

A Soldier to the Last: Maj. Gen. Joseph Wheeler in Blue and Gray

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Review

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Longacre, Edward G. *A Soldier to the Last: Maj. Gen. Joseph Wheeler in Blue and Gray*. Potomac Books, Inc., \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 9781574885910

Joe Wheeler's Cavalry

An Unembellished Account

Fightin' Joe Wheeler was one of a seemingly endless parade of notable cavalry commanders spawned by the Confederacy during the four years of the Civil War. Many of their biographers, if not most, seem to have fallen victim to biographer's syndrome, a dreadful affliction that renders the biographer so enmeshed in the personality of their subject that they tell the tale of a man whom they *wished* had existed, instead of the man who *really* existed. Of course the often-astonishing exploits of these Confederate knights of the saddle makes infection all too easy, but the consequences are that many of the horse-soldiers have been transformed \hat{u} in the literature \hat{u} into virtual demigods.

Careful reading of many of those biographies also suggests either that their authors did not fully understand the actual role of cavalry in a 19th century army, or that they chose to ignore or minimize the more mundane aspects of the life of a cavalryman. Many biographies foster the widespread perception that the sole function of cavalry was to conduct glamorous and exciting deep penetration raids behind enemy lines during which they wrought terror and havoc upon a hapless and helpless enemy, and returned crowned in glory: Jeb Stuart riding completely around Union General George McClellan's army before Gettysburg, or Nathan Bedford Forrest wrecking Union communications and spreading panic in West Tennessee in the summer of 1862, just before the final offensive that brought Vicksburg down.

Edward Longacre is different. In his hands, Joseph Wheeler's cavalry is shown without embellishment in its proper role as one component of the triad of services comprising an army: cavalry, infantry, and artillery. He actually tells the

story of Civil War cavalry like it was. Far from being a life of glorious saber-swinging charges by cavaliers with feathers in their hats, wreathed in clouds of glory and echoing triumphant trumpet blasts, it was mostly a life of incredible hardship and privation, of endless rain-drenched hours in the saddle with no time to stop and cook a hot meal, and always interspersed with sharp, vicious little mini-battles with their blue-coated counterparts. That is because the primary function of the cavalry was to act as the eyes and ears of the army. They probed enemy lines to obtain information, not to seek a fight. When not gathering intelligence, they guarded the flanks of an army on the march; they covered the rear of an army in retreat; they acted as a trip-wire to give warning of enemy movements; they guarded wagon trains carrying supplies; when rations were short for the priceless infantry, their mobility allowed them to forage over wider sweeps of countryside. Their role in battle was usually limited to protecting the flanks of the infantry formations and doing their best to dislocate enemy turning movements. Only rarely, and then only under special circumstances, did the commanding general send them on raids behind enemy lines. Even in such cases, their mission was not to fight, but rather to burn enemy wagon trains or destroy bridges and railroads. When the army commander did send them on a raid, it was only after carefully weighing the potential damage to the enemy's logistics against the temporary loss (or permanent loss, if the raiders were lost in the process!) of his eyes and ears.

Especially during periods of withdrawal or retreat the duties of the cavalry became onerous indeed; these were often periods during which the cavalry suffered intensely, not only from constant skirmishing with the advancing enemy, but from exhaustion, hunger, exposure, and sometimes the despair that is the inevitable handmaiden of defeat. The infantry could often rest; the cavalry could not. In this regard, it well to remember that despite the infantry's oft-repeated slur *Who ever saw a dead cavalryman?* the infantry nevertheless held the cavalry in esteem, because they knew that, at least in a well-commanded army, between them and the enemy there was always a screen of cavalymen who would protect the infantry no matter how tired, wet, and hungry they were. All of this Longacre makes clear. And this is a service to the readers of Civil War history that is long overdue.

Nor is that all. He makes it very clear that in company with many other commanders of both Blue and Gray, Wheeler's more-than-generous ego led him to exaggerate his achievements and minimize his defeats. On more than one occasion his tendency to inflate the numbers of men available for duty led his

army commanders, first Braxton Bragg and then John Bell Hood, to undertake operations that were premised on cavalry strengths that simply did not exist — except in Wheeler's imagination. It is refreshing indeed to have a biographer present even one of the great cavalry leaders as merely human.

That having been said, Longacre's book is not without flaws. If, as Belisarius of Byzantium is alleged to have said, *strategy is no more than applied geography*, then as a matter of principle, every study of military operations should be supported by maps on which are noted every geographic place-name mentioned in the text. Longacre's maps of Bragg's 1862 campaign in Kentucky do not meet this criterion. Even though I am not unfamiliar with the geography of Kentucky, I was lost much of the time. The same is true of the map covering Sherman's campaign in the Carolinas.

Perhaps less important but still significant, Longacre is absolutely meticulous about keeping the reader aware of the moment-by-moment composition of the forces under Wheeler's control. The problem is that, especially toward the end of the war, the composition changed on an almost daily basis, and reading a listing of those changes is rather like reading I Chronicles: 1-8; it may be important to genealogists, but it lacks narrative verve.

In sum, Longacre has produced a book which every student of the Civil War should acquire, in part because it presents the most accurate picture of 19th century cavalry operations yet available, in part because it provides an invaluable insight into how the Confederacy — plagued by ever-diminishing resources — managed its war in the West, and finally because it is a thorough and deeply thoughtful portrait of Joseph Wheeler, who despite his flaws was truly a Confederate Paladin.

Warren E. Grabau earned a Master of Science in Geology/Geography from Michigan State University in 1950 and worked in a variety of related fields until 1986, at which time he traded his vocation (science) for his avocation (military history).