

General Forrest

Author(s): Thomas F. Gailor

Source: *The Sewanee Review*, Jan., 1901, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Jan., 1901), pp. 1-12

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27528137

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Sewanee Review*

This content downloaded from 50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

THE
SEWANEE REVIEW.

VOL. IX.] JANUARY, 1901. [No. 1.

GENERAL FORREST.*

DR. JOHN A. WYETH'S "Life of Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest," C. S. A., is a worthy tribute to the memory of one of the most notable men that the Civil War produced, and in many respects one of the greatest soldiers that ever fought on this continent in any war.

Dr. Wyeth admires his hero and writes enthusiastically; but he has been painstaking and honest in collecting his facts, and evidently tries hard to be perfectly fair in stating them. To this work he has given the patient labor of thirty years. The result is a lasting memorial of Gen. Forrest and a monument of the author's ability, perseverance, and devotion.

The pathos of a biography like this—and it is full of pathos—lies in the fact that the splendid genius, the patience, the fortitude and unselfish patriotism of one of the South's very greatest military leaders still wait for adequate recognition even from his own people. During his service in the Confederate army Forrest was hampered and belittled by professional jealousy and stupidity, and after his death the prejudice and resentment of his enemies have succeeded in detracting from his fame.

War unquestionably is a dreadful thing, and the passions it exhibits are brutal passions. Yet if war is ever, on any ground, justifiable—and there are things worse than war—the man of war is not to be judged by the standards of the

*"Life of Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest," by John Allan Wyeth, M.D., with illustrations by T. de Thulstrup, Rogers, Klepper, Redwood, Hitchcock & Carleton. New York and London. Harper & Bros. 1899. Pp. 676.

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

man of peace. Stonewall Jackson was a Christian, but, if he had had his way, no quarter would have been given on either side; and, from the viewpoint of the soldier, Forrest is not to be condemned, but rather admired, because in the heat of battle he showed the spirit of the tiger.

If immense personal influence with men and control over them, fertility of resource, quickness to conceive and plan, eager and impetuous audacity, and heroism in battle, with success unparalleled for difficulties encountered and overcome —if these be the qualities of great military leadership, Forrest had no superior as a soldier in the armies of the North or South.

Gen. Robert E. Lee is in a class by himself. No officer on either side can be compared with him, for he was as great a man as he was a soldier. The Army of Northern Virginia also, though gaining by the reflected light of heroes like Lee and Jackson, is entitled to unmeasured praise. But the glory of Virginia has in a measure eclipsed and effaced the great deeds and the noble sacrifices of the people and the armies of the Southwest. We thank Dr. Wyeth, therefore, for having rescued the name of Gen. Forrest. For Forrest was unfortunate. He was not a West Pointer. He did not serve in Virginia. He was never given a fair chance. The President of the Confederacy did recognize his greatness at last—when attending his funeral. It would almost seem that Forrest served his people too well. He made enemies by his devotion to the Southern cause—enemies who traduced his name by stories of cruelty and brutality, so persistently declaimed as to make his own section timid in showing honor to his memory.

It may be worth while, therefore, from the material that Dr. Wyeth has so admirably collected and arranged, to give a brief outline of the military career of a man of whom Gen. W. T. Sherman wrote, "After all, I think Forrest was the most remarkable man our Civil War produced on either side;" and of whom Gen. Lee is reported to have said, after the death of Jackson, "My greatest subordinate is a man I never saw, Gen. N. B. Forrest."

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Nathan Bedford Forrest came of the best American pioneer stock. His great-grandfather, Shadrach, went from Virginia to North Carolina in 1740. Thence his grandfather, Nathan, emigrated to Tennessee in 1806, where his father, William, married a Scotch-Irish girl, Marian Beck, and there he himself was born in that part of Bedford County now known as Marshall, on July 13, 1821.

His mother was a fine type of the intelligent, energetic, brave, and God-fearing women of the Scotch-Irish race that has done so much for American civilization. She was married twice, and had eleven sons. Nine of these she gave to the Confederate army; one was a disabled veteran of the Mexican war; the youngest was a child when the Civil War began. Marian Beck is a fascinating personality, even in Dr. Wyeth's brief description of her, and her name might well appear in the dedication of the life of her distinguished son.

From boyhood Nathan Forrest exhibited the strongest traits of his mother's character. At sixteen, by his father's death, he was thrown upon his own resources, and, after a futile trip to Texas to volunteer for the Mexican War, he undertook the support of the family. He was a farmer, a stock-dealer, a speculator in horses and slaves, and was enterprising and energetic in any business that promised reward for labor. At the age of twenty-five he was married, and settled in Memphis with a good income, and was recognized as a prosperous citizen. The attempted lynching of a notorious criminal brought him prominently into public notice. Single-handed he threw himself before the mob that threatened the city jail, and successfully maintained the majesty of the law. In 1860 he was elected to the Board of Aldermen, and was honored as an upright and conscientious man.

When Tennessee seceded from the Union Forrest immediately volunteered as a private soldier; but, Gov. Harris's attention having been called to the fact, Forrest was authorized to raise and command a regiment of cavalry. By October 1, 1861, the battalion was *en route* to Dover, on the Tennessee river, and reported the capture of two transports

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

with supplies. Forrest's first engagement took place at Sacramento, Ky., where, with two hundred men detailed for scouting duty, he ran into five hundred of the enemy, and routed them with his usual tactics—viz., dismounting about one-third of his men in front as skirmishers, and then attacking with the others in two divisions on the flank and rear. For this action he was publicly complimented by his commanding general, Albert Sidney Johnston, and proceeded, February 7, 1862, to the defense of Fort Donelson. In the story of the disgraceful surrender of that place Forrest's behavior is the one redeeming feature. Dr. Wyeth calls attention to the fact that Fort Donelson rescued the name of Gen. Grant from oblivion; it ought to have taught the Confederate authorities the splendid ability of Forrest. The attack on the fort began February 13th, by Foote's fleet in the river and by McClernand on land. Both were completely repulsed. The next day the Confederates assumed the offensive and attacked with great enthusiasm. The Federal right wing was swept back, and Forrest performed prodigies of valor, attacking a battery without orders and capturing six guns. With the arrival of Federal reënforcements the Confederates withdrew, but the ground they had won was not reoccupied by the enemy. This to Forrest's mind was a clear opportunity of escape. He was consequently amazed when that night at a council of war the Confederate leaders decided to surrender on the next day, and he indignantly and with his accustomed vehemence refused to be a party to what he called disgrace. Soon after midnight he gave notice to his men, marched out in perfect safety with about thirteen hundred and fifty followers, and made his way to Nashville; while the general in command remained behind and the next morning surrendered more than ten thousand of the picked troops of the Confederacy, without striking another blow.

About March 1, at Huntsville, Forrest gave his men a furlough of ten days, and every man reported back, with two new companies in addition, on March 10.

Forrest again distinguished himself at Shiloh. He chafed

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and fretted over the slow march of the army, which took three days to go twenty miles. He captured another battery and rode down Preston's command, largely contributing to its surrender. By personal reconnoissance he discovered the confusion that prevailed in the Federal ranks, and pleaded for permission to attack, but this was refused. It was he who discovered the landing of Buell's reënforcements, and begged that the attack might not be delayed, but was told by a West Pointer to hold his tongue. On the retreat to Corinth he saved the Confederate army from destruction by checking Sherman's advance. He was carried by his horse into the enemy's lines, and was badly wounded, but escaped capture through his gallantry. On June 11 he reported at Tupelo, Miss. He was already beginning to be a hero to the troops, and his reward was that his old regiment, which he had trained, was taken from him and he was transferred to another command.

Within three weeks, however, he was again ready for action, and made a raid into Middle Tennessee that astounded his enemies, and so began the marvelous career of audacity and success that ended only with the civil war. With fifteen hundred men he swooped upon the fortifications at Murfreesboro, destroyed the railway station and the forts, took twelve hundred prisoners, including two brigadier generals, Crittenden and Duffield, destroyed seven hundred thousand dollars' worth of stores, captured sixty wagons, five hundred mules and horses, one battery of artillery, and escaped in safety, with the loss of but sixteen killed and twenty-five wounded. The country swarmed with Federal troops, and Forrest's escape reads like a chapter in fiction. Gen. Buell wrote: "Our guards are gathered up by Forrest as easily as he would herd cattle. Why don't you do something?"

After checking Buell's advance upon Bragg, who had marched into Kentucky, Forrest was again relieved of his command (Nov., 1862), and was ordered back to Tennessee to raise and equip another, if he could.

By December 1 a new brigade of two thousand men had

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

gathered round him at Columbia; but they had virtually no arms, ammunition, or other equipment, and the only source of supply was the enemy's garrisons. Forrest accordingly ventured to cross the Tennessee river, though it was patrolled by gunboats, and marched with his small brigade into West Tennessee in the face of more than twelve thousand Federal troops. He eluded pursuit, captured Col. Ingersoll and his command near Jackson, captured the garrison at Forked Deer Creek, then captured Trenton and its garrison, and again Union City with its garrison, and destroyed immense quantities of stores. Being surrounded finally by three brigades, he attacked one after the other and made his escape in safety, taking with him five hundred recruits, full supplies of arms, ammunition, horses, and clothes for his men, together with five pieces of artillery, eleven cannons, thirty-eight wagons and teams, and fifteen hundred prisoners. The Confederate Congress passed a vote of thanks to Forrest, but the authorities at Richmond still failed to recognize his ability. After this wonderful invasion of West Tennessee Forest chafed and fretted for two months in idleness in his subordinate position, and with the exception of the two dashing affairs at Thompson's Station and at Brentwood, in which he captured more than two thousand prisoners, he was not permitted to do anything until Gen. Streight's raid gave him his opportunity.

Gen. Streight was ordered by Rosecrans to take two thousand picked men, with carefully inspected arms and equipment, to join Gen. Dodge in North Alabama with his fifty-five hundred men, and move toward Chattanooga in order to destroy the railways entering that place. Forrest was given a free hand, and immediately started for Alabama, where he reënforced Roddy and attacked Dodge, prevented the junction with Streight, and then with less than one thousand men dashed after Streight's command. It was a marvelous race over muddy roads and swollen streams. Forrest's men went one hundred and nineteen miles in three days. Many of them fell by the way, but their leader's plan was to keep Streight running. Before they reached

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Macon, Ga., Forrest's command had dwindled to five hundred. Nearly four hundred of the Federals had been killed or captured. At their last stand many of the enemy fell asleep while trying to take aim. By a ruse Forrest convinced Streight that he had a large force with him, and so the Federal general surrendered sixteen hundred men, and Forrest had to send away for assistance to guard the prisoners. It was on this famous ride that a young girl, Emma Sansom, fearlessly directed Forrest to the ford under fire, and for this won the honor of having Wyeth's "Life of Forrest" dedicated to her. This achievement of Forrest's evoked another vote of thanks from the Confederate Congress, but the intrenched jealousy of the professional officers again prevented the Richmond authorities from giving him an independent command.

In the summer of 1863 Bragg began his retreat to Chattanooga, pursued by Rosecrans. Forrest, scouting with tireless energy, recognized with infallible instinct that the Federal commander had imperiled his army by dividing it, and urged his superior to attack and capture Buell and Crittenden separately. The best critics declare that the thing could have been done; but Bragg was passive, and Forrest raged helplessly.

At the battle of Chickamauga Forrest again distinguished himself. He himself was especially mentioned in the dispatches, and his men were extolled by Gen. D. H. Hill as equal in discipline and courage to any he had ever seen. It was here that Forrest dictated the dispatch to Bragg, upon which, says Longstreet, depended the fate of the Confederacy. With his usual perspicacity he understood the confusion and panic of the Federal forces, since described by Mr. Dana, and he clamored for permission to attack; but it was refused, and ten days afterwards he was again relieved of his command. The story of the interview with Gen. Bragg, as given by Dr. Wyeth, is tragic in the extreme. In November Forrest returned with his escort of sixty men to North Mississippi to raise another brigade.

The account of that recruiting and of his raid into West

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Tennessee is almost incredible. A Northern correspondent wrote: "In the face of ten thousand Federal troops Forrest with less than four thousand has marched right through the Sixteenth Army Corps, nine miles from Memphis, carried off one hundred wagons, two hundred cattle, three thousand conscripts, destroyed several railroads and many towns."

Six weeks afterwards Gen. William Sooy Smith started from Memphis with ten thousand men (of whom one thousand were cavalry) to join Sherman in a grand attack on Selma. Forrest attacked him two days after he left the city, frightened him into a retreat, and then routed him at Okolona. Col. Waring, of the Fourth Missouri, says: "The retreat to Memphis was a disheartening, panic-stricken flight. The expedition filled us all with burning shame." Forrest in his report states that he had twenty-five hundred men engaged against seven thousand. The figures given by Gen. Grant show even greater disparity.

Richmond at last began to see something in this citizen general. During the next two months Forrest swept West Tennessee. As Gen. Sherman said: "Forrest always seemed to know exactly what we were going to do, but we never did know where he was or what he was going to do." Then occurred the capture of Fort Pillow, about which so many wild stories have been told. Of these Dr. Wyeth very effectually disposes. The facts of the case, as proved by the record, seem to be these: 1. The detachment of Forrest's command detailed against this reputed impregnable fortress had succeeded in gaining a position under the breastworks, shielded from the guns of the fort. 2. The commander of the Federal force had been killed, and his successor in terror dealt out whisky in unlimited quantity to his soldiers, most of whom were negroes, until they were crazy with drink. 3. Federal transports had arrived and were landing reënforcements, against the protest of the Confederates, while the flag of truce was flying. 4. In the attack which followed, the Confederates stormed the fort, and the drunken garrison, thinking to escape to the transports, continued to fire after they were virtually surrounded, and very many of them

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

were killed. 5. More than two hundred and twenty of the garrison were taken as prisoners, and Forrest left at 6 P.M., so that the often repeated charges of "midnight rioting and butchery" are utterly false so far as Forrest and his men are concerned.

Whatever was the ferocity of the attack by men enraged at the crazy refusal to surrender, it was more than equaled by similar incidents on the other side, as told by Dr. Wyeth. In June, 1864, it was determined to annihilate Forrest in order to protect Sherman's advance into Georgia. Accordingly Gen. Sturgis, with eight thousand men, carefully selected and equipped, and twenty-two pieces of artillery, was sent after him. With only four thousand men Forrest met Sturgis at Brice's Crossroads, and demonstrated that he was not only a cavalry raider but a great general. Sturgis's army was nearly annihilated. No battle like this was ever known in the war, according to the Federal reports, and "the memory of it rankles after a quarter of a century." Forrest captured everything Sturgis had: his artillery, arms, wagons, and even the clothes of his men. Sherman said of it: "I cannot understand it. He is the devil. . . . He has no troops to speak of."

President Lincoln was urged to offer a reward to the man who defeated Forrest. The wildest reports began to be circulated as to his ubiquity. One of these averred that he was actually in Chicago. In vain Southern men appealed to President Davis to give Forrest command of all the cavalry and "turn him loose" against Sherman's line of communications.

In July an army of eighteen thousand men under Generals Smith and Mower found Forrest near Tupelo, and fought a fierce battle, and then retreated in great haste back to Memphis. In August Gen. Smith, with seventeen thousand men, started out again; but Forrest eluded him and made his famous raid into Memphis, capturing prisoners and supplies. During that autumn Forrest harried Middle Tennessee and kept its garrisons in perpetual terror. He was everywhere. In November he was put in command of all the cavalry, and

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

joined Hood in the disastrous campaign of Franklin and Nashville. In that retreat, as Gen. Sherman says, "he saved the remnant of Hood's army, and his ability and untiring energy were unsurpassed in the history of the war."

There is no finer tribute to Forrest's hold over his men and no more splendid evidence of heroism than the fact that, after the horrors of Franklin and Nashville, the Seventh Tennessee Regiment, when furloughed for thirty days, returned every single man at the expiration of his time.

Forrest's address to his soldiers at this time was calculated to stir the blood of veterans. "Soldiers," he said, "on the 24th day of December, 1863, there were three thousand of you at Jackson, Tenn., unorganized and undisciplined, and only four hundred of you were armed. You were surrounded by fifteen thousand of the enemy. . . . You have endured hunger and cold and labor in an arduous campaign without a murmur. . . . During the past year you have fought fifty battles; killed and captured sixteen thousand of the enemy; captured two thousand horses and mules, sixty-seven pieces of artillery, four gunboats, fifteen transports, twenty barges, three hundred wagons, fifty ambulances, ten thousand stands of small arms, forty blockhouses; destroyed thirty-six railroad bridges, two hundred miles of railroad, six engines, one hundred cars, and fifteen million dollars' worth of property. In the accomplishment of this great work your regular number never exceeded five thousand, two thousand of whom have been killed and wounded, while in prisoners you have lost about two hundred."

Thus virtually ended Forrest's military career. Hood's army was disorganized, broken-spirited, and beaten. The remnant that surrendered under Gen. Joe Johnston in North Carolina two months later went there knowing that it was all over.

In March, 1865, Wilson's cavalry, twenty-seven thousand strong, "the finest ever organized on this continent," rode down upon Forrest with his two thousand veterans. As Gen. Grant afterwards said, it was an easy task. Forrest had only old men and boys to recruit his worn-out battalions.

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

At Gainesville, Ga., he surrendered, and made his farewell address to the men who had followed him so nobly. With exquisite tenderness and pathos he spoke: "Soldiers, I have never on the field of battle sent you where I was unwilling to go myself, nor would I now advise you to a course which I felt myself unwilling to pursue. You have been good soldiers; you can be good citizens. Obey the laws, preserve your honor, and the government to which you have surrendered can afford to be and will be magnanimous."

He lived twelve years after the war, successful in business, abounding in love and charity to his less fortunate comrades and their families, a useful and respected citizen, and died in Memphis, Tenn., at the early age of fifty-six, October 29, 1877.

The foregoing scant outline of Forrest's military record leaves but little space for a summary of his personal characteristics. He was a man of immense physical strength and size, and as resolute and audacious in personal rencounters as in open battle. His temper was terrific when roused, and his language was often violent and profane, but never vulgar nor obscene. He detested uncleanness, as he despised wanton cruelty and oppression. In the midst of a battle, when his own life was in peril, he was known to rescue a woman and a child from danger and carry them to a place of safety. While he thrashed a scout with hickory withes for giving him second-hand information, he degraded one of his best officers for trifling with the affections of a woman. He was unlearned, but not illiterate. A pen, he said once, reminded him of a snake; and his spelling was consistently wrong: but his natural eloquence could move his troops to enthusiasm. He did not know the first principles of the drill, being astonished at the effect of a trumpet call upon disciplined soldiers, and yet in his general plan of battle he instinctively adopted the matured tactics of Napoleon. He exercised an authority as a general that was absolutely intolerant of the slightest variation or disobedience, and yet he was the genial companion of his subordinates and was foremost in exposing himself in every battle. He had

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

twenty-nine horses killed under him, and with his own hand slew thirty men. To him, as he said, "war means killing," and in the smoke and fire of actual conflict he was the incarnation of war. What he would have accomplished, had he been earlier recognized and placed in independent command, no one can say; but that he deserves the praise and the immortal honor of his countrymen, for whose cause he so unselfishly and so nobly fought, no one can deny. As Lord Wolseley eloquently and truly says: "Forrest had fought like a knight-errant for the cause he believed to be that of justice and right. No man who drew a sword for his country in that fratricidal struggle deserves better of her, and, as long as the chivalrous deeds of her sons find poets to describe them, and fair women to sing them, the name of this gallant general will be remembered with affection and sincere admiration. A man with such a record needs no ancestry."

THOMAS F. GAILOR.

This content downloaded from
50.231.32.122 on Fri, 05 Dec 2025 00:53:20 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms