

ESCAPING RAT HELL

REVIEWED BY GEORGE SKOCH

On a postwar tour of Richmond in late September 1865, Northern journalist John T. Trowbridge examined “infamous” Libby Prison, made notorious for its treatment of Union officers held there during the war. Upon entering the “large, gloomy brick building,” Trowbridge noted the ground floor was partitioned into dingy offices and store-rooms, and a “large cellar-room below, paved with cobblestones.” On three floors above, he found “large, whitewashed, barren” rooms. He easily envisioned the inmates they once held, “...diseased and haggard men crowded together... a den of misery, starvation and death.”

In late September 1863, Union Colonel Thomas E. Rose of the 77th Pennsylvania Infantry, captured at the Battle of Chickamauga, was sent to Libby Prison, and immediately resolved to “set about devising means of escape.” That was more easily said than done, as Douglas Miller reveals in *The Greatest Escape: A True American Civil War Adventure*.

This standout account of Rose’s quest to free himself and fellow Union officers from Libby Prison and the adventures that followed is a remarkable story of determination and human endurance. “To enter Libby Prison in 1863,” writes Miller, “was to enter bedlam.”

The author blends his talents as a writer and an award-winning documentary filmmaker to weave a chilling account of life inside Libby Prison, and the superhuman exertion of Rose and his compatriots to tunnel out and evade recapture. “...personal stories are front and center,” writes Miller. He sourced more than four dozen eyewitness accounts to tell his story of “the largest prison breakout in U. S. history...truer than it’s ever been told.”

Originally fashioned from a ship chandlery and grocers warehouse to house up to 500 Union officer POWs in 1861, within two years the captives in Libby had nearly tripled in number. In addition to the “formidable” Col. Rose, who became the driving force behind the greatest escape from Libby Prison, Miller populates his book with a memorable supporting cast, both Union and Confederate.

Chief among the antagonists, for example, is 23 year old Dick Turner, the notorious jailer responsible for day-to-day operations at Libby. Union “memoirists,” reports Miller, “were unanimous in their hatred of the man.” Equally despised was Turner’s younger cousin, prison commandant Captain Thomas Turner. Union POW Lieutenant Willard Glazier, for instance, reviled the enemy captain for heaping “barbarities upon us with Herculean and fiendish strength.”

Also serving in the prison, albeit reluctantly, was “Old Smoke,” an aged slave who shuffled from room to room toting a kettle full of burning tar to fumigate the squalid quarters. He exchanged pleasantries with the men, insisting his was “good Union smoke.”

Among the prisoners, Union Captain Andrew Hamilton of the 12th Kentucky Cavalry, shared Rose’s unbridled enthusiasm to escape. A brick

mason by trade, Hamilton would prove integral to Rose’s schemes. “These two,” writes Miller, “would support each other to the bitter end.” Miller also singles out Cuban American Lt. Col. Federico Cavada, as “one of the more fascinating of Libby’s denizens.” Captured at Gettysburg, Cavada left one of the best written accounts of prison life, including several skillful drawings Miller has included.

Miller deftly weaves these and many colorful characters into background for the heart of his story, the tunneling and its aftermath. Digging started from a festering recess in the cobblestone-floored basement. “Two feet of rotten straw covered the floor,” writes Miller, “hundreds of rats lived there, more likely thousands.” The space was christened “Rat Hell.”

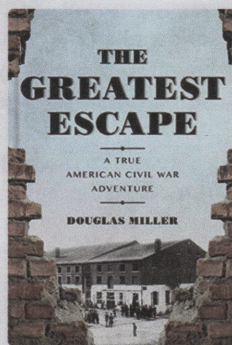
Failure was not an option for Rose. When two tunnels miscarried, he forged ahead with an ultimately successful third one. Rose and 108 other captives, including Union cavalry raider Colonel Abel Streight, finally struggled free on the frigid night of February 9, 1864.

Traveling singly, in pairs, or small groups, the underfed, scantily clad escapees battled forces of man and nature in the dead of winter. While Rebel soldiers, civilians, and bloodhounds pursued them; rivers, swamps, and trackless forests confronted them. Richmond, in addition, was ringed by a barrier of military fortifications.

Remarkably, 61 fugitives gained their freedom. In nearly every case, Miller points out, the “Libby inmate who successfully escaped did so with the help of local slaves.” The author makes a good argument that these slaves had a “formidable Underground of their own...connected to Elizabeth Van Lew and her Unionist spy network.”

Miller includes a helpful bibliography, with adequate endnotes and index. Numerous illustrations give face to key components of his story. His account of the daring and circuitous escape and pursuit would have benefited by including a map, however.

The author’s quest for primary sources and illustrations to tell his story spanned “more than two decades.” Now, “For the first time, a century and a half after the events, all the Libby memoirs are together in one place.” Miller spins an inspiring yarn. His book should not escape readers.



The Greatest Escape: A True American Civil War Adventure
By Douglas Miller
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