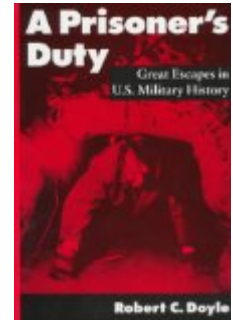


Robert C. Doyle. *A Prisoner's Duty: Great Escapes in U.S. Military History.* Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997. xxv + 372 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55750-180-6.



Reviewed by Lewis Carlson

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Going back at least to Indian captivity narratives, Americans have long been fascinated by stories of wartime prisoners who escape. Unfortunately, most such stories have been long on adventure and heroics but short on substance and analysis. Most reduced captivity to a simple struggle between the forces of good and evil in which noble individuals fall into the clutches of unsavory and diabolical captors but survive their crucible to become even more exemplary human beings.

Such morality tales play out particularly well for a people convinced of the uniqueness of the American experience and the inevitable triumph of the courageous individual over evil adversaries. Over the years, countless novels, short stories, popular histories, and, later, movies reinforced such notions. Only in recent years have scholars such as Arnold Krammer, Elliott Gruner, Craig Howes, Ron Robin, and Robert C. Doyle begun to examine the question of military captivity in a more critical, objective, and analytical manner.

In 1994, Robert Doyle, who presently teaches American civilization courses at France's University of Strasbourg, published *Voices from Captivity*, a seminal work on American POW narratives. His forthcoming *Prisoners in American Hands* will provide a comprehensive examination of the United States' treatment of POWs from Colonial times down through the present. His most recent work, *A Prisoner's Duty: Great Escapes in U.S. Military History*, is a well-written monograph, representing thorough research and providing the reader with many challenging and fascinating insights.

The old Revolutionary War adage, "Seldom have so few done so much for so many," clearly applies to the subject of Doyle's *A Prisoner's Duty*. No one knows the actual number of POW escapes, but seldom has the number exceeded more than one or two per cent of those incarcerated. For a variety of reasons, some of them very logically tied to self-preservation, only the most daring attempted to escape and even fewer achieved success. Doyle attempts to ascertain what separates such men from the overwhelming majority who

chose to sit out their captivity: "Many Americans chose to remain in captivity for various reasons," writes Doyle. "Most, however, endured their hardships stoically; a few collaborated and decided to join their captors; some refused to break out even when given an opportunity, and some defied tremendous odds and escaped."

A Prisoner's Duty covers escapes from the earliest Indian wars to Somalia. In spite of his subtitle, "Great Escapes in U.S. Military History," Doyle also includes many civilian escapees, including Colonialists captured by Indians, slaves who fled their masters, wartime journalists, and hostages. Doyle lists the ten elements that characterize most escape stories: pre-capture circumstances, the capture itself, dangerous long marches or transfers, the prison landscape, the decision to escape, planning, the escape itself, adventures along the way, contact with friendly forces, and reflections on or bearing witness to the experience. Little wonder novelists and Hollywood screenwriters love a good escape story, and there are a lot of them in this book.

After an introductory chapter and a remarkably comprehensive treatment of three centuries of American escape literature, Doyle arranges his next nine chapters chronologically. After several "a-fate-worse-than-death" stories of early Indian encounters, Doyle examines the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, two wars that make it clear that the British often treated their prisoners as harshly as did the Indians. A chapter on prisoners taken during the Texas War for Independence and the Mexican War is filled with many tales of derring-do, all reflecting the unblushing Texas perspective. In another chapter, Doyle describes several noteworthy slave escapes, although the extraordinary take-over of the *Amistad* is not included. His chapter on the Civil War describes many escapes on both sides, including several little known accounts of slaves helping Yankee prisoners escape back to their lines. World War I had its heroic escapes as did World War II, especially

in the European theater. Conditions were much worse in the camps controlled by the Japanese which, along with geography, greatly discouraged escapes. Doyle also includes a section on German prisoners who escaped from U.S. camps.

During the Korean War, Americans learned such terms as "Brainwashing" and "Turncoats," but Doyle's accounts of the many escape attempts make it clear these prisoners were no less courageous than their counterparts in earlier wars. Equally significant is Doyle's perceptive comment that "the lessons learned from Korean captivity implied that future hostilities in the Cold War would contain strong political issues for soldiers to come to terms with, from capture to repatriation." Americans learned about Vietnam War POWs primarily from the post-war memoirs of officers who were incarcerated in Hanoi. However, there were no successful escapes from the Hanoi Hilton, although, as Doyle tells us, there were from jungle camps. Doyle, who himself served as a naval officer in Vietnam, writes that our longest war did heighten "America's concern for its military prisoners in enemy hands." Doyle follows with a chapter on civilian hostages. His counter argument is that incidents such as the Iranian hostages and the many kidnappings in the Middle East indicated that cultural wars had replaced the shooting variety. Doyle concludes with a chapter on prison raids to free POWs. In spite of two successful liberations in the Philippines at the end of World War II, the success of such raids occurred much more frequently in the movies than in reality.

Doyle's *A Prisoner's Duty* is filled with provocative insights. Doyle rightly points out that "no one can determine beforehand who will or who will not become an escaper," although in our popular culture one can safely predict such heroes from the opening page or scene. Simply put, escapees seldom looked or acted like their Hollywood counterparts. Guilt was an important motivator for escapees who, if successful, could miti-

gate the opprobrium of having been captured. Doyle's many escapees also contradict those who insist Americans are much less likely to attempt an escape than other nationalities, such as the British in World War II or our United Nations allies in the Korean War. Finally, Doyle suggests civilians sentenced to prison because of a crime against society suffer "the same sense of isolation from society as do POWs." Of course, as he points out, the reasons for incarceration were vastly different.

Unfortunately, stories about daring escapes implicitly reflect adversely on those who choose to remain incarcerated. In truth, those staying put are not lesser human beings. An example Doyle himself introduces is David Westheimer, a former World War II POW who in 1964 wrote *Von Ryan's Express*, a novel, and later a movie, which like most POW stories, deals exclusively with escape. Doyle quotes Westheimer as saying, "Escape activities went on constantly," but Westheimer's explanation why he himself thought it foolish to escape is more telling:

I'd have loved to escape if it were handed to me on a platter but when it came to planning one I found the obstacles daunting....I didn't know where I was except that it was deep in enemy territory with no underground to help me, it was too cold to exist for long in open country, I was in the wrong uniform, and my German would never fool anyone. Maybe most important, when I was picked up, as I certainly would be, I'd have lost all the food and clothing I'd accumulated so painstakingly over the long months.

Westheimer's rationale for refusing to escape makes perfect sense, but such thinking does not produce national heroes. In truth, planning escapes was good therapy, but the actual escape was fraught with failure, danger, and possible recriminations against both the escaper and those left behind. Doyle, however, convincingly counters such thinking: "One perceptive truth overrides all other factors: rightly or wrongly, overcoming the fear

of death and conquering the uncertainty of prison life proved to be the most significant virtues of the committed escaper."

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