



## CHAPTER 1

# Legendary Deeds Produce a Legend

Legends are born in the most unlikely places. The dusty village of Chapel Hill, Tennessee, was one such place, for there, on July 13, 1821, Nathan Bedford Forrest was born. This infant was destined to become a legend in his own lifetime and remains one today.

Forrest is remembered today as a fierce fighter, an implacable foe, even a “butcher.” Forrest was a product of his time and place, sharing the virtues and vices of both. He was also one of the greatest fighting men ever produced by an American army.

In times of danger such men are seen as valuable assets; but in times of peace they are viewed in a different light, especially by people of a different time and place. During the War Between the States, his enemies called him “that devil, Forrest,” while his friends dubbed him “the wizard of the saddle.” Many years later, when Forrest’s portrait was hung in the state capitol in Nashville, one of his officers, John Morton, would say:

Forrest, like a ruthless besom of destruction, made the air livid with his maledictions as he hurled himself upon the foe. He was indeed “the Wizard of the Saddle,” self-reliant and aggressive with the conscious power of one who always knew when, how, and where to strike. . . . His fame, deeds, and genius . . . ever will be the theme of eager discussion in every camp and school where military skill and science enlist a thought. (CV 11: 398-99)

For so long as that conflict raged, Forrest blazed his way across the landscape of Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and Kentucky, destroying Union supplies, disrupting rail travel, capturing hundreds of Union soldiers, and spreading chaos in the ranks of Union strategists. On these campaigns and raids, after September 1862, Forrest would be accompanied by a devoted band of followers, his Escort and his Staff. This “official family” would become as legendary as their leader. “The Forty Thieves,” the Escort was sometimes called; “they were as adept at foraging as they were at

fighting and at fighting they had no equals," one contemporary commented.

Also accompanying Forrest on these forays was a group of Confederates whose existence many would like to deny or, at least, forget. These were black men, men who drove wagons loaded with food, ammunition, and equipment, men who sometimes took a weapon in hand and went in harm's way. These were men whose labor allowed white men to fight.

Indeed, riding with Forrest as combat soldiers were a handful of African-Americans, some of whom were members of the general's personal bodyguard. Of the black men who served under him, Forrest would later say, "There were no better Confederates." Though many of this group are now lost to history, some are to be found in the available records (see Appendix E). The bonds these black men forged on the anvil of war with the white members of the Escort endured into the times of peace, for some of the black Confederates joined the Veterans Association established by the Escort and Staff. At least one of them became an officer of that body. Astonishing as it may seem today, white and black Confederate veterans met in integrated assemblies in the postwar years, while to the North, the reunions of veterans were segregated by race. Of course, the Confederates had fought side by side, while the Union soldiers served in units that represented only one race. Obviously, there was a side of the personality and character of Forrest that appealed to the black cavalrymen who "rode with Forrest." Equally obvious, the matter of race in the Old South was not as simple as some would like to think.

### **Military Career**

The speed at which Forrest rose through the ranks was also legendary. He joined the army as a private in 1861, became a colonel by 1862, was a brigadier before that year was out, and was a lieutenant general when the war ended in 1865. He did not lead from the rear; that was part of his legend. At least two dozen Yankees fell to his hand in personal combat, he was wounded four times, and thirty horses were shot from under him in battle. This legendary combat record attracted fighters who would themselves become legends.

Forrest's financial rise and fall were also the stuff of legends. Born in poverty in an area still a raw frontier, and left without a

father at an early age, Forrest became a millionaire through planting, real-estate sales, and slave trading. At the end of the war he had lost all his worldly goods and lived out his last years in a modest log house on land he rented, though he constantly planned and worked to recoup his finances through railroad construction and land development.

Before the war, Forrest had only a small circle of family and friends in northern Mississippi, and though these family roots had ties back to his birthplace in middle Tennessee, he was not a famous man. He also had made friends in commercial circles in Memphis, but he was not considered to be a “civic leader” in that town, nor did Forrest show any ambition to enter politics. As a man of wealth and personal accomplishment he was known to political leaders, but they did not seek his advice. Relatively few people knew Forrest when the war began.

Modesty and patriotism led Forrest to enlist as a private in Confederate service in June 1861, but his ability and reputation among those who did know him soon made him an officer assigned the task of raising a cavalry regiment, a task for which he was well suited. The unit Forrest raised was officially designated the Third Tennessee Cavalry, but its members would always refer with pride to having been a part of “Forrest’s Old Regiment.”

In organizing this force in the summer and fall of 1861, Forrest put into practice several tactics he would use throughout the war. First, he sent agents widely into the surrounding country to gather news and bring in recruits; then, in search of supplies, he went behind enemy lines. The weapons and equipment Forrest wanted were in short supply in Memphis, where numerous cavalry units were forming. Withdrawing a large sum in cash from his personal bank account, Forrest rode alone to Kentucky, shopping for pistols and saddles in several towns, including Louisville. In the Bluegrass State, Forrest met with groups of Southern sympathizers, whom he recruited into his nascent command and whom he utilized as couriers to carry his supplies back to Tennessee.

By the end of October 1861, Forrest and his regiment were on duty along the outpost line of the Confederate forces. In what would become another staple of Forrest’s tactics, his men ambushed a steamboat on the Ohio River and seized supplies for themselves. On another occasion they challenged the gunboat *Conestoga* and sent so much small shot through its gunports that the commander of the vessel decided to retire. On December 26

Forrest fought a sizable skirmish near the village of Sacramento, Kentucky. Here another staple on his strategic menu was developed.

Hearing from civilians, including a young woman, that a Union force was in Sacramento, Forrest advanced boldly until confronted by a line of defenders under the cover of heavy woods. Forrest dismounted part of his men to engage the center of this line and, from a location unobservable by the Yankees, sent a detachment around each of their flanks. When these detachments attacked from the rear of the Union line, Forrest charged from the front. A stampede resulted, but a temporary stand by the bluecoats produced another scenario that would become standard Forrest fare: Forrest had outrun the rest of his men, found himself surrounded, and engaged several enemies in hand-to-hand combat. At the end of this encounter, Forrest had killed three men. Maj. D. C. Kelley described this scene, and the basic elements of his word picture would be repeated many times by other observers throughout the war.

Forrest seemed in desperate mood and very much excited. His face was flushed till it looked like a painted warrior, and his eyes, usually mild in expression, glared like those of a panther about to spring upon its prey. He looked as little like the Forrest of the mess-table as the storm of December resembles the quiet of June. (Wyeth, 44)

## Early 1862

At Fort Donelson, Forrest showed he was capable of performing the duties of a cavalryman as defined by the regular army. On February 12, 1862, Forrest was placed in temporary command of a force of about 1,300 cavalymen, who fought a series of skillful delaying actions against the advance guard of Grant's force moving from Fort Henry toward Fort Donelson. Using most of his men to fight dismounted, Forrest repeatedly identified, occupied, and defended tactical positions while retaining a portion of his men on horseback to protect his flanks.

Again, on the thirteenth, Forrest was constantly on reconnaissance, although the Confederate forces had withdrawn within the entrenched perimeter of Fort Donelson. On February 15 Forrest commanded the cavalry shield of the Confederate assault column, which drove back Grant's right flank and opened an escape route for the besieged Rebs, if only they had chosen to use it. During the

attack, which lasted several hours, Forrest's men captured two batteries of artillery and Forrest had his horse killed under him, the first of thirty such animals to meet that fate. That night, informed of the infantry commanders' plan to surrender, Forrest made the decision that would launch his widespread fame. "To hell with that," he snorted. "I did not come here to surrender." Nor did he. During the darkness of February 15-16, Forrest led his command, and as many others who cared to join him, out of the besieged fort, escaping to Nashville. This became the one bright ray to shine from that gloomy event for the South, and the Forrest legend began to grow.

Placed in command of the city of Nashville by General Floyd, Forrest showed his skill as an organizer and administrator. Forrest stationed guards at all depots of government property, who once used a fire engine to hose down a mob and extinguish their desire for loot. Food and ammunition were sent south to Franklin on the Tennessee & Alabama Railroad, while other trains were directed down the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad to Murfreesboro. Wagons poured out of the town along every pike leading south and east. Even after Union infantry arrived on the opposite bank of the Cumberland River, Forrest remained in Nashville an additional twenty-four hours, until Yankee gunboats arrived to protect the troop crossing and he was forced to act.

Falling back to Huntsville, Alabama, Forrest allowed his command to disperse so the men could spend two weeks at their homes in middle Tennessee and north Alabama. At a time when Southern fortunes were declining, allowing men to go home would seem to be an invitation to mass desertion, but on the day set for the rendezvous, the furloughed men came back, bringing new recruits with them. Something about Forrest aroused fierce loyalty among his command.

After occupying Nashville, the Union commander committed a classic blunder, dividing his troops and separating his command. Don Carlos Buell left Nashville for a push toward Chattanooga, while Grant moved up the Tennessee River (south) toward a vital railroad junction at Corinth, Mississippi. Confederates under Albert Sidney Johnston used the network of rail lines to concentrate forces from all over the Deep South at Corinth. The Battle of Shiloh was a counterattack designed to destroy one part of the Union army before it could be supported by the other. The plan almost worked.

Forrest did not play an important role in the advance from Corinth to Shiloh, but on April 6, the first day of battle, he supported the Confederate right flank and once joined in an infantry attack on a Union battery. Later in his military career Forrest was asked what was the best way to attack a battery of artillery. He replied, "Since Shiloh I've knowd they ain't no best way. Hell, they ain't even no good way." The heavily wooded nature of the battlefield did not provide much scope for cavalry, but a reconnaissance on the night of the sixth allowed Forrest to report the arrival of Union reinforcements. The Union army had reunited just in time to avoid disaster.

April 7, the second day of the battle, was a repeat of the previous day for Forrest. On the eighth, however, he came into his glory leading the Confederate rear guard. His tactics of ambush and sudden assault checked the Union pursuit only a couple of miles from the battlefield. This engagement at a creek crossing called Fallen Timbers brought Forrest his first serious wound—a rifle shot that entered his right side above the point of his hip joint and lodged on the left side of his spine—and led to the death of his second horse. Forrest recuperated in Memphis until April 29, returned to his command, had the ball removed, and then spent two weeks recovering from the operation.

Forrest returned from his medical leave the first week of June. On the eleventh he was ordered to report to Chattanooga to organize a cavalry brigade to operate against the Union advance on that key city. After slowly advancing against and capturing Corinth, the Union forces had concentrated at Nashville and advanced nearly to the Tennessee River, while repairing the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad to serve as their supply line for an advance to Chattanooga. Gen. Braxton Bragg was preparing to move the Confederate army to Chattanooga, but something had to slow the Yankee juggernaut first. That something was Forrest.

## **Rise to Fame**

Forrest was delighted to return to his roots in middle Tennessee, but he was sorry to have to leave behind his "Old Regiment." Arriving in Chattanooga on June 19 Forrest found he had a core cadre of veterans on which to build. His new command would include the Eighth Texas or Terry's Texas Rangers, the

Second Georgia Cavalry, the Second Georgia Battalion, and 100 Kentuckians under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Woodward. To this core would be added new recruits and some units of less-experienced men.

Using the organizational and administrative skills that he possessed in abundance (though historians have not commented on them before), Forrest had his new command organized in only two weeks. On July 6 he moved toward middle Tennessee. As Forrest crossed the Tennessee River and moved into the Cumberland Mountains, which form the eastern plateau of the central part of the state, he followed an established pattern that the coming years would only strengthen. He sent ahead of his force a number of scouts, who would contact sympathetic civilian residents and bring back accurate information about road conditions; the placement of Yankee pickets, patrols, and troop encampments; and the location of forage and fodder for Forrest's men and animals. These scouts brought interesting news about the Union garrison at Murfreesboro.

There were two Union infantry regiments at Murfreesboro, the Ninth Michigan and the Third Minnesota. They were supported by four guns of a Kentucky battery, while the task of patrolling was done by the Seventh Pennsylvania Cavalry. Because of friction among the commands, the Minnesota infantry and Kentucky battery were camped on the banks of Stones River north of town while the Michigan infantry and Pennsylvania cavalry were ensconced on the Maney family farm, "Oaklands," some two miles away on the east side of town. A third detachment of Yankees occupied the town square, where the courthouse provided administrative office space for Gen. Thomas T. Crittenden and where a number of military and political prisoners were held in the town jail. Forrest decided to exploit the error the Union forces had made in dispersing their men.

Careful intelligence gathering, strategic maneuvering, and tactical finesse were already evident as basic elements of Forrest's military operations and show him to be a much more sophisticated soldier than the "first with the most" folktales indicate.

On the evening of July 12 Union soldiers relaxed in their Murfreesboro camps, assured that no Confederates were within striking distance. That would be the last sound sleep for any Yankee in Tennessee for many months. The events of the next



twenty-four hours showed Forrest might be lurking anywhere, ready to pounce on the unsuspecting and the unprepared.

Forrest had left McMinnville about noon on July 12. About midnight his command entered the village of Woodbury, where they were fed—and enraged. Along with good food the cavalymen received the news that the Union provost, Capt. Oliver Cromwell Rounds, had arrested all the men and boys in the village and imprisoned them in the Murfreesboro jail. Some of these civilians were sentenced to hang on the next morning. Forrest promised he would celebrate his birthday, July 13, by freeing these innocent Confederates.

Pushing on the remaining nineteen miles to Murfreesboro, Forrest silently captured the Yankee pickets and assigned his command their tasks. The Texans were to take on the Michigan infantry and Pennsylvania cavalry at the Maney farm. The Georgia troops would charge the town square, freeing the civilians from the jail and capturing the Yankee command structure. The rest of the command was to attack the Minnesota and Kentucky encampment.

The fight at the Maney farm became a stalemate. The infantry camp was overrun and the Pennsylvania cavalry captured, but most of the infantry force barricaded itself behind a stout fence and the Texans had no artillery to open the way for them.

On the square the jail was taken, but not before the soldier in charge had set it on fire and run off with the keys to the cells. Apparently, burning to death Southern civilians was an acceptable act in some Yankee minds. The courthouse, which is still in use today, was captured by a storming party who battered down the door with axes, occupied the ground floor, and then lit a fire to smoke out the Yankees on the upper floors. Unlike the Confederate prisoners in the jail, there was no chance of the Yankees burning to death; the brick building was fireproof. Hay was piled in the stairwell to produce a smoky fire.

The Minnesota and Kentucky troops fought stubbornly, even after Forrest led an attack from the rear that captured their camp and set it on fire. It took Forrest three charges to capture this camp, and in the process, he killed another man in personal combat. Even with their camp in flames behind them, the Northern troops held firm on a ridge. Forrest left only enough men to pin them in place and concentrated the rest of his men against the Yankees on the Maney farm.

After making all apparent preparations for an assault, Forrest sent in a note that contained wording soon to be familiar from repetition on dozens of fields. The Union troops were told they must surrender immediately or face the consequences. The “consequences” were that the assault force would accept no surrender once the attack began. This demand was fully in keeping with the established rules of war of the day, which stated that if a position refused a demand to surrender and was carried by assault, the attacking troops were under no obligation to accept as prisoners those who, by their continued resistance, had forced the assault to be made. The Union commander knew that since he harbored a man who had attempted to burn to death civilians in violation of the rules of war, Forrest had every reason to be serious about his intention to kill those who resisted a successful attack. The same knowledge of Union atrocities would weigh on the mind of many officers called on to surrender to Forrest.

The demand for surrender was successful and the news of the capitulation of the Michigan troops was carried to the still-resisting men of Minnesota and Kentucky. After a brief conference, they joined their comrades as prisoners of war.

Before leaving Murfreesboro, Forrest and his Staff met with the Union officers in the Maney house, Oaklands, for a meal of sweet potatoes and black-eyed peas, all the food Yankee foragers had left on the place. This meal is still served at Oaklands each July 13 in celebration of Forrest’s birthday, the anniversary of his victory at Murfreesboro. Also, Forrest made a roll of the names of the prisoners captured. As this roll was called, the name of the soldier who had set fire to the jail was announced. “That’s all right,” said Forrest. “Pass on” (Lytle, 95-96). The summary justice of a drumhead court-martial was already a part of the conflict.

What the escape from Fort Donelson had begun, the capture of Murfreesboro completed. The Forrest legend was made.

In the late summer of 1862, Braxton Bragg conceived and executed one of his best strategic plans. Using the rail net to transport his troops to the area of Chattanooga, he concentrated a force that he then led across the Cumberland Mountains and Cumberland River into Kentucky. This obliged many of the Union troops in Tennessee to fall back toward the Ohio River to meet the Confederate move. Forrest, still growing into the skills and responsibilities of command, played a role in screening the army on its

northern move. However, in doing this, he made a tactical error.

At Guest Hollow, near Morrison, Tennessee, a Union stockade guarded a bridge on an important branch of the Nashville and Chattanooga line. Railroad fortifications were something new for Forrest. Because the Union forces depended so heavily on the rails for logistical support, every culvert, every bridge, was coming to be protected by blockhouses or stockades. These fortifications would provide effective protection against raiders or guerrillas but would be vulnerable to a force supplied with artillery. At this point Forrest had no artillery but he saw that most of the Yankee garrison was outside the stockade, lolling on the grass and eating. Forrest assumed a sudden attack would stampede the Yanks and they could be overrun before they got under cover. He was wrong, and thirteen of his men paid the price for his false assumption. Forrest was not infallible—he did make mistakes—but he learned from them. Never again would he order such an attack. When such a role was forced on him in December 1862 by Gen. Joseph Wheeler at Dover, Tennessee, Forrest rebelled and refused ever to serve under Wheeler again.

Though Forrest was an effective and growing officer, the commander of the army was not happy with him and decided to place all the cavalry under the command of Joseph Wheeler. The younger Wheeler did not have Forrest's record of combat success, but he had the educational credentials from West Point, which Bragg trusted. As a result, Forrest was removed from his command and assigned to return to the area of middle Tennessee to raise more men. For the second time in four months, Forrest became an officer without a command.

### **Maturing Ability as a Commander**

By this point, Forrest had become one of the first officers to recognize the realities of modern war. Forrest abandoned the use of the traditional cavalry weapons, sabers and carbines, in favor of pistols and rifles. When his men needed to attack on horseback, pistols were more effective than edged weapons; when they needed to fight on foot, rifles gave them more firepower than did carbines.

The day of the cavalryman taking on artillery and jumping over breastworks was over. Forrest developed the use of artillery as an effective offensive weapon by attaching cannon to his command

and by using them at ranges as short as sixty yards to blast a hole in enemy lines or fortifications. He knew that if the line of supply was destroyed, even the largest enemy force would have to retreat, so he became a master of disrupting Yankee logistics systems. Psychology was also an important tool, even if the word itself was not in Forrest's vocabulary. He would soon adopt as his battle cry, "Keep the skeer on!" Forrest knew too that the civilian population had become a military target. He despised the suffering inflicted on those he considered "innocent victims" of war and used his full fury to suppress those who committed atrocities against civilians. This practice made him a hero in the South, even as it made him a villain in the North.

Recognition of the realities of modern war did not mean a hesitancy to fight when fighting could be done to an advantage. In 1862 Forrest selected an officer's sword from among captured booty. In disgust he found the weapon to be sharp for only a few inches from the point. Forrest called for a grindstone and, with an aide, proceeded to put a razor edge on the blade. One of Forrest's more formally educated officers intervened, telling him swords were more for show than for fighting. Forrest replied with a comment that still exemplifies the essence of war:

Damn such nonsense. War means fightin' and fightin' means killin'. Turn the grindstone.

The national motto of Scotland is: "No one insults me with impunity." Forrest agreed with that attitude, even if he never heard the words spoken. He demonstrated the same spirit when, in the spring of 1863, one of his own officers shot Forrest in a fit of anger during an argument. Forrest went after his assailant with a pocket knife, roaring, "No damn man kills me and lives!" That attitude would attract as recruits men who were hardy, inventive, dedicated, and dangerous—men who understood the realities of war and laughed at those same realities. Forrest would spread men imbued with this spirit across the entire cavalry force of the Army of Tennessee, as he frequently was forced to turn over his command to another and begin again to raise, equip, and arm a new force.

By the autumn of 1862, Forrest's deeds had created a legend. Personal leadership, exercised from the front; a fit application of

analysis leading to the formulation of effective plans; skillful maneuvering followed by fierce attacks and implacable pursuit of a retreating foe; an uncanny ability to discern the position and intentions of the enemy; a shrewd use of psychology—Forrest had put all on display North and South. These traits had begun to attract men whose spirits admired and emulated that of Forrest. Their presence in the ranks of his command would create a symbiotic relationship in which commander and commanded fed off the other. No single unit would have a greater share of that spirit than the Escort.

As Forrest made his way back to middle Tennessee, he sent a relative of his wife to the county in which he had been born. There the call went out for adventurous, active men who wanted to follow a fighter. Despite the presence of numerous Northern sympathizers and a Union garrison still occupying Nashville, the men Forrest wanted began to rally. Shelbyville, Tennessee, would be their first camp. There a new part of the Forrest legend would be born.