

Fort Pillow Tennessee - April 12, 1864

Detachments of the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, 13th Tenn. Cavalry and 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery

As an incident of Forrest's raid into Tennessee his force marched on the morning of the 12th to attack the garrison at Fort Pillow. The pickets were driven in with little trouble, but the Confederates found the Union troops ready in the rifle-pits. After repulsing three cavalry attacks of the enemy, the Federals withdrew into the fort. A demand for surrender was made, but without success. Another demand for surrender was made and refused and about 4 p.m. the fort was stormed and carried by the Confederates. No quarter was given and the colored troops were indiscriminately slaughtered. Of the original garrison of 500 over 350 were killed, the majority after the fort had been carried. The enemy's losses were not reported.

SOURCE: THE UNION ARMY: A History of Military Affairs in the Loyal States 1861-65 - Records of the Regiments in the Union Army - Cyclopedia of Battles - Memoirs of Commanders and Soldiers. Volume VI. Madison, Wisconsin: Federal Publishing Company, 1908.

THE MASSACRE AT FORT PILLOW

Assault and Capture of the Fort. - "No Quarter." - Rebel Atrocities. - Gens. Forrest and Chalmers. - Firing upon Flags of Truce. - Murder of Men, Women, and Children. - Night after the Assault. - Buried Alive. - Morning after the Massacre

SOURCE: William Wells Brown. THE NEGRO IN THE AMERICAN REBELLION - His Heroism and His Fidelity. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1867.

Nothing in the history of the Rebellion has equaled in inhumanity and atrocity the horrid butchery at Fort Pillow, on the 13th of April, 1864. In no other school than slavery could human beings have been trained to such readiness for cruelties like these. Accustomed to brutality and bestiality all their lives, it was easy for them to perpetrate the atrocities which will startle the civilized foreign world, as they have awakened the indignation of our own people.

We have gleaned the facts of the fight from authentic sources, and they may be relied upon as truthful. The rebels, under Forrest, appeared, and drove in the pickets about sunrise on Tuesday morning. The garrison of the fort consisted of about two hundred of the Thirteen Tennessee Volunteers, and four hundred Negro artillery, all under command of Major Booth: the gun-boat "No. 7" was also in the river. The rebels first attacked the outer forts, and, in several attempts to charge, were repulsed. They were constantly re-enforced, and extended their lines to the river on both sides of the fort. The garrison in the two outer forts was at length overpowered by superior numbers, and about noon evacuated them, and retired to the fort on the river. Here the fight was maintained with great obstinacy, and continued till

about four, p.m. The approach to the fort from the rear is over a gentle declivity, cleared, and fully exposed to a raking fire from two sides of the fort. About thirty yards from the fort is a deep ravine, running all along the front, and so steep at the bottom as to be hidden from the fort, and not commanded by its guns. The rebels charged with great boldness down the declivity, and faced, without blanching, a murderous fire from the guns and small arms of the fort, and crowded into the ravine; where they were sheltered from fire by the steep bank, which had been thus left by some unaccountable neglect or ignorance. Here the rebels organized for a final charge upon the fort, after sending a flag of truce with a demand for surrender, which was refused. The approach from the ravine was up through a deep, narrow gully, and the steep embankments of the fort. The last charge was made about four P.M., by the whole rebel force, and was successful after a most desperate and gallant defense. The rebel army was estimated at from two thousand to four thousand, and succeeded by mere force of numbers. The gunboat had not been idle, but, guided by signals from the fort, poured upon the rebels a constant stream of shot and shell. She fired two hundred and sixty shells, and, as testified to by those who could see, with marvelous precision and with fatal. Major Booth, who was killed near the close of the fight, conducted the defense with great coolness, skill, and gallantry. His last signal to the boat was, "We are hard pressed and shall be overpowered." He refused to surrender, however, and fought to the last. By the uniform and voluntary testimony of the rebel officers, as well as the survivors of the fight, the Negro-artillery regiments fought with the bravery and cool-ness of veterans, and served the guns with skill and precision. They did not falter nor flinch, until, at the last charge, when it was evident they would be overpowered, they broke, and fled toward the river; and here commenced the most barbarous and cruel outrages that ever the fiendishness of rebels has perpetrated during the war. After the rebels were in undisputed possession of the fort, and the survivors had surrendered, they commenced the indiscriminate butchery of all the Federal soldiery. The colored soldiers threw down their guns, and raised their arms, in token of surrender; but not the least attention was paid to it. They continued to shoot down all they found. A number of them, finding no quarter was given, ran over the bluff to the river, and tried to conceal themselves under the bank and in the bushes, where they were pursued by the rebel savages, whom they implored to spare their lives. Their appeals were made in vain; and they were all shot down in cold blood, and, in full sight of the gunboat, chased and shot down like dogs. In passing up the bank of the river, fifty dead might be counted, strewed along. One had crawled into a hollow log, and was killed in it; another had got over the bank into the river, and had got on a board that run out into the water. He lay on it on his face, with his feet in the water. He lay there, when exposed, stark and stiff. Several had tried to hide in crevices made by the falling bank, and could not be seen without difficulty; but they were singled out, and killed. From the best information to be had the white soldiers were, to a very considerable extent, treated in the same way. D. W. Harrison, one of the Thirteenth Tennessee on board, says, that, after the surrender, he was below the bluff, and one of the rebels presented a pistol to shoot him. He told him he had surrendered, and requested him not to fire. He spared him, and directed him to go up the bluff to the fort. Harrison asked him to go before him, or he would be shot by others; but he told him to go along. He started, and had not proceeded far before he met a rebel, who presented his pistol. Harrison begged him not to fire ; but, paying no attention to his request, he fired, and shot him through the shoulder; and another shot him in the leg. He fell; and, while he lay unable to move, another came along, and was about to fire again, when Harrison told him he was badly wounded twice, and implored him not to fire. He asked Harrison if he had any money. He said he had a little money, and a watch. The rebel took from him his watch and ninety dollars in money, and left him. Harrison is, probably, fatally wounded. Several such cases have been related to me; and I think to a great extent, the whites and Negroes were indiscriminately murdered. The rebel Tennesseans have about the same bitterness against Tennesseans in the Federal army, as against the Negroes. It was told by a rebel officer that Gen. Forrest shot one of his men, and cut another with his sabre, who were shooting down prisoners. It may be so; but he is responsible for the conduct of his

men. Gen. Chalmers stated publicly, while on the Platte Valley, that, though he did not encourage or countenance his men in shooting down Negro captives, yet it was right and justifiable.

The Negro corporal, Jacob Wilson, who was picked up below Fort Pillow, had a narrow escape. He was down on the river-bank, and, seeing that no quarter was shown, stepped into the water so that he lay partly under it. A rebel coming along asked him what was the matter: he said he was badly wounded; and the rebel, after taking from his pocket all the money he had, left him. It happened to be near by a flat-boat tied to the bank, and about three o'clock in the morning. When all was quiet, Wilson crawled into it, and got three more wounded comrades also into it, and cut loose. The boat floated out into the channel, and was found ashore some miles below. The wounded Negro soldiers aboard feigned themselves dead until Union soldiers came along.

The atrocities committed almost exceed belief; and, but for the fact that so many confirm the stories, we could not credit them. One man, already badly wounded, asked of a scoundrel who was firing at him, to spare his life. "No: damn you!" was the reply. "You fight with niggers!" and forthwith discharged two more balls into him. One Negro was made to assist in digging a pit to bury the dead in, and was himself cast in among others, and buried. Five are known to have been buried alive: of these, two dug themselves out, and are now alive, and in the hospital. Daniel Tyler, of Company B, was shot three times, and struck on the head, knocking out his eye. After this, he was buried; but, not liking his quarters, dug out. He laughs over his adventures, and says he is one of the best "dug-outs" in the world. Dr. Fitch says he saw twenty white soldiers paraded in line on the bank of the river; and, when in line, the rebels fired upon and killed all but one, who ran to the river, and hid under a log, and in that condition was fired at a number of times, and wounded. He says that Major Bradford also ran down to the river, and, after he told them that he had surrendered, more than fifty shots were fired at him. He then jumped into the river, and swam out a little ways, and whole volleys were fired at him there without hitting him. He returned to the shore, and meeting, as the doctor supposes, some officer, was protected; but he heard frequent threats from the rebels that they would kill him.

"Yesterday afternoon," says "The Cairo News, of April 16 , "we visited the United States Hospital at Mound City, and had an interview with the wounded men from Fort Pillow.

"The Fort-Pillow wounded are doing much better than could be expected from the terrible nature of their wounds. But one, William Jones, had died, though Adjutant Learing and Lieut. John H. Porter cannot possibly long survive. Of the whole number, - fifty-two, - all except two were cut or shot after they had surrendered! They all tell the same story of the rebel barbarities; and listening to a recital of the terrible scenes at the fort makes one's blood run cold. They say they were able to keep the rebels at bay for several hours, notwithstanding the immense disparity of numbers and but for their treachery in creeping up under the walls of the fort while a truce pending, would have held out until "The Olive Branch" arrived with troops, with whose assistance they would have defeated Chalmers.

"So well were our men protected behind their works, that our loss was very trifling before the rebels scaled the walls, and obtained possession. As soon as they saw the Rebels inside the walls the Unionists ceased firing, knowing that further resistance was useless; but the Rebels continued firing, crying out, 'Shoot them, shoot them! Show them no quarter!'

"The Unionists, with one or two exceptions, had thrown down their arms in token of surrender, and therefore could offer no resistance. In vain they held up their hands, and begged their captors to spare their lives. But they were appealing to fiends; and the butchery continued until, out of near six hundred

men who composed the garrison, but two hundred and thirty remained alive: and of this number, sixty-two were wounded, and nine died in a few hours after.

" Capt. Bradford, of the First Alabama Cavalry, was an especial object of rebel hatred, and his death was fully determined upon before the assault was made. After he had surrendered, he was basely shot; but, having his revolver still at his side, he emptied it among a crowd of rebels, bringing three of the scoundrels to the ground. The massacre was acquiesced in by most of the rebel officers, Chalmers himself expressly declaring that 'home-made Yankees and Negroes should receive no quarter.'" The following is an extract from the Report of the Committee on the Conduct of the War on the Fort-Pillow Massacre : -

"It will appear from the testimony that was taken, that the atrocities committed at Fort Pillow were not the results of passion elicited by the heat of conflict, but were the results of a policy deliberately decided upon, and hesitatingly announced. Even if the uncertainty of those officers and men belonging to colored regiments, who have heretofore been taken prisoners by the rebels, has failed to convince the authorities of our Government of this fact, the testimony herewith submitted must convince even the most skeptical, that it is the intention of the rebel authorities not to recognize the officers and men of our colored regiments as entitled to the treatment accorded by all civilized nations to prisoners of war.

"The declarations of Forrest and his officers, both before and after the capture of Fort Pillow, as testified to by such of our men as have escaped after being taken by him; the threats contained in the various demands for surrender made at Paducah, Columbus, and other places; the renewal of the massacre the morning after the capture of Fort Pillow; the statements made by the rebel officers to the officers of our gunboats who received the few survivors at Fort Pillow, -- all this proves most conclusively the policy they have determined to adopt.

"It was at Fort Pillow that the brutality and cruelty of the rebels were most fearfully exhibited. The garrison there, according to the last returns received at headquarters, amounted to ten officers and five hundred and thirty-eight enlisted men, of whom two hundred and sixty-two were colored troops, comprising one, battalion of the Sixteenth United-States Heavy Artillery, formerly the First Alabama Artillery of colored troops, under the command of Major L. F. Booth; one section of the Second Light Artillery (colored); and a battalion of the Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry (white), commanded by Major A. P. Bradford. Major Booth was the ranking officer, and was in command of the fort.

"Immediately after the second flag of truce retired, the rebels made a rush from the positions they had so treacherously gained, and obtained possession of the fort, raising the cry of 'No quarter.' But little opportunity was allowed for resistance. Our troops, white and black, threw down their arms, and sought to escape by running down the steep bluff near the fort, and secreting themselves behind trees and logs in the brush, and under the brush ; some even jumping into the river, leaving only their heads above the water. Then followed a scene of cruelty and murder without parallel in civilized warfare, which needed but the tomahawk and scalping-knife to exceed the worst atrocities ever committed by savages.

"The rebels commenced an indiscriminate slaughter, sparing neither age nor sex, white nor black, soldier nor civilian. The officers and men seemed to vie with each other in the devilish work. Men, women, and children wherever found, were deliberately shot down, beaten, and hacked with sabres. Some of the children not more than ten years old were forced to stand up by their murderers; while being shot. The sick and wounded were butchered without mercy; the rebels even entering the hospital-buildings, and dragging them out to be shot, or killing them as they lay there unable to offer the least resistance. All over the hillside the work of murder was going on. Numbers of our men were collected

together in lines or groups, and deliberately shot. Some were shot while in the river; while others on the bank were shot and their bodies kicked into the water, many of them still living, but unable to make exertions to save themselves from drowning.

"Some of the rebels stood upon the top of the hill, or a short distance from its side, and called to our soldiers to come up to them and, as they approached, shot them down in cold, blood; and, if their guns or pistols missed fire, forced them to stand there until they were again prepared to fire. All around were heard cries of 'No quarter, no quarter!' 'Kill the d--d niggers, shoot them down! All who asked for mercy were answered by the most cruel taunts and sneers. Some were spared for a time, only to be murdered under circumstances of greater cruelty.

"No cruelty which the most fiendish malignity could devise was omitted by these murderers. One white soldier who was wounded in the leg so as to be unable to walk were made to stand up while his tormentors shot him. Others who were wounded, and unable to stand up, were held up and again shot. One Negro who had been ordered by a rebel officer to hold his horse was killed by him when he remonstrated; another, a mere child, whom an officer had taken up behind him on his horse, was seen by Gen. Chalmers, who at once ordered him to put him down and shoot him, which was done.

"The huts and tents in which many of the wounded sought shelter were set on fire, both on that night and the next morning, while the wounded were still in them; those only escaping who were able to get themselves out, or who could prevail on others less injured to help them out: and some of these thus seeking to escape the flames were met by these ruffians, and brutally shot down, or had their brains beaten out. One man was deliberately fastened down to the floor of a tent, face upwards, by means of nails driven through his clothing and into the boards under him, so that he could not possibly escape; and then the tent was set on fire. Another was nailed to the sides of a building outside of the fort, and then the building was set on fire and burned. The charred remains of five or six bodies were afterwards found, all but one so much disfigured and consumed by the flames, that they could not be identified; and the identification of that one is not absolutely certain, although there can hardly be a doubt that it was the body of Lieut. Albertson, Quartermaster of the Thirteenth Virginia Cavalry, and a native of Tennessee. Several witnesses who saw the remains, and who were personally acquainted with him while living here, testified it to be their firm belief that it was his body that was thus treated.

"These deeds of murder and cruelty closed when night came on, only to be renewed the next morning, when the demons carefully sought among the dead lying about in all directions for any other wounded yet alive; and those they found were deliberately shot. Scores of the dead and wounded were found there the day after the massacre by the men from some of our gunboats, who were permitted to go on shore, and collect the wounded, and bury the dead.

"The rebels themselves had made a pretense of burying a great many of their victims; but they had merely thrown them, without the least regard to care or decency, in the trenches and ditches about the fort, or little hollows and ravines on the hillside, covering them but partially with earth. Portions of heads and faces were found protruding through the earth in every direction; and even when your Committee visited the spot, two weeks afterwards, although parties of men had been sent on shore from time to time to bury the bodies unburied, and re-bury the others, and were even then engaged in the same work, we found the evidences of the murder and cruelty still most painfully apparent.

"We saw bodies still unburied, at some distance from the fort, of some sick men who had been met fleeing from the hospital, and beaten down and brutally murdered, and their bodies left where they had fallen. We could still see the faces and hands and feet of men, white and black, protruding out of the ground, whose graves had not been reached by those engaged in re-interring the victims of the massacre; and, although a great deal of rain had fallen within the preceding two weeks, the ground,

more especially on the side and at the foot of the bluff where most of the murders had been committed, was still discolored by the blood of our brave but unfortunate soldiers; and the logs and trees showed but too plainly the evidence of the atrocities perpetrated.

"Many other instances of equally atrocious cruelty might be mentioned; but your Committee feel compelled to refrain from giving here more of the heart-sickening details, and refer to the statements contained in the voluminous testimony herewith submitted. These statements were obtained by them from eye-witnesses and sufferers. Many of them as they were examined by your Committee were lying upon beds of pain and suffering; some so feeble that their lips could with difficulty frame the words by which they endeavored to convey some idea of the cruelties which had been inflicted on them, and which they had seen inflicted on others."

When the murderers returned, the day after the capture, to renew their fiendish work upon the wounded and dying, they found a young and beautiful mulatto woman searching among the dead for the body of her husband. She was the daughter of a wealthy and influential rebel residing at Columbus. With her husband, this woman was living near the fort when our forces occupied it, and joined the Union men to assist in holding the place. Going from body to body with all the earnestness with which love could inspire an affectionate heart, she at last found the object of her search. He was not dead; but both legs were broken. The wife had succeeded in getting him out from among the piles of dead, and was bathing his face, and giving him water to drink from a pool near by, which had been replenished by the rain that fell a few hours before. At this moment she was seen by the murderous band; and the cry was at once raised, "Kill the wench, kill her!" The next moment the sharp crack of a musket was heard, and the angel of mercy fell a corpse on the body of her wounded husband, who was soon after knocked in the head by the butt-end of the same weapon. Though these revolting murders were done under the immediate eye of Gen. Chalmers, the whole was planned and carried out by Gen. Forrest whose inhumanity has never been surpassed in the history of civilized or even barbarous warfare.

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