

**NATHAN
BEDFORD
FORREST**

NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST

IN SEARCH OF THE ENIGMA

EDDY W. DAVISON AND DANIEL FOXX

FOREWORD BY EDWIN C. BEARSS



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For our parents:

Bill and Marie Davison

Roy and Lois Foxx

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FOREWORD

Many longtime Civil War aficionados know that my interest in the Civil War dates to the winter of 1935-36, when my father, a World War I Marine, then a Montana cattle rancher, read to me John W. Thomason's *Jeb Stuart*. I was hooked, and until 1940, the "Plumed Cavalier" and his horse soldiers were my heroes. By the latter date, having read Lloyd Lewis's *Sherman, Fighting Prophet*, Robert Selph Henry's *The Story of the Confederacy*, Howard Swiggett's *The Rebel Raider: A Life of John Hunt Morgan*, and other Civil War-related books, I expanded my horizons. The exploits of Morgan and his raiders had entranced me even before my introduction to Jeb Stuart. In 1933 I had visited my Peru, Indiana, relatives. There I had listened wide-eyed as my great-grandfather's youngest brother recalled the summer of 1863, when the Bearss brothers answered Gov. Oliver P. Morton's call for militia to turn back Morgan and his "terrible men." It didn't matter, as I later learned, that though they never got nearer than a hundred miles of the raiders, for Uncle Frank this was one of the high points in a long and distinguished life that began before the war with Mexico and extended through the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Then combat in World War II as a Marine ground-pounder gave me a different perspective on the Civil War, particularly what makes a good leader. Twenty-six months in army and navy hospitals, especially the fifteen months spent as a patient in San Diego Naval Hospital, with its extensive library, gave me hundreds of hours to immerse myself in such books as Douglas Southall Freeman's multi-volume *R. E. Lee* and *Lee's Lieutenants*. Subsequently, I learned that the "Marine's Marine," then Col. Lewis "Chesty" Puller, was reading *Lee's Lieutenants* on the eve of the invasion of Pelelieu.

During the months from June 1944 to October 1945, I also read my first Forrest biography, Andrew W. Lytle's *Bedford Forrest and his*

Critter Company, my introduction to Forrest and his way of war. Further readings highlighting Forrest were postponed until the years following my September 1955 joining the National Park Service and entering duty as historian at Vicksburg National Military Park. This assignment enabled me to expand my focus, allowing me to devote more time and energy to the war in Mississippi, Louisiana, and west Tennessee and related Civil War sites. It was during these years that I immersed myself in following Forrest's paper trail, reading such major works as Henry's *As They Saw Forrest: Some Recollections and Comments of Contemporaries* and "First With the Most": *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, Thomas Jordan and Joseph Pryor's *The Campaigns of Lieut. Gen. N. B. Forrest*, J. Harvey Mathes' *Bedford Forrest*, Eric W. Sheppard's *Bedford Forrest, the Confederacy's Greatest Cavalryman*, and John A. Wyeth's *Life of Lieutenant-General Nathan Bedford Forrest*.

In the late 1950s, Mississippi governor James P. Coleman, a student of the Civil War, historian, and preservationist, secured an appropriation from the state legislature for identifying and marking the Brice's Cross Roads battlefield. Local historian and raconteur Claude Gentry, versed in the battle story, prepared the texts and located the interpretive markers. I visited Brice's Cross Roads and other north Mississippi and west Tennessee Forrest-related 1863-64 sites before my 1966 transfer to the National Park Service's Washington office.

In 1969, as an element of the National Park Service's ongoing research program, I prepared a resource study on the Battle of Tupelo and in 1971 authored the service's *Protecting Sherman's Lifeline: The Battles of Brice's Cross Roads and Tupelo*. Although long interested in Forrest as the ideal leader of troops in combat, coupled with the attributes of Marine Corps legends like Merritt "Red Mike" Edson, Chesty Puller, and Herman Hanneken, whose exploits dated from the Banana Wars through World War II, I had never considered an in-depth study of Forrest's leadership style and battles until the 1970s. It was then that my friend and Civil War guru Robert "Bob" Younger asked me to author a book on the Wizard of the Saddle. By the spring of 1979, my manuscript was finished and published by Morningside Bookshop under the title *Forrest at Brice's Cross Roads and in North Mississippi in 1864*.

Since then I have kept abreast of publications (books and monographs) with a focus on Forrest and his way of war. I have also led a number of tours, most of which are five days and six nights, highlighting Forrest and his command for Travel America, a history-oriented Texas company that guides people where they can walk in the footsteps of history. I have also spoken before a number of workshop symposia

on Forrest, a soldier described by the late Shelby Foote as one of “our Civil War’s” geniuses, the other being President Lincoln. In addition to keeping current with the academic treatment of this Civil War figure, I have authored featured articles in *Blue and Gray* on Forrest, titled “Brice’s Cross Roads: Forrest Puts the Skeer on the Yankees” and “Charge Them Both Ways! The Battle of Parker’s Cross Roads.”

Most of the Forrest monographs that have appeared since John L. Jordan’s definitive work in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly’s* 1947 spring edition have dealt with the Fort Pillow Massacre. Eleven years later Albert Castel addressed this controversy in his 1958 monograph in *Civil War History* titled “The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence.” The December 1982 issue of *Civil War History* revisited what would prove to be an increasingly acrimonious issue as late-twentieth-century historians waded in with their interpretations of the evidence. First to do so were editors John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort, with “Fort Pillow Revisited: New Evidence to an Old Controversy,” *Civil War History*, published in December 1982. Zeroing in on Forrest again, the spring 1985 issue of the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* carried a Cimprich and Mainfort monograph titled “Dr. Fitch’s Report on the Fort Pillow Massacre,” supporting Castel’s massacre thesis. Historian Lonnie Mannes came to Forrest’s support in the pages of the spring 1987 issue of the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* with “The Fort Pillow Massacre: Fact or Fiction.” Cimprich and Mainfort held their ground with “The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Statistical Note,” published in the December issue of the *Journal of American History*. Against this backdrop of attack and counterattack, Brian Steel Wills authored in 1992 an outstanding Forrest biography titled *A Battle from the Start*, which was republished in 1998 as *The South’s Greatest Cavalryman: Nathan Bedford Forrest*. No one will ever understand and better appreciate what made Forrest tick or document that his way of war and leadership is one that many soldiers aspire to but very few achieve.

Some five years ago I became aware of two historians who had accepted the challenge broached by Mannes fourteen years before: was Fort Pillow a Massacre? Eddy W. Davison and Daniel Foxx chose as their venue the *Confederate Veteran* and their article carried the title “A Journey to the Most Controversial Battlefield in America.” Long familiar with the site and the literature concerning the “massacre” controversy, I read the Davison-Foxx article with more than passing interest.

By this time Brian Wills and I had shared time as talking heads on the Forrest segment of *Civil War Journal* and *Booknotes*. We had also co-hosted many History America tours to Fort Pillow. Brian and I were in agreement that if Forrest had intended a “massacre” there would have been

few, if any, survivors. His practice heretofore was to lead. But uncharacteristically Forrest had absented himself from the field when his bugler sounded the charge. Today he would be held responsible for the actions of his men pending his return to the field, resuming command, and restoring order. It took some twenty minutes after the United States flag was cut down and Forrest had reached the strand fronting Coal Creek and called on his men to cease fire for order to be restored.

Within a year of reading the Davison-Foxx monograph, I traveled to Arizona for what has become my annual program before the Scottsdale Civil War Roundtable. There I was introduced to Davison, and I told him that I was impressed with his and Foxx's monograph. He informed me that he and Foxx were writing a book on Forrest and inquired whether I would like to see the manuscript on its completion. Recalling the superior quality of the *Confederate Veteran* article, I agreed.

Some two years ago I received the manuscript titled "Nathan Bedford Forrest: In Search of the Enigma." A careful reading satisfied me that the draft was of the same superior quality as "A Journey to the Most Controversial Battlefield in America." With the space given to battle actions, Davison and Foxx's book complements Wills' critically applauded Forrest biography. After returning this draft with my comments, I urged the coauthors to seek a publisher. When he replied, Davison asked, if they found an interested party, would I prepare the foreword. Yes, I answered. Now another Forrest biography will be out to enlighten us on the life and career of one of the Civil War's most remarkable and, at the same time, most controversial soldiers.

The word "enigma" in the title is inspired, as demonstrated in the various elements of his persona: his Scots-Irish frontier heritage, sometime participation in the slave trade, and role as a successful businessman, civic leader, and soldier who rose in rank from private to lieutenant general. A soldier far in advance of his time, who knew that war means fighting, and fighting means killing, he also recognized that getting the bulge on the foe was vital to success. The Fort Pillow massacre and his postwar leadership in the Ku Klux Klan raise hackles today as they did then and as such constitute part of the Forrest enigma.

Supplementing the book are a series of troop movements that document the marches, engagements, and battles of Forrest and his critter cavalry. Eddy Davison and Daniel Foxx are to be commended on their research and writing skills in seeking out the enigma that was Forrest. It, along with the Wills biography, is recommended as must reading for those who want to know Forrest and his way of war.

—EDWIN C. BEARSS
Historian Emeritus
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A work of this magnitude could not have reached completion without the assistance of many talented and committed people, and the gratitude we feel for a special group of such people and for their interest and support must be expressed. In attempting to do so, we realize that we risk leaving someone out in this acknowledgment and apologize in advance if this is the case.

Edwin C. Bearss, historian emeritus of the United States Park Service, has been particularly kind in his support of this project, and we no doubt owe him an apology for imposing on him, as we sought a liberal outpouring of his wisdom and expertise on the Civil War era. Those who have made the Civil War their special field of study know the legend of Ed Bearss, a man who has a passion for detail and the human connection in our national story. He has walked the trails and battlefields, retold the stories in virtually countless publications, held audiences spellbound as he weaves the tapestry of America's cast of historical characters as if he knew them personally, and, as an energetic octogenarian himself, continues to lead battlefield tours in the United States and Europe. All of this is impressive beyond words, yet there is another side to Ed Bearss that endears him to us: he took the time out of his almost impossible schedule not only to encourage us in our work, but also to spend hours reading and correcting our manuscript and making invaluable suggestions, for which we are humbly grateful.

We also owe a special debt to a man we have never met: Robert Selph Henry. In our early reading, and later in our serious research, and finally in the writing of this book, it was Henry who inspired us through the pages of his works on Forrest, the result of a lifetime of labor and scholarship. Indeed all who have followed him in studying the life and times of Nathan Bedford Forrest truly navigate the same waters he charted in his own research and writing.

Our first research trip into Forrest country took us to Oxford, Mississippi, where we were guests of novelist Lawrence Wells and his gracious wife, Dean, niece of southern literary icon William Faulkner. Larry had written an intriguing novel in which Forrest played a major role, and he spun fabulous stories for us as together we walked the fields of Shiloh and Brice's Cross Roads. We will never forget the wonderful evening we spent in Larry and Dean's kitchen, swapping stories and laughing until way too late in the night. For these unforgettable memories and for their advice and support we thank them.

Closer to home we must thank Neil Humphreys for his relentless criticism of the manuscript, from syntax to format. The readability of this book is due, in no small part, to his willingness to allow us to strain his patience and our willingness to let him bruise our egos from time to time for the sake of the work.

The Scottsdale Civil War Roundtable was a friendly refuge during the long process of research, writing, and revision. Past president Dean Becraft shared our interest in this project and from the beginning remained enthusiastic about the outcome when discouragement often knocked on our door. We thank him for his encouragement and support. Also, thanks to the 2006 president of the Roundtable, Mack Stanley, for his help and support.

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