



General John Gibbon

James H. Hillestad Chronicles the Career of the Man who was Known to be “A Tower of Strength and Cool as a Steel Knife.”

On the evening of July 2, 1863, an historic council of war took place behind Union lines at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia had beaten back the Union Army of the Potomac. The Union position along Cemetery Ridge was on the brink of collapse.

Major General George Meade met with his ten senior Union commanders. He wanted their opinions on whether they should stay and engage or fall back to fight another day.

Major General John Newton insisted that Gettysburg was no place to fight a battle. The opinion of Newton, Meade’s senior lieutenant, carried great weight among the other commanders.

But when Meade called for the vote that night, all eyes turned to John Gibbon, the 36 year old brigadier general, who, as the junior officer present, would cast the first vote. He told his seniors that the Army of the Potomac should “take no step which even looks like retreat.”

Newton, as well as the others, agreed — and voted with Gibbon to make a stand against Lee’s Confederates. Meade declared, “...such then is the decision.”

Meade then pointed to Gibbon, “If Lee attacks tomorrow, it will be in your front.” To which Gibbon responded that his men would decisively repulse any attack.

Who Was John Gibbon?

Born on April 20, 1827 to the family of a physician in Philadelphia, John Gibbon moved with his family to North Carolina in 1839. Three years later, he was appointed to West Point. After graduation, he saw service in Mexico and later fought the Seminoles in Florida.

From 1854 to 1859, he taught gunnery at West Point. When the Civil War erupted, he was commanding Battery B, 4th U.S.

Artillery, at Camp Floyd, Utah Territory.

He was then called east for active service. Despite the fact that his father was now a slaveholder and that three of his brothers were serving in the Confederate military, Gibbon believed his duty lay with the Union. The rift this caused in his family would never heal.

A New Dawn

On May 2, 1862, Gibbon was made a Brigadier General. His command was unique in the Army of the Potomac. It was the only brigade made up entirely of western units. It contained the 2nd, 6th and 7th Wisconsin and the 19th Indiana.

The uniform he chose for his Westerners was distinctive: a dark blue single-breasted frock coat, light blue trousers, white leggings, and a black felt “Hardee” hat. The uniform became so well known that the Westerners were known as the “Black Hat Brigade.”

Civil War Service

At Second Manassas, Gibbon came away with a reputation for strength

and steadiness that would follow him throughout his career. On September 14, 1862 at the battle of South Mountain, Major General Joseph Hooker exclaimed that Gibbon’s men “fought like iron.” From then on, his brigade was known as the “Iron Brigade.”

Three days later, Gibbon proved himself again at Sharpsburg, Maryland along Antietam Creek, on what was to be the bloodiest day of the Civil War. At dawn and supported by his old Battery B, Gibbon led his brigade down the Hagerstown Pike toward a now famous and bloody battlefield. Their objective: Dunkard Church.

On that day, he lost more than 300 men — but stopped Lee’s invasion of Maryland. Recognition came with his promotion to Division Commander.

On December 13, at the Battle of Fredericksburg, a shell fragment sliced open

TOP
General John Gibbon during the Civil War

BELOW
Mounted General John Gibbon with telegraph section at the Battle of Petersburg





his arm. After months of convalescence, Gibbon resumed his command and participated in the Chancellorsville Campaign. At the Battle of Gettysburg he commanded the 2nd Division, II Corp, where he was wounded for a second time. Returning to duty in the Spring of 1864, he led his troops during the siege of Petersburg and was promoted to Major General.

At the conclusion of the Appomattox campaign in the spring of 1865, Gibbon served as one of the surrender commissioners when Lee's army finally succumbed to defeat.

Indian Wars

Gibbon remained in the army after the war and was assigned command of the 7th Infantry in the District of Montana. He led

one of three columns engaged in the Sioux campaign of 1876, a column that reached the Little Big Horn River — one day too late to save Custer and his troopers.

The following year, Gibbon confronted Chief Joseph and his Nez Perce tribe. He was severely wounded in the Battle of Big Hole Pass. The Gibbon River and Falls bear his name after his 1872 expedition there.

Later Years

Gibbon retired from the army in 1891 and died in 1896. He once confided to an aide, "I am not a member of any church, but in all these battles I have believed that I was in the hands of God and that I should be unharmed or not, according to his will." ■



TOP
Gibbon monument at Gettysburg

ABOVE
Chief Joseph, of the Nez Perce
with Gibbon late 1880s early
1890s

FAR LEFT
Mounted Gibbon
No.31275

LEFT
No.31099 - Union Iron
Brigade Flagbearer
at Rest No.1

