



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

The Gray Ghost of the Confederacy

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A clean-shaven Mosby stands in the center of a group of members of the 43rd Battalion Virginia Cavalry, circa 1865 | National Portrait Gallery

John Singleton Mosby, the “Gray Ghost” of Northern Virginia, remains one of the most fascinating and controversial partisan raiders to serve the Confederacy during the Civil War. With absolutely no military training, he rose from private to colonel based on the effectiveness of his tactics, especially in the latter half of the war. His most daring raids—capturing a Union general in March 1863 and a Union colonel in September 1863—occurred in Fairfax County, Virginia, well behind Yankee lines. His raiders came not only from Northern Virginia but also from other sections of the Old Dominion, together with volunteers from Maryland, England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany—and even Union deserters!

Before the war, Mosby was a staunch Unionist. But when his native state of Virginia decided to leave the Union, he followed its lead, volunteering his services as a private. His daringness and resourcefulness brought him to the attention of J.E.B. Stuart, the Confederate cavalry leader. After one and a half years in Stuart’s service (it was Mosby’s scouting that convinced Stuart of the feasibility of his ride around Union general McClellan in June 1862), Mosby was given permission to conduct independent guerrilla operations in Northern Virginia in January 1863. He officially called his Rangers into service at Rector’s Cross Roads near Middleburg in June 1863. Until April 1865, Mosby led hit-and-run commando raids throughout Northern Virginia, often venturing into West Virginia, Maryland, and even Pennsylvania during the Gettysburg Campaign.



John S. Mosby | LOC

Normally, cavalry on the march sent up a humming sound that could be heard for hundreds of yards at night. Sabers and scabbards clanked, canteens jingled, and hooves clattered. Mosby, carefully practicing stealth, forbade sabers, canteens, and clanking equipment; his column moved so quietly that civilians lying in their beds in houses next to the road recognized when Mosby’s men were passing only by the sound of their hoof beats. Near the target, he would veer off into soft fields or woods, and it was so quiet that the men could hear whip-poor-wills calling in the distance.



Col. John S. Mosby | LOC

“Silence! Pass it back,” he ordered, and from that point, he directed only with hand signals. If attacking dismounted, he would have the men remove their spurs and leave them with the horse-holders. He walked in soft snow or used the sound of the rain and wind to cover footsteps and once timed his final pounce with the sound of coughing by a Union horse. “We made no noise,” he wrote, and one of his men recalled, “Our men were in among the prostrate forms of the Yankees before they were fairly awake, and they assisted some of them to unwind from their blankets.”

Modern military studies of sleep deprivation indicate that cognitive skills deteriorate after one night without sleep; after two or three nights, performance is considerably impaired. Confederate general John Hunt Morgan’s men were falling asleep on the road during his Indiana–Ohio

Raid of June–July 1863, and his exhausted scouts failed him at Buffington Island by reporting that the ford was guarded by regular forces when they were only a few frightened home guards. Gen. Abel D. Streight became groggy from exhaustion and sleep deprivation on a raid in Alabama in the spring of 1863, and Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest deceived him into surrendering to a force less than half his size. Union general H. Judson Kilpatrick became worn down and lost his nerve in his raid on Richmond, Virginia, with Col. Ulric Dahlgren early in 1864 and was driven away by defenders that he outnumbered six to one. But Mosby carefully saved the energy of his men and horses, moving slowly into a raid for maximum performance in the fight and hasty withdrawal. He preferred to strike at about 4:00 a.m., when guards were least alert and reserves most soundly asleep. He said that it was easy to surround sleeping men and that it took five minutes for a man to awaken out of a deep sleep and fully react.

As proof of his memorable service, it must be noted, that Mosby was the Rebel officer most mentioned in dispatches by Gen. Robert E. Lee, whose only complaint was that Mosby tended to be wounded too often. It is believed he prolonged the war by at least six months by harassing the Manassas Gap Railroad in 1864 and kept from combat anywhere from ten thousand to forty thousand Union troops.

William S. Connery is the author of two books, Civil War Northern Virginia 1861 and Mosby's Raids in Civil War Northern Virginia.



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