

A Prison Escape and Operations in Mississippi

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During the week of February 9- 15, 1864 about 100 Federal officers managed to escape from Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia, while in Mississippi William T. Sherman led an expedition to capture the town of Meridian.

Located along the James River, Libby was a warehouse appropriated by Confederate officials in July 1861 after the first battle of Manassas to house Union prisoners. Initially both officers and enlisted men were housed there, but the latter were soon transferred to Belle Isle and other facilities while Libby would exclusively hold Federal officers. The prisoners endured harsh conditions, though certainly not as extreme as those in other prisons such as Andersonville. During the winter of 1863-1864, Libby became extremely overcrowded, with more than 1,000 officers confined there. The captives, suffering from insufficient rations, clothing, and lack of heat, became increasingly desperate. These conditions would lead Colonel Thomas E. Rose of the 77th Pennsylvania and Major A.G. Hamilton of the 12th Kentucky regiments to devise a plan for the largest prison escape of the Civil War.

While escapes were common during the war, the escape from Libby Prison would be more complex and on a grander scale than most. Using only a pocketknife, some chisels, and a few other items, Rose directed the construction of a tunnel more than fifty feet in length that ended outside the walls of the prison. All the work had to be done at night to keep the Confederates from discovering the tunnel's location. After its completion, Rose chose the evening of February 9, 1864 for the attempt. On that night 109 Union officers utilized the tunnel to make their escape. Fifty-nine reached Federal lines, while 48 escapees were recaptured. Two

men drowned while attempting to cross the James River. The escape from Libby Prison was not only one of the largest attempts of its kind, it was also the most successful.

During this same week, the Meridian campaign was underway to the west in Mississippi. Though little remembered today, the campaign, conducted by forces commanded by General William T. Sherman, has been described as “the first concerted, organized effort at total warfare, wherein the military might of the North was launched against the will of the Southern people as well as military and transportation facilities.” Sherman’s hoped to destroy the railroads that intersected at Meridian, and to eliminate Confederate resistance in the area, thus allowing for a transfer of Union troops to Georgia for the upcoming Atlanta campaign. Sherman left Vicksburg on February 3 with two corps from the Army of the Tennessee. Another Federal force from Memphis, commanded by General William Smith, was to coordinate with Sherman, but Smith’s men were defeated by Confederate cavalry before reaching Meridian.

Meanwhile, a small rebel force under General Leonidas Polk attempted to defend Meridian, but it could do little but delay the Yankee advance. On February 13, Sherman reached the outskirts of the town. Polk withdrew what supplies he could and tried to obstruct the Union advance, but the Federals entered the town the following day. For the next six days the Federals ransacked Meridian, destroying bridges, storehouses, arsenals, and as much of the railroad lines as possible. Sherman had planned to continue his raid into Alabama, but because of the defeat of Smith’s forces, he ultimately decided to return to Vicksburg, which he reached on March 4. The Confederates repaired the damages to the railroads within a month, and Polk eventually moved his forces into Georgia to reinforce southern forces defending Atlanta. Sherman’s objectives had not been completely met, but the Meridian campaign served as a prelude to the Total War strategy he employed during the March to the Sea.