

Captain George Austin

Union Army Officer, 2nd Kentucky Infantry Volunteers and Prisoner of War

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Background

The Civil War began on April 10, 1861, when Brig. Gen. Beauregard, in command of the provisional Confederate forces at Charleston, South Carolina, demanded the surrender of the Union garrison of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Two months later, Colonel William E. Woodruff organized a volunteer regiment at Camp Clay, Pendleton, Ohio, just above Cincinnati on the north bank of the Ohio River. Although consisting primarily of Ohio recruits led by Kentucky officers, the unit was mustered into the Union service 13 June 1861 as the 2nd Kentucky Infantry Volunteers.

Traveling by steamer, the regiment left Cincinnati in early July for Guyandotte, Virginia (now West Virginia), traveled up Guyandotte river by flat boat reaching Camp Poco near where Scary Creek empties into the Kanawha River. On 17 July 1861, the regiment engaged Confederate forces led by Captain Jenkins, at which time, the regimental commander Col. Woodruff, his assistant Lt. Col. George W. Neff and the leader of Company B, Captain George Austin were captured and ultimately confined as prisoners of war in the Columbia Jail, Columbia, South Carolina.



Also roaming about Virginia at the time were the Virginia Rangers, civilian or partisan units, loosely sponsored by the Confederate Government, and whose purpose was supposed to harass Union forces using guerilla tactics. They were to organize themselves, elect their own officers, and submit affidavits for compensation of their expenses. Some groups were very effective, and some became common criminals, robbing friend and foe alike, producing such harsh criticism, that the Ranger act was repealed in 1864. However, not before General Sheridan was heard to say, “The crow that flies over the valley of Virginia must henceforth carry his rations with him.”

At some point, Union forces captured two Ranger officers, Captains Triplett and Spriggs. Since they were considered as outlaw civilians and not uniformed soldiers, they were tried for their crimes as civilians and not prisoners of war, and were scheduled to be executed, prompting a tug-of-war between Confederate and Union leaders reaching up to members of the U.S. Congress, the State and War Departments in Washington and Generals George B. McClellan and Robert E. Lee.

The Letters

The story unfolds from a series of letters that are published in “The War of the Rebellion - A compilation of Union and Confederate Armies” as assembled by the US War Dept. per the Hon.

Russell A. Alger, Sec'y of War, Washington DC, 1898 (Series II, Volumes 3 & 4). Brief excerpts follow:

4 Jan 1862, letter from Col. Woodruff to his Congressional representative Robert Mallory urging Mallory to work for his, Neff's and Austins release. Letter indicates that they were being held as hostages for the privateers Triplett and Spriggs.

15 Jan 1862, letter from William Seward (US Sec'y of State) to Major Gen. George B. McClellan asking his earliest attention to the fate of Captain George Austin, prisoner of war (apparently Mallory got things moving in Washington).

8 Feb 1862, letter from Col. Woodruff to Robert Mallory reminding him of their situation: "We are treated as felons, humiliated, degraded, yet no steps have been taken as we are aware to relieve us from the mortification and suffering we have been compelled to endure. As long as the privateers are held otherwise as prisoners of war there can be no possible chance for our release.

6 June 1862, letter from Major A. C. Godwin (Head of Confederate Military Prisons) to Brig. Gen. John H. Winder stating that Winder's order: "That two Captains to be selected by lot from the Federal Officers confined, to be held as hostages for two of our captains now in the hands of the enemy" was executed. Their names are Captains George Austin, Co. B, 2nd Kentucky Regiment Infantry and Timothy O'Meara, Co. E, Tammany Regiment, New York State Volunteers.

19 June 1862, letter from Gen. Robert E. Lee to Major Gen. George B. McClellan in its entirety: "GENERAL: I am directed by the Secretary of War to state that having been informed of the capture of Captains Spriggs and Triplett, of the Ranger Service of the State of Virginia, and of their intended execution by order of the United States Government, he has caused lots to be drawn from among US officers detained as prisoners of war for the purpose of selecting subjects for retaliation, and the that lots have fallen upon Captain George Austin and Captain Timothy O'Meara."

"It is the desire of the Confederate Government to conduct this war in conformity to the usages of Christian and civilized nations, but should he have been correctly informed and should Captains Spriggs and Triplett be executed, retaliation will be made on Captains Austin and O'Meara. This course will be demanded by due regard for the citizens of the Confederate States and will be unhesitatingly though reluctantly pursued."

"Not being certain of the correctness of the report no change has been made in the treatment of the hostages, and I shall be very happy to learn that the report is without foundation."

22 July 1862. letter from George Austin to J. A. Cravens, Member of Congress (who later forwarded it to E. M. Stanton, Sec'y of War) stating that he had been informed that the two governments had agreed on a general exchange of prisoners, but to continue to hold four hostages until the US delivers or gives notice of their intent to cooperate in regard to the Ranger Captains. Austin writes, "I do not fancy the idea of staying here and never did admire the position that I have been filling for over twelve months here in the South."

30 September 1862, General Order #147, US War Dept., Adjutant General's Office, Washington, DC: The following lists of officers of the US Service who have been exchanged as prisoners of war taken in arms against the United States are published for the information of all concerned (partial list quoted here):

Captain George Austin for Captain S. M. Somers
Captain T. O. O'Meara for Captain James Vance

Lt. Colonel G. W. Neff for (not stated)
(Colonel William E. Woodruff was not listed on this list, perhaps exchanged earlier).

Who was George Austin?

He was obviously educated. He was mustered into the Army 12 May 1861 as a 1st Lieutenant, and promoted one month later to Captain. The last record of his presence is late 1862 where he is serving as Acting Assistant Adjutant General under Colonel William E. Woodruff, commander of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, Right Wing of the Army of the Cumberland under Major Gen. William S. Rosecrans. There are Austins listed in the applicable censuses and city directories for Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, states that provided units for this Army, but these men are tradesmen, farmers, and laborers. The records of the Army of the Cumberland were perused with no further mention of Austin or possibly his premature death resulting from his service during the balance of the war, and he was not in attendance at the Chicago reunion of the Army of the Cumberland held December 15 and 16, 1868.