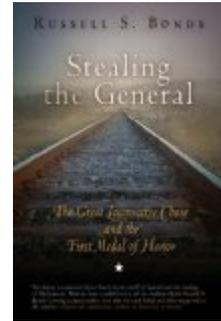


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Russell S. Bonds. *Stealing the General: The Great Locomotive Chase and the First Medal of Honor*. Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2007. xvii + 438 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59416-033-2.

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A Raid and a Race

In April 1862, James J. Andrews led nineteen Union soldiers into northern Georgia. Their mission was to destroy the Western & Atlantic railroad running from Atlanta to Chattanooga as well as telegraph lines and bridges. The means by which they would attempt to accomplish the feat was a Confederate steam locomotive, the “General.” If successful, Chattanooga, the railway center of the Confederacy, would be isolated from receiving supplies and reinforcements, making it untenable. If unsuccessful, the Northern volunteers would be executed as spies since they would be wearing civilian clothes. It was a daring adventure, the stuff of movies and legend.

Author Russell S. Bonds grew up in Marietta, just a few blocks from the spot where Andrews and his men stole the “General” and three boxcars. He is an attorney with Coca-Cola, but he writes as a historian, with one eye toward factual detail—sometimes bordering on the tedious—and the other toward writing a suspenseful work of fiction, though his tale is a true one. Although his story is well known, Bonds contends that many Civil War historians gloss over or even omit the raid from publications, perhaps due to its ultimate failure. *Stealing the General* is his attempt to provide an accurate account of the incident as well as its ultimate legacy, the awarding of the first Congressional Medal of Honor.

Rather than seize the train in Atlanta, Andrews’s plan called for his men, traveling in small groups dressed as civilians, disguising their Northern accents and trying to seem uneducated to avoid suspicion, to meet in Marietta, twenty miles to the north. When the “General” made

a breakfast stop at Big Shanty (Kennesaw) on April 12, Andrews and his raiders quietly took possession of the empty train and steamed off, despite the presence of Confederate soldiers and civilians nearby. Train conductor William Fuller gave chase on foot and handcar until he reached another train, the “Yonah,” whereupon he chased Andrews another thirty miles to Kingston. In Kingston, Fuller boarded a second train, the “William R. Smith,” to continue the chase until broken tracks forced him to once again travel by foot until he found the “Texas.”

But the “Texas” was headed south rather than north. Undeterred, Fuller gave chase in reverse. When Andrews realized that Fuller was continuing his pursuit, despite the numerous obstacles his Union soldiers placed in the way, Andrews decided not to stop along the Western & Atlantic line to destroy tracks and telegraph lines, or take on wood and water, which led to the “General” running out of steam north of Ringgold, GA, just a few miles south of Chattanooga. The raiders then scattered into the woods, but eventually all were captured, including two who overslept that morning in Marietta and missed all of the excitement.

Andrews was quickly tried as a Union spy in Chattanooga, found guilty, and executed on June 7, 1862 in Atlanta (the threat of Union troops moving toward Chattanooga forced his removal southward). Less than two weeks later, seven other raiders were hanged as spies. Several of the raiders made a remarkable jail escape into Union lines and the remainder were exchanged as prisoners of war in March 1863.

The daring plan, its implementation, and the subsequent chase and capture of the raiders comprise only half of the book. The remainder is devoted to the various trials, executions, escapes, and exchange of the raiders. Arguably, the most important aspect of *Stealing the General* is the story surrounding the awarding of the Medal of Honor. On July 12, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law a bill recognizing noncommissioned officers and privates who distinguished themselves in action. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton awarded the first Medals of Honor to six of raiders in March of 1863. In all, nineteen of the raiders were eventual recipients, but Andrews and William Campbell were ineligible since they were civilians. Two of the raiders, Perry Shadrach and George Wilson, both of whom were hanged in June 1862, never received the honor, though efforts are underway currently to secure a posthumous award for each man.

Bonds sets the stage for the raid with a good summary of the military situation in the western theater of the Civil War from the fall of 1861 through the following spring. He also provides excellent capsule biographies of

the raiders, complete with photographs of each, as well as a detailed map of the chase. He correctly cites the tremendous disadvantage of the Confederacy in terms of railroads, making it all the more important that it maintain control of its lines and trains. Andrews is portrayed as a quiet but effective leader who actually possessed no military training; he was best known as a smuggler of quinine prior to his raid.

This fascinating story is not new, however. In fact, many Americans were first introduced to Andrews's raiders in the 1927 silent movie classic "The General," starring Buster Keaton. The story was remade by Walt Disney in 1956 as a film entitled "The Great Locomotive Chase," featuring Fess Parker. Both depictions were filled with errors, in part due to "dramatic license" as well as exaggerations and faulty memories on the part of the surviving participants. Russell Bonds has ensured that such mistakes will never again be repeated and the story of one of the most daring, if unsuccessful, raids of the Civil War will no longer be overlooked.

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