could be done except to return to the casement prison and try again, which was easily carried out until the ditch was reached, and then, for-

unately, a plank was found that slopingly reached the bottom of the loop-hole and the officers "cooned" up it and were pulled through by their companions within. Because of the bevel of the stone widening the openings inward, 'twas easy to slip out with worn sperm smeared over the body; but returning, the grease had congealed and the flesh being otherwise cold, when it was pulled against the acute angled edge of the granite, it lacerated their bodies and the great fortitude of the gentlemen was portrayed by absence of complaint because of the punishment received. The plank was pushed so that it fell in the ditch, but nothing occurred to indicate that the Federals ever discovered their attempted escape.

The muster roll of prisoners was not called at that time and the escape of the seamen was not then discovered, which was so encouraging that the daring four and their faithful friends determined upon another attempt; so they set to work to prepare for it, ordering supplies in demijohns which would pass through the loop hole slits, they corked the bottles tightly, thereby securing very fair life preserver floats. This done, and a roped arrangement made for knotting the demijohns together and a second supply of sperm candles obtained, the brave fellows awaited opportunity and a suitable night. It finally came, by the anchoring of a small two-masted schooner, by the island across the channel on which the fishermen occupied a hut, and in a dark, no moon, boisterous night. The four officers slipped through the loop-holes, crossed the dry ditch and reached the island's shore as described in their first attempt and there Lieutenants Alexander (First Officer) and Thurston (Comdt. of Marines) of the Augusta, launching the demijohn raft breast the channel current and paddling with hands assisted by the inflowing tide, finally reached the boat sought, but in getting it ready for sailing they

3-4  
lost time, so that when it was possible to touch the fort island for their comrades it was too late to try, because of the fast approaching morn, and of necessity they headed the schooner to the sea and by sunrise were far out in the open and not suspected.

Captain Reed and Major Sanders hid in the sea-weed of the ocean, were chilled through and through, but bravely awaited the return of their companions, and so close were the sentries guarding the island that their conversation could be heard when they met and turned on their beats; and on espying Reed's white body in the early misty dawn said he believed there was a "damned rebel" and actually thrust his bayonet at him and touched his body so as to produce a slight wound, but the grit of the Captain saved him, for he neither moved nor said a word, and the other sentry belittled his companion guard for being afraid of a shadow, they turned on their beats without further examination.

Reed and Sanders of course, changed their positions, and when it was certain that something prevented Alexander and Thurston from returning, and the incandescent lighting up of the mist in the eastern offering admonished that they must return to prison or be captured outside of its walls, they went back and got across the ditch without difficulty but when climbing the plank to the loop-hole, it broke, and both fell back into the ditch making so much noise in the fall that it alarmed the sentry at the sally-port, and the guard was turned out and after a struggle, the officers taken.

The partial success of this attempt caused the calling of the roll of the prisoners, and the absence of Alexander, Thurston and the two seamen was discovered; and information of the escape telegraphed along the Atlantic Coast between Boston and Portland. To return to the escaped officers on the fishing schooner; They found

3-5  
/

two sails, but being naked, had to take one of them for raiment and out of it improvised clothing; they got to sea without difficulty and sailed a very considerable distance along the northeastern coast, and although the time was October they suffered so greatly from thirst that they were obliged to go ashore for water, and though selecting a rural place, the unfortunately fell in with a "nutting" party of young people, who questioned them on their strange appearance, barefooted and clad in sail cloth wrappings. They said they were ship-wrecked fishermen, but their southern pronunciation added to the improbability of the story caused suspicion; and as they returned to sea in the same plight, it is more than likely that information of their general locality was given by these nut gathers. Anyway, they were shortly afterward captured by a revenue cutter while crossing the offing of Portland harbor and brought back to Fort Warren, where they related their thrilling adventures and with Reed and Sanders for the time became the heroes of prison discussion; but no one ever remains the sole subject of consideration at a military post or in prison for very long, where the personell for distinction or attention is ever aggressive, so when Colonel Gordon announced to his "mess" that he had "a real live hero in petticoats", the entire roster of officers anxiously awaited the details, ready to applaud the worship a heroine until a newer ideal should be discovered.