

Nathan Bedford Forrest: in Search of the Enigma

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Review

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Nathan Bedford Forrest

Two Perspectives

Nathan Bedford Forrest's Escort and Staff by Michael R. Bradley

Nathan Bedford Forrest: In Search of the Enigma by Eddy W. Davison and Daniel Foxx

Nathan Bedford Forrest, one of the most controversial commanders in the Civil War, continues to inspire opposing interpretations. One of these new books upholds the view that there was no massacre at Fort Pillow whereas the other focuses a magnifying glass on the details of the massacre and other accusations against Forrest, some of them only rumors. Michl R. Bradley's study provides the first unit history of Forrest's famous Escort Company and staff including information on their postwar reunions. Bradley, who taught history at Motlow State Community College for thirty-six years and is the author of several other books, seeks to present only the Confederate side of controversial issues. The members of the Escort and Staff saw one side, their side, Bradley wrote (14). The book provides valuable new information on the lives of several of the men, unit roster, and new details from the minutes of their reunions from 1877 to 1909.

Bradley concludes that the Escort Company of sixty to eighty men was an elite strike force comparable to today's Delta Force (9). Forrest called on them for the greatest challenges--they often were out in front on frontal assaults; they scouted, conducted intelligence deception by masquerading as deserters, served as advance or rear guards, rounded up stragglers, rescued cannon from capture, and guarded Forrest's invaluable body. Over twenty were killed in action,

including their organizer and first leader, Captain Montgomery Little, struck by enemy fire during the fourth and final assault in the Battle of Thompson's Station. Later commending them for their attack at Brice's Crossroads and for their continual reliability as scouts, Forrest said that among the men in his command, they are without an equal (115).

The book reveals the new information that the Escort included two African-American enlisted men: Private Pleasant Arnold and Private Burrell Buchanan. Arnold was killed on July 14, 1864, in the Battle of Tupelo, Mississippi, but Buchanan survived and was welcomed into membership of the unit's veteran organization. He joined the group in their reunion in Petersburg, Tennessee, in 1888, delivered a speech in the 1889 meeting in Tullahoma, and was elected Sergeant at Arms at the 1890 reunion in Murfreesboro.

Bradley conducted research in pension records, reunion minutes, the *Official Records*, newspapers, and other primary sources, but relied heavily on lengthy quotations from *Confederate Veteran Magazine*. The *Confederate Veteran* is a valuable source, but the reader would appreciate a narrative of the exciting military operations of the Escort and staff in the scholar's words rather than lengthy quotations that are not interpreted or synthesized in the narrative. Five quotes from *Confederate Veteran* each run for at least one full page of indented text, and one non-indented quotation runs for nine and one-half pages.

Bradley concludes that no massacre occurred at Fort Pillow and states that the U.S. Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War rejected the atrocity stories and failed to uncover the reasons why it happened (11). John Cimprich's *Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory* (2005) appeared after these two books went into production and understandably is not mentioned. As Cimprich thoroughly explains, the report of the committee concluded that all of the atrocity charges were confirmed by the evidence and claimed that the reason for the killing of individual Union soldiers after they surrendered was Confederate government policy toward African-American Union soldiers. From the view of the committee, they had explained why the massacre occurred.

Bradley's book relies almost completely on a quotation of Forrest's chief of staff, Major Charles W. Anderson, to inform the reader of the military action at Fort Pillow. He commends the account in Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr. with Connie Walton Moretti and James Michl Browne, *Brigadier General Tyree H.*

Bell, C.S.A.: Forrest's Fighting Lieutenant (2004). Bradley argues that this book's analysis of Fort Pillow is fair and judicious and maintains historical perspective (98). This is true, and Hughes and his fellow authors concluded that there was a massacre and that Bell as a brigade commander should have attempted to stop the killing. Following the commendable example of Hughes, Moretti, and Browne, the reader may ask if the same might apply to Anderson. Could he have done more to stop the killing? Forrest ordered him to take a detachment to the riverbank to prevent Union steamboats from landing, and this placed him in a key position below the bluff. As Chief of Staff, could he have done more?

Eddy W. Davison and Daniel Foxx analyze Forrest's life with the goal of impartially interpreting all of the enigmas surrounding him. Davison is adjunct history professor at Ottawa University and teaches criminal justice at the International Institute of the Americas. Daniel Foxx is professor of history emeritus at Ottawa University in Phoenix and has taught at East Carolina University and Glendale Community College. Their intended audience is students and general readers; accordingly, the book relies mostly on published primary and secondary sources. The authors present little new information, but they succeed in providing a valuable synthesis. Their narrative of Forrest's raids is detailed, clearly written, lively, and entertaining.

Davison and Foxx portray Forrest as a violent man who from his youth on the frontier in middle Tennessee learned that for him the key to success was immediate and fierce action (19). He loved fighting, and you could see it in the transformation that came over him in battle--his eyes blazed, his face flushed, and his manner became more domineering. The authors describe his confrontations throughout his life, from when at the age of sixteen he shot his neighbor's bull to his testimony for Congress on the Ku Klux Klan.

Forrest ignored Napoleon's maxims and government regulations. He distributed captured weapons to his men, threatened no quarter if an enemy refused to surrender, and frequently practiced deception. Using fear as a psychological force multiplier, he directed elaborate ruses that caused enemy commanders to exaggerate his strength. In daylight, he would march the same men back and forth, first as infantry and then as cavalry. He had artillery batteries appear and reappear on hillsides, and in one case his opponent estimated that he had fifteen cannon when he had only two. At night he would light many bivouac fires and have the men shout loud commands as though they

were being reinforced. On the night of December 17, 1861, he staged one of these shows for captured Unionist civilians and set them free to report to Union General Jeremiah C. Sullivan a few miles away in Jackson, Tennessee. The next day Sullivan reported Forrest's strength at five times what it was; Forrest's 2,000 men had become 10,000 in Sullivan's mind.

The authors critically examine what they call the dark side of Forrest, such as rumors that he personally shot or ordered the shooting of captured civilians. They report a 1903 article in a local newspaper that had a reputed eyewitness account of Forrest ordering the execution of two African American men captured in the fight at Trenton, Tennessee on December 20, 1862. Davison and Foxx conclude that the report could well be true (107).

They prefer not to call the killing at Fort Pillow a massacre, but make it very clear that many Union soldiers, mostly African Americans, were shot while surrendering or after they surrendered. In a panic, several of the Union men ran to the river, jumped in, and were killed attempting to swim to safety. Forrest said later in a speech that the Mississippi River was stained red with blood for two hundred yards. The authors agree with the standard interpretation that there is no evidence that Forrest ordered the massacre; indeed, as others have written they emphasize that discipline broke down and once Forrest arrived on the scene, he stopped the killing.

Davison and Foxx agree with recent Forrest biographers that he did not organize the Ku Klux Klan but was an enthusiastic member who organized dens on his business trips. In 1870 he ordered the Klan disbanded and withdrew from membership. In emphasizing that Forrest was a complex individual who defies categorization, the authors suggest that less than two years before he died Forrest went far beyond the prejudices of his day to advocate equality for African Americans. In a speech delivered before a black social organization in late 1875, he declared that African Americans should have equal opportunity in business, agriculture and law. Edwin C. Bearss wrote the valuable foreword, and readers will enjoy his description of how he first became interested in the Civil War.

James A. Ramage, Regents Professor of History at Northern Kentucky University, is author of Rebel Raider: The Life of General John Hunt Morgan and Gray Ghost: The Life of Col. John Singleton Mosby. He is currently writing a book on the history of Kentucky from 1800 to 1865 with his daughter Andrea Watkins and a biography of Ulysses S. Grant.

