



Fort Pillow

Harry Turtledove

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A harrowing novel of the Civil War's most controversial battle.

In April 1864, the Union garrison at Fort Pillow was comprised of almost six hundred troops, about half of them black. The Confederacy, incensed by what it saw as a crime against nature, sent its fiercest cavalry commander, Nathan Bedford Forrest, to attack the fort with about 1,500 men. The Confederates overran the fort and drove the Federals into a deadly crossfire. Only sixty-two of the U.S. black troops survived the fight unwounded. Many accused the Confederates of massacring the black troops after the fort fell and fighting should have ceased. The Fort Pillow Massacre became a Union rallying cry and cemented resolve to see the war through to its conclusion.

Harry Turtledove has written a dramatic recreation of an astounding battle, telling a bloody story of courage and hope, freedom and hatred. With brilliant characterization of all the main figures, this is a novel that reminds us that Fort Pillow was more than a battle—it was a clash of ideas between men fighting to define what being an American ought to mean.

Fort Pillow Details

Date : Published May 16th 2006 by St. Martin's Press

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Author : Harry Turtledove

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From Reader Review Fort Pillow for online ebook

Lauren says

This book really pissed me off. Not because it was badly written, but because I've never actually read a book in which the atrocities of the civil war were so carefully laid out. If you are like me and believe that it is so much more than a sin to hate a person for any reason, let alone because of something as irrelevant as skin color or ethnic group, you will probably also be really pissed off after reading this book.

I did some additional background reading on Nathan Bedford Forest, the Confederate General who authorized the assault on Fort Pillow and did nothing to stop the slaughter that followed, and found that he was the first grand master of the KKK. Lovely.

This book was decently written overall, but lacked that spark that would take a decent novel and make it excellent or extraordinary.

Chad says

A good fictional account of the Civil War Battle at Fort Pillow. I enjoyed this audio book on my commute to and from work. I looked forward to getting into the car so that I could continue this story. Mr. Turtledove does a good job in presenting the horrors of war, but the excessive use of vulgar language took away from the overall story.

Timothy Riley says

The author and lovers of Nathan Bedford Forrest can't have it both ways. He is described as a man that all of his troops feared and could influence with a mere look. He is also defended from the massacre at Fort Pillow by saying there was no way he would be able to control his troopers after sacking the fort held by colored troops and local unionists.

This is not a terrible book, it was readable and probably well researched. However, it didn't give me a true feeling of the carnage of the massacre. Maybe that's because no one who committed it would've spoken or written much about it.

The fort itself seemed totally unrealistic to bother trying to hold in the first place.

I will say that I did get the intended feeling of pride that the new black soldiers must've felt when firing away in uniforms of blue at possibly their recent owners. No real Django Unchained moments to get excited about though.

Dale says

A Review of the Audiobook

Audiobook Edition Published in 2009 by Tantor Audio

Published in hardback in 2006.

Read by John Allen Nelson

Duration: 11 hours, 13 minutes

Unabridged

The massacre at Fort Pillow truly stands out in a bloody Civil War in which hundreds of thousands of men and women died. Even though the American Civil War had so many casualties, the war itself was remarkable in that the two sides were often quite civil with one another off of the battlefield. There are numerous stories of local truces to trade coffee for tobacco and the like. My favorite is the story of Confederate and Union pickets (perimeter guards) who co-built a cabin in stages during the winter and agreed to share it in shifts as the day went along. Prisoners of War were generally cared for (there were exceptions, but they stick out as exceptions), the enemy wounded were treated by the doctors (the care was bad, but the best that was available), and so on.

The battle at Fort Pillow in April of 1864, though, stands out as something different. It was much more like the Missouri Bushwhacker and Kansas Jayhawker fighting. It was more than just Union vs. Confederate. It had a personal side to it that resulted in a massacre.

The positive side to this book is that Turtledove has clearly done an exceptional amount of research. He presents Nathan Bedford Forrest as a complicated man. An uneducated man who outsmarts most West Pointers he fights against and outshines most of his experienced and educated peers. He truly was one of the most talented officers of the war. But, he was also a slave trader and certainly could not approve of Black soldiers fighting against white men.

Fort Pillow was garrisoned with white and black soldiers. The U.S. Colored Troops were roughly half of the soldiers, the balance were white soldiers, mostly from Tennessee. Even though Tennessee was a Confederate state, these white soldiers had sat out of the war and then volunteered for the Union army when they could or had deserted the Confederate army to join the Union. Tennessee supplied 100,000 men to the Confederate cause, but it also supplied 50,000 Union soldiers. A lot of Forrest's men were from Tennessee and they looked at Tennessee men who became Union soldiers as traitors or worse. Forrest's men also believed that these Union soldiers had attacked pro-Confederate families, including unsanctioned raping and looting. Turtledove hints that even though these attacks were unsanctioned, they may very well have been unofficially approved of by the Union leadership at Fort Pillow. Clearly, the fighting in Tennessee was more than just about secession or slavery - it had a personal dimension as well.

The U.S. Colored Troops had their own problems. The Confederate government had pledged to enslave any black soldiers that they captured, on the premise that they were all escaped slaves.

Forrest and his men launched a surprise, raid-style attack on Fort Pillow in an effort to pick up more arms and other supplies and in a non-stop effort to harass Yankee soldiers wherever they could be found.

Fort Pillow was poorly designed and its officers did little to improve its viability. For example, fields of fire were not cleared around the fort, little thought had gone into what would happen if the defenders got in close (the artillery could not hit them due to the limited ability of the cannons to fire downward).

After some hard fighting it became obvious to Forrest that he would eventually take the fort and he asked for a truce to discuss surrender terms. The original commander of the fort had been killed and his replacement

refused to surrender, even though Forrest promised to not enslave the U.S. Colored Troops and that they would not seek reprisal against the white soldiers from Tennessee. He also threatened that if his men were forced to take the fort by force he could not ensure that he could stop them from committing these sorts of atrocities.

And, it turns out, Forrest was right...

Read more about this book, including what I think is wrong with it by following this link:
<http://dwdsreviews.blogspot.com/2015/...>

Walt O'Hara says

For the life of me, I'm not entirely certain *why* I'm following up a very disappointing Harry Turtledove book (*Give Me Back My Legions!* with another Harry Turtledove book, but everybody should have a second chance, so why not. I suspect one of the major failings of the previous novel was that very little was written about it by ancient historians, and the plot is pretty linear to stretch out over the course of 3 years. With *Fort Pillow: A Novel of the Civil War*, Turtledove sets up a very similar chain of events, ending with a violent massacre, and set in a historical, as opposed to fantastical, setting. The Fort Pillow massacre was a nasty incident in backwater of the secondary theater of a nasty Civil War. I applaud Turtledove for taking up this subject and trying to humanize both sides of the story-- the massacre can be one of those incidents that "Lost Cause" types and other apologists tend to gloss over or would just as soon forget. Fortunately, there are better sources for Turtledove to draw upon than he could muster for *Give me Back My Legions!* and I think that makes the resulting novel a much better read. The facts are what they are-- a small fort on the banks of the Mississippi River was besieged by the South's brilliant cavalry commander, Nathan Bedford Forrest. The inhabitants of the fort, a recently created black artillery company and a regiment of Union Sympathizer cavalry from Tennessee, were offered a chance to lay down arms. They chose to continue the fight and in the resulting sack of the fort, many of them were brutally murdered, white and black. Nobody is covered in glory by this story; I liked the morally ambiguous tone of the plot and characters. Turtledove mixes historical figures (Forrest, his principle staff officers, and the principle union leaders) with fictional characters and does his best to plug a few holes in the narrative that history can't answer for. In general, I liked this novel far more than the last one and was reasonably engaged throughout. Turtledove's rather annoying tendency for having each and every POV character stop to silently moralize about a greater issue in the middle of action or discussion is still there all it's Glory. For example, a black character will be talking about an issue in the story with a white character, and he'll go into a mental soliloquy about race relations in the United States, the institution of slavery, the meaning of freedom, and what Reconstruction might be like for the black character. Mr. Turtledove, stop doing this. People don't talk or think this way in the middle of conversations.

In summary, not a bad read-- better than some out of Turtledove lately by far. I appreciated reading a straight up historical novel from Turtledove. Not an alien lizard or time traveling racist was in sight.

Bill says

Up close and personal look at the Battle of Fort Pillow, Tennessee during the American Civil War. The Federal troops which defended Fort Pillow were Tennessee "Tories" and black freedmen. After the

Confederate offer of surrender terms were rejected, the Confederate troops overran the fort and few prisoners taken.

Christopher says

This book is 1/3 too long. It tells the story of the massacre at Fort Pillow where several hundred black Union soldiers were killed by Confederates under the command of Nathan Bedford Forrest. The story never really develops any narrative tension or drama (especially as every three pages or so a character remarks that "if the Negroes are able to fight, then [our/their] whole philosophy of supremacy is negated!")

Turtledove does not excel at strong characters. He excels at strong premises (usually of the alt history "what if?" variety that he then fills with archetypes. As neither aliens nor time-travelers appear in this novel, he's left with actually writing a compelling narrative. It largely fails.

In addition, AFTER the massacre, the book continues for another 150 pages or so with no real purpose. We follow some of the prisoners taken, we sort of get wind of a Congressional inquiry into the massacre, but it's an overlong coda to a book that didn't need it.

Robert says

A very well written account of the battle for Fort Pillow during the Civil War. With a blend of historical fact and fiction author Harry Turtledove brings to life the details surrounding the battle. A very enjoyable book for Civil War buffs and anyone that enjoys reading about the history that shaped our great nation.

Diane Holm says

A vivid and intense look into the horror and brutality of the civil war.....

Nathan Bedford Forrest, a ruthless commander for the Confederate army, and his troops, approached Fort Pillow as if on wings. His men were driven by hatred for the escaped colored slaves and the Union army that trained them. Spurred on through the swamps and bogs, rain and cold by the demanding Nathan Forrest they reached Fort Pillow exhausted. However, fatigue quickly gave away to their desire to punish those sons-a-bitches.

Major William Bradford and his Union troops at Fort Pillow were comfortable knowing the Confederate soldiers were far away. Though he was a major, his experience in actual combat was minimal. A lawyer by trade, he fought best with words. Major Booth had added his forces to the fort about two weeks earlier. Experienced in the heat of battle, he was the senior officer and Bradford resented him, but was grateful for his knowledge.

The soldiers Major Booth brought with him were another story. Many were Niggers! Everybody that was anybody knew that coloreds couldn't fight. They just weren't worth considering and would likely turn tale in the heat of battle. Major Bradford knew all the training in the world couldn't change the color of a man's skin. Heck, he didn't even consider niggers to be men. Yet Major Booth seemed to have confidence in them.

The truth would soon be uncovered. The first morning light brought the crack of Confederate rifles. The battle was one that went down in history for many reasons. The bravery and determination on both sides left many would-be heroes silenced for eternity. Their stories would be buried with their bodies, in mass graves, unremembered and forgotten over time.

We take for granted our freedoms of today, yet we understand very little of the sacrifices that won those rights. *Fort Pillow* is more than a novel. It will let you feel and experience history as if you were there. It is graphic and candid, leaving nothing to the imagination. Read it if you dare, you'll never be the same.

John says

Of course, we mainly know Turtledove for his alternate history novels. But he is a Ph. D. historian and wrote several well-received historical fiction pieces, mostly on ancient history (his scientific specialty) but also a book on the Civil War, a fictionalized account of the Battle of Fort Pillow. My interest in this book (and my reason for recommending it) is that this event is rather little known, for it did not have any major effect on the outcome of the war. Yet it is important for other reasons. It was, arguably, the only involvement of African-American troops in a battle of such scale. Fort Pillow was defended (unsuccessfully) against overwhelming Confederate attackers of infamous General Nathan Forrest by African-American artillery (50%) and Tennessee volunteers (50%). The latter were considered traitors since Tennessee was a Southern state. After the fort fell, the defenders surrendered, but were largely massacred, execution-style (blacks, and, to a lesser degree, Tennesseans), which, at that time, was considered a war crime. Turtledove's account, while largely fictionalized, depicts the overall situation correctly, and reminds us of many forgotten, yet essential pages of our history.
