

Was Fort Pillow a “Massacre” or Not?

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To address the question, let's start with some irrefutable facts:

- War crimes were committed by Confederate soldiers at Fort Pillow, specifically the killing of Union soldiers who had surrendered or who were attempting to. This is attested to in several accounts penned by Confederate soldiers, but the number thus killed is unknown. Some of these same accounts also stated some Union soldiers threw down their weapons and surrendered, then picked them up again.
- Of the garrison (variously estimated to be 557 – 605 soldiers, of whom at least 262 were US Colored Troops), 226 men were marched into captivity uninjured or only slightly wounded and 69 severely wounded were released to Union steamboats the next day. A by-name list of prisoners taken exists. Of the identified 295 survivors (several of whom died on the steamboat), around 214 were white, the balance black.
- The engagement started at dawn and continued almost all day, carried through in particular by the efforts of Confederate sharpshooters who were able to suppress most of the fire from within the fort and who killed the commander early in the day.
- The terrain is highly dissected and offered covered and concealed approaches to within distances of 25 to 100 yards, while the defenders had to rise above the parapet, exposed to the sharpshooters, to engage any assaulters.
- The fort was offered a chance to surrender with a promise of humane treatment, but the offer was refused.
- The final assault was a coordinated attack from multiple angles and close range by over 1,200 men, almost all armed not only with rifles and carbines but also revolvers.
- The avenue of retreat was cut off by Confederate soldiers below on the riverbank, soldiers posted so as to prevent reinforcement by a steamboat full of Union soldiers. Some Union soldiers, number unknown, when faced with this ambush, chose to jump into the river, attempting to escape, and drowned.
- 1864 was an election year and the biggest issue was the war. A Congressional Committee composed primarily of pro-war Republicans seeking reelection held widely publicized and totally one-sided hearings. The hearing testimony was printed in 40,000 copies and sent to every election district in an attempt to sway voters, making the whole event a *cause célèbre*.

Around these facts have swirled many interpretations, but it seems clear from the numbers that a higher percentage of black troops were killed or missing. Although the USCT were more vulnerable because they manned cannon at the embrasures and they were credited with fighting more fiercely in Union accounts, it is clear that a significant number must have been executed. There is no evidence that any senior officer ordered this and there is evidence General Chalmers, who unlike the injured Forrest accompanied the assault, ordered his men to cease fire as they overran the fort. The fighting was severe; there were at least 98 Confederate casualties and perhaps more as Bell's Brigade may have not reported their casualties to Chalmers.

So, given these facts, now to determine: what is a massacre? The *Cambridge English Dictionary* says, “an act of killing a lot of people. Example: He ordered the massacre of 2,000 women and children.” A corollary indicates the victims should be helpless.

Does the engagement fit the definition? In part yes, although certainly not in whole. Some Confederate soldiers killed surrendering soldiers, disproportionately black soldiers. But certainly, many of the deaths and injuries are attributable to a larger force routing a smaller force and not too far out of line with what often has happened in such cases throughout military history as fleeing soldiers are cut down by pursuing victors.

But, was it a deliberate or premeditated massacre on the part of the Confederate commanders? All the evidence says no. Had that been the intent over half the inhabitants would not have been spared.