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From Brice's Crossroads to Grierson's Raid: The Struggle for North Mississippi

Stewart Bennett

The year 1864 proved pivotal in the development of the American Civil War. Decisions made determined the destinies of commanders, the men who fought under them, and the civilians caught in the crossfire of war. This was especially true in North Mississippi. This also was the year Lincoln put the military fortunes of the Union and its armies under the authority of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant.

While Grant led the war effort from the eastern theater, he put his trust in his close friend Major General William T. Sherman to command and oversee the work of the Union armies in the Western Theater. According to Grant, Sherman's ultimate goals included the destruction of the Army of Tennessee, and if possible, the capture of Atlanta.¹ Atlanta was a major railroad hub for the South and specifically the Western Theater. By taking Atlanta, Sherman would sever Confederate rail lines between the two theaters of war thus continuing to divide the Confederacy. In order to make these goals obtainable, Sherman needed a strong army and a protected supply line so he focused on how to supply his armies throughout the campaign toward Atlanta. Damage to Sherman's supply line would have caused lengthy delays in the Union Army's movements and ultimately would have meant disaster for Sherman. One of Sherman's problems, and quite possibly his most vexing, was the fear of an attack upon his long vulnerable supply line by Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest and his cavalry forces.

Sherman had good reason to worry about Forrest. Although Forrest had no military training, it became obvious early in the struggle that he was a natural at making war and a force to be reckoned with. By leading a successful escape of his troops from Fort Donelson, his hard fighting at Shiloh and Chickamauga, his raids through Tennessee, his successful pursuits of Union forces in Alabama, and then his

¹ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1886), vol. 2:120.

controversial taking of Fort Pillow, Forrest and his cavalry had made themselves seem larger than life to many in the South and to Union armies who crossed their path.² Although Georgia was on Sherman's mind, the specter of Forrest haunted Sherman's thoughts. Sherman later admitted, "There was great danger, always in my mind, that Forrest would collect a heavy cavalry command in Mississippi, cross the Tennessee River, and break up our railroad below Nashville."³ Therefore, Sherman developed a plan for dealing with Forrest.

In May 1864, Confederate Major General Stephen Dill Lee assumed command of the department that comprised all of Mississippi, Alabama, East Louisiana, and Western Tennessee, encompassing all Confederate forces operating within this large domain, including Forrest and his cavalry.⁴ Although others clamored for Forrest's cavalry to strike Sherman's supply line in Tennessee, Lee had his own problems. If Forrest and his men rode into central Tennessee, it would leave North Mississippi's cornfields and important rail lines vulnerable to Union raids. Furthermore, this would have hampered the delivery of supplies to Johnston's Confederate Army of Tennessee, which depended on North Mississippi for much of its provisions. Lee's fears of Mississippi's vulnerability grew when he realized Alabama's susceptibility to Union raids.

Sherman reasoned that until Forrest had been captured or killed, the southern cavalryman would be a constant worry. Therefore, Sherman decided to take the fight to Forrest by sending a small Union Army from Memphis under the command of Brigadier General Samuel D. Sturgis in search of the illusive cavalryman. In doing so, Sherman hoped to keep Forrest busy in Mississippi and away from Union operations in Georgia. Sturgis's first attempt in late April ended in failure, due mainly to rainy weather and low supplies, but on May 31, Sherman ordered Sturgis, once again, to move forward. This time,

² Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 92–93; Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle from the Start* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 113–16.

³ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), vol. 2: 31, 52.

⁴ Lee, Stephen D, "Battle of Brice's Crossroads, or Tishomingo Creek, June 2nd to 12th, 1864," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, Franklin L. Riley, ed. (Oxford, MS, 1902), vol. 6, 27–28. It should be noted that an official report has never been found. Lee's article for the Mississippi Historical Society appears to be his report, but it was written in 1902, years after the war and death of General Forrest.

Sturgis had Brigadier General Benjamin Grierson commanding Waring's Cavalry of 1,500 with Winslow's 1,800 cavalymen and six pieces of artillery. Infantry were also part of Sturgis's forces and included Colonel William L. McMillen's brigade of 2,000 along with Company E, First Illinois Artillery, four guns; a section of two guns from the Fourteenth Indiana Battery and part of Colonel George B. Hoge's brigade of A. J. Smith's division, some 1,600 troops. Finally, Captain F. H. Chapman's four-gun battery was added along with Colonel Edward Bouton's brigade of colored troops at 1,200 strong. Sturgis intended to march on Corinth. From there, they would continue to Tupelo, then on to Okolona, Columbus, and finally Grenada. The combined forces planned to return to Memphis from Grenada. Sturgis hoped, during his movements, to provoke an engagement with Forrest.⁵

While Sturgis's men marched through north Mississippi on June 1, Forrest and his men were busy moving toward the Tennessee River to break Sherman's supply line. However, with Sturgis on the move, Lee decided to call Forrest back to Mississippi in order to halt the Union advance. Lee's decision worked wonderfully into Sherman's overall plan. Heavy rains and lack of supplies once again hindered Sturgis's movements through North Mississippi, except this time Sturgis resolved to keep moving toward Tupelo.⁶

On the morning of June 10, Grierson's cavalry reached Brice's Crossroads ahead of Forrest's troopers. Forrest, hoping to catch Sturgis's cavalry separated from the infantry, sent forward what troops he had at the time, roughly 2,000. These men did their best to form a strong skirmish line until Colonel Tyree H. Bell with almost 2,800 men, more than half of Forrest's available troops, could arrive and enter the fight. Cavalry on both sides fought dismounted. Forrest later reported that his available force during the fighting at Brice's Crossroads stood at only 3,500.⁷

Regardless of the numbers, Forrest's men were able to conceal their troop strength by using the area's topography to their advantage

⁵ *OR*, vol. 39, 1: 217–18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 221–22.

⁷ John Morton, *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest's Cavalry* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2012), 174; James Harvey Mathes, *General Forrest* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), 238–239, 241; Thomas Jordan and J. P. Pryor, *The Campaigns of Lieut. Gen. N. B. Forrest* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996 reprint), 467–69; *OR*, vol. 39, 1: 222–23, 225.

while keeping up a heavy skirmish fire. This caused considerable angst for Grierson who believed that Forrest had more men than the wily southern general actually commanded. Sturgis and his infantry were at least two miles from the conflict at Brice's Crossroads when the general received notification of the fight. Sturgis committed himself and two of the brigades to the action by moving troops on the double quick under a stifling Mississippi sun. In doing so, Sturgis lost many of his troops to heat exhaustion before they could reach the crossroads. By 1:00 p.m. the remnants of his brigades reached the Union line at Brice's Crossroads. Bell's Confederates had also arrived and entered the fight. Forrest moved his men forward and pushed the Union forces back upon the crossroads finally breaking the federal line and forcing the Union troops back across Tishomingo Creek. Sturgis's final brigade, made up of Bouton's black soldiers, arrived in time to hold the Union line near the Tishomingo Creek bridge, allowing Union forces to cross the creek. The black troops then retreated to a final stand on Whitehouse Ridge. This last stand was short-lived because Sturgis's line could not withstand Forrest's onslaught. The Confederate charge caused the Union men to flee toward Ripley and beyond to Memphis. Sturgis lost about two hundred wagons and all of his artillery. Union troops trickled into Memphis over the next two weeks, yet Confederate forces captured many before they could reach the city. Sturgis recorded Union losses, including the missing, as 1,623.⁸

Forrest's win at Brice's Crossroads came with a price. Confederate casualties lost during his victory were hard to replace. S.D. Lee wrote authorities in Richmond of Forrest's exploits announcing that Forrest had "gained a complete victory, capturing many prisoners and wagon train." Yet in the end, Lee wrote, "our loss quite severe." The Union Army suffered 617 casualties, while the Confederate Army lost 492 killed and wounded. Given that Forrest had a smaller command, his loss was, as Lee mentioned, "quite severe." The greatest difference in assessing this battle could be in the number of Union soldiers taken prisoner.⁹

The battle of Brice's Crossroads became a celebrated Confederate victory and cemented Forrest's reputation as a great leader and fighter, while also helping to secure north Mississippi under southern control,

⁸ Stewart Bennett, *The Battle of Brice's Crossroads* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2012), 41, 66–69, 72, 99–104, 106–7, 109–15, 117–22; *OR*, vol. 39, 1: 92–95.

⁹ *OR*, vol. 39, 1: 95, 220, 230–31.

at least for the moment. Sherman received word of Sturgis's debacle soon after the fight. Although disappointed in the outcome, Sherman had in effect won at Brice's Crossroads, for the fight kept Forrest away from Sherman's supply line. Sherman continued to take the fight to Forrest in north Mississippi and demonstrated his commitment to defeating Forrest by sending an even larger army into Mississippi, stating that Forrest's cavalry "should be met and defeated at any and all cost."¹⁰

By the middle of June, Sherman's forces in Georgia found themselves near Kennesaw Mountain about twenty-five miles north of Atlanta. Sherman could not afford a serious disruption in his supply line, especially at this point. Therefore, it became imperative that Forrest be held in and around North Mississippi because Sherman's supply line continued to be vulnerable as his army maneuvered deeper into Confederate territory.

By early July, General A. J. Smith left Memphis in another attempt to defeat Forrest. Smith had an aggregate of 14,000 troops, which included infantry, cavalry, and four artillery batteries. By July 12, Smith and his Union forces had reached Pontotoc and encountered Confederate skirmishers. Forrest readied his men for a fight south of Pontotoc on the road toward Okolona. However, through reconnaissance, Smith found the Okolona road to be secured about nine miles south of Pontotoc by Confederate forces. This area included swampy lowlands, felled trees, and a strong enemy position upon a hill just beyond the swamp. While Forrest and Lee waited for the Union general to march into their trap at Okolona, Smith instead moved his men west toward Tupelo. Smith, in doing so, looked to secure Tupelo, possess the railroad there, and most of all, to choose the ground upon which he wished to fight.¹¹

As Union forces moved toward Tupelo, Lee ordered Forrest and his men to attack and press the rear of the Union forces. In doing so, both sides suffered casualties, and Smith lost a number of wagons. Smith's army, including his rear guard of colored troops, fought off attacks by Lee and Forrest during the march to Tupelo. When Smith arrived two miles west of Harrisburg, a tiny community west of Tupelo, he developed a battle line, which Forrest found to be, "a strong position on a

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2: 115.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1: 250–51, 321.

ridge fronting an open field, gradually sloping toward our approach.” The Union line also included fortifications causing Forrest to see the position as, “almost impregnable.”¹² Regardless, Lee decided to attack the next day, July 14. Forrest led the Confederate right in assaulting the Union left roughly a mile distant. Once Forrest had explained the plan to his subordinates and had moved out to select a position for an attack, he found the Kentucky Brigade already in motion toward the front and “retiring under the murderous fire concentrated upon them.” Forrest managed to move the brigade to a more secure area but the well-entrenched enemy position and Union firepower only strengthened Forrest’s resolve not to commit his troops to such slaughter. Instead, Forrest called forward his artillery and developed a new line.¹³

Meanwhile, the Confederate left made its way toward the main Union line and pushed the enemy skirmishers back as they went. These Confederates were within sixty yards of the main Union line when Smith unleashed artillery and small arms fire upon the hapless southerners. The Union gunfire, lack of ammunition, and the heat of the day became too much for the Confederate soldiers. The gray line found itself compelled to fall back after two hours of fighting. Lee, resigned to the fact that the Union line would hold, ordered his men to fall back and create strong works. During the night, Confederates led by Forrest attempted to turn Smith’s left flank but were beaten back, largely by Bouton’s colored troops. Forrest had ridden with one of his aides through the Union lines that evening, getting a good view of enemy positions before he was spotted. He and his aide managed to escape unharmed. The experience left Forrest with an even greater appreciation of Smith’s strong position. What he had seen no doubt accounted for some of his reluctance during the fighting on July 14.¹⁴

Smith and his Union forces had won a victory, but other problems quickly surfaced. Just as Sherman needed to keep his supply line sufficient and unmolested, Smith found on the morning of July 15 that his own supplies were seriously deficient. Much of the Union Army’s bread had spoiled. Now the army had to rely on one day’s rations. Furthermore, the army’s artillery ammunition supply allowed for only 100

¹² *Ibid.*, 1: 251, 321–22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1: 322.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1: 322–23; Michael B. Ballard, *The Civil War in Mississippi: Major Campaigns and Battles* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 230–31, 238–39.

rounds per gun. Smith had finally found Forrest and had beaten the Confederate Army, yet with these supply problems he found it necessary to return to Memphis. Perhaps, too, he did not wish to press his luck. Therefore, on July 15, Smith and his victorious army moved out, camping that night at Old Town Creek, but not before one last encounter. Lee called upon Forrest to pursue the Union troops as they made their way along the Ellistown Road. The fighting at Old Town Creek became heavy as Confederate troops drove Union forces from a hill and down into the creek area. Although both sides held their positions, Forrest arrived in the thick of the fighting only to receive a painful wound. That caused the general to be removed from further service for the day. Soon after, the Confederate troops were withdrawn from the fight.¹⁵

Smith and his men made their way back toward Memphis and into camp at La Grange, Tennessee, by July 21. Losses for Smith's command during the Battle of Tupelo (Harrisburg) were around 700 men. While Smith had kept Forrest busy in Mississippi, Sherman expected more. On July 20, Sherman wrote Washburn in Memphis, "Order Smith to pursue and keep after Forrest all the time."¹⁶ Sherman found himself at the gates of Atlanta fighting the Battle of Peachtree Creek on July 20, then the Battle of Atlanta and eventually Ezra Church on the 28th. General John Bell Hood had taken command of Confederate forces around Atlanta, and it became even more imperative that Forrest be kept from the federal supply line if Sherman expected to keep his campaign alive. With this in mind, Smith and an army of at least 20,000 men made their way back into Mississippi in search of Forrest.¹⁷

Not long after the fight near Tupelo, Stephen D. Lee was assigned to Hood's army in Georgia. Forrest continued to do his part serving within the North Mississippi region but at a greater disadvantage than before. The battle of Brice's Crossroads had taken its toll in casualties and additional losses during the fighting around Tupelo cost Forrest and the South 1,326 men.¹⁸ Forrest found that his manpower had been reduced to only 5,000 troops.¹⁹ In explaining his plight to the new

¹⁵ *OR*, vol. 39, 1: 323–24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 256, 2:184.

¹⁷ Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 210.

¹⁸ *OR*, vol. 39, 1: 324.

¹⁹ Hurst, *Forrest: A Biography*, 210.

department commander, Major General Dabney H. Maury, Forrest admitted, "I have not the force to risk a general engagement, and will resort to all other means in my reach to harass, annoy, and force the enemy back."²⁰ While Sherman tried to keep Forrest off his coveted supply lines, Forrest worked to keep Smith from moving into the Confederate general's homeland. What came next surprised Washburn, Smith, and the people of Memphis.

General Benjamin Grierson and his cavalry were, again, part of Smith's movement into Mississippi, this time down the north-south Mississippi Central Railroad. Grierson explained his frustration admitting, "We are moving south again without an objective point, merely striking out in a haphazard sort of fashion, and as likely to hit the air as the enemy. We can do but little good by such movements beyond occupying the attention of the rebels and keeping Forrest's troops from interfering with Sherman's movements further east."²¹ While Smith's troops continued their march toward Oxford, Forrest began his own expedition toward Memphis. Forrest worked to create a diversion that would cause the retreat of Smith's forces while also wrecking havoc among the Union generals, troops, and the civilians residing in Memphis. His possible objectives included capturing Union officers, especially Cadwallader Washburn (commanding in Memphis), creating confusion among the Union troops in the town, freeing captives in Irving Prison, and threatening if not capturing the city itself.²²

On Sunday, August 21, around 5:00 a.m., Forrest's command drove in the Union pickets and entered Memphis. Squads of Confederate cavalrymen surrounded the Gayoso House and Union Street where Washburn made his headquarters and residence. Fortunately for Washburn, he had been alerted and whisked away to nearby Fort Pickering minutes before the Confederates could capture him. The raid ended soon after it started. No Union generals were captured, no inmates were freed from Irving Prison, nor was the city of Memphis captured. However, confusion reigned in the early hours of that foggy Sunday morning. Forrest did procure Washburn's uniform, and the dash through Memphis frightened Smith, who burned many buildings in the vicinity

²⁰ *OR*, vol. 39, 2: 756.

²¹ Bruce J. Dinges and Shirley A. Leckie, eds. *A Just and Righteous Cause: Benjamin H. Grierson's Civil War Memoir* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 275.

²² Hurst, *Forrest: A Biography*, 212.

of Oxford and retreated back toward Tennessee. In doing so, Smith left Forrest and North Mississippi behind in what would be Smith's final expedition in that department. Forrest's raid reverberated throughout Memphis for days. Lieutenant Colonel William H. Thurston recalled on the twenty-third of August that "the whole town was stampeded at about 10 a.m. by a report being circulated that Forrest had returned in force and was again in town. It was the most disgraceful affair I have ever seen, and proves that there is demoralization and want of confidence by the people in our army, and our army in some of its officers."²³

The Union forces at Memphis soon began to dwindle as many were sent into Arkansas and Missouri for other military duties. Sherman's forces had been victorious in Atlanta and on September 2 entered the city. Forrest was finally free to strike Sherman's supply lines but at a time when Sherman no longer depended on them. Forrest then took his command and joined Hood and his army in Tennessee leaving Mississippi with fewer troops for protection. After Hood's disastrous campaign in Tennessee, Union forces, once again, made their way back into the region. In late December, General Grierson with about 3,500 men set out into north Mississippi, revealing just how desperate and unprotected the Confederacy and the region had become. The area of Booneville and Guntown, where Brice's Crossroads had been a major regional victory for Forrest and his men, became easy prey as Union patrols destroyed railroad bridges, culverts, miles of track and telegraph lines, and store houses with clothing and military goods. Grierson's men then attacked Confederate supplies at and near Verona. Here, Union troops destroyed supplies on board two trains of thirty-two cars along with eight warehouses containing what Grierson found to be, "ordnance, quartermaster, and commissary stores, besides 300 army wagons, most of which were marked 'U.S.A.' having been captured from General Sturgis at the time of his defeat by General Forrest near Brice's Crossroads."²⁴

From Verona, Grierson continued toward Tupelo destroying the 1,000-foot railroad bridge over Old Town Creek and the track toward Tupelo. This destruction was accomplished without serious delays from southern forces. The lack of strong Confederate resistance revealed a stark difference when compared with Confederate resistance during

²³ *OR*, vol. 39, 1: 468–72.

²⁴ Dinges and Leckie, *Just and Righteous Cause*, 302–3.

the summer of 1864. From this point, Grierson's forces moved along the Mobile and Ohio Railroad destroying Confederate supplies from Okolona to Egypt Station where Confederate forces made their bitterest stand. This three-hour fight ended in Union victory and Confederate supplies destroyed. Union forces continued moving west to Houston. Detachments of Union cavalry from Grierson's command then moved out across Mississippi to areas including Pontotoc, West Point, Bellefontaine, Greensborough, Bankston, Winona Station, and the area near Grenada. Track, bridges, and equipment were destroyed as well along the Mississippi Central Railroad. Although Union forces met with some Confederate resistance, more often than not, Union troops were able to move easily and accomplish their objectives without serious resistance.²⁵

Grierson's entire command moved southwest from the Winona area, arriving in Vicksburg on January 5, 1865. Success rode with Grierson while he and his troopers completed their 450-mile mission. Grierson's forces managed to destroy twenty thousand feet of bridges, ten miles of track, twenty miles of telegraph, sixteen locomotives, over three hundred wagons with supplies, two caissons, thirty warehouses of supplies, cloth and shoe factories along with a number of tanneries and machine shops, captured five thousand new muskets and a volume of foodstuffs. While Confederate troops were killed and wounded, more than a hundred of those captured at Egypt Station were found to have actually been Union prisoners who were recruited from southern prisons for Confederate service.²⁶ War had taken its toll on the region. Union and Confederate manpower proved to have a significant role in the part North Mississippi played in the war during 1864. Both sides had been able to muster the forces needed to fight battles such as the Confederate victory at Brice's Crossroads and the Union victory near Tupelo. Yet, as the summer waned, so did Confederate reinforcements. By the fall of 1864, Forrest found himself using diversionary tactics such as the raid on Memphis to draw back larger Union forces, but by the winter of that same year, Union cavalry under Grierson could raid at will. Although Union forces found themselves stretched

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 303–8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 309.

across Mississippi and Tennessee, they never wanted in material and manpower quite like Confederate forces in the same areas. When the remnant of Hood's army reached Corinth, they found few supplies, for Grierson's second raid had left the cupboard bare. With Union victories in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Sherman's successes in Georgia, the end of the war and the Confederacy became inevitable.

