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A Dagger Through the Heartland: The Louisville & Nashville Railroad in the Civil War

Abstract

The Civil War was a defining moment in American history. What began as a sectional debate over states' rights transformed itself into a bloody odyssey that would alter the national character itself. Within the wide scope of this conflict, scholars have sought to answer the multifaceted question of how the Union triumphed, often citing the proficient management of the railways as a key contribution to victory. Within this logistical network of rails, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad served as a vital mode of transportation for supplies and troop mobility through the heartland states of Kentucky and Tennessee. The Union exploited this advantage, thus making the Louisville & Nashville Railroad a case study in the field of Military History of successful: defensive strategy, offensive strategy, tactical efficiency and establishment of secure logistical lines. Doing so helped them secure the strategically important border state of Kentucky, which in turn became a launching pad into Tennessee and ultimately, the Deep South itself. Hence, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad significantly helped the Union win the Civil War.

Keywords

Civil War, Railroads, Railroads in the Civil War, Louisville-Nashville Railroad

A DAGGER THROUGH THE HEARTLAND: THE LOUISVILLE & NASHVILLE RAILROAD IN THE CIVIL WAR

Gared N. Dalton

Historians have long debated whether the Civil War was an old-fashioned or modern war, and with both sides offering convincing evidence, it makes this historiographical issue both arcane and, in some instances, irrelevant. But when the issues include the use of railroads by the Union military, one can only be left with the impression that if the Civil War was not a modern one in all aspects, it certainly was in the aspect of the North's skillful implementation of railways to overcome their strategic disadvantage of fighting a war by means of exterior lines.¹ One of the best examples of the Union's innovative use of an existing railroad was its efficient and highly effective control of the Louisville and Nashville (L&N) railroad in Kentucky and Tennessee for most of the war.

The North's control of the L&N reflected a profound understanding by its military leaders for synchronizing already existing railroads into a matrix for the transportation of troops, supplies, wounded soldiers, and rapid deployment

¹ Gary Gallagher, Introduction, *Victory Rode the Rails: The Strategic Place of Railroads in the Civil War*, ed. George Turner (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1953).

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in response to the ever-changing battlespace.² In comparison, the South's railway system was in utter disarray, plagued with railways unlinked with others and incompatible rail gauges, all of which created a logistical nightmare.³ Within this logistical network of rails and spikes, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad served as a vital vein into the heartland of the Confederacy to be exploited by the Union. Thus, it ensured a Northern victory over its Southern aggressor by becoming a dagger that drove straight into the Confederate heartland. This allowed the Union to establish a reliable line of communication as well as transport men and war materials directly toward the heartland front, spanning from western Kentucky to eastern Tennessee, and, later in the war, it played a key role in the Chattanooga and Atlanta campaigns.⁴ Running between the title cities of Louisville, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee, the L&N benefited the Union by providing a logistical route in a geographic area that lacked navigable rivers.⁵ Furthermore, the L&N was easily put into use by the Union because they were the same gauge as the Northern standard.⁶

² William Thomas, *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 149.

³ Steven Woodworth, *This Great Struggle: America's Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2012), 223-224.

⁴ John Clark, *Railroads in the Civil War: The Impact of Management on Victory and Defeat* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 34.

⁵ R. S. Cotterill, "The Louisville and Nashville Railroad 1861-1865", *American Historical Review* 29 no. 4 (July 1924), 700.

⁶ Clark, *Railroads in the Civil War*, 150-151.

At the outbreak of the war, the L&N became a contentious vital resource, eyed by both the Union and Confederacy for its military potential. The Commonwealth of Kentucky, however, decided to declare neutrality in the war and remain in the Union. That neutrality ended when the Confederate forces invaded the state, prompting the Union command to send troops into the Northwestern portion of Kentucky. In autumn of 1861, the Confederates established a long and fragile battle line that extended from a left flank of Columbus to a right flank near Mill Springs, supported by a bastion in the center, Bowling Green, which they quickly began to fortify in anticipation of a Union response.⁷ For a short time, the L&N was partially in the hands of both sides.⁸ Breaking this line, the Union first attacked (and defeated) the Confederates at Mill Springs in January of 1862, obliterating their right flank. Then, a month later, General Grant eradicated the Confederate left flank by attacking Corinth and subsequently securing Forts Henry and Donelson in Northwestern Tennessee.⁹ With the successful attacks on the Confederate flanks, the Union forces then positioned themselves to secure the bastion of the Confederate line, Bowling Green.

⁷ George Turner, *Victory Rode the Rails: The Strategic Place of the Railroads in the Civil War*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: Bison Books, 1953), 100-101.

⁸ Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company Yearly Report, June 30, 1862, in Joseph Kerr, *Historical Development of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad System*, January 1926, Kentucky Museum Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 20.

⁹ Woodworth, *This Great Struggle*, 89.

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Continuing the Union momentum, General Buell implemented the L&N to maneuver his troops toward Bowling Green in hopes of breaking the crumbling Confederate grip upon Kentucky.¹⁰ Recognizing the inevitable, Confederate General Johnston retreated from Bowling Green and took up a new position at a rail hub in Corinth, Tennessee. With General Buell subsequently occupying Bowling Green, Kentucky and Gallatin, Tennessee, the Confederate hold on Kentucky was lost. When Nashville fell to Union forces on February 25th, every mile of the L&N belonged to the Union military, which meant the North now held a major transportation and industrial center they could use to strike deeper into the Confederacy.¹¹

While occupying Nashville, the army under the command of General Buell also became “wholly dependent” upon the L&N for supplies.¹² Every bullet, black powder canister, food ration and medicinal instrument for the entire Army of the Ohio could now be expediently transported on the L&N. Even the letters from soldiers, the only connection that could soften the hard life as a soldier, could ride from Nashville to Louisville and find their way to their Northern recipient.¹³ Because of the Union victories in Kentucky and

¹⁰ Turner, *Victory Rode the Rails*, 116.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹² General Buell, December 18, 1862 in the U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1 vol. 16, 158. Hereafter cited as *O.R.* All references are to Series 1.

¹³ Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 94.

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Tennessee, the L&N was a reliable logistical source for their forces. However, as General Buell would discover, there were risks involved when relying upon one logistical resource.

The Confederacy, however, decided it had surrendered too much ground and chose to counter the Union advances by launching their Heartland Offensive in mid-1862. Doing so would demonstrate how vital the L&N truly was for Union as it had become the sturdy backbone that helped halt the Confederate campaign. As the Union was securing its grip upon the L&N railway, Confederate forces employed Colonel John Hunt Morgan and his raiders to sabotage the Union's vital supply line. One of the earliest attacks upon the L&N occurred in May of 1862, when Morgan's raiders attempted to free Confederate prisoners of war aboard a northbound train near Cave City, Kentucky. Not being able to obtain their goal, the raiders sufficed their expedition by capturing a passenger train and successfully burning forty-five freight cars and blowing up the locomotive.¹⁴

Tirelessly, the Confederacy persisted in its attempts to wreak havoc along the L&N, hoping for enough success to render the railroad virtually unusable as a secure resource, but Union authorities were determined to keep trains running along the L&N. In a report to President Lincoln alerting him of Morgan's entrance into Kentucky, Tennessee's Military Governor Andrew Johnson concluded that the Louisville-

¹⁴ Report of H.W. Stager, telegraph operator, May 11, 1862 in O.R. 10:891.

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Nashville railway was the main target of these raids and “should be protected by all means.”¹⁵ For the remainder of 1862, the L&N would serve as both a vital asset to the Union to counter the Confederate Offensive and as a strategic target for the Confederacy.

But this was no simple task for Union generals. Between July 1861 and June 1862, damages caused by Confederate raids resulted in a total of sixteen locomotives lost or damaged, 142 box cars destroyed, and a multitude of flatbeds, coal cars, and passenger cars put out of commission.¹⁶ In 1862, Morgan continued to plague the L&N with attacks along the line. His successful raids served as a template for future raids, but were most effective in this time frame due to the less than adequate defenses of the railroad. In August of 1862, he attacked Gallatin, Tennessee and disrupted communications between Louisville and Nashville by destroying a bridge and a locomotive attached to numerous cars.¹⁷ His raiders also made rail tunnels around Gallatin nearly impassible, hoping to cripple Buell’s supply line for weeks, if not months.¹⁸ Doing so would, they hoped, stall the Union advance through Tennessee and force the Union army to address their supply lines. A few days later, after Union troops repaired the railway, Morgan’s men then cut the telegraph wires, alienating General Buell’s army in

¹⁵ Andrew Johnson to Abraham Lincoln, July 10, 1862, in O.R. 16:188.

¹⁶ Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company Yearly Report, June 30, 1862, in Kerr, *Historical Development*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ Robert Mackey, *The Uncivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861-1865* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 136.

Nashville with no means of communicating with other Union armies in the field or with the War Department in Washington.¹⁹

The continual assaults upon the railway showed Morgan's ingenious tactical technique: by implementing his cavalry in swift raids and striking at various locations without warning, he baffled the Union commanders, leaving them to question how they could defend their strategic railroad. Capture was merely an appealing, yet allusive, idea, and the cavalry that would be required to adequately chase and destroy Morgan's force was unavailable. To deter attacks, General Buell scattered small detachments of troops along the railroad.²⁰ Enough to deter Morgan from striking defended locations, his forces focused instead on weakly held, or undefended, sections of the railroad. But the Union, heavily reliant upon the L&N, would be forced to repair whatever damages Morgan's forces inflicted. In September 1862, when Confederate General Bragg launched an invasion into Kentucky—coordinated to coincide with General Lee's invasion into Maryland—Morgan again destroyed sections of the railroad to hinder Buell's approach to counter Bragg.²¹

Meanwhile, the Confederate Heartland Offensive was straining the Union's defensive lines. Needing to counter the offensive, or to simply halt its advance, the Union authorities in Kentucky stationed troops along the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

²¹ L&N Yearly Report, June 30, 1863 in Kerr, *Historical Development*, 30.

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entirety of the L&N, forming a battle-line to oppose the Confederates. Doing so was tactically sound because not only did the L&N need to be defended, but it could then be used to aid any Union advance from anywhere its tracks laid. The Union could have easily maneuvered soldiers from any area along the rail to either counter the Confederate offensive or launch a counter attack.

Fearing a decisive attack, Major-General Halleck, General-in-Chief of the Union armies, sent reinforcements from Indiana and Illinois to the battle-line through Louisville, using the L&N to hasten their journey.²² Analyzing the Union's defenses of the L&N, prior to the reinforcements, Captain C.C. Gilbert reported his unfavorable opinion to General Buell. In his estimation, the detachments of ten or twelve men were too scarce and too small, and the entirety of defenses inadequate due to the less than satisfactory earthworks. Lastly, he noted that no defenses existed between Munfordville and Louisville at that time.²³ He rightly shared his worries because one intent of the Heartland Campaign was an all-out assault by Confederate forces aimed to repulse the Union forces and secure portions of the L&N.

In September 1862, Confederate General George Williamson, acting under General Polk, ordered an attack on Proctor's Station and Cave City, Kentucky in order to secure and hold those stations.²⁴ If successful, the attack would cut

²² Horatio Wright to Henry W. Halleck, August 29, 1862 in O.R. 16:447.

²³ C.C. Gilbert to Buell, August 9, 1862, in O.R. 16:299.

²⁴ Special Orders No. 17, September 12, 1862, in O.R. 16:817.

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the Union hold on the L&N and would leave all of the Federal forces south of Cave City alienated from their main supply and communication lines, not to mention vulnerable to being surrounded. The choice of location was a sound tactical move because the stretch of rail from Lebanon Junction to Bowling Green made a salient bowed to the south, with Cave City at the peak, thus making it more susceptible to attack. To support this assault, Confederate Colonel John Pegram ordered cavalry under the command of Colonel John Scott to destroy the L&N to halt Buell's approach.²⁵ Despite their best efforts to hinder either the Union's use of the L&N or their strategic hold on Kentucky, the Confederate forces did not succeed in either endeavor. Following the battle of Perryville on October 8th, the Confederate leadership decided to cut their losses of their flailing invasion and subsequently retreated. Both the Union and the L&N earned credit for holding the strategic border state of Kentucky. Without the L&N's backbone support of the Union lines, the North's ability to defend Kentucky would have been greatly reduced, possibly even rendering them incapable of doing so. Thus, the L&N was a vital part of the Union's repulsion of the Confederate Heartland Campaign.

In November of 1862, with the Union having secured and repaired the entirety of the L&N's railway, the blue-clad soldiers of the North stood poised to thrust a dagger into the

²⁵ John Pegram to John Scott, September 4, 1862 in O.R. 16:796.

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Confederate heartland.²⁶ But the South, eager to thwart any Union advance southward, launched a surprise attack upon the L&N by dispatching Morgan to attack the trestles at Muldraugh's Hill, Kentucky.²⁷ He successfully reached his target on December 28, 1862, by leveraging his cavalry's speed and agility to move northward all while delaying Union forces with flank skirmishes. After pummeling the garrison with artillery and forcing the Union troops to surrender, his raiders burned the two trestle bridges of the L&N. Immediately after achieving his goal, Morgan's force retreated, in order to avoid entrapment, to Confederate lines in Tennessee on January 2nd, 1863.²⁸ Just like before, the Federal troops called upon their engineer corps to make rapid repairs to the railway to mitigate the damage dealt to the L&N, so it could continue to be implemented as a vital logistical tool as they advance southward.

Thus, when 1863 dawned, Union leaders were preparing a dual offensive to capture Chattanooga and Knoxville, hoping to secure Tennessee and push the Union battle lines deeper into the Confederate heartland, to a point where they were virtually knocking on the door of the Deep South.²⁹ Still hoping to cripple or stall the Union advance, the South was preparing their updated raiding strategy for the upcoming year. But the Union had learned from the raids of 1862 and improved their defenses, including the L&N, by

²⁶ L&N Yearly Report, June 30, 1863 in Kerr, *Historical Development*, 32.

²⁷ Mackey, *The Uncivil War*, 143.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

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upgrading the blockhouse system already in place with embanked walls around the blockhouses and by positioning artillery near the railroad.³⁰ It appeared that the worries in Captain Gilbert's unfavorable report were no longer a concern.

With the L&N secured, but still under threat of Confederate raids, the Union pushed deeper into Southern territory. The L&N continued to provide vital service to the Union armies in the Western Theatre as a major supply line but also now to the troops of General Rosecrans.³¹ However, beyond serving as a vital vein for supplies and communication, the L&N by autumn of 1862 was routinely used to transport injured soldiers to rear-ward medical facilities in Louisville and Nashville.³² The railroad facilitated the transport of thousands of soldiers to larger facilities that were better equipped to serve their needs, improving the chance of survival. If anything, it could have been a needed morale boost to the wounded soldier to disengage from the conflict and be in more constant contact with friends and family. This system impressed General Thomas so much that he actually required the hospital trains to be equipped with the best crews and locomotive engines available.³³

In late 1863, the L&N was still a vital tool, as it aided the Union in ousting the Confederates from Kentucky. Later that year, the L&N best displayed its efficiency with the

³⁰ Ibid., 168.

³¹ Turner, *Victory Rode the Rails*, 249.

³² Ibid., 302.

³³ Ibid., 303.

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dramatic movement of General Hooker's Eleventh and Twelfth Corps to aid in the capture of Chattanooga, TN. With Rosecrans's defeat at Chickamauga, Assistant Secretary of War Charles Dana requested over twenty thousand troops to be hurried to Eastern Tennessee to not only assist Rosecrans, whose army was under siege in Chattanooga, but also to set the stage for upcoming operations into Georgia.³⁴ In response, Secretary of War Stanton boasted that 30,000 Union troops from the Army of the Potomac in the east could be taxied via rail to Chattanooga in five days. The planned route would ship the soldiers from Washington, D.C on the B&O railroad to Baltimore, where they would pick up the main B&O track to the Ohio River and be ferried across. Once across the river, they subsequently marched from Columbus to Indianapolis and then southward to cross the Ohio River into Louisville, KY. Once in Louisville, they then would ride the L&N to Nashville and be loaded unto the Nashville-Chattanooga railway to complete their journey.³⁵ After departing on September 26th, and following some delays in Indianapolis, the two corps arrived in Chattanooga fourteen days later.³⁶ To appreciate the sheer scale of maneuverability the L&N contributed to this scheme, one need only to consider the fact that the railroad moved 25,000 troops, accompanied by ten artillery batteries and one hundred cars of baggage a distance

³⁴ Thomas Weber, *The Northern Railroads in the Civil War 1861-1865* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 181.

³⁵ Turner, *Victory Rode the Rails*, 289.

³⁶ Weber, *Northern Railroads*, 186.

of approximately 1,200 miles in two weeks.³⁷ This logistical feat truly demonstrated not only the Union's mastery of the rail system, but also how interconnected it was, allowing specific lines like the L&N to become important resources in strategic planning and implementation. Thus, Rosecrans was reinforced and the Union lines held in Tennessee, despite the dire siege that poised to become a Confederate victory.

However, the Confederacy had not forgotten the importance of the L&N to the Union cause. Once more, they sent Morgan, the proven cavalry raider, with orders to attack the three hundred-man garrison holding Louisville.³⁸ This summer raid was designed to serve not only as a disruption of Union supply lines and a distraction for Union cavalry but also as a recruitment device aimed at encouraging sympathetic Kentuckians to join the Confederate cause.³⁹ But Morgan, disregarding his orders, set his focus on an assault in Indiana and Ohio rather than attacking the garrison in Louisville.⁴⁰ Morgan and his raiders attacked the L&N at Lebanon Junction, which Morgan's raiders captured before promptly departing across the Ohio River to continue their raid northward. But this time, success eluded Morgan and his raiders. After being defeated on July 19, the raiders were now fleeing Union territory. Morgan's "Great Raid," as it came to be called, concluded when his force was unsurprisingly surrounded by Union forces in Ohio,

³⁷ Turner, *Victory Rode the Rails*, 293.

³⁸ Mackey, *Uncivil War*, 178.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

surrendering, thus closing his chapter of terror upon the railway.⁴¹

The mastery of railways by the Union military during the American Civil War truly contributed to their victory over the Confederacy. Within this network of Union-controlled railways, the Louisville & Nashville played a significant role in aiding the Federal armies' invasion into the Deep South while still keeping a reliable flow of men and supplies to wherever the North needed them. Without the L&N, Union armies of the Western Theatre would have fought a treacherous campaign without sufficient supplies or means of adequate transportation for their wounded. In these respects, the L&N became a dagger in the hands of the Federal armies who benefited from the railroad's geographical location, efficient and reliable transportation, and long reach from Louisville to the vital river and rail hub of Nashville. By any measure, the L&N stands as an example of how the Union military fought a modern war in which steel rails meant the difference between victory and defeat.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

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