

# Tracing the Civil War

## The American Civil War along the Natchez Trace: Mississippi



### Summary of the Battle of Okolona (February 22, 1864)



**Overall Background:** The capture of Vicksburg in July 1863 gave the Union control of the Mississippi River and divided the Confederacy in half. Union General William Tecumseh Sherman, now commanding Federal forces in the area, began to devise a plan to further divide the Confederacy by marching eastward. His objective was the railroad junction town of Meridian. In a plan that would foreshadow his more famous “March to the Sea” in Georgia, Sherman would march from Vicksburg to Jackson then on to Meridian. Along the way, his men were ordered to destroy railroad tracks, cotton plantations, grain bins, factories, any facility or place deemed to be an asset to the Confederate cause. After reaching Meridian, Sherman intended to strike Selma, Alabama and destroy the arsenal there. To support this plan, Sherman ordered General William Sooy Smith to drive southward from Memphis Tennessee with a large cavalry force. As Sherman marched out of Vicksburg with 20,000 Union soldiers, Smith was to bring his 7,000 troopers

down the line of the Mobile-Ohio railroad into the area of north central Mississippi known as “The Prairie”. Also called “Little Egypt”, the Prairie was a rich agricultural area and produced tons of vital crops that helped sustain Confederate forces. Smith’s orders were clear: proceed to Okolona then follow the railroad south to Meridian, destroying anything of potential military value along the way.

Opposing Smith was Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest and 2,500 troopers. Forrest had only recently arrived in the area and been busy recruiting and equipping his new command. For most of his men, this would be their first action in battle. Forrest and his men were assigned the task of defending the Prairie from destruction. Sherman expected Smith to rendezvous with him near Meridian on or around February 10 but Smith’s departure was seriously delayed. When Sherman reached his destination on February 14, Smith was nowhere close. Sherman’s troops spent five days destroying the railroads, warehouses, and other structures in Meridian. On February 20, disgusted at the failure of Smith to appear, Sherman ordered his army to withdraw towards Canton. February 21 found Smith’s column in West Point, some 90 miles north of Meridian. At this point in the expedition, for reasons that remain unclear, Smith decided to turn back toward Memphis. He had faced little resistance along the way but now he began to fear a trap. His men clashed with Forrest’s near West Point, convincing Smith it was time to turn back. It was indeed Forrest’s strategy to draw Smith deep into Mississippi and wait for an opportunity to attack him. As the Federals began to withdraw northward, Forrest saw his chance.



**The Battle:** Learning of the Federal movements back toward Okolona, Forrest issued orders to his brigade commanders to concentrate in that area. All day February 21, the Confederates pressed the Federal rear guard with spirited attacks, the pursuit ending with nightfall. Early in the next morning, the

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Confederates attacked the rear guard's camp south of Okolona and drove them through the town. Just north of town the Union troops held out against the Confederate attacks. But as the Federals began to pull out of line to withdraw, Forrest led a charge that pierced the Union line and shattered it, sending the Union soldiers into a panicked retreat northward. Pressing on some 5 miles, the Confederates ran into a new Union line holding a series of hills along the Pontotoc Road in an area known as Prairie Mount. Here the Federal resistance was more stubborn and they repulsed the initial series of Confederate attacks. It was in one of the attacks on this Federal position that Colonel Jeffrey Forrest, the General's youngest brother, was killed. The death of the younger Forrest and the stiff resistance of the Federals caused the Confederate attacks to lull. General Forrest learning of his brother's death (some reports have Jeffrey dying in his arms), mounted his horse and ordered the bugles to sound charge. Forrest led a furious charge into the Federal position. So intense was the fighting that Forrest had 2 horses killed under him and the third mount was wounded. After vicious hand-to-hand combat, in which Forrest personally killed 3 Union soldiers, the Federals withdrew another 4 or 5 miles north. Here they established another defensive position in the hills. As the vanguard of Forrest's army approached, the Federals charged down the hill and another sharp fight ensued. The Confederates managed to hold off repeated attacks until the arrival of their main force caused the Federals to withdraw. Seeing it was nearly dark at this point and his men were exhausted and low of ammunition, Forrest ordered a halt to the pursuit.

**The Result:** The fighting had begun around 4:00 in the morning below Okolona and ended at dusk just south of Pontotoc. Forrest with a force of 2,500 untested troops had driven a Federal force of 7,000 over 20 miles in the running battle. Confederate casualties numbered around 150, Federal losses were about 400. Sherman was deeply disappointed in Smith's performance. Smith reported that he had destroyed millions of bushels of corn, thousands of bales of cotton, destroyed many miles of railroad track, and liberated hundreds of slaves. But failed to rendezvous with his chief in Meridian thus preventing the raid into Alabama, had not disrupted the agricultural production of the Prairie, and been soundly beaten by a force less than half the size of his own. Forrest's victory increased his reputation as a fierce fighter and relentless foe.