



# Stealing the General: The Great Locomotive Chase and the First Medal of Honor

*Russell S. Bonds*

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On April 12, 1862—one year to the day after Confederate guns opened on Fort Sumter and started the Civil War—a tall, mysterious smuggler and self-appointed Union spy named James J. Andrews and 19 infantry volunteers infiltrated Georgia and stole a steam engine called the *General*. Racing northward at speeds near 60 miles an hour, cutting telegraph lines, and destroying track along the way, Andrews planned to open East Tennessee to the Union army, cutting off men and materiel from the Confederate forces in Virginia. If they succeeded, Andrews and his raiders could change the course of the war.

But the *General*'s young conductor, William A. Fuller, chased the stolen train—first on foot, then by handcar, and finally aboard another engine, the *Texas*. He pursued the *General* until, running out of wood and water, Andrews and his men abandoned the doomed locomotive, ending the adventure that would soon be famous as "The Great Locomotive Chase." But the ordeal of the soldiers involved was just beginning.

In the days that followed, the raiders were hunted down and captured. Eight were tried and executed as spies, including Andrews. Eight others made a daring escape, including two assisted by a network of slaves and Union sympathizers. For their actions, before a personal audience with President Abraham Lincoln, six of the raiders became the first men in American history to be awarded the Medal of Honor—the nation's highest decoration for gallantry. Americans North and South, both at the time and ever since, have been astounded and fascinated by this daring raid. But until now, there has not been a complete history of the entire episode and the fates of all those involved.

Based on eyewitness accounts, as well as correspondence, diaries, military records, newspaper reports, deposition testimony, and other primary sources, *Stealing the General* is a blend of meticulous research and compelling narrative that is destined to become the definitive history of "the boldest adventure of the war".

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