

Forrest & the Evolution of Cavalry Tactics

By Cris Malone

On June 10, 1864, the U.S. Army suffered one of its most humiliating defeats at the hands of a man who, not only defied the textbook on tactics, but also had never read it. Bedford Forrest's victory at Brice's Crossroads exemplified a new role for the cavalry that would carry its name into the mechanized wars of the 20th Century.

General Stephen D. Lee's plan was based on practical West Point doctrine- when faced with overwhelming odds, withdraw into your interior lines and consolidate your forces; make your enemy extend his supply lines; then fight him on ground of your own choosing. This plan was related to his subordinate, Maj. General Nathan Bedford Forrest in a conference at Booneville, Miss. on June 9, 1864. A strong Union force of 10,000 was rapidly approaching from the west. Forrest had 4500 men scattered along the railroad. Lee told him to delay the Federals with part of his command while the rest would move to Okolona. There, Lee would gather what other forces he could for a stand in the open prairie, "where we can get a good look at them". Forrest was also told to use his own discretion in delaying the Federals.

Forrest intended to use his own discretion- and more. As soon as his superior was on the train to Okolona, Forrest ordered his cavalry brigades into motion- not to withdraw to Okolona, but to intercept the Federal column at a road junction called Brice's Crossroads. Colonel William Rucker , whose small brigade included the 7th Tennessee, was riding with his commander the next morning when Forrest disclosed his plan. Rucker later quoted him:

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 their 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 the infantry hurried up. It is going to be hot as hell, and coming on the run for five or six miles, their infantry will be so tired out we will ride right over them.

That was about what happened that day and the Federals were pursued so vigorously that they lost all of their wagons, artillery and

organization. The Union commanders' reports showed that they never understood how they were defeated so completely. It was believed that their cavalry was ineffective because the wooded terrain limited mounted operations, suggesting that they still thought cavalry fought cavalry with sabers on horseback. Forrest had no intentions of playing that outdated game. To him, the horse was simply a rapid way to move a soldier to a critical point on the battlefield, where he would dismount relatively fresh to fight with a rifle. He was less of a target and his fire was more accurate. Forrest didn't come up with the idea, but he certainly moved it from a secondary role for the cavalry to the primary one.

When he did fight mounted, it was usually after he had gotten the "skeer" on his opponent. At Brice's Crossroads he turned what was considered a disadvantage in fighting dismounted into an advantage. Every fourth man would hold the horses of the other three when fighting on foot, which was thought to weaken a cavalry unit's strength by one fourth. (Three men firing on foot were still more effective than four men firing from horseback were) After the Federals were routed Forrest used the relatively fresh horse-holders to pursue them, allowing the others to rest. This was the closest thing to a reserve that he ever had, other than possibly his escort, which he always used at some critical point on the battlefield. By 1864, his escort company was armed with captured Spencer repeaters. Ammunition was forwarded to them from the rest of the cavalry corps' captures on the battlefield. The escort paid a heavy price for their conspicuous position, however. Once, when Forrest was visiting General Dabney Maury's headquarters at Meridian, Miss., Maury told him that his escort was "a fine body of men and horses". "Yes it is", replied Forrest, "and that captain is the eighth captain who has commanded it. The other seven have all been killed in battle."

Forrest's deployment of his horse artillery was most radical. During a crucial moment at Brice's Crossroads, when the Yankee resistance was stiffening, he ordered his chief of artillery, Captain John Morton, to charge the enemy with his guns. Morton's men rode to within sixty yards of the Union line, unlimbered under heavy fire and sent shot and shell into the horrified Federals at point blank range; breaking the back of the Union resistance.

That Bedford Forrest was an "untutored genius" is widely known, but the suggestion by some of his peers that a West Point education would have made him more formidable is unlikely. The fact that he had no preconceived notions about strategy and tactics made him unpredictable. His natural ability to quickly evaluate a situation

and act decisively set him apart from the more predictable West Point graduates. He was not able to drill a company beyond the most basic commands and considered anything more "an unnecessary tax upon men and horses". An example of his "unorthodox" evaluation of a tactical situation occurred during Hood's retreat after the disastrous Nashville campaign. Forrest, in charge of the rear-guard, had decided to make a stand against the pursuing Federals at a place south of Pulaski, Tennessee called Anthony's Hill. Reports that his flanks had been turned had unnerved his officers and they were suggesting a withdrawal. When he was told that the enemy was in his rear, he snapped, " Well, that means I'm in their rear too!" Disgusted with his officers' timidity, he rode off muttering, "I always carry my rear around with me".

Forrest was the antithesis of the blue-blood autocrats that comprised most of the officer corps. Many of them considered him an "uncouth vulgarian" and his contempt for their snobbery manifested in several conflagrations. During the pursuit of the Federals after Brice's Crossroads, Forrest and some of his men came upon a group of burning supply wagons. After ordering his men to dismount and extinguish the fires, he noticed a lieutenant sitting on his horse and asked him why he didn't help. "I'm an officer," was the reply. "I'll officer you!" shouted Forrest and the lieutenant was involuntarily dismounted by his commanding general. On another occasion, an officer who had refused to help row a boat in Forrest's presence quickly found himself swimming for his life in the Tennessee River. Of course, Forrest pulled no punches with his superiors either and usually ran afoul of all of them; considering them as foolish as the enemy commanders he fought against. As a result, many of his most brilliant victories were achieved in theatres of little strategic importance. By the time Forrest was considered as more than a "raider", it was too late for a man of his talent to save the Confederacy.

What Bedford Forrest did save was the cavalry itself. By the Civil War, that branch of service, in its traditional sense, had become obsolete- developments in weapons technology had seen to that- though many commanders refused to realize it. By merging the mobility of the cavalry with the more concentrated firepower of the infantry, Forrest created a mobile rapid deployment force that would give the cavalry a new tactical purpose, and enable it to survive the elimination of the horse itself.

HEADQUARTERS FORREST'S CAVALRY,

Tupelo, July 1, 1864.

MAJOR: I have the honor to submit the following report of the operations of my command in the battle of Tishomingo Creek, fought near Guntown, Miss., June 10, 1864:

I received orders from Maj. Gen. S. D. Lee, commanding department, to move into Middle Tennessee with 2,000 men from my own command and 1,000 from the division of Brigadier-General Roddey, commanding cavalry of North Alabama, and two batteries of artillery, for the purpose of destroying the railroad from Nashville and breaking up the lines of communications connecting that point with Sherman's army in Northern Georgia. In pursuance of that order I left Tupelo on the 1st day of June with Buford's division and Morton's and Rice's batteries. Prior to leaving Tupelo I dispatched my aide-de-camp, Capt. Charles W. Anderson, and Capt. John G. Mann, of the engineer department, to make all necessary arrangements for crossing the Tennessee River, which they did through Brigadier-General Roddey.

On the morning of the 3d a dispatch reached me at Russellville from Major-General Lee, stating that the enemy were moving in force from Memphis in the direction of Tupelo, and ordering my immediate return. The order was promptly obeyed, and the column reached Tupelo on the 5th, at which time the enemy were reported at Salem, fifty miles from this place, west.

On the 7th my scouts reported the enemy moving in the direction of Ruckersville, and to meet him I moved with Buford's division to Baldwyn, and on the morning of the 8th from thence to Booneville. Major-General Lee had ordered Colonel Rucker, commanding Sixth Brigade of my command, to move to my assistance, and in pursuance of the order he had joined me at Booneville on the evening of the 9th. Major-General Lee had also dispatched Brigadier-General Roddey to leave a small force in the valley near Decatur, and re-enforce me with the balance of his command. I received a dispatch from General Roddey stating that Col. W. A. Johnson, commanding brigade, was moving and ordered to report to me at Tupelo; also informing me that the balance of his command was then between Decatur and Rome on the flank of a force of the enemy moving from Decatur to Sherman's army. Johnson's brigade reached Baldwyn on the 9th, and was ordered to join me at Booneville. The enemy had endeavored to cross the Hatchie River in the direction of Rienzi, but owing to high water had only succeeded in throwing forward about 500 cavalry, which entered Rienzi

on the morning of the 7th and attempted the destruction of the railroad, but left hastily after burning the depot and destroying a few yards of the railroad track. Supposing the main body would move in that direction, General Buford was ordered on the 9th to send Bell's brigade to Rienzi, holding Lyon's brigade, with two batteries of artillery, to await further developments.

On the night of the 9th I received dispatches reporting the enemy, in full force, encamped twelve miles east of Ripley on the Guntown road, having abandoned the upper route as impracticable.

Orders were issued to move at 4 o'clock on the following morning (10th instant). General Buford was also directed to order the immediate return of Bell's brigade from Rienzi to Booneville. The wagon train of my entire command, in charge of Maj. C. S. Severson, chief quartermaster, was ordered to the rear and southward from Booneville, east of the railroad to Verona. I moved as rapidly as the jaded condition of my horses would justify, intending, if possible, to reach Brice's Cross-Roads in advance of the enemy. On arrival at Old Carrollville, in advance of the command, I received intelligence that the enemy's cavalry were within four miles of the cross-roads. I immediately sent forward Lieutenant Black, temporarily attached to my staff, with a few men from the Seventh Tennessee Cavalry, who soon reported that he had met the advance of the enemy one mile and a half north of the crossroads, and was then skirmishing with them. I ordered Colonel Lyon, whose brigade was in front, to move forward and develop the enemy, and wrote back to General Buford to move up with the artillery and Bell's brigade as rapidly as the condition of the horses and roads would permit, and ordered him also to send one regiment of Bell's brigade from Old Carrollville across to the Ripley and Guntown road, with orders to gain the rear of the enemy or attack and annoy his rear or flank. Moving forward Colonel Lyon threw out one company as skirmishers, and soon after dismounted his brigade and attacked the enemy's line of cavalry, driving them back to near the cross-roads, at which place his infantry was arriving and being formed. Desiring to avoid a general engagement until the balance of my troops and the artillery came up, Colonel Lyon was not pushed forward, but in order to hold his position secure he made hasty fortifications of rails, logs, and such other facilities as presented themselves. I ordered up Colonel Rucker's brigade, dismounting two regiments and forming them on the left of Colonel Lyon, holding his third regiment, under Colonel Duff, mounted, as a reserve, and throwing it out well on the extreme left to prevent any flank movement on the part of the enemy. Colonel Johnson was also moved into position. We had a severe skirmish with the enemy, which was

kept up until 1 o'clock, at which time General Buford arrived with the artillery, followed by Bell's brigade. The enemy had for some time been shelling our position. On the arrival of the batteries I directed General Buford to move them in position and open fire, in order to develop the position of enemy's batteries and his lines. The enemy responded with two guns only. The firing from our batteries was discontinued, while Lyon and Johnson were ordered to move their lines forward. It was now 1 o'clock, and as all my forces were up I prepared to attack him at once. Taking with me my escort and Bell's brigade I moved rapidly around to the Guntown and Ripley road, and advancing on that road, dismounting the brigade, and forming Russell's and Wilson's regiments on the right, extending to Colonel Rucker's left, and placing Newsom's regiment on the left of the road, Duff's regiment, of Rucker's brigade, and my escort were placed on the left of Newsom's, and formed the extreme left of my line of battle. Before leaving General Buford I ordered him the moment the attack began on the left to move the center and right rapidly forward. Owing to the density of the undergrowth Colonel Bell was compelled to advance within thirty yards of the enemy before assaulting him. In a few seconds the engagement became general, and on the left raged with great fury. The enemy having three lines of battle, the left was being heavily pressed. I sent a staff officer to General Buford to move Lyon's and Johnson's brigades forward and press the enemy on the right. Newsom's regiment was suffering severely and had given way. Colonel Duff and my escort, dismounted, were ordered to charge the enemy's position in front of Newsom's regiment, and succeeded in driving the enemy to his second line, enabling the regiment to rally, reform, and move forward to a less exposed position. Fearing my order to General Buford had miscarried, I moved forward rapidly along the lines, encouraging my men, until I reached General Buford on the Blackland road, and finding but two pieces of artillery in position and engaged, I directed my aide-de-camp, Captain Anderson, to bring up all the artillery, and ordered General Buford to place it in action at once, which was promptly done. The battle was fierce and the enemy obstinate; but after two hours' hard fighting the enemy gave way, being forced back on his third and last line. Colonel Barteau, in command of the regiment sent from Old Carrollville, had gained the rear of the enemy, and by his presence and attack in that quarter had withdrawn the cavalry from the enemy's flank and created confusion and dismay to the enemy's wagon train and the guard attending it. The cavalry was sent back for its protection, and the enemy now in front made a last attempt to hold the crossroads; but the steady advance of my men and the concentrated, well-directed, and rapid fire from my batteries upon that point threw them back, and the retreat or rout began. He

endeavored, after abandoning the cross-roads, one piece of artillery, several caissons, and a quantity of ammunition, to protect his rear and check pursuit, taking advantage of every favorable position along his line of march, but he was speedily driven from them. Pressing forward he was forced to abandon many of his wagons and ambulances. Before reaching Tishomingo Creek the road was so blockaded with abandoned vehicles of every description that it was difficult to move the artillery forward. Ordering up my horses, they were mounted and the pursuit was then continued and the enemy were driven until dark. He attempted the destruction of his wagons, loaded with ammunition and bacon, but so closely was he pursued that many of them were saved without injury, although the road was lighted for some distance. It being dark, and my men and horses requiring rest, I threw out an advance to follow slowly and cautiously after the enemy, and ordered the command to halt, feed, and rest.

At 1 a.m. on the 11th the pursuit was resumed. About 3 o'clock we came again upon the enemy's rear guard of cavalry; but moving forward he gave way and did not attempt to check our advance. In the bottom on the south prong of the Hatchie they had abandoned the balance of their wagon train, all their wounded, and 14 pieces of artillery. We came upon them again about four miles east of Ripley, where they had prepared to dispute our advance, but made only a feeble and ineffectual resistance, the Seventh Tennessee and my escort driving him from his position. He made another stand two miles east of Ripley, but it was followed by another characteristic retreat. On reaching the town of Ripley, about 8 a.m., the enemy was found in line of battle and seemingly prepared for determined resistance, occupying all favorable positions for that purpose. I had but few troops present. My escort was sent to the left and engaged the enemy, and Colonel Wilson's regiment was thrown forward, dismounted, as skirmishers, expecting they would be driven until the balance of my forces came up. The advance of Colonel Wilson and the escort was spirited and determined, and at the first appearance of additional force he again retreated, leaving 21 killed and 70 wounded, among whom was Colonel McKeaig; also leaving another piece of artillery, 2 caissons, and 2 ambulances; and from this place to the end of our pursuit the enemy offered no organized resistance, but retreated in the most complete disorder, throwing away guns, clothing, and everything calculated to impede his flight. Faulkner's (Kentucky) regiment, commanded by Major Tate, and the Seventh Tennessee, Colonel Duckworth, made repeated charges, mounted, and captured many prisoners. I ordered General Buford to continue the pursuit, and taking with me my escort and Colonel Bell, with his brigade, endeavored by taking another road to cut them off at Salem, but

reached there an hour after their rear had passed. General Buford had pursued them rapidly and their infantry saved themselves by scattering on all by-roads leading toward the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, retreating through the woods in squads and avoiding capture in that way. Regarding all further pursuit of the enemy's cavalry useless, I ordered General Buford to move in the direction of Mount Pleasant and La Grange, and to scour the country on his return and to gather up prisoners, arms, &c., that could be found. All the troops were ordered back, and details made to gather up prisoners and spoils. Before reaching the battle-field on the return march several hundred prisoners were taken from their hiding places in the woods. My entire command moved to Guntown, and thence to this place.

My available force in the engagement was 3,500. From the reports of the prisoners captured, corroborated by official documents captured on the field, the enemy had in the engagement 10,252.

The loss of the enemy in killed and wounded is not less than 2,000, 250 wagons and ambulances, 18 pieces of artillery, 5,000 stand of small-arms, 500,000 rounds of ammunition, and all his baggage and supplies. I regret to say that during our pursuit the abandoned wagons, &c., of the enemy were pillaged and plundered by citizens and stragglers of the command.

I herewith forward reports from the chief quartermaster and commissary, (*) showing the amount of property belonging to their respective departments received; and but for fire and robbery the entire outfit could have been saved.

The enemy broke, bent, and secreted a large number of their small-arms, but as far as they could be found they have been packed up and sent back for repairs.

A report of the division provost-marshal, showing the prisoners captured and sent south, is also herewith forwarded. Quite a number were captured too far west to be returned to this route, and were sent south via Holly Springs and Grenada. The whole number captured and in our hands is not less than 2,000.

Our loss in the engagement in killed and wounded is, as will be seen by report of chief surgeon, 493.(+)

Colonel Rucker, commanding brigade, reported directly to me, and I take pleasure in speaking of his uniform good conduct. His attack was made with vigor, rapidity, and precision. Capt. John W. Morton, chief

of artillery, moved with great promptness, and did admirable execution with his guns. My medical staff, under the direction of Chief Surg. J. B. Cowan, were assiduous in attention to the wounded on the field and in their removal to comfortable hospitals. My chief quartermaster, Maj. C. S. Severson, and Maj. G. V. Rambaut, commissary of subsistence, were highly serviceable and useful in gathering up and taking care of captured property belonging to their respective departments.

Thus did my troops in the hour of need rally to the defense of their country. They deserve well of her gratitude. Notwithstanding the great disparity in numbers, they repulsed the foe and achieved a victory as imperishable as it is brilliant.

My obligations are hereby returned to Brigadier-General Buford, commanding division. He was prompt in obeying orders and exhibited great energy both in assaulting and pursuing the enemy. The high praises he bestows upon his brigade commanders, Colonels Bell and Lyon, are truthful and just. They exhibited coolness, skill, courage, and ability. Colonel Johnson, commanding brigade from General Roddey's command, exhibited throughout the engagement the qualities of a gallant officer.

This victory may be justly considered one of the most complete of the war, and for it I feel indebted to the valor of my troops and the skill of my subordinate officers, and I mention again that to Colonels Bell, Lyon, and Rucker, commanding brigades, I feel mainly indebted for this crowning success over vastly superior numbers.

It would be unjust to close my report without referring to the gallant and meritorious conduct of my escort company, commanded by Capt. J. C. Jackson. Owing to drill, discipline, and material its services were to me on this occasion, as on many other fields, invaluable, and I consider it to-day the best body of men in my command--dashing, daring, and unflinching in the execution of orders given, and as scouts, for reliability and effectiveness, they are without an equal.

In conclusion, my acknowledgments are also due to Maj. Charles W. Anderson, acting assistant adjutant-general, and to Lieutenants Donelson and Galloway, my aides-de-camp. Fully alive to the emergencies of the occasion and the odds against us, they were prompt and faithful in the execution of all orders and untiring in the discharge of every duty devolving upon them from the commencement of the battle until pursuit was ended.

Respectfully submitted.

N. B. FORREST,
Major-General.

Maj. P. ELLIS,
Assistant Adjutant-General, Meridian.