

## Forrest Could Have Made a Difference

Dr. Lonnie E. Maness

The Confederacy had many outstanding military leaders. One of these was the world-famous cavalry leader, Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a man who was unique in many ways. He was one of the truly great military leaders in the War Between the States, a leader whose exploits have been studied and will continue to be studied as long as wars and armies are necessary.

To understand Forrest, it is necessary to know something about his background. He was born on July 13, 1821, at Chapel Hill in the Duck River area of Middle Tennessee. Nathan Bedford Forrest was the eldest of nine children born to William and Mariam Beck Forrest. The family moved to Tippah County in northwest Mississippi in 1834, where William died in 1837. Forrest, not yet sixteen years of age, became the head of the family, subject only to the authority of his mother. He led his family from a struggling poverty to a very comfortable existence.

While growing up, both in Chapel Hill and in Tippah County, Forrest had some interesting experiences. In Chapel Hill, while Forrest and some young friends were picking blackberries, they encountered a rattlesnake. The other boys ran because of their fear but not Forrest. He killed the snake with a stick, demonstrating that he was not easily frightened. In Tippah County after a panther clawed his mother, Forrest took his gun and dog and tracked down the offending animal and killed it, demonstrating his determination and persistence.<sup>1</sup> These and other experiences would serve him well in the business world as well as in the military.

Forrest went into the livery stable and livestock business

with his Uncle Jonathan Forrest in Hernando, Mississippi, in 1842. He married Mary Ann Montgomery in 1845, and six years later the family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where Forrest dealt in cotton plantations, livestock, real estate, and slaves. Though Forrest had very little formal education, two to three years at most, he had a high level of intelligence, common sense, and good judgment. By the time he was forty years of age he was a wealthy man. When the War Between the States began, he was worth approximately \$1,500,000. After Tennessee seceded from the Union in June 1861, Forrest enlisted in the ranks as a private but did not remain long in that capacity.<sup>2</sup>

Governor Isham G. Harris of Tennessee knew Forrest was a man of means and ability and commissioned him to raise a battalion of Mounted Rangers. Forrest soon accomplished this task, and equipped his men at his own expense before he was appointed their lieutenant colonel.<sup>3</sup> Promoted to colonel on March 16, 1862, he fought at Shiloh, where he was wounded. By July 21, 1862, he was a brigadier general and had begun his career of brilliant cavalry raiding,<sup>4</sup> primarily behind enemy lines. Forrest was promoted to major general on December 4, 1863, and to lieutenant general on February 28, 1865. When he surrendered at Gainesville, Alabama, on May 9, 1865, his was the "last Confederate Command under arms East of the Mississippi" River.<sup>5</sup>

Forrest reminds me of other great military leaders such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte. Bonaparte's accomplishments anticipate the methods and tactics of General Forrest. For example, Napoleon believed in attacking his enemy first whenever possible, developing superior strategy and tactics, and especially carrying out surprise and envelopment

movements. Napoleon was also fond of saying that in war the leader dominated everything; he believed that it was the leader who provided the edge for victory. Though Forrest had no military training at all of a formal nature, he duplicated many of the tactics of Napoleon.<sup>6</sup> Forrest believed in hitting the enemy on the flanks, front and rear, and keeping the pressure on. Although Forrest probably could not have named a single principle of war as such, few generals, if any, made better application of these principles.<sup>7</sup>

It may also be pointed out that Forrest and Ulysses S. Grant were very similar in their views on the art of war. Grant stated: "The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on."<sup>8</sup> Forrest stated that he won victories "by getting there first with the most men, planning and making my own fight, never letting the other fellow make the fight for me....Strike the first blow....Get them skeered and keep the skeer on them....charge and give them hell."<sup>9</sup> However, Grant and Forrest differed in their opportunities. Grant commanded armies that could put his ideas into operation. Forrest commanded small units that could not do this.

This is not the occasion to discuss in detail the many victorious campaigns that Forrest was engaged in. However, several will be discussed in order to illustrate his military genius and to show that Forrest could have made a difference in the outcome of the War Between the States. First, there was the Fort Donelson campaign of February 1862, a campaign that was mismanaged by General Albert Sidney Johnston.<sup>10</sup> Forrest was

lieutenant colonel in command of all the cavalry in this campaign. After the Confederates attacked Grant's right wing on Saturday, February 15 and were pushing the Federals, Forrest saw two Union brigades--those of Richard Oglesby and Charles Cruft--in headlong retreat. Forrest advised an all-out attack at this time in order to make the rout complete, but the general on the field, Bushrod Johnson, fearing an ambush, would not order the attack. In any event, there was no ambush prepared. A concerted attack at this point could have led to victory, a victory that could have changed the war in the West and destroyed the career of General Grant. When the fighting ended shortly after noon, the Federals had been pushed back two miles. The way to Nashville was not open. However, after the Confederates went back into entrenchment around Dover and Fort Donelson, that very night their leaders decided to surrender.<sup>11</sup>

Generals John B. Floyd, Simon B. Buckner, and Gideon J. Pillow believed that the Federals had moved back up to their former positions and had cut off their escape route. Forrest knew this was not so and told them so, but they would not believe him. Forrest advised retreat--getting the entire Confederate force out of Fort Donelson. However, the decision to surrender stood firm. Forrest asked for permission to take his cavalry out before the surrender took place. He was given this permission, riding by the very route that he had told the generals was still open. And so it was that approximately ten to twelve thousand other Confederate troops became prisoners of war, along with all their equipment.<sup>12</sup> General Johnston's decision was a most deplorable mistake, one of the worst of the war. Why so? It is highly probable that if these troops had

been with General Johnston at Shiloh on April 6, adding one more strong corps, the Confederacy would have defeated the Union army under Grant that first day of battle. Grant and Sherman's military careers would have been ruined, and General Don Carlos Buell would have been forced to retreat. Given that eventuality, the Confederate forces could have reoccupied all of Middle and West Tennessee and a good part of Kentucky. The War could have been turned around in the West, where the War for Southern Independence was eventually lost.

Following the loss of Fort Donelson, General Albert Sidney Johnston, the Confederate commander in the West, evacuated southern Kentucky, including Columbus, the "Gibraltar of the West," gave up Nashville, Tennessee, most of Middle Tennessee and the northern part of West Tennessee. He concentrated his army in and around Corinth, Mississippi. The Union army under Grant was soon concentrated in the Pittsburg Landing-Shiloh church area. Shortly thereafter the Battle of Shiloh, the largest battle of the Civil War up to that time, was fought on April 6 and 7, 1862. Forrest fought gallantly at Shiloh, helping take the "Hornet's Nest." By this time Johnston was dead and P.G.T. Beauregard was in command. Thinking that Buell was still one or two days march from Pittsburg Landing, Beauregard called off the fighting when there was still approximately one hour of daylight remaining. The Confederate army was victorious on April 6; the next day the work would be completed. Forrest disagreed with Beauregard's decision. He wanted a massive effort directed at taking Grant's last line of defense at Pittsburg Landing while it was still daylight. Forrest's strategy was in line with what General Johnston planned on doing if we may

believe the general's son, Colonel William Preston Johnston. The commanding general, in fact, planned on continuing the fight after darkness set in if that was necessary. One can never be certain about what the outcome would have been had a massive last-ditch effort been made, but it is probable that Grant's line would have crumbled. And even if it had not, it is quite possible that it would have been penetrated at several points. That being the case, emplaced artillery could have stopped the movement of General Buell's troops across the Tennessee River. Then victory would have been almost a certainty for CSA forces on April 7. 13

However, no last ditch effort was made by General Beauregard. Around midnight and again shortly thereafter, Forrest, having sent troops dressed in Union uniforms through the Union lines to Pittsburg Landing, received their report that steamboats were ferrying Buell's 30,000 men across the river as fast as they could. He went to higher command to report this intelligence. Not being able to find the commander, he reported this intelligence to a corps commander, General William J. Hardee. Forrest advised a night attack to stop this movement across the Tennessee River or an immediate retreat. But, once again, nothing was done. The next day the Confederate army fought gallantly, but the overwhelming strength of Grant's forces drove them from the field of battle. The Confederates retreated to Corinth, Mississippi.<sup>14</sup> Had Forrest's advice been followed, it is highly probable that the Confederate army would have been victorious late on April 6 or the next day, and the war in the West would have been radically changed.

Forrest and his cavalry played a conspicuous role in the

Battle of Chickamauga September 18-20, 1863, where Forrest was in command of all the cavalry on the right wing of the army. On September 20, when Lieutenant General James Longstreet's Left Grand Division found an opening in the Union lines, he drove through, splitting the Union army in two. Soon most of the "boys in blue" were retreating wildly to Chattanooga. Early on the morning of September 21, Forrest saw a demoralized, beaten army moving toward and into Chattanooga. He sent a dispatch to commanding general Leonidas Polk apprizing him of the situation and urging him to follow up immediately on the victory won on the field at Chickamauga. Forrest's message read:

We are within a mile of Rossville. Have been on the point of Missionary Ridge. Can see Chattanooga and everything around. The enemy's trains are leaving, going around the point of Lookout Mountain. The prisoners captured report two pontoons thrown across for the purpose of retreating. I think they are evacuating as hard as they can go. They are cutting timber down to obstruct our passing. I think we ought to press forward as rapidly as possible.<sup>15</sup>

Forrest's estimation of the situation was correct. The enemy was expecting to withdraw from Chattanooga if it was pressed. Rosecrans's first telegram after reaching Chattanooga was to General James D. Morgan at Bridgeport, Alabama. He told Morgan to "secure the bridges at Bridgeport and Battle Creek at all hazards." Why? It would seem that the answer was obvious. If pressed immediately, Rosecrans planned to continue the retreat. On the evening of September 20, Rosecrans wired General Halleck, stating: "We have met with a serious disaster; extent

not yet ascertained....[The] enemy overwhelmed us." The next morning, September 21, in a telegram to Lincoln, Rosecrans was even more specific. "After two days of the severest fighting I ever witnessed," Rosecrans stated, "our right and center were beaten. The left held its position until sunset. Our loss is heavy and our troops worn down...We have no certainty of holding our position here. If Burnside could come immediately it would be well; otherwise he may not be able to join us unless he comes on west side of river."<sup>16</sup> Charles A. Dana, the Assistant Secretary of War, who was with Rosecrans on the field of battle and left at the same time, wired Secretary Stanton from Chattanooga at 4 p.m. on September 20. It was his opinion that "Chickamauga is as fatal a name in our history as Bull Run....Before them our soldiers turned and fled. It was wholesale panic."<sup>17</sup> Halleck fully expected a further retreat from Rosecrans, and if he was pressed immediately as Forrest urged, Rosecrans' retreat would probably have been the result.

On the night of the twenty-first Forrest went to Bragg's headquarters, somewhat beside himself because Bragg had not moved forward. He tried to impress upon Bragg the bad condition of the enemy and the necessity of pursuit at once if a more complete victory was to be theirs. Bragg wanted to know how the army could be moved without supplies. To this Forrest replied: "General Bragg, we can get all the supplies we want in Chattanooga." When Bragg made no answer, Forrest left the general's tent. The next day Tully Brown, who was serving with Morton's battery, asked Forrest whether the army was going to move forward. Forrest, raging mad, replied that it was not. Forrest continued to talk as if he were talking to himself--



delivering himself of his thoughts: "I have written to him (Bragg); I have sent to him; I have given him information of the condition of the Federal army...What does he fight battles for?"

Immediate pursuit of a beaten army is a principle of war that should be rarely, if ever, violated. Forrest, the untutored military leader, knew this. But violated it was and for no good reason. Had Rosecrans been pressed hard early on September the twenty-first, there is little doubt that the war in the West would have acquired a new character. The strategic consequences could and probably would have been great. However, when no immediate pressing of the enemy occurred, the last great opportunity of the Confederacy passed into history,<sup>18</sup> an opportunity that was lost because of the indecisiveness and incompetence of General Bragg.

Much information has been omitted that reflects glory on Forrest such as the Battle of Brice's Crossroads, the raid on Memphis, and the capture of Colonel Abel D. Straight, but enough has been covered to illustrate the genius of Nathan Bedford Forrest. He was a leader whom his men could look up to and follow. He led without asking his men to do anything he himself would not do. During the four years of war Bedford Forrest personally killed more enemy in combat than all other generals on either side of the war put together. He killed some thirty men with his sword, pistol and carbine on the field of battle, and he had twenty-nine horses shot from under him.<sup>19</sup> Forrest was a great general who surely knew how to execute these principles of warfare in a way to confound his adversaries.

Forrest's troopers recognized his genius at the time they

served. President Davis came to recognize his genius, but too late. Had Forrest's advice been followed at Fort Donelson, Shiloh, and Chickamauga, the outcome of the war could possibly have been changed. The same thing could have happened had Forrest been placed in army command. In any event, General Sherman feared Forrest, and after the war he remarked that when all things were considered, Forrest was the most remarkable man the war produced on either side. General Joseph E. Johnston said essentially the same thing as did General P.G.T. Beauregard. To Beauregard, "Forrest's capacity for war seemed only to be limited by the opportunities for its display."<sup>20</sup>

General Robert E. Lee stated: "He accomplished more with fewer troops than any other officer on either side."<sup>21</sup> The British military leader, Field Marshal Garnet Wolsley, also noted Forrest's military tactics in the most glowing of terms. He said that no soldier more thoroughly illustrated Napoleon's maxim that in war the man--the leader--was everything. It was his belief that Forrest would have made a great army commander and would have accomplished great things.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as Jac Weller has well stated in his 1959 article in the Tennessee Historical Quarterly: "Professional soldiers will do well to continue to study Forrest; military historians yet unborn will consider and reconsider his place in fame, and Americans of yesterday, today, and tomorrow can take pride in a great native hero."<sup>23</sup>

**The University of Tennessee at Martin**

## Sources

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2Ibid., pp. 15-16. John Allan Wyeth, Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest (Dayton, Ohio: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1975), pp. 18-22; Captain J. Harvey Mathes, General Forrest (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1902), pp. 13-14; Sheppard, Bedford Forrest, pp. 23-24; Robert Selph Henry, First With the Most Forrest (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), pp. 25-27.

3Southern Historical Society Papers, Vol. 7, p. 455; Thomas Jordan and J.P. Pryor, The Campaigns of Lieut. -Gen. N. B. Forrest and of Forrest's Cavalry (Dayton, Ohio: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1973), pp. 41-44; Wyeth, Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, pp. 24-26.

4Ibid., pp. 74-75; Jordan and Pryor, The Campaigns of Lieut.-General N. B. Forrest and of Forrest's Cavalry, pp. 105-107; Lonnie E. Maness, An Untutored Genius: The Military Career of General Nathan Bedford Forrest (Oxford, Mississippi: The Guild Bindery Press, 1990), pp. 57-81.

5Henry, First With the Most Forrest, p. 209; War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 69 vols and index (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), series I, Part 3, 31:853. Hereinafter this work will be cited as Official Records. It is interesting to note that Forrest's rank of major general began on the date he entered West Tennessee in December 1863 to recruit his new command. See also Maness, An Untutored Genius... pp. 356, 372.

6Brown, "Lecture..." pp. 1-14.

7Maness, Op. Cit.

8Donald, David, ed., Why the North Won the Civil War (New York: Collier Books, 1960), pp. 5-6, 51.

9Morton, John W., The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest's Cavalry (Kennesaw, Georgia: Continental Book Co., 1962), pp. 181, 198; Walter E. Pittman, Jr., "General Nathan Bedford Forrest and Military Leadership," The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, Vol. XXV, October 1981, p. 54.

10Maness, Op. Cit., pp. 31-52. If Johnston had concentrated at Fort Donelson as he did at Shiloh, the Confederates would have outnumbered the Federals. A victory probably would have resulted. Charles P. Roland, in "Albert Sidney Johnston and the Loss of Forts Henry and Donelson,"

Journal of Southern History, Vol. XXIII, No. 1, 1957, pp. 45-69, disagrees. Roland admits that rushing most of the troops at Bowling Green to Donelson was "perhaps the most likely possibility of destroying Grant's army." He also admits that Johnston was "censurable for failing to go in person to Fort Donelson for his presence there might have saved most of the fifteen thousand Southern soldiers lost in the surrender." Nevertheless, Roland maintains that there never was any real chance of massing against Grant and annihilating his army. To Roland this presupposes that "the Union generals would have persisted in the very course that they in fact did follow." He thinks their reaction would have been different. For example, more troops would have been rushed to Grant by Buell and Halleck. Besides, Grant, with the protection of his gunboats, could have remained at Fort Henry and defended himself easily. These are mere supposition on the part of Roland. The time element being what it was, Grant would not in all probability have known about a concentration of all the Bowling Green troops at Fort Donelson had Johnston ordered it. Being the aggressive fighter that he was, Grant probably would have gone forward in any event. Look at his audacity in the Vicksburg campaign of 1863 when he divided his army and crossed the Mississippi River at Bruinsburg in late April. He would have faced almost certain disaster had General Pemberton concentrated against him at that point, and Grant had no way of knowing he wouldn't do exactly that.

11Wyeth, John Allan, That Devil Forrest: Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 46; Jordan and Pryor, The Campaigns..., p. 74; Andrew Lytle, Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1931), p. 65.

12 Official Records, Series I, 7:269, 287-288, 295-298, 300, 333, 386, 396; Jordan and Pryor, The Campaigns..., p. 88; Wyeth, That Devil Forrest, pp. 52, 58. Forrest led about 800 men, mostly cavalry and some infantrymen and a few from the artillery, across the swollen icy waters of Lick Creek and ultimately on to Nashville and without incident in leaving Fort Donelson. As Benjamin Franklin Cooling points out in Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland (1987), the rest of the Confederate forces at Fort Donelson could have escaped as Forrest and his men did.

13Johnson, Robert U. and Clarence C. Buell, eds., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, 4 vols. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), I:530, 602; Wiley Sword, Shiloh: Bloody April (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1974), pp. 378-379; James Lee McDonough, Shiloh--In Hell Before Night (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), p. 194; Jordan and Pryor, The Campaigns..., pp. 135-137; Grady McWhiney, Braxton Bragg and Confederate Defeat (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 247; Henry, First With the Most Forrest, pp. 79-81.

14 Ibid., Sword, Shiloh: Bloody April, pp. 378-379; McDonough, Shiloh--In Hell Before Night, p. 194; Maness, An Untutored

Genius, pp. 58-67.

15 Official Records, Series I, part 4, 30:681.

16 Ibid., Series I, Part I, 30:142, 149-150.

17 Ibid., Series I, Part I, 30:192.

18 Henry, First With the Most Forrest, p. 193; Lytle, Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company, p. 233; Tully Brown, "Lecture..." File 436F72B7, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

19 Green, John W., "General Nathan Bedford Forrest," a speech delivered twice in 1944 by Attorney Green to audiences interested in Forrest's life and career, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

20 Sherman, William T., Memories of General William T. Sherman, 2 vols. (New York, 1875), 2:399; Official Records, Series I, Part 3, 34:275; Glenn Tucker, "Untutored Genius of the War," Civil War Times Illustrated, p. 36; Wyeth, Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, pp. 635-636; Dabney H. Maury, Recollections of A Virginian (New York, 1894), p. 150.

21 Flood, Charles Bracelen, Lee: The Last Years (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), p. 146.

22 Southern Historical Society Papers, Vol. XX, New Orleans Picayune, April 10, 1892; United Service Magazine, Vol. 5 Brown, "Lecture..." p. 14.

23 Weller, Jac, "Nathan Bedford Forrest: An Analysis of Untutored Military Genius," Tennessee Historical Quarterly, 18 (September 1959):213-251.

