

Fort Pillow Attack

THE GRAND FABRICATION

It is almost as difficult to find consistent information about the incident at Fort Pillow as it is to determine the moral significance of its outcome. Scholars disagree about exactly what transpired on April 12, 1864 at Fort Pillow, when General Nathan Bedford Forrest captured the fort with his 1,500 troops and claimed numerous Union lives in the process (Wyeth 250). It became an issue of propaganda for the Union, and as a result the facts were grossly distorted. After close examination it is clear that the 'Fort Pillow Massacre' (as it became known by abolitionists) was nothing of the sort. The 1,500 troops under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest acted as men and as soldiers in their capture of Fort Pillow.

It is first necessary to understand what happened in the battle before any judgment can be made. A careful study performed by Dr. John Wyeth revealed the following information: from April 9-11, 1864, troops under the command of Ben McCulloch, Tyree Harris Bell, and Brig. General James Chalmers marched non-stop to Fort Pillow to begin their assault under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Confederate sharpshooters claimed the lives of several key Union officers during the morning assault on the fort. The losses included the commanding officer Major Loinel F. Booth, and his second in command shortly after that. These losses created a complete breakdown of order and leadership among the Union troops within the fort. (251) During the morning engagement, the gun boat the New Era was continually attempting to shell the Confederate forces from the Mississippi, but with minimal success. The Union forces fought back heartily until around one o'clock in the afternoon, when both sides slowed down. Around that time the New Era steamed out of range to cool its weapons. It had fired a total of 282 rounds, and its supplies were almost totally exhausted. During this hiatus in the firing, while Confederate troops waited for supplies that would arrive around three o'clock, Forrest was injured when his horse fell on him after being mortally wounded (252). When the supplies arrived, Confederate troops under a flag of truce delivered a message from Forrest that said, 'My men have received a fresh supply of ammunition, and from their present position can easily assault and capture the fort,' (253). Forrest demanded 'the unconditional surrender of the garrison, promising that you shall be treated as prisoners of war' (253). This agreement was refused by Major William F. Bradford using the name of Major Booth, and Forrest was left with no option but to attack (Long & Long 484). Without a word, Forrest rode to his post, and a bugle call began the charge. The soldiers stormed the fort under the cover of sharpshooter fire. The Union spent their rounds on the charging mass, and the second wave was to all intents and purposes a 'turkey shoot.' As hordes of soldiers came over the wall, a considerable number of Union lives were lost to point blank fire, an action that was deemed murder by the northern press. (255) However, it must not be forgotten that those Union troops who died were in the process of reloading their rifles. Even knowing that they were severely outnumbered, they had demanded the fight (Henry 255).

By this point most of the Union officers in the fort had been killed, and the remaining troops fled the fort toward the river where they had provisions waiting. There was also a plan for the New Era to shell the Confederate troops in the fort with canister, but the shelling never happened. Confederate troops were waiting at the bottom of the fort to prevent access to the supplies by the Union forces. With the Union flag still flying upon the fort and Union forces still firing on the run, Confederate troops claimed many more lives on the river bank. It was reported by Colonel FIRST NAME Barteau that they made a wild, crazy, scattering fight. They acted like a crowd of drunken men. They would at one moment yield and throw down their guns, and then would rush again to arms, seize their guns and renew the fire. If one squad was left as prisoners ... it would soon discover that they could not be trusted as having surrendered, for taking the first opportunity they would break loose again and engage in the contest. Some of our men were killed by Negroes who had once surrendered (256).

With this type of activity, it is understandable how a superior force could claim so many casualties. However, the issue is not so clear to Civil War historians. The first and biggest problem has to do with the information that different historians base their opinions on. For example, in a historical account written by Carl Sandburg it is reported that Forrest's troops stood 6,000 strong. This is slightly inflated from the actual 1,500 that were present. In this same account Sandburg claims that the battle ended as a mob scene with wholesale lynching (Sandburg 247). It was distorted information such as this that was used by the Union as propaganda against the South. After the incident General FIRST NAME Kilpatrick was quoted saying Forrest had nailed Negroes to the fences, set fire to the fences, and burned the Negroes to death (Hurst 321). With reports like this, it is understandable why abolitionist were outraged.

The Congressional Committee released a summary after the event. It stated that the rebels took advantage of a flag of truce to place themselves in position from which the more readily to charge the upon the fort that after the fall of the fort the rebels commenced in an indiscriminate slaughter sparing neither age nor sex, white or black, soldier or civilian; that this was not the results passions excited by the heat of conflict, but of a policy deliberation decided upon and unhesitatingly announced; that several of the wounded were intentionally burned to death in huts and tents about the fort; and the the rebels buried some of the living the dead. (Henry 260)

In the intensive studies performed by Dr. John Wyeth there were more than fifty soldiers that were present at this battle who gave sworn testimonies contradicting these findings. (260) This suggests that the Union fabricated the truth to aid in its own cause.

The fact is that most of what was said about Forrest's unethical actions were false accusations. Testimonies from several different sources (both Union and Confederate) claim that there were no movements under the flag of truce, but that they had their positions hours before. (Henry 260) It is true that the

losses were huge in this battle, but that is typical of many significantly unbalanced battles. According to Wyeth there was only one incident of force against the Union after the Union flag came down, and that resulted in an on the spot arrest .

This entire incident was blown totally of proportion. It is tragic to lose even one life, but on a battle field, death is inevitable. This event became a monumental point in the war because of exaggeration and lies told by Union supporters. These lies strengthened the Union cause and further blemished the reputation of Confederate forces. Morally, there is no fault in Forrest's actions.

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