

Nathan Bedford Forrest:

Lessons from a Master Of the Science and Art of Warfighting

by Colonel John D. Rosenberger

Introduction

After observing, studying, practicing, and reflecting on the subject for years, the essence of the *art* of command at the tactical level of war, in my judgment, can be crystallized into one immutable phrase — *the ability to win your battles before you fight them.*

This ability is the acme of tactical and operational art. It is the thing we see embodied in the greatest of commanders

throughout history, illuminated in the battles and campaigns they conceived and won: Scipio's victory against Hasdrubal at Ilipa, General Dan Morgan's defeat of General Tarleton at the Battle of Cowpens, General Lee's defeat of General Hooker at Chancellorsville, Field Marshall Slim's victorious campaign against the Japanese in Burma — to name a few. All won brilliant and decisive victories against their opponents despite being significantly outnumbered, with minimal

loss to the soldiers they loved and led. But the truly astounding fact, overlooked by scholars and historians, is that their battles and campaigns varied little from how these commanders *envisioned* they would unfold *prior* to battle. In the hands of these extraordinary commanders, their battles were essentially won *before* they were fought.

Of course, my notion is anything but a revelation. I was preempted some 2500

years ago by the illustrious and indomitable Chinese general, Sun Tzu, whose experience and wisdom not only encapsulated the science and art of command, but the knowledge, skills, and abilities that underpin it. For instance, he wrote:

“The general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought. The general who loses a battle makes but few calculations beforehand. Thus do many calculations lead to victory, and few calculations to defeat; how much more no calculation at all! It is attention to this point that I can foresee who is likely to win or lose.... If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.... The natural formation of the country is the soldier’s best ally; but a power of estimating the adversary, of controlling the forces of victory, and of shrewdly calculating difficulties, dangers, and distances, constitutes the test of a great general. *He who knows these things, and in fighting puts his knowledge into practice, will win his battles. He who knows them not, nor practices them, will surely be defeated.*”¹

Said in a more contemporary fashion, if you want to be an incomparable combined-arms commander at the tactical or operational level of war, you must first possess the knowledge and the ability to *see the terrain, in combination with the weather*, and appreciate their *effects* on the enemy’s ability, as well as your own ability, to employ every capability of the combined-arms team. You must be able to see the effects of terrain and discern how to use the ground to win your battles. This tactical ability is preeminent and essential to the art of command. No victory can be or ever has been achieved without it.

Second, you must be able to *see the enemy*. You must know how he is led, organized, equipped, and trained to fight, and appreciate his patterns of operations — they are always there. Accordingly, you must be able to perceive your enemy’s actual capabilities, his limitations, and his inherent vulnerabilities. Moreover, you must clearly perceive what your enemy commanders must do to win and achieve their desired end state, the critical tasks they must accomplish, and how they will tactically employ their

forces to accomplish those tasks. Last, you must know your opposing commanders, their professional abilities and character, their inclinations to be bold or cautious, their methods of controlling forces in battle, and the strength of their will to win — to name a few traits.

Third, you must be able to *see yourself*. You must know the state of training and proficiency of your force from top to bottom, the readiness of your equipment, the ability to sustain your forces in combat, the confidence of your soldiers in themselves, their equipment, and their leaders, and the will of your leaders and soldiers to fight. Furthermore, you must know the actual capabilities, limitations, and inherent vulnerabilities of your own forces, not to mention the character, courage, and competence of your subordinate commanders. Equally important, you must have the ability to see yourself from your enemy’s perspective, and his perceptions of your strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities.

Combining this knowledge, tempered by your experience, you must develop the ability to mentally simulate the battle in your mind. You must be able to see it unfold from beginning to end in all its feasible permutations, then clearly envision how, when, and where to employ your forces — the *tactics* required to produce the *effects* on the battlefield necessary to achieve the outcome or end state you desire. You’ve got to get the tactics right. To do that, you must be able to recognize the critical tasks you must accomplish — sequentially and/or simultaneously — to defeat your opponent and discern the best means of employing your forces to produce the battlefield *effects* necessary to accomplish those critical tasks.

Finally, and equally important, you must clearly communicate through plans and orders what you want your leaders and soldiers to do and work tirelessly throughout your command to ensure by personal observation that conditions for victory are set. Then, direct your forces and impose your will on both your soldiers and the enemy from positions well forward, where you can personally see the battle unfold, sense the presence or absence of the initiative, and exploit opportunities for decisive action as they emerge. *Nothing in battle is as important as gaining and retaining the initiative over your opponent*. Your tactics, above all, must be devised to achieve that outcome.

Enough of my interpretation of Sun Tzu. There is nothing like an example, and I have found no better example of the

art of command — *defined as the ability to win your battles before you fight them* — than Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest and his masterful orchestration of the Battle of Brice’s Crossroads in June 1864. As Shelby Foote, the eminent Civil war historian, stated in the recent television documentary, *The Civil War*, “The Civil War illuminated only two men of military genius. One was Abraham Lincoln. The other was Nathan Bedford Forrest.” No better or appropriate accolade could be made. Here’s why.

Winning ‘Em Before You Fight ‘Em

The perfect example, an embodiment if you will, of the *enduring* elements of the science and art of tactical command is Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest’s victory against Union General Samuel Sturgis in a battle known as the Battle of Brice’s Crossroads. The battle occurred in northeast Mississippi on 10 June 1864. No better example or documentation of *the ability to fight and win your battles before you fight them* exists in the American historical record.

As related by John Allen Wyeth in his benchmark book, *That Devil Forrest*, “It was evident then to the mind of Forrest, from the situation of the two forces, that a conflict was almost inevitable, and it is a fact that that he had foreseen this collision at the point where it did take place, *two days* before it occurred.... On June 8th, two days before the battle, Forrest requested him [Colonel D.C. Kelley bearing a dispatch from Forrest] to hasten as quickly as possible to meet Colonel Johnson [Colonel W.A. Johnson of Roddey’s division] and tell him to press forward with all possible speed in the direction of Baldwyn and Brice’s Crossroads, that from the direction the enemy were moving, and from their present position and his own, he expected to be obliged to fight them there about the 10th of June.”²

Wyeth goes on to relate, “Between seven and eight o’clock in the morning [8 June], while riding at the head of his column, Colonel Rucker says that General Forrest rode by his side. He told Rucker that he intended to attack the Federals at Brice’s Crossroads.

“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 few 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 at 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 right over them.”³

Envisioned by Forrest two days before the battle, that is exactly what happened when the battle was fought on the 10th of June. A Federal expeditionary force of two divisions, composed of 3,200 cavalry, 4,500 infantry, supported by 22 pieces of artillery under the command of BG Samuel Sturgis, were not only defeated, but routed. Not only routed, they were pursued to utter destruction by one division of 4,800 cavalymen and 8 pieces of artillery of Buford’s Division under the command of Major General N.B. Forrest. Forrest won the Battle of Brice’s Crossroads before he fought it. He envisioned its conduct and outcome almost perfectly.

How did he do it? What knowledge, skills, and abilities empowered Forrest to foretell the conduct and outcome of battle with such uncanny accuracy? Even more enticing, did he do this intuitively? And if so, how did he develop this intuition not having one minute of military education and training prior to joining the Confederate Army as a private in 1861? Finally, was it simply enough to possess this intuitive feel and visualization of the battle, or were other critical elements of command, inherent in the orchestration of the battle, equally essential to its outcome? These are pregnant questions, and the subject of this article, but let me back up a bit and set the stage.

The Strategic Setting

To put this battle in the context of the Union and Confederate campaigns — the operational level of war — LTG Ulysses S. Grant’s grand strategy was unfolding at the time. While he accompanied MG Meade’s Army of the Potomac, aimed at the destruction of Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, MG William Tecumseh Sherman was attacking into the heart of

the Confederacy along a line from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Atlanta, Georgia, to destroy the Confederate Army under MG Joe Johnston. Sherman’s single line of communications to transport necessary supplies, equipment, and reinforcements to his Army extended along the rail network south from Nashville, Tennessee, into northern Georgia. Successful interdiction of this long, vulnerable lifeline had the potential of not simply disrupting Sherman’s efforts, but setting conditions for his decisive defeat.

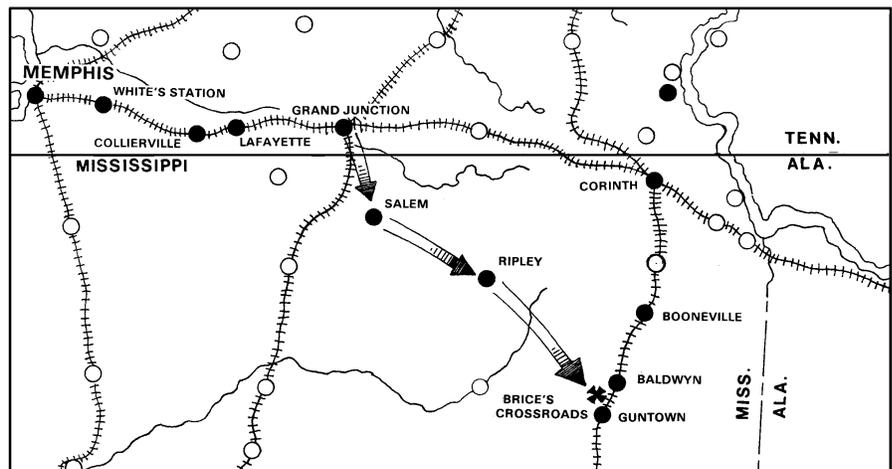
Forrest appreciated this vulnerability and so did Sherman. In early June, both were moving to defeat each other’s tactical attempts to gain the upper hand at the operational level. Forrest was advancing north-northeast from central Mississippi into northeastern Tennessee with the mission of destroying Sherman’s means of supplying and sustaining his army. Sherman dispatched Sturgis from Memphis, Tennessee, southeast to gain contact with Confederate forces under Forrest, fix them in position within Mississippi, and destroy them, thereby eliminating any further threat to his endeavors (Map 1). Sherman’s deep concern and fear of Forrest’s ability to achieve his objective could not be misunderstood as he wrote Sturgis, “It must be done, if it costs ten thousand lives and breaks the Treasury.” Now, let’s pick up the action.

Before the Battle

On 9 June, Forrest’s scouts, who ranged far and wide throughout the region, had been shadowing the Union advance from Memphis, reported that Union forces had bivouacked at Stubb’s plantation, about 10 miles from Brice’s Crossroads. The brigades of BG Abraham Buford’s 2d Division, under the command of MG Forrest, were widely scattered, having stopped mid-stride in their northward advance to attack MG Sherman’s lines of

communications extending through middle Tennessee into Georgia. Colonel William A. Johnson’s 500-man brigade was at Baldwyn, about 12 miles east of the chosen battlefield; Colonel Hylan B. Lyon’s and Colonel Edmund W. Rucker’s brigades, along with Captain John W. Morton’s two batteries of artillery — about 1,600 men — were at Booneville, 18 miles north; and Colonel Tyree H. Bell’s large brigade of 2,800 men, more than half the available force, was at Ripen, 25 miles north of the crossroads.

Given this appreciation, Forrest issued orders on the evening of 9 June for all brigades to march towards Brice’s Crossroads at 0400 the next morning. Lyon’s brigade would take the lead, followed by Rucker, Johnson, and Bell. It is in this simple order that the tactical brilliance of Forrest first emerges — the transition from how he envisioned the battle to its culmination in a rout. Clear in this order, is a masterful appreciation of the situation and Forrest’s intuitive perception of the tactical requirements necessary to accomplish the first critical task necessary to win the battle. Given an appreciation of the location of his forces relative to Sturgis, their distance from his chosen battlefield at Brice’s Crossroads, and an appreciation of each force’s expected rate of march, Forrest immediately perceived he had to move *earlier* than Sturgis to reach the battlefield *first* to seize the initiative and set conditions for success. Anytime later than 0400 would have been too late, given his rapid assessment of the situation. Additionally in this order, Forrest also clearly perceived, given the disposition of his forces relative to his chosen battlefield and the available routes of march, it would take him *time* to concentrate his forces where he intended to fight. Moreover, he would inevitably have to employ his brigades *sequentially* into the fight. However, before proceed-



Map 1

Sturgis was ordered to proceed into northern Mississippi to fix and destroy Forrest’s force, which had been attacking the Union logistical lifeline.

ing to Forrest's orchestration of the battle, and confirming these assertions, there are a couple of additional insights to consider at this point.

As depicted in the vision of the battle he related to Colonel Rucker on the 8th, Forrest understood that *deception* would have to be the foremost, essential tactic — essential to convince Grierson and Sturgis that his force was much larger than its actual size. He had to convince BG Benjamin Grierson, leading the advance, that he was stronger than Grierson, forcing Grierson's cavalry quickly to ground, thereby buying him *time* to concentrate the rest of his force and seize the initiative, while preserving his freedom to maneuver. Furthermore, Forrest clearly perceived how the limited visibility, created by thick stands of blackjack and scrub oak in full leaf around Brice's Crossroads, could aid him in creation of this belief in Grierson's mind. In short, Forrest chose his battlefield at Brice's Crossroads on the 8th because, among other things, the terrain and vegetation satisfied his first tactical requirement — deception — and supported accomplishment of his first critical task, fix Grierson's force in place and preclude his freedom to maneuver.

Furthermore, as Forrest's orders and actions bear out, Forrest thought through how he would have to employ his arriving brigades in such a way to achieve the effect of *fixing and containing* the remainder of Grierson's cavalry in the restricted terrain just east of Tishomingo Creek. He had to achieve this effect until he concentrated sufficient force to defeat not only Sturgis's cavalry division, but the trailing infantry division under Colonel McMillen as well. Moreover, if he did this, Forrest knew he would have the *tactical initiative*, or the "bulge" as he called it, the precursor to ultimate success in any engagement or battle. This was his second critical task and he saw it clearly, based on his visualization of the fight on the 8th, the orders he issued on the 9th, and the subsequent employment of his force on the 10th. Here's the evidence.

The Battle Unfolds

As Forrest predicted, on the morning of 10 June, the cavalry of BG Benjamin Grierson's division marched at a walk from Stubb's plantation around 0530,

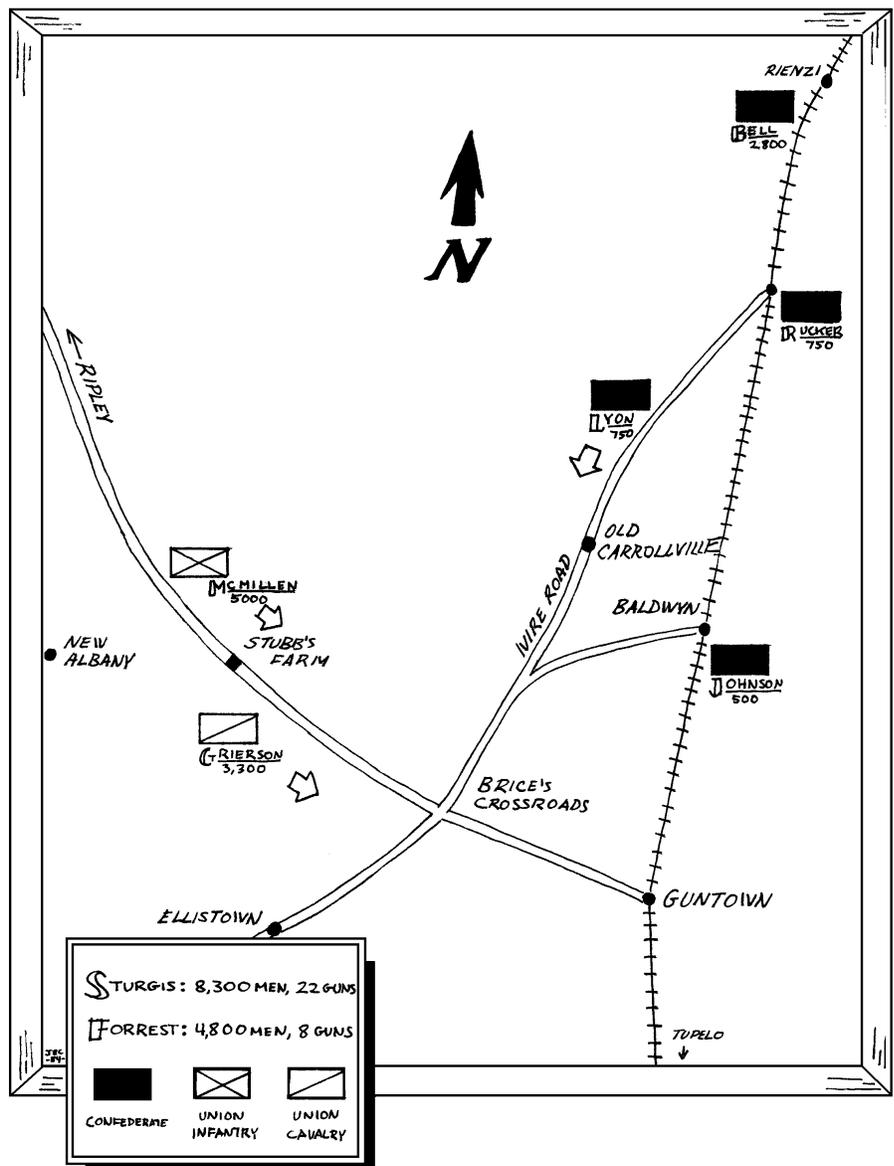
Map 2

Confederate and Union forces converge on Brice's Crossroads. Grierson's Union cavalry preceded the Union infantry, giving Forrest time to defeat them before the Union infantry could reach the battlefield.

slogging along the muddy road. The infantry division did not march until 0700 after a leisurely breakfast. Prior to breakfast, BG Sturgis and Colonel McMillen had a stiff drink of whiskey to fortify their spirits. The June day was hot and sultry. Sweat streamed beneath their heavy wool jackets. The Union infantry lugged themselves southeast up steep hillsides along the narrow, muddy roads churned into a quagmire in many places by the cavalry about nine miles ahead of them. Under full pack, with rations and full pouches of ammunition, they made slow progress; one to two miles an hour or about 4-5 hours behind the cavalry force that preceded them. Forrest's brigades moved promptly at 0400 from their respective locations at a trot (Map 2).

At about 0730, 10 June, near Old Carrollville, seven miles northeast of Brice's

Crossroads, General Forrest rode in advance with his escort. Scouts intercepted him and reported that lead elements of Grierson's cavalry division were four miles west of the crossroads. Forrest acted quickly, immediately appreciating, given his mental picture of the relative position of forces, that Grierson's lead elements were closer than he had expected and would be well east of Brice's Crossroads before Forrest's lead brigade could reach the battlefield and set conditions for success. In other words, he needed to slow Grierson's advance, control the tempo of the operation, and buy time for Lyon's brigade to reach the battlefield and deploy. Within seconds of receiving the report, he turned to Lieutenant Robert Black, and ordered him to take a small element with him, move quickly, gain contact with Grierson's lead elements and delay them. They met at Dry



Creek, about 2 miles northwest of Brice's Crossroads. The intrepid Lieutenant Black and his men did their best to delay, ripping planks off the Tishomingo Creek bridge, and stopping to ambush successively as they withdrew to the east.

What Forrest did immediately after dispatching Black's small force to delay Grierson further illuminates Forrest's genius. As related by Edwin Bearss,

"Word that Lieutenant Black had encountered the Federals in force and was retreating reached Forrest at Old Carrollville. Colonel Lyon having arrived, Forrest ordered him "to move forward and develop the enemy." Johnson and Rucker were told to rest their brigades and draw ammunition, and a staff officer rode up the Wire Road with orders for General Buford to push ahead with the artillery and Bell's brigade, as rapidly as the cut-up road and the exhausted horses would permit. Upon reaching Old Carrollville, Buford was to detach one regiment to follow a farm road that converged into the Ripley-Fulton road near the Tishomingo Creek bridge. Such a route would enable this unit to gain the enemy's rear. With the rest of the force, Buford was to continue on to Brice's Crossroads."⁴

Clear in these orders are Forrest's rapid assessment ability, mental simulation ability, and battlefield intuition at work — or *fingerspitzengefühl*, as the Germans call it. His order to Colonel Lyon would achieve his first critical task, *fixing* the lead elements of Grierson's cavalry division. His orders to Johnson and Rucker provided these commanders the time and opportunity to prepare for immediate and effective employment into the fight, an essential tactical pause. Ordering Buford to detach one regiment from Bell's brigade and attack the northern flank of a Union disposition that would not develop for hours, is simply testament to Forrest's masterful ability to see the battle develop and estimate how long it would take to unfold. Furthermore, Forrest's choice of tactic, a powerful and unexpected flank attack, highlights his intuitive appreciation of the *effect* he had to produce to strike the decisive blow, when and where that effect had to be produced, and how he would create that effect, given his existing capabilities.

The order also reveals that Forrest quickly recognized that the only force available to deliver the blow at the time it would be required, given the way Buford's brigades were flowing into the fight, would be a regiment of Bell's bri-

gade. Equally important, he recognized where Bell's regiment would have to be detached (Old Carrollville) and the route it would have to take to strike the enemy where it would have its greatest effect.

In other words, Forrest quickly perceived that the opportunity to strike a decisive blow would be hours away, and he picked a force that would be uncommitted and able to strike a decisive blow at the place and time he expected this future opportunity to emerge. All of these appreciations by Forrest were made in a few minutes, mind you. He used no staff or staff estimate process or recommendation to make these decisions. He knew what had to be done, what was capable of being done, and how to do it *intuitively*. There is no other explanation. Back to the battle.

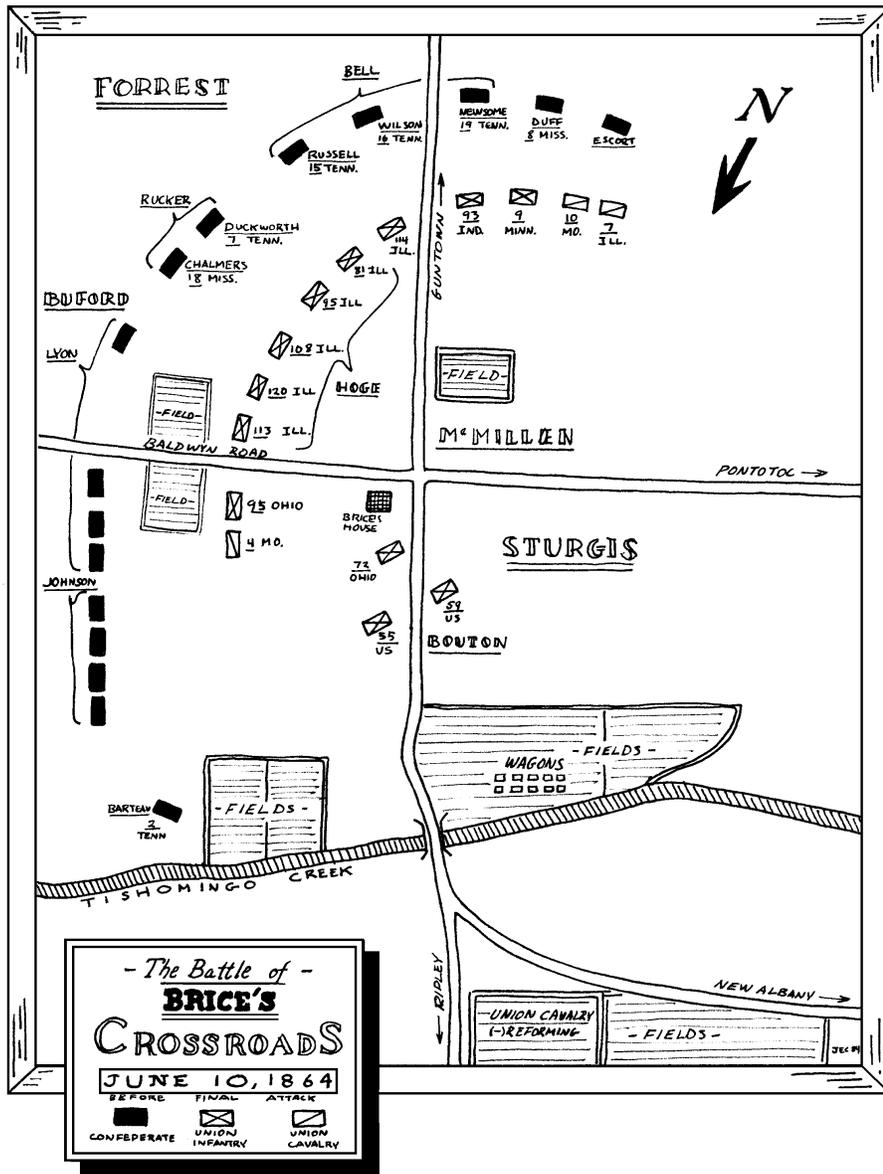
It was about 10 a.m., and Lyon's brigade of four regiments pounded down the road towards Grierson's lead brigade. As the two forces collided about a half mile east of Brice's Crossroads, Lyon's Kentucky regiments dismounted and quickly extended into line opposite Grierson's lead brigade under Colonel Waring, who had also dismounted his cavalrymen astride the Baldwin Road. General Forrest, positioned well forward where he could see both Lyon's and Waring's forces, ordered Lyon to quickly extend his regiments abreast and conduct a forced reconnaissance, creating a visual impression that his force was much larger than Waring's, although outnumbered three to one. In other words, Forrest used the tactic of deception. He used the limited visibility created by the thick foliage and the smoke-filled battlefield, combined with an aggressive advance, to conceal his weakness. In combination, these effects would convince Grierson that Forrest's force was larger than it was (as he had envisioned on the 8th), and buy him an hour of time until Rucker and Johnson's brigades could reach the battlefield. This was a calculated risk, to say the least, but Forrest knew Grierson, a tentative and cautious cavalry commander, and therefore accurately anticipated how he would respond to what he could see and hear.

Lyon's regiments executed their task, pressed the fight against Waring for about an hour, then withdrew back into the woods, continuing a galling fire at long range. Grierson, as Forrest anticipated, concluded the Confederate force was indeed much larger than his and immediately assumed a defensive posture. Grierson dismounted Winslow's brigade, his only remaining maneuver force, and deployed his two brigades abreast in hasty

defensive positions. In one bold hour, with skillful tactical employment of one brigade, Forrest had fixed Grierson's entire division in place, precluded his freedom to maneuver, and seized the tactical initiative. Grierson and Sturgis were now dancing to Forrest's tune and he controlled the tempo of operations. The "bulge" was on. But more needed to be done to set Sturgis up for defeat in accordance with Forrest's vision and plan.

Just after ordering Lyon's brigade into the fight, during that hour that he was waiting for Johnson and Rucker's brigades to arrive, Forrest dispatched Major Charles Anderson, a member of his staff, towards Booneville. He said, "Tell Bell to move up fast and fetch all he's got and tell Morton to bring on the artillery at a gallop." Clear in this order, *particularly when given at this time*, is Forrest's immediate appreciation of the narrow margin of time he would have to concentrate Buford's division and whip Grierson's cavalry before Sturgis could close with his remaining infantry division. To issue an order like this, Forrest had to have an accurate mental picture in his mind of the disposition of Buford's brigades as they approached the battlefield. Furthermore, he had to appreciate the time required for each brigade to reach it, and, therefore, the time it would take to concentrate his entire force *relative* to the time Sturgis could close with his infantry. This order also shows the pressing need he felt to get the shock effects of massed artillery into the fight. Artillery was obviously going to be an essential means of imposing his will on Sturgis and producing the effect of shock that he needed to break Sturgis's soldiers' will to fight.

Just as Lyon's regiments withdrew, within the hour Forrest anticipated, Rucker's 700-man brigade arrived. Forrest ordered Rucker to move his regiments quickly into position on the left of Lyon, detach a battalion, and position it astride the Guntown Road, thereby securing his left flank — his most vulnerable flank given the terrain — against counterattack. Rucker's men rushed into battle line. When ready, Forrest, riding along the line, ordered Rucker and Lyon to attack, an order the men of both brigades promptly obeyed. They slammed into the Union cavalry regiments, kept the pressure on Grierson's brigades, continued to fix them in place, then slowly pulled back. Just as they returned to their starting line, Johnson arrived with his 500-man Alabama brigade. Forrest quickly ordered them to dismount and occupy the ground on Lyon's right flank, thereby *containing* Grierson's force, pinning it



Map 3

Forrest's plan forced the Union infantry to fight with their backs to Tishomingo Creek, leaving only a narrow bridge for maneuver or escape.

trot and at a dead run at the last, the Union infantry under the command of COL McMillen marched in ragged column across the Tishomingo Creek bridge and deployed into line of battle. Many of them had collapsed beside the road with heat stroke, straggling was prolific, and those who could endure the pace and heat arrived physically exhausted — just as Forrest envisioned they would two days prior. The weather was stifling hot, not a cloud in the sky, and not a breeze of any kind. Smoke choked the battlefield. Sturgis's sweat-soaked infantry shuffled their way through Grierson's retreating cavalry, frightened horses, ambulances, and artillery and deployed into line of battle east of Tishomingo Creek (Map 3). Once in their initial positions, many more collapsed under the terrible heat and humidity. Across the way, Forrest rode to the lead of Bell's brigade and directed the employment of his regiments to the left of Rucker's brigade astride Sturgis's right flank, and Captain Morton's battery to a position where it could mass its fire against the Union center.

It was about 2:00 p.m., and Forrest, knowing that every minute he waited forfeited the initiative to Sturgis, shifted his efforts to setting conditions for the final assault and defeat of his opponent. For the next two hours, Forrest issued orders, personally and through his aides, for a coordinated attack by every element of his force against the Union infantry. While issuing orders and coordinating this attack from a position near Bell's brigade, elements of the Union infantry counterattacked at the juncture between Rucker's and Bell's brigades. The Confederate infantry began to falter and began to withdraw from this torrent of lead. Seeing this, Forrest quickly dismounted and called on his two escort companies to follow him. Pistol in hand, Forrest led them into the thickest part of the fray in the front rank with his men. Encouraged by this inspiring display of courage and determination, Bell and Rucker's men quickly rallied and drove the enemy back. Assuring himself that the situation was well in hand and the initiative restored for the moment, Forrest remounted his big sorrel and rode north along his lines to personally issue orders to his subordinate commanders.

against Tishomingo Creek, and eliminating any opportunity for Grierson to remount and conduct an envelopment of his flanks. At the same time, he created only one means, a piecemeal means at that, for Sturgis to commit his infantry — across one narrow road and the single bridge spanning Tishomingo Creek. All Forrest had to do now, and he knew it, was break the cavalry's will to fight. The Union infantry was closing.

Vicious fighting ensued with General Forrest in the thick of it, riding fearlessly among his three brigades, urging and encouraging his troopers, driving and pressing the fight, exerting his iron will and determination upon both his troopers and his enemy. The battle raged with fury, charge and counter-charge. At about 12:30 p.m., after a series of fierce, unrelenting Confederate assaults, compounded by the fear of envelopment, the Union cavalry collapsed. They began to

flee the field just as their infantry comrades reached the battlefield about 1300, 3 hours after the initial collision with Sturgis's cavalry. This, by the way, was exactly as Forrest had envisioned it on the 8th of June.

At about the same time McMillen's lead infantry brigade began filing over the Tishomingo Creek bridge, shouldering their way past the retreating cavalymen, Colonel Tyree Bell's brigade of 2,800 troopers arrived on the scene, completing the concentration of force Forrest knew he had to have to accomplish his aim.

For about an hour, between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m., there was a lull on the battlefield as Forrest's men caught their breath, quenched their desperate thirst, redistributed ammunition, and reorganized for the next assault. Meanwhile, dehydrated and exhausted by their strenuous march, the last three miles at a shuffling

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Using a volley of cannon fire and a bugle call as the signal for the final assault, he ordered BG Buford to attack with Johnson’s and Lyon’s brigades into the center of the Union position to fix the enemy’s attention to their front. Bell’s brigade would attack the enemy’s right. COL Barteau’s 2d Tennessee Regiment, previously detached from Bell’s brigade, would attack the enemy’s left flank and rear. During this ride to coordinate the assault, Forrest noticed that Morton’s artillery was dispersed by sections and not positioned where he wanted it. He ordered all sections, a total of eight guns of various types, massed and loaded with double-canister. At the sound of the bugle, when the brigades would advance, he told Morton to race forward within 50-60 yards of the enemy line, unlimber, and mass his fires against the infantry center. Having set conditions for effective employment of his artillery, Forrest continued his ride back to re-join Bell.

En route, he encountered Captain Tyler and his squadron of Kentucky cavalry, yet uncommitted. Seizing the opportunity, he ordered Tyler, supported by Forrest’s escort, to sweep around the Union right and get into the Yankees’ rear as the final assault began. Forrest intuitively chose a classic tactic to finish Sturgis off, a familiar pattern he had employed several times in battle over the past three years against linear-arrayed formations. While fixing the enemy’s center, conduct a double envelopment, striking the enemy simultaneously and unexpectedly on his relatively weak, unprotected flanks — or even better, on his rear.

Although Forrest never heard of the great Carthaginian commander — or thought about what he was doing as a “tactic” for that matter — he decided to employ the same scheme of maneuvering his forces as Hannibal chose to defeat the Romans at Cannae some 2000 years before. What is clear in Forrest’s orders is his pattern of thinking. He understood what *effects* he had to produce to defeat Sturgis’s infantry. He had to break their will to fight, and the only way to do that, being outnumbered, was to induce an overwhelming fear of destruction in the minds of those exhausted infantry leaders

and soldiers. “Get ’em skeered” as Forrest so often put it. A violent assault across the front, magnified by the effects of surprise attack on the flank or rear, as Forrest had learned in previous battles, was the quickest way to do it under these battlefield conditions that he had skillfully orchestrated.

It was now 4:00 p.m. Forrest sensed the initiative hung in the balance. He remounted and rode the length of his line from south to north yelling, “Get up, men. I have ordered Bell to charge on the left. When you hear his guns, and the bugle sounds, every man must charge, and we will give them hell.”⁵ Near his artillery, where he could see the enemy and the advance of his brigades, Forrest ordered Bugler Gaus to sound the charge. The Confederates rose up as one, pistols and carbines blazing, and charged the enemy.

Amazingly at this time, but just as Forrest had estimated some six hours before, COL Barteau’s 2d Tennessee Regiment of Bell’s Brigade, detached at Old Carrollville, arrived at a position investing the far left flank and rear of the Union position. Sturgis’s reserve brigade and trains were in plain view near the Tishomingo Creek bridge. Hearing the explosion of firing to his southwest, the orientation of the enemy before him, and understanding Forrest’s intent, Barteau wasted no time and charged into the flank of the unsuspecting enemy.

Buford, seeing this, immediately notified Forrest of Barteau’s presence and his ongoing attack. Mounted on his big sorrell, “saber in hand, sleeves rolled up, his coat lying on the pommel of his saddle,”⁶ Forrest immediately rode along the rear of his lines shouting encouragement to his men, and urging one final assault to break the will of the enemy.

To induce even greater shock, to induce overwhelming fear and make them break, Forrest ordered Morton’s artillery battery forward within 60 yards of the enemy line and ordered the gunners to pour continuous blasts of double-canister into the ranks of the enemy infantry. Men could not stand and live against the storm of shot unleashed by these cannoners, and coupled with the ferocious attack of

Lyon’s and Johnson’s brigades and the unnerving scream of the Rebel yell, the Union infantry in the center of the line collapsed in panic and disorder.

Simultaneously, Bell and Tyler struck McMillen’s right flank. Barteau struck his left flank and rear. The combination of the devastating effects produced by the artillery, the ferocious attack across the entire line of battle, coupled with the surprise attack on Sturgis’s reserve brigade and trains achieved exactly what Forrest expected. The effect of these simultaneous attacks, coming when and where they did, was so overwhelming, Sturgis’s forces disintegrated into a panic-stricken mass just as Forrest had foreseen. But Forrest wasn’t finished. Sensing the collapse of the Federal line, Forrest exhorted his exhausted men to exploit the attack, and drive the Federal infantry before them, which they did. As General Forrest always advocated, “Get ’em skeered, and then keep the skeer on ’em.” Consequently, as the Union soldiers rushed in fright and panic to the rear, Forrest immediately organized and launched a mounted pursuit which he personally led throughout the night, and did not stop until Forrest, completely exhausted, fainted and fell from his horse at nightfall, the 11th of June.

The extent of Forrest’s victory, which he had fought and won in his mind two days prior, is best summarized by a witness, William H. H. Barker, who encountered the routed Federals as they streamed back towards Memphis. “They were practically without ration, and had to march night and day. In order to escape at all, they were compelled to throw away arms and equipment of all kinds — strip themselves of all clothing — save shirts and drawers... I saw them by the hundreds — with not a vestige of clothing on but their drawers, and these worn to rags to their knees. They were bare-headed and many, too, shoeless. Of all the scenes I witnessed in my long Army service, this was the most heartrending.”⁷

How Did Forrest Do It?

And to what should we attribute the victory? Brave, well-led, disciplined soldiers? Soldiers inspired by a cause who

had absolute confidence and trust in their leadership? Intrepid leaders who had absolute faith and confidence in their men? The presence of commanders up front where they could see the battle and their men could see them, drawing courage and inspiration from their example? Fearless commanders who would not ask their soldiers to do anything they would not do themselves? Brilliant tactics executed by experienced teams? An inept opponent? Luck? An argument could be made for each of these factors, no doubt. But they were not the deciding factor. Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest won this battle before he fought it — the acme of the art of battle command as we attempt to define it today.

The question for any aspiring combined-arms commander today is — how was he able to do it? How could he foresee things so clearly in his mind and employ his forces so consistently with that vision? What knowledge, skills, and abilities were required to do it?

First, Forrest could *see the terrain*. He knew the country. He knew its features so well, his maps must have talked to him. He knew the road network, the surface condition of the roads, and the relief of the country they traversed. In his mind, given the enemy's position, he could see the only route suitable to move the size and type of forces Sturgis possessed and the densely forested hills, muddy creek bottoms, and steep slopes the route traversed. They had to come down the Ripley Road to Brice's Crossroads. Moreover, Forrest could visualize the effects of the weather on this road, in this case a dirt road drenched and turned to sticky slop by the rain, under a stifling hot, June sun. Furthermore, in his mental simulation, he could see the cavalry with artillery teams churning up the soft, sticky clay with the trailing infantry slogging through this mud and heat, draining their energy, reducing their pace to an exhausting walk.

He knew the distances between the towns and villages in the region and the route structure that connected them. Consequently, given the known position of his forces relative to Sturgis, and the rate of march his forces could generate relative to the enemy, Forrest quickly recognized which routes to use and where he could feasibly concentrate his forces to meet Sturgis in the time available — Brice's Crossroads. He had become a master of time/distance analysis.

All that remained was to select the best ground on which to fight; ground which afforded him the ability to whip Sturgis although outnumbered two to one.

Brice's Crossroads suited that purpose just fine. The terrain west of Brice's Crossroads compelled Sturgis to piecemeal his forces into combat along a single narrow road across a single bridge across Tishomingo Creek. Consequently, it would take hours for Sturgis to march, deploy from brigades in column, and concentrate his forces. Equally important, it must have been apparent to Forrest that there were no other routes or suitable approaches permitting maneuver north or south of this route of advance, until forces were well east of the creek. Therefore, if he could fix the lead elements of Sturgis's force in the vicinity of Brice's Crossroads, it would be like sticking a cork in a bottle. Likewise, Forrest could obviously see that a battle fought at Brice's Crossroads would place Sturgis's back to Tishomingo Creek, with only one route of withdrawal over a single bridge. At the same time, it would afford him the space to fix the enemy and use the north-south, lateral routes just east of the creek to contain Sturgis's forces and afford him the opportunity to attack into one or both flanks of the enemy.

Forrest also appreciated that the ground around Brice's Crossroads was timbered, interspersed with thick groves of trees in full summer foliage, and choked with undergrowth. There were few open fields of fire, and those there were lacked depth, negating the range advantage of the Federal carbines and rifles over Forrest's repeating pistols, shotguns, and rifles. Furthermore, the ground severely restricted the effective employment of cannon artillery, a tremendous combat multiplier and advantage of the Federal army. Equally important to Forrest, this terrain limited the enemy's visibility, denying enemy leaders the ability to see and determine the exact size of his force. In short, the terrain supported the necessity of deception; it could help him conceal the actual size and strength of his force. This was a masterful selection of terrain and set the fundamental condition for success, the foundation of every successful engagement and battle in history for that matter.

Second, Forrest could *see the enemy*. He had continual, reliable intelligence from his network of scouts. He knew the science of war. He knew how Sturgis was organized and equipped; the size and strength of his cavalry, infantry, and artillery forces. He knew how fast they marched. He knew the effective ranges of pistol, carbine, and rifle, as well as their rates of fire; therefore, the volume of direct fire the Federal forces could bring to bear, if allowed. And he knew the

range and effectiveness of the various types of cannon artillery that Sturgis could add to the fight.

He clearly understood the tactics of the day, the patterns of employment, and could foresee how Sturgis would employ his forces. On the approach march, cavalry with a few pieces of horse artillery would lead the infantry performing reconnaissance and providing security. He predicted the cavalry would proceed three hours in advance of the infantry, which to Forrest was the time available to whip the cavalry before the infantry arrived (almost exactly the time it actually required on the 10th). He knew the cavalry would be used to develop the situation and try and fix him in place until the infantry and artillery came up. Supply wagons would trail with an escort for protection. A mental simulation of this ran through his mind.

Forrest also knew the caliber of men and the commander he would be fighting. Sturgis had pursued him into northern Mississippi from Memphis just two months prior, turning back at Ripley, Mississippi, for lack of subsistence and the will to continue. Forrest was not facing an opposing commander with an iron will or with any experience in fighting the size and complexity of force under his command. Moreover, the Federal soldiers had never fought and won together as a team. They were a rapidly-assembled, *ad hoc* collection of units. Consequently, confidence in themselves and their leadership would be tenuous at best, not to mention teamwork; a glaring vulnerability in pitched battle with Forrest's battle-hardened and ferocious troops. In sum, Forrest knew the capabilities, limitations, and vulnerabilities of the commander and soldiers his men would face.

Third, Forrest could *see himself*. He knew the capabilities, limitations, and inherent vulnerabilities of his force. Steeled by months of combat together, molded by his iron discipline, he knew his subordinate commanders, he knew his troopers, and he knew the bonds of trust and confidence which existed between them. He knew what they were capable of doing in a fight; so did his men. He knew the rate at which they could march. He knew exactly where they were located throughout northern Mississippi. He knew how his forces were armed and equipped, the condition of their horses, stocks of ammunition for all weapons, and his ability to secure his lines of communications and replenish his force. And under his command, they had never lost a fight. His soldiers knew that, too.

Finally, armed with this knowledge and an incomparable tactical intuition, honed through three years of continual combat experience, Forrest had the ability to envision the fight from beginning to end, in all its possible permutations, given the terrain and the enemy. He could recognize all the critical tasks he had to accomplish sequentially to win. He could see the *effects* he would have to produce to accomplish these critical tasks, and therefore, when and where he would have to employ his forces to create those effects: delay, fix, contain, block, destroy, deceive, shock. All that was left for him to do was issue clear, concise orders that would bring his plan to life; maintain situational awareness of both enemy and friendly dispositions; position himself to see the battlefield and sense the progress of the fight; and direct his forces as the battle evolved to achieve the *effects* required to defeat his foe.

In these aspects of battle command, Forrest had no peers. Look no further for an example of a commander who had mastered the science and art of warfighting; a commander poured from Sun Tzu's mold.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wrote this paper for the aspiring Forrests of the 21st century, in the hope it will provide some insights into what the art of tactical command looks like in practice. I wrote it to illustrate what an accomplished tactician and combat commander looks like, how he thinks and acts on the battlefield, and the knowledge, abilities, experience, and intuition he must possess. I also tried to show that the requirements and characteristics for a master of the science and art of command at the tactical level have not changed in the least through the centuries, only the *conditions*.

These same abilities, no doubt, will be found in our great combined-arms commanders of the future. In our Army, there are and will continue to be those rare commanders who achieve mastery in the science and art of warfighting. They will be more rare given declining experiential opportunities and inadequate professional development patterns our combat leaders suffer today and will in the years ahead — barring bold intervention and change. I hope this article finds and helps those men achieve it despite these conditions and our Army's unwillingness to change. Our soldiers deserve them and our nation must have them to secure the blessings of freedom and liberty in the 21st century.

Notes

¹James Clavell, Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Dell Publishing, N.Y., 1983.

²John Allan Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest*, Harper & Brothers, N.Y., 1959.

³Ibid.

⁴Edwin C. Bearrs, *Forrest at Brice's Crossroads and in Northern Mississippi in 1864*, Press of Morningside Bookshop, Dayton, Ohio, 1979, p. 68.

⁵Parker Hills, *A Study in Warfighting, Nathan Bedford Forrest and the Battle of Brice's Crossroads*, McNaughton and Gunn, Saline, Mich., 1996, p. 35.

⁶*Forrest at Brice's Crossroads*, p. 93.

⁷*A Study in Warfighting, Nathan Bedford Forrest and the Battle of Brice's Crossroads*, pp. 43-44.

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