

Lightning Ellsworth

After I graduated Navy Basic Training and my Radarman School I was sent to the USS Pratt and promptly seated in front of a radio speaker. A pen was placed in my hand and a green logbook on the table and I was told to write down everything I heard. As I sat there writing furiously, I was informed that I might hear a distress call and so everything must be accurate.

As I manned my post I was also introduced to the concept of disinformation, the idea of using a radio net to confuse the enemy and make them do the things you want them to do by giving them false information. I was taught to listen for subtle clues in transmissions that might let us know that something was amiss. I also learned about the career of Lightning Ellsworth.

During the War Between the States lived a young 19-year-old man from Canada named George A. Ellsworth. He was an avid fan of the telegraph and went to the Morse School to get his training. He worked for a time as a telegraph operator in Lexington, Kentucky where he first met future Confederate General John Hunt Morgan. In 1860 he moved to Houston Texas.

When the Civil War began in the following year, Morgan conceived the idea of using the telegraph to send disinformation to the enemy. Realizing that Ellsworth was perfect for the job, he asked him to join him. Ellsworth accepted and enlisted in Morgan's 2nd Kentucky Cavalry Regiment at Chattanooga, Tennessee.

On the night of July 9, 1862, during Morgan's "First Kentucky Raid," the command went into camp within a few miles of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, about 90 miles due south of the city of Louisville. Morgan took a small group of men, including Pvt. Ellsworth, and located telegraph lines near the village of Horse Cave to intercept messages. A heavy lightning and thunderstorm ensued, making the receiving and sending of messages difficult. Ellsworth completed his duties despite the weather, sending false messages to aid Morgan. Because he handled the telegraph that stormy night, Ellsworth was given the nicknames of "Captain Lightning" or "Morgan's Lightning."

The following day, Morgan promoted Ellsworth to Captain. Armed with his pocket telegraph, Ellsworth intercepted federal telegrams, sent false orders, and provided incorrect information regarding the location and strength of Morgan's command. Ellsworth filed an official report about the Raid on July 16, describing in some detail how he manipulated messages using a pocket instrument which

could be connected to live wires at any point along the telegraphic lines. He signed the report as “General Superintendent Confederate States Telegraph Department”.

The press picked up the report, and it spread like wildfire through newspapers North and South, and also in England. Some newspapers highlighted the novel use of the telegraph as a weapon of war. *The Standard* of London headlined Ellsworth’s report “Extraordinary Telegraphic Strategy—A Curious Chapter in the History of the War.” *The Examiner* of London complimented Ellsworth as “a gentleman of lively imagination” in its report headlined “Tapping the Telegraph.” The *Atlanta Confederacy* heaped praise on Ellsworth: “His feats in telegraphing,” reported the newspaper, “are among the most extraordinary of the age.” The *Confederacy* added, perhaps the ultimate compliment when it embraced Ellsworth as an honorary son of the South: “Captain E is a Canadian by birth, but an ardent, whole-souled Southerner in his feelings.”

Union telegraphers eventually caught up with Ellsworth’s pioneer efforts and struck back with their own attacks, and the use of cipher telegrams, to protect lines of communication. Although the art of cryptography was not new—it had existed since times of antiquity for entertainment, political and military purposes—Ellsworth can be fairly recognized as a prominent name in Confederate military counterintelligence.

Ellsworth returned to his civilian occupation as a telegrapher at Western Union in Cincinnati. One of his fellow operators happened to be 18-year-old Thomas A. Edison, at the beginning of his career. In a 1929 biographical sketch of those early days, author Frank L. Dyer noted, “Edison says that while apparently a quiet man in bearing, Ellsworth, after the excitement of fighting, found the tameness of a telegraph office obnoxious.”

Ellsworth died of a heart attack, on Nov. 28, 1899, while working at a telegraph machine. A conductor discovered his lifeless body in a chair with his hand still upon the telegraph key.

(Many thanks to Stephen E. Towne's article: "The Adventures of Lightning Ellsworth" printed in the New York Times on 23 December 2012.)