

IOWA BRIGADES IN THE CIVIL WAR

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The American reputation for famous units owes much to the record of certain "fighting brigades" of the Civil War. Some of these have achieved imperishable renown in the annals of war. On the Confederate side this list includes Hood's Texans, McGowan's South Carolina Brigade, and the famous "Stonewall Brigade," of Virginians. The Federals, too, had equally famous units, such as the "Iron Brigade," "Vermont Brigade," and several others. It is to be noted that these brigades achieved fame in the Eastern Theater of war, i.e. they served either with the Army of Northern Virginia or with the Army of Potomac.

Too long ignored have been the exploits of certain fighting brigades in the Western Theater. Included among these were three excellent brigades from Iowa which certainly deserve more specific mention in recent books dealing with military operations of the 1861-1865 period.

The writer's interest in Iowa's war record was first aroused in the course of conversations with his grandfather years ago. He had served through the war in a New Hampshire Regiment but had had ample opportunity to observe Iowans in battle. His regiment (14th New Hampshire Infantry) had served with the 22nd, 24th, and 28th regiments of Iowa Infantry in the Shenandoah Valley Campaign in 1864, and also with these same units during Sherman's Campaign in the Carolinas in 1865. This veteran, wounded four times in battle himself, was very emphatic in his high commendation of the combat effectiveness and over-all soldierlike qualities of the men from Iowa.

As a result of these comments on Iowa troops, obviously objective in nature, I became interested in the accomplishments of other Iowa units as well. My research indicates that there were three Iowa brigades whose fighting qualities were well known during and after the war. This paper is written to give belated justice to these brigades. It should

be pointed out that this discussion involves only brigades. Some of the Iowa regiments were brigaded with regiments from other States and therefore their histories were basically regimental and not recorded as brigade histories.

The first of the Iowa brigades, and probably the most famous, was known as "Crocker's Iowa Brigade." This unit, named after its first commander, Marcellus M. Crocker,¹ consisted of the following infantry regiments from Iowa: 11th, 13th, 15th, and 16th. During the war this one brigade lost 1145 dead, by battle, disease, or in Confederate prisons.² The brigade fought at Shiloh, Iuka, Corinth, Big Shanty, Vicksburg, and Atlanta. It can be readily seen that Crocker's Brigade had extensive combat experience from early 1862, through the war. Accordingly, its fame was not confined to one battle alone but rather embraced most of the major battles in the West over a period of three years.

While space limitations do not permit an exhaustive history of this fine brigade, it should be pointed out that its name became a byword in the Army of the Tennessee of which it was a part. The men first learned soldiering at Jefferson City, where they not only learned drill but how to break in mules and dig trenches. After a long and tiresome trip in steamers to Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, the brigade received its baptism of fire at Shiloh, losing nearly one-fourth of its men. Then, it participated in Halleck's slow and cautious march on Corinth, the march to Grand Junction, Holly Springs, Oxford, and Abbeyville. Some of the time the men shared scanty supplies of corn with the mules. The brigade participated actively in Grant's Vicksburg campaign, where it spent weeks of hard work and lost heavily in the futile assaults on the "Gibralta of America." After the surrender of Vicksburg, the men fought in Northern Mississippi, and in Sherman's 1864 campaign ending in the capture of Atlanta. In the course of this campaign, Crocker's Brigade lost over 1,000 men in sixty days. During the war the brigade

¹ Anonymous, *Proceedings of Crocker's Iowa Brigade at the Second Annual Reunion . . . September 26th and 27th, 1883*, (Muscatine, Iowa, 1883), p. 52.

² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

marched 8,500 miles!³ As part of the 17th Army Corps, this gallant little Iowa brigade's battle dead totalled 443.

The second Iowa brigade achieved fame briefly by its fighting at Shiloh. This unit, known as the "Iowa Hornet's Nest Brigade," derived its title from its participation in the "Hornet's Nest" defense at Shiloh on April 6, 1862. Regiments of this Iowa brigade were the 2nd, 7th, 8th, 12th, and 14th regiments of Iowa infantry.⁴

The Battle of Shiloh, fought on Sunday and Monday, April 6 and 7, 1862, was the first great battle in the West, and the importance of this victory for the Union was at once recognized and appreciated in the North.

The Federal army was surprised at Shiloh: no adequate preparations had been made for defense—and the Confederate attack in the morning of April 6th nearly resulted in the distinction of Grant's entire army. The severity of the fighting can be gauged from the fact that casualties for both sides amounted to 19,897 killed and wounded, with 3844 missing or prisoners, out of about 100,000 men engaged.⁵

Iowa's "Hornet's Nest" brigade achieved fame by its stubborn defense of a portion of the Federal lines. So stubborn was this defense that the Confederates dubbed the fighting area the "Hornet's Nest." For seven hours, under repeated and gallant attacks by the Confederate forces, this brigade of five Iowa regiments grimly held on, although continually subjected to heavy pressure from the front and flanks. The heroic defense of this salient by the brigade unquestionably slowed down the momentum of the Confederate attacks and assisted materially in averting disaster for the rest of Grant's army.

The contribution of this brigade to the Federal victory

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16

⁴ Anonymous, *Ninth Reunion of Iowa Hornet's Nest Brigade . . . Held at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee . . . April 6 and 7, 1912*, (Des Moines, Iowa, N. D.), p. 5.

⁵ Livermore, *Thomas L., Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America 1861-1865*, (Boston, Mass., 1900), 79-80.

remained almost unmentioned in the Federal reports. This was due mainly to the fact that the divisional commander, General W. H. L. Wallace, was killed in the battle and no report for the brigade was ever rendered. It was from the Confederate reports that information was made public of the gallant defence of the Iowa brigade!

Although the brigade held out for seven long hours, it was finally driven from its position at 4:30 o'clock in the afternoon. Three of the regiments were captured by the enemy, and two succeeded in cutting their way out through an enfilading fire.

The spirit of this brigade can be illustrated by "Billy" Gilchrist of Company "D", 12th Iowa Infantry. "He was a plain, common country boy," having had but limited educational advantages. He probably had never been fifty miles from his home before he enlisted. For some time prior to the battle he suffered from diarrhoea and was reduced to a skeleton, but strenuously objected when ordered to the hospital, saying, "Oh, there is nothing much the matter with me; I will be all right soon." Nevertheless, his company commander ordered him to the rear as a camp guard. Two hours later, however, he rejoined his unit. "He was so weak that he could not carry his musket, but held it by the strap and dragged it after him on the ground." Gilchrist was captured that day, was later paroled, and died shortly after arrival home.⁶

A third Iowa brigade, Williamson's of the 15th Army Corps, received even less publicity than the "Hornet's Nest Brigade," but was a splendid command. It was composed of the 4th, 9th, 25th, 26th, 30th, and 31st Iowa infantry regiments. It served in the Vicksburg Campaign.⁷

⁶ Anonymous, *Ninth Reunion of Iowa's Hornet's Nest Brigade . . .*, 15, passim.

⁷ Fox, William F., *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War*, (Albany, N. Y., 1889), p. 519.



Near Ft. Hill, Vicksburg, Miss., in 1863

While battle deaths can not be considered the *only* indication of a unit's fighting ability, heavy casualties during the Civil War certainly were encountered by the Iowa brigades discussed in this paper. In the long run active service brings a unit many scars; "Where the musketry was the hottest, the dead lay thickest." The following statistics on losses by famous brigades are interesting when compared with Iowa brigades. It should be emphasized that the four non-Iowa brigades listed here led *all* Federal brigades in battle deaths.⁸

"IRON BRIGADE"

<u>Regiments</u>	<u>Killed or Mortally Wounded</u>
2nd Wisc. Inf.	238
6th Wisc. Inf.	244
7th Wisc. Inf.	281
19th Indiana Inf.	179
24th Michigan Inf.	189
	Total
	1,131

(Average Regimental Loss – 226)

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-118, 515-519.

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"VERMONT BRIGADE"

<u>Regiments</u>	<u>Killed or Mortally Wounded</u>
2nd Vt. Inf.	224
3rd Vt. Inf.	206
4th Vt. Inf.	162
5th Vt. Inf.	213
6th Vt. Inf.	203
11th Vt. Inf.	164

Total	1,172

(Average Regimental Loss - 195)

"IRISH BRIGADE"

<u>Regiments</u>	<u>Killed or Mortally Wounded</u>
63rd N. Y. Inf.	156
69th N. Y. Inf.	259
88th N. Y. Inf.	151
28th N. Y. Inf.	250
116th Pa. Inf.	145

Total	961

(Average Regimental Loss - 192)

"CROCKER'S IOWA BRIGADE"

<u>Regiments</u>	<u>Killed or Mortally Wounded</u>
11th Iowa Inf.	93
13th Iowa Inf.	119
15th Iowa Inf.	126
16th Iowa Inf.	105

Total	443

(Average Regimental Loss - 110)

"HORNET'S NEST BRIGADE"

<i>Regiments</i>	<i>Killed or Mortally Wounded</i>
2nd Iowa Inf.	120
7th Iowa Inf.	141
8th Iowa Inf.	102
12th Iowa Inf.	80
14th Iowa Inf.	64

Total	507

(Average Regimental Loss - 101)

"WILLIAMSON'S BRIGADE"

<i>Regiments</i>	<i>Killed or Mortally Wounded</i>
4th Iowa Inf.	115
9th Iowa Inf.	154
25th Iowa Inf.	65
26th Iowa Inf.	76
30th Iowa Inf.	73
31st Iowa Inf.	28

Total	511

(Average Regimental Loss - 85)

The disparity in losses between the Iowa brigades and their Eastern counterparts can be largely explained by the fact that the Eastern units were under fire in major engagements substantially more often than were the Iowans. But "there is glory enough for all," and Iowa's record must ever command our admiration. In this connection, it is hoped that these fighting brigades will find their historian, even as did the "Irish Brigade," "Iron Brigade," "Vermont Brigade," and other fine Eastern units.

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