Initiative: The Spirit of the Offense

MAJOR CURTIS L. COOK

Commanders in the U.S. Army, and in other modern armies as well, rely on several principles of engagement for success in battle. Of the nine principles the U.S. Army uses — mass, surprise, objective, economy of force, maneuver, security, offensive, simplicity, and unit of command — none are more important to the infantry than the offensive and maneuver.

The defensive is also essential, of course, especially in western Europe where the Warsaw Pact forces across the border have a clear superiority in both firepower and manpower. But our leaders should have instilled into them the idea that defensive operations are largely temporary measures whose aim is to blunt an enemy attack — to trade space for time, or to channel an enemy's forces until we can marshal our own to seize the initiative at decisive points and defeat him. The truth of the matter is that rarely, if ever, has a battle been won on the defensive — it is the offensive that is decisive.

To seize that initiative and go over to the offensive, combat leaders must be able to act more quickly than the enemy. Their subordinates, too, must act independently — within the context of the overall plan — to exploit local successes boldly and take advantage of unforeseen battlefield opportunities.

Imaginative commanders have accomplished this in every age and practically every war. As recently as 1973 in the Mideast, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) superbly demonstrated that an offensive spirit and sound tactics could overcome great odds. And in the U.S., improvisation, initiative, and aggressiveness have historically distinguished our soldiers from those of other countries.

Of the many remarkable commanders to use this concept in this country, none (save perhaps General Robert E. Lee in Virginia during the Civil War) exemplified it more than another Confederate general, Nathan Bedford Forrest, in Tennessee during the same war.

SUCCESSFUL

General Forrest had been so successful in his raids and attacks that in 1864 Union General William T. Sherman authorized the formation of a task force whose sole mission was to find and destroy him. This force, brought together in Memphis under the command of Major General Samuel D. Sturgis, numbered nearly 8,500 men. It had 22 artillery pieces of all sizes, 250 wagons loaded with 20 days' rations, and the latest in individual firepower — repeating rifles.

In spite of Forrest's brilliant record of success against numerically superior forces, Sturgis discounted him as a "plunderer who would not fight anything near an equal force." Sturgis set out from Memphis in early June on his "seek and destroy" sweep, maintaining what he called a compact striking force.

In addition to his advantage in numbers and in firepower, Sturgis had one other advantage — his 5,000-man infantry force, commanded by General William L. McMillen, included one brigade of highly motivated black soldiers who had sworn vengeance on Forrest and his men for the "Fort Pillow Massacre." (This was an earlier engagement with Forrest in which many of the black defenders had been killed while trying to surrender.)

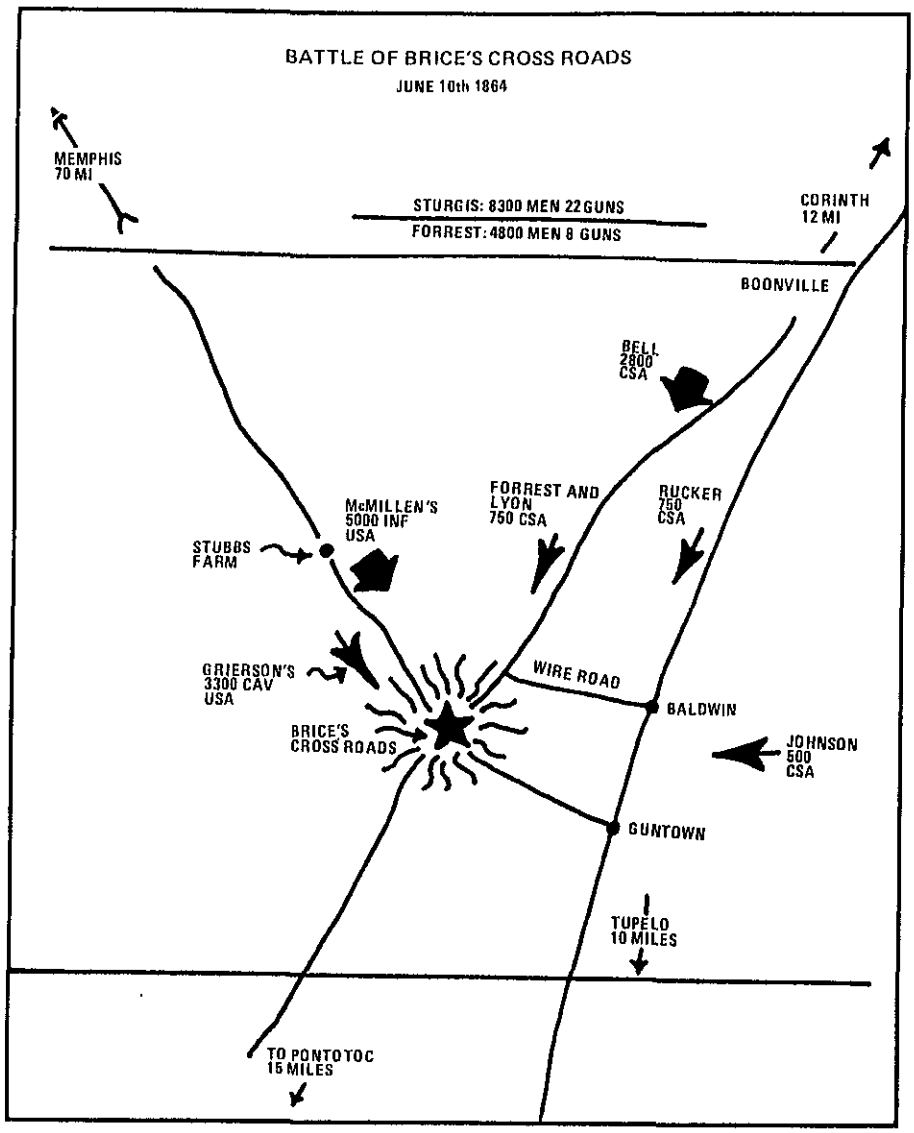
Sturgis's 3,300-man cavalry force under General Ben Grierson had been experimentally mounted on mules as that animal was believed to be possessed of more deliberate and "intellectual" traits than the "common horse."

Unlike Forrest — who seemed to consider intuitively his mission, the enemy, the terrain, and the weather, as well as the available troops and time (factors we now call METT-T) — Sturgis apparently made no provision for these factors.

By 9 July, he was some 70 miles from Memphis. The skies had cleared after several days of heavy rain, and the Mississippi sun beat down unmercifully on his soldiers as they marched along the muddy roads. He camped that night at a place called Stubb's Farm, about 10 miles northwest of Brice's Crossroad (see map).

Forrest had used his cavalry units and informers as well to keep track of Sturgis's movements. Thus, when Sturgis went into camp that evening, Forrest had already reconnoitered the area and decided to make a stand along the timber-laced low plateau of that same crossroads. He relied heavily on the superior mobility of his forces, which he planned to use as fire and maneuver elements. (He didn't call them that, but he almost always planned to use a reserve so as to be able, in his words, to "hit the enemy on the ee-end.")

Realizing what the weather and ter-



rain conditions had been for several days along the enemy's avenue of approach, Forrest planned to surprise Sturgis's cavalry, which he guessed would be leading the main infantry force by about five miles. If this cavalry could be locked into a defensive position for a reasonable time by a solid base of fire, Forrest reasoned, then it could be out-maneuvered and defeated. He knew that word was certain to be rushed back telling the Union infantry to come on the double and that those troops — made up of men from Illinois, Minnesota, and Indiana — would hardly be prepared for the Mississippi delta's heat and humidity. They would be rushed forward pell-mell and strung out along the muddy Memphis-to-Guntown Road, and Forrest planned to hand them a resounding thrashing.

Forrest's estimate of his opponent proved accurate. General Sturgis did not realize that his adversary was anywhere near and sent Grierson's cavalry out a good three hours before the infantry broke camp. (He wanted to allow his infantrymen time to dry their rain-soaked clothes.)

Meanwhile, Forrest had posted one of his brigade commanders, a Colonel Lyon, and his 750-man brigade in the thick woods directly astride the enemy's approach route with orders to attack their erstwhile pursuers.

In the confusion of the battle, Lyon's troops apparently charged three separate times and each time were repulsed by the Union cavalry. These "charges" were actually only feints, however, used to disguise the fact that not all of Forrest's troop had arrived.

Nevertheless, Grierson, believin himself to be under attack by superior force, fought back despe ately if unwisely, rapidly expendin ammunition with his repeating rifle During the first part of the fightin unfortunately, his "intellectual mules ran away, which deprived hi of mobility and lowered the moral of those cavalrymen who were n trained to stand and fight infant style.

Grierson, as Forrest had predicte sent back word to bring up the infa try with all haste as he was bein pressed to the extreme and would soo run out of ammunition. Sturgis con plied and drove his infantry as fast a possible, losing many men to heat ex haustion along the way. He stoppe only long enough to order his most in spired unit, the black brigade unde Colonel Bouton, to stay back an guard the supply wagons. It apparent ly did not occur to him that these blac soldiers, largely freed men and ex slaves from Mississippi, Louisiana Arkansas, and Texas, may well hav been more accustomed to the heat an humidity than the white troops fron farther north.

In any case, by this time Forrest ha attacked with two newly arrived bri gades. Their attack completely de feated the Union cavalry. At abou this time, McMillen's infantry begai to arrive on the field. Winded bu game, the soldiers were sent headlon into the conflict with neither a paus nor a plan.

Forrest maintained his force astride the road as they had been de ployed originally, but then he im provised with his eight-gun artiller battery. He had these guns double shotted with canister and ordered th artillery commander to join the up coming charge with these guns abreas of the infantry, keeping pace wit them as they advanced. A maneu vering brigade attacked from the flan and rear, combined with pressure o the front, and shattered Sturgis' force, sending it streaming back up th road toward Memphis and safety.

Back in the rear with his black brigade, Colonel Bouton saw that the main Union force had been beaten and was being pursued by the Confederates. He found General Sturgis and pleaded with him to commit the blacks so that a defensive line could be established and the Union force reorganized. Instead of granting any such permission, Sturgis ordered Bouton to join in the retreat. He was by this time so agitated and panicked by the turn of events that in stifling Bouton's argument he said, "If Mr. Forrest will let me alone, I will let him alone . . . Save yourselves."

General Forrest had determined when, where, and under what conditions he would fight. Having therefore gained the initiative, he did not surrender this "independence of action" until his enemy had been decisively beaten and put to headlong flight.

The concept of initiative, according to Field Manual 100-5, "implies an offensive spirit in the conduct of all operations; it means that the underlying purpose of an encounter with the enemy is to gain and hold an independence of action with the understanding that this requires risk taking and an atmosphere that supports it."

Forrest accepted the risks; Sturgis did not. The result, as usual, favored the risk taker. As it was on that battlefield of the past, so it will be on the battlefield of the future — the leader who seizes and holds the initiative will win the battle.

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Improv[illegible]

The Stand[illegible]

HARRY IKNER

For an infantryman, the expert infantryman's badge (EIB) traditionally has been a mark of excellence. Some infantrymen have said, however, that the badge's image has become tarnished because the EIB test is no longer tough enough.

As EIB proponent, the Infantry School recently studied the present test standards and concluded that, while the test is still a tough one to pass, some additional toughening was in order. The result is a new, improved EIB program and a test that will clearly distinguish the highest caliber infantrymen from the typical high-quality performers. Both the program and the test are outlined in detail in a revised Army Regulation 672-12, Expert Infantryman Badge, and in DA Pamphlet 672-12, Decorations, Awards and Honors, Expert Infantryman Badge. These publications will be distributed to the field in April 1985, with an effective date of 1 August 1985. (Both publications will be printed in the new "update" format.) Units can use the four months between the publication and implementation dates to review the new test requirements and prepare for the test.

HIGHER STANDARDS

The current test has 16 subject areas with 27 tasks; the new test will have 20 subject areas with 41 tasks. The tasks will still come from the Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks (Field Manual 21-2) and from the Soldier's Manuals (STP 7-11B, Skill Levels 1 and 2), but the standards and performance measures will be higher than those in the manuals. EIB candidates will now be retested by tasks rather than by subject areas. A candidate can fail no more than two tasks and can be retested only once on each task he failed. Thus, a candidate who fails more than two tasks will be disqualified and will have to take the entire test during his unit's next annual test period.

In addition to the changes in the number of events and in the standards (shown in the accompanying matrix), two items are worthy of note: There is now an SQT for officers, and a standardization committee has been created. Officers must take the 11B Skill Level 4 SQT and score 80 percent or higher on it. And the function of the EIB Standardization Committee, in the Infantry School's Directorate of Training and Doctrine, will be to approve or disapprove requested modifications to the training program and test; to monitor EIB training pro-