Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a wealthy plantation owner and former slave trader who would later become the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, led 2,300 men from his cavalry command in an attack on Fort Pillow, Tennessee, on April 12, 1864. The outpost, located on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River forty miles north of Memphis, was defended by about 600 Union soldiers, 305 from the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery and 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery and at least 277 from the 13th Tennessee Cavalry, a regiment of white unionists that included deserters from the Confederate army. Sergeant Achilles V. Clark of the Confederate 20th Tennessee Cavalry wrote about the assault on the fort to his sisters, both of whom were married to slaveholding Confederate soldiers (the end of the letter is missing). Of the 585 Union soldiers known to have been at Fort Pillow on April 12, 277 were killed or died from their wounds in Union hospitals—82 from the 13th Tennessee Cavalry and 195 from the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery and the 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery.

My Dear Sisters,
I write you a few hurried lines to inform you that I am quite well and have just passed safely through the most terrible ordeal of my whole life. I guess that you know what I mean as you doubtless have before this heard of the taking of Fort Pillow. In as much as I am a member of Forrest’s Cavalry modesty would direct that I should say nothing in our praise nor will I but will tell you in as few words as possible what was done and leave you to judge whether or not we acted well or ill. If you remember we left Paris Wednesday morning from which point we proceeding immediately to Eaton Gibson County where we found Col. Bell’s camp. Saturday we prepared five days

Camp near Brownsville
April 14th 1864

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rations in anticipation of a move to some place we knew not where. Sunday evening directly after supper the bugle sounded to saddle. At twelve o’clock we marched off in the direction of Brownsville. We camped just at daybreak on the north side and about two miles from South Forked Deer river where we rested one hour. Mounting our horses we crossed the above mentioned stream and one mile this side took the Fort Pillow road. From this time we rightly supposed that we were going to attack that place. At 10 A.M. (Monday) we stopped to feed and were detained about one hour and a half. At 3 P.M. we stopped again and rested until six. From this time on we were in our saddles until we reached a point one and a half miles this side of the Fort where we dismounted to fight (this was about 7 A.M. Tuesday) leaving every fourth man to hold horses, we marched on foot in sight of the fortifications which were said to be manned by about seven hundred renegade Tennesseans and negroes commanded by Major Boothe of the Negro regiment Major Bradford of the 13th Tenn. U.S.V. being second in command. Our brigade filed round to the right of the fort Chalmer’s command to the left. Skirmishers were deployed and we advanced very slowly it is true but surely toward the enemy. Just here it would be proper to describe the fort which I shall attempt to do. It is a very strong earthwork situated on a high bluff inside the works erected by Gen. Pillow in 1861. It is formed by an irregular trench being dug somewhat in the shape of a half circle the edge of the bluff being the diameter. The fort is quite small just about large enough to hold a thousand men in two ranks. The ditch is eight feet deep and six wide and the dirt thrown from the ditch on the inside formed a bank five feet high making from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the breast work thirteen feet up which we had to climb. By two o’clock P.M. we had approached within fifty yards of the fort on all sides. A part of our regiment was in twenty steps of it. Strange to say after five hours constant firing the Yankees had not killed a single one of our men and wounded only a very few among whom I am sorry to name the gallant Capt. Wilson of our regiment who fell in twenty steps of the fort shot through the lungs dangerously though tis greatly to be hoped not mortally wounded. At 2 P.M. Gen. Forrest demanded a surrender and gave twenty minutes to
consider. The Yankees refused threatening that if we charged their breast works to show no quarter. The bugle sounded the charge and in less than ten minutes we were in the fort hurling the cowardly villains howling down the bluff. Our men were so exasperated by the Yankees' threats of no quarter that they gave but little. The slaughter was awful. Words cannot describe the scene. The poor deluded negroes would run up to our men fall upon their knees and with uplifted hands scream for mercy but they were ordered to their feet and then shot down. The whitte men fared but little better. Their fort turned out to be a great slaughter pen. Blood, human blood stood about in pools and brains could have been gathered up in any quantity. I with several others tried to stop the butchery and at one time had partially succeeded. but Gen. Forrest ordered them shot down like dogs. and the carnage continued. Finally our men became sick of blood and the firing ceased. The result. The report kept in the Post Adjutants office shows that there were seven hundred and ninety men for duty on the morning of the fight. We brought away about one hundred and sixty white men and about seventy five negroes. Two transports came down the morning after the fight and took off the badly wounded Yankees and negroes about thirty or forty in all. The remainder were thrown into the trench before which two hours previous they had stood and bade open defiance to Forrest and all his ragged hounds, and were covered up about two feet deep. We captured seven hundred stands of small arms, six pieces of the finest artillery I ever saw, a large amount of quar- ter masters and comissary stores. Our loss as compared to that of the enemy were small yet we deeply mourn the loss of ten or fifteen as brave men as ever pulled a trigger. Those from our Regt. John Beard of our company a bright minded moral young man who fell on top of the breast work close to my side. [  ]