

**NATHAN BEDFORD
FORREST'S
ESCORT AND STAFF**

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MICHAEL R. BRADLEY



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*To William Andrew Warren, that my grandson may
not be ignorant of those from whom he is sprung*

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Preface

During the War Between the States, all general officers at or above the rank of major general were allowed to have an escort, or bodyguard, unit. For the most part, these units were simply detached from existing cavalry regiments and were used to provide camp security and to supplement the number of couriers who could be dispatched to carry orders to various subordinate officers. Likewise, general officers were allowed a staff of administrative officers to carry out the various specialized functions demanded by a military organization. In addition to managing an administrative unit, such as ammunition or food supply, these staff officers were representatives of the general they served and were authorized to oversee the execution of his orders in the area under his command.

Most of the staff officers and escort members have faded into obscurity unless they wrote memoirs, such as Kyd Douglas's *I Rode with Stonewall* or W. W. Blackford's *War Years with Jeb Stuart*. Robert E. L. Krick has authored an annotated listing of the staff officers of the Army of Northern Virginia, but most staff officers remain in the shadows of history. There is no history of an escort unit.

One group stands as an exception to these general observations. Even during the war, the Escort Company and Staff Officers of Nathan Bedford Forrest were held in awe by men on both sides of the conflict. These men were not merely headquarters guards, couriers, or administrative officers; they were an elite strike force, the closest thing the Western Confederacy had to a Delta Force. In a cavalry corps known for hard riding and fierce fighting, the Escort and Staff of Forrest rode harder and fought more fiercely than any others. In a situation where a regiment seemed called for, Forrest would send in his Escort Company and always achieved the desired results. These men became a legend among their contemporaries (I say "contemporaries" because they had no peers). Until now, the story of this legendary force had not been told.

Of those who rode with Forrest, Lord Garnet Joseph Wolseley,

Commander in Chief of Her Majesties' Army, later wrote:

They were reckless men, who looked on him as their master, their leader, and over whom he had obtained the most complete control. He possessed that rare tact—unlearnable from books—which enabled him not only effectively to control those fiery, turbulent spirits, but to attach them to him personally “with hooks of steel.” In him they recognized not only the daring, able, and successful leader, but also the commanding officer who would not hesitate to punish with severity when he deemed punishment necessary. . . . They possessed as an inheritance all the best and most valuable fighting qualities of the irregulars, accustomed as they were from boyhood to horses and the use of arms, and brought up with all the devil-may-care lawless notions of the frontiersman. But the most volcanic spirit among them felt he must bow before the superior iron will of the determined man who led them. There was something about the dark gray eye of Forrest which warned his subordinates he was not to be trifled with and would stand no nonsense from either friend or foe. He was essentially a man of action, with a dauntless, fiery soul, and a heart that knew no fear. (Wyeth, 174-75)

In part, this group became a legend because they served a legendary figure. There is no debate that Nathan Bedford Forrest is such a figure. There is, however, continuing debate over the nature and content of that legend.

Forrest was a legend from birth. He was of legendary size and strength, apparently from boyhood. It is documented that more than once during the war years Forrest scooped up from the ground unwilling, struggling enemies; slung them behind him on his horse, and used them as a shield as he broke out of a surrounding ring of steel. Forrest killed twenty-nine armed opponents in face-to-face combat, ending the war with his right arm in a sling from a wound inflicted by the last of these adversaries. During these encounters, thirty horses were killed under him.

Enlisting as a private at age forty, Forrest rose to the rank of lieutenant general in less than four years. He organized a regiment of cavalry in the early days of the war, broke out of the perimeter at Fort Donelson before it surrendered, and increased his command to the size of a brigade. Stripped of his men in September 1862, he raised another brigade and, when stripped of that in October 1863, raised another, which he increased to the size of a division. By the end of the war, he commanded a corps of cavalry. His victories in north Mississippi and west Tennessee in 1864 are even today

considered gems of strategy and tactics. His skilled and determined guarding of the rear of the shattered Army of Tennessee on its retreat from Nashville in December 1864 is still studied as an example of the proper conduct of a rear-guard action.

This legendary figure has been an inspiration for writers of both biography and fiction for over a century and a quarter. During that time, the nature of the books about Forrest has evolved from dealing with wartime controversies and personalities, to romantic views of a picturesque, and picaresque, hero, to an analysis of his social and military significance. Despite this historical maturation process, legends, half-truths, and whole lies still cluster around Forrest, while some authors are so overcome by their passions against him as to depart from the standards of the historian to become mere propagandists.

As one example of the legend of Forrest, the motto so often attributed to him, "Git thar fustest with the mostest," is sheer gibberish. No Southerner ever spoke in such a ridiculous fashion. The persistent connection of these words with Forrest shows a stubborn desire not to understand the man, his times, or his home country but to create a legend of fantastic proportions.

Equally unbelievable is the positive assertion that Forrest ordered a massacre of black troops at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, in April 1864. Obviously something bad happened at Fort Pillow, but the reasons why it happened were not uncovered by a wartime investigation by the United States Congress, and they are beyond recovery today. What is clear is that human life had become a cheap commodity in the South by the spring of 1864. The provost marshal records of the United States Army show large-scale deportation of civilians from strategic zones around railroads, the establishment of "free fire" areas, executions of hundreds of civilians without trials, local genocides, and even the use of torture against Confederate citizens by Union officials. Rape committed by Northern troops was a common occurrence. These acts make it difficult to accept at face value Lincoln's words at his second inauguration, "with malice toward none." There was a great deal of malice toward the South during the war, and after; and such malevolence can even be seen today. It is instructive to note that Fort Pillow is widely cited as evidence of Southern racism, but most Civil War historians have ignored the provost marshal records, with their accounts of war crimes perpetrated against Southern civilians by the United States armed forces. (Before any

of my Rebel brothers objects to my use of the term *Civil War*, let me point out that this is the name “Ole Bedford” applied to the conflict in his famous farewell address to his men at Gainesville, Alabama, in May 1865.) These historical records make it clear that many people joined Mr. Lincoln’s armies because their malice caused them to desire to wreak havoc on Dixie. They make it clear that Northern hands are far from clean of innocent blood. An honest, impartial reading of the records places Fort Pillow in a clearer historical context.

The often-repeated statement that Forrest founded the Ku Klux Klan flies in the face of solid historical evidence. John Morton in *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest’s Cavalry* states that Morton inducted Forrest into the Klan some eighteen months after the organization’s founding. Forrest did become the Grand Dragon of the Klan and, using the authority of that position, ordered the Klan to disband in 1870.

The complexities of nineteenth-century attitudes toward race relations are illustrated by a contrasting pair of quotes. The first quote says, “I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races—that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which prevents them from living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”

The second quote says:

I came here with the jeers of some white people, who think that I am doing wrong. I believe I can exert some influence, and do much to assist the people in strengthening fraternal relations and shall do all in my power to elevate every man—and to depress none. I want to elevate the colored people to take positions in law offices, in stores, on farms, and wherever you are capable of going. I have not said anything about politics today. I don’t propose to say anything about politics. You have a right to elect whom you please; vote for the man you think best, and I think, when that is done, you

and I are freemen. Do as you consider right and honest in electing men for office. I came to meet you as friends. When I can serve you I will do so. We have but one flag, one country; let us stand together. We may differ in color, but not in sentiment. Go to work, be industrious, live honestly and act truly, and when you are oppressed I'll come to your relief.

The first quote is from Abraham Lincoln, the second from Forrest. Minds can, and do, change over time.

If many false ideas about Nathan Bedford Forrest persist, then the state of knowledge about those who “rode with Forrest” is even more abysmal. The officers and men who followed “the wizard of the saddle” are usually painted with the same brush as Forrest, for good or ill. For, if Forrest has become a legend, so have those who fought under him. Well into the twentieth century, men considered it a badge of honor to say, “I rode with Forrest,” and many today are proud to say that of their forbears. Forrest was a leader who was feared but was fearless, vicious in battle but usually victorious, charismatic in personality but careful with the lives of his soldiers. Such a one attracts daring followers.

So there rises the eternal, cyclical question: did Forrest create a legendary fighting force, or did a legendary fighting force create Forrest? I propose that each created the other. There existed a symbiotic relationship between Forrest and his men; each fed off the other. Forrest attracted men ready to fight; fighting men needed a general like Forrest.

Though raised an untutored child in a frontier society, Forrest rose to a level of wealth and authority that brought an appreciation of education, if not of culture. He made friends among the wealthy, educated people of his time and place and, when war came, called on these same people to use their talents as members of his Staff.

Innocent of military training, Forrest still valued discipline and instilled it into the character of his soldiers. His command was not a band of lawless, untrained guerrillas fighting “bushwhacker” style but a highly mobile strike force comprised of units trained to operate together or independently of one another. Such forces require the highest level of discipline to function effectively, and Forrest’s command was spectacularly successful. The Escort accepted and practiced the necessary discipline more thoroughly than any other of “Ole Bedford’s” units.

This book is intended to give a clear picture of the members of the Escort and Staff, so far as the available historical records permit. In this book, these men are allowed to speak for themselves, to "tell their side of the story." Contemporary historians will note that not all sides of controversies are presented. The members of the Escort and Staff saw one side, their side.

These men, many of them really only boys, had the closest possible association with Forrest during the war. The Escort and Staff were picked men, chosen for their ability to perform under combat conditions and to make a military unit function smoothly. This body would be a military extension of Forrest himself. This book deals with these men and their exploits. They would indeed become "a band of brothers, native to the soil." The bonds of brotherhood would survive the war.

Soon after the end of the conflict, veterans on both sides began to form associations, formal and informal, to perpetuate the bonds forged during the war. In time, an organization for all Confederate veterans, the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), would be formed. The local groups of the UCV were called "bivouacs." Wives and daughters of veterans formed the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) in 1890. The sons and descendants of veterans would form the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) in 1896. In addition to these large, formal organizations, the old soldiers held reunions of their regiments, brigades, divisions, and army corps. Surgeons and chaplains met to share their common experiences of the war. In 1877, the surviving members of the Escort and Staff formed a veterans association to keep alive their memories of the valiant days of their youth. The history of this association is also a part of this book. The men who belonged to the Escort and Staff Veterans Association were involved in numerous other veterans groups and attended many reunions, but they valued most highly of all their right to say, "I rode with Forrest."

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to the making of this book. They did their best to help me, and if I have made mistakes, such are my responsibility alone.

Heath Mathews of Franklin, Tennessee, should be thanked above all others for making this book possible. Heath helped me acquire a copy of the unpublished minutes of the association formed by the Escort and Staff in 1877.

Brian Allison is the current staff historian at Carnton Plantation in Franklin and he made available to me a most exciting find. In February 2005 the staff found and opened a safety deposit box, which contained papers of George Limerick Cowan, the secretary of the Veterans Association for many years. Among those papers were two roll books, which date from after the war but in which are many notes about the fate of various members of the group, and a short history of the Escort written in a small notebook in Cowan's hand. This history covers only the first few weeks of the Escort's formation.

Dr. James Jones, Tennessee Historical Commission, helped find many obscure facts and was always courteous and enthusiastic. Dr. Lonnie Maness, professor emeritus at the University of Tennessee—Martin, offered encouragement and suggestions. Professor Maness knows more about Forrest than any other person now alive.

I have had a delightful relationship with Dr. Bruce Bickley at Florida State University in which we have discussed Southern postbellum writers and the role of Forrest in various pieces of fiction. Lee Millar of Memphis, Tennessee, has collected material about the Escort Company for several years. When he learned of my project, he immediately and generously offered to share his information.

Ronnie Mangrum of Franklin, Tennessee, provided an invaluable service when he shared with me letters written by an enlisted man in the Escort, Johnston C. Ryall of Bedford County. These letters

added a spark of life to the history of the Escort. Bill Harris of Lewisburg helped me identify veterans of the Escort who applied for pensions after the war.

David Fraley and Thomas Cartwright of the Carter House in Franklin, Tennessee, made me welcome and shared resources with me. George Stone shared with me his vast knowledge of the families of Moore and Bedford counties. Dr. Randall Black used his skills in Internet research to my great advantage.

My friend and neighbor, O. B. Wilkinson, not only ran down numerous loose ends but over the years frequently gave me a kick in the pants by asking, "Are you working on the Forrest Escort book yet?" Jason Morgan and Russell Sells of my SCV camp, Dr. J. B. Cowan Camp #155, tramped through area cemeteries looking for the final resting place of "Ole Bedford's Boys." Joyce Bateman of the Crouch Library at Motlow College was always cheerful, efficient, and willing to help with the numerous arcane requests I made of her for interlibrary loans.

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And, most of all, there has been "The Carolina Belle," my consort since 1963, who is eternally patient with my Confederate enthusiasms. She is a true daughter of her ancestors, Sgt. John Newton Todd of Orr's South Carolina Rifles and Pvt. Elias Alexander of the First South Carolina Cavalry. I hope Pvt. Andrew Jackson Bradley of Turney's First Tennessee Infantry is proud of his offspring, too. We have no need to be ashamed of our Confederate ancestors. I am conscious of the need to be sure they have no cause to be ashamed of us.

Through the help of all these people, the Escort and Staff ride once again with Forrest, in war and in peace.

"Keep the skeer on 'em."

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