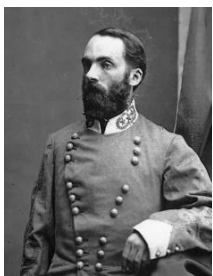


General Joseph Wheeler



There lingers to this day a romantic vision of Confederate Cavalry that brings forth the images of Sir Walter Scott's gallant knights of old. To a considerable degree this reputation is not undeserved. Confederate Cavalry quickly gained a reputation for valor, gallantry, horsemanship, bold tactics and esprit de corps that persisted throughout the Civil War and can be validated in the many histories of that conflict.

Many Southern cavalymen and to a certain extent the whole Confederate Army were strongly influenced by the romantic novels of Scott, which were very popular reading in the South. Furthermore, many successful cavalry exploits early in the war had an electrifying effect on Southern morale and were causes for hope late in the war.

"Every morning brought a noble chance, and every chance brought out a noble knight." (Tennyson)

Yet the reality of cavalry success, and especially Joe Wheeler's success, required much more than knightly valor and gallantry. It required dogged, often sweaty perseverance and long, physically exhausting days and nights, enduring many hardships and deprivations.

Joseph Wheeler was characterized by Robert E. Lee as being one of the two best cavalymen in the war.

This will be sure to provoke considerable debate, but a very strong case can be made that Wheeler was, in fact, the most effective cavalry leader of the war on either side. This was despite his youth and modest appearance and manner. Wheeler was without doubt brave and gallant, but he was very unlike the colorful Jeb Stuart, the flamboyant and daring John Hunt Morgan, and the fierce Nathan Bedford Forrest. The latter two of these, Morgan and Forrest, were at one time both under the command of Wheeler. Wheeler's effectiveness lay in his utterly selfless and single-minded devotion to duty. Given an order, Wheeler's extraordinary sense of duty and honor drove him to persist and persevere and innovate until he had overcome any obstacles to meeting his assigned responsibilities. Wheeler was most effective at the cavalry basics. These were such routine duties as protecting the rear and flanks of the main infantry forces from surprise, collecting intelligence, slowing and frustrating enemy advances, acting as rear guard for retreating forces, and disrupting enemy communications and supply lines. Due to the numerical and material advantages of the Union forces, he was often called on to protect the Army of Mississippi and the Army of Tennessee during retreat, which he performed very reliably. He was less successful at daring raids, but extremely successful at interdicting and destroying Union supply and communication lines. In addition, Wheeler proved very effective in combating Union Cavalry.

The youngest of the four children and the second son born to Joseph and Julia Wheeler near Augusta, Georgia, arrived on September 10, 1836. Like his father he was given the name Joseph and christened at St. Paul's Episcopal Church there in Augusta. His family was originally from Connecticut, but settled in Georgia in 1819, where his father became a merchant and planter. After his mother's death in 1842, he was raised principally in Connecticut and New York by aunts. Shortly after completing his secondary education at the Episcopal Academy at Cheshire, Connecticut, he received an appointment by a New York Congressman to West Point. He entered West Point in 1854 at the age of seventeen. Wheeler was only about five foot five and weighed only about 120 pounds. His appearance was rather mild and youthful, but he, nonetheless, had a dignified presence that seemed to command respect. Everyone who ever knew him noted his very high energy level. His

West Point classmates gave him the nickname, "Point," because he had neither height, nor width, nor thickness. Like the Superintendent of West Point at that time, Robert E. Lee, he had a strong sense of duty and was noted for his obedience. The quick-thinking military brilliance and the scholarly brilliance of his future Congressional career were not yet very evident at West Point. He graduated 26th out of 29 cadets, completing the then five-year course in 1859, ironically making his lowest grades in Cavalry Tactics.

After completing Cavalry School at Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania, 2nd Lieutenant Wheeler was assigned to a regiment of mounted rifles at Fort Craig, New Mexico. The rule of warfare and scouting there was to travel light and range far. This experience was to prove formative and very valuable in his career as a Confederate Cavalry Commander that was to commence in 1862.

In June of 1860 Wheeler was assigned as an escort for a wagon train traveling from Hannibal, Missouri to points in New Mexico. Several days into the trip he was detailed to escort an ambulance that had to be left behind until a young mother delivered her baby. As the ambulance with mother and new baby along with an accompanying surgeon and wagon driver proceeded to catch up with the wagon train, it was attacked by a small group of marauding Indians. Wheeler and the wagon driver were its only defense. With the surgeon taking the reins of the wagon, the driver downed one attacker with his musket. Wheeler then charged the attackers on horseback, knocking down one horse with a shot from his musket. Then throwing his musket down, with arrows flying everywhere, he continued the charge blazing away with his Colt pistol. With the driver now also firing into the attackers with his pistol in support of Wheeler, the marauders were put on the run. When the ambulance overtook the main wagon train and the story was told, the soldiers began to call Wheeler, "Fightin' Joe." Thus the polite, little fellow with a soft Southern voice and dignified manner received the nickname that would follow him all of his life. It would prove to be a very apt nickname. He was a serious and usually mild mannered fellow, but he would prove many times that he possessed a fighting spirit both on the battlefield and later as a member of Congress. As one of his men said after the war, Joe Wheeler "warn't afraid of nuthin' or nobody."

Wheeler's courage, demonstrated time and again, was much deeper than a purely physical courage. Physical courage is often a temporary self-confidence in physical or weapons prowess or even a misapprehension of danger. Wheeler's courage was born of his highly developed sense of duty and honor.

Once Wheeler saw his duty, no arrows, gunfire, grapeshot, flashing sabers, danger or hardship mattered.

He exerted all energy and resources to his strongly felt obligations to duty and honor. Wheeler was wounded three times during the course of the war. He had sixteen horses shot from under him! Six of his staff officers were killed by his side and another 30 were wounded.

Like most of the officers in his mounted rifle regiment, young Wheeler sympathized with the South. When Georgia seceded from the union on January 9, 1861, Wheeler immediately resigned his commission in the U. S. Army and headed to his family in Georgia, hoping to receive a commission in one of the newly forming Georgia regiments. With the help of his older brother, William, he received a commission as a First Lieutenant and was assigned as an artillery officer in Pensacola, Florida. One of the ironies of Wheeler's career as a Confederate officer is that he first distinguished himself as an artillery officer and then an infantry officer before receiving a Confederate cavalry command. This, however, demonstrates the great breadth of abilities that Wheeler possessed and would manifest in combat and later in Congress.

Wheeler's initial duty as an artillery officer and especially his innovation and ability to get things done under difficult circumstances gained him the favorable attention of General Braxton Bragg and Confederate politician and General Leroy Pope Walker. In September of 1861 Walker succeeded through his connections in the Confederate Congress, though not with the approval of Bragg, of getting 1st. Lt. Wheeler promoted to the rank of full Colonel, a rather controversial jump of four ranks. Wheeler was then made the commander of the 19th Alabama Infantry Regiment. Wheeler proved himself an able trainer and organizer and had his regiment more highly trained and drilled than most before they would get a serious taste of combat.

On April 6-7, 1862, Col. Wheeler and the 19th Alabama distinguished themselves at the Battle of Shiloh.

Wheeler with the 19th wound up in the center of the battle, and found himself in effective command of his whole Brigade. During this time Wheeler's men captured 2000 Union soldiers including a Union General.

He was highly praised in dispatches for his personal valor, quick thinking, and cool presence and leadership under heavy fire. As the numerical superiority of Union forces increased, the Confederate Army of Mississippi retreated first to Corinth and then to Tupelo. Wheeler further distinguished himself commanding the 19th Alabama and three other infantry regiments (the 25th and 26th Alabama and the 4th Mississippi) in conducting rear guard actions against advancing Union forces.

On August 28, 1862, Col. Wheeler was put in command of three cavalry regiments and assigned to the command of fellow Georgian, General William J. "Old Reliable" Hardee. During September and October on an advance into Tennessee and Kentucky, Wheeler performed well in protecting Hardee's flanks and gathering intelligence. His cavalry also succeeded in destroying much of Union General Don Carlos Buell's railroad and telegraph lines north of Nashville and frustrating his movements and attempted advances. On October 13, Wheeler was appointed Chief of Cavalry for the Army of Mississippi, followed on October 30, by his promotion to Brigadier General at the age of only twenty-six. On November 14, the new Brigadier General was ordered to take charge of all cavalry under General Joseph E. Johnston, including the forces under the famous Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Hunt Morgan. During this time Wheeler developed tree-felling tactics in delaying Union Army advances, gaining his men the nickname of "the Lumberjack Cavalry."

In December of 1862 and January of 1863 Wheeler's Cavalry wreaked havoc with Union General Rosecrans' supply lines in Tennessee, burning over 450 Union supply wagons and capturing over 2400 prisoners. This left Rosecrans at least temporarily ineffective and utterly frustrated.

February of 1863 brought still another nickname to Wheeler's Cavalry. Operating along the Cumberland River in Tennessee, Wheeler's forces burned bridges and managed to capture and destroy a Union gunboat and four transports resulting in the capture of 400 prisoners. Hence they gained the name, "Horse Marines." The fame of Wheeler's Cavalry continued to grow and was a household name in the Middle South. On May 1, 1863, Wheeler was promoted to the rank of Major General, CSA, by the Confederate Congress. During May Wheeler also published a manual entitled, *Cavalry Tactics*, which proved very valuable in systematizing Bragg's cavalry. It was also adopted by General Johnston's Army of Tennessee. The manual advocated mounted infantry over heavy cavalry.

The months of June and July 1863 would prove difficult for Wheeler and for the Confederate cause.

On June 27, Wheeler experienced a near disaster trying to rescue Forrest and his 3000 men from being cut-off by Union forces at Duck River, near Shelbyville, Tennessee. Wheeler personally led 600 men in a cavalry charge to drive Union forces back across the bridge at Duck River. He and about 50 men, however, found themselves cut-off and had to plunge on horseback 15 feet down into a sweeping current while under fire to escape. Meanwhile Forrest managed to extricate himself and his men from cut-off.

On June 13, Wheeler had given permission to the restless John Hunt Morgan to take 2000 men on an expedition against Union forces and facilities in the vicinity of Louisville, Kentucky. Their objective was to be the disruption of the Union supply, transportation, and communications systems supporting Rosecrans' forces in Tennessee. Morgan, however, went further than his orders. The daring and flamboyant Morgan took his famous raiders across the Ohio River and raided across the states of Indiana and Ohio. This threw the Union forces and the state governments of Indiana and Ohio into panic and diverted more than 60,000 Union troops to the end of dispatching or capturing the unexpected intruders. Perhaps some Union forces were diverted from opposing Lee's advance into Pennsylvania. The result, however, was that Morgan and most of his men were captured when they could not escape across the Ohio into West Virginia because heavy rains upstream made the Ohio unfordable at their planned exit point, Buffington Bar. About half of Morgan's men were captured at Buffington Bar on July 19th. Most of the rest were captured further north in Ohio by the end of July. Only about 300 managed to escape. This reduced Bragg's cavalry by almost 20% at a critical time.

In the meantime, Bragg, badly outnumbered by the ever-increasing forces of Rosecrans, was forced to retreat from Middle Tennessee to Chattanooga on July 3rd, the very same day Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania was halted at Gettysburg. The very next day on July 4th, Vicksburg and 30,000 troops under Pemberton were surrendered in Mississippi, giving Union forces effective control of transportation on most of the Mississippi River.

September of 1863, however, brought more favorable developments. On September 19-21 the Confederate forces under Bragg, reinforced by Longstreet from Virginia experienced a major victory over Union forces under Rosecrans at Chickamauga, Georgia, just south of Chattanooga. Wheeler's cavalry protected Bragg's flanks and gave Rosecrans' forces considerable harassment in their disorderly retreat to Chattanooga. On October 3, Wheeler's cavalry dealt a really devastating blow to Rosecrans' forces, destroying according to official Union estimates at least 500 supply wagons. Many believe the official Union estimates are far understated. The number of supply wagons destroyed was probably nearer 1800 total, leaving a smoking corridor of destruction from Chickamauga to Chattanooga..

On October 9, Major General Wheeler encamped near Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and at nearby Courtland met and began to court his future wife, the recently widowed, Mrs. Daniella Jones Sherrod, the daughter of Col. Richard Jones. They married after the war on February 8, 1866. After a brief time as a partner in the carriage business in New Orleans, they would return to North Alabama in 1870. Starting out as a planter and later becoming a self-taught lawyer, he would be elected to Congress in 1880, serving nearly 20 years representing his North Alabama district in Washington.

In November of 1863 Wheeler's Cavalry was assisting Longstreet at Kingston and Knoxville. On November 26, his cavalry repulsed the forces of Union General Hooker near Ringgold, Georgia. On December 2, Hardee replaced Bragg temporarily as Commander of the Army of Tennessee. On December 27, General Joseph E. Johnston assumed command of the Army of Tennessee and retained Wheeler as his Cavalry Commander, supporting Hood's and Hardee's Corps. On February 22, 1864 Wheeler turned back federal forces at Tunnel Hill near Dalton, Georgia, frustrating their plans for

assaulting Atlanta and delaying them until May. In May Wheeler again broke the federal movement into North Georgia and slowed Union General Sherman's movement toward Atlanta. With the death of Lee's Cavalry Commander, Lt. General J. E. B. Stuart on May 12 in Virginia, Wheeler became the highest ranking cavalry officer in the Confederate Army. On May 24, he received personal congratulations from General Johnston for destroying 80 Union supply wagons and capturing 100 prisoners at Cassville, Georgia, and continued to be a major nemesis to Union forces. Every effort to turn the Confederate flank and drive to Atlanta was met and successfully thwarted by Wheeler.

On July 17, 1864, John B. Hood replaced Johnston as Commander of the Army of Tennessee. On July 29-30, Wheeler's Cavalry force of 5000 men dealt Sherman's cavalry forces of 9000 men a series of stunning, one might even say astonishing, defeats. Wheeler routed divisions of Sherman's cavalry at three different points. He mauled and defeated McCook at Newnan. He routed and captured Stoneman and five of his Brigadier generals at Macon, and turned Garrard to flight northeast of Atlanta. In all the Confederates took 3200 prisoners and numerous supply wagons and artillery batteries. This was the worst and most disastrous defeat ever inflicted on Union Cavalry during the whole war. Unfortunately, the overwhelming manpower resources of the Union would be able to replace Sherman's losses within months, and supply them down to the last tent peg.

In August General Hood ordered Wheeler to take 2000 cavalry on a raid into Central Tennessee, but he returned demoralized with less than one thousand and according to Forrest only about 500 who were effective for combat. Meanwhile the reduction of cavalry in the Atlanta area left Hood unable to gather intelligence effectively or to successfully hinder the build-up of Union forces approaching Atlanta. At Jonesboro, just south of Atlanta, on August 30 to September 1, 1864, Hardee's Corp with portions of Stephen D. Lee's Corps and units of Wheeler's Cavalry attempted to parry a death blow to the strategic city of Atlanta by defending the remaining railroad connection between that city and Macon. This valiant endeavor was against odds nearly three to one. On September 2, General Hood was forced to evacuate Atlanta.

On October 4, Wheeler's men felled trees near Dalton, Georgia, and used them as rafts to destroy the Chattahoochee Bridge at Resaca, Georgia. In October and November of 1864 Hood headed for Tennessee in hopes of a surprise defeat of Union forces around Nashville. He left Wheeler to harass Sherman as he marched through Georgia. Although Wheeler's cavalry was successful in containing Sherman within a narrower swath of destruction than might have been, Sherman succeeded in leaving a fairly wide path of burning towns, homes, farms, crops, and dead livestock, thus devastating the Georgia economy. On November 26, Wheeler nearly captured one of Sherman's infamous and rising young cavalry stars, now transferred from Virginia, Judson "Killcavalry" Kilpatrick. Kilpatrick was the same age as Wheeler and was graduated two classes behind Wheeler at West Point in 1861. He was quite a different personality than Wheeler and seemed to have a personal vendetta against him. Kilpatrick's nickname "Killcavalry" was given to him by Union officers for his aggressive tactics, not for the amount of casualties inflicted on Confederates. He was one of Sherman's more devoted subordinates.

In December of 1864 Wheeler came under the criticism of Confederate Generals D. H. Hill and P. T. G. Beauregard. This criticism in turn came to the attention of President Davis. Wheeler's cavalrymen often had to travel very light and forage for food and supplies. Against very specific orders from Wheeler, however, some of his men had stolen chickens, small livestock, and food, and made similar depredations on an already hard -pressed civilian population. General Hardee came to Wheeler's defense and most of the charges were proven false. Responding to complaints, however, that Wheeler's forces were out of control, General Beauregard's Inspector General found Wheeler's Corp lacking in discipline, organization, leadership training, and proper records. He noted, however, that

the same conditions prevailed in the commands of Forrest and Wade Hampton. No charges were made against Wheeler, but a recommendation was made that the 28-year-old Wheeler be placed under the command of the 48-year-old South Carolinian, Wade Hampton. Beauregard stated that while Wheeler was a modest, gallant, zealous, and indefatigable officer, he was unable to control such a large cavalry force. In the meantime on February 11, Wheeler was successful in driving back the cavalry forces of his frequent rival, Union General Kilpatrick at Aiken, South Carolina.

On February 17, 1865, Wheeler was put under the command of Lieutenant General Wade Hampton. His responsibility was reduced by about half, but he continued to serve without complaint or bitterness. When Hampton personally informed Wheeler of the change in command he is said to have responded, "Certainly, General, I will receive your orders with pleasure." This tells us as much about the character of Wheeler as anything. Many officers on both sides would have resigned their commissions in bitterness and fury rather than take an apparent demotion or any sort of slight. Wheeler's response gives light to his concept of honor. His was not the kind of honor that sought personal glory or spent much time sulking about being unappreciated or slighted. To Wheeler honor was about doing the right thing regardless of personal recognition or personal cost. It was a matter of personal conscience of what duty and loyalty to higher causes than himself required.

February 17, was the same day General Sherman's Army pillaged and then burned Columbia, South Carolina. For the rest of February Wheeler's Cavalry continued to dog and harass Sherman's marauding forces as they destroyed and burned their way through South Carolina. Kilpatrick had become the leader of Sherman's mobile forces after Atlanta. Sherman had this to say about his new chief cavalry commander:

"I know Kilpatrick is a hell of a damned fool, but I want just that sort of man to command my cavalry."

Less than two weeks later, on February 28, 1865, the Confederate Congress promoted Wheeler to the rank of Lieutenant General. On March 9, Lt. General Wheeler again forced his rival, Union General Kilpatrick to flee in the night, much to his embarrassment, this time in his nightclothes.

On April 26, following the surrender of Lee at Appomattox, Virginia, on April 9, Johnston, again in command of the Army of Tennessee was forced to surrender at Bentonville, near Durham, North Carolina.

Wheeler issued a farewell to his cavalry command before departing to assist President Davis. Wheeler's farewell address included these words:

"During four years of struggle for liberty you have exhibited courage, fortitude, and devotion. You are the sole survivors of more than two hundred severely contested fields; you have participated in more than a thousand successful conflicts of arms. You are heroes, veterans, patriots...In bidding you adieu, I desire to tender my thanks for your gallantry in battle, your fortitude under suffering, and your devotion at all times to the holy cause you have done so much to maintain. I desire also to express my gratitude for the kind feeling you have seen fit to extend toward myself and to invoke on you the blessing of our heavenly Father, to whom we must always look in the hour of distress. Pilgrims in the cause of freedom, comrades in arms, I bid you farewell."

With the Confederate Armies collapsing all around him, with the Union in a frenzy because of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, "Little Joe," as his men often affectionately called him, embarked on one last knightly quest. He headed south to Georgia with a small volunteer escort to try and rescue President Davis. Such is the final tribute of knights to whom duty and honor and loyalty mean everything.

President Davis and his family were, however, captured on May 10, at Irwinville, Georgia, before Wheeler and his small escort could reach him. About three days later Lieutenant General Wheeler was himself captured.

Now prisoners, President Davis and his family, Vice President Alexander H. Stephens, Postmaster General Reagan, other cabinet and military staff and now Wheeler were taken to Augusta. There they were loaded on a prison boat for Savannah, guarded by about 50 mostly German speaking Union soldiers and accompanied by Union gunboats. During this time Wheeler saw that Mrs. Varina Davis was under much stress and volunteered to assist with caring for the Davis baby daughter, Winnie. Thus Lt. General Wheeler was not too proud to walk the deck of the prison boat holding an infant on his shoulder. True to his knightly, always resourceful, and energetic nature, Wheeler also devised a plan for President Davis to escape, but it was foiled before it could be put in action. From Savannah Wheeler was taken as prisoner of War to Fort Delaware and was not released until June 8, 1865. So ended the Confederate Cavalry career of "Fightin' Joe" Wheeler. President Jefferson Davis described him as "one of the ablest, bravest and most skillful of cavalry commanders."

Wheeler's dedication to the cause of liberty did not end, however, with the War in 1865. In 1880 he was elected to the U. S. Congress and continued to fight for States Rights, constitutional liberties, and against unjust tariffs. Wheeler also had a respect for all soldiers and for justice and honor no matter what the color of the uniform. In 1882 Wheeler defended one of his former instructors at West Point, former Union General Fitz John Porter, before the U. S. House against accusations made by Union General John Pope, trying to make Porter the scapegoat for losing the Second Battle of Manassas. Porter was acquitted and commended by Congress. On July 13, 1894, he gave a speech on the floor of Congress educating his colleagues on the causes of the War of 1861-1865. This scholarly speech was printed in the Richmond Dispatch on July 31, 1894, and may be read today on the Internet.

See <http://www.civilwarhome.com/wheelercauses.htm>

Wheeler turned out to be a scholarly and gentlemanly Congressman, but he was as always full of energy, and sometimes gave very fiery, sharply worded speeches. One of Wheeler's passions was Cuba. He was an outspoken opponent of Spanish misrule in Cuba and an advocate for Cuban independence. Following the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, he petitioned President McKinley to serve in the U. S. Army to liberate Cuba. McKinley made him a Major General of Volunteers in the U. S. Army. His dismounted cavalry, which included Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders," took San Juan Hill near Santiago and Wheeler returned a hero and symbol of a reunited nation.

Joseph Wheeler, famed Confederate Cavalry leader, highly respected Alabama Congressman, and hero of the Spanish-American War died on January 25, 1906, while on a visit to Brooklyn, New York. The whole nation, North and South mourned. He is one of the few Confederate officers buried at Arlington Cemetery in Virginia. His life and character could very well be summed up by the West Point Motto: Duty, Honor, Country.

Completed on Memorial Day, May 26, 2003

by Mike Scruggs A compatriot of Fighting Joe Wheeler Post 1372 of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, Birmingham, Alabama