

### Feather In Their Caps: Two Celebrated Units Were Forged In The Cauldron Of Battle

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## Review

### FEATHER IN THEIR CAPS

**Two celebrated units were forged in the cauldron of battle**

**Fisher, Noel**

**Summer 1999**

**Wert, Jeffrey D.** *A Brotherhood of Valor: The Common Soldiers of the Stonewall Brigade, C.S.A., and the Iron Brigade, U.S.A.*. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 684824353

The fascination with Civil War soldiering continues to run wide and deep in American society. Evidence for this fact can be found in the popularity of Civil War films, television shows, histories, novels, and games, and by the numbers of Americans who spend their free time recreating Civil War battles and camp life. This great interest is not surprising, for the spectacle of tens of thousands of men marching into combat time after time when they knew that a quarter or more might suffer death or maiming wounds is indeed compelling.

**A Brotherhood of Valor** tells the story of two groups of men who achieved remarkable combat records and who seemed to epitomize much that was best in the armies of both sides. With considerable narrative skill, Jeffrey D. Wert follows the often intertwined fortunes of the Confederacy's Stonewall Brigade and the Union's Iron Brigade, beginning with the naive enthusiasm of the volunteers in the first days of the war and ending with their near destruction as viable units.

#### **Based on records left behind by both sides**

Though Wert inevitably follows the same paths as earlier histories, such as Alfred T. Nolan's *The Iron Brigade*, his work is solidly based on the large number of records left behind by the men on both sides. Wert handles these sources with an expert touch, ensuring that the voices of the common soldiers remain predominant throughout his work.

The Virginia regiments that came to make up the Stonewall Brigade, the 2nd, 4th, 5th, 27th, and 33rd, were all drawn largely from central Virginia, and they brought to the war a common desire to defend their beloved homeland. The Iron Brigade was a more diverse unit, constructed from the 2nd, 6th, and 7th Wisconsin, the 19th Indiana, and later the 24th Michigan. At the same time, their status as the only brigade in the Army of the Potomac made up entirely from Western regiments set them apart.

Despite their differences, the two brigades shared a number of common characteristics and experiences. Both served under exacting commanders who deliberately shaped them into elite units. General Thomas Jackson was a stern, intense man who drove his men, and himself, to their very limits in his consuming desire to defeat the enemy. In the beginning, many in the brigade resented his seemingly inhuman demands and considered him reckless, even mad. But in time many of the same men came to trust Jackson implicitly, to believe in his invincibility, and to take pride in their shared victories and shared name.

General John Gibbon, likewise, was a sober man who expected his volunteers to measure up to the highest standards of the Regular Army in drill, behavior, and dress. Initially many of the Western volunteers found him fussy and unreasonable, but eventually they, too, came to understand that the long hours of drill and stern discipline translated into superior combat performance. Gibbon also gave the Iron Brigade a powerful sense of identity by issuing them the Regular Army tall black hat and feather rather than the common blue cap. The headgear made the brigade clearly identifiable on the battlefield and became a badge of excellence.

But it was the experience of combat that ultimately transformed volunteers into elite troops. The Stonewall Brigade won their name in the first major battle in the East, when they halted the Union advance at Henry House Hill and contributed decisively to the Confederate victory. They solidified their reputation as one of the Confederacy's hardest marching, hardest fighting units in Jackson's valley operations in the winter of 1861-1862 and by their superior performance at the battles of Fredericksburg, Antietam, and Chancellorsville. Similarly, the Iron Brigade won lasting fame by their remarkable assaults on the Confederate lines at Brawner's House and South Mountain, their refusal to give way in the vicious fighting in the Cornfield at Antietam, and their stubborn, crucial defense of McPherson's Ridge the first day of Gettysburg.

## High rates of absenteeism and desertion

Though Wert pays respectful tribute to the courage and fortitude of these units, he does not romanticize the war. He concedes that the Stonewall Brigade suffered shamefully high rates of absenteeism and desertion, particularly when stationed near home. He admits that men on both sides grumbled about the routines of camp life, shirked drill, occasionally stole from civilians, and engaged in drunken brawls.

Further, Wert fully demonstrates the grim cost that these units incurred in winning their reputations. The Iron Brigade recorded more combat deaths than any other brigade in the entire war and suffered casualty rates of over 30 percent in several encounters. Indeed, the brigade never recovered from its losses at Gettysburg, and on the first day of the Battle of the Wilderness it would break and run. Likewise, by May 1864 the Stonewall Brigade, once 8,100 strong, had shrunk to 200 men, and it would suffer the ignominy of losing both its brigade designation and its name.

Readers looking for a sociological study of Civil War units, a psychological consideration of responses to combat, or a rigorous analysis of the reasons for superior combat performance will not find them here. Rather, what Wert offers is an affectionate account of two groups of ordinary men who achieved extraordinary things. Wert leaves the reader with a profound sense of the soldiers' common experiences, of camp life, drill, the sometimes inexplicable demands of officers, hunger, exhaustion, fear, rage, comradeship, and above all combat, that transcended boundaries of North and South and bound these men together in a brotherhood of valor.

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