

THE FORT PILLOW "MASSACRE"

By Dr. Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr.

It was April 1864. Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest was returning from his latest highly successful raid into western Tennessee. Strengthened by new recruits, fresh horses and the best equipment and supplies Uncle Sam could buy, Forrest was now ready to return to Mississippi. On his way back, he halted at Eaton, Tennessee, where a number of ladies met with him and tearfully begged him to take Fort Pillow before he left the state. The troops there were largely ex-slaves who had previously belonged to the residents of this area and were now terrorizing the families of their former masters, who did not know what to expect next, but feared the worst. Several robberies had taken place and a number of women in the area had been raped by blacks and/or Tennessee Tories. Some of the blacks had made a special point of insulting the wives and sisters of Confederate soldiers and their widows and orphans, some of whom had been physically abused.

"General Forrest was a man of great sympathy, and when he heard the pathetic stories told by the ladies, he changed his plans and decided to capture Fort Pillow," Theodore F. Brewer, one of Forrest's soldiers, recalled later. Always the self-appointed protector of Southern womanhood, the stories of sexual violations instantly threw him into a cold rage. He decided to put an end to it. "You may go home and rest assured that I will take the fort if it costs me my life," Forrest said to the women.

Nor was Eaton the only place Forrest heard about the outrages. When he left Paducah, the "Wizard of the Saddle" was distressed by "well-authenticated instances, repeatedly brought to his notice of rapine [rape] and atrocious outrages upon non-combatants of the country by the garrison at Ft. Pillow." The Union soldiers, General Jordan wrote, were also accused of "venting upon the wives and daughters of Southern soldiers the most opprobrious and obscene epithets, with more than one extreme outrage upon the persons of these victims of their hatred and lust."

Since Fort Pillow had no military value, it is clear that General Forrest had only one motivation for attacking it: Chivalry. As a protector of Southern women, Forrest was not about to put up with *that*.

The Union defenses at Fort Pillow were about as poorly constructed as one could imagine. After an all-night ride of almost 60 miles, Forrest and his men arrived in a rush early on the morning of April 12. They quickly sneaked up on the drowsy pickets and took them prisoner or silenced them with their knives. Attacking immediately, the Rebels quickly captured the first two lines of earthworks, and the garrison fell back to its final defensive position. They were now effectively surrounded, with only one tenuous route of retreat to the Mississippi River. Instead of accepting Forrest's generous surrender terms, however, the Union commander decided to bolster the courage of his men by allowing them to drink. Barrels of whiskey, beer and ale, complete with dippers, were placed at various spots in the fort, and the men were granted unlimited access. The liquor made the defenders bulletproof—at least in their own minds. When scouts reported to Forrest that they were drinking, he was pleased. "I will give them time to get drunk," he grinned.

Forrest nevertheless rode forward to give them a second chance to surrender. In doing so, he exposed himself to the ridicule of the garrison, which had now been drinking for about three hours. They had lost all self-restraint. Trooper Winik later recalled: ". . . the cocky Federals openly taunted Forrest, daring him to try to take the garrison. It was the mistake of their lives." They also taunted the Confederate privates, dared them to attack, and made faces and "insulting gestures" at them. The boys in gray were already unhappy, because they thought it was morally wrong for the Union to arm the ex-slaves of local residents. Now they were furious.

So was General Forrest. He walked up and down the Confederate ranks, shouting encouragement to his men and yelling, "At 'em! At 'em!"

"He was the incarnation of all the destructive powers on earth," Captain Dinkins recalled. "He was to a battle what a cyclone is to an April shower. His voice could be heard by the Yankees. No doubt they trembled, as later events proved."

"Blow the charge, Gaus, blow the charge!" Forrest shouted at his bugler.

Eager to extract revenge, the “Johnnies” surged forward immediately. Firing as rapidly as they could, the sharpshooters poured a hail of lead into the fort, keeping Union heads down as the men of the first assault wave climbed out of a ravine, scurried across the higher ground and into the ditch at the foot of the redan. The first men in the ditch used their bodies as human ladders as the next waves climbed to the top of the parapet and poured over it like a flood. It happened so quickly that the Yankees had little time to react as a thousand men “as if rising from the very earth” were suddenly on top of the parapet, then firing down into the fort--firing into their foes with their pistols and carbines. The fighting was fierce and often hand-to-hand. But the Rebels had superior numbers and better weapons, so Union casualties rose quickly. For a few moments there was a terrible slaughter. Then the Federals broke and ran toward the river. Their officers were quickly killed or ran panic-stricken down the bluff. “Boys, save your lives!” the Union commander shouted as he ran away. He had completely lost control. Some Yankees surrendered, some tried to, others kept fighting, while still others took the only route of retreat available: down the bluff to the Mississippi River--a gauntlet of death. Several men jumped into the river, taking their chances with the current. They were shot as they tried to swim away. “The river was dyed red with the blood of the enemy for 200 yards,” Forrest reported later.

Inside the dying fort, there was complete confusion. Here, murders undoubtedly took place. Some of the Yankees played dead, and some dropped their weapons and pretended to surrender, then picked them up again and fired into the backs of the Confederates after the assault wave passed. The Southerners were in no mood to take prisoners after such treachery. There can be no doubt that many were seized by an atavistic rage—what the Germans call a *Blutrausch*—a “fury of the blood”. The Romans called it *insanitas belli*—the “fury of battle”. Confederate Sergeant Achilles V. Clark wrote his sisters on April 19: “Our men were so exasperated by the Yankees’ threats of no quarter that they gave but little. The slaughter was awful—words cannot describe the scene.”

Former Confederate soldiers who had deserted fared badly. They were ordered to their knees, found guilty (although there were no trials) and were then summarily shot. Of the 64 known deserters in the fort, only 17 survived.

Some of the African-Americans played dead, but just before they were to be buried, they would plead for their lives. One of them cried “Marster, for God’s sake, spare me! I didn’t want to leave home; dey ‘scripted me! Spare me, marster, and take me home. Dey ‘scripted me!”

It was easy for the Rebs to believe the Yankees had conscripted this man, and since he was in the fort against his will, they spared him, along with several others.

It seems clear from the subsequent testimony that Forrest tried to stop the unnecessary slaughter. At one point, sword drawn, he rode between a group of African-Americans who were trying to surrender and some of his men, who were about to shoot them. Whether he was complicit in the prior killings is a matter of speculation. Most of the murders that took place toward the end of the battle occurred at the bottom of the bluff, while Forrest and his second-in-command, General Chalmers, were on the top of the bluff. Forrest nevertheless would spend the rest of his life under the shadow of “the Fort Pillow Massacre.”

Forrest lost 14 men killed and 86 wounded. Union losses were much higher. Of the 585 to 605 men at the fort, between 277 and 297 were killed or mortally wounded. Two hundred, twenty-six men were taken prisoner—168 whites and 58 blacks. Of the Union garrison, between 47 to 49 percent of the total were killed—very high losses indeed. Forrest’s command suffered less than 1% fatal casualties.

Ironically, once the killing was over, the African-Americans who survived were treated better than the white prisoners. They were mostly sent to labor battalions in Mobile, where life was no picnic but at least they received food. The white prisoners were sent to Andersonville.

A reporter for the New York *Tribune* wrote an article, dated April 18 from Knoxville, breaking the “news” of the “Fort Pillow Massacre.” The propaganda piece was copied all over the North. But there was no massacre. In military terminology, a massacre is when all or nearly all of the defenders are deliberately killed—such as at the Alamo, Thermolyae or Little Big Horn. Forrest clearly could have killed all of the

Yankees had he wished, but he took dozens of prisoners, so Fort Pillow was not a massacre. It was, however, an atrocity, because many men were not granted quarter or were put to death after they surrendered. The term “massacre,” however, sold more newspapers, so that is what it became in the court of public opinion.

The Radical Republicans soon saw a political opportunity in the “massacre”. They conducted an investigation, led by Senator Benjamin F. Wade and Representative Daniel W. Cooch of the Joint Select Committee on the Conduct of the War. Much of the testimony was false and at least two "eyewitnesses" were in Memphis at the time of the battle. The final report was "politically correct" by 1864 standards, and most of its conclusions were exaggerated or distorted and cannot stand close scrutiny. For example, it declared that the Confederates murdered black women and children, even though these non-combatants had been evacuated by the Union Navy before the battle began. Naturally Forrest and his men were demonized, and 40,000 extra copies of the report were printed for dissemination to the Northern public, in hopes of swaying their votes for Lincoln and the continuation of the war. The report inflicted the title "butcher" on General Forrest—a label which he did not deserve but would wear for the rest of his life.

In view of the uproar, and not trusting the Congressional probe, General Sherman ordered his own investigation, to determine if retaliation was in order. After he received the report, he did nothing. William T. Sherman was not the kind of man to shrink from retaliation if he considered it justified. He obviously concluded that the Congressional investigation had little merit.

Dr. Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr. is the author of more than three dozen books on World War II and The War of Southern Self-Determination, including:

- *Bust Hell Wide Open: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest*
- *It Wasn't About Slavery: Exposing the Great Lie of the Civil War*
- *The Greatest Lynching in American History: New York, 1863*

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