

Firing Into Prisoner Tents

The hatred instilled in black troops against their former white neighbors in the South became deadly; it would continue in Reconstruction as the victorious Republican party needed black political dominance to remain in power. Below, this shooting of unarmed prisoners was no doubt a contributing factor in the higher percentage of Confederate deaths in Northern prison camps.

Bernhard Thuersam, Director
Cape Fear Historical Institute

Firing Into Prisoner Tents:

“As a general rule, the treatment by the white soldiers was not so bad, and it would have been much better, no doubt, had it not been for the cruel policy of the United States Government, and the stringent orders to have that policy carried out. The colored troops were very harsh in their treatment of us, and they we no doubt urged to do this by their officers, who were certainly the meanest set of white men that could be found anywhere. The Negroes never let an opportunity pass to show their animosity and hatred towards us, and the man who shot a Rebel was regarded as a good soldier. They carried their authority to the extreme, and would shoot upon the slightest provocation.

If a prisoner happened to violate even one of the simplest regulations, he was sure to be shot at, and should he be so unfortunate as to turn over in his sleep, groan, or make any noise, which some were apt to do while sleeping, the tent in which he lay would be fired into. For instance, one night in Company G, Fourth division, some one happened to groan in his sleep. The Negro patrol was near, heard it, and fired into the tent, killing two and wounding several others. These were killed while sleeping and were unconscious of having committed any offence whatever. None of these patrols were punished, but were praised for vigilance.

Scores of incidents, similar in character and result, might be given...Suffice it to say that a man’s life was in more danger than upon a picket line, for he was completely at the mercy of the cruel and malignant Negro soldiery. Shooting into the tents of prisoners became so common that the officers of the white regiments protested at last against their (the colored troops) being allowed in camp, and accordingly they were withdrawn at night, and white patrols substituted.”

(Southern Historical Society Papers, Prison Experience (Point Lookout), James T. Wells, Volume VII, pp. 397-398)