

Battle of Fort Pillow

The **Battle of Fort Pillow**, also known as the **Fort Pillow Massacre**, was fought on April 12, 1864, at Fort Pillow on the Mississippi River in Henning, Tennessee, during the American Civil War. The battle ended with a massacre of surrendered Federal black troops by soldiers under the command of Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Military historian David J. Eicher concluded, "Fort Pillow marked one of the bleakest, saddest events of American military history."^[1]

Background

Fort Pillow, 40 mi (64 km) north of Memphis, was built by Brigadier General Gideon Johnson Pillow in early 1862 and was used by both sides during the war. With the fall of New Madrid and Island No. 10 to Union forces, Confederate troops evacuated Fort Pillow on June 4, in order to avoid being cut off from the rest of the Confederate Army. Union forces occupied Fort Pillow on June 6, and used it to protect the river approach to Memphis.

The fort stood on a high bluff and was protected by three lines of entrenchments arranged in a semicircle, with a protective parapet 4 ft (1.2 m) thick and 6 to 8 ft (1.8 to 2.4 m) high surrounded by a ditch. (During the battle, the thick parapet would in fact prove to be a disadvantage to the defenders because they could not fire upon approaching troops without mounting the top of the parapet, subjecting them to enemy fire. Similarly, operators of the six artillery pieces of the fort found it difficult to depress their barrels enough to fire on the attackers once they got close.) A Federal gunboat, the USS *New Era*, commanded by Captain James Marshall, was also available for the defense.^[1]

On March 16, 1864, Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest launched a month-long cavalry raid with 7,000 troopers into western Tennessee and Kentucky. Their objectives were to capture Union prisoners and supplies and to demolish posts and fortifications from Paducah, Kentucky, south to Memphis. Forrest's Cavalry Corps, which he called "the Cavalry Department of West Tennessee and North Mississippi", consisted of the divisions led by Brig. Gens. James R. Chalmers (brigades of Brig. Gen. Robert V. Richardson and Colonel Robert M. McCulloch) and Abraham Buford (brigades of Cols. Tyree H. Bell and A. P. Thompson).

The first of the two significant engagements in the expedition was the Battle of Paducah on March 25, and Forrest's men did considerable damage to the town and its military supplies. Numerous skirmishes occurred throughout the region in late March and early April. Needing supplies, Forrest planned to move on Fort Pillow with about 1,500^[2] to 2,500^[3] men. (He had detached part of his command under Buford to strike Paducah again.) He wrote on April 4, "There is a Federal force of 500 or 600 at Fort Pillow, which I shall attend to in a day or two, as they have horses and supplies which we need."^[4]

The Union garrison at Fort Pillow consisted of about 600 men, divided almost evenly between black and white troops. The black soldiers belonged to the 6th U.S. Regiment Colored Heavy Artillery and a section of the 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery (previously known as the Memphis Battery Light Artillery (African Descent)), under the overall command of Major Lionel F. Booth. Many were former slaves and understood the personal consequences of a loss to the Confederates—at best an immediate return to slavery rather than being treated as a prisoner of war. Some Confederates had threatened to kill any Union black troops they encountered. The white soldiers were predominantly new recruits from the 13th Tennessee Cavalry, a Federal regiment from western Tennessee, commanded by Maj. William F. Bradford. (Major Bradford's regiment was known as Bradford's Tennessee Cavalry Battalion and was organized as the 13th West Tennessee Cavalry (US). Officially it was the 14th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment(US).)

Battle

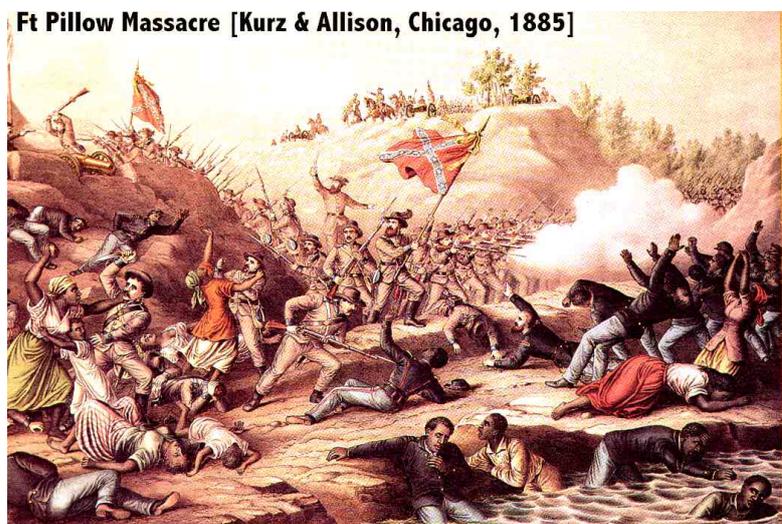
Forrest arrived at Fort Pillow at 10:00 on April 12. By this time, Chalmers had already surrounded the fort. A stray bullet struck Forrest's horse, felling the general and bruising him. (This would be the first of three horses he lost that day.^[5]) He deployed sharpshooters around the higher ground that overlooked the fort, bringing many of the occupants into their direct line of fire. Major Booth was killed by a sharpshooter's bullet to the chest and Bradford assumed command. By 11:00, the Confederates had captured two rows of barracks about 150 yd (140 m) from the southern end of the fort. The Union soldiers had failed to destroy these buildings before the Confederates occupied them and subjected the garrison to a murderous fire.

Rifle and artillery fire continued until 15:30, when Forrest sent a note demanding surrender: "I now demand unconditional surrender of your forces, at the same time assuring you that you will be treated as prisoners of war. ... I have received a new supply of ammunition and can take your works by assault, and if compelled to do so you must take the consequences." Bradford replied, concealing his identity as he did not wish the Confederates to realize that Booth had been killed, requesting an hour for consideration. Forrest, who believed that reinforcing troops would soon arrive by river, replied that he would only allow 20 minutes, and that "If at the expiration of that time the fort is not surrendered, I shall assault it." Having been given the opportunity to surrender Bradford's final reply was: "I will not surrender." Forrest ordered his bugler to sound the charge.

The Confederate assault was furious. While the sharpshooters maintained their fire into the fort, a first wave entered the ditch and stood while the second wave used their backs as stepping stones. These men then reached down and helped the first wave scramble up a ledge on the embankment. All of this proceeded flawlessly and with very little firing, except from the sharpshooters and around the flanks. Their fire against the *New Era* caused the sailors to button up their gun ports and hold their fire. As the sharpshooters were signaled to hold their fire, the men on the ledge went up and over the embankment, firing now for the first time into the massed defenders, who fought briefly, but then broke and ran to the landing at the foot of the bluff, where they had been told that the Union gunboat would cover their withdrawal by firing grapeshot and canister rounds. The gunboat did not fire a single shot because its gun ports were sealed, and there probably would have been more Union casualties than Confederate if they had fired. The fleeing soldiers were subjected to fire both from the rear and from the flank, from the soldiers who had been firing at the gunboat. Many were shot down. Others reached the river only to drown, or be picked off in the water by marksmen on the bluff.

Massacre

Conflicting reports of what happened next, from 16:00 to dusk, led to controversy. Union and Confederate sources claimed that even though the Union troops surrendered, Forrest's men massacred them in cold blood. Surviving members of the garrison said that most of their men surrendered and threw down their arms, only to be shot or bayoneted by the attackers, who repeatedly shouted, "No quarter! No quarter!"^[6] The Joint Committee On the Conduct of the War immediately investigated the incident and



1885 color poster of the "Fort Pillow Massacre".

concluded that the Confederates shot most of the garrison after it had surrendered. A 2002 study by Albert Castel concluded that the Union forces were indiscriminately massacred after Fort Pillow "had ceased resisting or was incapable of resistance."^[7] Historian Andrew Ward in 2005 reached the conclusion that an atrocity in the modern sense occurred at Fort Pillow, including the murders of fleeing black civilians, but that the event was not premeditated nor officially sanctioned by Confederate commanders.^[8]

Recent histories agree that a massacre occurred: Richard Fuchs, author of *An Unerring Fire*, concludes, "The affair at Fort Pillow was simply an orgy of death, a mass lynching to satisfy the basest of conduct – intentional murder – for the vilest of reasons – racism and personal enmity."^[9] Ward states, "Whether the massacre was premeditated or spontaneous does not address the more fundamental question of whether a massacre took place... it certainly did, in every dictionary sense of the word."^[10] John Cimprich states, "The new paradigm in social attitudes and the fuller use of available evidence has favored a massacre interpretation... Debate over the memory of this incident formed a part of sectional and racial conflicts for many years after the war, but the reinterpretation of the event during the last thirty years offers some hope that society can move beyond past intolerance."^[11]

Lieutenant Daniel Van Horn of the 6th U. S. Heavy Artillery (Colored) stated in his official report "There never was a surrender of the fort, both officers and men declaring they never would surrender or ask for quarter."^[12] Another officer of the unit, however, and the only surviving officers of the 13th Tennessee Cavalry attested to the characterization that unarmed soldiers were killed in the act of surrendering. However, a Confederate sergeant, in a letter written home shortly after the battle said that "the poor, deluded negroes would run up to our men, fall upon their knees, and with uplifted hand scream for mercy, but were ordered to their feet and then shot down."^[13] This account is consistent with the relatively high comparative casualties sustained by race of the defenders. (See next section.)

Forrest's men insisted that the Federals, although fleeing, kept their weapons and frequently turned to shoot, forcing the Confederates to keep firing in self defense.^[6] Their claim is consistent with the discovery of numerous Federal rifles on the bluffs near the river (see Jordan, who inconclusively asked in 1947, "Was there a Massacre. . .?" *THQ*). The Union flag was still flying over the fort, which indicated that the force had not formally surrendered. A contemporary newspaper account from Jackson, Tennessee, states that "General Forrest begged them to surrender," but "not the first sign of surrender was ever given." Similar accounts were reported in both Southern and Northern newspapers at the time.^[14]

Historian Allan Nevins wrote that although the interpretation of the facts had "provoked some disputation":

Northerners, however, saw only one side. They read headlines announcing "Attack on Fort Pillow – Indiscriminate Slaughter of the Prisoners – Shocking Scenes of Savagery; dispatches from Sherman's army declaring "there is a general gritting of teeth here"; reports from the *Missouri Democrat* detailing the "fiendishness" of rebel behavior; and editorials like that in the *Chicago Tribune* condemning the "murder" and "butchery".^[15]

The *New York Times* reported on April 24:

The blacks and their officers were shot down, bayoneted and put to the sword in cold blood... . Out of four hundred negro soldiers only about twenty survive! At least three hundred of them were destroyed after the surrender! This is the statement of the rebel General Chalmers himself to our informant.^[16]

Later, in his Memoirs, Ulysses S. Grant, who was not present at the battle, wrote of the battle:

Forrest, however, fell back rapidly, and attacked the troops at Fort Pillow, a station for the protection of the navigation of the Mississippi River. The garrison consisted of a regiment of colored troops, infantry, and a detachment of Tennessee cavalry. These troops fought bravely, but were overpowered. I will leave Forrest in his dispatches to tell what he did with them.

"The river was dyed," he [Forrest] says, "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." Subsequently, Forrest made a report in which he left out the part which shocks humanity to read.^[17]

According to the Official Records, casualties were not as high as Forrest had estimated.

Aftermath

Confederate casualties were comparatively low (14 killed and 86 wounded) and Union casualties were high. Of the 585–605 men present, the Union losses were reported as 277–297 dead. Some scholars, however, believe these reports were exaggerated (Jordan). It is obvious that the race of the soldiers affected casualties. Of the black members of the garrison, only 58 (around 20%) were marched away as prisoners; 168 (almost 60%) white soldiers were taken prisoner. Not all of the prisoners who were shot were black – Major Bradford was apparently among those shot after he surrendered.^[18] Confederate anger at the thought of blacks fighting them, and their initial reluctance to surrender (because many of the black troops believed they would only be killed if they surrendered in Federal uniform) resulted in a tragedy.

The Confederates evacuated Fort Pillow that evening, so they gained little except a temporary disruption of Union operations. The "Fort Pillow Massacre" was thereafter used as a Union rallying cry and cemented resolve to see the war through to its conclusion.

On April 17, 1864, in the aftermath of Fort Pillow, Grant ordered General Benjamin F. Butler, who was negotiating prisoner exchanges with the Confederacy, to demand that in the exchange and treatment of prisoners, black prisoners had to be treated identically to whites. A failure to do so would "be regarded as a refusal on their part to agree to the further exchange of prisoners, and [would] be so treated by us."^[19] This demand was refused and Confederate Secretary of War Seddon in June 1864 stated the confederate position:

I doubt, however, whether the exchange of negroes at all for our soldiers would be tolerated. As to the white officers serving with negro troops, we ought never to be inconvenienced with such prisoners.^[20]

Fort Pillow, now preserved as the Fort Pillow State Park, was named a U.S. National Historic Landmark in 1974.^[21]

In popular culture

In 1997, an American motion picture, titled *Last Stand at Saber River* (based on the Elmore Leonard novel), features a character (played by Tom Selleck) who was a Confederate soldier at the Fort Pillow Massacre. The character returns to his home in the U.S. Southwest and describes the incident as murder.

In 1999, Las Vegas documentary film-maker, Stan Armstrong produced *The Forgotten Battle of Fort Pillow*. The documentary explores the details of the battle and gives an in-depth look at General Forrest who planned and led the attack.

An alternate version of the Fort Pillow massacre is described in the 2004 mockumentary *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*. The only difference is that the massacre took place somewhere in the north, following the Confederacy winning the Civil War.

In 2006, in contrast to his many alternative history novels, Harry Turtledove published the historical novel *Fort Pillow* about the battle and the massacre. In his alternate history novel, *The Guns of the South*, the events of Fort Pillow are referred to as a massacre in the novel's imagined timeline.

African American novelist Frank Yerby provided a brief narration of the massacre in his 1946 novel, *The Foxes of Harrow* (Chapter XXXVI).

Notes

- [1] U.S. Congress JCCW, p. 3.
- [2] Foote, p. 108.
- [3] NPS website
- [4] Eicher, p. 655.
- [5] Foote, p. 109.
- [6] Bailey, p. 25.
- [7] Castel, pp. 37–50.
- [8] Ward, Andrew (2005). *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War*. Penguin Books. pp. 3. ISBN 978-1-4406-4929-5.
- [9] Richard Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire: The Massacre At Fort Pillow* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2002), 14.
- [10] Ward (2005) , 227.
- [11] John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow: A Civil War Massacre and Public Memory*(Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 123–124.
- [12] "Lieut. Daniel Van Horn's Official Report For The Battle Of Fort Pillow" (<http://www.civilwarhome.com/vanhornftpillowor.htm>). *The War Of The Rebellion: A Compilation Of The Official Records Of The Union And Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.) **Volume Xxxii/1 S# 57**. 1880. Archived (<http://web.archive.org/web/20101215022101/http://civilwarhome.com/vanhornftpillowor.htm>) from the original on December 15 2010. . Retrieved January 4, 2011.
- [13] Foote pp. 111–112
- [14] Cimprich and Mainfort, pp. 293–306.
- [15] Nevins p. 60
- [16] Fuchs p. 84.
- [17] Grant, p 391. Fisher pp. 145–146. Fisher writes, "Grant refers here to two reports from Forrest to his superior officer, Leonidas Polk: (1) a hasty, exuberant report dated April 15, 1864, dashed off three days after the attack on Fort Pillow, describing the success of Forrest's recent operations in West Tennessee, and (2) a well-defined, detailed, and comprehensive report of the action at Fort Pillow *only* dated April 26."
- [18] Eicher, p. 657; U.S. Congress JCCW, p. 103.
- [19] Fuchs pp. 143–144
- [20] Fuchs p. 144
- [21] "List of National Historic Landmarks by State" (<http://www.nps.gov/history/nhl/designations/Lists/LIST10.pdf>) (PDF). U.S. Department of the Interior. June 2010. p. 94. .

References

- Bailey, Ronald H., and the Editors of Time-Life Books. *Battles for Atlanta: Sherman Moves East*. Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1985. ISBN 0-8094-4773-8.
- Castel, Albert. "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence." *Civil War History* 4 (March 1958).
- Cimprich, John, and Robert C. Mainfort, Jr., eds. "Fort Pillow Revisited: New Evidence About An Old Controversy." *Civil War History* 4 (Winter, 1982).
- Clark, Achilles V. "A Letter of Account." Edited by Dan E. Pomeroy. *Civil War Times Illustrated* 24(4) (June 1985).
- Eicher, David J. *The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. ISBN 0-684-84944-5.
- Fisher, John E. *They Rode With Forrest and Wheeler: A Chronicle of Five Tennessee Brothers' Service in the Confederate Western Cavalry*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1995. ISBN 0-7864-0083-8.
- Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War: A Narrative*. Vol. 3, *Red River to Appomattox*. New York: Random House, 1974. ISBN 0-394-74913-8.
- Fuchs, Richard L. *An Unerring Fire: The Massacre at Fort Pillow*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2002. ISBN 978-0-8117-1824-0.
- Grant, Ulysses S. *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/4367>). 2 vols. Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885–86. ISBN 0-914427-67-9.
- Jordan, John L. "Was There a Massacre at Ft. Pillow?" *Tennessee History Quarterly* VI (June 1947): 99–133.
- Nevins, Allan. *The War for the Union*. Vol. 4, *The Organized War to Victory 1864 – 1865*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971. ISBN 1-56852-299-1.

- U.S. Congress Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, "Fort Pillow Massacre." (<http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa;idno=AAW7861.0001.001>) *House Report No. 65*, 38th Congress, 1st Session.
- Ward, Andrew. *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War*. New York: Viking Adult, 2005. ISBN 0-670-03440-1.
- National Park Service battle description (<http://www2.cr.nps.gov/abpp/battles/tn030.htm>)
- CWSAC report update (<http://www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/CWSII/TennesseeBattlefieldProfiles/FortPillowtoFranklinII.pdf>)

Further reading

- Burkhardt, George S. "No Quarter." *North & South*, vol. 10, no. 1.
- Frist, William Harrison, Jr. *A Telling Battle: The Fort Pillow Massacre During the American Civil War*, Senior Thesis No. 20318, Princeton University, 2006.
- Wills, Brian Steel. *The Confederacy's Greatest Cavalryman: Nathan Bedford Forrest*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992. ISBN 0-7006-0885-0.

External links

- US and CSA official reports concerning Fort Pillow (<http://www.civilwarhome.com/ftpillow.htm>)
 - Bradford's 14th Tennessee Cavalry (<http://www.tngenweb.org/civilwar/usacav/usa14cav.html>)
 - Mr. Lincoln and Freedom: Fort Pillow (<http://www.mrlincolnanefreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=55&subjectID=3>)
 - Illustration of the Massacre at Fort Pillow (<http://www.civilwarliterature.com/ListOfIllustrations/TheMassacreAtFortPillow.htm>)
 - Roster 100 names of Confederate Casualties of Fort Pillow (<http://www.custermen.com/DixieBoys/FtPillowCSA.htm>)
 - Roster 590 names of Union Prisoners & Casualties of Fort Pillow (<http://www.custermen.com/DixieBoys/FtPillowUSA.htm>)
 - The Forgotten Battle of Fort Pillow on IMDB (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0477170>)
-

Article Sources and Contributors

Battle of Fort Pillow *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?oldid=520784066> *Contributors:* Acwbuff276, Alai, Alanscottwalker, Alexwww, Anaraug, Anbu121, AndrWSC, AnnaFrance, Areaseven, ArmadilloProcess, Az81964444, Bedford, Bowikidick, Brian0918, Buddy1879, Caerwine, Carlossuarez46, Cuchullain, D6, DaltonCastle, Danny, DareofTruth, Doncram, Donner60, DoxTxob, ESKog, Epbr123, Fauxcouture, Foofighter20x, Frietjes, FrisoHoltkamp, GearDown, Gilliam, Greenfyre, Greywood1862, Hanbrook, HanzoHattori, Hersfold, Hlj, Howcheng, Hushpuckena, Ixfd64, JMesserly, JW1805, Jdperkins, Johnfrancisc, Jrcrin001, Jrnold, Kaldari, Kateshortforbob, Kathode, Kirill Lokshin, Klsdad2012, Kumioko (renamed), Lithistman, Lokuinva, MK2, Magus732, Mattm681, Minimac's Clone, North Shoreman, Norum, Ohconfucius, Orphan Wiki, Parkwells, Phantomsteve, Pinethicket, Prathfig, Producerjosef, RL, Reach Out to the Truth, Ready, Reedmalloy, Rich Farmbrough, Rjensen, Ryuhaku, Saebjorn, Scotia Scotia, Scott Mingus, Scromett, Shaliya waya, Sherurcij, Shsilver, Superbly Christa, Theonemacduff, Tim!, Tlincoln, Tommy2010, Varlaam, Vdavisson, ViriiK, Wehwalt, Welsh, Weum2004, Wifione, Wild Wolf, Windsagio, Wkharrisjr, Wwoods, Zanoni, Zzuuzz, 205 anonymous edits

Image Sources, Licenses and Contributors

File:FTPILLO4.JPG *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:FTPILLO4.JPG> *License:* Public Domain *Contributors:* Rjensen

License

Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported
[//creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)