

# The Irish Brigade at Antietam

September 17, 1862 has the sad distinction of being the bloodiest single day of fighting in America's bloodiest war. Combined casualties at the Battle of Antietam were 26,134. Few regiments suffered more than the Irish Brigade.



*Future President of Notre Dame, Father Corby, rides along the line of the Irish Brigade giving absolution under fire. "Sons of Erin" by artist Don Troiani.*

The Irish Brigade had been the brainchild of their commanding officer Thomas Francis Meagher. The former "Young Ireland" rebel, creator of the Irish Tricolor of Green, White and Gold, escaped political prisoner, lawyer, newspaper editor and politician had formed the brigade with the twin objectives of gaining respect for the Irish by their patriotism for their adopted country and developing a nucleus for a future fight for Ireland's freedom. The Brigade was formed of the almost exclusively Irish American 69th, 63rd and 88th New York and the "honorary Irish" of the 29th Massachusetts (after Antietam the 29th would be replaced by the Irish American 28th Massachusetts that would gain fame at Fredericksburg). The regiments of the Irish Brigade had already earned a formidable reputation as a crack unit, having distinguished themselves in every battle of the earlier "Seven Days" Campaign. It was small wonder, many in the Brigades ranks had already distinguished themselves in the Mexican American War or in fighting with the Papal forces in Italy against Garibaldi.

The Union Army was already heavily engaged, when the Irish Brigade was ordered to advance through an open field and to take an area of high ground. Subjected to accurate Confederate rifle fire as they crossed the field, the Brigade marched on in disciplined order, the National and the famed Green Regimental Colors (flags) fluttering overhead. When they encountered a fence across their line of march, eighty volunteers rushed forward

to knock it down, rather than see the whole Brigade slowed by the obstacle and exposed to fire. Over half of these volunteers would be killed. Seeing the Irish continue to press forward, the Confederates fell back as the Irish advanced up the hill.

What no one on the Union side knew was that on the other side of the hill was a farmer's dirt road that years of rain had eroded into a ditch five feet below the surrounding ground level. "The sunken road" was a perfect rifle pit and was filled with Col. John B. Gordon's Georgians. As the Irish crested the hill, they were met with a volley that decimated the Brigade, including killing or wounding every single Color Bearer. Seeing the flags fall from across the field, an aide to Union General McClellan exclaimed, "The battles lost, the Irish are fleeing!" only for McClellan to respond, "No, the flags are raised again, they are advancing". Eight successive Color Bears of the 69th New York alone would fall that day as men would pick up the flags from fallen comrades. Captain Patrick Clooney, though wounded himself, would snatch up the colors from the 88th's fallen color bearer only to be killed by multiple shots, the Green Flag wrapping around him like a shroud befitting a hero. Another Color Bearer, the staff of his Irish Brigade flag snapped in two by a rifle shot, draped the flag over his shoulder like a sash and continued to move forward, personifying the Gaelic phrase on the flag he was carrying "Riamh Nar Dhruid O Spairn lann", "Who never retreated from the clash of spears"

The fire of the Confederates was so intense that the Irish Brigade could not advance, but they did not flee either. Despite the failure of promised reinforcements that never materialized, the Brigade poured "Buck and Ball" (a 69 cal. Ball and three 30 cal. Buckshot) into the enemy at 300 paces, turning "the Sunken Road" into "Bloody Lane". When their ammunition was depleted, the remnants of the Brigade, with drill ground precision, formed and then marched back to the Union lines, the Irish Brigade never "ran" from the enemy. Another Union unit would take the "Bloody Lane", but most credited the punishment that the Irish Brigade inflicted on the enemy, at a terrible cost to themselves, with making it possible. The New York Regiments had taken over 50% casualties. The Irish Brigade was now no bigger than a single regiment. As the depleted ranks of the 88th marched passed, Union Major General

## Did you Know that....

- None other than enemy commander Robert E. Lee bestowed the nickname "The Fighting 69th" on the 69th New York Regiment. Upon hearing that the 69th NY was moving into position to face his troops across the battlefield at Fredericksburg in December of 1862, Lee remarked, "Ah yes, that Fighting 69th."
- The Battle Cry of the Irish Brigade, and historically of other Irish Regiments that have served in armies around the world is the Gaelic "Faugh A Ballagh", "Clear the Way" (the Irish are coming). It is still the official battle cry of the modern 69th.
- Eleven Members of the Irish Brigade were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Three of the Irish Brigades Commanding Officers fell in battle.
- 150,000 Irish born soldiers fought for the Union, 40,000 for the Confederacy representing a significant portion of the soldiers enlisted in each Army. This does not include the many more that were American born and of Irish descent.
- Despite their significant contribution to achieving the Union Victory at Antietam and the fact that many other units had previously been recognized, it was not until 1997 that the Irish Brigade role was finally recognized by a monument on the Antietam battlefield thanks to the persistent efforts of the AOH.

Israel Richardson saluted as it passed with the words 'Bravo 88th, I shall never forget you!'

During the course of the War, the Irish Brigade suffered over 4,000 casualties, more men than the Brigade ever had at any one time. The Fighting 69th lost more men than any other New York regiment. The Battle of Antietam is remembered as the Union victory that allowed President Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves in the Confederate States. It is all too often forgotten that this emancipation was secured in no small part with the blood of Irish Immigrants, Immigrants who were denied civil rights in their own country and faced before and after the Civil war discrimination in their adopted county.

In thinking of the Civil War, all Americans should remember the words of a defeated Confederate Officer to his Union counterpart at Appomattox; "You only won as you had more Irish than we did."