

# Forrest's Last Raid

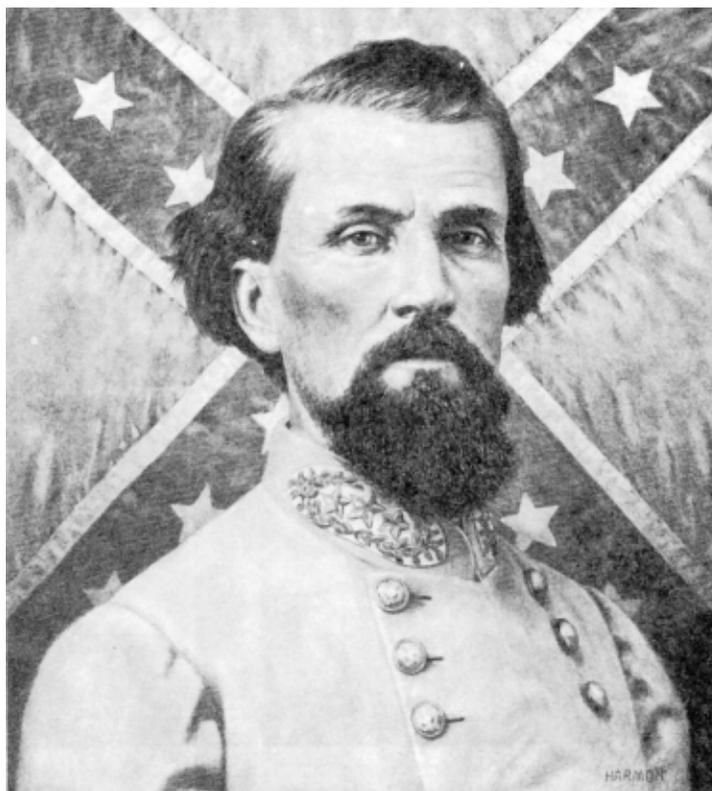
*The cavalry raider planned a combined land and water campaign against the Union's vulnerable, river-borne logistical system*

by Brigadier General Philip L. Bolté, USA, Ret.

Cavalry raids have been a part of military operations since the dawn of cavalry and have survived the demise of the horse. Never, though, have they been a more important and integral part of a military strategy than in the American Civil War. To the Confederate Army in the western theater, cavalry raids were critical to the limited success the South enjoyed there. Usually outnumbered and outgeneraled, at least at the most senior levels, Confederate forces experienced more losses than victories on major western battlefields. Without the successes of cavalry raids, defeat in the west would have come sooner.

Confederate cavalry raids in the western theater wreaked havoc on Union lines of supply and communication. Generals John Hunt Morgan and Nathan Bedford Forrest operated throughout Tennessee and Kentucky with such effectiveness that a significant portion of Union forces was committed to the defense of rear areas.

Confederate raids on Union supply depots had a decided impact on Union operations. In December of 1862, Forrest had helped bring Grant's 1862 offensive against Vicksburg to at least a temporary halt. Shortly after Van Dorn destroyed Grant's supplies at Holly Springs, Mississippi, Forrest took a cavalry force far into Tennessee, where he "gobbled up one Federal base after another," cut the railroad in several places, and destroyed courier routes and telegraph lines. Grant wrote of these two raids that they "cut me off



from all communication with the north for more than a week, and it was more than two weeks before rations or forage could be issued from stores obtained in the regular way."

General Joseph E. Johnston, desperately trying to stop Sherman in 1864 as he advanced to Atlanta, saw the benefit of cavalry raids on Sherman's supply line. Johnston wrote after the war, "It can scarcely be doubted that five thousand cavalry directed by Forrest's sagacity, courage, and enterprise, against the Federal railroad communications... would have compelled General Sherman to the desperate resource of battle on our terms." His successor in command of the Army of Tennessee, Gen-

eral John B. Hood, requested that General Maury, Forrest's superior at the time, order "General Forrest ... with the whole of his available force into Tennessee." General Robert E. Lee himself, in a letter to President Davis in July, recommended that all the cavalry in Mississippi and Tennessee be concentrated on Sherman's communications.

It was Forrest's own understanding of the value of striking Sherman's communications that caused him to write directly to President Davis in September 1864 asking permission to move into Tennessee with a strong force of cavalry to cut the railroads and interfere with Sherman's supplies. President Davis supported Forrest's request in a letter to Forrest's new commander, Lieutenant General Richard Taylor, who promptly issued the orders. It was from this raid that Forrest

had just returned when he was called on again to attack Sherman's line of supply. It would be his last raid.

Forrest stated his intent in a communication to General Taylor: "It is my present design to take possession of Fort Heiman, on the Tennessee River, below Johnsonville, and thus prevent all communication with Johnsonville by transports." He had determined that Sherman had "received most of his supplies at Atlanta" by that route. The supply line that connected Sherman with his depot in Louisville included supply bases at Nashville and Chattanooga, as well as the new depot at Johnsonville on the Tennessee River. There, supplies brought in by river

were transferred for rail shipment to Nashville and on to Chattanooga and then Atlanta.

Forrest's Cavalry Corps included two divisions, each led by a bold and aggressive commander. Buford's Division, made up mostly of men from Kentucky and Tennessee, was commanded by Brigadier General Abraham Buford, a cousin of the better-known Gettysburg hero, Union cavalryman John Buford. (Another cousin, Napoleon Buford, also served as a Union general.) Buford had become a division commander in Forrest's Cavalry Corps in early 1864 and served in that capacity at Brice's Crossroads and on several raids. (While not the best known Confederate general, at 320 pounds he was undoubtedly the heaviest.)

Chalmers' Division was commanded by Brigadier General James R. Chalmers, a man sometimes at odds with Forrest, but one of unquestioned ability and gallantry. Rising from captain to brigadier general commanding an infantry brigade, he was severely wounded at Murfreesboro. After recovering, he led a cavalry brigade and division, joining Forrest's command in 1864.

By October 21, Forrest had his headquarters in Jackson, Tennessee, and his two divisions in the vicinity. Buford's was the stronger division as Chalmers had only one brigade and about 550 men from two others. The total force numbered about 3,000.

Having determined that there was no Federal force that might threaten him from the east or west, Forrest sent Buford's division north to Fort Heiman, an abandoned former Confederate post directly across the river from the better-known Fort Henry. Buford carried with him, besides his field artillery, two 20-pounder rifled Parrot guns sent up from the fortifications at Mobile. They had been moved by rail to Corinth and dragged over wretched roads since then.

Buford placed the brigade of Colonel H. B. Lyon, along with the two Parrot cannons, inside the abandoned works of Fort Heiman. Farther upstream he stationed the brigade of Colonel T. H. Bell. He directed his men to stay hidden so as not to discourage approaching vessels. Only laden transports heading south were to be fired on, and those



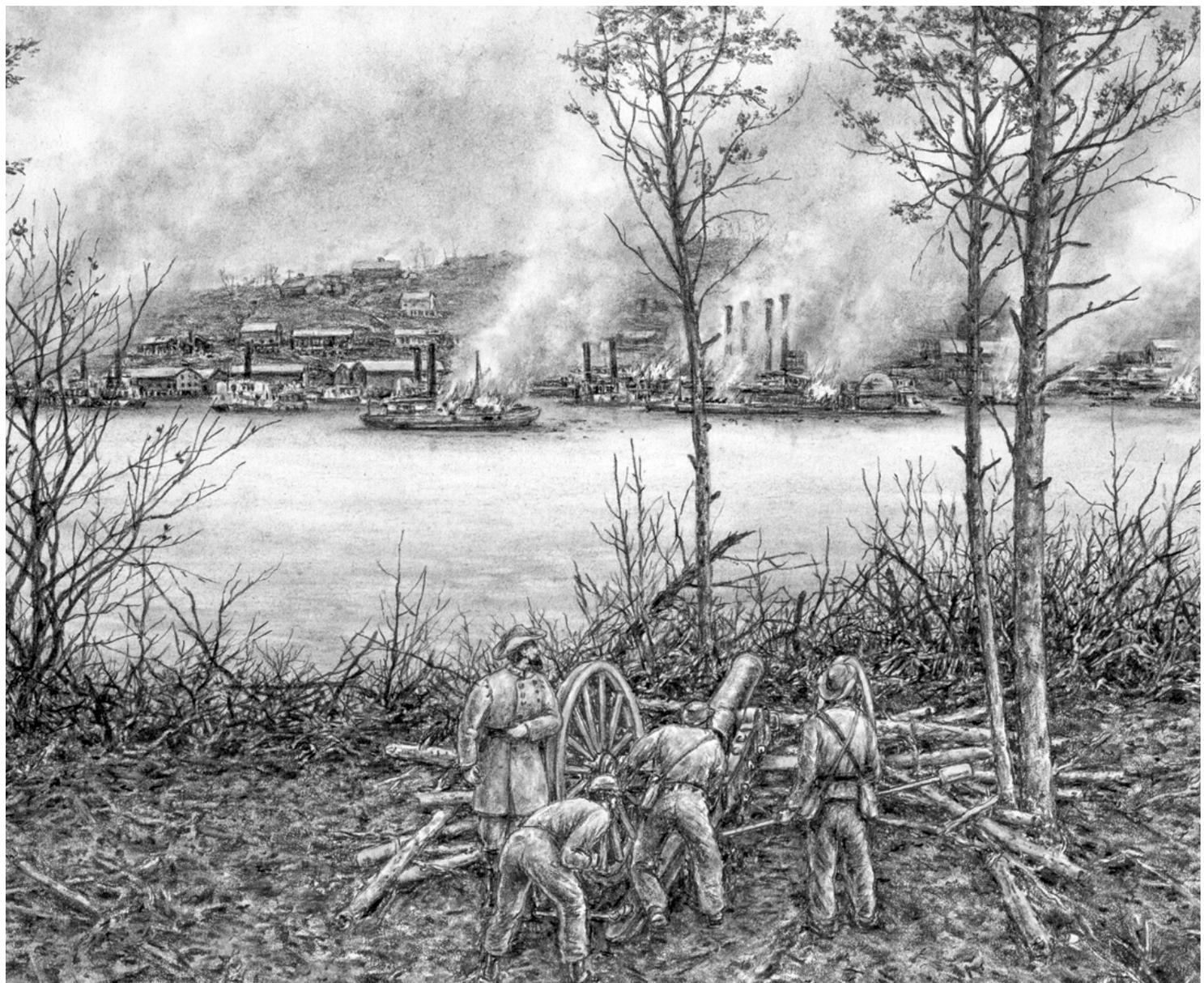
only after they had passed Fort Heiman. Buford also stationed dismounted troopers along the river bank to discourage fire from any armed vessels that could challenge the artillery.

Forrest had once again moved so rapidly and covered his approach so successfully that the Federals were completely unaware of his presence. On the 28th, Buford managed to hold his soldiers in check as four steamers sailed downstream from Johnsonville. Early on the 29th, though, the Federal transport *Mazepa* steamed into sight on her way up the river. The Confederates allowed her to pass a two-gun section north of Fort Heiman, but as she came abeam of the middle section, Buford gave the order to fire. The heavy Parrots joined the light artillery and after

three accurate rounds had struck her, the ship became unmanageable and drifted ashore on the opposite bank, where her crew abandoned her.

A volunteer made his way across the river and took possession of the *Mazepa*. Soon after a hawser was attached to her, the *Mazepa* was on the west bank. The vessel carried a large supply of flour, footwear, blankets, hardtack, and other goods of much value to her captors. A demijohn of brandy, confiscated by General Buford from the trooper who found it, was apparently claimed by Buford as "just enough whiskey for the general."

While the cargo was being unloaded, three gunboats made their appearance and began to shell the unloading detail. Although the Confederate batteries



drove them off, Buford, afraid the Federals might return in force, ordered the *Mazeppa* to be burned.

The next day, October 30, was a busy day for Buford's troopers. First, the steamer *Anna* arrived, bound downstream. Hoping to capture her, Buford undertook to hail her into the bank under an understanding that his fire would be withheld. Promising to land at a downstream landing, the pilot instead steamed at full speed past the lower batteries. Although the lower batteries were able to inflict some damage on the vessel, they fired too late to prevent escape.

Meanwhile, the crew of the *Undine*, a gunboat that mounted eight 24-pounder brass cannon and had escorted the *Anna* to a point a few miles upstream,

heard the firing, cleared for action, and steamed to the sound of firing. She first came under fire from two field pieces at Paris Landing. After an hour-long battle, with his vessel badly damaged and four crew members dead, the captain withdrew to a point between the Confederate positions at Paris Landing and Fort Heiman where he could not be reached by the cannon at either location. There, he started repairs on his boat and used his guns, loaded with shrapnel, against the Confederate musket fire on the shore.

While the *Undine* was anchored, she saw the transport *Venus* approaching from upstream and signaled her to keep out of danger. Failing to heed the signals, the *Venus* came into the range of the upper battery. She was able to pass

by with minimal damage, although her captain was killed, and came to anchor under protection of the *Undine*.

Several minutes later, another transport, the *J. W. Cheeseman*, approached, also ignoring the *Undine*'s signals. She came under heavy fire and limped to the west bank, where some of Buford's men boarded her and captured the crew.

While the battle continued, one of Buford's regiments, the Second Tennessee Cavalry, was sent to a point about eight hundred yards below Paris Landing, where it could attack the *Undine*. There, the regimental executive officer improvised an order for his troopers: "Dismount, and prepare, on foot, to fight — a gunboat."

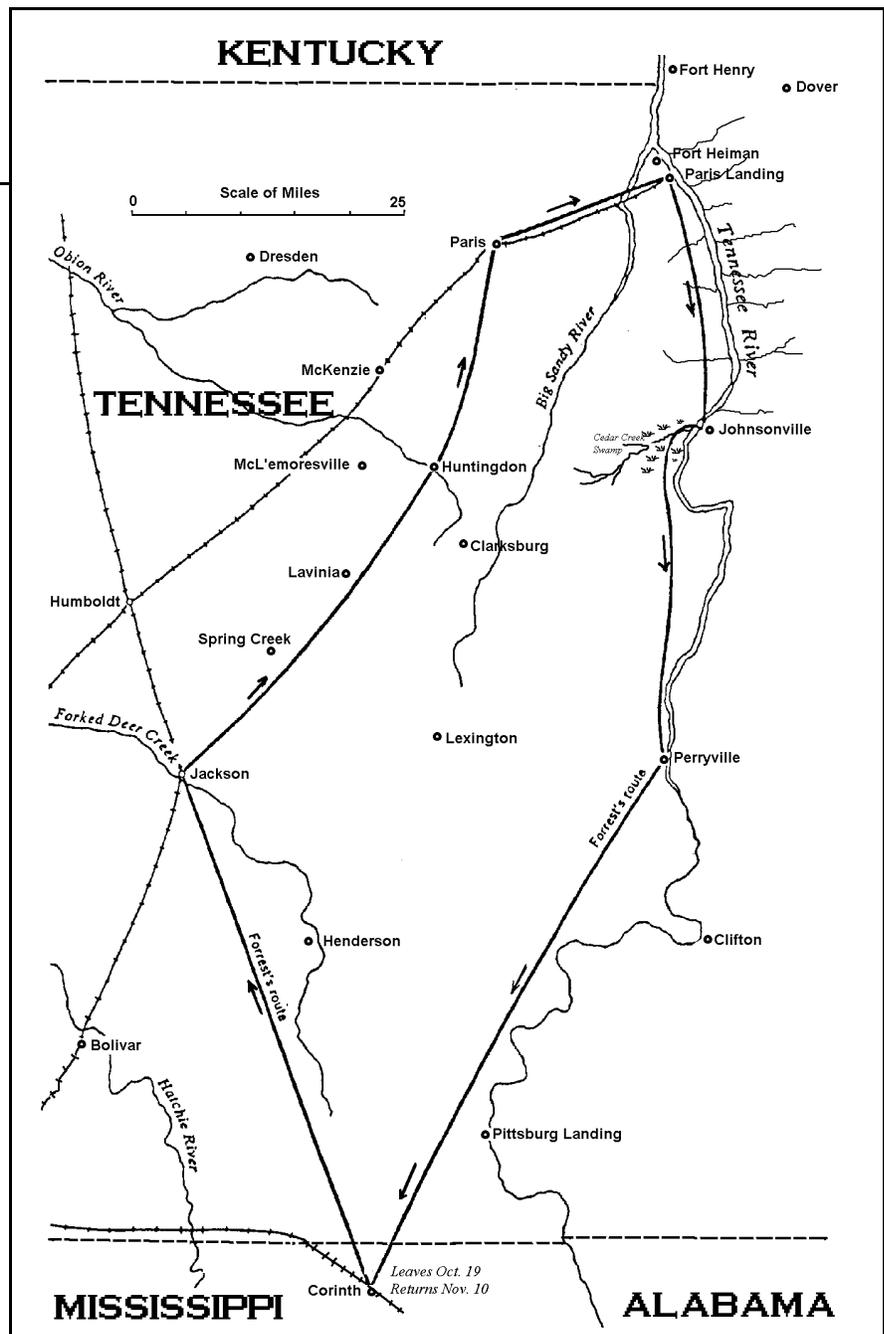
Colonel Edward W. Rucker, commanding a brigade of Chalmers' division, which had just arrived that day, found a way to move two field pieces through the tangled brush along the river so that they could be brought to bear on the *Undine* and the *Venus*. By late afternoon, the gunboat had been disabled by artillery fire and abandoned on the east bank of the river. The *Venus* surrendered to rifle fire and was boarded by troopers of Chalmers' division. The cavalymen then crossed the river on the *Venus* and took possession of the *Undine*.

Meanwhile, another gunboat, the *Tawah*, arrived from Johnsonville and dropped anchor a mile and a half from the nearest Confederate guns. After she had fired a few salvos at the upper battery, though, Chalmers' gunners got her range and she steamed away upstream.

So far, it had been a winning operation for Forrest's Confederates. At a cost of one man severely wounded, they had inflicted on the enemy losses of eight killed, 11 wounded, and 43 captured. Of the prisoners, all were ship's crew except for one officer and ten men of the infantry. The captured *Undine* and the *Venus* were both repairable. The *Mazeppa* had already been burned and the *Cheeseman* was too badly damaged for further service.

Consistent with his oft-demonstrated operational flexibility, Forrest now conceived a plan for a cooperative land and water operation against Johnsonville and the Federal flotilla there. Lieutenant Colonel Dawson of the Fifteenth Tennessee was appointed fleet commodore, a position he accepted with considerable reluctance, and captain of the *Venus*. Artillery Captain Frank P. Gracey, a former steamboat captain on the Cumberland River, was appointed captain of the *Undine*. Teams of volunteer cavalymen made up the crews and a few hours practice in seamanship was conducted between the artillery positions along the river. The two Parrot cannons were mounted on the *Undine*.

Forrest's plan called for parallel movement of his land and water forces. Movement began on November 1, with Chalmers' troops and artillery paralleling the ships to provide protection if they encountered Federal gunboats from



Johnsonville. Buford followed, prepared to do the same if gunboats from Paducah approached. On the afternoon of November 2, after a quiet advance of almost two days, the *Venus* was well in advance of the *Undine*, as well as the supporting troops. Suddenly she found herself confronted by two gunboats, *Tawah* and *Key West*, just rounding a bend in the river about five miles north of Johnsonville. Engaging the *Venus* immediately, the trained U.S. Navy gunners made short work of Forrest's sailors. Soon after the firing began, the *Venus* crew ran her aground, abandoned ship, and set fire to her. The *Undine* crew, witnessing the disaster,

quickly withdrew to protection of the artillery on the shore.

The next day, Gracey, about two miles north of Johnsonville in the *Undine*, attempted without success to decoy the Federal gunboats under Lieutenant E. M. King into range of the artillery on shore.

On the night of November 3, Forrest quietly moved his artillery into position on the west bank of the river to attack Johnsonville. He also placed guns above and below to cut off reinforcing gunboats. Forrest ordered Brigadier General Lyon to place a battery opposite the south face of the Johnsonville land-

ing and in easy range of it. After a night of enthusiastic work by the men, the battery was in place and completely out of sight from the landing. Other guns were dug in, as well, while still others were free to move about. Finally, two guns were moved through a swampy area and over fallen timbers so that they could bear directly on Johnsonville. All was ready by two o'clock in the afternoon.

Earlier, at about 8:00 in the morning, action had started downstream when gunboats dispatched from Paducah arrived. The six-boat fleet of Lieutenant Commander Le Roy Fitch — *Moose*, *Brilliant*, *Victory*, *Paw Paw*, *Fairy*, and *Curlew* — mounted a total of 79 guns. The *Key West*, *Tawah*, and *Elfin*, under command of Lieutenant King, also approached the area from Johnsonville. The three carried 25 additional guns. Arrayed against them were the *Undine*, with her eight guns, and four field guns on shore. There was little Gracey could do against such odds except destroy and abandon his ship. The crew quickly tore up mattresses and piled the shavings from them in the magazine and cabins, soaked them in oil, and abandoned ship, with Gracey applying the torch before he waded ashore. It was the end of Forrest's navy.

The field guns, though outnumbered, had the advantage of position. They badly damaged the gunboats, causing the upstream fleet to withdraw to Johnsonville and preventing the six ships from Paducah from participating in the later action at Johnsonville.

Forrest and the cannon he emplaced opposite Johnsonville remained undetected while the unsuspecting garrison, ship's crews, and laborers at Johnsonville carried on their normal activities. There were acres of supplies on the ground and three gunboats, eight transports, and some 18 barges at the landing. Barges were being unloaded, crews were scrubbing decks and washing clothes, and all was serene.

Suddenly, Forrest unleashed his gunners, with ten guns hurling their shells toward the river, first at two gunboats lashed together leaving the dock. One of the gunboats and the fort returned fire, but little damage was done to the protected Confederate batteries. After an hour, two of the gunboats were on fire and the third was abandoned by its crew. The burning gunboats drifted into

the transports and set them on fire as well. Two packets with barges, somewhat separated from the rest, became targets for one battery and were soon set afire. Forrest next turned his attention to the redoubt, the warehouses, and the supplies on the ground. A few rounds striking a large mass of hay set fire to it and the fire spread to heaps of corn and bacon. Forrest, suspecting that the contents of a large number of barrels might be liquor, ordered the rifled guns to take them under fire. Soon a blue flame shot into the sky and burning liquid flowed in a stream toward the river. The Confederates across the river could savor the odor of burning bacon, liquors, sugar, and coffee. Within two hours, Johnsonville was almost a solid sheet of flame, and for a mile along the river, buildings and ships blazed out of control. The destruction ensured that the supply base would never again be in commission.

By late afternoon, when the destruction was complete and Confederate cannon had silenced counter-battery fire, Forrest ordered his artillerymen to cease firing. He then collected his troops and withdrew from the river bank. Leaving one brigade to cover his withdrawal, he marched south six miles by the light of the flames. The next morning, the rear guard brigade had a skirmish with Federals at the fort south of Johnsonville, but by November 10 the entire force was back in Mississippi.

The commander at Johnsonville estimated Forrest's force as 13,000 men, with 26 guns, 20 of them twenty-pounder Parrots. According to the official report of the U.S. Army Assistant Inspector General, Forrest had done \$2,200,000 worth of damage. Forrest himself reported that he had "captured or destroyed four gunboats, 14 transports, 20 barges, 26 pieces of artillery, and \$6,700,000 worth of property, and captured 150 prisoners." He also reported that he had turned over about



U.S. Grant

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9,000 pairs of shoes and 1,000 blankets to his chief quartermaster. His own loss had been two killed and nine wounded.

It had certainly been a successful raid. However, it was too late to be of great significance. Atlanta had fallen to Sherman on September 2. At the end of September, Hood had implemented his plan to move into Sherman's rear area, hoping to draw Sherman out of Atlanta and perhaps divide his Army, allowing it to be defeated in detail. For two weeks, Sherman, with a corps left to hold Atlanta, pursued Hood as he moved through northwest Georgia. But Sherman was frustrated with this type of warfare and the problem with maintaining his supply line.

Consequently, Sherman proposed to Grant that he leave Thomas with his 60,000 men to handle Hood and his 40,000, while he cut loose from his supply line and march to the sea, living off the land, with his army of 62,000. His plan approved, the next week Sherman returned to Atlanta and prepared to launch his march to the sea on November 15. By the time Forrest had done his damage at Johnsonville, Sherman had already decided to cut his reliance on the long Louisville-Johnsonville-Nashville-Chattanooga-Atlanta supply line.

Thus, while the Johnsonville raid did not have the major impact on Union operations of earlier raids by Forrest, it was yet another example of Forrest's mastery of cavalry raid tactics.

Sherman himself reportedly considered Forrest “the most remarkable man our civil war produced on either side.... He had a genius which to me was incomprehensible.... He always seemed to know what I was doing or intended to do, while I am free to confess I could never tell or form any satisfactory idea of what he was trying to accomplish.”

For the remainder of the war, Forrest’s role was one of more mundane cavalry actions, first in support of Hood’s offensive into Tennessee and then in defensive operations in Alabama as the war wound down. Throughout the war, Forrest participated in a wide variety of operations, most of them successful. Many were more important, harder fought, and more demanding than the Johnsonville raid — but none was more unique.

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## Old Jack Hinson

His steel-gray eyes could stare a hole right through a man, and the mere mention of his name terrified Union soldiers and sailors traveling the Tennessee River. While that could certainly be said of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, it also described one of Forrest’s most unlikely allies in his attack against the Federal Depot at Johnsonville, Tennessee. Old Jack Hinson, a Stewart County farmer and miller, had been opposed to secession and had every intention of sitting out the war. But that was before Col. W.W. Lowe, commander of the 5th Iowa Cavalry, took two of his sons prisoner while squirrel hunting, accused them of bushwacking, and executed them without trial. A third son, enraged by his brothers’ murders was captured in a Federal uniform and hanged by Lowe, who then ordered the Hinson boy’s body tied to a horse’s tail and drug around Fort Donelson from daylight until dark — a warning to guerrillas who would bushwack Federal soldiers.

Old Jack Hinson could stand no more. He took up his rifle and swore a blood oath against any man wearing a blue uniform. For the next three years, he shadowed the banks along the Tennessee River, hiding in brush blinds, and picking off Union officers from the decks of passing gunboats. He took such a toll that the government levied a reward for his capture — DEAD OR ALIVE. But pursuit of Hinson was futile, for the 52-year-old farmer knew every cowpath and backtrail for miles on both sides of the river.

When Forrest’s Cavalry approached Johnsonville in October of 1864, they discovered the creeks had been swollen by recent rains. General Forrest’s chief of artillery, John Morton, would have been unable to maneuver his guns through the Cypress Creek Swamp if a



Old Jack Hinson

vengeance-crazed Jack Hinson had not appeared at the general’s headquarters. He introduced himself to Major Charles Anderson, Forrest’s adjutant, and told of his blood feud with the Yankees. Then he showed Anderson his rifle, which revealed 36 notches along the barrel.

“They murdered my boys, and may yet kill me, but the marks on the barrel of my gun will show that I am a long ways ahead in the game now,” Old Jack Hinson told Anderson, “and I am not done yet.”

With Hinson showing the way, Morton got the artillery through the swamp and brought it to bear upon Johnsonville, wreaking terrific destruction on the Federals. Hinson disappeared into the wilderness again, and spent the rest of the war sniping at Federal soldiers. Though desperately pursued, Hinson was never caught. *The Nashville Union and American*, 3 March 1873, claims that Hinson died on the operating table of appendicitis; but the *Dover Record* a few weeks later indicates Hinson was still alive and hiding out in the White Oak Swamp. Who knows? Perhaps the ghost of Old Jack is still drifting along the banks of the Tennessee in search of vengeance.