

Episode 126: The Army of the Potomac is Humiliated by the Capture of General E.H. Stoughton and His Entire Staff at Fairfax Court House

Week of March 3- March 9, 1863

On the evening of Sunday, March 8, 1863, Confederate Brigadier General John Singleton Mosby and 29 of his Partisan Rangers set off to Fairfax Court House for a raid on Union forces quartered there. It was a frosty, pitch black night and the Rangers were able to slip past the Union pickets who were huddled around fires. Mosby wrote after the war:

“We passed along close by the campfires, but the sentinels took us for a scouting party of their own cavalry. I felt cold in the early part of the night but my blood grew very warm as we got further into the Yankee lines.”

Mosby captured several prisoners who told him that Union General Edwin H. Stoughton was camped nearby with his staff. Historian Amanda Foreman wrote:

“The twenty-five-year-old Stoughton was famous for his unlikely promotion as he was for his high living. He should not have been in Fairfax at all, since his brigade was five miles away, but the general liked his independence. The two-story brick house that served as his headquarters was never empty or silent. Unable to resist the challenge, Mosby tricked his way inside by claiming to have a dispatch from the 5th New York Cavalry. He then grabbed the surprised Union officer, ‘whispered my name in his ear, and told him to take me to General Stoughton’s room. Resistance was useless and he obeyed.’ Stoughton was sleeping off a rowdy night. Mosby woke him by spanking his bottom. ‘He asked in an indignant tone what all this meant. I told him he was a prisoner, and that he must get up quickly and dress. I then asked him if he had ever heard of ‘Mosby,’ and he said he had. ‘I am Mosby,’ I said.”

Stoughton insisted he be allowed sufficient time to dress appropriately for his rank, which required nearly an hour. Mosby spent this time ransacking the headquarters and taking other prisoners. When they finally left Mosby had secured the following loot: one Confederate general, three majors, 2 captains, 26 other soldiers, 58 high quality horses and assorted arms and equipment. General Stoughton was irate when he discovered he would ride the 25 miles back to the Confederate lines bare back on a poor, bony old horse, over very rough roads.

An article in the Richmond Dispatch newspaper on March 13, 1863 noted:

“When the raiding party, with captives and loot, arrived at Richmond, the 26 enlisted prisoners were taken to Libby Prison; but the officers, including General Stoughton, were allowed to retire to the Ballard Hotel for the night. The fact of their being given accommodations at the plush hotel being made known to the commander of Libby Prison, at a late hour of the night, they were removed from there, much against their will, and placed in the Libby Prison with their comrades. The contrast between the luxurious beds of the Ballard Hotel and the unheated floors of the Libby Prison was marked indeed, and did not fail to excite dismal forebodings in the minds of the imprisoned Yankees.”

It is reported that President Abraham Lincoln laughed when he heard about General Stoughton’s capture, joking, “I can make a new general in five minutes, but those horses cost one hundred and twenty-five dollars apiece!”

A chagrined North and a jubilant South saw this adventure in different lights.