

“Those Damned Black Hats”: The Iron Brigade in the Civil War

By Adam Ruschau
Wittenberg University Class of 2001

On the early morning of July 1, 1863, General John Buford's two brigades of Union cavalry held a thin line along a low ridge just west of the town of Gettysburg. Buford's men were facing a Confederate force that vastly outnumbered them and who had reinforcements near by. When one of Buford's aides, up in the cupola atop the Lutheran seminary, spotted blue troops coming from the southeast, the cavalry men received a welcome sight; the infantry had finally arrived to support them. Among the first two infantry brigades to arrive on the field was the brigade commanded by General Solomon Meredith, known throughout the Union army by their nickname: the Iron Brigade. This brigade was famous for their tenacity in battle. Their distinctive black Hardee hats gave them a different appearance than most of the rest of the army. (During the Chancellorsville campaign, less than two months earlier, one of Berdan's Sharpshooters, recalling a march, mentioning the Iron Brigade:

[A]s the great Western of Iron Brigade passed, looking like giants with their tall black hats, they were greeted with hearty cheers. . . . And giants they were, in action. . . . I look back and see that famed body of troops marching up that long muddy hill unmindful of the pouring rain, but full of life and spirit, with steady step, filling the entire roadway, their big black hats and feathers conspicuous.¹⁾

The men of the Iron Brigade quickly formed into line of battle and relieved Buford's tired cavalry. As they started to engage the Confederates, one Confederate soldier was said to remark "There are those damned black-hatted fellows again! Tain't no militia. It's the Army of the Potomac."²⁾

The Confederates soon realized they were

not facing weak militia or cavalry, but crack Union infantry. The battle of Gettysburg was on. After the battle, a public journal would state that "It was to the Iron Brigade more than any other that the nation owes its salvation at Gettysburg..."³⁾

T. Henry Williams called the Iron Brigade "probably the best fighting brigade in all the army."⁴⁾ It served throughout the Civil War, being formed shortly after the battle of First Bull Run. In all the battles it fought in, it was never routed,⁵⁾ something few brigades in the Union Army of the Potomac can claim. It was the only all western brigade in the eastern Union armies.⁶⁾ Other brigades in the Civil War had nicknames. Many, such as the Excelsior Brigade, the Irish Brigade, and the Louisiana Tigers, received their nicknames before they saw action. Relatively few brigades earned their nicknames for their performance in battle, like the Stonewall Brigade and, of course, the Iron Brigade.

What made the Iron Brigade such an effective fighting force? What enabled them to make some of the bravest stands and charges in the Civil War? Historians have repeatedly stressed some of the same issues and some different ones. Jean P. Ebling believes that the brigade's fighting spirit, (or unit pride or *esprit de corps*), stemmed from their pride in being volunteers, the high quality of leadership in the brigade, the skilled training they received, and their successful performance in battle.⁷⁾ Meanwhile, Alan T. Nolan, probably the acknowledged expert on the Iron Brigade, claims that "... unusual leadership, the coincidental fact of the opportunity to be trained as soldiers, and *esprit de corps* made the Iron Brigade what it was- the best fighting brigade in the Federal armies."⁸⁾ Both of these descriptions of what

made the Iron Brigade good fighters have merit. The brigade's leadership and training had a huge impact on crafting the brigade into a fighting unit, but what really sustained it throughout numerous battles was its reputation. They built for themselves a reputation as the best fighters in the army. It was something the men were very proud of, and no matter how terrible the odds, the men felt they have to live up to that reputation. This is what truly made the Iron Brigade great. Their story is one of great courage, sacrifice, stubbornness, and determination.

When the war broke out in April 1861⁹, the state of Wisconsin, in the initial call for troops, was called to furnish only one regiment. Instead of only one regiment, Wisconsin furnished two. The Second Wisconsin Volunteers were mustered into federal service on 11 June 1861 and were assigned to General Irvin McDowell's command near Washington. Initially enlisting for only three months, before they would see action they re-enlisted for three years. During the campaign of First Bull Run, the Second served in General William T. Sherman's brigade. There they saw their first action and learned of the horror's of war. Sherman wrote of the Second that "This regiment ascended to the brow of the hill steadily, received the severe fire of the enemy, returned it with spirit, and advanced delivering its fire."¹⁰ First Bull Run had been a disaster for the Union, but the Second Wisconsin had fought fairly well in spite of the federal route. Around Washington, as the army was being reorganized by General George B. McClellan, three new regiments arrived: the Sixth Wisconsin, the Seventh Wisconsin, and the Nineteenth Indiana. These new regiments were assigned into a brigade along with the Second Wisconsin and the brigade was placed under command of General Rufus King. This was start of the brigade that would later be known among the annals of war as the Iron Brigade.

King's brigade of Westerners, as the brigade was soon called, was still assigned to General McDowell's command, what would later become the First Corps of the Army of the Potomac. In the spring of 1862, much to the disappointment of the green regiments, McDowell's corps did not participate in

McClellan's Peninsula campaign. Changes were made to the brigade as well. King was promoted to command the division to which the western brigade belonged and a regular army artillery captain named John Gibbon was promoted to brigadier general and assumed command of the brigade. The men from Wisconsin and Indiana did not yet know it, but their new commander was to have a such an impact that "after the war, if called upon to name the commander of the Iron Brigade, most of the veterans would have unhesitatingly named the man they served under for only six months in 1862— John A. Gibbon."¹¹

As a regular army man, Gibbon set about making his volunteer soldiers more like regulars. Gibbon already had a positive view of the men he would command noting that "from the character of these I was already impressed with the conviction that all they needed was some discipline and drill to make them first class soldiers and my anticipations were more than realized."¹² Within a week of taking command he issued his men new uniforms, the dress uniforms of the regular army, complete with the black regulation hat, known as the Hardee hat.¹³ With this action, "Gibbon achieved organizational unity by the simple expedient of providing his troops with a distinctive uniform."¹⁴ His men were already distinct in makeup from the rest of the army, and now they were distinctive in looks as well. With his men looking like regulars, Gibbon next set out to train them to act like regulars. Overhearing a remark that he was just an artillery officer and knew nothing of infantry drill, Gibbon immediately set out to drill his brigade relentlessly, to make it the best drilled brigade in the army.¹⁵ The result of this drill was that "before the brigade had been in action, it won a reputation as a superior unit."¹⁶ One soldier in the brigade wrote later that "it was Gibbon who did much to teach us how to be soldiers."¹⁷ While McClellan's Army of the Potomac was fiercely fighting in the Peninsula, McDowell's forces waited, training, defending Washington from the Confederate threat of Stonewall Jackson.

In Gibbon's brigade, some changes were made in the field officers of some of the

regiments. After weeding out some officers that were unfit for command or transferred, the brigade finally had generally good quality officers to lead them at the regimental level as well as the brigade level. In Second Wisconsin, Colonel Edgar O'Connor, a West Pointer, commanded the regiment with Lieutenant Colonel Lucius Fairchild as second in command. Gibbon had a very high opinion of both of these men and it was his opinion that they were what made the Second such an outstanding regiment.¹⁸ The Sixth Wisconsin had some outstanding leadership as well. Colonel Lysander Cutler, Lt. Colonel Edward Bragg, and Major Rufus Dawes constituted the Sixth's field officers. (Both Cutler and Bragg would eventually command the brigade.) Although none of them had been to West Point they would prove their caliber as leaders in the upcoming battles. The leadership in the Seventh Wisconsin and Nineteenth Indiana, while not as highly regarded as that of the Second and Sixth¹⁹, was also quite capable. The Seventh was commanded by Colonel William Robinson, while the Nineteenth was commanded by Colonel Solomon Meredith, who received his commission due to his political connections, who did not get along well with General Gibbon and tried to use his political influence to both remove his regiment from Gibbon's brigade and to get appointed a brigadier general. (He would later succeed in the later.) Although there was friction between Gibbon and Meredith, Meredith proved himself a capable leader, even if he was a political appointee. With capable officers and good, strict training, "Gibbon's Black Hats", the new nickname of the brigade, were shaping up into a fine body of men. The question was, how would these well trained and well led men act in combat? The brigade would soon find out.

In late Spring of 1862, McClellan's Peninsula campaign started to fall apart after a new southern general, Robert E. Lee, took command of the Confederates. With McClellan's forces still disembarking from the Peninsula, the scattered Union forces in northern Virginia, which Gibbon's brigade was part of, faced a severe threat. Not only were they threatened by Stonewall Jackson's forces, but now Lee's army

was moving up to join forces with Jackson. Quickly, the scattered commands were gathered together and placed under command of General John Pope. As elements of the Army of the Potomac arrived back in Washington, they were filtered down into Pope's Army of Virginia. In a daring move, General Jackson moved his army in between Pope and Washington, in the area near where the battle of First Bull Run had been fought a little over year ago. As Pope's army concentrated to meet this threat, King's division, to which Gibbon's Brigade belonged, marched along the Warrenton Turnpike towards Centerville on August 28. Hatch's brigade was the first brigade in line²⁰, Gibbon's second, and Doubleday's and Patrick's brigades behind Gibbon. Hatch's brigade was a fair ways ahead of Gibbon's. As dusk was setting in, Gibbon's four regiments along with the brigade's artillery, Battery B, Fourth U. S. Artillery, (Gibbon's old command), marched past the farm of John Brawner. Unbeknownst to the Westerners, Jackson's forces were very close and he was planing to attack this lone brigade marching across his front. As the brigade passed a rectangular wood, Gibbon looked to the north and saw a Confederate artillery battery unlimbering and preparing to fire on his men. The Confederate battery fired several rounds at Gibbon's surprised brigade before Gibbon, suspecting that the battery was alone and unsupported,²¹ ordered Battery B up to neutralize that battery's fire. He also sent the Second Wisconsin, his only veteran regiment, forward, believing he might be able to capture the enemy battery. As the Second moved forward and came to the crest of the low ridge on which the was situated, they were fired upon by the regiments Jackson had sent forward to attack. It was then, Gibbon realized his men were in for a serious engagement.

The Battle of Brawner's Farm, also known as Gainsville or Groveton in some history texts, pitted Gibbon's one brigade against elements of two Confederate divisions.²² As the Second Wisconsin became engaged, Gibbon ordered the Nineteenth Indiana to move into line on the left of the Second, and the Seventh Wisconsin on the right of the Second. The Sixth Wisconsin was ordered to right of the Seventh with a

sizable gap in between the two regiments. Realizing his brigade was seriously outnumbered, Gibbon sent urgent requests for reinforcements. The only reinforcements he received were two regiments from Doubleday's brigade which moved into line between the Seventh and Sixth Wisconsin. The fighting was fierce. Rufus Dawes, of the Sixth Wisconsin, said of the battle; "the two crowds, they could hardly be called lines, were within, it seemed to me, fifty yards of each other and they were pouring musketry into each other as rapidly as men could load and shoot."²³ The Confederate brigades of Taliaferro, Baylor, Lawton, and Trimble, as well as some other brigades in support, pressed Gibbon's men for over an hour. The Westerners held their ground, even though they were taking appalling casualties. The more severe fighting was on the Union left flank, near the farm buildings. Seeing the other regiments of the brigade under harsher fire than his own, Dawes remarked "How long our men withstood this last attack, I cannot estimate, but in the history of war, it is doubtful whether there was ever more stubborn courage than was displayed by the Second and Seventh Wisconsin and Nineteenth Indiana regiments, on this field of battle."²⁴ Colonel O'Connor, of the Second Wisconsin, was killed, and Colonel Meredith's horse was shot out from under him injuring him as it fell. On the right, Dawes was receiving his orders from Colonel Cutler when Cutler was wounded. Remaining calm, he said to Major Dawes, "Tell Colonel Bragg to take command, I am shot."²⁵ No matter how many casualties they took, the brigade still held its ground. Even Jackson remarked after the battle that, the federals "maintained their ground with obstinate determination."²⁶ Finally with nightfall and exhausted men, the Confederates halted their attack and assumed their prior position. Gibbon then moved his brigade off the field, and in a conference at King's headquarters it was decided that they would continue with their original orders to march towards Centerville, but they would do it via Manassas Junction, to the south.

Gibbon's brigade had fought their first engagement and showed what they were made of. "Outnumbered, they had fought to a standstill the best men in the Army of Northern

Virginia."²⁷ Bragg would write after the war that "... there it was that Jackson's stubborn fighters learned that iron was just as enduring and immovable as stone."²⁸ (A reference to the Confederate's "Stonewall Brigade", which faced the Iron Brigade at Brawner's Farm.) The men of the brigade who hadn't seen combat before were eager for their first fight, but after Brawner's Farm, Dawes would write that "in our future history we will always be found ready but never again anxious."²⁹ The brigade had proved itself, but had suffered heavy casualties. Almost one third of the brigade was lost at Brawner Farm, losing a total of 751 men.³⁰ Even though the brigade had behaved with great gallantry, they received little recognition for it³¹ and the small battle they fought was overshadowed by the battle of Second Bull Run, which was to be fought in the days immediately following Brawner's Farm. The question still stands; how was this brigade of mostly green, untried regiments able to hold their ground with steady determination in the face of vastly superior numbers? It seems unlikely that only excellent leadership and discipline held them to the line. Before the brigade had seen action, the Second Wisconsin men tended to view themselves in higher regard than their brigade members since they were veterans already. This constant boasting by the Second may have forced them to live up to this boast and keep from being disgraced at Brawner's Farm. This boasting may have also compelled the other regiments to try and perform as well or better than the Second Wisconsin.³² This was the start of their growing reputation. Not only were they one of the best drilled brigades, they were now one of the best fighting brigades.

During the battle of Second Bull Run, Gibbon's brigade saw relatively little action until the end. When Longstreet's Confederate corps attacked the Union left flank, the flank collapsed and the Union army began to route. Gibbon's brigade was chosen to be the rear guard of the entire army. While Gibbon's men were holding their line as the rest of the army retreated, General Philip Kearny rode up to Gibbon, disgusted that the army was being routed again on the same battlefield as First Bull Run, and told him to hold his position until General's

Reno's men, which were still fighting, were able to retreat past them. Kearny would be killed in action a week or two later and in one of his last letters he wrote of Second Bull Run saying, "the army ran like sheep, all but a General Reno and a General Gibbon."³³ Gibbon's brigade held on until the rest of the army past and then conducted a fighting retreat with his brigade. During the entire battle of Second Bull Run Gibbon's brigade lost another 120 men.³⁴ They were able to hold off the Confederates long enough for the army to regroup and fall back in an orderly fashion.

Not long after Second Bull Run, Lee decided to invade Maryland. The Union army was reorganized during the same period of time. Pope was removed from command, and McClellan was put in command again. Pope's Army of Virginia was merged into the Army of the Potomac and the corps to which Gibbon's brigade belonged was designated the First Corps and placed under the command of General Joseph Hooker. McClellan moved his army to try and get at Lee's divided forces. In his way, was South Mountain. There were several passes in South Mountain that were defended by Confederates. One of these was Turner's Gap which Gibbon's brigade was heading for. While on the march, Gibbon went to see General McClellan to request a new regiment for his brigade. He explained to McClellan that his brigade was made of western men and requested that the new regiment also be a western regiment. McClellan agreed and promised Gibbon that the first western regiment he received would go to Gibbon's brigade. Returning to his brigade, he told them what General McClellan had said and also that McClellan had told him that if the army was to do a few more days hard marching, they would destroy Lee's army. Urging his men to ridicule stragglers along the line of march, brought more pride to the men and eventually developed into the brigade's tradition of having no stragglers.

On September 14, the battle for South Mountain was on. Gibbon's brigade was detached from the division and moved into position at the base of Turner's Gap where the National Road passed through the gap. There the brigade waited until about five o'clock in the

afternoon³⁵, when it was ordered to attack the gap up the National Road. The brigade marched up the road, the Nineteenth Indiana on the left of the turnpike, with the Second Wisconsin behind them, in support, and the Seventh Wisconsin on the right of the turnpike, with the Sixth Wisconsin supporting them.³⁶ As they marched forward, a section of Battery B was placed on the road, to support the advance. They were attacking up a mountain side against Colquitt's brigade of D. H. Hill's division. They advanced steadily, driving back Colquitt's pickets. Soon the Seventh Wisconsin came up against a stone wall, behind which the Confederates took shelter and poured deadly fire onto the Seventh. The Confederates behind the wall started moving around the Seventh's right flank and poured flanking fire into them. Captain John B. Callis, commanding the Seventh, since the three field officers of the Seventh had been wounded at Brawner's Farm, quickly sent word the Colonel Bragg, of the Sixth, asking for support. Bragg quickly wheeled his regiment to the right. Dawes, commanding the right wing of the Sixth, was ordered by Bragg to have his men to fire a volley into the woods where the flanking fire had been coming from. As soon as they had fired this volley, Dawes heard Bragg order, "Have your men lie down on the ground, I am going over you."³⁷ Dawes gave the order and right wing lay down as the left wing, commanded by Bragg, which had moved into position behind the right wing while the volley had been fired, charged over their prone comrades and fired another volley into the woods. The right wing then repeated this maneuver and did this several times, attacking the woods and driving off the Confederates that were there. Meanwhile, on the left of the road, the Nineteenth Indiana swept forward running into slight opposition. As they moved up parallel to the Seventh Wisconsin which was still bogged down by the Confederates behind the stone wall. The Second Wisconsin then came up and formed a line parallel to the turnpike and charged into the flank the Confederates behind the stone wall. This forced them to fall back. The Sixth Wisconsin, moving up, found a position to inflict severe fire on the main body of

Confederates. As dark came the fighting ceased, and the Confederates withdrew. Late in the night, the brigade was relieved by fresh troops, except the Sixth Wisconsin which stayed on the field all night, in their advanced position.

Bragg's report rings with sarcasm saying, "Soon after daylight my regiment was relieved by the Second New York from Gorman's brigade, who had been lying in the field, under cover of a stone wall, at a safe distance in the rear, refreshing themselves with a good night's sleep, after a long and fatiguing march of some 10 miles."³⁸

Watching the battle from his headquarters, was General McClellan and General Hooker. They were both very impressed with the brigades performance in the battle. After the war, McClellan related his verbal exchange with General Hooker that reportedly gave the Iron Brigade its nickname.

McClellan: "What troops are those fighting on the Pike?"

Hooker: "General Gibbon's Brigade of Western men."

McClellan: "They must be made of iron."

Hooker: "By the Eternal, they are iron! If you had seen them at Bull Run as I did, you would know them to be iron."

McClellan: "Why, General Hooker, they fight equal to the best troops in the world."³⁹

Gibbons Black Hats had new nickname that would come into popular use just after the battle of Antietam, only three days away. After South Mountain, McClellan wrote to the governor of Wisconsin saying:

I beg to add my great admiration of the conduct of the three Wisconsin regiment in General Gibbon's brigade. I have seen them under fire acting in a manner that reflects the greatest possible credit and honor upon themselves and their state. They are equal to the best troops in any army in the world.⁴⁰

At Brawner's Farm, the brigade had proved itself in battle, but was unnoticed; at South Mountain, the brigade had shown its worth under the eye of the commanding general and had received the nickname that would follow them ever after.

The Iron Brigade had performed exceedingly well at South Mountain. Gibbon would write that "the conduct of the officers and men was during the engagement everything that could be desired, and they maintained their well-earned reputation for gallantry and discipline . . ."⁴¹ The brigade was building a reputation that they would have to live up to, but it was also a costly one. The brigade lost 318 men at South Mountain, heavy casualties.⁴² The brigade had shown itself admirably so far in this trial by fire, but Antietam was only three days away.

After the Union gained possession of the passes through South Mountain, they marched towards Sharpsburg, where Lee was trying to concentrate his forces. McClellan decided to attack on the morning of September 17. Hooker's First Corps would open the assault, attacking from north, through the Miller farm which had a cornfield just to the south of it. The Iron Brigade was to be in the first wave of the assault. They would be going up against some of the same men they fought at Brawner's Farm. Early in the morning, the brigade marched down the Hagerstown turnpike, the Seventh Wisconsin and the Nineteenth Indiana on the right of the turnpike, and the Second Wisconsin on the left, with the Sixth Wisconsin in two groups on both sides of the turnpike.⁴³ Battery B moved in behind them in support. The bloodiest day in American history had begun.

As the regiments advanced, the Second Wisconsin and part of the Sixth, commanded by Major Dawes, moved through the cornfield. As they were moving through the corn, the other regiments of the brigade and the rest of the Sixth Wisconsin, under Colonel Bragg, moved forward and encountered the enemy in the woods. After some hard fighting the Confederates fell back, and Colonel Bragg fell wounded. While the Seventh Wisconsin and Nineteenth Indiana were clearing out the West Woods, the Sixth and Second Wisconsin appeared at the edge of the cornfield, where they received heavy fire from the Confederates. Nevertheless, the Sixth and Second Wisconsin pushed forward towards the Dunker church at the end of the clearing. The Confederates soon counter attacked however, and after a brief attempt to hold their position,

the Sixth and Second were forced to withdraw through the corn. Bragg wrote of this that "the enemy broke and ran before their advance, leaving his dead and wounded in large numbers on the field, and the regiment pursued, and only retired again in the presence of a host that would have been madness to have opposed with a handful of men, brave though they were and fearless."⁴⁴ As they withdrew, the Confederates pressed their advantage and tried to take Battery B. The men of the Second and Sixth attempted to defend the battery. Gibbon himself was sighting some of the cannons of the battery, pouring double canister into the attacking Confederates. Just when it looked as if the battery might be lost, Lt. Colonel Bachman, commanding the Nineteenth Indiana in the absence of Colonel Meredith, led the Nineteenth Indiana in charge onto the flank of the attacking Confederates. This brave charge forced the enemy back, but the Nineteenth lost heavily; Bachman and many others were killed in the charge. The battery was saved and shortly after this, the Iron Brigade was relieved by another, and sent to the rear to reform. Later in the battle, many of the Union regiments were routed and the Iron Brigade attempted to stop the route. Captain John Kellogg, of the Sixth Wisconsin, rallied some of the stragglers behind a stone wall. Then General Doubleday, commanding the division, rode up and asked Kellogg "What regiment is this?" "A regiment of stragglers" Kellogg replied. "What regiment do you belong to?" "The Sixth Wisconsin, sir." "Are these Wisconsin men?" Then Kellogg replied, "No sir, Wisconsin men never run."⁴⁵ The men of the Iron Brigade had again performed exceedingly well in battle.

In just three weeks, the Iron Brigade had fought in four engagements, earned a reputation as one of the best brigades in the Union army, and suffered near catastrophic casualties. The brigade lost another 348 men at Antietam.⁴⁶ Gibbon would say of this that "the loss of the brigade is again evidence of its well-earned honors."⁴⁷ Between Brawner's Farm and Antietam, the brigade had lost 1,592 casualties,⁴⁸ far more than fifty percent casualties. They had fought valiantly and both earned and upheld their reputation. It has been written that "... if

South Mountain had given them a reputation, Antietam reinforced it."⁴⁹

After Lee retreated from the battlefield at Antietam, the Union army stayed around Sharpsburg, regrouping and reorganizing itself. McClellan was removed from command and Ambrose Burnside was put in charge. Hooker was promoted to command one of Burnside's grand divisions and General Reynolds was placed in command of the First Corps. While this was going on, the Twenty-fourth Michigan regiment arrived at the army and was assigned to the Iron Brigade. While Colonel Henry Morrow of the Twenty-fourth brought his regiment before the veterans of the Iron Brigade, and extolled their qualities, the Wisconsin and Indiana men were silent and did not enthusiastically welcome the new members. As one member of the Twenty-fourth later put it, they "had a right to know before accepting our full fellowship if we, too, had the mettle to sustain the honor of the brigade."⁵⁰ The men of the Twenty-fourth, although not pleased with the cool reception they received from the other regiments, were excited to be part of "a fighting brigade, a fighting division and a fighting corps, all commanded by fighting generals."⁵¹ Although they didn't show it openly, many of the officers and men of the Wisconsin and Indiana regiments thought fairly highly of their new Michigan companions. Gibbon wrote of it that "from its bearing I have no doubt it will not be long before it will be a worthy member of the 'Black Hats.'"⁵² Gibbon would not be with the brigade long enough to see this, though. Soon after the Twenty-fourth joined the brigade, Gibbon was offered a divisional command and took it, but not without regrets. Gibbon had created the Iron Brigade, and the men who served in it would always think of it as Gibbon's brigade.

Even more distressing to Gibbon than leaving his precious brigade, was the new commander. Solomon Meredith finally received his promotion to brigadier general and received command of the Iron Brigade. Although the way in which got the promotion and Gibbon's dislike of him paint Meredith in a bad light, it is worth noting that "whatever Meredith's faults, Gibbon alone left a record unfavorable to

him.⁵³ In fact, "the soldiers' letters and diaries are warmly admiring of Meredith."⁵⁴ Along with a new commander of the brigade, some old faces came back as well. Colonels Robinson and Cutler had recovered from their wounds enough to retake the field. The army then proceeded to march south towards Fredricksburg and another looming battle with Lee's army.

On December 12, the First Corps crossed on pontoon bridges over the Rappahannock, south of Fredricksburg, and took up position across from Stonewall Jackson's Confederate corps. The battle opened the next morning. While several Union corps assaulted the Confederates atop the heights just outside of Fredricksburg, down where the First and Sixth Corps were, Meade's and Gibbon's divisions assaulted Jackson's lines. The Iron Brigade, in Doubleday's division, saw relatively little action, compared to their previous battles. At one point in the battle, however the brigade was ordered to advance on some woods where some enemy fire had been coming from. The Twenty-fourth Michigan and the Seventh Wisconsin led the advance on the woods. Taking some fairly heavy fire from the woods, the Twenty-fourth kept advancing. As the regiment faltered slightly, Colonel Morrow told his men, "Steady, men, those Wisconsin men are watching you."⁵⁵ and the men kept steadily advancing. They cleared the rebels out of the woods and won recognition from the rest of their brigade.

Meredith praised the efforts of the Twenty-fourth in his report saying, "the Twenty-fourth Michigan, commanded by Col. Henry A. Morrow, is a new regiment, having never been under fire before. They showed themselves to be worthy of the praise they have received, and of association with the old Iron Brigade."⁵⁶ Meredith was not alone in his assertion that the Twenty-fourth had lived up to the Iron Brigade's reputation. Dawes wrote that "No soldiers ever faced fire more bravely, and they showed themselves of a fibre worthy to be woven into the woof of the 'Iron Brigade.'"⁵⁷ The chaplain of the Twenty-fourth wrote that "the Twenty-fourth won its spurs in the late battle and has a right to wear the Black Hats of the 'Iron Brigade.' the only entire brigade that wears them, and the old regiments say that they can

now swear by the Twenty-fourth."⁵⁸ The distinctive hats of the Iron Brigade had become a badge of honor to be earned, and the Twenty-fourth Michigan earned theirs at Fredricksburg, although they would not receive the hats until shortly before Gettysburg.

After the Union defeat at Fredricksburg, the Union army re-crossed the Rappahannock and the two armies spent the winter across the river from each other. Burnside was relieved of his command and General Hooker was placed in command of the army. In the spring of 1863, Hooker devised a plan to swing around the Confederate army and attack Lee from the rear. To do this, he would need several diversions in order to keep Lee's army in its present position. The Iron Brigade would launch one of these diversionary assaults at Fitzhugh's Crossing. On April 29, the Twenty-fourth Michigan and the Sixth Wisconsin charged down the bank of the Rappahannock, boarded pontoon boats, and crossed the river under heavy Confederate fire. Meanwhile, the other regiments of the brigade supported the crossing from the river bank and then crossed themselves. The Twenty-fourth Michigan and the Sixth Wisconsin quickly cleared out the Confederate defenses and occupied them. It was a daring operation that probably should have caused many casualties, but the Iron Brigade received relatively few casualties for such an attempt.

Not too long after this engagement, the battle of Chancellorsville began, but the First Corps arrived too late to participate and prevent the Union defeat. At Fitzhugh's Crossing, the Iron Brigade "had done what was asked of them and more, and the defeat the army suffered seemed in no way to be attached to them."⁵⁹ Although the Union army had suffered severe defeats at both Fredricksburg and Chancellorsville, the Iron Brigade in its part in both these battles was not defeated. As the Union army regrouped after this defeat, Lee and his army marched north to invade Pennsylvania. Hooker's army turned to pursuit with the First Corps in the lead. Hooker would be replaced before the next engagement by General George Meade, but this mattered little to the Iron Brigade as they marched towards the small town of Gettysburg on June 30 and a meeting with destiny.

On July 1, Wadsworth's division, to which the Iron Brigade belonged, was the first infantry division to arrive on the field. His division consisted of two brigades: the Iron Brigade and Cutler's brigade. (Lysander Cutler had been promoted earlier and received a brigade command.) As Wadsworth's division relieved the tired cavalrymen, Cutler's brigade moved to either side of the Chambersburg pike and the Iron Brigade moved forward into McPherson's Woods, to the left of Cutler's brigade.⁶⁰ The Sixth Wisconsin, under command of Lt. Colonel Rufus Dawes (Bragg was not at the battle), was initially held in reserve. The rest of the Iron Brigade charged forward into Archer's brigade of Confederates, smashing the Confederate assault and capturing many of Archer's men, including General Archer himself. As General Reynolds was ordering them into position, he was shot dead from his horse. After they had broken the Confederate assault, the brigade reformed in the woods and prepared to repel future assaults. Meanwhile, Cutler's regiments on the right of the pike were being routed. Dawes took the Sixth Wisconsin over towards a railroad cut which was cut through McPherson's ridge, where Confederates from Davis' brigade were advancing. Dawes, seeing the situation, ran over to the major commanding the Ninety-fifth New York and told him, "We must charge."⁶¹

Together, the two regiments charged the railroad cut, losing many men but forcing the surrender of an entire Confederate regiment, the Second Mississippi. The battle continued to rage on and both armies received reinforcements, but the Confederates received more. Soon the Iron Brigade regiments began to be pressed. Meredith's horse was shot out from under him and landed on him, severely wounding him. The Nineteenth Indiana, which held the extreme left of the Iron Brigade's line soon began to buckle under heavy pressure from the front and flank. Colonel Morrow said that the Nineteenth Indiana "fought most gallantly, but was overpowered by superior numbers..."⁶² As the Nineteenth Indiana was forced to fall back, the Twenty-fourth Michigan was exposed to some severe flanking fire and compelled to fall back to a second line of defense. As the Confederates superior numbers pressed the

Union brigades backwards, the Iron Brigade fought a fighting retreat, constantly making stands even in the face of overwhelming numbers. At one point in the battle, the Seventh Wisconsin was surrounded by Confederates on three sides before they were compelled to retreat. Over by the railroad cut, the Sixth Wisconsin was forced steadily back as well. They ordered to defend Battery B, which was stationed astride the railroad cut on Seminary Ridge. As the men of the Sixth defended the battery, Dawes noticed that Eleventh Corps in the fields to the north of Gettysburg had been completely routed and that his command was in danger of being taken from the rear by the Confederates. The Sixth fell back through the town fighting as they retreated, trying to make their way to the Union rallying point on Cemetery Hill. They finally made it and joined up with the rest of the shattered Iron Brigade, which had fought bravely as they retreated, even though many other Union regiments had been completely routed.

The brigade saw little action in the next two days of the battle. The brigade was less than a shadow of its former strength. Out of the 1,883 men that were in the brigade on the morning of July 1, only 671 men were left at the end of the battle.⁶³ The Twenty-fourth Michigan had more men killed than any other Union regiment at Gettysburg.⁶⁴ They also lost nine color bearers on the first day.⁶⁵ The Iron Brigade had been decimated, but they had held their ground long enough to enable the Union to defend Cemetery Hill. After the battle, General Wadsworth told Colonel Morrow "Colonel Morrow, the only fault I find with you is that you fought too long, but God only knows what would have become of the Army of the Potomac if you had not held the ground as long as you did."⁶⁶ Gettysburg was the crowning achievement of the Iron Brigade, but it was also the beginning of the end of the brigade.

Gettysburg was the last stand of the "Iron Brigade of the West."⁶⁷ After Gettysburg, new regiments were added to the brigade, and some of them weren't western regiments. First the 167th Pennsylvania was attached to the brigade for a short while. These men were draftees and at one point refused to march, and the rest of

the brigade was almost forced to shoot them before they kept marching. The Seventy-Sixth New York served with the Iron Brigade for a few weeks in 1864 and were then moved elsewhere. Finally a battalion of the First New York Sharpshooters and the Seventh Indiana joined the brigade permanently. None of these regiments which joined the Iron Brigade after Gettysburg wore the black hats. Before the Union army started on the Wilderness campaign in 1864, the First Corps was merged into the Fifth Corps. This was a source of irritation for many of the men of the Iron Brigade because being in the First Corps was a great source of pride to them, especially being the First Brigade, First Division, First Corps, (which they had been since Chancellorsville). These effects started demoralizing the old Iron Brigade.

At the Wilderness, the Iron Brigade was led into battle by General Cutler, and later by Colonel Bragg after Cutler assumed command of the division when Wadsworth was killed. They still managed to fight bravely at the Wilderness and in the rest of Grant's campaign. The biggest blow to the morale of the Iron Brigade was the removal of the Second Wisconsin after the Wilderness. Later on, the Nineteenth Indiana would be merged with the Twentieth Indiana, losing their name and being moved out of the brigade. In spite of these demoralizing maneuvers, many men of the Second Wisconsin, Sixth Wisconsin, Seventh Wisconsin, and Nineteenth Indiana re-enlisted in the army when their terms of service ran out. Dawes wrote of the Sixth Wisconsin,

Our detached men who have been cooks for officers, hostlers, clerks, and teamsters, . . . nearly all decline to re-enlist, but the men who have stood by the old flag through fair and foul weather, and through many bloody battles, almost to a man dedicate their lives and service anew to their country.⁶⁸

The Iron Brigade although altered in its composition continued to fight bravely until the

end of the war.

During the war, the Iron Brigade suffered the heaviest losses, in proportion to their numbers, of any Union brigade in the war.⁶⁹ Lance Herdegen points out that the brigade had to uphold its name on the battlefield and as a result of this, ended up fighting themselves to death.⁷⁰ Through the comments of many of the men and historians, it can be clearly seen that their pride in their reputation as the best troops in the Union army often influenced the brigade to stand up and fight against fierce odds. It is doubtful that the Twenty-fourth Michigan would have performed so well in battle as quickly as they did had they not felt the pressure to live up to the reputation the brigade had already carved for itself. Jean P. Ebling emphasizes this spirit when she remarks:

The staunch spirit of the Iron Brigade was an outgrowth of the success they experienced on their own part of the line in every one of the seven battles in which they had fought. The army as a whole might retreat or fail to capitalize on victory, but the Brigade had always given as good or better than it had taken.⁷¹

Reputation and pride can be powerful motivators. The Iron Brigade had these as well as uniqueness, excellent leadership, and excellent training.

Due to their feats on the battlefield, the Iron Brigade will always be revered for their bravery. The pride the men felt at being members of the Iron Brigade was incredibly tangible. John Gibbon was always extremely fond of his little brigade, even after he ceased to command it. When invited to a reunion of soldiers from Wisconsin, Gibbon replied "I was never a Wisconsin soldier . . . but at the judgment day I want to be with Wisconsin soldiers."⁷² This remark of his would probably hold true for any of the regiments of the Iron Brigade. The Iron Brigade earned for itself a reputation of valor.

Endnotes

¹ C. A. Stevens, *Berdan's United States Sharpshooters*, as quoted in Alan T. Nolan, *The Iron Brigade: A Military History* (Ann Arbor: Historical Society of Michigan, 1983), 219.

² Champ Clark and the editors of Time-Life Books, *Gettysburg: The Confederate High Tide, The Civil War* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1965), 48.

³ O. B. Curtis, *History of the Twenty-fourth Michigan of the Iron Brigade* (Detroit: Winn and Hammond, 1891), 166.

⁴ T. Henry Williams, as quoted in Alan T. Nolan, "Iron Brigade General: John Gibbon", in "Rally Once Again": *Selected Civil War Writings of Alan T. Nolan*, Alan T. Nolan (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House Publishing, 2000), 57.

⁵ Some historians have claimed that the Iron Brigade was routed in the battle of the Wilderness, in May 1864, but there is some evidence against this. For more information about this and the Iron Brigade in the Wilderness, see Sharon Eggeleston Vipond, "A New Kind of Murder": The Iron Brigade in the Wilderness", in *Giants in Their Tall Black Hats: Essays on the Iron Brigade*, eds. Alan T. Nolan and Sharon Eggeleston Vipond (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁶ While most historians do inherently claim that the Iron Brigade fought well because westerners fought better than easterners, they do recognize that the Brigade's westernness was a great source of pride to the men who served in the brigade.

⁷ Jean P. Ebling, "The Fighting Spirit of the Iron Brigade: A Study of Morale in a Civil War Volunteer Unit" (M. A. thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1963), 83.

⁸ Alan T. Nolan, "Virginia's Unwelcome Visitors", in "Rally Once Again", Nolan, 190.

⁹ William DeLoss Love, *Wisconsin in the War of the Rebellion: A History of All Regiments and Batteries the State has Sent to the Field* (Chicago: Church and Goodman, 1866), 228.

¹⁰ Report of Col. William T. Sherman, 25 July 1861, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, vol. 2 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1971), 369.

¹¹ Ebling, 51.

¹² John Gibbon, *Personal Recollections of the Civil War* (Dayton: Morningside Bookshop, 1978), 27.

¹³ See Appendix A.

¹⁴ Ebling, 54.

¹⁵ Gibbon, 39.

¹⁶ Ebling, 15.

¹⁷ Lance J. Herdegen, *The Men Who Stood Like Iron: How the Iron Brigade Won its Name* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 72.

¹⁸ Ebling, 21.

¹⁹ Ebling believes that the leadership in the Seventh Wisconsin and Nineteenth Indiana was not as good as that in the Second and Sixth Wisconsin, because the Second and Sixth outperformed them on the parade ground. Ebling, 31.

²⁰ General Pope's report on the battle indicates that Gibbon's brigade was first in line, but this was not so. See *Reports of Maj. General John Pope, 27 January 1863*, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 12, 37, and *Reports of Brig. Gen. John Gibbon, 4 December 1863*, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 12, 380-382.

²¹ *Reports of Brig. Gen. John Gibbon, 3 September 1862*, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 12, 378.

²² See Appendix B for a map of the battle.

²³ Rufus R. Dawes, *Service with the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1962), 62.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁶ Report of Lieut. Gen. Thomas J. Jackson, 27 April 1863, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 12, 645.

²⁷ Ebling, 59-60.

²⁸ Steven J. Wright, "John Gibbon and the Black Hat Brigade", in *Giants in Their Tall Black Hats*, 66.

²⁹ Dawes, 70.

³⁰ *Reports of Brig. Gen. John Gibbon, 3 September 1862*, in *War of the Rebellion*, vol. 12, 378.

³¹ Many histories of the Second Bull Run Campaign mention the battle of Brawner's Farm as occurring between King's division and Jackson's corps, ignoring the fact that the battle was fought only by Gibbon's brigade and two of Doubleday's regiments. Even Pope's report, elsewhere referred to, seems to indicate that all of King's division was engaged when that was not the case. Gibbon said, in his response to Pope's report that "... my single brigade was left almost alone to sustain itself against a division of the enemy, and that the division as such was not engaged at all; that in place of being 'supported handsomely by Doubleday's brigade,' but two regiments of that brigade came to our assistance." (*Reports of Brig. Gen. John Gibbon, 4 December 1863*, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 12, 380.) Some histories that perpetuate the fallacy that King's division was engaged are Francis F. Wilshin, *Manassas National Battlefield Park, Virginia, National Park Service Historical Handbook Series, no. 15* (Washington, 1933), and Edward J. Stackpole, *From Cedar Mountain to Antietam: August-September, 1862* (Harrisburg: The Stackpole Co., 1959), 160.

³² Nolan, "Virginia's Unwelcome Visitors", 186. Nolan puts forth this explanation of why the brigade may have fought as well as they did for their first engagement. He makes a fairly compelling argument for this.

³³ Philip Kearny, as quoted in Gibbon, 66.

³⁴ *Reports of Brig. Gen. John Gibbon, 3 September 1862*, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 12, 379.

³⁵ Report of Col. Solomon Meredith, 20 September 1862, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 19, 249. Meredith gives an estimate on the exact time the brigade was ordered forward.

³⁶ See Appendix C for a map of the battle.

³⁷ Dawes, 82.

³⁸ Reports of Lieut. Col. Edward S. Bragg, 20 September 1862, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 19, 254.

³⁹ This conversation is related in: Herdegen, *The Men Stood Like Iron*, 146.

⁴⁰ George B. McClellan, as quoted in Dawes, 85.

⁴¹ Reports of Brig. Gen. John Gibbon, 20 September 1862, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 19, 248.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See Appendix D for a map of the battle.

⁴⁴ Reports of Lieut. Col. Edward S. Bragg, 21 September 1862, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 19, 255.

⁴⁵ This story is reported in: Herdegen, *The Men Stood like Iron*, 183.

⁴⁶ Return of Casualties in the Union forces at the battle of Antietam, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 19, 189.

⁴⁷ Reports of Brig. Gen. John Gibbon, 20 September 1862, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 19, 249.

⁴⁸ Dawes, 53.

⁴⁹ Dennis S. Lavery and Mark H. Jordan, *Iron Brigade General: John Gibbon, A Rebel in Blue* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1993), 66.

⁵⁰ Curtis, 65.

⁵¹ Ibid., 66.

⁵² Gibbon, 92.

⁵³ Alan T. Nolan, *The Iron Brigade: A Military History* (Ann Arbor: Historical Society of Michigan, 1983), 173.

⁵⁴ Nolan, "Virginia's Unwelcome Visitors", 189.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 187.

⁵⁶ Report of Brig. Gen. Solomon Meredith, 22 December 1862, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 21, 476.

⁵⁷ Dawes, 112.

⁵⁸ William C. Way, as quoted in Curtis, 102.

⁵⁹ Marc Storch and Beth Storch, "Like So Many Devils": The Iron Brigade at Fitzhugh's Crossing", in *Ghosts in Their Tall Black Hats*, 100.

⁶⁰ See Appendix E for a map of the battle.

⁶¹ Dawes, 167.

⁶² Report of Col. Henry A. Morrow, 22 February 1864, in *The War of the Rebellion*, vol. 27, 268.

⁶³ William Wade Dudley, *The Iron Brigade at Gettysburg* (Cincinnati, 1879), 15.

⁶⁴ William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Albany: Albany Publishing Co., 1898), 17.

⁶⁵ Curtis, 166.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁷ Many historians of the Iron Brigade, including Alan T. Nolan and John Selby, consider Gettysburg the last battle of the Iron Brigade. Although the regiments continued on, the brigades composition changed and it was never the same.

⁶⁸ Dawes, 235.

⁶⁹ Fox, 117.

⁷⁰ Herdegen, *The Men Stood like Iron*, 198.

⁷¹ Ebling, 70.

⁷² John Gibbon, as quoted in Nolan, *The Iron Brigade*, 167.

Works Cited

- Clark, Champ and the Editors of Time-Life Books. *Gettysburg: The Confederate High Tide. The Civil War.* Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1985.
- Curtis, O. B. *History of the Twenty-fourth Michigan of the Iron Brigade.* Detroit: Winn and Hammond, 1891.
- Dawes, Rufus R. *Service with the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers.* Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1962.
- Dudley, William Wade. *The Iron Brigade at Gettysburg.* Cincinnati, 1879.
- Dunn, Craig L. *Iron Men, Iron Will: The Nineteenth Indiana Regiment of the Iron Brigade.* Indianapolis: Guild Press of Indiana, Inc., 1995.
- Ebling, Jean P. "The Fighting Spirit of the Iron Brigade: A Study of Morale in a Civil War Volunteer Unit." M. A. Thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1968.
- Fox, William F. *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865.* Albany: Albany Publishing Co., 1898.
- Gibbon, John. *Personal Recollections of the Civil War.* Dayton: Morningside Bookshop, 1978.
- Herdegen, Lance J. and William J. K. Beaudot. *In the Bloody Railroad Car at Gettysburg.* Dayton: Morningside, 1990.
- Herdegen, Lance J. *The Men Stood Like Iron: How the Iron Brigade Won its Name.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Kozlowski, L. J. "To Stand For All They Wore: Rufus Dawes of the Iron Brigade." *Timeline* 12, no. 2 (1995): 2-15.
- Lavery, Dennis S. and Mark H. Jordan. *Iron Brigade General: John Gibbon, A Rebel in Blue.* Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Longacre, Edward G. "The Fighting Life of John Gibbon: Cool as a Steel Knife." *Civil War Times Illustrated* 26, no. 2 (1987): 16-25, 44.
- Love, William DeLoss. *Wisconsin in the War of the Rebellion: A History of all Regiments and Batteries the State has Sent to the Field.* Chicago: Church and Goodman, 1866.
- McPherson, James M. *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Nolan, Alan T. and Sharon Eggleston Vipond, eds. *Giants in Their Tall Black Hats: Essays on the Iron Brigade.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Nolan, Alan T. "Rally Once Again": *Selected Civil War Writings of Alan T. Nolan.* Madison: Madison House Publishing, 2000.
- _____. *The Iron Brigade: A Military History.* Ann Arbor: Historical Society of Michigan, 1983.
- Priest, John Michael. *Before Antietam: The Battle for South Mountain.* Shippenburg, Pennsylvania: White Mane Publishing Co., Inc., 1992.
- Quiner, E. B. *The Military History of Wisconsin: A Record of the Civil and Military Patriotism of the State in the War for the Union.* Chicago: Clark and Co., 1866.
- Robertson, JNO. *Michigan in the War.* Lansing: W. S. George and Co., 1882.
- Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865.* Vol. 1. Madison: Democrat Printing Co., 1886.
- Sears, Stephen W. *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam.* New Haven and New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1983.
- Selby, John. *The Iron Brigade.* New York: Hippocrene books, Inc., 1971.
- Stackpole, Edward J. *From Cedar Mountain to Antietam: August-September, 1862.* Harrisburg: The Stackpole Co., 1959.
- The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Record of the Union and Confederate Armies.* Vols. 2, 12, 19, 21, 25, 27, 36. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971.
- Wert, Jeffrey D. *A Brotherhood of Valor: The Common Soldiers of the Stonewall Brigade, CSA, and the Iron Brigade, USA.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999.
- Wilshin, Francis F. *Manassas National Battlefield Park, Virginia. National Park Service Historical Handbook Series, no. 15.* Washington, 1958.