

Were Forrest and Bate Haunted by Ghosts of Stone's River?

SHOCK waves from the Battle of Nashville traveled all across Middle Tennessee, with raids and counter-raids up and down the Cumberland River. The biggest and hardest fought of all these engagements could be called, for lack of a name, the

Third Battle of Murfreesboro. The Confederate commander at Murfreesboro was the same man who had commanded Southern forces in the first battle fought at that place in 1862 — Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest.

The Federals had a garrison of 8,000 men under Gen. Lovell Rousseau. The garrison was well protected by formidable works which Federals had built around the town after the Battle of Stone's River, sometimes called the Battle of Murfreesboro.

Shallow Graves

Robert Selph Henry wrote that "the fight was over the same fields and rocky cedar glades where 100,000 men had battled for three days, over ground still littered with the wreckage of that struggle and with, here and there, the gleam of white bones protruding from some imperfect grave washed by the rains of two years."

About the same time Forrest was sent to Murfreesboro, Hood ordered Bate's division, commanded by Gen. W. B. Bate of Castalian Springs, to proceed along the railroad toward Murfreesboro, capturing blockhouses along the way and tearing up track. At that time Bate's division was only 1,600 strong, consisting of Jackson's, Tyler's and Finley's brigades, and Slocumb's battery.

At this time Tyler's brigade was commanded by Gen. Thomas Benton Smith, and Finley's by Major Joseph Lash.

Hood did not speak to Bate about the garrison at Murfreesboro, and Bate asked for instructions. In reply Hood estimated the garrison at 5,000 (it was 8,000) and said Forrest's cavalry would assist in the operation. He told Bate to use his own judgment, keeping in view the object of your expedition—to destroy the railroad.

Took Blockhouses

Bate took the blockhouses at Stewart's Creek, Reed's Branch and Smyrna and destroyed much of the railroad, beating off enemy attacks all day on Dec. 4.

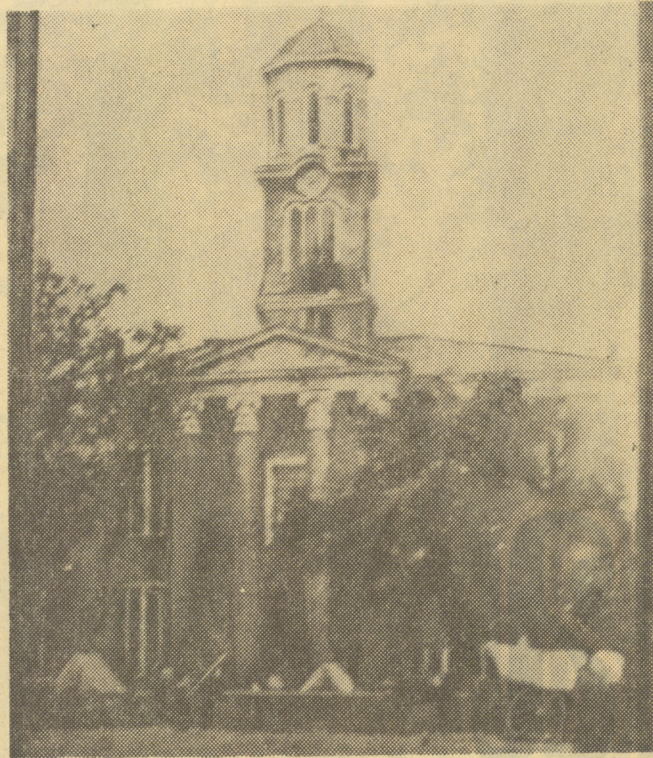
On the following day Bate and Forrest joined forces at a point four miles south of Levensville. With him Forrest had two cavalry divisions, Buford's and Jackson's, and two small brigades of infantry, Sear's and Palmer's. The combined force now numbered perhaps 6,500 men.

Near Murfreesboro, Rousseau's men occupied an extensive and formidable group of earthworks known as Fort Rosecrans, enclosing 200 acres and mounting 57 guns. Forrest led a reconnaissance in force right up to the Federal works. After a close study of the fortifications, he decided they could not be stormed and taken by so small a force.

Forrest Ruled

In the meantime General Bate was taking a dim view of the proceedings. He felt the expedition ought to remain on the railroad, destroying track as ordered, and stay away from the powerful garrison at Murfreesboro. Forrest, however, outranked Bate and was giving the orders.

While matters stood thus, on December 7, the Federals resolved the deadlock by marching out of their works to give battle. This, of course, was just what Forrest wanted. Lined up behind breastworks,



This photo of the court house at Murfreesboro was made during the Civil War. Two Federal army tents and a Federal wagon appear on the lawn. The court house is still in use.

his men prepared to receive the Federal attack with about an equal number of troops. In the meantime Buford, with a detachment, rode around Murfreesboro and came in on the Woodbury Pike to the center of town, just as Forrest had done two years before.

As the Federals approached Forrest rode up and down the line and said:

"Men, all I ask you to do is hold the enemy back for 15 minutes, which will give me sufficient time to gain their rear with my cavalry, and I will capture the last one of them."

Nathan Bedford Forrest himself reported what happened next:

"The enemy moved boldly forward, driving in my pickets,



Gen. Nathan B. Forrest
Wizard of the saddle

when the infantry, with the exception of (Thomas Benton) Smith's brigade, from some cause which I cannot explain, made a shameful retreat, losing two pieces of our artillery. I seized the colors of our retreating troops and endeavored to rally them, but they could not be moved by any entreaty or appeal to their patriotism. Major-General Bate did the same thing, but was equally as unsuccessful as myself. I hurriedly sent Major Strange of my staff to Brigadier Generals Armstrong and Ross of Jackson's division, with orders to say to them that everything depended on their cavalry. They proved themselves equal to the emergency by charging on the enemy, thereby checking his further advance."

During this retreat an eyewitness said that Forrest was in a magnificent rage. Seeing a Confederate color bearer running to the rear he shot the man down, seized the colors and shouted, "Rally, men—for God's sake, rally!"

But the men "broke around him as water breaks around a rock," as Andrew Lytle put it. And finally Forrest threw the flag, staff and all at an officer who was outrunning his men.

Federals Fell Back

The upshot of it all was that the Federals, hearing of Buford's approach in their rear, and faced by new cavalry forces in front, fell back into their works. Bate was ordered

back to Nashville, and both Forrest and Hood thought his infantry had behaved badly. Bate, however, said the cavalry gave no warning of the Federal approach, and if the cavalry did any fighting at all, he was not aware of it.

Bate was replaced by A. J. Smith's brigade under the command of Col. Charles H. Olmstead, and his division got back to Nashville in time to participate in the great battle of Dec. 15-16.

Regarding the fight at Murfreesboro, Forrest later reported:

"I did not fall back for the purpose of drawing the enemy out, but because he drove me back. The infantry sent me I do not think can be relied on to charge the enemy's work."

The affair today was most disgraceful, all the men and most of the officers, with the exception of Smith's brigade, having fled in confusion at the first approach of the enemy.

"The artillery was handled well but the only thing that saved the army was Armstrong's and Ross' getting in the enemy's rear and charging them, thereby checking their advance."—N. B. Forrest.

It ought to be added that Forrest did not criticize Bate personally, regarding him as a gallant officer and a brave man. After the war Bate was elected to the U.S. Senate from Tennessee.

Forrest remained in the vicinity of Murfreesboro after the battle, though making no

attempt to attack the fortifications. As for the Federals, they seemed content to remain within their lines.

While Forrest remained in the vicinity of Murfreesboro a part of his men were near their homes. In Company C of the Second Tennessee Cavalry every man went home except one lieutenant. One of these men, J. E. J. Hawkins, was killed near Auburn.

When Hood was defeated at Nashville he immediately ordered the return of Forrest. The order to move came just as a Confederate regiment

was about to fall upon a Federal cavalry company commanded by Col. Joseph Blackburn. Forrest swept across country, and with Gen. Edward Walthall's division, formed a valiant rear guard for the Confederate retreat across the Tennessee.



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