The Iron Brigade of the West in the American Civil War

Collin Monesmith

The five-sided symbol of the Iron Brigade[1].

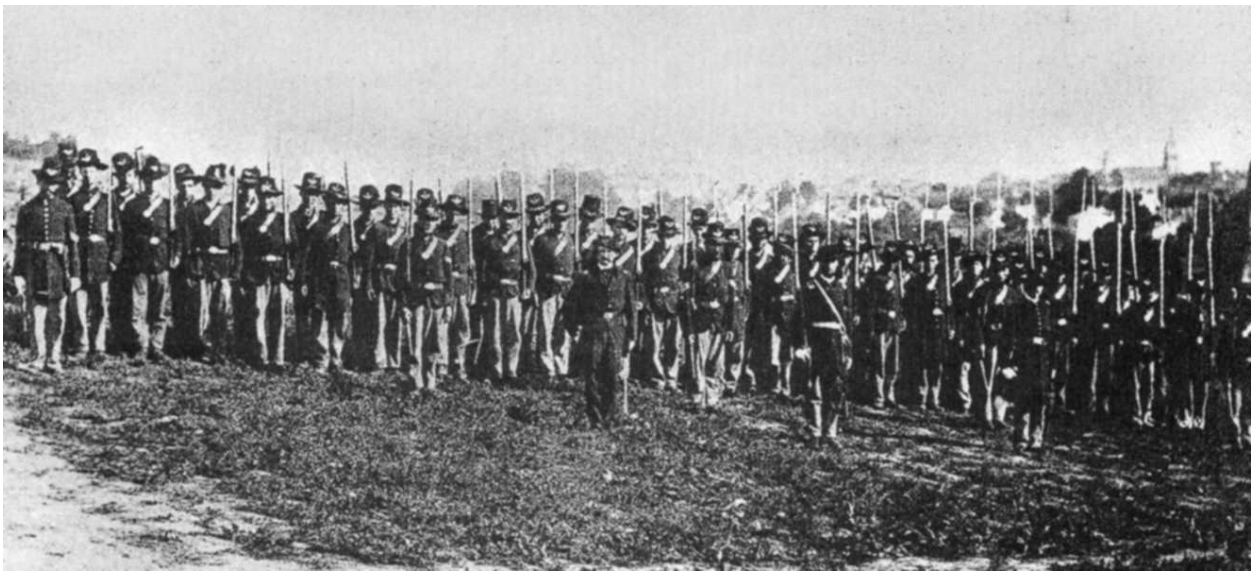
It was nothing short of a baptism by fire for the inexperienced Union troops from the West when veteran Confederate forces commanded by the legendary General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson ambushed them in the dying light of a Virginian sunset in late August of 1862. Facing off at close range against the dreaded Stonewall Brigade and exchanging murderous volleys of fire, these men from the West delivered a "whirlpool of death" to the Confederates despite suffering casualty rates up to an appalling 64%.[2] As darkness enveloped the now blood-soaked Virginian farm field and the curtains fell over the fighting at Brawner's Farm, the thunder of the guns may have faded out, but the Second Battle of Bull Run had just begun. General Stonewall Jackson, expecting a decisive and speedy tactical victory, had unexpectedly been checked full stop by the mysterious federal troops, men whom he called of "obstinate determination."[2] Jackson was by no means alone. Major General George B. McClellan, commander of the Union's Army of the Potomac, remarked that these men from the west "must be made of iron"[3] after witnessing them fearlessly advance amidst withering fire not even three weeks later at the Battle of South Mountain. Thus, a legend was born. So courageous and tough were these Westerners that their unit would go down in history as a legendary exemplar of military valor and fighting spirit: the famed Western infantry of the "Iron Brigade."

These men of iron constitutions hailed from the then Western states of Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin, rugged states which by necessity had instilled a disposition of grit and fortitude into their populations. An all-volunteer force, the men of the Iron Brigade were commanded by one of the finest Union officers, Brigadier General John Gibbon, a man who

refused to join the Confederacy despite his three brothers having declared for the renegade South. Gibbons' allegiance, like that of his men, lay unflinchingly with the Union. The Iron Brigade was not only recognizable for their courage in battle, but also for their distinctive affection in their choice of headgear; tall, black felt Model 1858 Hardee hats, as opposed to standard Union regulation kepi caps, donned the heads of the "Black Hats." As word of the Iron Brigade's prowess and fortitude spread throughout the lands, depending what side you were on, the sight of the Black Hats heralded either well-founded trepidation or a very much welcome site.

A Union regulation kepi cap[4] (left) and a Model 1858 Hardee hat[5] (right).

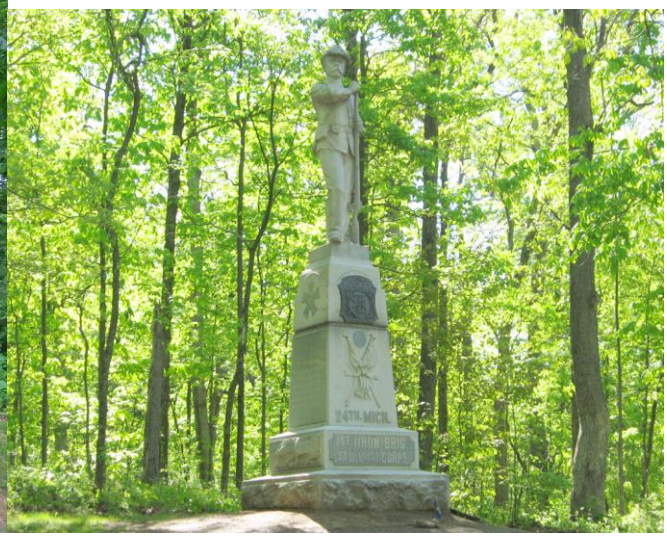
The original composition of the Iron Brigade consisted of four infantry regiments: the 2nd, 6th, 7th Wisconsin, and the 19th Indiana, but after suffering from gruesome casualties after the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest one-day battle in American history[6], the 24th Michigan Volunteer Infantry was added to the ranks of the brigade to bolster its flagging strength. Following this surge of more rugged Westerners, the Iron Brigade would go on to fight in many of the Civil War's most legendary battles, etching their legacy in stone but earning it with blood at hallowed battlefields like Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. So pernicious and lethal were their exploits that at war's end, the Iron Brigade held the grim honor of suffering among the highest casualties out of any Union brigade.[7]



The 7th Wisconsin Infantry Volunteer Regiment of the Iron Brigade, Virginia 1862[8].

As time would tell, this entirely Western composition, though ultimately disrupted by the addition of the 167th Pennsylvania after the Battle of Gettysburg, instilled an exceedingly strong espirit de corps within the brigade that enabled the men to persevere and fight so fiercely. The legend of the black-hatted Iron Brigade lives on through their Midwestern heirs to the old West, where Hoosiers, Badgers, and Wolverines continue to honor and remember their long-lost brethren. Though the last veteran of the Iron Brigade died in 1947[9], the living memory of thousands accompanies the hallowed markers across Gettysburg and the Midwest in forever honoring the courage and sacrifice of the brave Western men of the Iron Brigade.

Highway markers commemorating the Iron Brigade in Wisconsin[10] *and Indiana*[11].



Monuments to the 19th Indiana[12] and the 24th Michigan[13] at Gettysburg National Park.

Sources

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