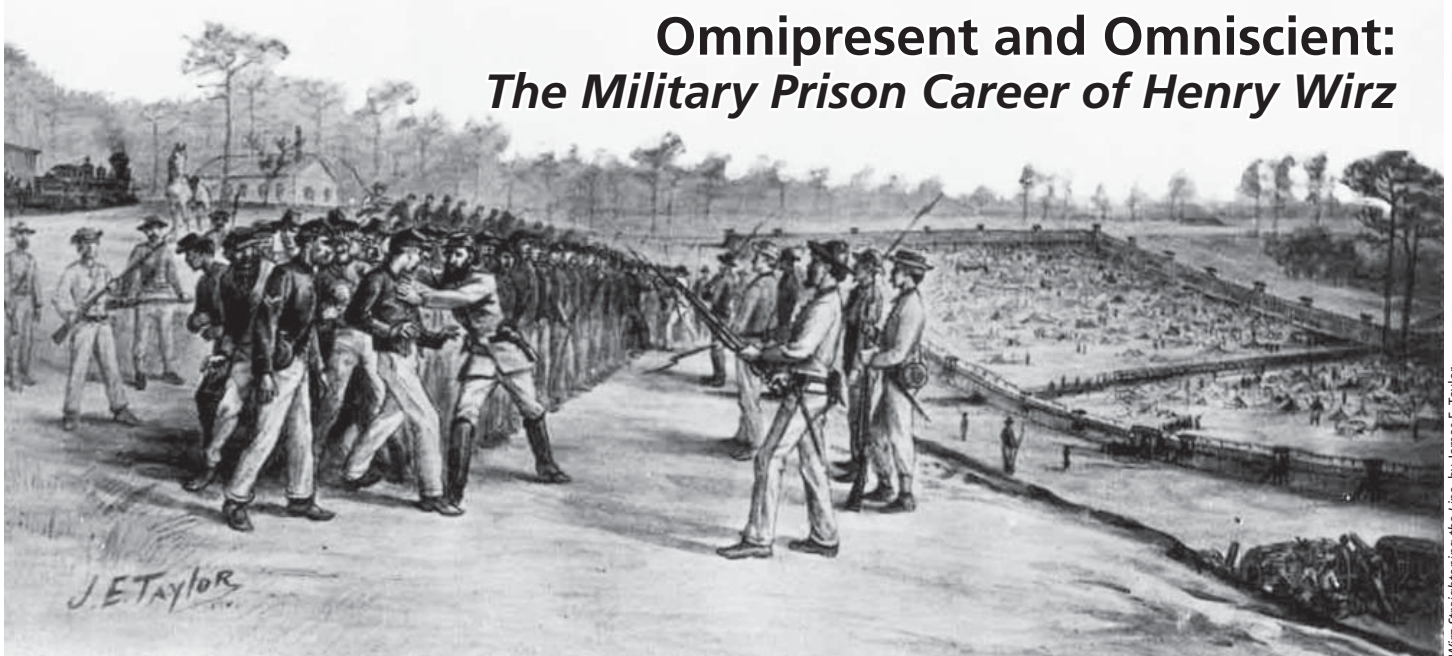




Omnipresent and Omniscient: *The Military Prison Career of Henry Wirz*



Wirz Straightening the Line, by James E. Taylor
NPS/Andersonville National Historic Site

“Vat you tink dem Yankees do, if dey get me prisoner, up Nort-eh?... Dey will kill me sure! But I shall take care dey vill no catch me – but if dey do I am certain dey will kill me so quick – so quick, I tell you – dat I shall know nothing about it!”

– Sgt. Henry Wirz, Richmond, VA, 1861.

Before the War

Henry Wirz was born in 1822 in Switzerland. In 1849 he immigrated to the United States and attempted to go into business as a physician in New York City. Unsuccessful, he moved to Connecticut and then to Northampton, Massachusetts where he worked as a translator in several small factories. Eventually he took a job at a water-cure establishment before moving to Kentucky to work as a homeopathic physician.

He operated water-cure establishments in Cadiz and Louisville until 1857, when he moved to Louisiana to “take charge of” Cabin Teele, a 2,200 acre plantation owned by Levin R. Marshall. At Cabin Teele, Wirz continued to practice homeopathic medicine while overseeing the hundreds of slaves in bondage there. This was Wirz’s first experience with controlling and caring for large numbers of people, a skill that would serve him later.

Richmond

At the outset of the Civil War, Wirz enlisted in the 4th Battalion of Louisiana Infantry, organized in his home of Madison, Louisiana. In the aftermath of Bull Run in July 1861, the unit was sent Richmond, where Wirz was assigned to guard duty at Howard’s Factory Prison. He immediately began to organize prisoners, and developed a reputation for efficiency, however callous. He was, as one prisoner wrote in 1862, “the essence of authority at the prison. . . [he] thought himself omnipresent and omniscient.”

During the fall of 1861, Wirz attracted the attention of General John Winder, who at that time was in charge of the Richmond prison system. Winder placed Wirz on detached duty as a part of his prison management team. In November 1861 the Richmond newspapers reported that Sergeant Henry Wirz was one of seven men on the city’s Prison Board, charged with ensuring the security of all military prisons in Richmond.

Moving Through the Ranks

After serving on the Richmond Prison Board, Sgt. Wirz was transferred to the prison at Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In the late spring of 1862 Wirz was appointed provost in Richmond, a position he held for only a brief time. In June he was promoted to Captain and placed in command of Libby Prison and Belle Isle. In September the Confederate War Department sent Wirz throughout the south to document how many prisoners the Confederacy held. At some point between the summer of 1862 and March 1863 he sustained a tissue injury to his right arm.

In March 1863 he applied for a medical furlough, and later that year went to Europe to seek medical treatment.



Captain Henry Wirz

NPS/Andersonville National Historic Site

At Andersonville

Upon his return from Europe, Captain Wirz was assigned command of the prison at Andersonville by General Winder on March 27, 1864. Immediately, he ordered the construction of the deadline and a mandatory headcount of prisoners each day. Throughout his complicated tenure, Wirz was frustrated by military bureaucracy. Authority at Camp Sumter was compartmentalized to extremes. Captain Wirz controlled daily operations inside the prison stockade, but had no power over the guards, hospital, or delivery of supplies. Hoping he could address these shortcomings if he had a higher rank, Wirz repeatedly requested a promotion from Richmond, but without success.

Wirz relied on aggressive behavior and coarse language to intimidate prisoners. He also attempted to control the entire prison population through practices such as withholding rations, and harsh punishments for minor infractions. Supplies sent to the prison by northern agencies or southern civilians were confiscated or banned entirely by Wirz, intentionally cutting off humanitarian aid to prisoners. While he could not control the Confederate economy or supply lines, with the powers that he did possess he denied most prisoners sufficient access to space, food, water, medical treatment and shelter. These decisions resulted in the deaths of almost 13,000 prisoners.

Arrest and Trial

After the surrender of the Confederacy in the spring of 1865, Captain Wirz was arrested by Union forces at Andersonville. He was taken to Washington D.C. and charged with conspiracy to “injure the health and destroy the lives” of United States soldiers in violation of the laws of war, and at least thirteen counts of murder. His trial received national attention. Brigadier General John H. Winder, the highest ranking officer at Andersonville, and Wirz’s superior, died before the end of the war and went unpunished by the United States. Wirz’s attorneys argued that he did all he could, and that shortages of supplies and medical care were beyond his authority. Wirz blamed poor logistics and overcrowding on his superiors, but he could not escape his own words and actions.



Library of Congress

The execution of Henry Wirz, November 10, 1865.

A special military commission was formed and heard evidence from August through October, 1865. Nearly 150 former prisoners, guards, Confederate officials, civilians, and medical staff testified that Wirz withheld available resources, and that he issued orders that directly resulted in the death of

prisoners of war. The commission found him guilty and sentenced him to death. President Johnson affirmed the verdict, and Wirz was hanged on November 10, 1865. He was the most prominent Confederate officer to be executed for violating the laws of war.

Legacy

In 1866, President Andrew Johnson halted further military tribunals, saving Confederate leaders and most of Wirz’s named co-conspirators from trial. During Reconstruction, many Southerners turned to Wirz as a martyr of the “Lost Cause.” In 1909, the United Daughters of the Confederacy dedicated a monument to Captain Wirz in the town of Andersonville.

Whether or not Wirz violated the existing laws of war is not a subject for debate. Wirz’s own subordinates and colleagues in the prison system testified that he failed to meet the legal obligations toward prisoners. The real questions regarding his legacy have broader applications even 150 years later.

What are the responsibilities of a prison commander in regards to his prisoners?

Who has the right to try soldiers for violations of the laws of war?

Does “just following orders” excuse any actions?

The legality and process of military justice continues to challenge us even today.



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In 1909 the United Daughters of the Confederacy erected this monument to Henry Wirz, located in downtown Andersonville, within sight of where prisoners once arrived on the train.