

# THE WIZARD OF THE SOUTH

by

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Nathan Bedford Forrest was Tennessee's most effective general in keeping the state free from Union control, occupation or total domination during the War Between the States. At his enlistment Forrest was not aware of the tremendous task ahead of him; in fact, he never expected to play the important role he was to fill in defense of his home state. Forrest became acquainted with the Confederate army at the time of his enlistment as a private in Memphis on June 14, 1861. Patriotic Southerner and wealthy cotton planter, he felt it his duty to enlist to protect his homeland and his right to retain his many slaves. He had no previous military background; however, it soon became obvious that he could maneuver cavalry in a profound manner.<sup>1</sup>

A careful review of his tactics has been done by his contemporaries, both military leaders and historians. According to a number of them, Forrest believed the key to any victory in war was to get to the right place at the right time with decisive striking power. His men stated this idea simply as "Git thar fustest with the mostest men."<sup>2</sup> Forrest also realized the importance of mobility and ability to fight; thus, he would push his cavalry to their maximum speed to a battle, then have his men dismount and fight as infantry or return to their roles as cavalry. Forrest's energy never seemed to run out when it came to pursuing the enemy, carefully planning his moves from scouting reports, recruiting or carrying out any of the activities of a commanding officer. Those who fought against him soon became educated to the fact that he was no common soldier or ordinary commander. General U.S. Grant rated him as "about the ablest cavalry general in the South."<sup>3</sup> To General William T. Sherman, as he tried to supply his troops deep in Georgia, "he was 'that devil Forrest,' who must be 'hunted down and killed if it costs ten thousand lives and bankrupts the Federal treasury."<sup>4</sup> Forrest was not only a commander but a trooper in the heat of almost every battle in which his troops were engaged during the war. As a result, he was wounded four times, had twenty-nine horses shot from under him, and had a documented thirty Union soldiers killed by his Colt pistol or sword. His efforts were strengthened by his love for Tennessee and his foresight that, if Tennessee fell permanently, the heart of the South would be open for Federal attack.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after his enlistment, some prominent citizens of Memphis visited with the governor in Nashville and expressed their feelings about Forrest's high character, courage, and success in business. Governor Isham G. Harris, being impressed with Forrest's background, sent word to Forrest that he would be allowed to raise a battalion of cavalry for volunteer service. Forrest began immediately with the task presented to him and began recruiting around Memphis by advertising for experienced horsemen. Also, realizing

the inability of the new government to furnish his raw recruits with suitable arms and equipment, he supplied himself with money from his private sources and made a secret trip to Kentucky to purchase these items. By the first week in October, "Forrest's Rangers" were around 650-strong and were badly needed in Kentucky for scouting and observation purposes.<sup>6</sup>

While in the western part of Kentucky, Forrest's patrol was ordered to a small town to restore order following the arrest of a Southern sympathizer. Leading the detachment were Forrest and his chief surgeon, both being dressed in full uniform. As they approached the town, a hidden Unionist opened fire on the squad and with deadly aim killed the surgeon. The bullet was meant for the leader of the column; however, the matching uniforms confused the assassin, so the bullet did not find the intended target. Had the bullet hit Forrest, it could have been the most valuable piece of metal fired by the North in their offense against the western Confederacy.<sup>7</sup>

At Sacramento, Kentucky, Forrest was engaged in his first hand-to-hand battle during which his men would totally overwhelm a superior force of Union Cavalry. In his early engagements, Forrest had so little regard for the ordinary rules of battle and was so reckless in exposing himself to danger that some of his men felt his career would be short.<sup>8</sup>

Despite his shortcomings as viewed by his fellow officers, he was sent to the Cumberland River fort at Dover, Fort Donelson. The engagement at Fort Donelson was the first decisive Civil War battle in Tennessee. This fort was located where it could dominate traffic on the Cumberland River, while a sister fort, Fort Henry, was located where it could control the Tennessee River. The Federal officer commanding the assault on these two river forts to open up the state to attack was an aspiring young officer, General Ulysses S. Grant. Grant proposed a bombardment of Fort Henry from the Union gunboats on the Tennessee River and a landing of troops to circle and capture the 2600 men defending the fort before these could escape to Fort Donelson. Within one hour the gunboats had literally battered to the ground three-fourths of the earthen fort.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after the fall of Fort Henry, Forrest learned of the attack and was ordered to ride in the direction of the fallen fort to detect Union movement. A detachment of Union calvary was engaged some three miles from Fort Donelson, a fact causing Forrest to suspect that Grant would be moving against the remaining fort. After returning to Donelson, the Confederate defenses were strengthened for the upcoming onslaught. Word had reached the fort that Grant's gunboats had returned down the Tennessee to the Ohio and were steaming up the Cumberland to Donelson. Also, Grant had sent a force of around 15,000 troops inland from the Fort Henry area to coordinate an attack with the gunboats on the river fort.<sup>10</sup>

By the fourteenth day of February, the gunboats were poised in a position to strike. Even though the boats were positioned at close range and sent well-directed volleys into the Confederate defenses, the defending

batteries were able to repulse the gunboats and render them useless during the remainder of the siege. Forrest later reported, "No one could do justice in description to the attack or the defense."<sup>11</sup>

Grant, even more determined to capture the fort, re-enforced his ground troops to 27,000 men. Forrest recognized the noose that had been created around the defenses of the fort and urged his commanding officer to an assault to open a path to safety. Predicting a loss, the commander at Donelson allowed Forrest to ride with 2000 cavalry toward the Union trenches and overrun the inhabitants. The freezing weather and factor of surprise were to the attacking Confederates' advantage when Forrest, leading the charge, swarmed the Federal position to wreak havoc upon the lines. The battle that followed this attack was fierce and often hand-to-hand, with Lieutenant Colonel Forrest having first one, then two horses shot from under him. The way was now open for pursuit of the Union army around what remained of the fort or escape by the Confederates. Forrest rode quickly back to Dover to report to the commander of the fort the favorable results of the skirmish and receive further orders. Upon reaching the headquarters, Forrest learned that discussion was centered around surrendering, not attacking, defending, or even retreating. After a heated discussion with his superior officers, Forrest stormed out of the presence of these men announcing to them that he would not surrender himself or his command.<sup>12</sup> Returning to the fort, Forrest sent for the handful of men under his command. Forrest crossed the icy river leading 1500 men through the opening in the Union lines and headed toward Nashville. Meanwhile, the 13,000 Confederates left in the hands of the remaining commanders surrendered "unconditionally" to General Grant.<sup>13</sup> This was a shocking blow to the defenses of the South and even harder on the morale of the Confederate nation. It was after the battle at Fort Donelson that Nathan Bedford Forrest's name became known to the Confederate government, citizens of the South, and the advancing Union army.<sup>14</sup>

After the escape from Fort Donelson, Forrest marched his new "command" to Nashville in two days, some eighty-five miles. He found the city in an extreme condition of disorder, with the citizens and defending soldiers in a panic state. Upon his arrival, Forrest was placed in charge of restoring order and evacuating war materials that had been stockpiled. Trains, thousands of men, supplies of all sorts, and nearly a thousand wagonloads of meat were evacuated. He remained in downtown Nashville with forty men for twenty-four hours after the arrival of the advancing Union army on the opposite bank of the Cumberland River.<sup>15</sup>

In two months Forrest had fought in Kentucky, escaped the tragedy at Donelson, and evacuated Nashville. The remainder of the Army of Tennessee was based at Murfreesboro; thus, that is the place where the wandering Forrest reported after leaving Nashville. From Murfreesboro, Forrest took his command to Huntsville, Alabama, for a brief furlough and for recruiting.<sup>16</sup>

By April 2, 1862, Forrest was on the move from northern Mississippi to the area where the Army of Tennessee was assembling for a confrontation with the Union army. Grant had moved down the Tennessee River and landed at Pittsburg Landing near Shiloh Church.

By the first week in April the Confederate commander, General A.S. Johnson, clashed with the invading force in their camps along the river. The first day, April 6, 1862, proved to be successful for the waves of Southern troops because they pushed the startled Union soldiers from their campfires to a point parallel with the river. If the attacking Confederates had pushed onward that first day, victory might have been guaranteed for the South.<sup>17</sup>

During the night, however, the battle-experienced General Grant was able to reenforce with 25,000 fresh troops to save his oppressed men. As a result, the second day found the Confederates on the defensive and on the retreat. A rear guard was needed to ensure the safe removal of the battered Army of Tennessee from the hills around Shiloh. Forrest, called upon to command this rear guard, immediately set up a series of lines to protect the fleeing infantry. Following close behind the Confederates was the ambitious General Sherman, who was keeping constant pressure on the rear guard.<sup>18</sup>

Realizing the danger to the retreat, Colonel Forrest positioned his men at a strategic point along the road that the army had taken to Corinth, Mississippi. As the advance guard of Sherman's forces approached, Forrest belated the signal of attack, "Charge!" When his 800 troopers rode down upon the foremost infantry, the almost defenseless infantry threw down their guns and ran. As the swarm lashed into the fleeing first line and headed toward the second, they were instantly stopped by a hail of bullets from the second. Now the Confederate cavalry was trapped between a strong secondary line and an ever-strengthening first line. Forrest was one of the trapped troopers when firing from all sides commenced toward him, wounding his horse. Suddenly, he turned the wounded animal, drew his pistol, and killed two of the Union troops, opening a way for him to escape to safety. As he rode the wounded horse through the gap, a Union soldier wheeled around and put the barrel of his musket almost against him, leaving a ball in the colonel's side. The bullet entered Forrest's left side above the hip and lodged against his spinal column. Forrest was rushed to a field hospital, where minor surgery was performed. Later he was transported from the field hospital to Memphis, where the bullet was removed.<sup>19</sup>

On April 29, 1862, he rejoined his command after twenty-one days of recuperation. At this time he met the new commander of the Army of Tennessee, General Braxton Bragg. Forrest was advised of the grim situation that the railroad city of Chattanooga faced if the advancing Union army could not be deterred somewhere in Middle Tennessee and that he would be responsible for raising another command.<sup>20</sup>

Forrest left this meeting with a mission but no troops. While in Chattanooga, he set up a recruiting station and within three weeks had around 1400 horsemen. With these troops, he was to cross the Tennessee River, move one hundred and fifty miles from Chattanooga, cross the Cumberland Mountains, and delay the advancing troops of Federal General Buell. On July 9, 1862, the cavalry colonel moved out of the city to feel out the point at which the thrust of the Union army was centered along with other Union outposts in the midstate region. This would be the first of his many skillfully planned raids with the sole purpose of totally disrupting the North's supply lines and communications.<sup>21</sup>

Forrest, upon reaching the small town of Altamont, sent scouts to determine the direction in which to strike the vast supply lines and garrisons fueling the North's offense. The 1200-man garrison at Murfreesboro was chosen by Forrest as the best place to strike to do considerable damage. As the calvary passed through Middle Tennessee towns, they were hailed as heroes and given home-cooked meals in almost every instance. Forrest's troopers advanced, uncontested, to the outer limits of Murfreesboro, where they overtook the sentry guards. The way being open, Forrest divided his command into three striking parties. One was to storm the Union camp; another, charge straight into town; and a third, take the courthouse. The attack commenced with the clatter of horses' hooves and wild yells of raiders. The camp and most of the town were taken, but a group of Yankees remained in the courthouse. Forrest rode to the center of town, ordered a battering ram constructed, and made a final successful assault on the courthouse. With the capture of the garrison and the town, along with many prisoners, Forrest needed to complete his raid and remove the prisoners and supplies before Union reenforcements arrived from Nashville. He exited Murfreesboro with 1700 Union prisoners, one million dollars' worth of stolen supplies, and his first four artillery pieces. When he realized the burden the prisoners were adding to his retreat, he offered them parole at McMinnville if they would drive the wagons loaded with supplies. At McMinnville he kept his word and let all the men go with the exception of a few officers. The freed men praised their captor with a cheer for General Forrest. After this daring raid, which set the Union army back for weeks and allowed the Army of Tennessee to move to Chattanooga, Forrest was promoted to brigadier general.<sup>22</sup>

Following the raid in Murfreesboro, the Union spearhead was forced to abandon its domineering hold on all of Middle Tennessee and to stay close to Nashville. During this time—late summer and fall of 1862—Forrest was able to roam about Middle Tennessee recruiting and attacking as he chose. Only after raiding towns in Middle Tennessee, such as Antioch, Franklin, Sparta, Woodbury, Manchester, and Lebanon, did he venture as far as Bardstown, Kentucky, to assist in the invasion of Kentucky. The roles that Forrest's calvary played in this campaign were successful, but the overall invasion failed. While in Kentucky, Forrest was ordered to leave his command and report back to Murfreesboro to establish a third command. Forrest followed the orders with very bitter feelings toward Bragg.<sup>23</sup>



Although embarrassed and demoralized, Forrest returned to Murfreesboro and organized a whopping force of 2100 men, the largest he had been able to command. Orders came in the early days of December, 1862, for the new command to move into West Tennessee. The Southern leaders realized that Forrest had given Middle Tennessee new life out of the hand of the oppressor. They wanted him to move into West Tennessee to try to disrupt the efficient supply lines the Union army had developed for their siege of Vicksburg.<sup>24</sup>

On December 10, 1862, Forrest crossed the Tennessee River near Clifton, Tennessee, south of Lexington on two flatboats. Forrest then allowed rumors to circulate throughout the area that he had crossed with a very large force, some 10,000 strong. This game of "brag and bluff" was a favorite of his when the odds were great in the opposition's favor.<sup>25</sup>

At Lexington, Forrest used a new tactic in attacking infantry. Instead of a direct assault on entrenched men by his cavalry, he would dismount his frontal forces while another group would circle and ride in from behind. This tactic worked at Lexington and allowed a sure victory. The eager raiders chased many Union stragglers to the outer limits of Jackson.<sup>26</sup>

To avoid the heavily fortified garrison at Jackson, Forrest headed north and proceeded west until the entire column reached the Mobile and Ohio Railroad near Humboldt. Starting at Humboldt, the raiding party moved straight along the railroad northward, burning bridges and attacking stock-houses. At Humboldt they captured an additional four cannons and 500 badly needed guns.<sup>27</sup> Arriving at Trenton, Forrest ordered an immediate charge of the Federal position. The position gave way, along with 20,000 rounds of artillery ammunition, twenty times that amount of small-arms ammunition, and 100,000 rations of subsistence. By December 21, Forrest had wagonloads of supplies moving northward and raiders creating havoc throughout several counties. During the move from Rutherford to Kenton, two companies of the defending Federals were captured and the railroad was destroyed. The bridge over Obion River required a full day to burn properly. This gave the remainder of the caravan a chance to catch up with the lead group. On December 23 Union City was captured without a gun's being fired. Onward north the Confederates proceeded until they stopped at Moscow, Kentucky. Without exception, not one bridge was left standing on this vital line of communication from Jackson to Moscow.<sup>28</sup>

Now Forrest was faced with the problem of getting his weary troops and the bulging wagons south to Clifton, where they had crossed the Tennessee River. Moving as quickly as possible, his furtive riders headed for Clifton, trying desperately to avoid the throngs of infantry pouring down from Kentucky and inward from Memphis.<sup>29</sup>

South of Huntingdon near Clarksburg, his luck ran out; Forrest found himself trapped to the north by the enemy, to the east by the Tennessee River, and to the west by infantry moving directly toward him. At Parker's

Crossroads, Forrest turned like a rabid dog and struck at the threatening enemy. The battle cost Forrest much of the loot he had acquired and nearly one-fourth of his men. However, this stand allowed the ferryboats at Clifton, which the Union had sunk to conceal, to be brought up again and the remainder of the raiders to rejoin their unit for transportation across the Tennessee River to safety.<sup>30</sup>

Now back safely on the eastern bank of the Tennessee River, Forrest's command joined the ranks of the Army of Tennessee camped there helplessly watching Union advances from Nashville outward. As January ended, Bragg finally was interested in somehow stopping the free movement of Yankees in Middle Tennessee. He decided that Fort Donelson should be retaken to stop the flow of troops and supplies to Nashville. Forrest was given the assignment to go back to Fort Donelson and retake it. Forrest protested. Bragg ignored the protest and outfitted Forrest with an unfit detachment to accomplish the task at hand. Forrest moved the distance to Dover and personally scouted the defenses. He saw a highly fortified position that would be impossible to take without gunboat support or a greater number of troops. He once again reported to Bragg, who ordered an immediate attack.<sup>31</sup>

A Union officer described the scene as the charging Rebels approached the heavily fortified structure: "In an instant the siege gun, double-shotted with canister, was turned upon them and discharged, tearing one man and two horses to atoms within ten feet of the muzzle. At the same time I ordered my infantry to fire, and this, with the grape and canister, was too much for them and they gave way."<sup>32</sup> The Confederates never reached the breastworks of the fort. After this heavy fire Forrest signaled retreat, only after having two horses shot from under him. The battered group left the field of battle remembering February 3, 1863, as a futile attack.<sup>33</sup>

During the spring of 1863, Forrest led missions throughout Middle Tennessee on scouting raids trying to confuse and disrupt Union lines of communication and generally aggravate the enemy. At Brentwood the garrison and stockhouse were taken, and about 520 men were captured by Forrest. Then came battles at Franklin and Thompson's Station. It is safe to say that these ghost riders horrified the Union commanders trying to gain a stronger foothold in the area.<sup>34</sup>

As the war lengthened, the North was pressured to end it by any means possible. Chattanooga appeared to be the key to opening the way into Georgia and Alabama. One effort to cut off the railroad between Chattanooga and Atlanta was made by the daring Union officers in the great locomotive chase.<sup>35</sup> Another attempt was made by a Colonel Abel D. Streight, who believed that the only way to take the railroad was to cut across northern Alabama and circle below Chattanooga, burning bridges in the process. He left Nashville on boats with 2000 men and 1200 mules and horses.<sup>36</sup>

Forrest was ordered to Florence, Alabama, after the daring Streight had unloaded his men and mules and horses. Forrest reached Florence from Columbia, Tennessee, in one day, pursuing with his one thousand men, attacking at every chance, until the command of Streight was some 150 miles from their debarkation point near the Georgia line. When Streight finally surrendered, his forces consisted of nearly 1700 exhausted troops. Forrest's men pushed themselves over rough terrain for fifty-seven hours, spending fifty-two in the saddle, to defeat a fresh fighting force of Yankees.<sup>37</sup>

As the Union army was strengthened from Nashville into surrounding areas, Bragg felt a major battle would be disastrous, considering his position at that moment. As the mass movement of troops and supplies headed south, Union cavalry kept constant pressure on the rear guard comprised of Forrest's forces. At Tullahoma, Forrest turned and created enough time for the main body to cross the mountains without further delay. As Forrest and the few remaining in the rear guard broke into full retreat through the streets of the tiny town of Cowan, a woman stormed into the street yelling at him, "You great big cowardly rascal; why don't you turn and fight like a man, instead of running like a cur? I wish old Forrest was here, he'd make you fight!"<sup>38</sup> The general, realizing she did not recognize him, burst into laughter and spurred his horse down the street.<sup>39</sup>

While in the Chattanooga area, Forrest participated in the battles of the city and at Chickamauga. After a breakthrough in the Union lines at Chickamauga, Forrest advocated an immediate advance to throw even more confusion into the retiring force. Bragg waited until his advance was stopped by the strengthened Union army at Chattanooga. Forrest received word that Bragg wanted his command.<sup>40</sup>

As Forrest entered the commander-in-chief's tent on Missionary Ridge to meet with Bragg, Bragg offered his hand. Forrest standing stiff and erect said:

I am not here to pass civilities or compliments with you, but on other business. You commenced your cowardly and contemptible persecution of me soon after the battle of Shiloh, and you have kept it up ever since. You did it because I reported to Richmond facts, while you reported damned lies. You robbed me of my command in Kentucky, and gave it to one of your favorites—men that I armed and equipped from the enemies of our country. In a spirit of revenge and spite, because I would not fawn upon you as others did, you drove me into west Tennessee in the winter of 1862 . . . You did it to ruin me and my career. When in spite of all this, I returned with my command, well equipped by captures, you began again your work of spite and persecution, and have kept it up . . . You have taken these brave men from me.



I have stood your meanness as long as I intend to. You have played the part of a damned scoundrel, and are a coward, and if you were any part of a man I would slap your jaws and force you to resent it. You may as well not issue any more orders to me, for I will not obey them, and I will hold you personally responsible for any further indignities you endeavor to inflict upon me. You have threatened to arrest me for not obeying your orders promptly. I dare you to do it, and I say to you that if you ever again try to interfere with me or cross my path it will be at the peril of your life.<sup>41</sup>

Bragg never again dealt with Forrest, and the cavalry general was allowed to establish a command of his own in northern Mississippi. In December, 1863, Forrest moved his 275 men again into West Tennessee to raid and recruit. He progressed as far as Bolivar, where he was detected, moved his small band of raiders to Jackson, and he was able to enlist some badly needed troops in Madison County.<sup>42</sup> He left the area with 2500 men and regretted that he had not been able to arm them properly, not to mention the 3000 he had recruited but had not been able to make battle-ready.<sup>43</sup>

A Northern newspaper correspondent wrote of the raid, "Forrest, with less than four thousand men, has moved right through the Sixteenth Army Corps, has passed within nine miles of Memphis, carried off a hundred wagons, two hundred beef cattle, three thousand conscripts, and innumerable stores; torn up railroad-tracks, destroyed telegraph-wires, burned and sacked towns, run over pickets with a single derringer pistol, and all in the face of ten thousand men."<sup>44</sup>

In the early months of 1864, Forrest made a third raid into West Tennessee to enlist the large number of recruits left behind in December, 1863. Arriving in Jackson, some 150 miles from his Columbus and Starkville, Mississippi headquarters, he found the general mood of the people distressed with robbers, looters, and the Union army. Forrest advanced all the way to Paducah to secure recruits and horses while a subordinate captured Union City.<sup>45</sup>

The various groups Forrest had scattered throughout the two states moved southward to Fort Pillow on the Mississippi River. This fort, built on the river bluff, was commanded by an inexperienced major and was guarded by around 550 men. The death toll to Union officers, as the battle progressed, led to much disorder in the ranks. The Southern troops commanded the battle and were successful in scaling the entrenchments and inflicting a heavy loss upon the fort's defenders. Much controversy came from this battle because of the extent of bloodshed. The fact that prejudices might have been a factor in this battle was that nearly half of the Union troops were Negro. The Northern newspapers labeled this as a massacre.<sup>46</sup>

10. Thomas Jordan and J. P. Pryor, *The Campaigns of General N. B. Forrest* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1973), pp. 56-75.
11. Wyeth, pp. 30,40.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-54.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-56.
14. Henry, p. 62.
15. Jordan and Pryor, pp. 99-104.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
17. Wyeth, pp. 61-63.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-68.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-70.
21. Henry, pp. 85,86.
22. Jordan and Pryor, pp. 162-179.
23. Wyeth, pp. 83-88.
24. Henry, pp. 102-108.
25. Wyeth, pp. 92-94.
26. Henry, pp. 109,110.
27. Wyeth, pp. 98-100.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-103.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
30. Henry, pp. 117-120.
31. Jordan and Pryor, pp. 221-226.
32. Wyeth, p. 129.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 129,130.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 145-150.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
36. Henry, p. 141.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 139-157.
38. Wyeth, pp. 212,213.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 200-220.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 221-242.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 242,243.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
43. Henry, p. 212.
44. Wyeth, pp. 265,266.
45. Henry, pp. 235-247.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-268.
47. Wyeth, pp. 342-374.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 452-470.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 471-509.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 540-542.

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