



## INTRODUCTION

In the years following the Civil War, it was the proud boast of many an Old Johnny Reb that “I rode with Forrest.” Many of them had indeed done so, although the truth may be that their tenure under “the Wizard of the Saddle” was quite brief. A man may have fought under the command of Joseph Wheeler or Earl Van Dorn for 90 percent of his military career, but if ever his unit had been under Nathan Bedford Forrest, that veteran was likely to identify himself as “one of ole Bedford’s boys.” When the United Confederate Veterans were organized in 1889, agitation began at once to create a subdivision called “Forrest’s Cavalry Corps Veterans.” No other group requested a subdivision. Even today, those who proudly trace their Confederate ancestry are quick to point out “he rode with Forrest” if they can find any validity for the claim.

One of the early historians of the American Civil War, Lord Garnet Joseph Wolesey, a high-ranking member of the Royal Army, described those who followed Forrest:

They were reckless men, who looked on him as their master, their leader, and over whom he 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.

Forrest continued to claim the loyalty of his veterans for the rest of their lives. That loyalty is understandable. Forrest led from the front, inspiring by example. In his farewell address to his command at Gainesville, Alabama, on May 9, 1865, the day of their surrender, he said, "I have never, on the field of battle, sent you where I was unwilling to go myself." His men knew that to be true. In 1864, when ferrying his command across the Tennessee River on the return from the Johnsonville Raid, Forrest overheard a lieutenant remark that he would not help paddle the boat because that would be unbecoming of an officer. Forrest is said to have seized the lieutenant by the collar and flung him overboard. Such an action might have been resented in some officers but not in Forrest. He was wielding a paddle himself. Forrest stood with his men.

Few other Confederate generals have inspired more biographies, and no other Confederate general who fought in the Western Theatre has come close. Since 1990, the public has seen released *An Untutored Genius*, by Lonnie Maness (1990); *A Battle from the Start*, by Brian S. Wills (1992); *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, by Jack Hurst (1993); *Forrest: The Confederacy's Restless Warrior*, by R. M. Browning, Jr. (2004); as well as a host of battle studies, interpretive works, and biographies of Forrest subordinates.

While some became fiercely loyal to Forrest, others came to hate him, a situation that continues today. Sherman referred to him as "that devil" and opined there would never be peace in Tennessee until Forrest was dead. To achieve that goal, Sherman said he was willing to suffer 10,000 deaths and bankrupt the national treasury. Today, that same visceral reaction still erupts on occasion. Periodic protests are made about the statue of the general in Forrest Park in Memphis. In 2006, Middle Tennessee State University considered removing Forrest's name from the campus ROTC building. Public support for Forrest caused the university to keep the name. Allegations that Forrest founded the KKK persist in the face of irrefutable evidence that this is not true. But each controversy seems to attract more Forrest defenders.

Forrest became a legend in his own lifetime. He was alleged to have scooped up an unsuspecting Union soldier from the ground and flung the man behind his saddle in order to shield himself from enemy fire, all this while seriously wounded. Forrest was said to have spoken in gibberish ("firstest wit da mostest" and other unintelligible utterances), and people accepted and repeated (still repeat) the phrases.

Beginning in 1864, many of the regiments commanded by Forrest carried a battle flag with twelve stars, instead of the familiar thirteen stars, on a blue St. Andrew's Cross. The missing star has produced all manner of folktales. According to one version, Forrest was angry at soldiers from a particular state and refused to recognize them with a star on his flag. Another tale is that Forrest said he would not display a star for some state until all Yankees had been driven from its borders. The truth is rather more prosaic. The original 1861 design for the Confederate battle flag had twelve stars because only twelve states were represented in the Confederate congress at that time. The thirteenth star was added when Kentucky was recognized by the Confederacy. In 1864, the Confederate army depot in Mobile was ordered to issue new flags to units in the Western Theatre. The depot had the original 1861 pattern in its records and that is what it used to produce the flags. Several regiments not in Forrest's command carried twelve-star flags, but only in connection with Forrest was the aberration ever noticed. In fact, the twelve-star flags are merely an example of a mindless government bureaucrat abiding by the paperwork instead of doing what common sense would dictate.

Actually, the only flag Forrest seems to have cared about or commented on was a white flag. He liked to have a white cloth and a pole handy so some staff officer could carry it to the command of positions held by the U.S. Army, demanding the surrender of the Yankees.

Some would argue that Forrest was interested in the black flag. The specter of Fort Pillow will always be associated with Forrest and his men, despite the fact that much of what is written about Fort Pillow is based on a report published by a congressional investigating committee desiring to rally Northern support for the war. It is interesting that historians have never attempted to determine how many men were unlawfully killed at Fort Pillow. Instead, the total number killed is always cited, as if all these casualties had been inflicted during the final Confederate assault. Nor do many comment on the actions of the U.S. occupation troops who killed hundreds of Southern civilians prior to the fight at Fort Pillow. Their actions are well documented in the Provost Marshal Records of the U.S. Army, available in the National Archives, but they are generally ignored.

Nor do most of the Forrest detractors point out that Forrest was not involved in the actual assault on Fort Pillow. He was at an observation post some eight hundred yards away. It is a matter of record that Forrest gave orders that the U.S. flag be taken down from the pole—it had never been lowered as a sign of surrender—and that he gave, and enforced, orders to cease firing. No doubt some U.S. soldiers were killed unlawfully at Fort

Pillow. There is also no question that Southern civilians had been killed by U.S. forces as early as 1862. When Forrest attacked Murfreesboro on July 13, 1862, a U.S. soldier set fire to the town jail in an attempt to burn to death the civilian political prisoners held there. Human life had become cheap long before Fort Pillow, and Forrest was not the first to debase its value.

Despite all that has been written about Forrest and his men, both good and bad, there is no compendium of the units who rode with the best cavalry commander who ever lived on the North American continent. This book was written to fill that void. From organization tables and Order of Battle charts in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, a list was compiled of the units that served, even if only briefly, with Forrest. Research was then done in a variety of sources to determine the commanding officers of these units, along with a sketch history of the organization. When possible, anecdotes that tell something of the life of the men in the unit were added. This research shows that Forrest commanded cavalry and artillery units from ten of the thirteen Confederate states. Occasionally, Forrest had tactical control of infantry units, for example, at Harrisburg, Mississippi, and Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in 1864, but these are not discussed in this book. Forrest never commanded any troops from Florida, South Carolina, or Virginia.

Although the men who rode with Forrest often fought dismounted, they were not, properly speaking, mounted infantry. A few units were so designated and are noted in the text, but they were a minor part of Forrest's command. At times, Forrest's men did give the appearance of mounted infantry. From the first days of the war, Forrest preferred to arm his command with rifles instead of carbines. His original unit carried Maynard rifles. When Forrest was ordered to form new commands, he usually found the initial drafts of men inadequately armed. For example, on the Murfreesboro Raid in July 1862, many of his men carried shotguns. The same was true when Forrest began his First West Tennessee Raid in December 1862.

Forrest armed his new commands largely with captured weapons. Thus, many of his men carried infantry rifles. As soon as possible, these were swapped for the short version of the Enfield rifle carried by infantrymen. Forrest also captured, and used, breech-loading carbines and Spencer repeaters, though the Confederacy could not furnish ammunition for the latter.

It soon became well known to fellow Confederates, and Yankees who happened to face them, that Forrest's men used pistols, not sabers. The .36-caliber Navy Colt was the weapon of choice, but men used what they could get. If possible, the troopers acquired a pair of pistols, giving themselves more available rounds to fire in a fight.

This mixture of arms—rifles and revolvers—might allow one to call Forrest's men a hybrid force, but they considered themselves a cavalry. Yet they were versatile. At Chickamauga, the men Forrest commanded fought so well on foot that an infantry leader, Gen. Daniel Harvey Hill, complimented them on their performance. Forrest gained the advantage in his most complete victory, Brices Cross Roads, with most of his men fighting on foot. But these are both instances of cavalry fighting dismounted. The men of Forrest's command could, and did, fight on horseback. Mounted infantry did not. Forrest, then, commanded a cavalry force, which he used in unorthodox ways when the occasion demanded.

Artillery was also used by Forrest in unorthodox ways. He learned the value of artillery early in the war. In the summer of 1862, Forrest attacked a small stockade defending a trestle on a short-branch railroad line leading from Tullahoma to McMinnville. In this attack, near the modern village of Morrison, he lost thirteen dead and failed to capture the position. After that, Forrest always had a battery attached to his command. During 1864, the artillery command increased to a battalion commanded by Capt. John Morton.

Forrest was known to use his big guns as an assault force, sending forward unsupported guns to take and hold advanced positions and driving back the enemy by sheer firepower. As early as Parkers Cross Roads in December 1862 and, most famously, at Brices Cross Roads in June 1864, Forrest sent his artillery to very close range of the opposing lines to blast a hole for a dismounted attack. Advancing artillery without support was a contradiction of the accepted military doctrine of the day.

Forrest was a superb organizer. In 1861, he organized a regiment from scratch. In 1862, he organized a brigade and, later, a division; finally, in 1864, he raised a corps. He was skilled at recruiting, consolidating, and training troops. One should recall that this same organizing ability had made Forrest an antebellum multimillionaire whose wealth came largely from business, not planting. These organizing skills became especially obvious in 1864. In the opening months of that year, Forrest brought together numerous under-strength, disorganized units and, within a few weeks, turned them into a well-organized, well-trained fighting force that defeated expedition after expedition sent against him.

A part of that organizational ability was being able to instill discipline. Forrest's men often found themselves under field officers of low rank, located in isolated places, and performing independent assignments. These assignments were usually carried out successfully. Only men who understood the need for, and accepted, the limits required by discipline could have been

successful under these conditions. Poorly disciplined troops would have fallen apart under these circumstances. Forrest, and his subordinates, were good disciplinarians.

Forrest was a quick learner who did not repeat mistakes. At La Vergne, in the fall of 1862, he met a sharp defeat because his raw command was not properly trained. After that, Forrest emphasized training for his men. At Parkers Cross Roads, he was surprised by the appearance of an enemy column in his rear. One of his officers had failed to understand an ambiguous order to block a particular road. After this, Forrest made sure his orders were clear and understood. Following the January 1863 engagement at Dover, he generally avoided frontal attacks unless the conditions were favorable to him. Harrisburg is an exception to this rule, and there Forrest felt himself under direct orders to attack in front.

Notoriously, Forrest did not suffer fools gladly. From the ranks of his command, he weeded out men he felt inadequate to the task, and he bluntly informed his superior officers of faults he perceived in them. In modern jargon, Forrest was not “a team player.” He also knew that war is not a sport. “War means fightin’ and fightin’ means killin’,” he said. In most cases, history shows that the criticism Forrest expressed of his superiors was correct.

Even those most closely associated with Forrest felt the rough side of his tongue. He often had confrontations with his brigade and regimental commanders. Despite this, large numbers of men and officers found that the positive results of Forrest’s military ability far outweighed his character flaws. That is why they said proudly, “I rode with Forrest.” He may have “cussed” them, but he led them to victory.

A visitor to Chickamauga National Battlefield Park, one of the many fields where Forrest fought hard and effectively, was heard to ask a question that reveals both a personal bias as well as a lack of understanding of Forrest. In a dismissive tone, the question was asked, “What general did Forrest defeat who was any good?”

Forrest did not pick and choose his opponents; he fought every U.S. general sent against him, and he aggressively went looking for those who sought to avoid him. The issue is not “Whom did Forrest defeat who was good?” The proper question is “Why couldn’t the Army of the United States produce anyone good enough to defeat Forrest?” The U.S. Army had the manpower, the weapons, and the supplies; it lacked the talent. No wonder the old veterans, and their descendents, are proud to say, “I rode with Forrest.”