

**South Carolina's  
Major-General  
Joseph Brevard Kershaw**  
(1822-1894)



General Kershaw emerged from the War Between the States with the reputation of being one of the premier generals in the Army of Northern Virginia. Detailed studies by numerous postwar scholars and historians ever since have reached the same conclusion. Ed Bearss, one of the nation's most prominent historians of the war, wrote, "Few if any units were more capable or terrible in battle as Kershaw's Brigade." He added, "[Kershaw] repeatedly demonstrated he was without peer as a combat leader".

A native of Camden, South Carolina and the grandson of a Revolutionary War hero for whom Kershaw County was named, General Kershaw was orphaned at age seven. Making the best of his secondary school education, he passed the bar exam in 1843 without attending college. Hard work, a keen and clear-thinking mind along with a gentlemanly and approachable countenance were among his life-long attributes. He was described as, "... a man of high character, moral worthy, zealous and true." Kershaw served briefly in the Mexican-American War as a Lieutenant in South Carolina's famed Palmetto Regiment. Politically active, he served in the state legislature and as a member of the 1860 Secession Convention. Additionally, his militia unit elected him as its Colonel in 1859 and, upon forming the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Volunteers in early 1861, he was elected Colonel of the regiment.

He and his regiment, at Charleston when Fort Sumter was taken in April 1861, were shortly afterward sent to Virginia. There they played a pivotal role in the First Battle of Manassas bringing him much acclaim from, among others, Generals Jubal Early and James Longstreet. Appointed a Brigadier-General in February 1862, he and his superb brigade solidified their reputations at Savage's Station. His division commander, Major-General Lafayette McClaws, wrote, "I beg leave to call attention to the gallantry, cool, yet daring, courage and skill in the management of his gallant command exhibited by General Kershaw."

He received additional acclaim for action at Sharpsburg. At Fredericksburg, Kershaw assumed command at Marye's heights when General Thomas Cobb was mortally wounded. Bringing his brigade to reinforce Cobb's Georgian's there, Kershaw, while mounted, rode to the crest of the hill in spite of the furious fighting going on. One source wrote that when he reined in his horse, "...the Yankees withheld their fire as if out of respect and that Kershaw took off his hat in acknowledgement..." before returning to his line and commanding that site until the fighting ended.

On the second day at Gettysburg amidst the intense fighting in the Peach Orchard, his brigade fought stubbornly in confused fighting against a numerically superior foe. Continually adjusting the brigade alignment, refusing his flanks to meet threats, and establishing offensive coordination with other brigades at critical times, Kershaw displayed adeptness and superb battlefield skill.

In September 1863, Kershaw's Brigade moved with Lt. General James Longstreet to Georgia and was quickly in action at Chickamauga. The battle ended as a huge Confederate victory and Kershaw again played a major role. In early November Longstreet launched his Tennessee campaign which resulted in several engagements, battle against the winter elements, and an unsuccessful attempt to take Knoxville before going into winter quarters. Kershaw performed well under the adverse circumstances in this period and received promotion to Major-General in early 1864 just prior to Longstreet's Corps return to Virginia.

At The Wilderness he displayed confidence and skill in his first trial as a division commander. There, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, other personal attributes attesting to his superb soldierly qualities were brought into play. While riding with Longstreet as the battle raged, friendly fire wounded Longstreet, killed General Micah Jenkins and two of Kershaw's staff. Immediately recognizing the situation, Kershaw showed awareness, true leadership and personal courage by his personal efforts in defusing the situation and bringing order to the scene. His prompt and crucial actions in those tense moments, free of panic or confusion, prevented an even deeper calamity.

Kershaw and his division were heavily involved in the intense fighting at Spotsylvania Court House, Cold Harbor and elsewhere in the fall of 1864. His division served for a period with General Early in the Shenandoah Valley before returning to the trenches around Petersburg. Kershaw was one of six Confederate generals captured at Sailor's Creek April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1865. Though treated kindly, he was not offered parole but sent to Fort Warren in Boston Harbor where he remained as a prisoner of war until late July.

Returning to his beloved home of Camden after four years of meritorious service, Kershaw resumed his legal profession. After Reconstruction he was elected a district judge, a position he held until 1893 when his health began failing. He died peacefully a year later leaving behind a legacy of military excellence, a highly respected judicial career, and devoted service to the Palmetto State.