

Episode 181: Nathan Bedford Forrest

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On March 25, 1864, Confederate cavalry forces under Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest attacked the fortifications around Paducah, Kentucky. This attack came after the mounted forces had wreaked havoc through western Tennessee in the preceding days. Though Forrest's assault on Paducah was eventually repulsed, the intrusion by this feared commander paralyzed the citizens of the Ohio River Valley.

Forrest is one of the legendary generals of the Civil War and some historians consider him the best. Standing a couple of inches over six feet and weighing over 200 pounds, Forrest was an intimidating physical presence and he perfected mobile warfare in a way that would be studied well into the next century. His bravery was unquestioned and he is thought to have personally killed more than thirty Union soldiers in combat.

His maxims to "Get there first with the most" and that "War means fighting and fighting means killing" have lived on as symbols of his aggressive style. Some of his battlefield victories were audacious as he overpowered or forced surrender of far superior forces. For example, at Brice's Crossroads in June, 1864, his force of 3,500 men defeated 8,500 Union soldiers under Brigadier General Samuel Sturgis.

Forrest was born in southern Tennessee in 1821. At age 17, he moved to Mississippi to work with an uncle in Mississippi. Several years later, when his uncle was killed in a feud, Forrest killed two of the men responsible and wounded two others. Over time, Forrest built up an empire based on cotton and slave trading. By the start of the Civil War, he was one of the South's richest men.

Despite his prominence, when the war began he enlisted as a private. Confederate officials, realizing his stature and ability, quickly promoted him to Lieutenant Colonel. His early successes in the war prompted his promotion to Brigadier General thus making him one of very few men on either side to rise from private to general. According to friends of Ulysses S. Grant, Forrest was the only Confederate cavalry commander that Grant dreaded facing in battle.

Not surprisingly, Forrest's aggressive nature sometimes led him to controversy. After Braxton Bragg refused to pursue retreating Union soldiers after the battle of Chickamauga, Forrest was furious and apparently asked others "What does he fight battles for?" He confronted Bragg and when he made death threats against him, Bragg transferred him to a new post in Mississippi.

A bigger controversy occurred after the battle of Fort Pillow in April of 1864. Forrest and his men were accused of the massacre of a large number of Union African-American soldiers. Historians still debate what happened there, but perhaps even the rumor of such an event makes Forrest's history after the war less surprising.

After surrendering with his men in May of 1865, it is rumored that Forrest was one of the founding members of the Ku Klux Klan and possibly its first Grand Wizard. He had moved to Memphis where he got into the railroad business, but without the success of his pre-war ventures. Nathan Bedford Forrest dies in 1877 from complications related to diabetes. He remains to today as a popular example of aggressive and successful military leadership.