

## BOOK REVIEW

Edited by Walter Darrell Haden

Lonnie E. Maness. *An Untutored Genius: The Military Career of General Nathan Bedford Forrest*. Oxford, Mississippi: The Guild Bindery Press, 1990. 425 pages.

Many reasons have been given for the defeat of the Confederate States of America. While there is a variety of explanations for defeat, on one point almost all historians agree: that in general the ability of the Confederate generals was higher than that of the Union generals.

Probably no general in the Confederate Army did more to cause this difference than Nathan Bedford Forrest. If the Confederacy had had several other generals of his ability, or had even utilized Forrest more effectively, the outcome of the war might have been different. Forrest has been called "the Wizard of the Saddle," and Viscount Garnet Woseley, chief of the British army wrote: "The art of war was an instinct in him."

Forrest was born on July 13, 1821, in Middle Tennessee at the hamlet of Chapel Hill. Aside from the fact that his ancestors were Scotch-Irish who originated in Virginia and followed the frontier west for several generations, little is known about his ancestors. As the family followed the frontier, Forrest received very little formal education. His father died when the future general was sixteen years old, and Forrest began to support a family in which his mother was the dominating figure.

By 1841 he had begun to prosper. Forrest dealt in real estate, livestock, and slaves. He allowed the slaves to travel around Memphis seeking a future owner and refused to sell slaves to persons who had a reputation for cruelty.

On June 8, 1861, Tennessee seceded from the Union, and on June 14 Forrest enlisted in a volunteer company of the Confederate Army. Within a short time Governor Harris authorized Forrest to recruit a battalion of "Mounted Rangers" and appointed him a lieutenant colonel. By October of 1861, Forrest had a command of 650 men organized into eight companies.

His unit first saw action against the Union gunboat *Conestoga*. In this battle he and his command prevented the destruction of a Confederate supply depot. A short time later Forrest engaged a force of about 500 Union soldiers at the battle of Sacramento.

Forrest attacked first at the head of 150 men. When the rest of his unit arrived, Forrest used a flanking movement and a feigned retreat to win a decisive victory. This pattern of decisive action, skillful use of tactics, and personal leadership became the pattern for Forrest throughout the war. Forrest was one of the first to see that the days of mounted cavalry charges with sabers were over by devising his tactics to meet the new conditions.

Forrest was then assigned to Fort Donelson, where he was successful in checking the first Union assault. If there had not been so many officers present with superior rank, the outcome of this affair might have been quite different. As it was, he was the only high ranking officer present to emerge from the affair with his reputation and honor intact.

One of the most controversial episodes in Forrest's career was the capture of Fort Pillow on April 12, 1864, and the events that followed the capture of the fort. Although some historians have maintained that the Union losses occurred before the surrender of the fort, others hold that a "massacre" occurred after the fort surrendered.

Just what did happen at Fort Pillow that day is difficult to reconstruct. Professor Maness has studied the original documents dealing with this event and summarizes previous accounts. He notes that the claim that out of about 790 defenders fewer than one hundred survived is contradicted by other figures that give the number of survivors as 398. Also, it was not a massacre in the sense that it was a "killing of those who are defenseless or unresisting." It seems to have been a confused affair on the Union side in which incompetent leadership and drunkenness contributed to the confusion. While casualties on the Union side were heavy (Professor Maness cites a number of contradictory estimates of just how many federal soldiers were in the fort), they were not out of line with figures for many other engagements in the Civil War. Also, since Forrest was all of his life a man of principle, it seems very improbable that he would have ordered prisoners "shot down like dogs." In fact, Forrest was often able to win victories without bloodshed because he was known to treat prisoners with kindness and consideration.

Forrest fought through the last campaigns in Tennessee, and if his advice had been followed at the Battle of Franklin (which almost destroyed Hood's command), the battle might have had a different outcome.

After the surrender of Lee's army, Forrest had to decide whether to try to continue resistance by resorting to guerrilla warfare in the Far East. Since many of his men desired to surrender, on May 9, 1865, Forrest surrendered his command at Gainesville, Alabama. Forrest made a final address in which he said in part: "Civil War such as you have just passed through naturally engenders feelings of animosity, hatred, and revenge. It is our duty to divest ourselves of all such feelings." Forrest would carry out these principles for the rest of his life.

The question remains: What made Forrest a great field commander? Forrest had almost no formal education or military training. He probably never studied a textbook on the military art. However, his common sense, clear judgment, and military instinct enabled him to grasp the essential aspects of military strategy. He probably could not have named the nine principles of war recognized by the United States Army today, but he understood all of them and how to apply them.

He was among the first to see that the horse was a means of getting a soldier from one place to another as quickly as possible. He also realized that attempts to use firearms when soldiers were mounted were very ineffective, but when used by dismounted troops, their effectiveness was increased severalfold.

This book is well furnished with maps, photographs, a chronology of Forrest's career, index, and bibliography. It is an important contribution to Civil War scholarship and can be read with equal benefit by the student of military history, the Civil War buff, and anyone else who is interested in the extraordinary career of an extraordinary man.

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