Nathan Bedford Forrest

The Confederate Cavalry Leader Most Feared by Union Generals

Part 2 of a Series on Confederate Cavalry

By Mike Scruggs

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By Mike Scruggs
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Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue in Memphis park 2010, Removed by PC politicians 2017.

"I'll be damned if I'll surrender."

By Mike Scruggs

The battles of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson in February 1862 were the first two significant victories for the Union. They also demonstrated an important Union strategy that many believe was the ultimate key to Union defeat of Confederate resistance. They set out to dominate the water transportation lifelines critical to the Southern economy and military defense. They were eventually able to dominate these critical arteries with a "Brown Water Navy" of gunboats. The South had few such resources to oppose them. Fort Henry was on the Tennessee River in west-middle Tennessee near the Kentucky border. Fort Donelson was about 12 miles to the east on the Cumberland River. The commander of Fort Henry was West Point graduate and engineering inspector Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman, from Paducah, Kentucky. Tilghman had realized that both forts Henry and Donelson were defective defensive positions but put up a valiant battle before surrendering to a Union siege on February 6, 1862. Meanwhile he had secretly moved most of his of his troops to Fort Donelson.

Fort Donelson was commanded by Brig. General John B. Floyd, a former governor of Virginia who had been U.S. Secretary of War from 1857 to 1860. He was not an experienced field commander. His deputy was Brig. General Gideon Pillow with Mexican War experience. The third ranking officer was Brig. General Simon Bolivar Buckner, a West Point graduate and personal friend of U.S. Grant. Lt. Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest arrived with a battalion of about 500 men of Second Tennessee Cavalry on February 10 and was appointed to command the total of about 1,300 cavalry there, bringing the total defenders to about 16,000. They were, however, surrounded by 20,000 troops under Grant and a Brown Water Navy river force of numerous gunboats and transports carrying 7,000 more troops. By February 12, Grant had cut off the main road to Nashville. Grant was unopposed until he ran into Forrest, who though outnumbered ten to one, drove the Union cavalry back on its infantry and held up Grant's progress for hours, before Buckner ordered him to withdraw. This left the Confederates almost completely surrounded.

On February 14, Union Commodore Andrew Foote brought six of his largest gunboats, including four iron-clads, into the battle. When Forrest saw this, he asked Major Kelley to pray: "Parson, for God's sake pray, for nothing but God Almighty can save the fort!" But the gunboats made the mistake of coming too close (within 300 yards) to the Donelson batteries, resulting in 147 hits badly damaging and incapacitating all six boats and resulting in 54 casualties, including seriously wounding Commodore Foote . On February 15, the Confederates launched a surprises attack on Union forces, nearly breaking out of the trap. Forrest was continually engaged in the combat, receiving seven minor wounds and losing three horses. Floyd, however, decided to withdraw back to the Fort.

Floyd favored surrender and turned command over to Pillow and Buckner. Floyd was able, however, to escape with two Virginia regiments by steamboats on the river. Pillow and Buckner also favored surrender, but Forrest refused, saying **"I'll be damned if I'll surrender."** Pillow

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granted Forrest permission to take his 500 Tennessee cavalry and about 1,000 other men and try to fight their way out. Pillow escaped across the river in a small boat and left Buckner to surrender about 10,700 men.

Forrest and his men did breakout, with not one man wavering in the cold, hardship, and fight and made it 80 miles to Nashville, which was now being besieged by Grant. Forrest brought order to the panicked city that General Floyd had fled to and was now evacuating. Forrest managed to hold off Grant until February 25 and save considerable supplies and equipment from capture. He left to join General Albert Sidney Johnston at Shiloh, where he was promoted to full colonel commanding the Third Tennessee Cavalry, which was composed of his battalion of the Second Tennessee and new recruits.

 Floyd was sacked by President Jefferson Davis after a board of inquiry on March 11. Pillow held only administrative positions following Donelson. After a brief period as a POW, Buckner was exchanged and later distinguished himself, obtaining eventually the rank of Lt. General. The commander of For Henry, Lloyd Tilghman, was also exchanged in the fall of 1862. He was killed in action near Corinth, Mississippi, in May 1863. Forrest's reputation for courage, cunning, and masterful leadership continued to grow. He was promoted to Brig. General in July 1862, Major General in December 1863, and to Lt. General on February 28, 1865. Following the War, **Lee called him "the greatest battlefield commander of the war."**

Nathan Bedford Forrest was born in Bedford County, Tennessee on July 13, 1821 to William and Miriam Beck Forrest. He was called Bedford. Like his father, he grew to be about 6 feet, two inches tall and weighed a muscular 210 pounds. His mother, Miriam, was a gentle person, but she was five feet ten and a muscular 180 pounds. Miriam was also a devout Christian, but Bedford did not lean fully that way until later in life. Bedford believed in God, and he respected Christians and the moral teachings of his mother, but he thought Christianity "was a fine religion for women." He intended to be a worldly success. By God's providence, however, he married a strong Christian woman, Mary Ann Montgomery, whose prayers, conduct, and gentle influence with the help of some Christian officers, finally brought him to public confession and baptism in 1875.   Bedford had long before promised God that he would never take a second drink of alcohol, but cursing, gambling, and a fiery temper characterized him until after the war. Thereafter his friends noted the increasing mildness of his temperament.

 Bedford had always had a compassionate and kind side, however. He showed great respect for women and would not curse around them or allow any other man to curse or behave disrespectfully around them. Women found him invariably courteous and protective, willing to go to great length to relieve them from distress, danger, or insult. He always spoke kindly to children. He did not tolerate adultery or trifling with women among his officers. He was also normally gracious and friendly to men and well liked and respected. He had been elected an Alderman while a businessman in Memphis. But many were aware of his fiery intolerance for bad manners, unfairness, unmanly behavior or moral laxity. While Robert E. Lee invited his men to attend camp religious services, Forrest commanded it.

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Forrest grew up in the rough frontier of western Tennessee and northern Mississippi. Of his nine brothers and sisters, one brother and all three sisters died of typhoid. Bedford's father died when he was 15, and he became the senior responsible male of the household. He sometimes had to defend family and relatives with guns and a Bowie knife. Forrest had only two three-month periods of formal education as a boy. Winter was the only time children could be spared from the urgency of farming. Yet his mental brightness was obvious to most people. He seemed to have a gold touch for successful business ventures, which included farming, cattle trading, real estate, merchandising, and slave trading. By 1858, he was the equivalent of a multi-millionaire in 2020 dollars. That year he purchased 1,900 acres of cotton land for the 2020 equivalent of $1.2 million and sold it a few months later for the 2020 equivalent of $3.6 million. Forrest also won the 2020 equivalent of $50,000 gambling at least three times, although he eventually gave up gambling as a promise to his wife, Mary. Forrest had little formal schooling, and his spelling and grammar were often unpolished, but he apparently had high mental ability seen in his quick calculation of risks and rewards in gambling, business, and war. Confederate President Jefferson Davis proclaimed him a "genius" and regretted not taking advantage of it until late in the war.

Forrest was well liked by the slaves he held and those he traded. He never beat slaves. Harsh corporal treatment was a foolish lack of business sense. He never broke up families in purchase or sale. Forrest brought over 40 slaves into his original cavalry regiment and freed them before the war ended. Several served in his elite escort company. Other things that could be noted both before and during the war were that he was an extraordinarily good shot with a rifle and able to blaze away accurately with a revolver in each hand while mounted. He was also an extraordinary horseman. When aroused to anger or in combat he had a fierce and frightening countenance and personally killed many men in war with revolver, blade, and rifle. His courage was legendary. Twenty-nine horses were shot from under him during the war. His cunning was also famous. He often defeated and captured enemy forces simply by deceiving or bluffing them on his actual numbers and weapons. Forrest learned the skill of bluffing as a boy and used it often in many circumstances.

Besides his important military victories, there were controversies in Forrest's career—the Fort Pillow "massacre" and his association with the KKK from 1867-1869. These will be covered in later articles. .

Forrest's military adversaries both feared and respected him. After the war, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman called Forrest:

"…the greatest cavalryman that ever lived."

To be continued.