

THE BLOODY SHAMROCK

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian

Before the Civil War, the 69th NY State Militia regiment, was commanded by Sligo-born Michael Corcoran. On November 15 1860, he was arrested for refusing to parade the 69th before the visiting Prince of Wales. Less than two months later, on January 9, 1861 Fort Sumter was fired on and everything changed.

The commander of the artillery battery that opened fire on Fort Sumter was Capt. John Mitchel, who had escaped from Van Dieman's Land with his father, Irish patriot John Mitchel. After the surrender of the fort, Mitchel allowed defending Major Anderson a cannon-salute to their flag in tribute to a courageous defense. However, with fire and sparks all around the cannon, a flake of fire entered the muzzle of one of the guns and when the cartridge was rammed down it exploded, killing Private Daniel Hough and wounding five men. Private Hough, who became the first casualty in the American Civil War, was a recent immigrant from Ireland.

In April, 1861, Lincoln called for volunteers and Col. Corcoran's pending Court Martial was dropped so he could lead the 69th to protect the nation's capitol. One Hundred and Fifty years ago, on July 21, Confederate forces marched north and Union forces were sent to Manassas, VA to meet them at a creek called Bull Run. The largely untrained Union forces were buttressed by Corcoran's 69th while on the Confederate side Brigadier General Thomas Jackson commanded a brigade of Virginians. Jackson, whose great-grandfather hailed from Coleraine, Co. Derry, held firm in the face of furious assaults against his lines earning him the nickname *Stonewall*, and launching a legend in military history.

In Jackson's command was the 1st Virginia Infantry, whose Company C, **Montgomery Guards**, was almost totally Irish, led by another Irish patriot, John Dooley. There were also Irishmen from Alexandria, Va. in the **Emmett Guards** and **O'Connell Guards**, which were incorporated into the 17th Virginia Infantry. There were other Irish in the Confederate forces as well, like the rough and tumble Irish longshoremen from New Orleans, fighting with Roberdeau Wheat's 1st Louisiana Special Battalion, known as the **Louisiana Tiger Rifles**.

The Irish in the Union and Confederate forces met at Bull Run where the Confederates built up enough troops on the Union right side to overrun their flank leading to a disorderly retreat to the North. This was the first major engagement of the War and the Federal army was routed, but the 69th regiment had charged bravely and stubbornly held its ground. Even after its commander, Col. Corcoran, was wounded and captured, the 69th retreated in order, protecting the rear while panicked Union soldiers swarmed around them headed for Washington. After the battle, Union commander General McDowell personally thanked them for their gallantry.

Shortly after the battle, the regiment was re-enlisted and re-formed as the 69th New York State Volunteers. Capt. Thomas Francis Meagher was commissioned colonel, and the War Department authorized him raise four more regiments to form a brigade. Col. Meagher formed **the Irish Brigade** – a name chosen not merely to describe the nationality of its men, but also in honor and remembrance of the men who had gained a reputation for valor during the preceding century in the French Army where names like Fontenoy and other great European battle-fields flew among their battle-ribbons. The original Irish Brigade was dissolved in 1791 by the revolution. In 1792, Count de Provence (later Louie XVIII) presented them with a 'farewell banner' embroidered with an Irish Harp, shamrocks and fluer-de-lis. The future King said, *We acknowledge the inappreciable services that France has received from the Irish Brigade in the course of the last 100 years; receive this Standard as a pledge of our remembrance, a monument of our admiration, and our respect; and in future, generous Irishmen, this shall be the motto of your spotless flag: Semper et ubique Fidelis (Always and Everywhere Faithful)* – a motto not unfamiliar to U.S. Marines!

Meagher intended the brigade to be made up of two New York, one Boston, and one Philadelphia infantry regiments, with artillery forming the fifth regiment. Initially made up of the 63rd 69th and 88th NY regiments and four small artillery companies of the 2nd NY Light Artillery Battalion, they began training at Fort Schuyler, NY, the first Headquarters of the Irish Brigade. In the fall of 1862, the 2nd New York Light Artillery was reassigned and the 28th Massachusetts and the 116th Pennsylvania were added. Meagher ordered 69-caliber smoothbore muskets, which many considered obsolete, but were very effective at close range which was the style of fighting he had in mind for the Irish Brigade. Close fighting had won the day at Fontenoy, and he intended to follow this tradition. These tactics would make the Irish Brigade famous on both the Union and

Confederate sides, but would also produce heavy casualties within its ranks since they had to get up close before being effective.

The Irish Brigade fought in every campaign of the Army of the Potomac, from the Peninsular Campaign in the early half of 1862 to the surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox on April 9th, 1865. At various points throughout these campaigns the brigade's ranks became so depleted that its very existence was threatened and they were actually reorganized in February 1863.

After First Bull Run, when Gen. McClellan was put in command of the Army of the Potomac, he placed the Irish Brigade in the 1st division of the II Corps. The emblem of II Corps was the Club (playing card suit) and 1st, 2nd and 3rd Division colors were Red, White and Blue; thus as part of the 1st Division of the II Corps, the emblem of the Irish Brigade was a Red Club.

Out of a total enlistment of 7,000 men during the war, the Brigade returned to New York in 1865 with just 1,000; one company was actually down to seven men. The 69th NY suffered 75 per cent casualties among enlisted men; compare that to the famed Light Brigade which rode into the 'Valley of Death' at Balaklava and lost only 36.7 per cent of its men. Is it any wonder that the men of the Irish Brigade referred to McClellan's Red Club emblem as the 'Bloody Shamrock'!

