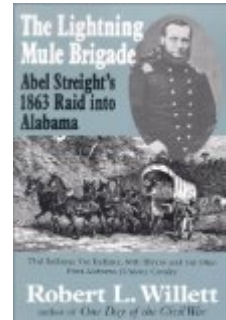


Robert L. Willett, Jr.. *The Lightning Mule Brigade: Abel Streight's 1863 Raid into Alabama.* Carmel: Guild Press of Indiana, 1999. 232 pp. \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-57860-025-0.



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Robert L. Willett's *The Lightning Mule Brigade* is the first book-length treatment of Indiana Colonel Abel D. Streight's Independent Provisional Brigade and its three-week raid in spring 1863 through Northern Alabama to Rome, Georgia. The raid, the goal of which was to cut Confederate railroad lines between Atlanta and Chattanooga, was, in Willett's words, a "tragi-comic war episode" (8). The comic aspects stemmed from the fact that the raiding force was largely infantry, mounted not on horses but on fractious mules, anything but lightning-like, justified by military authorities as necessary to take it through the Alabama mountains.

Willett's well-written and often moving narrative shifts between the forces of the two Union commanders (Streight and Brig. Gen. Grenville Dodge) and two Confederate commanders (Col. Phillip Roddey and Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest) who were central to the story, staying in one camp for a while, then moving to another. The result is a highly textured and complex, but enjoyable, narrative.

Abel Streight, who had no formal military training, was proprietor of the Railroad City Publishing Company and the New Lumber Yard in Indianapolis when the war began. Originally a New Yorker, he was a staunch Republican and the author of an abolitionist tract published in 1861. Willett describes him as an "aggressive, impatient, restless man" (18); his dogged determination and initiative were his strongest qualities. Before the raid, Streight had been commander of Camp Morton for several months, then was commissioned as colonel of the 51st Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment. The 51st participated in the siege of Corinth and the Battle of Stones River, and Streight was garrisoned in Northern Alabama in July 1862, where he had helped Alabama mountain Unionists join Northern forces. Sent home to Indianapolis in January 1863 to recuperate from a condition described as "congestion of the cerebellum" (11), he conceived and successfully lobbied the idea of a raid that would rely, at least in part, on the perceived Unionism of these mountain folk.

Streight's brigade had only two companies of cavalry troops in it (belonging to the 1st West Tennessee/Alabama Cavalry, containing Southern Unionists). Its other units were midwestern infantry regiments: the 3rd Ohio, 51st Indiana, 73rd Illinois, and 80th Illinois. Brig. Gen. Grenville Dodge, commanding the Department of Corinth, was given orders to screen Streight's movement, allowing him to reach Rome unscathed. (Dodge failed, declaring his own success too soon.) Opposing them were Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest's Cavalry Division and Col. Philip Roddey's independent cavalry command, both part of Bragg's Army of Tennessee. Although the Union forces outnumbered the Confederates, it was clear that they were no match for the likes of the illustrious (or notorious) Forrest in the cat-and-mouse game that pitted veteran Southern cavalry in pursuit of Union troops mounted on mules across Alabama hills.

Streight was troubled from the beginning by the unhealthy, noisy, and difficult mules; delays; miscommunications with Dodge; and poor intelligence that almost always made the Confederate forces seem larger than they really were. He also assumed, incorrectly, that Unionist sympathizers in the hills and mountains of northern Alabama would supply horses to replace the mules when he reached them. Still, Willett credits Streight with a fair degree of innate military skill, and argues that in part, at least, the failure of the mission was due as much to Streight's poor luck as to Forrest's military superiority. In particular, the timely aid given to Forrest by a young Southern civilian, Emma Sansom, and the Paul Revere-like 67-mile ride of John Wisdom from Gadsden, Alabama, to Rome, Georgia, to warn the Romans of Streight's approach, are seen as significant pieces of the train of events that spelled Streight's doom. After several forced night marches and clashes with Forrest, Streight and his exhausted men surrendered on May 3, 1863, to what they thought was a significantly superior force-but which actually was only Forrest circling his small artillery

force around a hill in the distance to make it appear larger than it was.

Willett places Streight's raid in the context of other Union raids in spring 1863, and in particular compares it to Illinois Colonel Benjamin Grierson's successful raid from Tennessee to Baton Rouge. Ironically, though Streight's raid was a failure, Willett argues that it aided in Grierson's success by diverting attention from Grierson's path. Willett does not end his narrative with Streight's surrender, but follows the officers to Richmond's Libby Prison, where Streight and others were able to escape in 1864. The dogged determination that characterized Streight in the raid that bears his name was evident in his escape as well.

The narrative occasionally suffers from sections strung together with long quotations from other primary and secondary sources (chapter 14, pages 155-159, is an example). Given Willett's ability to create an interesting narrative in his own words, it is difficult to justify this practice. The book is based upon research in libraries and archives, but it is geared more toward the Civil War enthusiast than the scholar. Indeed, scholars may find unusual certain practices like using incomplete citations for articles in the bibliography, an idiosyncratic division of bibliographic sources, and placing quotes from original unpublished accounts and "on-the-spot" newspaper accounts in italics (announced on p. 10). Still, the work has plenty of positives going for it: a clear and exciting narrative; and interesting character vignettes, not only of the principals in the drama, but of many others, otherwise anonymous. The maps by Richard Day are excellent. Willett, whose previous work *One Day of the Civil War: America in Conflict, April 10, 1863* (1998), was well received, has followed it with this engaging story of a little-known episode of the Civil War, one in which Hoosier Abel Streight almost succeeded in the daring if ultimately doomed "lightning mule" raid.

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