

Record Traffic From The Past

by
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Few commanders have had a communicator quite like the remarkable man GEN John Hunt Morgan had on his staff. George A. Ellsworth was a highly talented telegrapher with a keen mind and an outstanding sense of humor. The men who rode with Ellsworth describe him as "an incredible telegrapher," "a wizard," and "that prankish spirit of the brigade whose malicious military comedy was to cause havoc in Northern headquarters."

Ellsworth was a telegrapher in the Confederate States Army in 1862. His usual facial expression was the solemn, tragic mask of the great comedian. He enjoyed the fast-moving life and excitement of riding with Morgan's cavalry as their communicator. Ellsworth wore a pair of Navy pistols, and he definitely had the audacity, courage, and daring which were requisites of a good cavalryman. His audacity was often displayed in his work as a communicator.

The nickname, Lightning, was given to Ellsworth on July 8, 1862, as he was intercepting enemy traffic at Horse Cave, KY. While Ellsworth was copying information about Union forces in the area, a violent summer thunderstorm broke, and when lightning began running in on the wires, it amazed the soldiers to see Ellsworth calmly sitting at his telegraph key with the lightning arcing and crackling around him. Watching the lightning playing around Ellsworth, a wide-eyed trooper exclaimed, "Old Lightning himself!"

Lightning's skill provided Morgan with timely, accurate intelligence about his enemy, thus enabling Morgan to "see the battle." Ellsworth's incredible ability to perfectly imitate the "fist" of other telegraph operators gave Morgan the opportunity to completely deceive the Union forces to the extent that he, in the name of Union commanders, was able to order their troop movements! The tactical situation dictated how Morgan would make use of his communicator's talent.

An example of Lightning Ellsworth's brilliancy at imitative deception was demonstrated on July 15, 1862, at Midway, KY. Morgan's men had ridden into the little town



on the Louisville & Lexington Railroad at about noon, and while the troopers were capturing the Union garrison of 70 men, Ellsworth, with his deadpan expression and Navy pistols, captured the Midway telegraph operator.

The intelligence gathered was not welcome news—one strong force of Union soldiers was moving out from Frankfort, northwest of Midway, a second force was poised at Lexington, to the southeast, a third force was at Cynthiana, northeast of Midway, and a fourth was at Paris, to the east. The clicking telegraph key spelled out messages that said the Union commanders in Kentucky knew Morgan's exact strength, his location, and his direction of movement, and that they were planning to surround him at Midway. Lightning Ellsworth's quick thinking and actions were instrumental in getting the rebels out of the situation, and he described what he did like this:

"At this place I surprised the operator, who was quietly sitting on the platform in front of his office, enjoying himself hugely. Little did he suspect that the much-dreaded Morgan was in his vicinity. I demanded of him to call Lexington and inquire the time of day, which he did. This I did for the purpose of getting his style of handling the 'key' in writing dispatches. My first impression of his style, from noting the paper in the instrument, was confirmed. He was, to use a telegraphic term, a 'plug' operator. I adopted his style of telegraphing, and commenced operations. In the office I found a signal book, which proved very useful. It contained

the calls of all the offices. Dispatch after dispatch was going to and from Lexington, Paris, Georgetown, and Frankfort, all containing something in reference to Morgan.

"I discovered that there were two wires on the line along the railroad. One was what we termed a 'through wire,' running direct from Lexington to Frankfort and not entering any of the way offices. I found that all military messages were sent over that line. As it did not enter the Midway office, I ordered it to be cut, thus forcing Lexington on to the wire that did run through the office. I tested the line and found, by applying the ground wire, it made no difference with the circuit; and, as Lexington was headquarters, I cut Frankfort off. Midway was called, I answered, and received the following:

MIDWAY, JULY 15, 1862.

TO J.W. WOOLUNG, OPERATOR, MIDWAY:

WILL THERE BE ANY DANGER IN COMING TO MIDWAY? IS EVERYTHING SOUND?

TAYLOR, CONDUCTOR.

"I inquired of my prisoner (the operator) if he knew a man by the name of Taylor. He said Taylor was the conductor. I immediately gave Taylor the following reply:

MIDWAY, JULY 15, 1862.

TO TAYLOR, LEXINGTON:

ALL RIGHT; COME ON. NO SIGN OF ANY REBELS HERE.

WOOLUNG.

"The operator in Cincinnati then called Frankfort. I answered and received about a dozen unimportant dispatches. He had no sooner finished than Lexington called Frankfort. Again I answered, and received the following message:

LEXINGTON, JULY 15, 1862.

TO GENERAL FINNELL, FRANKFORT:

I WISH TO MOVE THE FORCES AT FRANKFORT, ON THE LINE OF THE LEXINGTON RAILROAD, IMMEDIATELY, AND HAVE THE CARS FOLLOW AND TAKE THEM UP AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. FURTHER ORDERS WILL AWAIT THEM AT MIDWAY. I WILL, IN THREE OR FOUR HOURS, MOVE FORWARD ON THE GEORGETOWN PIKE; WILL HAVE MOST OF MY MEN MOUNTED. MORGAN LEFT VERSAILLES THIS MORNING WITH EIGHT HUNDRED AND FIFTY MEN, ON THE MIDWAY ROAD, MOVING IN THE DIRECTION OF GEORGETOWN.

BRIGADIER GENERAL WARD.

"This being our position and intention exactly, it was thought proper to throw BG Ward on some other track. So, in the course of half an hour, I manufactured and sent the following dispatch, which was approved by GEN Morgan:

MIDWAY, JULY 15, 1862.

TO BRIGADIER GENERAL WARD, LEXINGTON:

MORGAN, WITH UPWARD OF 1,000 MEN, CAME WITHIN A MILE OF HERE, AND TOOK THE OLD FRANKFORT ROAD, MARCHING, WE SUPPOSE, FOR FRANKFORT. THIS IS RELIABLE.

WOOLUNG, OPERATOR.

"In about 10 minutes Lexington again called Frankfort, when I received the following:

LEXINGTON, JULY 15, 1862.

TO GENERAL FINNELL, FRANKFORT:

MORGAN, WITH MORE THAN 1,000 MEN, CAME WITHIN A MILE OF HERE, AND TOOK THE OLD FRANKFORT ROAD. THIS DISPATCH RECEIVED FROM MIDWAY, AND IS RELIABLE. THE REGIMENT FROM FRANKFORT HAD BETTER BE RECALLED.

BRIGADIER GENERAL WARD.

"I received for this message and again manufactured a message to confirm the information BG Ward received from Midway, and not knowing the tariff from Frankfort to Lexington, I could not send a formal message; so, appearing greatly agitated, I waited until the circuit was occupied and broke in, telling them to wait a minute, and commenced calling Lexington. He answered with as much gusto as it called him. I telegraphed as follows:

FRANKFORT TO LEXINGTON:

TELL GENERAL WARD OUR PICKETS ARE JUST DRIVEN IN. GREAT EXCITEMENT. PICKETS SAY THE FORCE OF THE ENEMY MUST BE 2,000.

OPERATOR.

"It was now 2 p.m., and GEN Morgan wished to be off for Georgetown. I ran a secret ground connection and opened the circuit on the Lexington end. This was to leave the impression that the Frankfort operator was skedaddling, or that Morgan's men had destroyed the telegraph."

While the Union commander concentrated on Frankfort, Morgan's men leisurely moved eastward to Georgetown. Later, on July 21, 1862, as he was leaving Kentucky, Morgan had Ellsworth send a jeering message to BG Jeremiah T. Boyle. The message read: "Good morning, Jerry. This telegraph is a great institution. You should destroy it as it keeps me posted too well. My friend Ellsworth has all your dispatches since July 10 on file. Do you want copies?"