

The Imbecile Iverson

Command Failure at Gettysburg

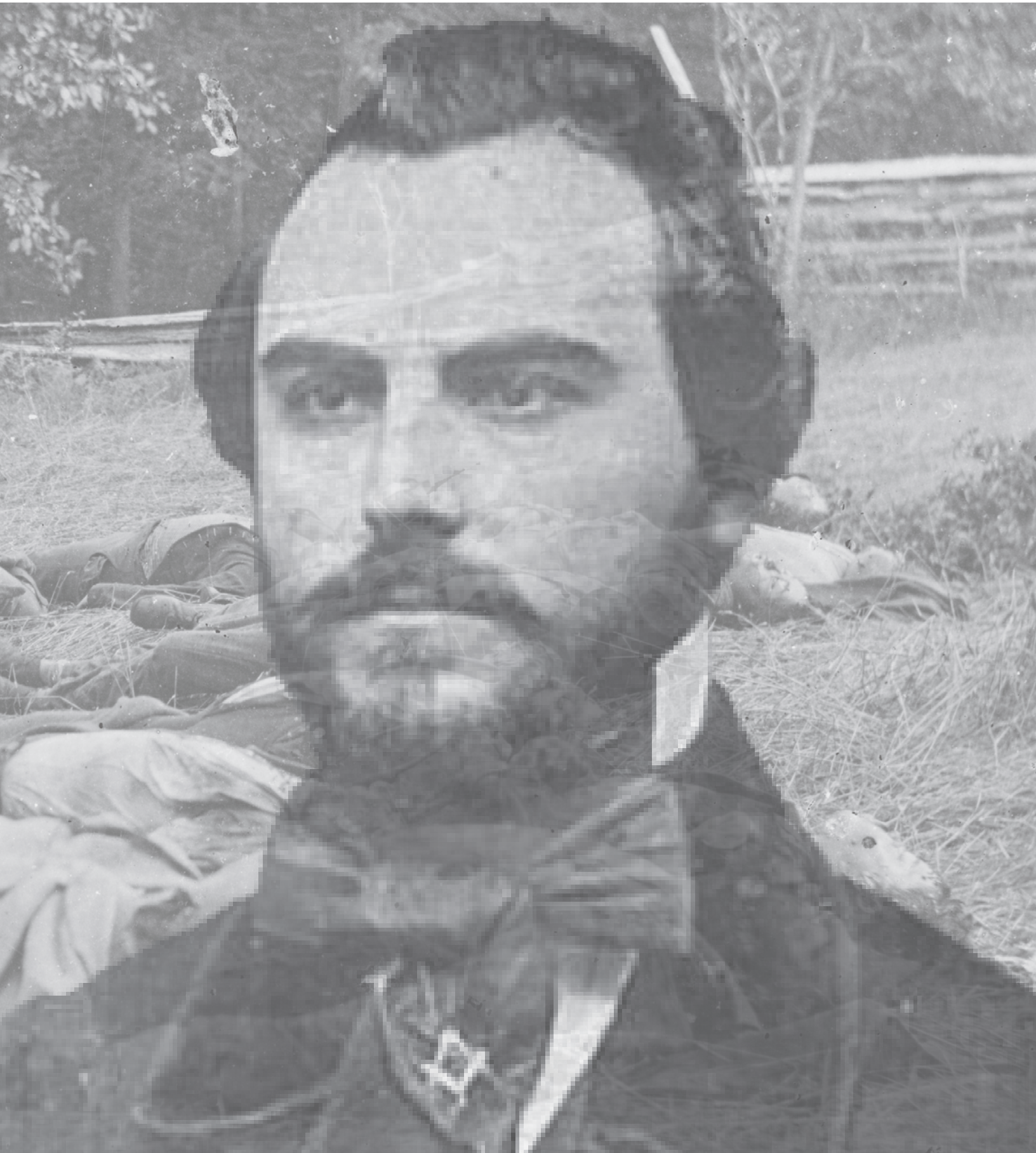
Bob Williams

At first dawn on July 2nd, 1863, cannoneers and drivers of Capt. Thomas J. Kirkpatrick's Amherst (Virginia) Artillery began to stir from their night's encampment along Oak Ridge, northwest of Gettysburg. Having arrived too late the previous evening to participate in that day's brutal engagement, the awakening soldiers found themselves numbed by a grisly panorama being slowly unveiled by the rising sun. As one young Virginian sorrowfully recalled: "This morning on getting up, I saw a sight which was perfectly sickening and heart rending in the extreme. It would have satiated the most blood-thirsty and cruel man on God's earth. There were, within a few feet of us, by actual count, seventy-nine North Carolinians laying dead in a straight line. I stood on their right and looked down their line. It was perfectly dressed. Three had fallen to the front, the rest had fallen backward; yet the feet of all these men were in a perfectly straight line . . . They had evidently been killed by one volley of musketry and they had fallen in their tracks without a single struggle . . . I turned from this sight with a sickened heart and tried to eat my breakfast, but had to return it to my haversack untouched." (1)

This memorable vista of carnage was located in a broad timothy field just south of the Mummasburg Road, on the eastern edge of the John Forney farm. There, on July 1st, the veteran North Carolina brigade of General Alfred Iverson, Jr. fell prey to a nearly perfectly executed Union ambush and received a mauling remarkable by even Civil War standards. In just a few short minutes Iverson's command lost over 900 men and suffered one of the highest percent casualty rates of any Confederate brigade at Gettysburg. Said one witness plainly: "They died as if on dress parade." A Tar Heel survivor afterward lamented: "Unwarned, unled as a brigade, we went to our doom. Deep and long must the orphan children of North Carolina rue the rashness of that hour." (2)

Retribution for that "rash hour" came swiftly. Less than a fortnight after battle's end, Alfred Iverson was reassigned from his brigade in the Army of Northern Virginia and soon relegated to a backwater of the war. He has since been castigated for employing faulty tactical dispositions that led to his command's destruction. Other commentators have bluntly branded Iverson a coward by not advancing with his men. Yet, a closer look at the

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Alfred Iverson as he appeared before the war

Iverson initially pursued a military career and attended Tuskegee Military Institute. When only 17 he marched off to the Mexican War as second lieutenant in Seymour's Battalion of Georgia volunteers, raised by Alfred, Sr. Following the "Mexican adventure," young Iverson tried a brief stint in civilian life. Several business ventures failed to satisfy his spirited temperament. In 1855, he used his own military experience and father's clout as a now United States senator to gain a first lieutenant's commission in the newly authorized 1st U.S. Cavalry. Over the next few years, Alfred's service with his regiment proved honorable and his experiences memorable. In between diverse assignments along the frontier Lieutenant Iverson also found time, while stationed at Carlisle Barracks, PA, to marry Harriet Hutchens of Gwinnett Co., GA.

As sectional crisis loomed between North and South, the seasoned young lieutenant resigned his commission in March of 1861 and returned home. With his statesman-father at the forefront of the secession movement, there could be little doubt where Alfred, Jr.'s loyalties lay. When war began, Iverson sought to parlay his impressive military credentials into meaningful rank in Confederate service. Traveling to Montgomery, AL, he leveraged his father's relationship with newly elected Southern President Jefferson Davis to obtain a captaincy in the Confederate States' Provisional Army. Iverson's first assignment was to report to the vital port of Wilmington, NC. There he became post commander of Ft. Caswell, located at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Drawing on his

record reveals that the brigadier's transgressions that fateful day were more about leadership capacity and fate than any want of personal courage or skill. Gettysburg, in fact, proved to be the bloody culmination of a long and acrimonious relationship between Iverson and his North Carolina soldiery.

Who was General Alfred Iverson? What manner of men did he seek to lead? More importantly, what events presaged that fatal

summer's hour near the Pennsylvania crossroads town?

Born on February 14, 1826 in Jones County Georgia, Alfred Iverson, Jr. was the son of *lawyer-cum-politician* Alfred Iverson, Sr. and Caroline Holt. In the youth's formative years, he acquired some of the elitist ideals and affectations often associated with privileged, Southern upper-crust families. Some say he was spoiled. At his father's insistence, the younger

extensive experience, the ambitious captain immediately began to recruit and train several companies of raw North Carolina volunteers for active service.

When these companies along with others were organized into the 10th North Carolina Volunteers in June 1861, Iverson was elected colonel. For a unit of primarily North Carolina yeoman farmers to elect a pampered, high-bred Georgian as their commander seems unusual in an era where state chauvinism was omnipresent. It implies, initially at least, that Iverson had earned the confidence and respect of his men. Yet, any elation Colonel Iverson might have felt at this personal accomplishment was rudely shattered when his beloved wife Harriet died unexpectedly the following month, leaving him with two young children. (3)

Devastated by his personal loss, Iverson nonetheless applied himself diligently to bringing his men up to form. Comprised of companies with such colorful monikers as the Cabarrus Black Boys, Confederate Grays, and Independent Blues, the raw regiment adjusted well to the new business of soldiering. Re-designated the 20th Regiment N. C. Troops in October 1861, the unit was described as “well drilled in both infantry and artillery tactics, though much depleted by sickness.” The 20th remained in the Cape Fear district until mid-June of the following year when they were ordered to Richmond. There they were brigaded with the 5th, 12th, 13th, and 23rd North Carolina Regiments under General Samuel Garland. (4)

In his regiment’s baptismal engagement at Gaines’ Mill during the Seven days’ Battles, Iverson was

painfully wounded while leading a bold attack on a Federal battery. The colonel’s behavior was said to be “gallant.” The Twentieth itself performed superbly and, despite frightful losses, was first to penetrate the strong Union position. Iverson rejoined his unit in time to participate in the Maryland Campaign. At both South Mountain and Antietam in September, Garland’s brigade was roughly handled and its casualties heavy. Garland himself was killed in the former engagement. In the latter, the general’s successor Colonel D. K. McRae of the 5th North Carolina proved unsuited to the mantle of command. While there is no remarkable mention in official reports of Colonel Iverson’s performance in either battle, he obviously impressed his superiors. Division commander Daniel Harvey Hill recommended that the native Georgian assume the post-Antietam vacancy in brigade leadership. Never one to mince words, Hill noted: “In my opinion, [Iverson is] the best qualified by education, courage, and character of any colonel in the service for the appointment of brigadier general.” (5)

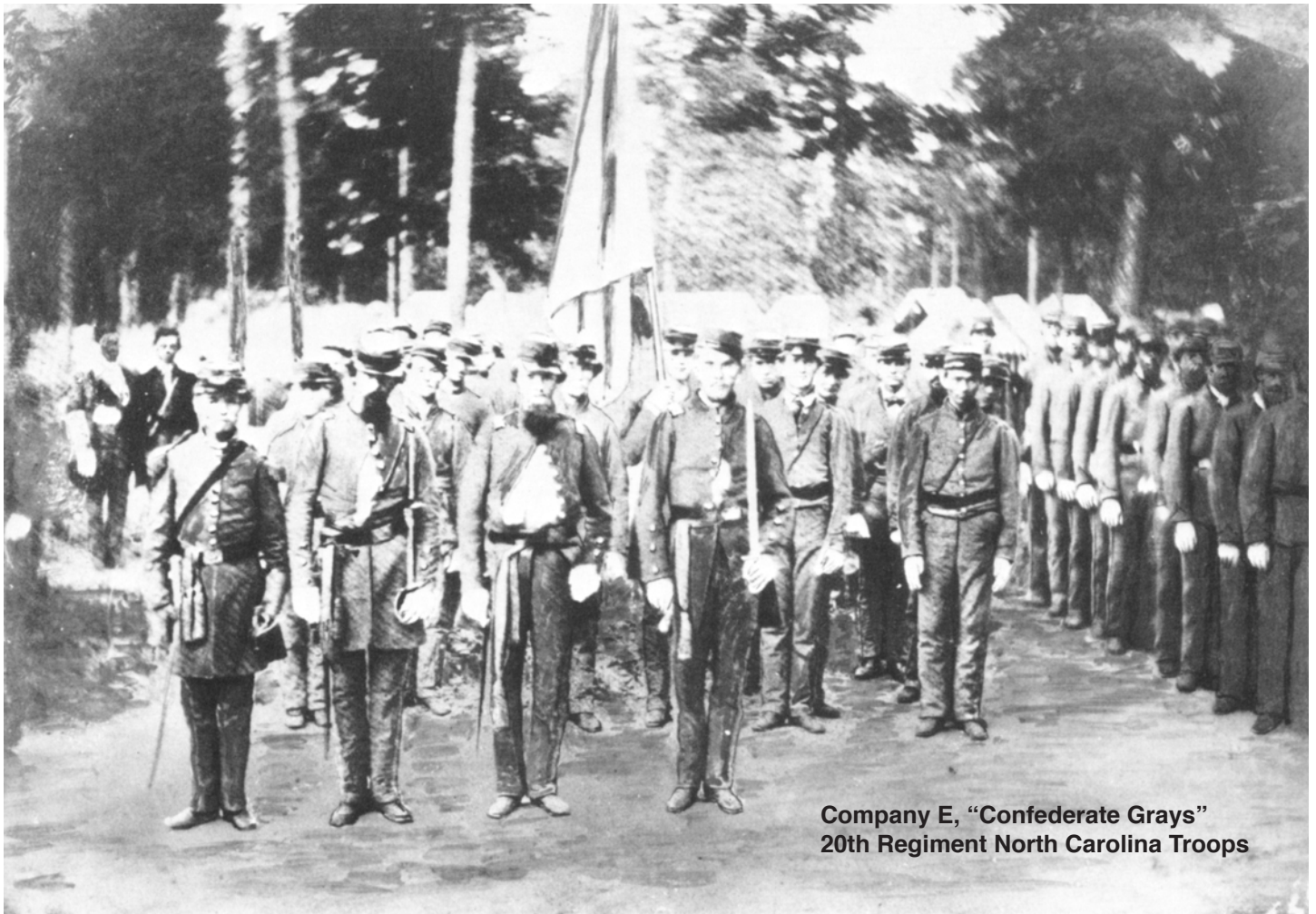
Iverson received his promotion in November of 1862. Yet his ascension to brigade command exposed a glowing ember of discontent between Iverson and his former colleagues that soon burst into open flame. At issue was who would succeed him to command of the 20th North Carolina. Iverson, apparently, was contemptuous of several of the higher-ranking field officers in the regiment and preferred not to promote from within. Instead, he sought to bring in a personal favorite from outside the unit. Indignation among the North

Carolinians was both swift and universal. Twenty-six officers from the 20th promptly drafted a letter of protest to Confederate Adjutant and Inspector General Samuel Cooper. When Iverson bluntly refused to sign and forward the document, the rebellious officers circumvented him and sent their grievance directly to Cooper.

Iverson was furious! His next move makes it evident that the young Georgian did not inherit the political savvy and personal influence skills of his senior-statesman father. Rather than seeking to negotiate or find acceptable compromise, Iverson peremptorily ordered all twenty-six of the offending officers placed under arrest. Outraged, one captain among them wrote an impassioned letter home avowing that defiance of Iverson was “every man’s reasonable duty.” Others threatened to resign forthwith. At least one did. Disaffection soon spread beyond regimental boundaries to permeate the entire brigade.

In the end, by making judicious use of competent counsel, the arrested officers found vindication. Iverson’s attempt to import his candidate of choice was quashed. A review board upheld that the regiment had the right to select its own officers. Former Captain T. F. Toon of the Twentieth was subsequently elevated to colonel. Not to be upbraided, the petulant general sought to gain some revenge by rejecting any promotional recommendations for officers who had opposed him. (6)

Even North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance later weighed in on the issue by pressing President Jefferson Davis as to why Iverson had been awarded brigade



**Company E, "Confederate Grays"
20th Regiment North Carolina Troops**

command versus another Tar Heel. Vance's implication, of course, was that the appointment was politically motivated, which indeed it may have been. Clearly, Alfred Iverson's first test in brigade management had gone sorely awry. By unyieldingly exerting a might-makes-right doctrine of rank, he destroyed the most essential element of true leadership: Trust. Iverson became, in essence, a commander with only grudging followership. Any dreams of glory the fledgling general had for himself were not shared by his men. (7)

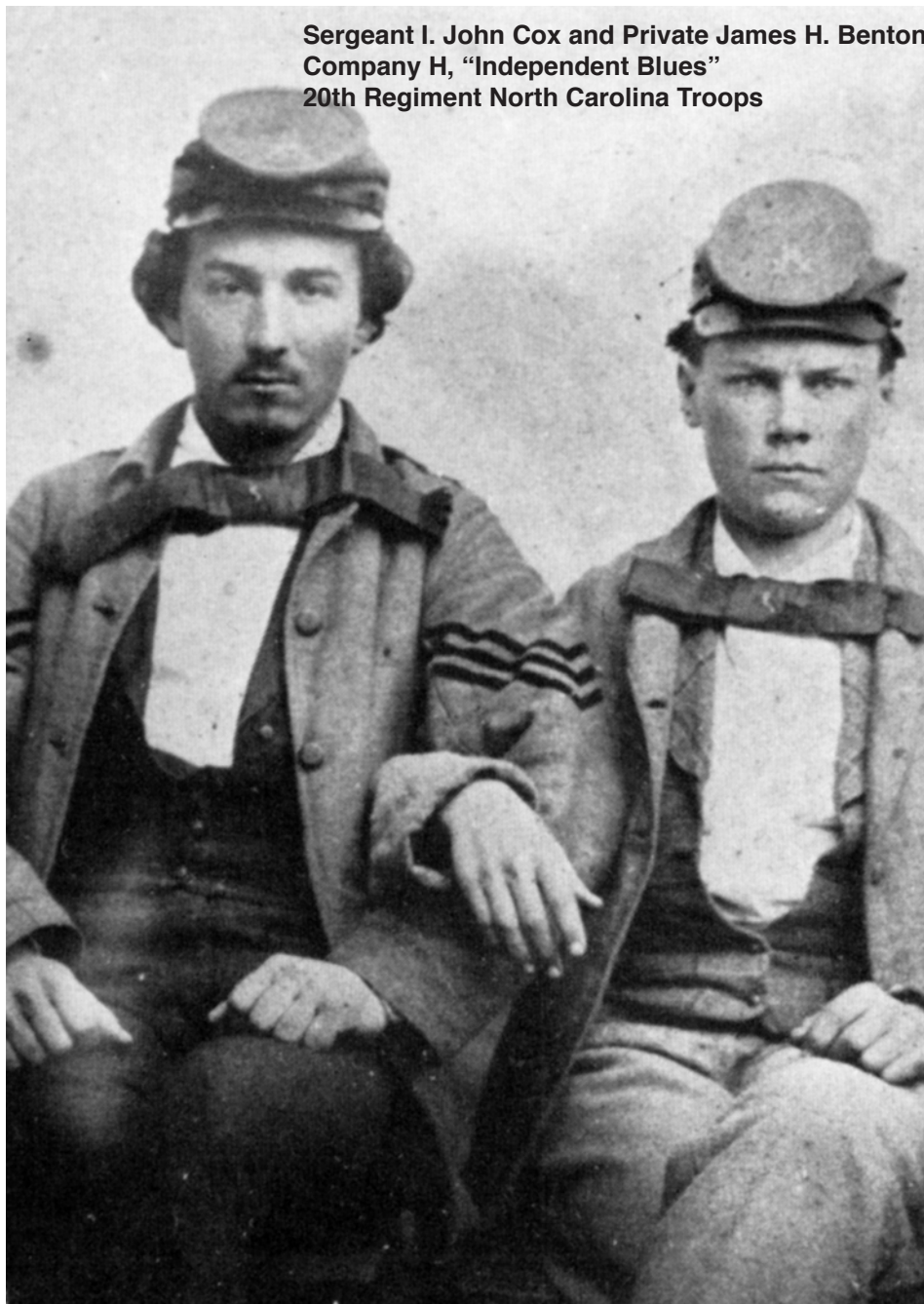
Evidence of this was not long in manifesting itself. In May 1863, as part of Major General Robert E. Rodes' infantry division, Iverson led his brigade through

the intense and confused fighting at Chancellorsville. At one point his regiments got out of hand and became badly separated by dense thickets and overlapping lines of battle. When Iverson dutifully sought reinforcements to help repel one particularly aggressive Federal flank attack, several of his men accused him of sulking in the rear. "Where he was when [General Dorsey] Pender led forward his (Iverson's) brigade has never been explained" one observer later wrote. To make matters worse, Iverson was painfully struck in the groin by a spent ball late in the action, forcing him to retire. Whatever the general's actual behavior during the battle, few of his resentful men were disposed to cut their Georgia-

born leader any slack. Iverson himself, in a classic misstatement, backwardly praised his brigade's "unexceptional conduct" throughout the engagement! (8)

During the Pennsylvania Invasion in late-June, negative rumblings about Iverson continued. Yet, the beleaguered general did find some bittersweet solace when his brigade, along with the rest of Rodes' division, occupied Carlisle Barracks. It was here that Iverson had married while in the pre-war army. The post brought back happy memories of his now-deceased wife and a chance to renew old acquaintances. Much to the delight of occupying Confederates, a search of the surrounding area also uncovered ample stocks of alcohol

**Sergeant I. John Cox and Private James H. Benton
Company H, "Independent Blues"
20th Regiment North Carolina Troops**



and lager beer. After a long campaign with extended marches, the liquid refreshment seems to have been particularly welcome. A soldier in the 23rd NC freely acknowledged "many of our jaded weary boys drank too much U. S. Govt. whiskey and a battle with a Georgia regiment likewise drowning their weariness was narrowly averted." Division officers seem not to have been above the fray. One swore "the beer was the strongest I ever saw . . . [and]

probably mixed with whiskey." At a flag-raising ceremony over the old barracks, even Rodes and his staff were described as "somewhat affected by liquor." This included Iverson who was said by way of excuse to be drowning memories of his lost love. All one Carolinian could say of their three-day sojourn in Carlisle was "mint juleps in tin cans were plentiful." (9)

When Rodes' division marched toward Gettysburg on

June 30th its officers and enlisted men were probably not in top form. Just how much overindulgence in alcohol may have had an impact on Confederate command decisions the following day is purely a matter of conjecture. One thing is certain: Clear heads did not generally prevail among divisional leadership during the battle's early stages.

The details surrounding the slaughter of Iverson's brigade on July 1st have been told often and will not be recounted here. However, it is ironic that in the aftermath of Gettysburg, division commander Robert Rodes has managed to avoid heavy censure. Indeed, ample evidence exists that Rodes personally assumed field control of both Iverson's North Carolinians and Eugene O'Neals Alabama brigade and superintended their hasty deployment. His impetuous and piecemeal commitment of these units virtually assured their destruction. The fact that neither Iverson nor O'Neal initially accompanied their brigades in the fumbled assault along Oak Ridge served to compound an already bad situation. (10)

While Iverson's lack of presence on the front line might reasonably be explained by the fact that he was actively seeking support from sister brigades to cover his exposed flanks, the men in the ranks would have none of it. "Iverson's part in the heroic struggle of his brigade seems to have begun and ended with the order to move forward and give them hell" declared a surviving officer in the 23rd North Carolina. Another participant was even more blunt: "Iverson's men were uselessly sacrificed," wrote Lt. Walter A. Montgomery of the



1st Sergeant Joseph B. Oliver
Company E, "Confederate Grays"
20th Regiment North Carolina Troops

12th N.C. "The enemy's position was not known to the troops. The alignment of the brigade was a false alignment and the men were left to die without help or guidance." Still another observer accused Iverson of hiding in the rear behind a big chestnut log. Unfortunately for the Georgian, he was close enough to the front to make a most grievous and unpardonable error.

Seeing his command surprised and nearly decimated by the first Union volley, Iverson was stunned beyond measure. Through the smoke he perceived what looked

to be white flags or handkerchiefs being waved at various points along the prostrate Confederate battle line. Iverson's addled mind conjured the worst. Were his men deserting him *en masse*? Iverson so concluded and, in effect, proceeded to pitch a tantrum. Without an afterthought the overwrought brigadier dispatched a courier to Rodes wildly postulating "that one of his regiments had raised the white flag and gone over to the enemy." It was an obscene indictment of men who were dying by the scores under withering musketry. Such

behavior further demonstrated that Iverson had completely lost the ability to exercise sound control on the battlefield. Even corps commander Richard S. Ewell afterward pointedly acknowledged that "the unfortunate mistake of General Iverson at this critical juncture . . . might have produced the most disastrous consequences." As it was, vicious rumors quickly circulated throughout the army that a North Carolina unit had deserted wholesale, causing no little wounding of state pride.

Even as Iverson's rant continued, the bloody remnants of his luckless regiments were left to reform under the firm hand of staff Captain Don P. Halsey. Rodes characterized Iverson's near-hysterical behavior as "misconduct." Others were less charitable, citing drunkenness and "the well known cowardly behavior of Iverson." Heavy alcohol use while at Carlisle and subsequent dehydration from the summer heat may, in fact, go a long way in explaining Iverson's brittle condition. Whatever the case, embittered survivors of his shattered command pondered their unfortunate circumstances. "With much feeling," the mortally wounded Colonel D. H. Christie of the 23rd North Carolina assured the remaining members of his regiment "that while he might never live to lead them into battle [again] he would see that 'The Imbecile Iverson' never should." (11)

Iverson seems to have regained some composure later in the afternoon but his efforts to be useful were more pathetic than effective. While some sources indicate that Iverson was immediately relieved of duties by Rodes, the preponderance

of evidence indicates the ill-starred brigadier retained command at least until the army's return to Virginia. He later earnestly attempted to exonerate his men from his own calumny, claiming that his North Carolinians had indeed "fought nobly and died without a man running to the rear." It was too little too late: The Tar Heels (such as were left) flatly refused to serve under Iverson any longer. Rodes was probably only too willing to exercise a permanent change in brigade leadership, thus neatly deflecting attention away from untidy battlefield errors higher up. (12)

Following Gettysburg, Iverson was viewed as damaged goods within the Army of Northern Virginia. Once again political connections providently intervened on his behalf, to the chagrin of many. One staff officer pointedly recalled that while the general "was relieved at once and sent back [to Richmond] to await trial," he eventually "got off scott free & had a brigade of reserves given him in Georgia." Indeed, Iverson was discreetly reshuffled to the Georgia State Guard and later commanded a mounted brigade in the Army of Tennessee. He afterward gained some redemption by capturing Union General George Stoneman and his raiders in 1864. Nonetheless, Iverson's fitness for high command, overall maturity, and personal courage still remained under a cloud of doubt. After the war, Iverson initially settled in Macon, Ga., before eventually relocating to Florida. There he engaged for some years in the orange agriculture business. He died in Atlanta in 1911. At no time during Iverson's post-war career did he attempt to

seek absolution for his actions at Gettysburg. (13.)

Of Iverson's performance in the pivotal battle, history has reached a general, if not altogether unbiased, consensus. His peevish temperament and emotional breakdown on the field render Iverson a rather convenient scapegoat for the destruction of his fine North Carolina brigade. Yet, there were mistakes at many levels on the Confederate side that July afternoon along Oak Ridge. As circumstances would have it, they were countered by some brilliant and opportunistic tactical moves on the part of the defending Federals. The best that might be said of the whole unfortunate affair is that Brigadier-General Alfred Iverson, Jr. was the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time.

NOTES

- (1.) Berkeley, Henry Robinson, *Four Years in the Confederate Artillery*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1961, p. 50.
- (2.) Patterson, Gerard A., "The Death of Iverson's Brigade," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, No. 5, (July 1991), pp. 13-18; Krick, Robert K., "Three Confederate Disasters on Oak Ridge," in Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *The First Day at Gettysburg: Essays on Confederate and Union Leadership*, Kent, Ohio, Kent State University Press, 1992, pp. 129-137; Casualty statistics from Greg Mast, Gettysburg Discussion Group, at: <http://www.gdg.org/Research/OOB/Confederate/July1-3/iverbgd.html>
- (3.) Evans, Clement A., *Confederate Military History Extended Edition (Georgia)*, Wilmington, NC, Broadfoot Publishing, 1987, pp. 424-426; Evans, David, *Sherman's Horsemen: Union Cavalry Operations in the Atlanta Campaign*, Indianapolis, IN, Indiana University

Press, 1996, pp. 321-323.

(4.) Clark, Walter, Comp. *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War, 1861-'65*, (Reprint) Wendell, N. C., Broadfoot's Bookmark, 1982, Vol. 2., pp. 110-114.

(5.) *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington: GPO, 1884, Vol. 11, Pt. 2, p. 554; Vol. 19, Pt. 1, pp. 1040-1045; Vol. 51, Pt. 2, p. 844; Comments of Greg Mast, Gettysburg Discussion Group at: <http://www.gdg.org/Research/OOB/Confederate/July1-3/aiverson.html>

(6.) Krick, "Three Confederate Disasters," pp. 129-131.

(7.) O.R., Vol. 51, Pt. 2, p. 844; Patterson, "Iverson's Brigade," p. 14.

(8.) Clark, "*North Carolina Regiments*," Vol. 2., pp.239-240; "Civil War General of the Day: Alfred Iverson," at: <http://www.rocemabra.com/~roger/tagg/generals/general56.html>

(9.) Patterson, "Iverson's Brigade," pp. 13,14. See also comments on Gettysburg Discussion Group at: <http://www.gdg.org/Research/Authorred%20Items/dtoakrd.html>

(10.) Griffen, D. Massy, "Rodes on Oak Hill: A Study of Rodes' Division on the First day of Gettysburg," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, No. 4, (Jan. 1991), pp. 33-48; See also Cooksey, Paul C., "They Died as if on Dress Parade: The Annihilation of Iverson's Brigade at Gettysburg and the Battle of Oak Ridge," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, No. 20, pp. 89-112.

(11.) Patterson, Iverson's Brigade," pp. 13-17; Krick, "Three Confederate Disasters," pp. 131-137; Tucker, Glenn, *High Tide at Gettysburg*, Dayton, Ohio, Morningside Bookshop, 1973, pp. 129-132.

(12.) For Iverson's report see O.R., Vol. 27, Pt. 2, pp. 578-581

(13.) Krick, "Three Confederate Disasters," p. 136; Evans, *Sherman's Horsemen*, pp. 341, 355-356; Evans, *CMH Georgia*, p. 427.