The Battle Of Paducah Essay, Research Paper

THE BATTLE OF PADUCAH

“More than just a skirmish”

by Scott Bradley

For many years “The Battle of Paducah” has been grossly under-stated. There is no mention of the battle in most history books. The latest Kentucky History book has no mention of the battle at all. Without a doubt, Paducah has been overshadowed by the massacre at Fort Pillow on April 12, 1864, some eighteen days later. In fact, if the Battle of Paducah had not turned out the way it did, the Massacre at Fort Pillow may have never taken place. With over thirty-thousand rounds exchanged between the Union and Confederate forces, and the death of one of the South’s foremost Colonels, the “skirmish” at Paducah’s significance should not be overlooked. .

On March 1, 1864, a man with a battle record that few could imagine began planning to recruit troops and mounts from West Kentucky. This man fought at battles such as Fort Donelson and Shiloh. He also served under General Bragg and General Sooy Smith. He is none other than General Nathan Bedford Forrest. (herein referred to as Forrest).

On March 1, 1864 three Kentucky regiments received orders from General Forrest asking them to join his force around Columbus, Mississippi. The Third, Seventh, and Eighth Regiments immediately went up the Tombigbee River and joined Forrest’s forces. These Kentucky regiments had been badly damaged in the many hard fought battles they had already experienced. Word that they were going back to their home state of Kentucky came as a great comfort. Upon arriving, some of the men found that they would have to walk because of the lack of mounts; not a complaint could be heard. One may ask why Forrest would want such a worn and tattered regiment. To put it simply, he wanted to advance into West Kentucky and who knew the land better than those who have lived there.

Immediately, Forrest split his command into four brigades, consisting of about seven thousand total men. The first commanded by Colonel J. J. Neely, the second by Colonel Robert McCullock, the third by Colonel A. P. Thompson, and fourth by Colonel T. H. Bell. The bulk of the fighting brigade would be that of Colonel A. P. Thompson with the Third, Seventh, Eighth and Twelfth Kentucky regiments, along with The Jeffrey Forrest regiment. The Twelfth Kentucky had been under General Forrest for some time. General Buford would command the divisions of Thompson and Bell.

Meanwhile, it was no secret what Forrest planned. A report from Major General S. A. Hurlbut of the Headquarters Fourth Division, District of West Tennessee states: “It is reported that Forrest with about seven-thousand men was at Tupelo last night or the night before, bound for West Tennessee.” He adds: “I think he means Columbus or Paducah.”

On the morning of March 15, Forrest readied his entire command in Columbus Mississippi, and set out for Jackson, Tennessee. Forrest arrived at Jackson with about fourteen hundred riders on March 20. The remainder of his force would soon follow. On March 22 Forrest decided to leave General Buford at Jackson, and take about 800 men of the Seventh Tennessee and Twelfth Kentucky to Trenton, Tennessee. After collecting supplies, recruiting and rallying with Buford and his other troops, Forrest left for West Kentucky. Then, hearing of a federal command at Union City, Tennessee, Forrest ordered Colonel Duckworth to take the Seventh Tennessee, and the Twelfth Kentucky and try to take the town. Thinking that Forrest’s entire force was approaching the town, a newspaper reported, that Forrest, with over seven thousand men and heavy artillery, were about to advance on the town.

Upon arriving at Union City, Colonel Duckworth saw he was not strong enough to storm the fort. Duckworth then resorted to an old Confederate trick which made his numbers seem larger than they actually were. After making a considerable amount of noise and concentrating fire on the fort, Duckworth sent Colonel Hawkins (commander of the Union City fort), a letter demanding surrender. Hawkins wasted little time in accepting the surrender. Little did he know that when he surrendered, reinforcements by way of General Brayman of Cairo, were only six miles away. Brayman writes: “Arriving at a station six miles this side of Union City, I learned with great pain and surprise that Colonel Hawkins had surrendered,” He continues to say, “The force of the enemy does not appear to have been more than a fourth represented, and without artillery.” After taking the town, Duckworth was able to secure sixty thousand dollars in money, mounts, and various supplies.

While Duckworth was doing his damage in Union City, Forrest had crossed over into Kentucky. Forrest entered Kentucky by way of Dukedom and proceeded into Pilot Oak, up Old Dukedom Road and into Mayfield on what is now Tenth Street. Here, Forrest told his troops of a leave they would receive to see their families, collect supplies, and mounts. First, however, they were to move on Paducah.

In Paducah they would find the second largest earthen fort in the war, second only to Fort Fisher in Petersburg Virginia. It was built by Union forces after General Grant occupied the town in 1861. The exact location is where an abandoned Life Care Center nursing home now stands, just in front of the Executive Inn. It was named for the Union hero of Fort Sumter, Major Robert Anderson. Until Forrest, no one had ever attempted to attack the fort. Fort Anderson stood as “a symbol of Union might in a decidedly pro-Southern region.” Western Kentucky, or the “Jackson Purchase” became known as “Kentucky’s South Carolina and Paducah its Charleston” The fort, all but impregnable, had a castle-like moat over fifty feet wide completely surrounding it. The fort had eight mounted cannons and an impressive amount of artillery. The star shaped fort measured four hundred feet in length and over one hundred sixty feet wide.

On the morning of March 25th , (Good Friday) before sunrise, Captain H.A. Tyler and a company of the Twelfth Kentucky set out to probe the outpost of Paducah. In 1864 Colonel S.G. Hicks commanded the fort. Forrest hoped he might surprise Hicks, but did not worry about whether he did or not. Hicks, knowing that Forrest was coming, but not knowing when, sent out pickets to watch The Old Mayfield Road and the other roads that led into the town. Hicks also readied the fort’s nine hundred men. In the fort were the First Battalion, Sixteenth Kentucky Cavalry, several companies of the Eighth U.S. Colored Artillery, and a couple of independent men who had been separated from their regiments.

Around noon on March 25, the pickets that Hicks had sent out foolishly returned to the fort to report they had seen nothing. Hicks quickly sent them back with a stern warning “not to leave again until ordered to do so.” Within about three miles of the fort, at 2:10 p.m., on Eden’s Hill, Union soldiers made contact with Forrest’s force. Rebel, Otto Rosecranz, saw the Union picket coming up the other side of the hill. Rosecranz fired his pistol at the picket, and without returning fire, they ran for the city. J.V. Greif saw this and wrote “ Two of the men throwing away their sabres and as many losing their hats in the stampede.” Captain Tyler’s men, who had been sent out early that morning, went in hot pursuit after the fleeing pickets. Hearing the gunshots, Hicks ordered his men to the protection of the fort. Hicks reportedly said, “such was the impetuosity of the attack, that their rear was being fired upon by the enemy.” The Battle of Paducah had begun.

It had been drizzling rain all day, and the streets were filled with mud. In the port of Paducah floated two gunboats ready to defend the fort at all costs. The Peosta and PawPaw were told to “not spare the town” in the event of an attack. These boats were heavily armored and carried vast amounts of artillery. They were in a perfect position to shell the town and protect the fort.

In a small grove of trees, where the Katterjohn Building now stands, Forrest laid out his plans for the attack.. The Third and Seventh would be under the command of A. P. Thompson and sent to the fort. The Eighth Kentucky was ordered to cover their flank. The Twelfth Kentucky and the Seventh Tennessee were to raid the “Yankee Warehouses” on the waterfront to get supplies and horses.

The Third and Seventh Kentucky regiments were first to advance on the town. They held a tight formation until reaching the densest part of the city. There they had to disband, and the advance had to be made in smaller columns. When within rifle shot, the Confederates took shelter in alleys and behind buildings. Colonel A. P. Thompson sent word to Forrest that he was in position and would await further orders. It is not known whether Forrest gave an order to pin down the fort or to storm it. One soldier said “Forrest told Thompson to attack the fort, call for its surrender, and if the surrender was refused, to storm the works, making sure your flanks are well protected.”

In any case, at 3:00 p.m., Thompson proceeded to order his men to storm the works. Once Thompson and his men reached the clearing, which separated the town from the fort, Hicks and his men opened fire. Continuing to advance, Thompson’s men soon learned of the deep water filled moat which encompassed the entire fort. A retreat was ordered. Thompson noticed the tall buildings in the vicinity of the fort. He then ordered his sharpshooters to take elevated positions in these buildings and put down a barrage of fire inside the works. This proved to be one of the most effective tactics against this massive place. Major J. F. Chapman said:

“They filled all the houses in reach of the fort, and opened a heavy fire from behind every obstacle that would afford them protection.” he added, “From the time they began to move into the houses until they were repulsed, the fire of small-arms was almost incessant.”

After much sparatic fighting, Forrest rode up and ordered a flag of truce to be sent to the Union Army. Charles Reed, John Brooks, Rufe Stevens, and John Garret were among the six men sent by Forrest. He sent those six men because they were natives of Paducah and hopefully they would be well received within the fort. Seeing this, Hicks ordered the cease fire and sent his own flag of truce to meet the men. In Forrest style the demand of surrender was addressed to Colonel Hicks and read:

Having a force amply sufficient to carry your works and reduce the place, and in order to avoid the unnecessary effusion of blood, I demand the surrender of the fort and troops, with all public property. If you surrender, you shall be treated as prisoners of war; but if I have to storm your works, you may expect no quarter.

Hicks replied by writing:

I have this moment received yours of this instant, in which you demand the unconditional surrender of the forces under my command. I can answer that I have been placed here by my Government to defend this post, and in this, as well as all other orders from my superiors. I feel it to be my duty as an honorable officer to obey. I must, therefore, respectfully decline surrendering as you may require.

It is reported that upon receiving this reply from Hicks, General Forrest wadded the note up, shoved it in his pocket and ordered an all out attack on the main garrison of the fort.

So, once again the rebels attacked. Some made it as far as the moat surrounding the fort. Many met their fate. Upon seeing this attack, the gunboats Peosta and Paw Paw opened fire on Paducah. The firing became especially heavy on Trimble Street. An old maple tree on Trimble Street was pierced by a cannonball coming from one of the gunboats. For years it was one of the reminders of the battle.

In this, the third and final phase of the battle, Forrest suffered a great loss, that of A. P. Thompson. Sometime around dusk Thompson was in an alley between Hospital and Trimble Streets. Today, Hospital Street is Martin Luther King Boulevard and Trimble Street is Park Avenue. There is an alley that is formed by Fourth and Fifth Streets. Thompson, a native of Paducah, is reported to have been in this alley, sitting on his horse conversing with two of his staff members, one of which was Lieutenant Hickenberry.

In Hickenberry’s diary, he reports that Thompson was on his horse, looking through a pair of field glasses. While looking upon the action at the fort, which was no more than one hundred yards away, without warning Thompson wheeled his horse around as if he was attempting to move. As he wheeled his horse, a cannonball fired by Sgt. Tom Hayes of the 15th Kentucky Cavalry cut through the neck of Thompson’s horse, hit the pommel of the saddle, sprang up and cut his head and the top of his shoulders completely off. The scene was visible from the fort, and one Union veteran said he saw the Colonel fall backward off of the saddle with his feet still in the stirrups. The horse then bolted, pulling Thompson out of the stirrups. This caused his backbone to fall to the street “and coil up like a snake,” only a few blocks from the house in which he grew up. Legend has it that a letter of commission for Brigadier General was later found in his coat pocket. After hearing of their leader’s death, the Confederates retreated and reorganized under the wounded Colonel Ed Crossland.

Meanwhile, across town, Colonel Bell, who had been sent to raid the town for supplies, was doing his job with great haste, raiding storehouses and rounding up horses. They also burned sixty bales of cotton, a river pier, and the steamboat “Decotah”.

Forrest’s men where accomplishing almost every objective given. However, bad news soon reached the proud General. A civilian lady from the town, presumably of Confederate Sentiment, brought news of an outburst of smallpox in Paducah. Forrest, knowing smallpox could be detrimental, ordered his men to leave Paducah and go back to Mayfield by the way they came. In his report on the battle, Forrest said: “I drove the enemy to their gunboats and fortification, held the town for ten hours, and could have held it longer, but found the smallpox was raging and evacuated the place.”

The day after the battle, a Confederate soldier was found dead by some Unions soldiers looking over the town. He was leaning with his back against a tree grasping an “ambrotype likeness of two children.” The hardened Union soldiers were reduced to tears as they dug his grave and laid him to rest, still holding the pictures of his children. Over the grave they carved in a maple tree, “Somebody’s Father. March 25, 1864.”

Not knowing if Forrest would return, Hicks, on the morning of the 26th, ordered the sixteenth Kentucky Cavalry to burn the houses where the Rebels had rained down their fire on the fort. However, because of the heavy wind that day, the fire was carried into other wooden structures and some sixty homes burned. Some of these home owners demanded reparations for the loss of their homes. Many were declined, but some stayed wrapped up in Congress until 1985, over 120 years later.

While these houses were burning, General Forrest sent a letter of communication. The letter read:

I understand you hold in your possession in the guard house at Paducah a number of Confederate soldiers as prisoners of war. I have in my possession about 35 to 40 Federal soldiers who were captured here yesterday, and about 500 who were captured at Union City. I propose to exchange man for man, according to rank, so far as you my hold Confederate Soldiers.

Hicks quickly replied to Forrest: “ I have no power to make the exchange. If I had, I would most cheerfully do it.” In reading this, Forrest continued to Mayfield. He and his men camped at George Schmidts farm which was located about halfway between Paducah and Mayfield. Forrest tied his horse to a black oak tree in the front yard. The scene is described as follows:

The “Death Wagon” was parked under a small tree to the right of the front entrance, and the groans heard throughout the nigh – faint calls for help like those of the dauntless defenders and fearless assailants who after the Battle of Waterloo and while yet alive found a common grave in the well at the Chateau of Hougoumont.

Upon getting back to Mayfield, Forrest fulfilled his promise of a personal leave for his troops. He allowed his men from West Kentucky to go home for a few days with orders to meet again in Trenton, Tennessee. Not a single man deserted.

An underlying factor of this battle was definitely the African American troops that fought for the Union cause. The African American troops made up over one third of the fort’s defenders. One historian speculates, “that if Kentucky Confederates had captured the fort” they would have massacred the black soldiers as they did in the Fort Pillow incident. John Robertson said, “A second purpose of Forrest’s raid was to deliberately make an example of areas that were recruiting blacks.” In Hicks’ summary of the battle he states “I have been one of those men who never had much confidence in colored troops fighting, but those doubts are now all removed, for they fought as bravely as any troops in the fort.”

With the aforementioned material being said, the significance of The Battle of Paducah becomes clear. Forrest, a future Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, was irritated by the reports that his attack on Paducah failed. The Louisville Journal said the Rebels had been “gloriously drunk, and but little better than a mob.” The Chicago Tribune reported that Forrest’s men had been “ignominiously beaten back by negro soldiers with clubbed muskets.” With this boiling in his blood, Forrest turned his attention to Fort Pillow.

Fort Pillow recruited many African American troops for the Union cause. In short, Forrest surrounded Fort Pillow and demanded its surrender. General Bradford, commander of the fort, replied: “My name is not Hawkins,” alluding to the surrender of Colonel Hawkins at Union City two weeks earlier. He continues, “General; I will not surrender.” Forrest then gave the order of an all out assault.

With the lingering embarrassment from the Paducah raid, Forrest’s men produced a deadly onslaught of vengefulness. General William T. Sherman, (not present at the battle) said: “Forrest’s men acted like a set of barbarians, shooting down the helpless negro garrison after the fort was in their possession.” In his official report Forrest said:

The river was dyed with the blood of the slaughtered for two hundred yards. The approximate loss was upward of five hundred killed, but few of the officers escaping. My loss was about twenty killed. It is hoped that these facts will demonstrate to the Northern people that negro soldiers cannot cope with Southerners.

From the first to the last shot, The Battle of Paducah lasted twelve hours. The total Union dead totaled 46 to 50. The total Confederate dead totaled 14 to 25. These numbers are officially reported in the battle records, but are thought to be much lower than actual. Both sides wanted to claim victory, therefore the death tolls were probably understated.

In summary, March 25, 1864 will probably never be remembered in many text books. Today there is no trace of the battle and those who died there. There is a plaque in the sidewalk where the fort stood so diligently. There are a few markers that the citizens of Paducah drive by, most without even knowing what they say. If one was to walk around the downtown area today and ask people if they knew the historical significance of their town, few would know. Few know, that had the Battle of Paducah not occurred, many history books would be changed forever. The Massacre at Fort Pillow would be known as, “ The Battle of Fort Pillow.” All of this, stimming from a battle that many historians consider, “a skirmish.”

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