

British Prisoners of War in France during the Napoleonic Wars

By J. David Markham, FINS

During the 17th and 18th centuries, prisoners of war were generally treated with respect and compassion, largely due to the fact that military forces were primarily professional in nature. There was little animosity between opposing soldiers, and therefore little reason to mistreat those soldiers who had the misfortune to become your prisoner. Indeed, during most of the 18th century, prisoners of war were soon exchanged and sent back to their homeland. This exchange, called the cartel system, was based on precise monetary rates, with each class of prisoner being worth a certain amount of money. Each side was careful to see that there was a proper accounting of the value of their prisoners.¹

The French Revolution brought forth the concept of the “citizen army,” and warfare was seen more of a crusade against what today might be called an “evil empire.” Consequently, the prisoners were seen as evil incarnations of the *ancien regime*, rather than fellow professional soldiers, and as such they could expect less favorable treatment.² The account of the plight of British officer Thomas O’Neil makes this level of treatment clear. While much of his account is a diatribe against Napoleon and the French, his description of treatment is in marked contrast to those given below.³ O’Neil relates that since the

Revolution made no distinction between officers and men, there was no difference in treatment, save for his claim that officers were actually treated worse. O’Neil claims he and his fellow POWs were abused by the residents of the towns through which they passed, required to sleep in dismal conditions, had their personal effects stolen, and were often shot as an example.

Napoleon brought back a more traditional approach to POWs, and prisoners could again look forward to the possibility of better treatment. This new attitude was reflected in a letter to Minister of Foreign Affairs Talleyrand dated 10 March 1800, which discusses the exchange of some specific POWs. He goes on to say:

*. . . how unworthy of the English nation is the threat to treat French prisoners in England more harshly. Is it possible that the nation of Newton and Locke can so far forget itself? Prisoners, indeed, neither can nor should be held responsible for the conduct of their government. They depend entirely on the generosity of the capturing power. These being the principles of the French Government, it will never copy the hateful practice of reprisals.*⁴

1 Michael A. McKibbin, “Citizens of Liberty, Agents of Tyranny: The Dual Perception of Allied Prisoners of War During the French Revolution,” in *The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe: Selected Papers*, 1996 (Tallahassee FL, 1996), 112.

2 *Ibid.*, 116.

3 *An Address to the People of the United Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland, Containing an Account of the Sufferings of*

Thomas O’Neill, a British Officer, While Confined in the Prison of the Conciergerie, At Paris, For Two Years and Ten Months; And of His Escape from Thence, During His Second Imprisonment as a Prisoner at War, Written by Himself. (London, 1806).

4 Napoleon I, Emperor of the French, *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier* (Paris, 1869, hereafter cited as CN) VI, No. 4655. John Howard, ed. *Translation found in Letters and Documents of Napoleon, Volume One: The Rise to Power.* (London, 1961), No. 494.

After asking his Minister of Marine the legitimate question as to why “are the English prisoners being given a pound of beef, while the soldiers’ ration is only half a pound,”⁵ Napoleon then sets forth the official policy on POWs in a decree of 14 March 1800:

The Consuls of the Republic, considering that prisoners of war are entrusted to the care and humanity of the nations into whose power the fortune of battle has placed them, decree:

Article 1. The Ministers of War and of Marine will use all means in their power to provide food and clothing for the Russian, Austrian and English prisoners. They will ensure that they are treated with every consideration compatible with public safety.

*Article 2. They will also take all necessary measures to speed up the exchange of prisoners.*⁶

It should be mentioned that not all who wrote about the situation of prisoners of war in France were likely to agree that Napoleon treated them well. Some British citizens in France wrote propaganda tracts much like the one by O’Neil referenced earlier. Charles Sturt, for example, would have us believe that the treatment of all POWs was very cruel, and that Napoleon directed that it be that way.⁷ This claim is inconsistent with most other observers, including the POWs themselves, and can be generally discounted. Indeed, while there were bad conditions on both sides of the Channel and the Pyrenees (the British and Spanish hulks immediately come to mind), it is reasonable to

5 CN VI, No. 4663 (12 March 1800); translation in Howard, No. 496.

6 CN VI, No. 4669 (14 March 1800); translation in Howard, No. 497.

7 Charles Sturt, *The Real state of France in the Year 1809; With An Account of the Treatment of the Prisoners of War and Persons Otherwise Detained in France* (London, 1810).

suggest that POWs on both sides were treated “with humanity.”⁸

However, the rigid class system of the time meant that this treatment would not be equal, but based on the class of the prisoner. The lower class prisoners languished in prison cells, while others had significantly more liberty and were, in fact, free to live a reasonably good life.

There was also a decided difference in the overall treatment of British POWs compared with those from other nations, especially Spanish soldiers captured in the Peninsular campaigns. Part of the reason for this was simply the numbers. England had far more French POWs than France had British POWs.⁹ This meant that it was to France’s advantage to treat British POWs well. The same was not true for continental prisoners, however, as the ratio for them was reversed.

Another reason for the disparity of treatment, especially for the Spanish POWs, was the general attitude toward them. French soldiers captured by the Spanish were often mistreated; quite naturally French soldiers were often interested in giving their POWs like treatment. There was also a general feeling of superiority over the Spanish soldiers. As a result, they were often mistreated, although it must be said that common soldiers of all nationalities were subject to poor treatment. Edward Proudfoot Montague recalls:

We passed some Spanish and Austrian prisoners, escorted by cavalry, many of them were without shoe or stocking, they were chained together, and we were informed that when fatigue or sickness caused them to advance with difficulty, they were most cruelly beaten to urge them on; we were not permitted to look round

8 Philip J. Haythornthwaite, *The Armies of Wellington* (London, 1994), 208.

9 Michael Lewis, *Napoleon and His British Captives* (London, 1962), 53-55.

*the town, and our gendarmes did not like us to speak to the Spanish officers.*¹⁰

Napoleon himself took a personal role in the question of POWs, and contributed to the negative feelings toward Spanish prisoners. In a letter to Berthier he writes:

*. . . Write also that the prisoners must be sent to France, retaining the Germans, Swiss and French to serve in my army, but that no Spaniard must be employed; they are habitual traitors.*¹¹

Earlier in the year Napoleon wrote to Minister of War General Clarke regarding the disposition of Spanish POWs:

*Twelve thousand prisoners have arrived from Saragossa. They are dying at the rate of 300 to 400 a day: thus we may calculate that not more than 6000 will reach France. My intention is, that the officers shall be separated, and sent towards the North. As for the rank and file, you will send them [to various sites to drain marshes]. You will order a system of severity—these people are to be made to work, whether they like it or not. The greater number of them are fanatics, who deserve no consideration whatever.*¹²

Napoleon put his Spanish POWs to work in other areas as well. In 1811 there were thirty-eight battalions of such POWs working on

fortifications, roads, and bridges.¹³ It seems that not all Spanish prisoners were sent north, for on the 16th of September 1810 Napoleon wrote a sharp letter regarding corruption in Spain, including French officers selling freedom to Spanish prisoners.¹⁴ Wellington, for his part, took so many prisoners that he at one point sent 20,000 to England despite the fact that there was nowhere to put them and he had been told not to send any more.¹⁵

The surplus of POWs during the Peninsular campaigns put additional pressure for prisoner exchanges. Unfortunately, all attempts to negotiate a mass exchange of prisoners failed, and both sides continued to take and hold prisoners until the end of the war. Wellington and his commanders were able to arrange for local POW exchanges,¹⁶ but it is doubtful that they relieved the pressure very much. In 1813, for example, Soult and Wellington agreed to an exchange of three French for one Englishman and two Spaniards. While Napoleon agreed to the plan, it is unlikely that very many prisoners were actually exchanged.¹⁷ When Wellington began to move into France, however, many British POWs were not moved north and thus managed to escape. Others were able to walk away from their captivity because their guards simply lost their motivation.¹⁸

We know a fair amount about the lives and experiences of these prisoners because many of them kept journals during their periods of

10 *The Personal Narrative of the Escape of Edward Proudfoot Montagu, (An English Prisoner of War) From the Citadel of Verdun.* (Not Published, London, 1849), 11.

11 CN 20, No. 16047 (13 December 1809). *Translation from The Confidential Correspondence of Napoleon Bonaparte with His Brother Joseph, Sometime King of Spain. Selected and Translated, With Explanatory Notes, From The "Memoires du Roi Joseph."* (New York, 1856) No. 566.

12 *New Letters of Napoleon I, Omitted from the Edition Published Under the Auspices of Napoleon III.* Trans. Lady Mary Lord (London, 1898; hereafter cited as *New Letters*), No. CLXV (6 March 1809).

13 John R. Elting, *Swords Around A Throne: Napoleon's Grande Armée* (New York and London, 1988), 274.

14 *New Letters.*, CCLXXXVI.

15 Lewis, 58.

16 Paul Chamberlain, "Marching into Captivity: Prisoners of War during the Peninsular Campaign, 1808–1814," in *New Lights on the Peninsular War, 1989 International Congress on the Iberian Peninsula, Selected Papers 1780–1840*, ed. by Alice D. Berkeley (Almeida, 1991), 228.

17 Elting, 621.

18 *Ibid.*, 170.

detention, or wrote memoirs in their later years. This paper will look at the experiences of British prisoners of war, as related through their first hand accounts and other sources. We will present an over-all description of what it meant to be a prisoner of Napoleon, including such issues as how prisoners of war were transported to their place of confinement, and what kind of treatment they received while there.

While most of the available source material was not written by Wellington's soldiers, their experiences mirrored those stories we do have. Where possible, we will look directly at the experiences of Wellington's soldiers.

In order to understand these experiences, it is first necessary to understand the different classes of prisoners that existed in France, since membership in a particular class had major implications for the treatment that might be anticipated. The amount of freedom given on the way to one's final area of incarceration, the amount of freedom given once there, and the place of incarceration itself; all were largely determined by the class of prisoner into which one was placed.

There were two basic types of British captives of Napoleon: those who found themselves in France when the Peace of Amiens broke down in May of 1803, and those members of the British military or merchant seamen who were taken prisoner as a result of military or quasi-military action.¹⁹ Those *détenus* (detainees) who found themselves trapped in France by the outbreak of hostilities were mostly upper class British citizens who were in France either on business or vacation when the peace broke down. Frequently referred to as "traveling gentlemen," or "TGs," they came from politics, law, clergy, medicine, or academia, and often had their families with them.²⁰ It must also be

¹⁹ Lewis, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

understood, however, that along with the "respectable" members of British society, the *détenu* population included a less savory group of people. These included a criminal element, debtors, and other people whose motive for being in France was somewhat different than the TGs. As Lawrence points out, this presented an interesting problem for both classes of *détenu*:

*This involuntary association of the honorable part of the community with individuals of a different character was disagreeable to both parties. It was not only disgraceful to the first, but it made them in a manner responsible for the misconduct of the others; and forced the latter, who came abroad perhaps with the intention of reforming among strangers, to live among their countrymen, who were acquainted with their misdemeanours.*²¹

Incidentally, relatively few French found themselves in a similar situation in England. Michael Lewis has a decidedly pro-British bias, but nevertheless writes:

*In those happy days a Frenchman was equally free to travel in Britain at all times—if he wanted to. Normally, however, he did not exercise his privilege to anything like the same extent: not because we were more than usually rude to him in wartime, but because we were apt to be rude to all foreigners always. . . Besides, where to us Paris was on the road to Vienna or Rome, for the Frenchman the road to London might almost be said to stop there.*²²

The second major category of British prisoners of war consists of those who were taken in military action. Of these, there were

²¹ *A Picture of Verdun, or the English Detained in France, From the Portfolio of A Detenu* (James Henry Lawrence, Knight of Malta) (London, 1810), I, 20–21. Lawrence was the son of a very wealthy planter.

²² Lewis, 19.

three sub-categories. First, there were the non-military men, usually merchant seamen, who were taken either by the French navy or, more likely, by privateers working under commission from the French government. Second were the military officers captured in regular action. These ranged from general officers (only three British generals were captured) down to the lowest grade. While there was certainly significant difference in the treatment of these various ranks, they were all entitled to a certain high level of treatment by their captors. All officers were considered “gentlemen” until their actions proved otherwise. As such, their word of honor was assumed to be beyond reproach—an assumption that was generally justified.

Finally there were the enlisted men. In British society and military hierarchy these men were on the bottom, and their treatment as prisoners of war reflected their status at home. They were accorded little in the way of freedom or other benefits, and were usually kept in poor conditions under lock and key. This class of prisoner was the least likely to write a narrative of his experiences, due, no doubt, to their relative lack of education.

The “Traveling Gentlemen”

Let us first deal with the *détenus*. These people were not captured, as such, but rather refused passports to depart from France, based on Napoleon’s decree of 23 May 1803:

*St. Cloud, 2nd Prairial
Eleventh Year of the Republic*

All the English enrolled in the militia, from the age of eighteen to sixty, holding a commission from his Britannic Majesty, who are at present in France, shall be made prisoners of war, to answer for the citizens of the republic, who have been arrested and made

prisoners of war by the vessels or subjects of his Britannic Majesty before the declaration of war.

The ministers, each, as far as concerns him, are charged with the execution of the present decree.

The First Consul (signed)

Buonaparte

The Secretary of State (signed),

B. Maret²³

This decree was evidently based on the supposition that these people might be liable for military service if they were to return to England, thus presenting a threat to France.²⁴ Once the decision was made, notices were sent to all British citizens who met the criteria. A typical notice read as follows:

The Prefect of the Department of the Somme, to Mr. G—, Englishman, at Amiens.

I inform you, Sir, of the decree of the government of the republic, dated the 2nd of Prairial, in the eleventh year, of which a copy is underneath.

Consequently, within the space of four and twenty hours from the present notification, you will be so good as to constitute yourself prisoner of war, at the house of the Town Major of the City of Amiens.

I tell you before hand that no pretext, no excuse can exclude you, as according to the British laws, none can dispense you from serving in the militia.

After having made this declaration, within twenty-four hours, you will be permitted to remain prisoner upon parole.

²³ A Picture of Verdun, I, 12.

²⁴ John Alger, *Napoleon’s British Visitors and Captives 1801-1815* (New York, 1904) 176-178. Lewis also discusses this issue at length, and issues a rather predictable condemnation of the policy, 20-38.

In case that you have not made your declaration within twenty-four hours, you will no longer be admitted to give your parole; but you will be conducted to the central point of the military division that will be fixed upon by the Minister of War.

*I salute you.*²⁵

Once informed they were prisoners, they were usually assigned to stay in a town other than Paris. For some reason, Napoleon did not want a bunch of unhappy English aristocrats hanging around Paris! Initially they were sent to Fontainebleau, Nîmes, Valenciennes, or Verdun. Once in their new cities, these English “guests” were free to make their own lodging arrangements, and were considered on parole d’honneur. As was the case with the military officers, these people were considered gentlemen, and it was assumed that if they gave their word that they would not try to escape, their word could be trusted. Thus, at least for the well to do *détenus*, who could afford nice apartments, life often continued much as it had before. Indeed, it may well be that Napoleon wanted these wealthy British citizens in France for the money that they would bring in more than for the security against military service.

Their initial treatment in these various cities was quite reasonable. They were often expected to simply report once each week or even less frequently, and be in their lodgings by ten in the evening. As time went on, those restrictions increased somewhat. They were free to form clubs, and often mingled with upper class French citizens. On some occasions, when regular prisoners of war would pass through their town, the wealthy *détenus* would provide dinner, clothes and other necessities.²⁶

In December of 1803, all *détenus* were ordered to report to Verdun. Some went on their own,

while others were given escort (at their expense). Once they arrived, they were required to give their parole in writing, and then allowed to find lodging. They soon were well established, and the wealthy began to spend their money to make their new life as comfortable as possible. It should be noted that the *détenus* were fewer in number than military prisoners of war, which included not only the men kept in the citadel but officers on parole as well.

This sudden influx of money was quite good for the local economy. Indeed, numerous cities sought to have *détenus* kept within their gates for this very reason. Metz, for example made repeated efforts to have the English sent there. Napoleon was well aware that Verdun’s citizens were likely to gouge the English. In a letter to Fouché he warned the citizens of Verdun to keep their rents down or he would have the Minister of War send their guests elsewhere. It seems rents had risen from an average of 36 francs to 300 francs, and Napoleon was not amused.²⁷

For most of the reasonably wealthy *détenus*, life at Verdun was reasonably comfortable. They had clubs, horse racing, gambling, theater, and numerous other distractions. As such, their stories often do not make for exciting reading. From time to time, however, this is not the case. A Mr. Garland, for example, played a rather major, if unwanted, role in the politics of Verdun. General Wirion was the commandant of Verdun, and he and his wife were notorious for exploiting his power for their own financial gain. Mr. Garland had been intimidated into buying lady Wirion large quantities of clothes, and his wealth had been plundered by Wirion, his wife, and his aide on many occasions. Indeed, Wirion even manipulated Garland’s choice of female companionship. When Garland selected a lady that Wirion felt might interfere with his constant abuse of Garland, he had his

25 *A Picture of Verdun*, I, 10–11.

26 *Ibid.*, I, 41–42.

27 CN 10, No. 8191 (24 November 1804).

soldiers remove her forcibly and send her back to her former lover. Lewis says that Garland was charged with attempted rape, but that seems a bit of a stretch.²⁸

In another incident, Garland, who had been deceived into thinking that he was a favorite friend of Wirion's, was allowed to live, accompanied by a young lady outside the city. A few days later, an order was given that all living outside the city must return, but Garland was assured that he was excluded from the requirement. However, in the middle of the night he was arrested and brought to the citadel. There, Wirion threatened to have him shot, but was "persuaded" not to do so when Garland offered him £5000.²⁹

The deal fell apart, however, when Garland's banker, suspecting that something was wrong, refused to honor a note of that sum. While Wirion ultimately got his money, the swindle was soon common knowledge and the *détenu* community was outraged. Word got back to England, and Charles Sturt publicized it widely.³⁰ Lord Lauderdale and others protested to Talleyrand and Minister of War General Clarke, and Wirion was called to Paris to answer for this and many other complaints. Rather than face Clarke, Wirion committed suicide. He was not missed by anyone in Verdun. Personal accounts written by all levels of prisoners of war and *détenus* go on at great length about the lengths to which he would go to enrich himself at the expense of the English.

One very interesting exception to the rule of non-Parisian residency was Bertie Greatheed and his family. A Squire whose son (also named Bertie) was a notable artist, Greatheed ran in

28 132.

29 *A Picture of Verdun*, I, 183-198.

30 Sturt, 101-110. Sturt's account of the incident is essentially the same as that given by Lawrence.

very high circles, which included military luminaries Junot, Berthier, and Cambacères, artists David and Gérard, and politician Talleyrand, as well as Napoleon, Josephine, and Madame Mère (Napoleon's mother). With these connections, it is no wonder that he was allowed to stay in Paris, though it is somewhat surprising that he was unable to obtain his release from detainment in France.³¹

Greatheed's journal is full of interesting stories and impressions of Paris, Napoleon, and other important persons of the time. Talleyrand "is a nasty looking dog,"³² Napoleon's "apprehension is quick, and he frequently repeats your answer,"³³ and Josephine's "person is good and her manners elegant and pleasing."³⁴ His connections notwithstanding, however, his sudden change in status comes as a complete surprise:

*May 23, Monday. Went for my passport for England and was informed we were all prisoners of war and [to be] sent to Fontainebleau in 24 hours on our parole. I have been with Junot and have permission to stay at Paris. These notes may be dangerous. I will send them home by Maclaurin.*³⁵

Eventually, Greatheed was able to obtain passports to Germany, and again his connections worked in his favor. "He [Col. Green] had dined with Junot pressed him to grant our passports. Murat was there and spoke very kindly in favour of it."³⁶ Before he left, his wife paid two calls on Napoleon's mother.

31 *An Englishman in Paris: 1803. The Journal of Bertie Greatheed*, edited by J. Bury and J. Barry (London, 1953).

32 *Ibid.*, 9.

33 *Ibid.*, 13.

34 *Ibid.*, 55-56.

35 *Ibid.*, 154.

36 *Ibid.*, 181.

Another *détenu* who met Napoleon and had some success at obtaining release was George Sinclair. He was arrested in 1806 near Jena, and was suspected as a spy. Sinclair and his companion Rigel were immediately brought before Napoleon by Count Froberg, who he found in a dressing gown and white night-cap. After numerous questions which were “remarkable by their perfect clearness” and in which Napoleon “omitted nothing that was necessary; he asked nothing superfluous,” the conversation then turned to Greek and Roman writers.³⁷ Sinclair later wrote:

*When taken before him, I had the strongest prejudice against him. I considered him the enemy of my country and the oppressor of the rest of Europe. On quitting him, the grace and fascination of his smile and that superior intelligence which illumined his face had entirely subjugated me.*³⁸

Sinclair produced some family letters to bolster his story, and after the battle of Jena was put back on parole.

Men In The Middle: The Merchant Seamen

Merchant seamen were truly in the middle. They were not officers or military men, and they were not “traveling gentlemen” either. While they were not taken in military action per se, they were usually captured at gunpoint, usually by privateers who were given license by the French government for just such actions.

Peter Bussell was Master and part owner of the unarmed trading sloop *The Dove*, which was captured in February of 1806 by French privateers. He was taken to France, and remained a prisoner under various levels of confinement in several different locations until

³⁷ Alger, 252-253.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

April of 1814. He kept a diary of his “adventures,” which he recopied upon his return to England.³⁹

As Master of a ship, Bussell was given substantially more freedom of movement and of sleeping arrangements than common prisoners of war were afforded. He was often allowed to live in the town near whatever prison he was assigned. Bussell tells a most interesting story, especially of his travels from one location to another. His stories of some of the French gaolers and others are often amusing. This story of his gaoler in Cherbourg is typical.

*Our gaoler was an elderly man, very friendly to us, but loved the bottle. His wife and he often had words betwixt them, particularly when the old woman caught him at the bottle, which he would get to on every opportunity.*⁴⁰

As Bussell traveled to various locations, usually on foot with a cart for luggage or infirm men, he was often able to buy his way into more private quarters and better beds. While he had some of his own money with him, the French also paid him a certain amount of “marching” money. Later, when he was staying at more permanent locations, he, like many British prisoners, was sent money from Lloyds Patriotic Fund, which was funded in England by subscription. He was able to use this money for better lodgings, improved food, and wine. Throughout the diary, Bussell complains about the high prices he was often charged, and the occasional reductions in the amount of money afforded him, dual complaints repeated by virtually all British narratives. He often displays

³⁹ Peter Bussell, *The Diary of Peter Bussell* (1806-1814). Edited by his great-grandson and now first published. With illustrations from original drawings by the author. G. A. Turner, editor. (London, 1931).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

rather dry wit, as in this description of one of his days at march:

*When we reached the prison where we was to take up our night's abode we had marched twenty-seven miles this day. We was as hungry as half-starved hounds, and at last we succeeded in getting for our refreshment half a sheep's head, a little soup maigre [thin], and some bread. They charged us three livres (or half a crown). So much for their humanity! Our night's rest was very uncomfortable, we having only but a little dirty straw to lay our weary bones on, and being likewise both wet and cold.*⁴¹

Funds would often be a problem for Bussell, and his frequent lack of adequate funding evidently caused him to lose his ability to stay in the village. Part of the problem was the French government's differentiation between those masters of ships that weighed over 80 tons and those from ships under that weight. The "over 80s" were

*allowed from the French Government twenty-nine livres (one pound, four shillings, and two pence) per month, whilst all those that are under that tonnage receive no more than the smallest lad in the depot. I am sorry to say that I am one of that unfortunate number whose pay is the small sum of one sol and a half (3 farthings) per day. This is paid every ten days when one, two, or three sols is stopped from each prisoner to pay for the use of the stoves etc.*⁴²

While Bussell was often kept apart from the prisons, he was sometimes required to stay within their confines. While so confined, he tells of very poor conditions, of extreme cold, and lack of provisions. The health of prisoners so confined was, predictably, not good. Bussell frequently reports on the number of prisoners

41 Ibid., 13.

42 Ibid., 29.

who died, and complains that they were not buried but given over to doctors for practice. This, naturally, leads to a certain reluctance on the part of prisoners to go to the hospital:

*The fever and ague seem to abate a little. I am recovered something myself. Four of us here have a French doctor to attend us at our own expense, as we do not wish to go to the Hospital.*⁴³

The commandant was not amused, but Bussell was. The commandant decreed:

I understand that many injuries have been done to the health of the prisoners in general, owing to when people get sick not being willing to go to the Hospital. Many of them have lain so long sick in their room til the cases have not only been dangerous to themselves but also to their room-mates. Therefore, it is my desire from this time forward each captain of the rooms will send into the office the names of those who may be ill, that they may be removed to Hospital.

NOIROT, Commandant

Bussell wryly responded:

*The Hospital is not beloved by many of the prisoners, many of them would suffer almost anything rather than go there.*⁴⁴

Bussell provides countless other examples of what life was like, what types of people he encountered, and what kinds of relationships he observed. He often offers some rather surprising details of the relationships between the local French citizens and the prisoners. For example, on two occasions prisoners helped put out some major fires, and were shown a great deal of gratitude by the local citizens.

43 Ibid., 53.

44 Ibid., 81-82.

Incidentally, the problem with food mentioned by Bussell and others was not confined to its cost, as this passage points out:

*All prisoners suffered more or less from lack of food and clothing, and they were often in the power of extortionage and corrupt contractors, or at the mercy of famine prices owing to the prolonged wars. It was difficult also to adjust their national diets; a Frenchman craved for good soup, light bread, thin wine, cider, or spirits, whilst an Englishman missed his beef or bacon and cabbage, his strong mouse-trap cheese and mug of beer or his grog. It is not easy to imagine what a Spanish prisoner did with his ration of boiled beef, cabbage, bread, and small beer. Soup was probably the general solution for foreigners. Tea and coffee, unless brought by prisoners, were luxuries and not on the dietaries.*⁴⁵

Alexander Stewart (1790-1874) ran away from home at an early age and eventually became a cabin boy in a merchant ship. In January of 1805, his ship was captured within clear sight of the coastal guns of Brighton when a French privateer boarded her and took her to France.

Stewart was marched in a humiliating way, as he describes:

We were marched off to Dunkirk, each carrying the few clothes he was allowed to bring with him from the ship, slung on his back. We were tied to each other with a strong chord [sic], much as you may see a number of horses coming to Smithfield, and escorted by a party of soldiers headed by two Drummers, beating what, I suppose, we should call the Rogue's March, to give dignity to the scene. Before we

45 Elton, Oliver (Mrs.), *Locks, Bolts, and Bars: Stories of Prisoners in the French Wars, 1759-1814* (London, 1945), 10-11.

*reached Dunkirk we were much fatigued, partly from want of food, but chiefly from depression of spirits.*⁴⁶

After a few days, both the drummers and the ropes disappeared, and they arrived in Verdun. Stewart reflects the experiences of other prisoners, in that his conditions of marching ranged from being in ropes to being given the responsibility of getting to his next place of confinement pretty much on his own honor.

Much of Stewart's ten years in captivity would be spent either in school or teaching it, and his education (and general mastery of French) would stand him in good stead with both his fellow captives and their captors.

Stewart's accounting provides the reader with many interesting stories of his life during the 10 years that he was captive, though a period of as much as two years may pass in a mere sentence! After a failed escape attempt, Stewart was marched, often chained with French deserters, to Bitche, that most dreaded of depots, which was the destination of those who tried to escape or otherwise caused trouble. He arrived in 1811, and found conditions predictably horrible. Soon, however, he was actually able to continue his education, obtaining some books and gaining the favor of the commandant. His study conditions, however, would put the rowdiest college dorm to shame:

The whole was tedious, wearing and depressive beyond what I could well describe. The frequent boisterous rioting, gambling, drinking, swearing, and fighting, especially when shut down in the middle of the day, [they were locked up for 3 hours each mid-day] often made the place a little hell on earth. Though at times it was quiet enough. If your next neighbour chose to swear or to sing close to your ear when you wanted to read or write, or keep quiet, there

46 Alexander Stewart, *The Life of Alexander Stewart, Prisoner of Napoleon and Preacher of the Gospel* (London, 1948), 21.

*was no remedy but your fists. And yet many lived on the most friendly terms, and many employed their time well, as far as circumstances would allow. Generally where there is a will, there is a way.*⁴⁷

Stewart spent time in a number of depots, eventually traveling throughout much of France. Largely the result of his mastery of French, Stewart eventually became the favorite of a number of commandants, and was given a great deal of freedom and responsibility, even serving as the personal secretary to the commandant at Arras. On the way to Arras, he actually fell in with some French students at Reims, who were delighted to practice their English. They went to a café, and they expressed great satisfaction with his command of French (“Nous parlons Anglais comme Français, mai vous parlez Français comme Français; voilà la difference.”)⁴⁸ After Arras, when traveling he was generally in charge of pay and the assignment of rooms.

Stewart, like many others, found that as 1814 approached, the attitude of the commandants become reflective that the fortunes of war were changing. By 1814, he is able to simply make his way to the coast, get into a British ship, and go home, where his most disheartening story unfolds. While in France, and, on his escape attempt, in Luxembourg, he met with many people who treated him well and did their best to soften his plight. Upon return to England, he discovered that he and his companions were seen as oddities, with little concern for their welfare, although they were virtually destitute. In desperation, they decided to ask the authorities for some assistance: assistance that would have been forthcoming in France, even as prisoners:

⁴⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 78.

On reaching the next town, we consequently asked for the Mayor. ‘There is no such person’ was the mortifying reply. We then asked for the person who managed the town affairs, and were directed first to one person and then to another, to each of whom we told our tale, but in no case met any response or the least sympathy.

*I felt so hurt that I said I would perish by the roadside rather than ask again. I already felt I could spit in the face of England and abandon it forever. We were not culprits. We did not occasion the war. Such treatment was insult added to injury. It was barbarous that we should be dispatched from the Guardship, and taken no notice of by the Portsmouth authorities in the first instance, not only as to our reaching our respective homes, but as to whether we could get a morsel of bread.*⁴⁹

The “Good Life” for Officers

High ranking military officers were often treated about as well as the well to do *détenus*. Major-General Andrew Thomas, Lord Blayney, was one of only three British general officer prisoners. Captured in Spain in 1810 while in action against General Sebastiani, he was generally treated as a distinguished visitor rather than a prisoner of war. He was wined and dined by General Sebastiani, who sent for his baggage on board the frigate *Topaze* under a flag of truce.⁵⁰ As he traveled toward France, usually on horseback with mules for the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁰ Edward Fraser, *Napoleon the Gaoler: Personal Experiences and Adventures of British Sailors and Soldiers During the Great Captivity* (New York, 1914) 199-200. Fraser gives a rather complete accounting of Lord Blayney’s experiences, but criticizes Blayney’s willingness to accept the good life while other British POWs were much worse off. Blayney’s own story can be found in his rather rare *Narrative of a forced journey through Spain and France, as a prisoner of war, in the years 1810-1814* (London, 1814).

luggage, he attended a number of dinners in his honor, and even had the complete assurance as to his future treatment to criticize the food and company! Blayney was able to obtain some improvements in the condition of other prisoners, ranging from obtaining better meat and clothing for men in prison to arranging dinners with fellow officers, in which they were often joined by French and Spanish officers.⁵¹ Later, at Bayonne, Marshal Bessières entertained Blayney, and gave him letters of reference and a large personal loan.⁵²

Blayney's experiences were not all fun and games. His extravagant lifestyle often brought him unwanted attention; he enjoyed himself so long at Bordeaux that he was ordered to either leave immediately or lose his parole. He left, but continued to travel more as a tourist than a POW on parole. It took him six months after his capture to get to Paris.⁵³ He soon came under suspicion, and was ordered transferred to Verdun. While there, the War Office in London placed him in charge of providing for prisoners of little means. He was provided money and given authority to provide whatever he deemed necessary for the good of the prisoners. His comments on the other prisoners, especially the *détenus*, are worth noting:

*Among the prisoners at the dépôt at first were two sets-- détenus, or hostages, and prisoners of war. Among the former were many respectable families seized in 1803, but also there were debtors who had given the King's Bench the slip, and on the Continent were living by their wits; also many traders, tailors, bootmakers, and traiteurs[caterers].*⁵⁴

51 Ibid., 207-209.

52 Ibid., 215-216.

53 Ibid., 218-225.

54 Ibid., 233, quoting from Blayney's Narrative.

At one point, in retaliation for poor treatment of a French General POW in England, Blayney was forced to stay under close confinement in the citadel. This lasted for seven weeks, at which time things returned to normal until his release at the end of the war in 1814.

Another of Wellington's "Lost Soldiers" was Captain Charles Boothby of the Royal engineers. In 1809 Boothby served under General Sherbrooke at the battle of Talavera.⁵⁵ He was wounded and his leg amputated. When the British forces withdrew from the city, Boothby was left behind with other wounded soldiers and some medical personnel. When the French arrived, many of the soldiers began to loot the possessions of those British left behind. Hearing of this, Boothby took care to have his most valuable possessions buried. One such possession need no burial: he quickly drank the last of some claret given him by General Sherbrooke "with a sort of spiteful defiance, saying to myself, 'You don't get this, my boys!'"⁵⁶

Boothby persuaded two French Captains to stay in the home where he was quartered. These captains were very gracious to him, providing him food, books and friendly companionship. His good fortune continued, as General Sémellé himself took responsibility for his welfare. Other officers also took up the cause, telling him that they appreciated the fact that the English soldiers often protected captured French soldiers from the uncertain fate that awaited them were they to fall into the hands of the Spanish.

His kind treatment notwithstanding, Boothby's primary desire was to be exchanged. To this end he was in contact with Wellington's

55 Charles Boothby, *A Prisoner of France: The Memoirs, Diary, and Correspondence of Charles Boothby, Captain Royal engineers, During His Last Campaign* (London, 1898). Boothby's narrative is well written, and his story quite unique among the POW experiences I have encountered.

56 Ibid., 49.

secretary Colonel Bathurst, and with Marshal Mortier, Duc de Treviso, with whom he dined and had quite friendly relations. Unfortunately, no one seemed to have the authority to either exchange him or simply send him home as an amputee. Instead, his case was forwarded to the Minister of War in Paris. While Mortier encouraged Boothby to stay with him as long as he liked, he also suggested that only by going to Paris was he likely to obtain his release. In October, armed with letters from Mortier, an armed escort, and a wagon provided by the Marshal, Boothby and a number of other POWs left for Madrid, from where he hoped to travel to Paris. He was, quite rightly, deeply moved by Marshal Mortier's treatment of him:

On taking leave, he [Mortier] gave me a letter addressed to Marshal Jourdan, in which he recommended me strongly to the good offices of that Commander-in-Chief; repeating his application for my exchange, or for my early and commodious conveyance to France, in order to further an object so desirable for my unfortunate situation. In short, though sensible of how much a noble mind deems due to the unfortunate, I was at a loss to conceive how I could have deserved such kindness and aid from the Marshal Duke of Treviso as would in all points have become the affection of a near relation.⁵⁷

In Madrid, Boothby was closely confined in the hospital. He delayed sending the letter from Mortier to Jourdan, and too late discovered that Jourdan had departed for France. His good fortune returned, however, in the personage of Mortier himself, who then arranged with King Joseph for the granting of parole for passage to Paris. In January of 1810, Boothby and a large contingent of POWs and escorts left for Paris. The trip is generally uneventful, with few of the charming anecdotes common to so many of the

57 Ibid., 151.

other memoirs. They pass many corpses and are frequently lost and traveling too late at night. In Valladolid, however, they dine with General Kellerman, to whom Marshal Mortier had sent a letter of introduction. One of their biggest fears is attack by brigands, which was a very real possibility.

Boothby has little complaint, however. On the way to Verdun he is given leave to stay at Versailles, where he falls under the protection of General Hedonville. Boothby relates that "Marshal Mortier, not content with his efforts to procure me my liberty, has recommended me to his friends in Paris, supplied me with cash at Madrid to prepare for my journey, and gave me besides a letter of credit for Paris to an unlimited amount."⁵⁸ Boothby's time in Paris is most pleasant, and he even gets the opportunity to observe the Emperor in his chapel for over half an hour.

In April the Minister of War approves Boothby's request for exchange and forwards it to the Emperor. Boothby goes so far as to suggest to Napoleon that an exchange be made for a Captain Meseure. This suggestion is accepted, and in July of 1810, Captain Charles Boothby is returned to England.

Captain Jahleel Brenton, a post captain, was captured when his frigate ran aground near Cherbourg on 2 July 1803.⁵⁹ Captain Brenton was at first treated rather harshly. His march to Épinal was marked by very different treatment from region to region, depending on whether or not the officer in charge was of the old regime or obtained his power as a result of the Revolution. Brenton made the best of it however, and

58 Ibid., 267.

59 Lewis, 86. Both Lewis and Fraser have lengthy discussions of Brenton's experiences and of his special role while at Verdun. He is also mentioned favorably by virtually all of the narratives written by those prisoners who stayed at Verdun.

eventually became an important source of help for British prisoners. Lewis takes note of his efforts with scathing remarks "No two men could be more different in character and outlook than Blayney and Brenton: the general insouciant and self-centered, the captain conscientious, responsible, intelligent, far-sighted."⁶⁰

Originally assigned to Épinal, Brenton immediately set about to improve conditions for the men held there. He obtained loans based on his personal letter of credit, raised a subscription from local *détenus*, and found gainful employment in the village for those who had useful trades. Brenton evidently took pride in his work, remarking that, unlike prisoners from other nations, "although British seamen were evidently worse off than any who had preceded them, there was no instance of any of them being seen begging."⁶¹ Brenton also arranged for educational opportunities for the men, a priority that he would later pursue at Verdun.

Brenton was clearly a man of action. He had contacted the British Admiralty asking for money, and eventually received a cash grant, with more to follow. Wherever he went, he was willing to challenge the local authorities and push for better treatment of his men. At one time, for example, on the road to Verdun, he rented a very large house and housed his men there, rather than in the local jail with its awful conditions. When they left the next day, he arranged for it to be available for the next group of prisoners due to arrive the next day.

After arriving at Verdun in December of 1803, Brenton became the key link between British prisoners and their homeland, and assumed substantial responsibility for their well being. In May of 1805, Napoleon permitted Brenton's wife to join him. In November he was

⁶⁰ Lewis, 86-87.

⁶¹ Quoted in Fraser, 179.

moved to Tours, where he continued to serve as Commissioner for British Prisoners in France. He visited various depots, and generated much correspondence. He had hoped to be exchanged early in his confinement, but had about given up. Fate interceded for him, however. Marshal Masséna's nephew, Captain Infernet, had been taken at Trafalgar, and Masséna continually hounded Napoleon to obtain an exchange. The British would only accept Captain Brenton, and in 1806 the deal was done.

The influence of Captain Brenton cannot be overstated. During his time as a prisoner, he made repeated efforts to improve the conditions of all British prisoners, not just the officers. Alexander Stewart, captured as a lad of 14 as described above, was removed from general confinement at Brenton's insistence. Stewart writes of Brenton's actions as follows:

*Soon after this, a Benevolent Fund was raised, chiefly at the instance of Capt'n B. and a few other benevolent men, to establish a school in the dépôt for our instruction. In this, I for my own part greatly rejoiced, though some others, nay many, refused to attend. The Committee, however, very wisely made it obligatory, considering that boys of our age should be served, even against their own wills.*⁶²

The education of prisoners was of particular concern not only to Captain Brenton, but to *détenus*, who made significant contributions, and to people in England as well. A voluntary committee to raise funds was formed, and publicity generated. The committee included Major Generals Scott and Abercromby, and had a fair measure of success. A flier produced by the committee reads in part:

The Committee for the management of the English Schools beg leave to lay before the subscribers a

⁶² Stewart, 25.

statement of the sums raised & expended for the support of the establishment during the year 1805. The number of boys left to partake of the benefits of the Institution formed at Verdun is at present very inconsiderable, but the Committee have the satisfaction of announcing that schools have been opened in all the other Depots which promise the greatest advantages.⁶³

The flier goes on to say that 119 boys are being educated at Sarre Libre, 140 at Givet, and 120 boys and 145 young men at Valenciennes.

Junior Officers: The Midshipmen

In February of 1804, midshipman Donat O'Brien⁶⁴ having been forced by weather to abandon ship, found it necessary to surrender himself and his crew to a French ship. Here he was treated with the "utmost civility" and sent to the hospital at Brest. The French commander insisted that O'Brien keep his sword, since he had been shipwrecked and not taken in action. Soon the order came for the officers to be sent to Verdun, while the seamen were to be sent to Givet. The French had difficulty translating O'Brien's rank, and decided it was comparable to *sous-officers*, thus putting him in with the men. No amount of argument could change that, though promises were made (but not kept) by the local French officials that a remedy would be forthcoming.⁶⁵

Incidentally, to add insult to O'Brien's injury, a young volunteer named John Hopkinson was sent off with the officers. He was later kept at Verdun, where he compiled one of the most

63 *A Picture of Verdun*, 1:17-19.

64 Donat Henchy O'Brien, *My Adventures During the Late War: A Narrative of Shipwreck, Captivity, Escapes From French Prisons, and Sea Service in 1804-14*. Charles Oman, editor. *New edition, illustrated, with a preface, notes, and biography of the author* (London, 1902).

65 *Ibid.*, 11.

complete listings of British prisoners to be found.⁶⁶

O'Brien gives many examples of how the local French citizens charged outrageous prices for food and lodging. While clearly disgusted by such treatment, O'Brien was also able to describe it with humor and sarcasm. An "old hag" had charged them a penny each for renting eggspoons; a charge that even amazed the French officer in charge. This lady was an "old mercenary creature, who proved herself a compound of extortion and nationality," but he left her having "respectfully wished the *honest old lady* a good morning."⁶⁷

To be fair, it was not only the French who created such difficulties for O'Brien. In Amiens he and his men were attended to by an Englishwoman who ran an eating-house. This "benevolent Christian" was most unhappy with the treatment suffered by the men, and after issuing forth many "tender expressions" and a promise of an excellent meal, sent a rather disappointing meal to them, consisting of a small amount of meat, no vegetables, and two bottles of "very inferior wine." O'Brien relates:

*We expected to have the opportunity in the evening of expressing to the lady in person our sense of the excellence of the dinner; but she never came near her 'dear, dear countrymen!' She took care, however, to send her man with the bill, the charges of which exceeded those of the gaoler's wife at Rouen!*⁶⁸

Eventually, O'Brien was recognized as the officer he was, largely through the intercession of Captain Brenton at Verdun. He was

66 Thomas Walker, *The Depot for Prisoners of War at Norman Cross Huntingdonshire, 1796 to 1816* (London, 1913). See pages 223-233 for Hopkinson's story, and Appendix H (312-341) for his list of prisoners.

67 O'Brien, 18-19; italics his.

68 *Ibid.*, 24-25.

transferred to Verdun, and put on parole. There, he took up French and Italian, as well as fencing. He reflected the comments of other visitors to Verdun regarding the gambling and other related activities, commenting that "Every kind of debauchery and libertinism, I am sorry to add, was permitted and practiced in this town."⁶⁹

In spite of living a relatively good life at Verdun, O'Brien decided in 1807 to try to escape. His comments as to why are interesting and instructive:

*I reasoned with myself that I was losing the prime of my youth in captivity. I saw no prospect of peace or an exchange of prisoners; no hope or possibility of being promoted in my present state, nor of recommending myself, through any personal exertions, to the notice of the Admiralty. I was deprived, while in France, of being able to afford my country, my friends, or myself the least assistance. The youthful visions of the glories of the naval service again came over me; but sadly were my spirits broken when I reflected that my hopes of joining others in the strife of honour and patriotism were destroyed, unless I could rescue myself from bondage.*⁷⁰

One of the most interesting and useful of the prisoner of war accounts is that by Edward Boys.⁷¹ Boys was a midshipman who was a POW for some six years. His accounts of his treatment confirm the accounts of other writers. His writing provides interesting insight into the frame of mind of these young lads, of whom many were able to maintain a good sense of humor and hope despite what must have been a situation they found dreadful.

69 Ibid., 45.

70 Ibid., 47.

71 Edward Boys, *Narrative of a Captivity and Adventures in France and Flanders Between the Years 1803 and 1809* (London, 1827).

Boys was captured in action off the port of Toulon in 1803. He was kept aboard the frigate that captured him for 21 days, anchored in Toulon harbor. Here Boys shows his contempt for the "equality" brought on by that Revolution.

*. . . and so excited the rage of the captain of the Rhin, that he told us we were pirates; this novel information did not in the least disconcert us, for we suspected the ignorance of the man, and afterwards learnt he had been a barber; indeed, the whole tenor of his conduct evinced the dreadful convulsion which society in France must have undergone during the revolution, for such an ignorant, low-bred fellow to have risen to the command of a frigate.*⁷²

Boys was eventually marched "under drum" to Toulouse. At first his treatment was almost that of a common man, but eventually it improved. At Toulouse he was put on parole, found outside lodging and began to study French. He began to receive money from his family, and actually lived rather well. In December of 1803, he and his fellow officers were sent to Verdun, and traveled with a *gendarme* [military policeman] who served only as a guide. At one point on this journey, one of his "hosts" actually arranged for a local bank to loan Boys twenty pounds so that he could travel in greater comfort.

During this trip, Boys was sometimes allowed to stay in town, and other times forced to stay in the local prison, which was contrary to his conditions of parole. In all cases, however, he felt that the local French authorities and townspeople were cheating him. It was on this trip that perhaps the most humorous, and certainly one of the best known, incidents occurred. While Boys' companions were arguing with the local officials, Boys retired into an adjoining room.

72 Ibid., 8-9.

. . . observing on the mantle various little images in plaster of Paris, in the midst of which was the bust of the adored Buonaparte, and no one being near, I could not resist the temptation of placing it head downwards, in a vessel which was no ornament to a mantle piece, nor usually found there; the arrangement of the images I also altered, so as to make them appear ridiculing this misfortune of the "premier consul."⁷³

This outrage did not go unpunished, however. Several days later, when expressing their objections to being sent to the local prison, the guard told them that it was their punishment for putting Napoleon's head into a '*pot-de-chambre*.'

Boys' description of daily life at Verdun, and of various incidents there, offers a very useful insight to the plight of the prisoners. He discusses at length the gambling, and his belief that it was a major source of income for the French. He also provides us with detailed accounts of the rules at Verdun, and the different treatment afforded field officers and midshipmen.

The Common Men

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss at length the experiences of the common soldiers and sailors who were unfortunate enough to become prisoners of war, but some comment is necessary. As bad as the *détenus*, merchant seamen, and officers had it, the men had it much worse. They were usually not allowed to live in the towns on parole. They were kept in prison depots where their ability to move about was much more severely restricted. These depots were often greatly overcrowded and filthy. Yet even under these conditions these men showed

their ability to make the best with what they had. They often made creative works of art, such as pipes and snuffboxes, which they were able to arrange to have sold to people in the villages. Any good collection of period artifacts may well have examples of their handiwork. These men were less likely to write lengthy descriptions of their experiences, but their experiences are none the less of great interest, and are the subject of ongoing research.

The experiences of Napoleon's British prisoners of war were quite varied, and often quite interesting. The depot to which they were assigned, their rank, and their attitude influenced their situation. It is reasonable to assume, of course, that the plight of the common prisoner was rather less varied and interesting; unfortunately, it is also considerably less well documented.

It may be that, like military experiences throughout time, the story seems less oppressive and more humorous in the retelling than in the actual event. Nevertheless, the accounts discussed here, along with many not mentioned here, do speak to the ability of the human spirit to sustain varying degrees of deprivation, and often to respond with amazingly good humor.

73 Ibid., 28-29.