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Heroes or Fools
N.B. Forrest's Magnetism for Followers

Immediately after the carnage in New York, Washington and rural Pennsylvania on September 11th, U.S. armed forces recruiting offices reported dramatic increases in inquiries about military service and actual attempts at enlistment. One office in this area reported and increases from 5 per week to near 50. Driven by a sense of duty and patriotic commitment, young men and more recently young women have presented themselves for service in their country's military.

Similar circumstances existed during the War Between the States. In early 1861 an entire company, Company A of the First Regiment Cavalry, CSA, was formed mostly by young men from Daviess County Kentucky. Their leader was Captain C. T. Noel, a physician, founder of the Sugar Grove Baptist Church where this writer grew up as a young boy, and landowner of a farm adjacent that owned by my early family. Of 155 men in that unit, over half as Daviess Countians are reported to have joined on October 5, 1861 in either Russellville or Bowling Green.

This unit made themselves proud during the battle of Murfreesboro, when they facilitated the surrender of a much larger contingent of Union forces.

As an interesting side note, the home of Captain Noel, who was mortally wounded in battle in May of 1862, stood on our farm in Daviess County until vandals burned it in 1961. The basement foundation walls of my childhood home were built with bricks from an outbuilding on the property.

As the war languished on and in retrospect is observed as becoming more futile for the South, recruiting efforts intensified and took on a host of different strategies.

On October 14, 1864 a young, 15 year old Ohio County boy and two of his teenage friends began a trek from Ohio County Kentucky southward. These three young men intended to join the Confederate military unit of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. What was the driving force for these young men's actions?

Recruiting for the Confederate forces through out the War Between the States had generally always been very localized. To examine thoroughly the motivating behavior of these three boys it is necessary to change the scenery somewhat.

As most of you know the fall and winter of 1861 found Col. N. B. Forrest encamping here in Hopkinsville and traveling Western Kentucky, as far east as Louisville in search of men and supplies. His unique exploits included the acquisition of weapons, tack and related supplies with his personal resources. In most cases he secured these supplies from under the noses of Union sympathizer or home guard. In November of 1861, General Lloyd Tilghman ordered Forrest to search the region northwest of Hopkinsville for enemy units. During that excursion, the unit traveled through Princeton to Smithland where they encountered a Union transport flatboat loaded with supplies. They captured the boat and all of its supplies. "When we got back to Hopkinsville," reported one of the troopers, "we were the proudest boys in the army". December 26, 1861 brought another call for Forrest and his riders to scout the countryside, north of Hopkinsville. Rumors of Union troops in McLean County were bountiful. As Forrest and his men approached the small town of Sacramento, a rider for the town informed them of the location of the Union encampment. Unorganized chaos followed. Better riders with faster horses, led by Forrest rushed to the site. Forrest and his men approached so rapidly the Union forces were caught off guard. Forrest's speed carried him through the Union ranks where upon he and his troopers wheeled and rode through them again, guns blazing and sabers flailing. The

victory for the Southern forces was dramatic. The news of fight had an electrifying effect on the Confederate troopers' morale and the residents of the surrounding countryside.

Subsequent campaigns by Forrest were equally impressive and increasingly controversial. The Battle of Fort Pillow left questions regarding the behavior of Forrest where some alleged that he massacred Union troops that had surrendered. The Battle of Murfreesboro was also "a work of military genius" but Forrest was accused of murdering a black man found dressed in a Union uniform.

Forrest was frequently found in strong disagreement with his commanders. One of the most notable events occurred right here in our own backyard, Dover, Tennessee's, Fort Donelson. Northern troops under the command of Grant attacked and forced the surrender of Fort Henry, a few miles west on the Tennessee River. Savoring their victory, Grant's forces moved on Fort Donelson. Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston sent Forrest to defend Fort Donelson. If there wasn't enough to trouble the troops, fate held that not just one but three Confederate generals; Pillow, John B. Floyd and Simon Bolivar Buckner. Forrest moved to the front lines of the battle to defend against Grant units. One incident where Forrest grabbed a rifle from an infantryman and from horseback felled a Union sharpshooter who had nested himself in the limbs of a tall oak tree. The defenses held for three days, or until Grant's orders activated a flotilla of Union gunboats to pummel the fort's Cumberland River batteries. The Confederates led by Forrest, fought valiantly, and ultimately at night fall on February 14, 1862 they drove the Union back from Donelson on all three incoming routes. Assuming the battle to resume at first light, Forrest ordered his men to rotate watch and get sleep. In the middle of the night he was summoned to the Dover Inn, command headquarters for General Pillow. He observed three generals, who had gained the upper hand the day before, acquiesce to rumor of Grant's troop reinforcements and their own fears, and decide to surrender the fort. Angered by their

willingness to concede defeat and their posturing for post surrender recognition, Forrest addressed General Pillow. In his mangled English, he admonished the others for their cowardice and indicated that he would not surrender himself or his men. To which General Pillow responded, get out if you can. Forrest replied, "I will by G__ D___, and he lead his men, unscathed through the southern frozen marshes to Clarksville.

Another of these circumstances occurred in September 1863 after the battle of Chickamauga. General Braxton Bragg commanded the Army of Tennessee. While Union forces had taken Nashville, Chattanooga and Knoxville and territory as close to Nashville as Columbia were under Southern command. Historians have long noted the weakness of Bragg's leadership throughout the war. Forrest had smarted from Bragg's bungles since Shiloh. Having been ordered out of northern Mississippi to join Bragg for defense of his rear at Franklin was not a pleasing assignment to him. He preferred to function independent of organized campaigns. In the ensuing months of summer 1863, it became clear that Bragg didn't want to defend against the Federals moving south from Nashville and commanded a retreat to Chattanooga. Once again he left Forrest and his cavalry to defend his rear.

As he and his men fired and fell back day after day, Forrest heard a lady shout from her porch, "You great big cowardly rascal; why don't you turn and fight like a man, instead of running like a cur? I wish old Forrest was here, he'd make you fight!" Accusations of cowardice only added to his ire with regard to General Bragg. Bragg's orders for retreat continued until both Knoxville and Chattanooga were surrendered to the Yankees. Only after being backed as far south as Chickamauga did Bragg decide to go on the offensive. These actions only compounded Forrest's feelings toward Bragg. The offensives were uncoordinated and poorly timed with communication between commands virtually nonexistent. According to reports, the South's victory at Chickamauga was the result of good luck and a major mistake by

Union General Rosencrans. Moving a division to protect a hole in his defenses, which actually didn't exist created one. At just the right moment, Confederate General Longstreet charges poured through the hole dividing the Union ranks and catching them by surprise. In disarray, the Union forces hastily retreated toward Chattanooga, followed by Forrest. From a vantage point of Missionary Ridge Forrest viewed chaos in Chattanooga as trains of supplies and troops were leaving the city toward Lookout Mountain. Forrest appealed to Bragg for permission to pursue. In typical fashion Bragg mulled the decision for days allowing the opportunity to pass.

Frustrated by the perceived rebuff, Forrest went to Bragg's headquarters and strode past the sentry into Bragg's presence. Ignoring Bragg's outstretched hand, he advised the General "I am not here to pass civilities or compliments to you, but on other business". Forrest proceeded with a full two-minute tirade, which included a summary of Bragg's historical insults to him ranging from Shiloh to the present. He capped the commentary stating, "you have played the part of a damned scoundrel and a coward, and if you were any part of a man, I would slap your jaws and force you to resent it". He proceeded to challenge Bragg by telling him he would no longer follow his orders and dared Bragg to allow him to transfer or arrest him.

Forrest wasn't the only Bragg subordinate who resented his lack of leadership. The situation became so intense that President Davis himself came to the scene. After listening to the men's complaints for five days, Davis ordered Bragg to honor Forrest request for a release.

In December of 1863 Forrest moved west in Tennessee to Jackson where he set about to rebuild his command. He took with him nearly 300 men including Charles McDonald's battalion, John Morton's four gun battery and Tom Woodward's cavalry.

The rebuilding process began rapidly. While requesting supplies from General Joseph Johnson, Forrest drew on his own money, spending \$20,000 to subsist this command. Forrest's recruiting efforts included the offering of inducements to new recruits. He offered "that

everything that will add to our Comfort Shall be Supplied—Blankets, Shoes, and all that is necessary for a Soldier and also that all we Capture will be ours.”

One of the strategies Forrest used to gain recruits was to reward any man under his command with a 20-day furlough for each recruit he garnered. Such was the case of one Cornelius Moseley, an Ohio County boy who was a 2nd Lieutenant with Company H of the 8th Kentucky Cavalry. On a furlough home, it was Moseley who persuaded the three young men to venture south to join the ranks of Forrest’s Cavalrymen. The records hold that all three of them enlisted at Lexington, Tennessee in December 1864. All three were soon assigned to the 8th Kentucky in a cannon battery.

From the time in 1863 when Forrest moved to West Tennessee to rebuild his command, they were involved in a number of skirmishes the last of which was the rear guard duty they provided during the battle of Nashville, with specific involvement at Spring Hill and Franklin at the end of November 1864.

As 1864 drew to a close, Forrest’s Command withdrew from West Tennessee to neighboring Corinth, Mississippi to continue his rebuilding efforts, the three Ohio county boys, and a host of other new recruits and a few conscripts in tow. Word of defeats in Atlanta, Richmond, and Gettysburg filtered to the commanders and the troops. Forrest, who biographers felt knew the cause was lost, continued his efforts to rejuvenate and regenerate his battered and exhausted command addressed his troops. “Soldiers, the old campaign is ended and your commanding general deems this an appropriate occasion to speak of the steadiness, self-denial, and patriotism with which you have borne the hardships of the past year. The marches and labors you have performed during that period will find no parallel in the history of the war. If your course has been marked by the graves of patriotic heroes who have fallen by your side, it has, at the same time, been more plainly marked by the blood of the invader.

“Bring with you the soldier’s safest armor—a determination to fight while the enemy pollutes your soil; to fight as long as he denies your rights; to fight until independence shall have been achieved; to fight for home, children, liberty, and all you hold dear. Show to the world the super-human and sublime spirit with which a people may be inspired when fighting for the inestimable boon of liberty... You can never again unite with those who have murdered your sons, outraged your helpless families, and with demoniac malice wantonly destroyed your property, and now seek to make slaves of you... Be patient, obedient, and earnest, and the day is not far distant when you can return to your homes and live in the full fruition of freemen around the old family alter.”

In February 1865 Forrest was promoted to Lieutenant General and given command of the Departments of Alabama, Mississippi and East Louisiana. He immediately reorganized the command placing individuals from the same states in one group; Mississippians under General James Chalmers, Kentuckians under General Abraham Buford and Tennesseans under General Tyree Bell.

Forrest and his new division commanders had little time to rest for a young Union General, James Wilson began making motions toward deeper penetration into Alabama toward Selma, one of the Confederacy’s supply depots. On March 22nd Wilson’s troops began their move southward. A Union diversion created at Pensacola Florida distracted Forrest and allowed Wilson’s units to travel south for several days, unmolested. Forrest responded with a brilliant plan to attack Wilson’s troops on the move with a small contingent at their front, and full units at their middle and rear. Hoping to divide and confuse them and break their line of supply. Unbeknownst to Forrest however, Wilson was privy to the entire plan, having captured a Forrest courier who revealed the whole strategy. Therefore Wilson bore straight ahead knowing that Forrest was at his front will only a small escort of 75 mounted men and 300 foot soldiers. The

10,000-man army of Wilson attacked at the Ebenezer Church, a few miles northeast of Selma. He soon overpowered them and swept into Selma through an opening in the breastworks that had been revealed to him by a Union sympathizer. Selma which had been defended by a host of new recruits, including the three boys from Ohio County and some wounded regulars was soon outmanned. Hence on April 2, 1865 Wilson captured 2700 plus their four cannon battery. Forrest and his mounted escort escaped.

History reveals that neither Wilson or Forrest were aware that while they fought at Selma a general cease fire had been ordered and negotiations were underway for the April 9th surrender of Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Courthouse.

The men captured at Selma were imprisoned on bread and water for approximately thirty days when they were unexplainably marched 100 miles south, stripped of their shoes and jackets, "compelled to take the oath" and paroled.

Twelve young men from Ohio and Daviess County Kentucky, including the three young recruits began the long walk home. Traveling mostly at night they reached the Cumberland River near Dover some two months later. On arrival at river they soon became aware that the single swimmer of the group was the young 15 year old from Ohio County, who by the way had now turned 16. Willingly he swam the river eight times, carrying others of the contingent each trip. During the clamor of the crossing they lost their parole papers. Having traveled most of the way with little food, their fatigue diminished their alertness and they fell into the hands of a Union picket and were once again imprisoned. They were detained yet another thirty days, before being "compelled to take the oath" and paroled. Free again, they continued their homeward walk arriving at the Sugar Grove Church in southern Daviess County at the end of August 1865. There the 12 split up going their respective ways.

The young 15 year old made his way to the family farmstead for a reunion with his family who had presumed him dead, having not heard from him since the day he left.

Late in his life a few months before his death in April, 1928 Charles Franklin Westerfield, Sr. was interviewed by my father, his grandson. My father asked Grandpa Westerfield a host of questions recording meticulously the responses. All of the events involving Charles' activities were revealed in these notes. The most intriguing question, the one which prompted this paper, was, "Grandpa, why did you join up?". With a wry smile and a glint in his eye, he responded, "I guess were a bit foolish, Cornelius said they would give us our own gun and horse."

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