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**OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature

*John R. Sanders*

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**ABSTRACT**

This research paper studies the operational leadership of Confederate cavalry General Nathan Bedford Forrest at the tactical level of combat and presents some lessons learned for the modern warfare commander in the context of doctrinal publications such as Army Field Manual 100-5. Forrest's greatest victory at the Battle of Brice's Cross Roads is examined as a case study which exemplifies many of his innovations and tactics in the art of maneuver warfare and operational leadership.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

"I wish [to recruit] none but those who desire to be actively engaged...Come on boys if you want a heap of fun and to kill some Yankees."

General Nathan Bedford Forrest was one of the most complex and controversial military leaders of the Civil War. His reputation down through the years is that of an unlettered military genius in the operational art of war at the tactical level. Without a formal military education, he became one of the leading cavalry figures and greatest operational leaders of the war. Feared by his opponents and many of his men, Forrest was an authentic military genius with six months of formal education, yet he possessed an instinct and talent for combat that few military leaders have equalled in U.S. history.

Forrest was an epic figure. He overcame severe poverty and deprivation in the rural South to antebellum planter status before the war. Generals Robert E. Lee and William T. Sherman and other leaders on both sides ultimately declared him the most remarkable soldier of the Civil War. He was the only soldier from North or South to join the military as a private and rise to the rank of lieutenant general.<sup>1</sup> A fierce combatant who led by personal example, Forrest was wounded four times, had twenty-nine horses shot from under him and killed at least thirty Union soldiers in hand-to-hand combat.<sup>2</sup> Forrest's keen insight into the true nature of war is best revealed by his famous quote: "War means fighting and fighting means killing."<sup>3</sup>

This research paper will attempt to bring alive many of the tactical innovations and operational leadership techniques of Bedford Forrest which contributed so greatly to his many successes in what has become known as maneuver warfare. Although Forrest would rise through the ranks in responsibility from a small tactical unit to a full corps commander, this paper will focus on Forrest's operational leadership at the tactical level.

Forrest was a true visionary in the conduct of war; his extraordinary leadership produced incredible victories against overwhelming odds on the field of battle. His legacy comes down to the present through doctrine and example. His innovative use of maneuver and firepower coupled with aggressive tactics incorporating surprise, deception, offense, shock and simplicity are directly reflected in current Army doctrinal publications such as Field Manual 100-5. This paper will examine Forrest's operational leadership and his tactics in the context of modern Army doctrine and present some lessons learned for the modern military operational commander.

## CHAPTER II TACTICS AND INNOVATIONS

"Whenever you meet the enemy no matter how few there are of you or how many of them, show fight."

### Background and First Engagement

Nathan Bedford Forrest was born in middle Tennessee, July 13, 1821, the eldest son of a blacksmith. The family moved to Mississippi in 1834 when young Bedford was thirteen. His father died three years later leaving Bedford to support his mother, five brothers and three sisters. Through hard work and business sense as a laborer, livestock dealer, slave trader and planter Forrest overcame poverty and achieved great wealth; by 1861 he was a millionaire alderman in Memphis. When Tennessee seceded from the Union Forrest was almost forty years old, but he promptly enlisted as a private in the Tennessee Mounted Rifles.<sup>4</sup> Within a month the governor of Tennessee authorized him to raise a battalion of cavalry and six months later he became lieutenant colonel of the Third Tennessee Regiment, which he had recruited and outfitted primarily at his own expense. Over the course of the war he broadened his scope of command from the purely tactical level of small unit engagements with peripheral participation in large battles, to long-ranging cavalry raids with a brigade, to ultimately command of a cavalry corps.<sup>5</sup> At Fort Donelson, and the Battles of Shiloh, Chickamauga, and Nashville he commanded cavalry support elements; his greatest

fame would accrue from his series of highly successful raids into Tennessee and Kentucky and by his victories as a corps commander in Mississippi.<sup>6</sup>

Physically Bedford Forrest was two inches over six feet tall, powerfully built with a commanding presence. Ordinarily mild in manner and quiet in speech, in anger or the excitement of combat he was transformed into "a seeming maniac, terrifying to look upon, savage and profane...The excitement of battle, however, never impaired his observation or judgment, although he had a propensity for riding into the thick of battle and engaging in hand-to-hand combat."<sup>7</sup>

In his first substantial combat experience at Sacramento, Kentucky, on 28 December 1861, operating with a small force of several hundred men, Forrest demonstrated the skill and tactics which were to characterize his military actions throughout the war by employing envelopment tactics and boldly engaging the enemy in personal combat.<sup>8</sup> Forrest and his men were on reconnaissance patrol when they ran into a group of Federal cavalry twice their strength. His initial reaction was simple, direct and effective. Forrest first dismounted some of his men to serve as sharpshooters to attract attention at the front, then he dispatched small groups on both flanks to work rapidly around the enemy, then simultaneously attacked with a frontal assault crying: "Charge! Forward, men, and mix with 'em!"<sup>9</sup> The Federal force quickly faltered. "The enemy, broken by the charge and perceiving movement on their flanks, broke in utter confusion,



and, in spite of the efforts of a few officers, commenced a disorderly flight at full speed, in which the officers soon joined."<sup>10</sup> From this first combat experience Forrest's intuitively skillful use of maneuver, flanking and simultaneous attack would become a trademark of his aggressive style.

### Offense

The heart of Forrest's operational art at the tactical level was in the offense. His system of fighting was distinctly aggressive: whenever possible he always attacked, despite any disparity in numbers. He firmly believed the moral effect was with the attacker, that one man advancing in attack was equal to two men standing in line of battle awaiting attack.<sup>11</sup> John Wyeth, Forrest's principal biographer wrote: " [Forrest] knew that the excitement of a forward movement inspired even the timid with courage, while to stand in the open and receive a charge was a severe test of the bravest men."<sup>12</sup>

Forrest keenly understood the role of boldness and audacity in exercising combat leadership. After the war he described his methodology in seizing the initiative in the opening moves of a combat engagement. Forrest stated that most men regarded the battlefield with "horror and consternation" and that he tried to make his initial appearance "as shocking to the enemy as possible," committing his entire force against the enemy in the "fiercest and most warlike manner possible--to overawe and demoralize from the very start..." then with unabated fury

continue to fight by a series of blows, killing, capturing and driving them but with little difficulty.<sup>13</sup>

Although usually inferior in force, Forrest would employ maneuver and deception to feign attacks or field imaginary units to throw his opponent off balance; then by concentrating rapidly to a critical mass, he would personally lead a fierce charge at the crucial point in battle with greater strength, resolve, and will to break through the enemy's line. Forrest had the uncanny ability to mass his men properly against segments of the enemy, or if the enemy had massed, Forrest would maneuver his forces until the enemy became dispersed or had fallen into a poor position, then strike rapidly and vigorously before they recovered from the surprise. Forrest immortalized this concentration of force doctrine by his simple formula: "Get there first with the most men."<sup>14</sup>

### Intelligence

But Forrest did not merely go charging into the first line of bluecoats he encountered. While his battles were usually fought "on the instant," his campaigns were carefully planned and the result of meticulous intelligence. Part of Forrest's "genius" was his thorough knowledge of the military situation and a carefully planned movement of his forces. One of his most successful methods was in his extensive use of scouts, who, attracted by his daring and reputation, were eager to join Forrest's service. His unerring eye and judgment for the fitness of a man for duty enabled him to select the very best.<sup>15</sup>

Forrest's superb scouting cadre enabled him to always know where the enemy was and how to avoid contact, while no one seemed to know where Forest was at any given moment.<sup>16</sup> Forrest routinely sent his scouts out in every direction, continually reporting back enemy movement--or no movement...he considered it just as important, quoting one of his men, "to know where they ain't--as to know where they are."<sup>17</sup> Forrest placed such value on intelligence and veracity of reporting that on one occasion he severely beat a scout who returned with information relayed from a passing civilian, without verification.<sup>18</sup>

By finding, locating, and placing the enemy at a disadvantage, Forrest always had the odds on his side--he was also careful not to act or commit until the odds were in his favor. The odds were not just "the numbers;" Forrest had contempt for merely using numbers as an indicator of success because by themselves they were meaningless and unimportant. Forrest believed that the character of the commander, the will and morale of his men, and other factors such as weather and terrain were more important in determining the odds.<sup>19</sup>

Forrest was the antithesis of the West Pointer. He not only scorned the fixation of "educated" generals with troop strength as the sole predictor of battlefield success; he cared little for Army regulations or tactics and disobeyed or went around them whenever the good of the service or circumstances demanded it. Likewise, Forrest regarded exhaustive cavalry drills and similar

evolutions in camp to be an unnecessary burden upon men and horses.<sup>20</sup>

### Firepower and Tactics

Forrest recognized early in the war that the increase in firepower from the rifle and revolver made the successful cavalry charge against infantry outdated.<sup>21</sup> His first change was in the traditional use of the saber by cavalry. Except for officers (as an insignia of rank), he banned the saber from his command, regarding it as a "dangling, clattering appendage"<sup>22</sup>-- of little or no value as an offensive weapon. Forrest preferred to arm his men with a Sharp's rifle, or short carbine, and two Navy revolvers, better for either attack or defense.<sup>23</sup>

Early in the war, soon after the Battle of Shiloh, Forrest began to employ his men as "mounted infantry," fighting battles on foot and using the horse as a means of conveyance and transportation.<sup>24</sup> One of the first Confederate generals to fight in this manner, Forrest recognized that men on horseback, even when armed with repeaters, could not match those who dismounted and took advantage of cover for protection and steadiness of aim. Forrest's men soon realized he was not just concerned with maximizing their effectiveness, but also in "fighting smart" with their lives. Armed and trained in such a manner, accompanied with artillery, Forrest's cavalry could perform all the functions of an all-arms force, giving him tremendous flexibility and the capability for rapid movement and assault.<sup>25</sup> These advantages were recognized by outside observers as well. Captain Scheibert

of the Prussian Grand staff wrote: "...the Confederates combined shock tactics and dismounted fighting to a remarkable degree and were able to use cavalry as a virtually independent arm."<sup>26</sup>

In fighting his men dismounted, Forrest also did not conform to the rule of thumb that every fourth man acted as horseholder. At times he would have a single trooper hold up to eight horses and in certain extremes Forrest would order every man into battle with the horses tied to trees or fences. On one of these occasions when some of his officers who were drilled in the cavalry manual suggested to him the danger of leaving the animals unprotected, Forrest replied, "It won't make any difference...I need the men to whip the enemy, and if they do not whip them they'll have no need for horses."<sup>27</sup>

Forrest was a revolutionary proponent on the use of artillery at close range as an assault weapon with forward troops. In action at Parker's Cross Roads, Tennessee, in December 1862, Forrest dismounted the bulk of his troops and pushed them forward, while placing his artillery in front of his line. The dismounted men used all available cover and advanced slowly behind the guns.<sup>28</sup> As described in Battle Tactics of the Civil War, the effect of cannon used at short range could be devastating: "...at 'canister range'--the last three hundred yards to the gun--the flash and crash of a Napoleon firing 2 1/2 pounds of powder with grape and canister staggers the enemy..<sup>29</sup>

Forrest's aggressive attack philosophy carried into the pursuit phase of battle, routinely using a fierce and relentless

pursuit after the enemy had broken and was fleeing in retreat or rout. Forrest was a master of pursuit and saw it as a logical extension of the battlefield, a further opportunity to not only physically but psychologically crush the enemy, inflicting deep wounds that would also enhance his terrible reputation. It took amazing stamina and indomitable will to push victorious yet fatigued men on for miles against a defeated foe, but Forrest understood intuitively the psychology of the "skeer," as he called it, and the mechanics of initiating it and keeping it going.<sup>30</sup> After the overwhelming Confederate victory at Brice's Cross Roads, against a numerically superior foe, Forrest's men pursued the thoroughly beaten Federals into the night and the next day, inflicting continuous punishment on the rear guard and capturing numerous supplies in the panic-stricken rout of the Federal soldiers.<sup>31</sup>

### Deception

In addition to his tactical innovations, Forrest was a master of deception and bluff and possessed "a cunning acumen for deceit and duplicity."<sup>32</sup> He routinely employed deception to inflate the strength of his command, enabling him on more than one occasion to fully control the movement of his opponent, who would be under the impression that Forrest's strength was much greater than it really was. Forrest often combined his exaggerated strength with his own bluff and deceit to force the complete surrender of enemy forts, garrisons or forces.

On Forrest's first major raid into Tennessee in 1862 he immediately began to employ deception tactics, and soon had the Federals in the area convinced that his cavalry force of 2,100 men was almost 20,000. As described by his chief artilleryman, Lieutenant John Morton: "No device for creating this impression [of inflated strength] was too insignificant to be called into play. The constant beating of [infantry] kettle drums, the lighting and tending of numerous campfires, moving pieces of artillery from one point to another, the dismounting of cavalry and parading them as infantry--nothing was overlooked."<sup>33</sup>

Deception was reinforced by tricking captured prisoners in camp into believing the inflated numbers, then paroling them back to their commands to report on Forrest's strength. Within days Union General Sullivan had consolidated his outlying garrisons back to Jackson in the face of this "huge" Confederate force, in effect conceding the surrounding countryside to Forrest and his men! As Forrest's cavalry rode out unopposed to destroy the railroads and other Federal communications, Sullivan wired General Grant: "...my preparations for defense are good. I can hold Jackson against all [Forrest's] forces if it numbers 10,000."<sup>34</sup>

On another occasion Forrest and his personal escort of sixty troops were retreating from Western Tennessee at night when they encountered a Federal force of 600 cavalry. Forrest quickly dispersed his men under cover of darkness and formed them into a deceptive "battle line" in the woods, spacing the men every ten

paces or so. The call "brigade charge" then rang out and was repeated half a dozen more times down the line. The troopers crashed through a field of dried cornstalks, creating a din of a massive cavalry charge, causing the Federals to rapidly withdraw in the face of an apparently overwhelming force.<sup>35</sup>

Forrest's most famous use of bluff and deception occurred in May, 1863, when he skillfully halted a Union raiding force in Northern Alabama led by Colonel Abel Streight. Vigorously pursued by Forrest and about 500 Confederates, the Federal force of 1500 men were completely worn down by five days of continuous pursuit and running engagements. Under a flag of truce, employing "couriers" from phantom units and moving his artillery pieces continuously to create the impression of superiority, Forrest used psychology and deception to convince the exhausted Union officer to surrender his body of men which was actually three times larger than Forrest's. Once the ruse was discovered by Colonel Streight he immediately demanded a return of his equipment and arms for a "fair fight," but Forrest just smiled and replied, "Ah, Colonel, all is fair in love and war you know."<sup>36</sup>



### CHAPTER III LEADERSHIP AND SHAPING THE BATTLEFIELD

"Whenever you see anything blue, shoot at it, and do all you can to keep up the scare."

#### Personal Example

Nathan Bedford Forrest's extraordinary leadership qualities were directly responsible for his combat success. "He possessed more than his share of personal courage and in battle he took no quarter. He was afraid of no man."<sup>37</sup> Forrest inspired his men through personal example, and was routinely at the head of a charge or attack at the decisive point in an engagement or battle. At the front line Forrest was not only a visible leader of his men but he preferred to be where he could personally observe the enemy's reaction to his tactics, the effect of maneuver and terrain on the momentum of battle, and decide how to best control the flow of combat. Forrest instinctively knew that nothing inspired the common soldier as to be led into life-threatening combat by a commander who is willing to take the same risk that his men take...and who stays with them in the "thickest fray."<sup>38</sup>

Through sheer willpower and determination to succeed, Forrest pushed his men hard. He could be extremely demanding in his tasking to subordinates, believing that the first duty of a commander was to so direct, control and influence the men who did the fighting that they became an extension of his own personality.<sup>39</sup> Only those who rode with Forrest knew how

demanding he was. "Many commanders inspire courage and zeal on the battlefield, but the few great ones conquer fatigue... when the limits of endurance had been reached, Forrest called on his men to make still greater efforts-- then personally led the way-- and the men always responded."<sup>40</sup>

### Pride and Fear

Forrest's men were not naturally braver than other Confederate soldiers, but they caught their courage and inspiration from him. Private J.P. Young of the 7th Tennessee Cavalry wrote in 1864: "...this was their first fighting under their new commander Forrest, and his immediate presence seemed to inspire everyone with his terrible energy, more like that of a piece of powerful steam machinery than a human being."<sup>41</sup>

But Forrest's leadership was a mixture of pride and fear. Every soldier under Forrest knew it was expected that he would fight to the death if it became necessary, and he knew moreover, that Forrest had no respect or mercy for a coward. Forrest ordered his officers to shoot any man who wavered, and he emphasized this order by his own conduct. Forrest on occasion personally beat or shot his own men who were fleeing the battlefield; he considered such punishment the cost of achieving his desired ends of victory.<sup>42</sup>

Forrest was a master of using psychology to overcome physical and mental blocks to success. A classic example is seen in his actions before the Confederate cavalry charge at Okolona, Mississippi, in 1864. Confronted by a Federal force three times

his own, Forrest remarked to his escort staff, "We can't hold them--but we can run over them!"<sup>43</sup> As Lieutenant William Witherspoon remembered years later, "Forrest then proceeded to go down his line of cavalry and identified with each man. Looking them in the eye, Forrest charged each man in turn, '...hold this line for me.' So you see when the Federals charged that line, it was not one Forrest you were contending with, but every man in that line was a Forrest."<sup>44</sup> This cohesion and bonding was a cornerstone of Forrest's leadership; he knew that success or failure on the battlefield was the direct result of the morale, willingness to fight and die, and unit cohesion which men had for each other and their commander.

Soon Forrest's exceptional leadership and successful exploits in battle created an "intimidating aura of invincibility" that further enhanced his fierce reputation. Men took great pride in the fact that they rode with Forrest, making his subsequent recruiting efforts easier; but more than any other cavalry commander Forrest was relieved of his troops almost as soon as he had molded them into a well-coordinated fighting outfit...the penalty Forrest paid for his extraordinary ability to organize, to train and to inspire recruits.<sup>45</sup> For example, in 1862 Forrest was ordered to Chattanooga to organize a new command. The men present were largely disaffected, with little training, supplies or morale. Forrest quickly put to work his formula for instilling fear and respect: "By alternatively cursing, praising, and threatening to shoot his men himself if

his orders were not carried out, Forrest rapidly jolted his men into a unit possessing some degree of order and discipline. Forrest also made plans to use military action to accomplish some of his training..."<sup>46</sup>

Forrest's leadership extended to other units as well. One of John H. Morgan's cavalymen recalled Forrest's exhortations to his group prior to the Battle of Chickamauga: "...the whole army moved out for battle. Our small force was ordered to report to General Forrest on the field, and did so about ten o'clock...as the men galloped by Forrest he called to them in language which inspired them with still higher enthusiasm. He urged them to do their whole duty in the battle. He spoke of their chief...who was then lying in the cell of a [Federal] penitentiary. He gave them 'MORGAN!' for a battle cry and bade them maintain their old reputation."<sup>47</sup>

Through his legendary exploits a personality cult developed among those who served with Forrest. The boast "I rode with Old Bedford" was the highest claim a Confederate cavalryman could make.<sup>48</sup>

#### Attention to Detail

Forrest was equally famous for his keen attention to detail in the leadership and administration of his men and equipment. His many years as a private businessman, coupled with a natural genius for mathematics, served him in good stead. He directly related relatively mundane activities back at camp, such as the care and feeding of men and horses, to combat capability. The

business inbetween battles of replacing wornout mounts and refitting his men were closely observed by Forrest and his staff.<sup>49</sup> He would carefully inspect the artillery and harness, and the condition of the animals as well as the men, and held his officers strictly accountable for keeping his command supplied with ammunition, forage, and rations. Nothing dealing with his combat capability escaped his scrutiny. At daylight on the move he would take his place by the roadside and inspect his regiments as they rode out, checking men, equipment, and animals for proper rig and fitness. He also never rested until his men were bedded down and pickets properly posted to insure the safety of his men at night. These and many similar actions of care, concern and attention to detail formed a strong bond between Forrest and his men. They knew he cared.<sup>50</sup>

#### Shaping the Battlefield: The Battle of Brice's Cross Roads

Reinforcing Forrest's tremendous physical courage and formidable presence on the battlefield was his raw intellect and keen insight throughout the raging battle. Forrest had the ability to maintain his cool under fire while retaining his exceptional powers of logic and reason, despite the horrors of battle raging about him or overwhelming mental or body fatigue. This facility enabled him to cope with stress and rapidly react to the unexpected in combat--the crucial test of a battlefield commander. Many observers and biographers have emphasized this aspect of Forrest's character, his unique ability to "see" the

entire battlefield, and be ready to seize the moment to press home an advantage to victory.<sup>51</sup>

No greater example of this facility exists than Forrest's actions at the Battle of Brice's Cross Roads in June, 1864 in what has become a textbook case on the art of maneuver warfare and shaping the battlefield. Forrest, with 3,500 Confederate cavalry and eight cannon, overwhelmingly defeated a Union force of 8,100 cavalry, infantry and 22 cannon under General Samuel Sturgis. The large Union force left Memphis in early June on an expedition to destroy Forrest in Northern Mississippi. Forrest made plans to engage Sturgis on his own terms and correctly predicted the entire course of battle. As the Federal army of cavalry, infantry, artillery and support wagons pressed into his territory, Forrest closely monitored their progress with his scouts and allowed them to get far away from their base in Memphis. "Like a ship's pilot charting a collision course with an approaching vessel, Forrest marked Brice's Cross Roads as the point of encounter."<sup>52</sup>

Heavy rains the night before the battle turned the roads into mud. When the hot June sun came up it was a muggy Mississippi summer day that saps a man's strength. Early that morning Forrest outlined his battle plan to his brigade commander E.W. Rucker:

I know they greatly outnumber the troops I have at hand but the road along which they will march is narrow and muddy; they will make slow progress. The country is densely wooded and the undergrowth so heavy that when we strike them they will not know how few men we have. Their cavalry will move out ahead of the infantry, and should reach the

crossroads three hours in advance. We can whip their cavalry in that time. As soon as the fight opens they will send back to have infantry hurried up. It is going to be hot as hell, and coming on a run for five or six miles over such roads, the infantry will be so tired out we will ride over them.<sup>53</sup>

The ensuing battle went exactly according to Forrest's vision.

By four o'clock in the morning Forrest had his units on the move, while the Federal cavalry rode out from camp about 5:30 toward Brice's. The Federal infantry cooked their breakfast in camp with "fateful leisure," and got on the road around seven o'clock.<sup>54</sup> The advance guard of cavalry reached the Cross Roads around ten o'clock. Early skirmishing and feints by the vanguard of vastly outnumbered Confederate troopers was psychologically effective and held the bulk of the Federal cavalry in check until all of Forrest's men could arrive at the scene.<sup>55</sup>

The cavalry battle was then joined in earnest with fierce hand-to-hand combat. As the Confederates surged forward one trooper recalled: "Our movement was too slow to suit Forrest, he would curse, then praise, then threaten to shoot us himself if we were so afraid the Yankees might hit us...he finally said, 'I will lead you.'<sup>56</sup> Hard-pressed, the Union cavalry commander sent word back to General Sturgis in the rear--"Bring up the infantry!" Sturgis passed it on: "Make all haste! Lose no time in coming up!" The order was an invitation to disaster. As Forrest had predicted, it was hot and humid and the infantry was hampered by the narrow muddy road and the stifling atmosphere.<sup>57</sup> The Federal infantry arrived at the battle about noon, totally exhausted, having "tramped about nine miles since seven o'clock,

the last three had been made at a trot, and the final mile at a double-quick."<sup>58</sup>

Forrest, having defeated the Federal cavalry, now prepared to crush the infantry. He would not let the enemy rest, even though his own men were fatigued. A Confederate private observed, "Mounted on his big sorrel horse, sabre in hand, sleeves rolled up, his coat lying on the pommel of his saddle, looking the very God of War, Forrest exhorted his tired troopers: 'Get up men! When you hear the bugle sounds, every man must charge--and we will give them hell!'"<sup>59</sup>

Forrest attacked the Federal infantry vigorously at the center of attack. He and his escort dismounted and joined in the fight against the Union line; in hand-to-hand combat the infantry bayonets were no match for the Confederate Colt revolvers.<sup>60</sup> Just as the fighting was at its peak, a regiment of Confederate cavalry, using deception, hit the enemy's left flank and rear:

The cavalry attacked widely deployed to exaggerate their apparent strength with the bugler galloping along the line sounding the charge at long intervals for imaginary regiment after regiment. So many bugle calls, blown so loudly and so far apart, made the skeleton regiment scattered through the woods seem a veritable host.<sup>61</sup>

This charge threw the Union forces off balance and the wagon train in the rear into confusion.

Forrest recognized that the battle had reached its climax. He ordered his artilleryman Lieutenant Morton to load his cannon with double shot canister and to advance--without support--to within pistol range of the Federal infantry. At point blank range they unlimbered their pieces and fired directly into the massed



bluecoats with frightful effect, then pushed the guns forward by hand and increased the slaughter.<sup>62</sup> After a brief fight the Federal infantry broke ranks and the rout was on.

Forrest's brilliant direction and determined leadership carried the day. As biographer John Wyeth observed,

"The Civil War does not afford an exhibition of more steady, persistent fighting against great odds than that shown by Forrest's command at Brice's Cross Roads. Hour after hour, from ten in the morning until nearly five in the afternoon, almost without cessation of firing, they stood up against twice their number of Federal troops thoroughly well armed and equipped, and finally drove them from the field in wild disorder."<sup>63</sup>

Now came the final stage: pursuit. General Sturgis was unable to stop the rout of his army. In his after action report he stated "...Order gave way to confusion and confusion to panic. The army drifted toward the rear and was beyond control. The road became crowded and jammed with troops; wagons and artillery sank in the deep mud...no power could check the panic-stricken mass as it swept toward the rear."<sup>64</sup>

But Forrest was not through. The rout continued into evening. At dark Forrest brought up his horseholders and personally took charge of the pursuit, capturing large quantities of abandoned arms, equipment, supplies and prisoners. Forrest's men quickly crushed the few futile attempts by the enemy to regroup. During the night under unrelenting pressure from the Confederates, General Sturgis and many of his officers panicked and abandoned fourteen cannon and the remainder of their wagon team.<sup>65</sup> Crying to a subordinate Sturgis remarked, "For God's

sake, if Mr. Forrest will leave me alone I will let him alone...all you can do is to save yourselves."<sup>66</sup>

Forrest's men rested a few hours in the night but were back in the saddle by daybreak in relentless pursuit, with the General exhorting his troops to "keep the skeer on 'em." At the end of the second day Forrest called off the pursuit due to total exhaustion of his men and horses. The Federal army had suffered the most humiliating defeat of the war. Sturgis' men, who had taken eight days to reach Brice's Cross Roads, retreated to Memphis in sixty-four hours.<sup>67</sup>

This single battle offers many lessons learned for the operational commander. Correctly analyzing the battlefield and the conditions of terrain and weather, predicting then shaping the sequence of events that transpired, using deception and tactical innovation, and motivating his men through extraordinary leadership in personal combat, Forrest was able to resoundingly defeat an enemy force twice his own size and achieve an overwhelming victory.

#### CHAPTER IV CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

"If Forrest was in command [Grant] at once became apprehensive, because the latter was amenable to no known rules of procedure, was a law unto himself for all military acts, and was constantly doing the unexpected at all times and places."

War Correspondent Sylvanus Cadwallader

This paper has offered a glimpse into the distinctly unique personality and career of Nathan Bedford Forrest at the operational-tactical level of war. Forrest possessed a rare combination of military genius, personal courage, raw leadership and sheer determination to win against all odds. He transitioned the war from enlisted ranks to major theater command as his legendary exploits have transcended the boundaries of nineteenth century two dimensional warfare. "Politically incorrect" due to his post-war involvement in the Ku Klux Klan (which he repudiated after four years) Forrest is rarely, if ever mentioned by name in doctrinal publications. Even in his own time Forrest was not fully appreciated by the senior leadership of the Confederacy until the end of the war. Over time, recognition of his genius has grown and he is today considered the greatest cavalryman of all time.<sup>68</sup>

Bedford Forrest is important to today's commander and leader because his legacy lives on in current operational and tactical doctrine. Forrest's masterful use of what has become known as Principles of War and Dynamics of Combat Power, including such basics as maneuver, firepower, deception, offense and leadership fairly leap off the page whenever his actions are studied in depth.

Forrest's fundamental philosophy of attack--seize the initiative--then relentless pursuit--is a dominant theme of "the offense" in the Army's Field Manual 100-5. His innovative use of tactics and firepower, coupled with deception, surprise, and speed form the bedrock of modern maneuver warfare doctrine.

A master of psychology, deception and bluff, Forrest instinctively knew what his opponent would do in any given situation. Rarely surprised in combat due to his meticulous preparation and intuitive military genius, Forrest had the gift of vision and the ability to almost read the mind of his opponent in combat. This keen ability to operate "inside the enemy's decision-making loop" is today considered the highest form of operational art.

It is in Bedford Forrest's leadership that the real lesson is to be learned for today's commander. In an era of Total Quality Leadership and group dynamics, Forest is an anachronism. Yet Forrest instinctively understood that men will bond to a leader who cares for them, challenges them, is firm but fair, and who asks no man to do what he personally would not do. As biographer Jack Hurst writes, "His indomitable refusal to countenance effort less than total has become a lesson for later soldiers receiving the formal education he never had."<sup>69</sup> In John Keegan's book, The Face of Battle, leadership, cohesion, and human bonding emerge as the essential fabric of armies: "Soldiers fight and die for each other, not for lofty political ideals. The

presence of the commander really does make a difference and can be decisive."<sup>70</sup>

Bedford Forrest quickly molded his men into a fiercely loyal fighting corps through a mixture of pride and fear, enabling them collectively to accomplish tasks that other commanders would have considered impossible or foolhardy, to push through the walls of mental and physical fatigue to achieve victory. As Forrest's biographer John Wyeth wrote almost a hundred years ago: "...no commander on either side in our war, or in any war, ever got more fighting, marching, or work out of the men and officers under him than did General Forrest."<sup>71</sup>

Group dynamic leadership methods cannot compare to the iron will and discipline of a commander who has the hearts and minds of his men. S.L.A. Marshal, in his book, Men Against Fire, could be writing about Forrest's men when he states:

...it is unworthy of the profession of arms to base any policy upon exaggerated notions of man's capacity to endure and to sacrifice on behalf of ideals alone. In battle, you may draw a small circle around a soldier, including within it only those persons and objects which he sees or which he believes will influence his immediate fortunes. These primarily will determine whether he rallies or fails, advances or falls back.<sup>72</sup>

The effectiveness of the combat unit or group is thus irrevocably wedded to the spirit and influence of the commander, who understands how to motivate his troops and keep sight of the ultimate goal in combat, victory over the enemy. To that end Nathan Bedford Forrest dedicated his life and left to history his legacy of extraordinary operational leadership.

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