



THE ORIGINAL IRON BRIGADE

By: Frank J Ruiz Jr.

The standard story of the "Iron Brigade" is that Brigadier General John Gibbon commanded a Brigade from the west. It was composed of the 2nd, 6th, 7th Wisconsin, 19th Indiana, and 24th Michigan Infantry regiments. We have been told that the nickname resulted primarily because of its fighting abilities as demonstrated at the Battle of South Mountain.

The Legend stems from an account given by a news reporter, who was near Major General George B. McClellan and Major General Joseph Hooker during the battle of South Mountain. General McClellan asked General Hooker for an "Iron Brigade" to pierce the Confederate center that day, and Fighting Joe sent forward Gibbon's men, who had been known at that time as the "Black Hat Brigade" because of their distinctive Hardee hats. The general's continued in conversation during the battle, and both of them used the term "iron" in their description of the men. The reporter later wrote home to his paper and told them of this account he had over heard and the legend of the "Iron Brigade" had begun. But Gibbon's "Iron Brigade" was not the first Brigade with this moniker at all, nor was it the only, brigade to have this title.

The entire account is based primarily upon a story by W.H. Atkins that was published in the veterans' publication "The National Tribune" in 1904. None of the generals mentioned by Atkins were still alive at the time to refute his account. General Hooker had not been with McClellan at the time during the battle and did not even witness Gibbon's men in action. Well after the war was over, Gibbon was asked about the "Iron Brigade" nickname, but he could not recall when it had been applied to his brigade but thought it was shortly after the Battle of Antietam.

The 1st Brigade, 1st Division, First Corps commanded by Brigadier General Christopher C. Augur was a brigade entirely made up of New York regiments and they were in fact the original brigade to hold the moniker "Iron Brigade". The Brigade was composed of the 22nd NYVI, 24th NYVI, 30th NYVI, 2nd USSS and 14th Brooklyn NYSM ["Red Legged Devils"]. In March 1862, Brig. Gen. Christopher C. Augur began a campaign near and around Fredericksburg, Virginia, from April 16 to July 23, 1862. After the Fredericksburg Expeditions, Brig. Gen. Marsena R. Patrick commented to Augur: "Your men must be made of iron to make such marches." The men of the 1st Brigade adopted this well received nickname. From then on they were known as the "Iron Brigade," and then later on as the "Eastern Iron Brigade" as to avoid any confusion with the "Western Iron Brigade", also known as "The Iron Brigade of the West".



During the Fredericksburg Expeditions, the brigade had two cavalry regiments attached to it, including the 2nd New York Cavalry Regiment "Harris Light" under the command of Lt. Col. Judson Kilpatrick [originally of 5th New York Zouaves]. The pair of cavalry regiments got sent back to their normal divisions and didn't partake in anymore actions with the "First Iron Brigade".

After the Brigade successfully completed their campaign, the brigade was mostly used in skirmishes and reconnaissance missions for the Army of the Potomac. They were known for their hard grit and

Iron Nerves, it was said that they had no fear in them when it came to the fight. A few days before the battle of Antietam General Hatch who had been commanding the "First Iron Brigade" for a short time was transferred and Colonel Walter Phelps Jr. assumed command. Colonel Phelps wrote:

"In compliance with orders from General Hatch, I assumed command of his brigade Sunday, September 14, [1862] at 10 a.m. The column of General Hooker's corps was then moving through Frederick toward Middletown on the pike."



The First Iron Brigade fought on through Antietam's Bloody Cornfield, within the Brigade was the Fourteenth Brooklyn New York State Militia [Red Legged Devils] who saved the Sixth Wisconsin and the two regiments fought side by side getting further than any other Regiments in the cornfield, the mesh of Fourteenth Red Legged Devils and Sixth Wisconsin "Black Hats" fought all the way up to Dunkard

Church and held their until reinforcements could be brought up to relieve them. Colonel Rufus R. Dawes the commander of the Sixth Wisconsin later wrote in his book "Service with the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers":

"The Fourteenth Brooklyn Regiment, Zouaves, came into our line closing the awful gaps. Now is the pinch. Men and officers of New York and Wisconsin are fused into a common mass, in the frantic struggle to shoot fast. Everybody tears cartridges, loads, passes guns, or shoots."

The Brigade continued to impress all the way through 1863. According to a report from William Fox of the 107th NY he states that:

"The brigade that was composed of the 22nd New York, 24th New York, 30th New York, 14th Regiment [New York State Militia], and 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters was the first to be called the "Iron Brigade" because of its brave fighting at South Mountain and Antietam"

Shortly before the battle of Gettysburg, most of the regiments were transferred or their enlistments were up so the original 1st Brigade, 1st Division, I Corps was disbanded. The 2nd USSS was the first of the regiments transferred out because their skills would be needed with the 1st USSS.

Sgt. Major James Mero Matthews of the 2nd Us Sharpshooters wrote in his journal the night that his regiment had been transferred over to the command of Col. Berdan of the 1st US Sharpshooters:

[December 30th 1862] *"Orders Came Late last night to join Berdan's 1st Regiment. So this morning after taking leave of the Brigade and Colonel Phelps, we left this Old Iron Brigade. Colonel Phelps made a short heartfelt speech and then the brigade stacked arms and took leave of us by shaking hands."*

The strongest evidence supporting this brigade's claim to the nickname include papers of Colonel Walter Phelps, Jr., of the 22nd New York, that contain a number of references to the term in his letters and diaries. There are also several relics that bolster this position. Medals were made up for all of the brigade's members, and they contain the name First Iron Brigade, a list of the regiments in it and the First Corps Symbol in the middle. Several years ago, a relic hunter found one of the medals when digging near Fredericksburg, before it had been found they weren't know to exist. And yet there is more evidence circulating out there such as the flag carried by the 24th New York Volunteer Infantry which is preserved in the New York State capital in Albany. On one side of the standard has the words "24th Regiment, Iron Brigade, 1st Division, 1st Corps." Captain Austin W. Holden, the assistant surgeon of the 22nd New York Volunteer Infantry, wrote a song dedicated to Colonel Walter Phelps Jr. called "A Song of the Iron Brigade." As well as a Poem called "The Old Iron Brigade". Below is the poem written by Captain Austin W Holden:

"The Old Iron Brigade"

From the camp and its now peaceful revels,
The bugles will soon call us forth,
The "Thirtieth" and "Red Legged Devils",
"Twenty-second" and the brave "Twenty-fourth."
To terror each heart is a stranger,
Tis cowards alone are afraid,
Then on to the front line of danger,
With the gallant old "Iron Brigade."

The following is taken from *The Union army: a history of military affairs in the loyal states, 1861-65 -- records of the regiments in the Union army -- cyclopedia of battles -- memoirs of commanders and soldiers*. Madison, WI: Federal Pub. Co., 1908.:

"In June the regiment became a part of the 1st brigade, 1st division, 3d corps, Army of Virginia, and in Sept., 1862, the same brigade and division, was made part of the 1st corps, Army of the Potomac. This brigade was known as the Iron Brigade before the Iron Brigade of the West was formed."