

Brilliance Unleashed: Nathan Bedford Forrest and the Battle of Brice's Cross Roads

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Nathan Bedford Forrest became head of the household upon his father William's death (the exact cause is unknown) at 16 years old. The family had struggled financially, forcing Forrest, the oldest, to provide for the family. Forrest took those responsibilities seriously with early signs of his fearlessness in 1837 while still in his teens.

Mrs. Miriam Forrest (1802–1867) and his sister Fanny (1821–1841) had traveled ten miles to visit their closest neighbors. As a measure of gratitude for the visit, the neighbors had gifted Mrs. Forrest and Fanny with valuable baby chickens. A panther stalked and attacked the two women on their return trip. The attack killed their horse and seriously wounded Mrs. Forrest. The two eventually returned to their house with the chickens and relayed the event to Forrest. The young Forrest stated, "Mother, I am going to kill that beast if it stays on the earth."¹ By 9 a.m. the following morning, Forrest made good on his promise, returning to the house with the panther's scalp and ears.²

In his teenage years, Forrest's fighting spirit was again displayed with a neighbor who allowed his ox to roam free. This ox wreaked havoc on the Forrest family's fences and destroyed valu-

able corn crops. The young Forrest repeatedly asked the neighbor to control his ox, to no avail. Having had enough and now angered, Forrest gave an ultimatum to the neighbor: if he found the ox on his property again, he would shoot it. Put off by the young man's insolence, the neighbor angrily retorted that he would shoot anyone who kills his ox.

Forrest again found the offending ox rampaging through his property several days later. An infuriated Forrest grabbed his rifle and made good on his earlier warning. Word of the ox's demise reached its owner, who took his rifle to confront Forrest. With a head full of steam, the owner made for the fence line and began to scale it, only to have Forrest's carefully aimed round wizzed through his clothes, knocking him off the fence. The terrified neighbor high-tailed it back to his home, with a defiant and committed Forrest showing signs of what would become his "adoption of the active defensive."³

Brigadier General James R. Chalmers, who served under Forrest from 1864 until the war's end, wrote, "[Forrest] was restrained by no knowledge of law or constitution. He was embarrassed by no preconceived ideas of military science. His favorite maxim was, 'war means fighting and fighting

means killing.’ Without the slightest knowledge of them, he seemed by instinct to adopt the tactics of the great master of the military art, if there be any such art.”⁴ This assessment held true throughout Forrest’s military endeavors, beginning with his first significant engagement in the Battle of Sacramento, Kentucky.

The clash at Sacramento on 28 December 1861 was between Colonel Forrest, leading a patrol of 300 men, against a federal cavalry force nearly double his numbers.⁵ The relatively minor action was a precursor of his conduct in future battles. Forrest demonstrated three specific actions at Sacramento that would become his tactical hallmarks:

1. Dismount a portion of the cavalry to act as sharpshooters and draw the enemy’s attention.
2. Send elements of his force in flanking maneuvers to get around and behind the enemy.
3. Personally lead a charge to break the enemy’s line.⁶

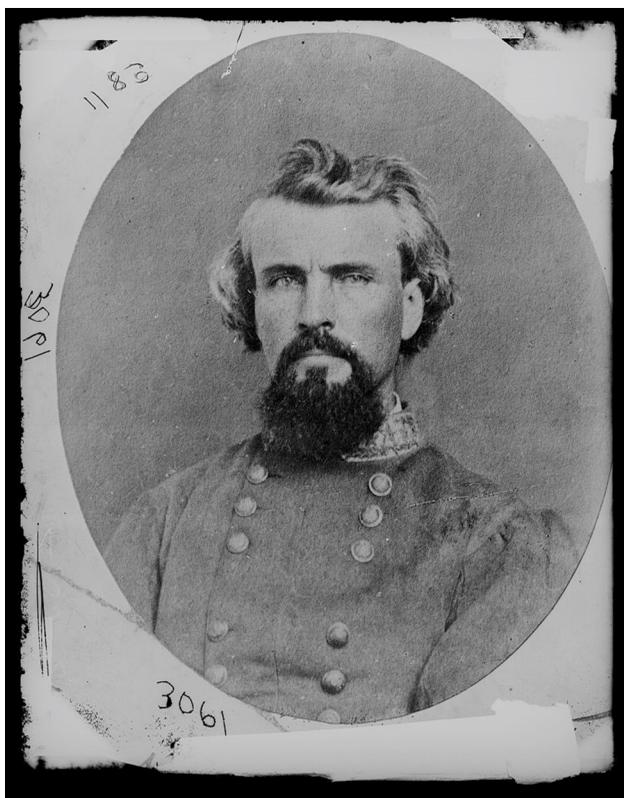
The Confederate attack succeeded as the Federal force “broke in utter confusion.”⁷ The powerfully built, six-foot-two-inch tall Forrest led the charge and pursuit of the routed Federal cavalymen, with later reports that he sabered two of the fleeing officers himself.⁸ The casualties reported by the two sides in the clash, as were typical at the time, varied, with Forrest reporting two killed, three wounded, and around one-hundred Union casualties.⁹

The Union reported eight killed, with around thirteen captured and five Confederates killed.¹⁰

Confederate Brigadier-General Charles Clark in a report to Albert Sidney Johnston, referred to the engagement as “Forrest’s brilliant and dashing affair at Sacramento.”¹¹ “It was one of the most brilliant and successful cavalry engagements that the present war has witnessed and gives a favorable omen of what that arm of the service will do on a more extended scale. For the skill, energy, and courage displayed by Colonel Forrest, he is entitled to the highest praise, and I take great pleasure in calling the attention of the general commanding and the government to his service.”¹²

The following year and a half saw Forrest’s reputation grow. In his official report, Brigadier General Simon B. Buckner spoke of Forrest’s characteristic audacity during the siege and fall of Fort Donelson to Major General Ulysses S. Grant. “During the morning of the 12th, Forrest reported the enemy advancing in force with a view of enveloping our line of defense, and for a time, he as engaged with his usual gallantry in heavy skirmishing with them, at one time driving one of their battalions back upon their artillery.”¹³ Before surrendering the fort to the Union, Forrest led a breakout around 4 a.m. on 16 February 1862.¹⁴

Forrest and his cavalry saw extensive service at the Battles of Shiloh and Fallen Timbers in April 1862. Fallen Timbers specifically saw Forrest’s aggressive leadership style get the bet-



Nathan Bedford Forrest's life experiences shaped his military acumen, resulting in his tactical zenith at Brice's Cross Roads. Library of Congress, Photo by T.J. Selby: this media is in the public domain. <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/pnp/ppmscd/00000/00082v.jpg>

ter of him when he found himself alone and out front of his men, surrounded by Union troops. Observed by the enemy, Forrest soon took one round on his left side, above the hip. Severely wounded by attacking Union troops, Forrest drew his revolvers and fought his way back to Confederate lines.¹⁵

Forrest was a results-oriented individual who believed that the ends justify the means. His raid into Tennessee and the Battle of First Murfreesboro on 13 July 1862 was one such episode that foreshadowed a more infamous event later. At the head of 1,400 men, Forrest, on his 41st birthday, caught the Union

soldiers stationed in Murfreesboro unaware.¹⁶ The colonel sent a message to the Union officer in charge: "I must demand an unconditional surrender of your force as prisoners of war, or I will have every man put to the sword. You are aware of the overpowering force I have at my command, and this demand is made to prevent the effusion of blood."¹⁷ The officer quickly agreed to the demand.

The battle was a great success for Forrest, and more importantly, it reflected the daring tenacity of how Forrest waged war. The cavalryman's successes did not go unnoticed, as For-

rest's superiors promoted him to brigadier-general on 21 July 1862, with another promotion to major general in December 1863.¹⁸

Forrest wreaked havoc on the Union supply lines, which added to his fame among the Confederates and his infamy to the Union. He earned the moniker "wizard of the saddle" for his raids and exploits throughout Tennessee, becoming public enemy number one for General William T. Sherman, who "wanted to destroy General Forrest."¹⁹

Nathan Bedford Forrest was a physically imposing man on the battlefield who generally remained calm in the tumult of battle. Having had no formal military education, Forrest relied on his instincts time and again to read both his adversaries and the battlefield. Then, he would strike at the most opportune time, often resulting in victory. His tactical brilliance would be on full display at the Battle of Tishomingo Creek, better known as the Battle of Brice's Cross Roads.

In March 1864, Grant was a newly minted General-in-Chief of the United States armies. He helped devise a strategy that was effectively a one-two punch. Grant relentlessly pursued General Robert E. Lee in Virginia, while his right hand, General Sherman, would destroy the Army of Tennessee and then drive to Atlanta, effectively breaking the back of the Confederacy.

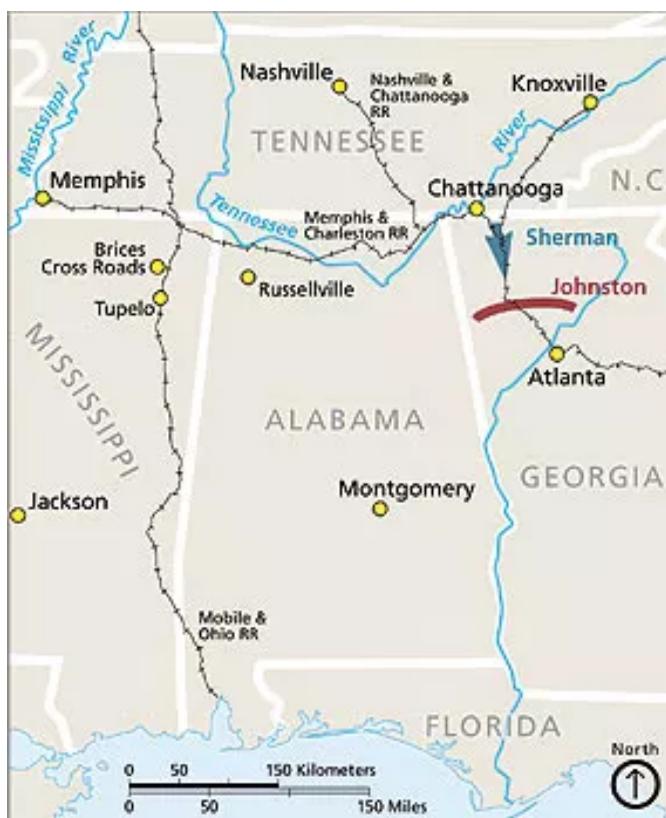
Sherman's offensive started in May 1864. Union forces steadily pushed the Confederates under General Joseph E. Johnston back, though Johnston

made them earn every inch of territory. The further Sherman's army progressed toward its prize of Atlanta, the more strung out and exposed his supply and communication lines became. Grant and Sherman feared that such an inviting target would prove irresistible to Forrest, who was "a constant threat" to their operations.²⁰

Sherman initially communicated with the Union commander in Memphis, General Cadwallader Colden Washburn, instructing him to let Forrest roam throughout the country, as it was less destructive than stirring him up. Grant, however, recognized the true danger of a roaming and free Forrest and ordered Sherman to dispatch a large enough force to Memphis to kill or, at least, tie him down. Sherman needed an officer to lead the Union troops assembling in the Memphis area. The one selected to defeat Forrest was an officer who had failed to do so previously (just a month before, in May 1864), West Point graduate and Mexican-War veteran General Samuel Davis Sturgis.²¹

Sturgis arrived at Memphis on 2 June to command what he assumed to be an overwhelming force consisting of 5,000 infantry, 3,300 cavalry, and twenty-two artillery pieces.²² He promptly set out to execute his orders, but heavy rains made already barely passable roads even worse, significantly slowing their progress. The general would later remark that for nearly 100 miles, their "line of march" was along an "almost impracticable road."²³

Forrest had been ordered by Lieutenant General Stephen Dill Lee, the



In 1863 Federal armies won important victories at Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Chattanooga. In the spring of 1864 the Federal mission was to bisect the South from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to the Atlantic coast at Savannah, Georgia. Major General William T. Sherman wanted to destroy the Confederate Army led by General Joseph E. Johnston and occupy Atlanta along the way as he executed his “March to the Sea.”

Sherman knew that his plan was vulnerable. To supply this large troop movement into north Georgia, he depended on the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad. The excellent horseman of Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry corps could seriously threaten this rail line. Sherman needed to keep Forrest in north Mississippi.

On June 1, Forrest put his 3,500 horsemen in motion at Tupelo, headed for Tennessee. By June 4, they had reached Russellville, Alabama. Meanwhile, a concerned Sherman ordered Brigadier General. Samuel D. Sturgis and a force of 8,100 men moved out of Memphis and threatened north Mississippi to draw Forrest away from Sherman's much-needed railroad in Tennessee. It worked! Major General Stephen D. Lee ordered Forrest to return to Tupelo. On the evening of June 9, Forrest learned that Sturgis's forces were camped about ten miles northwest of Brice's Cross Roads. Both commanders knew that the next day would bring battle. National Archives, Map by the National Park Service: media is in the public domain. <https://www.nps.gov/brcr/why-brices-happened.htm>

new Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana commander, at the same time on 1 June, to proceed with his best men (Forrest took 2,600) into Tennessee and destroy the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad.²⁴ The intention was that destroying the railroad would disrupt Sherman's supply lines, thus buying Johnston some breathing room. Forrest would not get far as he received new orders two days later that a sizeable Union force was moving toward Tupelo from Memphis and that he was to return to Tupelo immediately.

Forrest arrived back in Tupelo on 5 June, receiving intelligence from Confederate scouts that Sturgis was at Salem, MS, where he was slogging ever so slowly through the constant rain and mud-caked roads towards Ruckersville. As Forrest made his way back, he sent out return orders to his scattered units to consolidate his troops to counter the Union threat. As Forrest returned, Brigadier General Benjamin H. Grierson ordered 400 Union cavalry to destroy the railroad tracks at Rienzi.²⁵ The sudden arrival of several brigades of Forrest's troops chased the Union cavalrymen off before they could destroy more than the railroad tracks.

Several days later, on 7 June, Sturgis called a meeting with his division commanders to discuss the state of the operation. The heavy, constant rain, combined with the quagmire-like roads, had exhausted both man and animal, according to Sturgis. He expressed his doubts about continuing and suggested they should reverse course and return to Memphis. After the urging of

his officers not to do so again (he gave up an earlier search for Forrest in May), Sturgis grudgingly agreed to carry on with "a sad foreboding of the consequences."²⁶ Adding together the serious doubts from Sturgis and his officers, while operating in hostile territory with little to no understanding of the local terrain and faulty intelligence at best, made for a situation that played right into Forrest's hands.

Sturgis pressed on down Guntown Road, arriving at Stubbs' farm, some nine miles from Brice's Cross Roads, the early evening of the 9th and decided to make camp. Concurrently, Forrest and his escort had arrived at Booneville, roughly 18 miles from the future battlefield. Captain John Watson Morton's artillery, Colonel Edmund Winchester Rucker's, and Colonel Hylan B. Lyons' brigades joined Forrest and his troops, accounting for a total force of around 1,800 men. Additionally, Colonel Tyree Harris Bell and 2,787 men were at Rienzi, some 25 miles from Brice's Cross Roads.²⁷

Lee joined General Forrest that evening and directed him to pull back toward Okolona in response to the Union force's size. Lee believed this would expose the Federals' supply lines and make them ripe for attack while screening them from valuable southern crops. The general left soon after by train, promising to send Forrest reinforcements but leaving Forrest with the necessary discretion to engage as he saw fit.

Forrest's scouts had been shadowing the Union troop movements,



Brig. Gen. Samuel D. Sturgis had been tasked with bringing Forrest to heel even though he had failed to do so once already. He would be outmaneuvered and outfought at Brice's Cross Roads. Library of Congress, Photo by Brady's National Photographic Portrait Galleries: this media is in the public domain. <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/pnp/cwp/4a40000/4a40400/4a40422r.jpg>

which by the 9th had made it clear to Forrest that the Union troops intended to continue down the road to Guntown. The road ran southeasterly, connecting Ripley through Guntown to Fulton with another road that led from Carrollville through Ellistown to Pontotoc, connecting all at Brice's farm, thereby being known as Brice's Cross Roads.²⁸ The general recognized an opportunity

to trap the Union force at Brice's Cross Roads and laid out his plan to 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 many 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 the infantry hurried up. It is going to be as hot as hell, and coming on a run for five or six miles over such roads, their infantry will be so tired out we will ride over them.²⁹

The Confederates set out at 4 a.m. on 10 June. The rain ceased sometime around midnight, having done its job of robbing the Union troops of their strength from endless days of marching in miserable conditions. Accustomed to the weather, the Confederate forces were seemingly unaffected. Additionally, the heat was building when the Confederates left for their positions, which would sap the Union troops of even more of their energy and fighting spirit. Forrest planned to exploit it all.

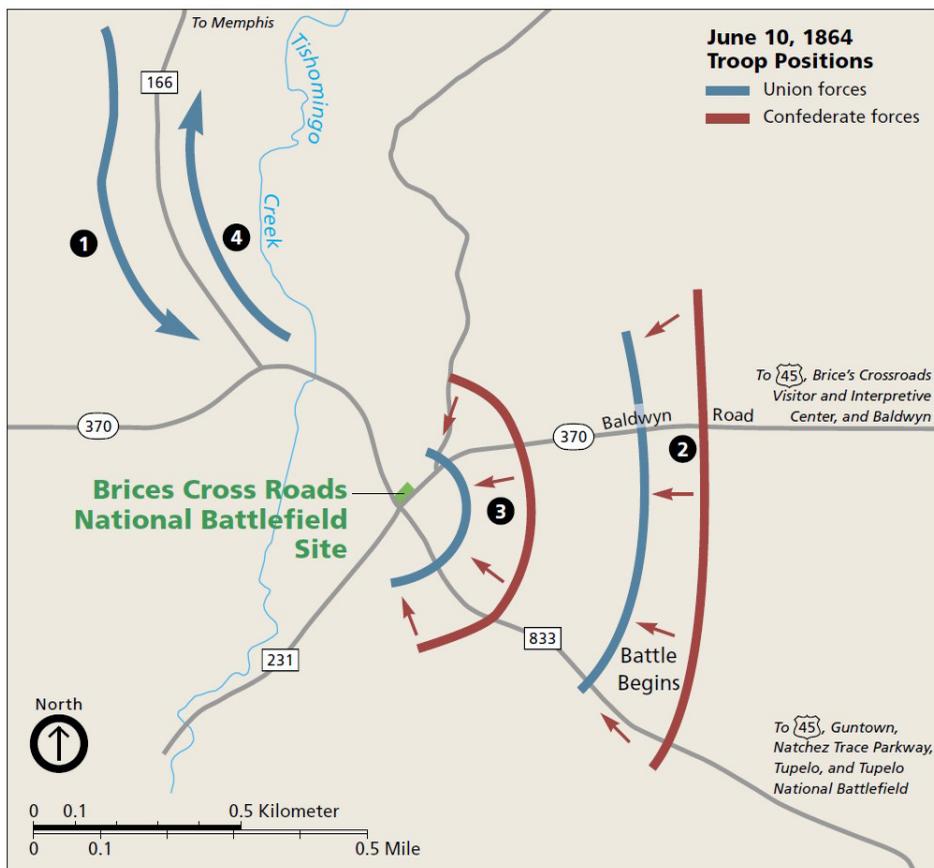
The Union force, for its part, did not get underway until 5:30 a.m. with the advance of Grierson's 2,400-strong cavalry that had orders to engage any rebels they encountered. The infantry under Colonel William L. McMillen, a full 4,800 men (including the 55th and 59th United States Colored Troops), would not move out until 7 a.m. "as it would take the cavalry a full hour and a half to clear their camp."³⁰ This would give Forrest the needed time to "whip their cavalry."³¹

Advance elements of the Union cavalry under Colonel George E. Waring encountered and dispersed a Confederate detachment from the 7th Tennessee at Tishomingo Creek bridge before reaching Brice's Cross Roads at 9:45 a.m. Having learned about the presence of Grierson's cavalry at the crossroads, Forrest, his escort, and Lyon's brigade headed to engage them. Greater Union numbers would swallow up Forrest, so he knew he had to play his game of deception perfectly.

Forrest called for Brigadier General Abraham Buford to double-time it with the artillery and for Bell to make haste. Forrest dismounted nearly all his available troops to tie up the cavalry and pushed towards the crossroads. Simultaneously, he sent a communique to Lee in Okolona that read: "The enemy are advancing directly to this place. Johnson's brigade is here. Buford's division and Rucker's brigade with two batteries are moving and will arrive by noon. Our pickets have already commenced firing."³²

Grierson similarly had Waring's brigade of 1,600 men, two guns, and four howitzers dismount and deploy over both sides of the road, which also afforded them a clear range of the open field to their front. The dismounted Union cavalrymen engaged the Confederates as Lyon's troops repeatedly charged them as ordered by Forrest to keep them off balance.

The shuffling, deployment, and attacks by the Confederates led Grierson to deploy Edward Winslow's 1,800 men and light guns to the right of War-



This map of the Battle of Brice's Cross Roads depicts Union and Confederate positions on June 10, 1864. Forrest utilized his Union opponent's terrain, weather, and psychology to execute and win a battle against far superior odds. Sturgis's army moved out at dawn on the 10th, headed southeast, the cavalry in the lead (1). About a half-mile east of the crossroads (2) the lead elements of the Federal cavalry met the Confederate Kentucky brigade about 9:30 a.m. and the battle began. By 11:00 a.m. Forrest, now reinforced, began to push the Federals back toward the crossroads. The Federal horsemen held out long enough for infantry reinforcement. Having formed an arcing battle line around the crossroads (3), the two forces battled for the next 4 hours. By 5 p.m., after enveloping both Federal flanks and launching a slashing frontal attack, Forrest had shattered Sturgis's line, forcing the Federals to retreat toward Memphis (4). An overturned wagon at the Tishomingo Creek bridge slowed the Federal retreat, resulting in the loss of 16 artillery pieces and supplying wagons containing guns and ammunition. Thanks to a series of defensive actions by a brigade of United States Colored Troops, most of Sturgis's army was able to escape almost certain capture. National Archives, Map by the National Park Service: media is in the public domain. https://s3.amazonaws.com/NARAprdstorage/opastorage/live/90/7535/33753590/content/electronic-records/rg-079/NPS_MAPS/BRCRmap3.pdf

ing on the Guntown road while sending frantic messages to Sturgis asking for immediate reinforcements.³³ Sturgis would finally arrive to assess the situation only after having previously sent a rider who had reported that Grierson was in dire straits. Sturgis observed the “battle [was] growing warm” and so ordered McMillen to bring up the infantry with all due speed (after having communicated not to do so shortly before).³⁴

The Confederate feint attacks, meanwhile, had worked to keep pressure on the Union line and convince them that they faced a large rebel force. More of Forrest’s troops arrived by 1 p.m., including Buford, Bell, and the rest of the artillery. The rest of the pieces were now in place to finish off the Union cavalry, and Forrest ordered the assault.

The attacking Confederates hit the Union line seemingly from every direction. The pressure, momentum, and ferocity proved too much for Grierson’s flanks, who pulled back further, exposing the Federal center and giving Forrest the battlefield momentum he craved. Relentless pressure by the Confederates forced the dismounted Union cavalry to withdraw even further. The Confederates had beaten the Union cavalry by 12:30, just as Forrest had planned.

The arrival of Sturgis and the spent infantry at 2 p.m. should have been a relief for the besieged Union cavalrymen. Instead, it was immediately plagued by disagreements between Sturgis and Grierson on disengaging

the cavalrymen and replacing them with infantry. Sturgis slowly fed infantry into the line piecemeal, which made matters worse. He also ordered the cavalrymen to pull out, which caused mass confusion in the heat of the battle.

Forrest had an inherent ability to read a battle and identify the moment that would decide it, and the moment had arrived. The general ordered Captain Morton and his four guns to prepare double-shot and to be ready to move when he gave the order. Not long after, the bugle sounded, and the entire Confederate line advanced, with Morton unleashing a double shot at point-blank range into the massed Union infantry. The murderous fire from the guns and the collected fire of the grey tide forced the Union to pull back from the crossroads, losing several cannons in the process.

At the same time, Colonel Bell and the 2nd Tennessee Cavalry regiment had worked their way around and behind the left flank of the Union line as ordered, and chaos ensued. At this point, Sturgis would say, “Order gave way to confusion and confusion to panic Everywhere, the army now drifted toward the rear and was soon altogether beyond control.”³⁵

The entire Union line soon collapsed. Confederate troops chased the broken Union troops for miles with only the efforts of the 55th and 59th USCTs, saving the Union force from complete rout. Despite these efforts, Sturgis and his retreating force would not stop until 11 June and traveled twenty-four miles. The appearance of Con-

federate troops, however, prompted the retreat to continue. The Union column would eventually end back in Memphis after 64 hours, while it had taken them ten days to reach Brice's Cross Roads.³⁶

Brice's Cross Roads was an unmitigated disaster for Sturgis but a brilliant tactical victory for Forrest. The Union lost 2,612 total casualties compared to the Confederate losses of 493.³⁷ Besides 1,500 Union captives, Forrest also claimed 250 wagons, 18 cannons, and thousands of rounds of ammunition and arms.³⁸ It was a substantial bounty for an improbable victory that should not have happened.

At Brice's Cross Roads, Forrest brought everything his life and intuition had taught him: take and hold the advantage, no matter the size of the enemy; know the terrain and use it to your advantage; disguise your weaknesses as strengths, and vice versa; turn the enemy's flanks and get behind them.³⁹

These martial philosophies made Forrest a "wizard of the saddle" as well

as an immense headache for those like Sherman. Forrest won a great victory at Brice's Cross Roads but failed to effectively change anything in the Western Theater. If anything, Sturgis strategically won, as he was supposed to tie up Forrest, and that he did. The time it took for Forrest to engage, beat, and then chase Sturgis was time spent not disrupting Sherman's supply and communication lines.

Nathan Bedford Forrest was a naturally gifted tactician who felt his way around a battlefield. This afforded him great success over many professional soldiers. In the end, however, the Confederate command recognized Forrest's talents far too late to have been a true difference-maker as the Union machine marched through the west and down toward Atlanta. The Battle of Brice's Crossroads, while recognizing Forrest's tactical brilliance and control, was very much an example of the Union (i.e., Sturgis) snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

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Michael G. Stroud is a Military Historian from Michigan with a passion for all eras of military history, from ancient to modern times. Michael has traveled to some of history's most iconic sites, from Stonehenge in England to Napoleon's tomb in France to the Colosseum in Rome, with many more on his must-visit list. He has published a wide range of history articles on military history websites, scholarly journals, and print magazines.