

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Iron Brigade

By **Lance J. Herdegen**

The Iron Brigade was one of the most celebrated military organizations of the American Civil War. Composed originally of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin and 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana Volunteer Infantry regiments, it was reinforced after Antietam in October 1862 by the 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan Volunteer Infantry. Battery B of the 4<sup>th</sup> U.S. Artillery was also attached to the brigade for much of the war and volunteers from the infantry regiments were selected and trained to serve the battery. In the first weeks at Washington in 1861, the provisional brigade included the 5<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin and Governor Alexander Williams Randall of Wisconsin had hoped to form an all-Wisconsin unit. But when the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin arrived at the war front in August 1861, the Army transferred the 5<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin from the brigade instead of the 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana. Of the four regiments remaining only the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin had arrived at Washington early enough to fight at First Bull Run.

The commander was Brigadier General Rufus King of Milwaukee. Born in New York City, he was the son of Charles King, one-time president of Columbia College, and named for his grandfather, Rufus King, a delegate for Massachusetts to the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention. The younger King graduated from Columbia and then enrolled in the U.S. Military Academy, finishing in the top of his class of 1833. He resigned from the army in 1836 to work as an associated editor for two New York State newspapers, the *Albany Evening Journal*, and the *Albany Advertiser*, and served a time as commander of the Albany Burgess Corps described as “one of the most renowned volunteer militia organizations” of that day. He left New York State in 1845 to become part proprietor and editor of the *Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette* (later the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*)—a post he held until 1859. In March 1861, King was appointed by President Lincoln as Minister to the Papal States, but with the news of Fort Sumter, he quit the federal appointment and offered his services to Governor Randall. King served in several capacities organizing Wisconsin regiments before being commissioned as a brigadier general first in Wisconsin and then by President Abraham Lincoln who named him to his subsequent post in the national army. King’s new brigade was at first assigned to work on the defenses covering the Capitol.<sup>1</sup>

It was a unique organization from the very first days because all the regiments were from states on the nation’s frontier and it was the only all-Western infantry brigade

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert C. Damon, *History of the Milwaukee Light Guard* (Milwaukee, WI: Printed by the Sentinel Company, 1875), 20-22.

in the Eastern armies. It was not until after Gettysburg that the sectional makeup of the unit was lost with the addition of Eastern regiments to reinforce and rebuild the organization.

As did many of the early Federal regiments, the Wisconsin units and Indiana organizations arrived at Washington in uniforms of state militia grey. In the coming weeks the uniforms were slowly replaced. The changeover started in late summer 1861 first in the various companies of the ragged and needy 2<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin which was still equipped as it was at first Bull Run with grey uniforms. The first issue included dark blue wool trousers, a blue wool, nine-button frock coat, and the Model 1858 black felt hat, all of the kind worn by the Regular Army. “The boys no longer look like beggars, with ventilated suits of clothing, but present a very neat, tidy and soldier-like appearance,” one Badger reported in October. As the changeover occurred, state uniforms, except for pants and overcoats, were ordered packed and boxed for return to Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup>

The Model 1858 Hardee dress hat made the best impression. It was a showy black felt affair, looped up on the side with a brass eagle and trimmed with an infantry-blue cord, black plume, brass infantry bugle, company letter and regimental numeral. “We have a full blue suit, a fine black hat nicely trimmed with bugle and plate and ostrich feathers, a 7th Wisconsin man wrote home, “and you can only distinguish our boys from the regulars, by their [our] good looks.” The black hats made the tall Westerners look even taller, and subsequently made the brigade recognizable to friend and foe on both sides of the battle line. At Gettysburg, for example, in the very opening of the infantry fighting on July 1, 1863, Confederates on seeing them called out, “There are those damned Black Hats of the Army of the Potomac.”<sup>3</sup>

Of more far reaching consequence during the winter period of 1861 and 1862 was attachment of Battery B of the 4<sup>th</sup> U.S. Artillery to King’s Brigade. It was one of the most famous organizations of the old army and one of thirty-six artillery companies (the “companies” officially became “batteries” in 1861) created in the artillery reorganization of 1821. Battery men fought as dragoons in the Seminole War and served with distinction as artillery at Monterrey and Buena Vista during the war with Mexico. It was stationed at Camp Floyd, Utah, for the Mormon Uprising and was serving as cavalry escorts to guard the Pony Express route. With the firing on Fort Sumter, the battery was ordered to move overland to Fort Leavenworth in Kansas and then traveled by rail to Washington. The unit was equipped with six Model 1857 muzzle-loading 12-pound bronze smoothbores, often called “Napoleons,” or “Light Twelves” to distinguish them from an earlier model. The December 1861 roll showed Battery B with three lieutenants and forty-seven enlisted men and it was at that time that Captain John Gibbon, a West

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Walker, *Diary*, May 6, 1862, transcribed Nona Walker Dougherty 1933, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

<sup>3</sup> *Mineral Point (WI) Weekly Tribune*, October 22, 1861; Philip Cheek and Mair Pointon, *History of the Sauk County Riflemen, Known as Company "A" Sixth Wisconsin Veteran Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865*. (n.p.: 1909), 73.

Pointer and the battery commander, went to the volunteer infantry regiments to fill the ranks of his gunners. The captain, along with two battery officers, carefully picked the men choosing only two, three or four from each of the various companies. Those selected became among the best artillerymen in the Army of the Potomac.

When King was promoted to division command in May 1862 Gibbon was made a brigadier general of volunteers and given command of the Western Brigade. At the time, the change caused only a minor stir as attention was focused on the long awaited order moving the brigade from Washington to Fredericksburg, Virginia, and the movement of the main army to the Confederate capital at Richmond. The Western brigade was to be held with a force at Fredericksburg to protect Washington and poised for a possible move on Richmond as part of Major General George Brinton McClellan's offensive. But the assignment left a growing desperate worry in the Western ranks they might never join McClellan's army at Richmond and the war might soon be over. In his journal, one Wisconsin officer wrote: "General McClellan presses steadily on to Richmond. We are left out in the wet."

Gibbon, meantime, began gathering up the reins of his new brigade. His first moves tightening the discipline were not greeted with enthusiasm. The new general was a regular and West Pointer, after all, and the volunteers were distrustful of regulars and their old army manner. Especially upset was Colonel Solomon Meredith of the 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana, who had made known his own ambition to win brigade promotion. Volunteers should be commanded by volunteer officers, he told anyone who would listen, and he began a letter writing campaign to his powerful friends in Indiana and Washington to see what might be done. Gibbon realized he faced a daunting challenge in bringing his brigade to readiness and had found during the Mexican War, much like his friend, McClellan, that volunteer troops tended to be frisky and undisciplined. The Wisconsin and Indiana men had been in service almost a year, but he found the relationship between enlisted man and volunteer officer was still casual and discipline not consistent.

Gibbon was an unusual case. Born in Pennsylvania in 1827 into the family of a physician, he grew up in North Carolina and it was from that state that he entered West Point, graduating in the Class of 1847. He was assigned to the artillery and saw duty in the war with Mexico and against the Seminole Indians in Florida before he returned to the U.S. Military Academy as an artillery instructor from 1854 to 1859. He won some attention in 1859 for publication of his highly regarded *Artillerist's Manual*. He left West Point when he was promoted captain and joined Battery B at its duty post at Camp Floyd in the Utah Territory. With the start of the Civil War, despite his North Carolina roots and even though three brothers went into the Confederate service, Gibbon stayed with the Union. When his battery joined the army outside Washington, he served for a time as Major General Irvin McDowell's chief of artillery before taking the infantry promotion.

Gibbon, who later was credited with making his brigade efficient and well-trained, was familiar with the Westerners because of their ongoing association with his regulars in the ranks of Battery B. "The first marked feature I noted with these men was

their quick intelligence,” he wrote in his memoir. “It was only necessary to explain a thing but once or twice to enable them to catch the idea and then with a little practice they became perfect.” Gibbon proved a competent professional who, to his credit, had the intelligence to recognize that his volunteers could not be handled in the same fashion as the regulars.<sup>4</sup>

His first efforts did not win favor in the ranks. One Wisconsin private reported: “We are reduced to strict military subordination, and Gen. Gibbon is bound to make regulars of us.” One of the general’s first orders required each soldier take a bath once a week; another instituted a “daily review at what seemed to us an unwarrantably early hour in the morning—5 o’clock, I think—to be followed immediately at its close by the drinking of a cup of hot coffee by each member of the brigade whether he liked it or not.” Regimental officers who had been not attending the early morning roll call were now required to do so. Following an inspection of the 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana camp, he forced the Hoosiers to completely realign the tents on their company streets according to regulations. “The impression in relation to our new Brigadier, on first sight, is rather unfavorable,” a Hoosier wrote in his diary.<sup>5</sup>

Gibbon was also upset with the uneven appearance of his regiments. Uniforms still varied from company to company with some soldiers in caps and others in the tall black felt dress hats of the regulars. Trousers varied from dark blue to sky blue. The transition actually began before he took command when Colonel Lysander Cutler of the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, then acting brigade commander, decided to make the Model 1858 dress hat a consistent item for all the soldiers. Gibbon now took the uniform matter a step further and required all soldiers in his command be issued the felt hats and the nine-button dark blue frock coat of the regulars along with white linen leggings and cotton white gloves. His order also required each soldier be supplied with two shirts, two pairs of trousers, two pairs of cotton drawers, two pairs of shoes, and two pairs of gray wool stockings, in addition to the other accoutrements. If the additions were first greeted with “the greatest merriment,” there was loud grumbling when it was discovered that the cost of the gloves and leggings would come out of the soldier clothing allowances. Lieutenant Colonel Lucius Fairchild of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin outfitted a soldier as required and found the entire outfit weighed 85 pounds. Field service soon reduced the clothing carried by the soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

In a series of changes ordered after McClellan stalled outside Richmond, the brigade was transferred to the newly formed Army of Virginia under Major General John Pope and began a series of marches in August 1862 in attempts to locate a Confederate

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<sup>4</sup> John Gibbon, *Personal Recollections of the Civil War* (New York: G.P. Putnam Sons, 1928), 12-14, 27-8.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Young, “His Pilgrimage,” *Milwaukee Sunday Telegraph*, July 1, 1888; Gibbon’s General Order No. 52 in Alan D. Gaff, *On Many a Bloody Field: Four Years in the Iron Brigade*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 124; William Murray Diary in Gaff, *Bloody Fields*, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Rufus R. Dawes, *Service with the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers*, (Marietta, OH: Alderman & Sons, 1890), 44; Edwin Brown, letter to his parents, September 1, 1861 in Lance J. Herdegen, *The Men Stood Like Iron: How the Iron Brigade Won its Name* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 37.

force under Major General Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson, which had left Richmond and was operating in central Virginia. It was while marching quietly along the Warrenton Turnpike near the old battlefield of Bull Run that the brigade was attacked by Jackson’s force in a battle the soldiers called Gainesville, but which is now known as Brawner’s Farm. The fighting began in late afternoon of August 28, 1862, and resulted in a stand-up battle at ranges of seventy yards as both sides stood in an open field. It only ended when it became too dark to continue firing. That night, uncertain over the tactical situation and without orders, the brigade marched on to nearby Manassas Junction.

The baptism of battle was staggering. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, eight were killed, sixty-one wounded and three missing with Colonel Cutler among the wounded. The losses in the other three regiments were worse. The Seventh Wisconsin lost 164 of 580; the Nineteenth Indiana, 210 of 423; the Second Wisconsin 276 out of 430. Initial reports showed more than one-third of the brigade—725 men—were casualties. Eight of the brigade's twelve field officers were wounded with Colonel Edgar O’Connor of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin killed. Colonel Meredith of the 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana was hurt when his horse was shot in the neck and fell on the colonel's leg. All three field officers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin were wounded with Colonel William Wallace Robinson carried bleeding from the field. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Apthorp Hamilton was shot through the thighs but maintained his seat in the saddle with his boots filling with blood. Major George Bill suffered a slight head wound. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin, Major Thomas Allen was shot in the neck and left arm, but did not leave the field. "Our Col. fought bravely until killed and the Lt. Col. [Lucius Fairchild] was under the hottest fire but escaped unhurt," Allen wrote home. With no field officers available in the 7<sup>th</sup>, Gibbon consolidated the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin under Fairchild, the senior field officer on his feet.<sup>7</sup>

A Confederate officer wounded at Gainesville later tried to catch in words what the fighting involved: "[I]t was a stand-up combat, dogged and unflinching... There were no wounds from spent balls, the confronting lines looked into each other's faces at deadly ranges, less than one hundred yards apart, and they stood as immovable as the painted heroes in a battle-piece," he wrote. "There was cover of woods not very far in the rear of the lines on both sides, and brave men—with the instinct of self-preservation which is exhibited in the veteran soldier, who seizes every advantage of ground or obstacle—might have been justified in slowly seeking this shelter from the iron hail that smote them, but out in the sunlight, in the dying daylight, and under the stars, they stood, and although they could not advance, they would not retire. There was some discipline in this, but there was much more of true valor." Major Rufus Dawes of the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin wrote of the battle in his memoir: "Our one night's experience at Gainesville had eradicated our yearning for a fight. In our future history we will also be found ready but never again anxious."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Allen letter home, September 4, 1862 in Herdegen, *The Men Stood Like Iron*.

<sup>8</sup> W.B. Taliaferro, "Jackson's Raid Around Pope," Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: The Century Co., 1884-1887), 2:510; Dawes, *Service*, 69-70.

The brigade was also engaged the next few days in the battle of Second Bull Run and covered the retreat of the defeated army of John Pope.

It was a few days later, September 14, 1862, as the Federal forces followed the Confederate movement into Maryland, that the brigade fought up the National Road at South Mountain. The long climb was a transforming moment for the soldiers of Gibbon's four regiments. Not long afterward, other soldiers in other regiments were not talking about a Western Brigade, or even a "Black Hat Brigade," but an "Iron Brigade of the West." It became a mighty war name that would ring down through the decades to present times. General McClellan claimed to have a role in the naming, and perhaps he was a factor. The story he told Colonel John Benton Callis of the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin during a reception at the Continental Hotel in Philadelphia after the war included this exchange that he claimed was between himself and General Joseph Hooker:

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."<sup>9</sup>

McClellan said it was sometime after the fighting that Hooker rode up to headquarters and called out, "General McClellan, what do you think now of my Iron Brigade?"<sup>10</sup>

It was an exchange that could have happened. Gibbon in his memoir of the war said: "How or where the name of the 'Iron Brigade' was first given I do not know., but soon after the battle of Antietam the name was started and ever after was applied to the brigade." His use of Antietam as a starting point for the name *Iron Brigade* has some interest, although the fighting at Sharpsburg, Maryland, occurred three days after South Mountain. Dawes in his history of the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin never identified the origin of the name.<sup>11</sup>

Other evidence produces a more acceptable explanation. The slope of South Mountain is more wooded now than it was then and a visitor today would find it difficult to see or track where Gibbon's regiments advanced. It was less cluttered in September

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<sup>9</sup> Program of the reunion and banquet of the Iron Brigade at the Chicago Athletic Association, Michigan Avenue, Monday evening, August 27, 1900 at 6:30 o'clock, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gibbon, *Recollections*, 93.

1862, however, with clumps of woods, some large clusters of boulders, and lines of stone fences marking the open fields. From the viewing platform built by his engineers on a rise of ground near his headquarters, Little Mac had a clear view of the advance. In his account of the battle, McClellan wrote a glowing description of the action: "The [Gibbon's] brigade advanced steadily, driving the enemy from positions in the woods and behind stone walls, until they reached a point well up towards the top of the pass, when the enemy, having been reinforced by three regiments, opened heavy fire on the front and on both flanks.... Gen. Gibbon, in this delicate movement, handled his brigade with as much precision and coolness as if upon parade, and the bravery of his troops could not be excelled."<sup>12</sup>

It was a display of military discipline and brave fighting that was remembered because it was in full view. At Gainesville, the four regiments fought almost alone in the gathering darkness against elements of the Stonewall Brigade of the Confederate Army. But it was still then an untested and as yet un-acclaimed "Black Hat Brigade" against a "Stonewall Brigade." The Westerners also covered the retreat at Second Bull Run, but won little fame although recognized at the time by Hooker for their discipline and behavior. At South Mountain, however, the general commanding the Army of the Potomac and others watched as Gibbon's Brigade fought its way up to Turner's Gap, and perhaps, just perhaps, Little Mac did ask what brigade was moving up the hill, and when told, perhaps, just perhaps, did make a clever remark about "iron men."

Known is the fact that a newspaper reporter nearby overheard something along those lines and wrote it in his own notebook long before McClellan's memory of the movement was romanced a bit. The correspondent worked for the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*. His dispatch was printed September 22, 1862, just eight days after South Mountain and five days after Antietam. In it he described Gibbon's four regiments: "The last terrible battle has reduced this brigade to a mere skeleton; there being scarcely enough members to form half a regiment, The 2nd Wisconsin, which but a few weeks since, numbered over nine hundred men, can now muster but fifty nine. This brigade has done some of the hardest and best fighting in the service. It has been justly termed the Iron Brigade of the West."<sup>13</sup>

In the years long after the war, New York men claimed the famous name was stolen. The original "Iron Brigade," they said, was actually the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> New York regiments and the 14<sup>th</sup> Brooklyn (officially the 84<sup>th</sup> New York). When the two-year New York regiments mustered out, (the 14<sup>th</sup> Brooklyn, a three-year regiment, remained), the veterans claimed the name was "taken" by the Wisconsin and Indiana regiments. An officer in the 24<sup>th</sup> New York said the name was first attached to his brigade following a march that covered 50 miles in two days. "Sixteen miles a day is considered good march," he wrote, "so you can see why we are sometimes called the 'Cast Iron Brigade'." Wisconsin and Indiana men, however, always believed there was no confusion and that it

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<sup>12</sup> George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1887), 582.

<sup>13</sup> *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, September 22, 1862.

was McClellan, the hero of the Army, who singled them out as not a two-year “Cast Iron Brigade,” but the “Iron Brigade of the West.”<sup>14</sup>

But the mighty war name came with a great cost. At Antietam, the Western men "fought more like demons than anything else until but 400 or 500 were left of the Brigade that had 2500 as good men as ever carried guns, but two months before," a Black Hat said. "Judge for yourselves whether the brigade has seen hard times or not, with three times three for brave 'Little Mac,' the man we *all* love, I await further movements." In the Seventh Wisconsin, a private reported home there "is only eight here now fit for duty. There is not many sick at present. We have no stragglers like some of the companies, but still the men are gone. They have died the soldier's death or have been wounded on the field of battle. We haven't a coward in our company."<sup>15</sup>

The small four regiments were reinforced by 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan after the savage fighting in a corn field during Antietam September 17, 1862. The brigade was engaged at Fredericksburg in December 1862, and again at Chancellorsville in May of 1863.

Of course, it was at Gettysburg, July 1, 1863, that the Iron Brigade—now the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division of the I Army Corps—won a place in American military history and played a key role in the Union victory. Thrown into the fighting northwest of town to stall a Confederate advance, the brigade helped push back the Confederates in the morning, but were overwhelmed later in the day and forced to retreat through the town to the rally point on Cemetery Hill. It was the brigade's staunch defense, however, that helped to allow the Federal army to consolidate on the high ground south of Gettysburg. It was that defensive position that was the key to the Union victory. It came at terrible cost to the Western men. Of the 1,883 men engaged in Pennsylvania, 1,153 were killed, wounded or missing. Nine of the brigade's fourteen field officers were killed or wounded. It was also discovered at the end of the fighting that eighty men from Grant County in Wisconsin were down or dead. To add to the dismay, it was just weeks after the battle that a Pennsylvania regiment was temporarily assigned to the brigade forever ending the unit's all-Western makeup.

Other changes followed. In a reorganization of the army over the winter of 1863-64 it became apparent that the five army corps comprising the Army of the Potomac were under strength to the point they could no longer function effectively. Accordingly, in Order 115, the War Department ordered the consolidation of the five corps into three. As a result, the V Corps was merged into two divisions and combined with two divisions created by the consolidation of three divisions of the I Corps. The III Corps also disappeared when it was merged in the same way into the II Corps.

Under the changes the Iron Brigade was now named the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 4<sup>th</sup> Division,

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<sup>14</sup> Tom Clemens, “‘Black Hats’ off to the original ‘Iron Brigade,’” *Columbiad* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 46-58.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome Watrous, *Appleton (WI) Crescent*, Sept. 27, 1862; Hugh Perkins to Dear friend Herbert, Sept. 21, 1862, in Herdegen, *The Men Stood Like Iron*, 21-2.



V Corps. The loss of the I Corps was a bitter disappointment to the soldiers who were with the famous old unit organized by McClellan in the Washington camps of 1861. Lost as well was the proud designation as the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps, an identity—one Black Hat said—that was "purchased with blood and held most sacred." The only bright spot was that the order allowed I Corps men to retain and wear the red wool disc badges marking their original organization.<sup>16</sup>

With the arrival of General Ulysses Simpson (Hiram Ulysses) Grant at the Army of the Potomac, the fighting took on new meaning. It went on and on, day after day, in such places as the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, Cold Harbor, North Anna, and finally the new trenches around Petersburg, Virginia. The brigade was now in the V Corps' 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. The old 4<sup>th</sup> Division of the V Corps, which had been led by General James Samuel Wadsworth and then Lysander Cutler at the start of the Overland Campaign in 1864—disappeared off the army rolls. The last of the Iron Brigade was now the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and included the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan, four companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> New York Sharpshooters., and the 143<sup>rd</sup>, 149<sup>th</sup>, and 105<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania. The 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana, which failed to sign up for another three years of service was merged with the 7<sup>th</sup> Indiana on September 23, 1864, and then the 7<sup>th</sup> Indiana merged into 20<sup>th</sup> Indiana on October 18 and left the brigade for good. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin went home in June 1864, the three years of service expired. The two companies in the Independent Battalion of Wisconsin Volunteers were merged into the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin on November 30, becoming companies G and H.

In the long hard months of 1864-1865, a number of men commanded the brigade containing the Iron Brigade regiments. Solomon Meredith left after Gettysburg and never returned to active service. The brigade commanders following him, disregarding temporary assignments, were William Robinson of the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, from July 1, 1863 to March 24, 1864; Lysander Cutler of the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, March 24, 1864 to May 6, 1864; Brigadier General Edward Stuyvesant Bragg of the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin June 7, 1864 to February 10, 1865; John Colonel Azor Kellogg of the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin from February 28, 1865 to April 27, 1865. Colonel Henry Andrew Morrow of the 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan commanded the brigade during the Grand Review and during the period April 27, 1865 to June 5, 1865.

The fighting continued in 1865 and it was apparent to the men in ranks of the Union army the end was near. In a strange mix-up, the 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan and the Pennsylvania regiments were sent North on recruiting duty never to again march with the regiments of the old brigade. Left behind for more fighting were the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin. Finally, on April 1, there was a sharp Union victory at Five Forks, Virginia, and the chase of the badly wounded Confederate Army of Northern Virginia began. It ended once and for all on April 9, 1865, Palm Sunday. The men of the old Iron Brigade regiments were up at daylight with the others, moving along a railroad. Ahead could be heard artillery fire. The news passed back along the marching column that 20,000 rebels had surrendered, but the hard veterans shook their heads, saying it was too good to be

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<sup>16</sup> Cheek, *Sauk County*, 89.

true. Finally, the firing ahead stopped altogether and the brigade was told to make camp and that the men could erect their tents—something that had not been done in many days. In the distance, white flags could be seen hoisted from every tree and the word was passed that General Robert E. Lee wished for an interview with Grant because he did not want to surrender to Major General Phillip Henry Sheridan, preferring a man of his own rank. It was suddenly a time of reflection. Lieutenant Earl Rogers would write later that in that “army at Appomattox” stood “the remnants and shattered battalions” of Rufus King’s Division of 1861, which had fought the battles of their country for nearly four years. “Many had fallen by the wayside, while others had pressed forward to the end.”<sup>17</sup>

The hours passed slowly and quietly on that last day. Then, said a Black Hat: “We saw an officer come riding down the lines, his horse wet and covered with lather. As he passed along we saw the boys’ caps went up in the air—the shout rang with cheers.... As he came in front of us, he shouted, ‘Gen. Lee and army had surrendered to Gen. Grant.’ Cheer—Oh, no! We yelled for joy for we know the war was ended.”<sup>18</sup>

The last Grand Review came at Washington a few weeks later. In the ranks of the Army of the Potomac were the veterans of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin who had been there from the first days of the war. Others from the old 2<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin marched with the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin and probably looked for “Bull Run” painted on the worn and tattered flags of the old regiments. At the head of the brigade was Henry Morrow, the old commander of the 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan, and nearby, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Indiana, marched some of the old hands from the 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana. The heavy guns of Battery B of the 4<sup>th</sup> U.S. Artillery rolled along the avenue as well. The brigade’s second commander, John Gibbon, rode at the head of his own corps. “The whole thing went off quietly & without a blunder,” said a Wisconsin man.<sup>19</sup>

The last great gathering of the Union armies was a spectacle never forgotten, and now the soldiers were about to go home. On June 16, 1865, the 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan, now stationed at Camp Butler, Illinois, were it served as an honor guard for the burial of slain President Abraham Lincoln, was ordered to proceed to Detroit for muster-out. The city’s formal welcome came on June 20 at the place where the regiment had departed nearly three years before. There were 1,026 men in ranks then, now less than 200 of those original men returned. “Of all the brave troops who have gone from our State,” reported the *Detroit Free Press*, “few, if any, regiments can point to a more brilliant record, to more heroic endurance, to greater sacrifices for the perpetuation of the priceless legacy of civil liberty and a wise and good government.” There were speeches, full tables of food, and the sad realization that many of those who left with the 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan in 1862 would never be welcomed home. The regiment was formally mustered out June 30. In his farewell order Lieutenant Colonel Albert Marshall Edwards said: “you will soon return to your homes and families, and engage in civil pursuits. You can carry with you the sweet

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<sup>17</sup> Earl Rogers, *Milwaukee Sunday Telegraph*, 11 parts, July-December 1889.

<sup>18</sup> Cheek, *Sauk County*, 170-2.

<sup>19</sup> Lance J. Herdegen and Sharon Murphy, *Four Years With the Iron Brigade: The Civil War Journal of William Ray, Seventh Wisconsin*. (New York: DeCapo Press, 2001), 373-4.

reflection that you have done your duty, and a restored and happy country will applaud the heroic sacrifices you have made in its defense. Let no act of your future life sully the fair name you have won in the field.”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, on June 16, the two Wisconsin regiments left Washington for Louisville, Kentucky, traveling by rail over the Baltimore and Ohio to Parkersburg, Virginia, where they were loaded on steamers for a trip down the Ohio River. They arrived June 22 and went into camp on the Indiana side of the river. Ten western regiments—from Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Minnesota—were organized into a provisional division under the command of now Brigadier General Henry Morrow. The process of mustering out began.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, Lieutenant Colonel Hollon Richardson gathered his soldiers for a few remarks. The orders had come to muster the regiment out of service and head for Wisconsin to be paid off and be discharged. He cautioned his men he wanted none of “this drunkenness” he had seen earlier and that he wanted the soldiers to go home better than they came back to the army from the veteran furlough of 1864. One listener remembered Richardson “advised them to brush up & get shaved & hair cut &c &c. Go home like men.” The departure for Wisconsin came July 2 with “a great shaking of hands” with the old 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin boys who came to see them off. Madison was reached July 5 and the regiment marched to capital square where they found a large banner—Boys, we welcome you home! A few days later, homecomings were played out in hundreds of small communities and backwoods farms.<sup>21</sup>

The old Black Hat veterans of the 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana were also at Louisville in the ranks of the 20<sup>th</sup> Indiana and left July 12. The regiment reached Indianapolis the same day where it was given an official welcome, then mustered out. The roster numbered 23 officers and 390 men of the near 1,000 which had left the state.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin started for Wisconsin July 14—arriving in Madison two days later to an enthusiastic public welcome. On hand for the welcome was one-armed Lucius Fairchild, the hero of Gettysburg. “Should our country be again in danger,” he told the assembled crowd, “we’ll raise another 2nd, 6th and 7th, and Indiana will furnish another 19th and we’ll send to Michigan for a 24th and we’ll have another Iron Brigade.” Then, at the conclusion of the welcome, “the words of command were given,” one of the Black Hats said, and “the bronzed veterans wheeled to the right, drums and fifes struck up their stormy music and, with guns at right shoulder shift and bayonets gleaming in the slant sunbeams, under the green arches of the summer trees, the last organized fragment of the old ‘Iron Brigade’ of the Army of the Potomac...passed on, to dissolve and disappear from men’s eyes forever, but to live immortal in history and in the memory of a grateful

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<sup>20</sup> *Detroit Free Press* in Orson B. Curtis, *History of the Twenty-Fourth Michigan of the Iron Brigade* (Detroit: Winn & Hammond, 1891), 312-14; *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Edwin B. Quiner, *The Military History of Wisconsin* (Chicago: Clarke, 1866), 482.

people.”<sup>22</sup>

The unit’s fame came at great cost. Often highlighted in the histories of the Iron Brigade is the grim statistic reported by Colonel William F. Fox in his *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War*, first published in 1889, that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wisconsin lost the highest percentage of killed in battle of any regiment in the Union army in proportion to the number enlisted. The 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin is sixth on that list, the 19<sup>th</sup> Indiana eleventh, the 24<sup>th</sup> Michigan twentieth, and the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin thirtieth. Fox also noted, correctly, that the percentage of the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin should be higher because the total enrollment included 256 conscripts, very few of whom reported for duty. Less attention is given to Fox’s report that the casualty records of the War Department in 1865 showed the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin first on the list of men killed outright or mortally wounded in battle. The 7<sup>th</sup> lost 280 over the four years of service, compared with 278 for the 83<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania, and 277 for the 5<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire. The records were later revised by the various states. Soldiers originally listed as missing in the official reports were determined to belong properly among the killed in action. As a result of the review, the 5<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire moved to the top of his list with 296 killed or died of wounds, compared with 282 for the 83<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania, and 281 for the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin.<sup>23</sup>

But the rankings are only one indication of the brigade’s record of service. More significant is the distinction of serving at critical places in important battles. The brigade spearheaded the opening attack at Antietam and was with the first Federal infantry to reach Gettysburg. From the time of organization late 1861 until the last day at Appomattox, the brigade was present with the army, ready to serve whenever and wherever called for duty.

At the end of the war, on July 1, 1865, a correspondent for *The Milwaukee Sentinel* tried to put the record of the unit into perspective: “Wisconsin, Michigan and Indiana can say with truth that they have furnished the bravest soldiers of the war and they have had their shoulders to the wheel ever since the rebellion broke out. Their soldiers have never faltered... [and] they were confident that Right would be vindicated—and the result proved they were not wrong.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>William J.K., Beaudot, and Lance J. Herdegen, *An Irishman in the Iron Brigade: The Civil War Memoirs of James P. Sullivan, Sergt., Company K, 6th Wisconsin Volunteers*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 31; Cheek, *Sauk County*, 180-2.

<sup>23</sup>William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War 1861-1865: A Treatise on the Extent and Nature of the Mortuary Losses in the Union Regiments, with Full and Exhaustive Statistics compiled from the Official Records on file in the State Military Bureaus and at Washington* (Albany, NY: Albany Publishing, 1889).

<sup>24</sup>*Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 1, 1865.