



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Those Damned Black Hats! The Uniform of the Iron Brigade

By Laurence D. Schiller

"Loud cheers were frequently given when some particular regiment or brigade passed by. Especially when...the 1st Corps came along with the 'full moon' on its banners, and as the great Western or Iron Brigade passed, looking like giants in those tall black hats... 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..."

Captain Charles Stevens, Berdan's Sharpshooters, May 1863

On the morning of July 1, 1863, Major General Harry Heth directed his division to advance towards Gettysburg. He and his superior, Lt. General A.P. Hill had dismissed reports of Federal cavalry in that town assuming it could only be militia or, at most, a post of observation. To his dismay, he ran into Brigadier General John Buford's veteran cavalry division whose brilliant delaying tactics and superior firepower held his men up for more than two hours. Frustrated by his slow progress, Heth had deployed his two leading brigades, Brigadier General James J. Archer's and Brigadier General Joseph R. Davis's, south and north respectively of the Chambersburg Pike in order to sweep those pesky blue coats away. Archer's southern infantry had just splashed across Willoughby Run and were driving the cavalymen when his men were suddenly and rudely confronted with the reality that a new foe had arrived on the ridge before them. His Tennessee and Alabama men viewed the onrushing men of the 2nd Wisconsin with the shout, *"Thar are them damned black hatted fellows again! Tain't no militia, it's the Army of the Potomac!"* And indeed, it was.



The Iron Brigade (at Gettysburg) by Don Troiani

The Federal brigade racing to confront Archer was the famed Iron Brigade, called the Black Hats due to their distinctive regular army M1858 dress hat, sometimes erroneously referred to as the 'Hardee'. Commanded at Gettysburg by Indiana native Solomon Meredith, they were the only all-Western brigade in the Army of the Potomac and suffered the highest percentage of soldiers killed in combat of any brigade in that army. They would, for all intents and purposes, be destroyed at Gettysburg along with much of the rest of the 1st Corps helping save the high ground south of town for General Meade's army. Composed originally of the 2nd, 6th, and 7th Wisconsin and 19th Indiana, losses in 1862 led to the addition of the 24th Michigan after Antietam.

These Western soldiers were distinguished by their uniform from most other union soldiers. Not only were they amongst the few who wore the distinctive M1858 hat with brass, hat cord and feather, they also wore the 9-button frock, and linen leggings. How did the Iron Brigade come to have this distinctive uniform? It is commonly assumed that when newly minted Brigadier General of Volunteers John Gibbon, an 1847 West Point graduate and career officer, took command on May 7th, 1862, that he wanted his brigade to look 'regular army' and consistent in their dress and so issued orders for the Regular Army regulation signature hats, frocks, and leggings. But, of course, the reality is far more complicated.

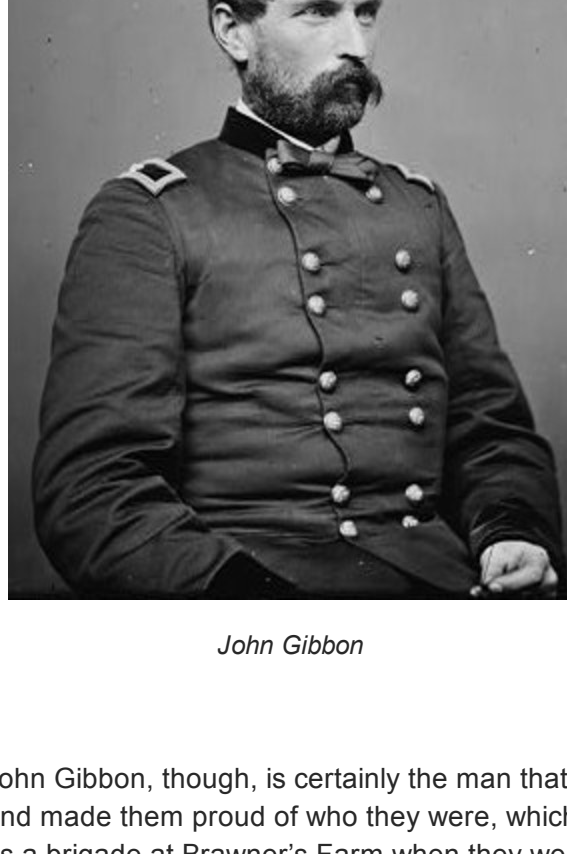
The first of the regiments that became the Iron Brigade to be mustered into Federal service was the 2nd Wisconsin and I will use them to illustrate the permutations that led to the Black Hats distinctive uniform. While there were uniform regulations for the regular U.S. army, there were none for militia units and when the boys north and south rushed to the colors, there was not only no uniformity as to how they looked, there was not even agreement as to what color uniform would distinguish each side. Not only were there colorful Zouaves and Chasseurs in reds and blues, but the 1st Minnesota and the 4th Alabama both wore red flannel shirts. Worse, a number of northern militia units wore gray uniforms, similar to the cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point while some in the south wore blue, like the Regular army dress uniform. This confusion of attire at the Battle of 1st Bull Run (1st Manassas), led to friendly fire incidences which only added to the shock and chaos of combat for the green troops on both sides.

The 2nd Wisconsin was formed from companies raised all over the state after Ft. Sumter was fired upon, who were then sent to Camp Randall in Madison to train. The State of Wisconsin issued them gray wool, single breasted frock coats and gray trousers with a narrow black stripe on the outer seam of the same cut and pattern that the 1st Wisconsin had adopted in April of 1861. They participated at Bull Run in those uniforms and the survivors were in camp around Washington in September when Wisconsin Governor Randall visited and promised that the government would shortly replace those raggedy gray uniforms, which had given rise to the sobriquet 'Raggedy a - Second', with the proper blue which all the rest of the Badger State units, save the first two, had been issued from the start. They gladly received their new uniforms in the first week of October and a correspondent wrote, *"The boys no longer look like beggars, with ventilated suits of clothing, but present a very neat, tidy and soldier-like appearance. Their new uniform consists of a handsome blue frock coat, pants of the same, a high felt hat, blue cord and black plume."* The second had been outfitted with the regulation army uniform as per the revised Army Regulations of 1861 which specified the 9-button frock and matching dark blue pants. Images of the time show that their hats were the M1858 and they were equipped with a brass eagle pin, which pinned the brim of the hat up on the left, plus a hunting horn (bugle), regimental numerals, and company letters. The left side was pinned up because the position of 'shoulder arms' in Scott's Infantry Tactics was on the left shoulder, not the right where the 1855 Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics, commonly called 'Hardee's' for William Joseph Hardee who revised Scott's, placed it. Pinning up the left brim kept the hat from being knocked off the soldier's head during the manual of arms. Of course, soldiers being soldiers, there are many pictures of 2nd Wisconsin boys either pinning up the brim or not and photos show everything from full brass and feathers to nothing but the hat cord. It should be pointed out here that the 2nd was also unusual because they actually used Scott's Tactics for their manual of arms throughout their service, while the other Iron Brigade units, and nearly all other infantry units north and south, used Hardee's.

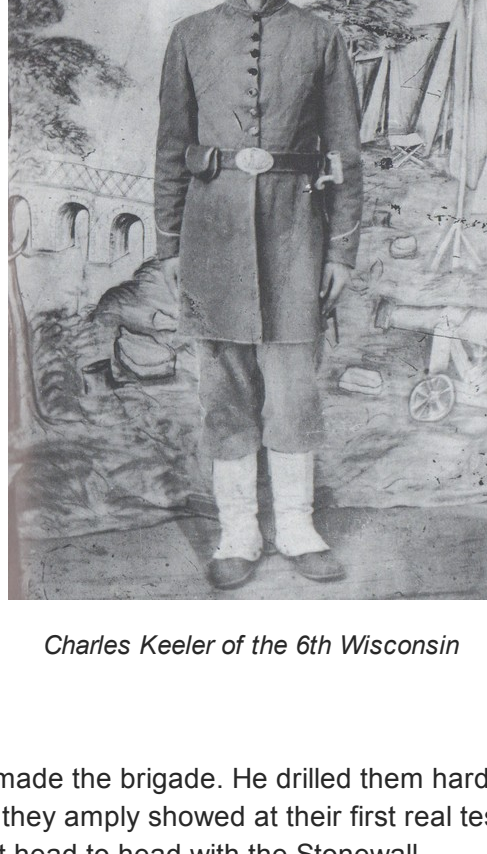


Cornelius Wheeler, Company I, Second Wisconsin

Dark blue cloth was more expensive and harder to obtain, so most states ignored the regulations of 1861 and provided cheaper sky-blue trousers to their men. This led the War Department to issue General Orders 108 on December 16, 1861 which specified the sky-blue pants, but naturally, having already a supply of dark blue pants on hand, we know that the Quartermaster issued dark-blue pants to the 2nd into the summer of 1862. Records show that the other regiments in the brigade received the lighter pants and we even have a note from the 7th Wisconsin's Quartermaster in May 1862 requesting more sky-blue pants because they had mistakenly been given, *"138 prs Dark Blue Pants which we could not use but turned over to the 2d Regt. Wis. Vols."* The 2nd likely had a mix of dark and light pants at Antietam, while by Gettysburg, they would all have received the sky-blue replacements. Records also show that the other regiments received the M1858 hat and a mix of frocks and four button sack coats well before John Gibbon arrived to take command.



John Gibbon

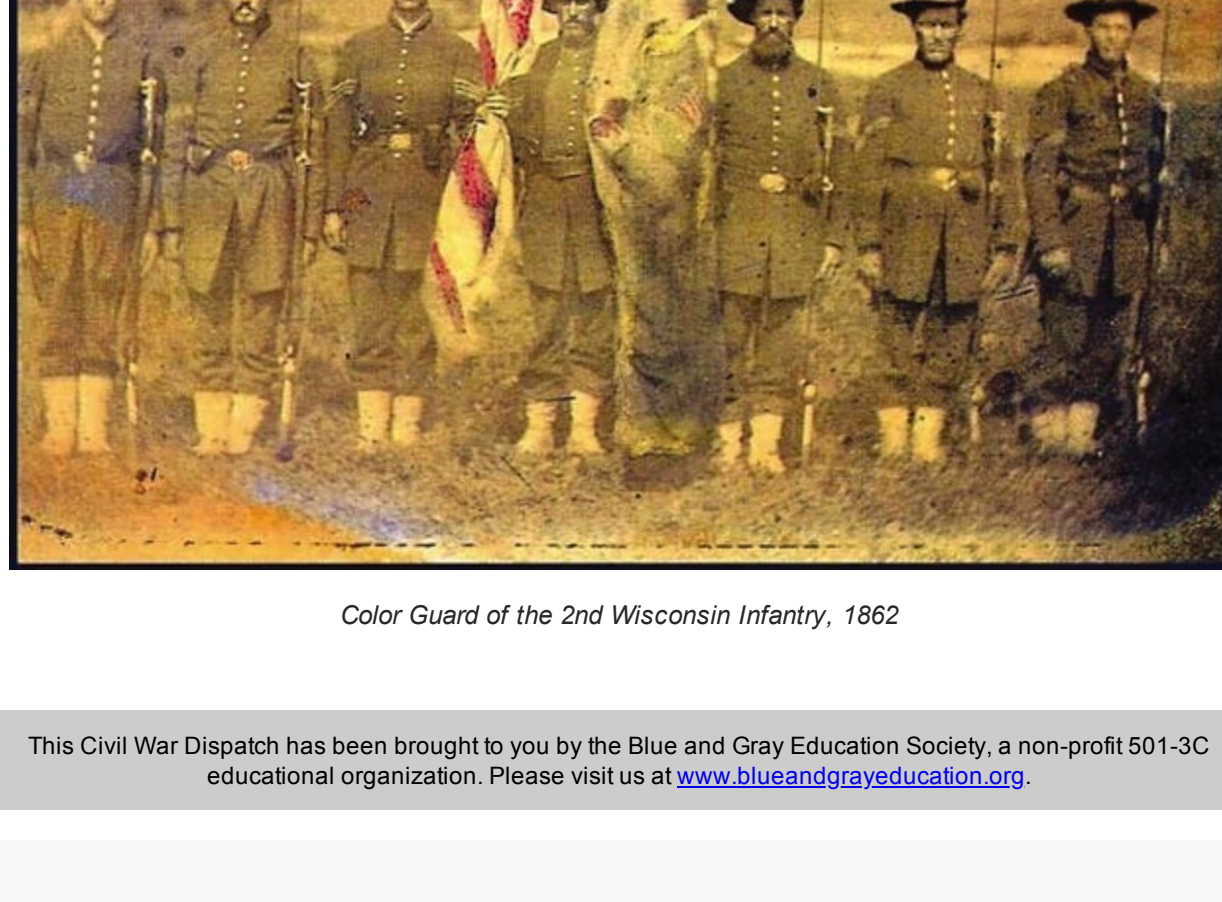


Charles Keeler of the 6th Wisconsin

John Gibbon, though, is certainly the man that made the brigade. He drilled them hard and made them proud of who they were, which they amply showed at their first real test as a brigade at Brawner's Farm when they went head to head with the Stonewall Division on August 28, 1862. He did two other things. First, he made sure that the men would continue to wear the regulation uniform with the M1858 dress hat, thus the sobriquet 'Black Hat Brigade' in addition to the title of 'Iron Brigade' they would earn at South Mountain. And Second, he ordered white 'linnen' leggings to be added to their uniform. These leggings were supplied to many of the eastern regiments and the design was patterned on a French model. They were distinguished by closing the outer seam by means of a series of leather looped thongs which were passed through each other until the top, where a leather strap secured the highest thong. It is a measure of their popularity that although there were many still in use by the Iron Brigade in the Fall of 1862, they would never receive a second issue of them.

Moreover, although Gibbon never told the story, several correspondents relate a tale that not long after the men received the leggings in May 1862 opposite Fredericksburg, *"Gen. Gibbon found his pet horse equipped with leggings much to the amusement of the men."* (Philip Cheek and Mair Pinton of Co. A, 6th Wisconsin). First Lieutenant William H. Harries of Company B of the 2nd Wisconsin related the best post war anecdote. About 16 years after the war the men of SE Wisconsin were having a reunion in Boscobel. Gibbon, in civilian clothing, was passing close by, heard about it and came to greet the men. On asking if any of the old Iron Brigade were present, one man came up and Gibbon inquired of him, *"Well, I am looking for the man."* *"What man?"* says the soldier. *"Why, the man who put the leggings on my horse when we were opposite Fredericksburg!"*. Gibbon, it is said, never did find out who did it!

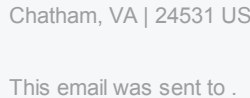
So, the Black Hats came by their uniform partly by accident and partly by intent. Had the 2nd Wisconsin not been wearing worn out militia uniforms at the time they did, they may well have been outfitted as a more typical Federal regiment of the eastern theatre. But they happened to need new duds at a moment when the Quartermaster had regulation hats and uniforms and so they got them. And because they got them, the other regiments, once brigaded together in the Fall of 1861, also got them, at least the hats. Then John Gibbon resolved to keep the uniform as a symbol of his western brigade and so it was and passed into history. After Gettysburg, after the losses of that battle and then the mustering out of many veterans in the spring of 1864 who chose not to re-up, the brigade lost its character. Already in the summer of 1863 new, non-western regiments had been added to the brigade and, in essence, the brigade really ceased to exist. But history wouldn't forget them, their deeds, and their black hats.



Color Guard of the 2nd Wisconsin Infantry, 1862

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