

I would like to share the story of my great uncle Elwood M Robinson who would become a prisoner of war at Andersonville prison. Many members have shared their interest in his plight and suffering during a very inhumane civil war.

Elwood was born in New York on March 26th 1841 and was the third of four sons of William and Mary Anne Robinson. The Robinson family moved to Ohio sometime in the mid 1850's near New Garden. They were farmers by trade and finding work in New York became difficult to find. The rich farmlands of Columbiana County at that time had an abundance of land owners with farms that they could work on.

While they were not totally illiterate, they had limited education. By obtaining the brothers civil war records I was able to learn that they could at least sign their enlistment papers with a signature rather than the use of an X.

By 1860, Andrew and Isaac, the two older brothers had migrated further west into Illinois leaving Elwood and Joseph behind in Ohio. At the outbreak of the war, Elwood and Joseph received a letter from Andrew stating he had joined the 8th Illinois infantry. That letter was followed by one from Isaac telling them of his intentions of joining as well.

Elwood went to the nearest recruiting center which was in Bellaire Ohio and joined the 19th Ohio infantry, company I, on September 17th 1861. The regiment mustered in at Cleveland. He was 20 years old.

Elwood was with the Army of the Ohio under the command of General Don Carlos Buell. On April 3rd 1862 they were camped in Nashville Tennessee with a force of about 22,000 men. Buell was order by General Halleck to march to Savannah Tennessee and link up with General Grant for the campaign against Corinth Mississippi. Grant had made it further south to Pittsburg Landing and camped awaiting Buell's arrival.

Confederate General Albert Sydney Johnston had other ideas. He would march his army of nearly 45,000 men 20 miles north of Corinth to engage Grant before Buell's arrival.

On the 6th of April the Battle of Shiloh would commence. Grant would be driven back to the Tennessee River and hold his position that night. The following morning Buell would arrive. Elwood was with General Crittenden and the 11th brigade commanded by General Jeremy Boyle. As did many regiments, The 19th Ohio took many casualties. The brigade had 33 killed 212 wounded and 18 missing for a total casualty listed as 263

The army would continue on to Corinth and lay siege upon the city until the confederates evacuated their position there.

By December of 1862, Confederate General Braxton Bragg was making a move towards Nashville to recapture that vital city, and was encamped near Murfreesboro. Lincoln by this time was disenchanted with the slow moving tentative General Buell and replaced him with General William Rosecrans.

Elwood now became attached to the XIV Corp Army of the Cumberland, Third Division 1st brigade.

Rosecrans was ordered to march against Bragg in Murfreesboro. On December 26th they marched out of Nashville and arrived at Stones River on the 31st. Elwood was with VanCleve's brigade on that day of intense and fierce fighting. Elwood took a Minnie ball to the right shoulder and was carried off the field.

Fortunately the bullet missed any bone mass and hit the flesh. Elwood would spend many months in a hospital in Nashville recuperating from his wound. The more severely wounded soldiers would stay in Murfreesboro.

Elwood rejoined his unit now camped in Chattanooga sometime in late July 1863. Rosecrans now would pursue Bragg into Georgia. Bragg had reinforced his army and was now ready to go on the offensive. The Battle of Chickamauga would begin on the 19th of September 1863. Elwood was again with Samuel Beatty's brigade and were positioned at Gordon's Mill, south of the La Fayette Road. They were ordered north to the Brotherton Field. They held that position until around noon when General Woods's division was ordered to move north to fill a gap in the line. That gap wasn't a gap at all, and by Wood's movement it did create a gap that he had just left. General Longstreet recognized the weakness in the line and hit Elwood and Beatty's brigade head on. This is where Elwood was captured.

Elwood along with all the other prisoners were marched to Ringgold and held there until rail cars could be loaded. They then went to Dalton, then to Atlanta. They changed rail cars in Atlanta and went to Augusta, through Columbia South Carolina, then northward through Charlotte and Raleigh North Carolina and on to Richman Virginia.

Upon arrival the enlisted men and officers were separated. Officers were sent to Libby Prison while the enlisted were sent to Belle Island. Belle Island was a 6 acre Island in the middle of the James River. The prison had been in service off and on since 1862. When prisoner exchanges were transacted the prison would close. After the Battle of Chancellorsville and the Dix-Hill cartel exchange program were no longer adhered to, the population of prisoners exploded.

By the time Elwood arrived at Belle Island there wasn't any shelter for him or his fellow prisoners. The prison had enough tents to house about 3,000 inmates. By the 1st of October there were an estimated 8,000 prisoners. Elwood along with many others spent that cold winter out in the elements and were reduced to digging holes for any kind of shelter. Rations were meager and disease ravished the compound. Those that died were buried in shallow graves on the north end of the Island. Escape was nearly impossible because of the swift current of the river. There was only a foot bridge that crossed over to the island, it was dubbed the "Bridge of Sighs".

To alleviate the overcrowding conditions the South decided to construct new facilities farther south in Georgia. On February 4th 1864 Camp Sumter (Andersonville) was opened. Elwood was shipped via railroad to Andersonville shortly after it opened, sometime in early February. At first it was a far cry better than what he endured at Belle Island for he was able to concoct his own shebang (make shift tent). At this time the population was around 4,000. By April it swelled to 8,000, and by August there were 31,000 prisoners.

record_id: 31679

Name: ROBINSON, ELWOOD M.

Alternate spelling of last name:

Year born: 1841

Rank: PRIVATE

Company: I

Arm: INFANTRY

Regiment number: 19th Ohio Infantry

Date captured: 9/19/1863

Location captured: Chickamauga, Georgia

Date of death:

Cause of death:

Fate:

Released February 1865 and discharged at Columbus, Ohio.

Remarks:

RELEASED 02/1865

The creek that ran through the grounds that provided drinking water and bathing was now a cesspool and sanitation conditions grew deplorable on a daily basis. Scurvy, dysentery and diarrhea were the main cause of mortality rates. Some men purposely went into the "Dead Zone" to commit suicide. Others were killed by their own comrades, mainly the "Andersonville Raiders". The Raiders were a ruthless band of men that preyed mostly on the weak and dying. New prisoners were of great value as well because they still had watches, jewelry, money etc.

The Raiders were led by six chieftains. Charles Curtis, John Sarsfield, Patrick Delaney, Teri Sullivan, William Collins and A. Munn. There are conflicting reports as to how many raiders there were. The agreed and probably most accurate account is around 100. The population finally grew intolerant of these thugs and formed a group called the "Regulators". In late June of 1864 the regulators were able to round up all of the raiders and with the consent and support of the camp Commander Henry Wirtz, these raiders were put on trial by prisoners in the camp. Many of these men were sentenced to a punishment of "Running the Gauntlet" They would have to run through a line where inmates had bats, sticks or anything else they could equip themselves with. Some were beaten so severely that they died. Some were sentenced to "Setting in the stocks" Hung up by the thumbs, or hung upside down by the feet. The Six chieftains were sentenced to death and were hung on gallows constructed within the compound by the prisoners. I am certain that Elwood was a witness to all of this.

In the fall of 1864 the South again saw that the overcrowding and alarming death rate needed to be addressed. They started construction on a new facility in Millen Georgia about 100 miles south of Augusta. It was situated on 42 acres and had ample water supply. It also afforded a rail line for transport of prisoners. This was called Camp Lawton. The land was owned by a Mrs. Caroline Elizabeth Jones. The prison was built with slave labor and some Union prisoners.

The camp was designed much like Andersonville. There were no barracks. Pigeon nests were posted around the perimeter with armed guards. They employed the same death zone and a creek would provide drinking and bathing water.

By mid-October 1864, 10,000 prisoners from Andersonville were transferred to the camp. Others were shipped to Blackshear Georgia and some to Thomasville Georgia. By November there were barely 7,000 prisoners left at Andersonville.

With the help of National Parks Service rangers Jody Mays and Charles Barr of Andersonville National Park we were able to rationalize that Elwood went to Camp Lawton. The Confederates did not keep records of those that went to Camp Lawton nor did they record names of those that died there. It is estimated that 756 of the 10,000 died within a six week span. The reason for our deduction of Elwood being in Camp Lawton was that nearly all of the prisoners left at Andersonville were Officers and ranking NCO's. Elwood was a private. Also, the prisoners that went to Blackshear were transferred to South Carolina when Sherman was approaching Savannah. The prisoners at Thomasville stayed there until their release in February 1865.

At the end of November Camp Lawton was shut down and most of the prisoners were shipped back to Andersonville, because of Sherman's March to the sea.

Historians in the early years debated as to why Sherman didn't swing south to liberate the soldiers from Andersonville. The truth of the matter was that Sherman didn't have any use for a bunch of emaciated, disease riddled, weak and starving men. Sherman had cut off his supply line and his troops were living off the land as it was. He didn't have the resources to feed, clothe, treat the sick or transport them. When Wirtz realized that Sherman had no intention of liberating these soldiers, like he had hoped: out of desperation he sent a group of the union prisoners to Washington D.C. to plead their case for some kind of exchange. It was denied and the prisoners returned to relay the news to their comrades as promised. At one point Wirtz released some 1,500 prisoners and sent them to Beaufort South Carolina and didn't want any compensation for them, only to have them returned. Wirtz was an escape goat and was executed by the very people that facilitated his so called war crimes.

Elwood would be released from Andersonville prison on February 4th 1865, after 490 days of captivity. It is hard to fathom that a man could endure such a length of pure hell on earth and survive it.

Arrangements were made by the Federals to ship many of these prisoners by railroad to Memphis so they could charter river boats up the Mississippi River to Illinois and inland to Indiana and Ohio. Elwood arrived at Memphis on the day the steam boat Sultana was to embark to Cairo Illinois. The ship being grossly overloaded, he was turned away. The boat was designed to carry a maximum of 750 people, there were over 2,400 men women and children aboard. A majority of the passengers were ex-prisoners from Andersonville and Cahaba prison in Alabama. Her boiler room exploded and she went up in a ball of flames killing many instantly. Those that managed to bail overboard drowned. Over 1,800 people died in that tragedy. This was the largest maritime disaster in American history.

Elwood made it back to Ohio and settled in Alliance. He married a Sarah Baxter on March 21st 1867 and they had two daughters, Elsa and Winnie. Elwood applied for and received a pension of 12.00 a month in 1890. He suffered the rest of his life from the beating he took from the war, mainly scurvy. He fought

to have his pension increased for years and finally in 1920 he was awarded an increase to 20.00 a month. Elwood died the following year on July 30th 1921 at the age of 80.