

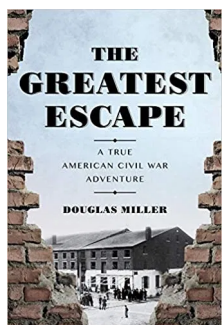
Emerging Civil War

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America's defining event

Book Review: The Greatest Escape

Posted on April 27, 2021 by Doug Crenshaw

The

***Greatest Escape: A True Civil War Adventure***

By Douglas Miller

Lyons Press, 2016, \$26.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Doug Crenshaw

Of the thousands of Federal officers who were imprisoned in Richmond's notorious Libby prison, 109 made a daring attempt to escape in February 1864. Douglas Miller spins the tale of this breakout in a most engaging way – it reads like a suspense novel. Much of the story is told in first-person accounts.

The story begins with the capture of some Union troops, and Miller's narrative makes you feel as though you were there. While some of the prisoners were handled poorly, others were surprisingly treated with respect. This all changed when they arrived in Richmond. The privates, corporals and sergeants were trundled off to Belle Isle, an outdoor prison with little or no protection from the elements and extremely poor sanitary conditions. The officers were sent to their own hell... a converted warehouse known as Libby Prison. Miller provides a moving description of the conditions there. The cruelty of the guards (and especially of the commandant) was appalling. There was little food, most of which was inedible. Muddy drinking water was taken from the James River. The warehouse was extremely overcrowded. Men were hungry, filthy, cold in the winter and hot in the summer. As a side note, Miller states that some 51,000 prisoners around the country never made it back to their homes.

Individuals made several attempts to escape. Sometimes these were traps—men were led to believe that their freedom could be bought from some of the guards. To their extreme disappointment, they discovered that the authorities were waiting for them outside the prison. Some Union loyalists tried to help, notably Elizabeth Van Lew. Escape seemed nearly impossible, and the guards definitely thought it was. However, a few intrepid officers would not be deterred and they hatched a plan to work their way down to the basement and tunnel out. Once they escaped the building, their ordeal had only begun; they would still have to carefully make it fifty miles to the Union lines at Williamsburg in the dead of winter.

Miller offers a vivid description of the attempt. The officers had to cut their way down two floors to the vermin-infested basement: “rat hell” as they termed it. A few attempts failed, as they didn't dig far enough, or the tunnel was just too tight. Suffocation became a real threat. Finally, they were able to dig a tunnel across the grounds and past the fence, and 109 men made a run for it. Some hid in the city briefly while others went on. Once the breakout was discovered, Confederate patrols were everywhere. Dogs were sent out. It was the dead of winter, and the men were hungry and freezing. About 48 of the escapees were recaptured, and the ones who did make it to the Federal lines owed it in large part to slaves along the way who fed them and provided them with shelter and directions. One unfortunate escapee made it to within a half-mile of freedom before being caught.

Miller tells a gripping story, backed by solid research and primary accounts. His work paid off: it's definitely a fascinating read.

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