



## **The Battle of Ft Pillow Victory Stigma**

**By Edwin L. Kennedy, Jr. Lieutenant Colonel, US Army (Ret.)**

General Nathan Forrest was declared by leaders on both sides to be one of the best commanders the war produced. Success tends to beget emotional and irrational jealousies, especially by those who suffer from inferiority complexes. Forrest's overwhelming victory at Fort Pillow provided a propaganda coup for the northern press as survivors' accounts were coached and embellished to denigrate a commander who could not be beaten on the battlefield. While there may have been some truth in a few of the accusations, they were wildly distorted, exaggerated and uncritically accepted ---- even when logical explanations are considered and the results of official northern inquiries could not "prove" malice by Forrest.

Forrest had a reputation of using deception throughout his military career. When he threatened the garrison at Pillow, it was no different than the other ruses he had previously employed and would continue to employ. This seems to be the crux of the criticisms of Forrest's actions leading to the use of the word "massacre" by those who conveniently over-look the fact Forrest (and his subordinates) commonly used threats to scare enemies into submission. The fact that it worked infuriated the northerners for being duped. When Pillow's garrison refused to succumb to the threats and then fell to assault, northerners illogically assumed that the threats were executed. No subsequent Federal investigations ever found evidence of such.

An enemy who appeared to be reinforcing the garrison by river during a truce meant that Forrest's forces' reaction was questioned as the truce violation when it was a natural response. Experienced soldiers know of the difficulty of controlling attacking units, even with modern technology such as radios. 150 years ago, attacking at Ft Pillow was fourfold more difficult due to distances, background battle noise, rough terrain, and the inability of sound commands to carry. Forces converging on an objective from multiple directions are extremely difficult to control as Forrest knew but he had no choices. Once the assault began, it traditionally ended with the enemy surrendering, or running away. When the Federals refused to surrender as a unit by striking the colors and then continued to resist, they garnered a natural response that wasn't a planned massacre but the result of passions in the heat of battle. The result was an embarrassment to the Federals not only for their loss of the battle, but the high casualties resulting from their soldiers feigning surrender but recovering arms to continue fighting. They suffered the results of their poor decisions and actions. Forrest unfairly suffers the stigma for victory.

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