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"Send Forward Some Who Would Fight": How John T.Wilder and His "Lightning Brigade" of Mounted Infantry Changed Warfare

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“Send Forward Some Who Would Fight”:
How John T. Wilder and His “Lightning Brigade” of Mounted Infantry
Changed Warfare

Eric Nelsen Maurice

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Art in
the Department of History & Anthropology
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“Send Forward Some Who Would Fight”: How John T. Wilder and His “Lightning Brigade” of Mounted Infantry Changed Warfare

I. Introduction

Warfare often involves innovation and problem solving. Eventually, certain tactics and technology reach the limits of their usefulness or effectiveness, resulting in stalemate and ineffectiveness. This problem is often overcome when someone invents a solution on the fly. Military history is replete with examples of units, or individuals, developing innovative ways to overcome problems they faced, either through raw innovation or by simply using existing tools in a distinctive way. Brigadier General John Thomas Wilder was one such individual.

Faced with the continued frustration of having to pursue some of the best Confederate cavalry commanders on foot, Wilder made a push that would culminate in an original, though in hindsight obvious, solution.¹ His 17th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment, as well as the rest of his brigade, would be placed on horseback and equipped with the best weapons possible for the time.² Wilder’s intention was to make the brigade more effective against the cavalry units he was charged with locating, but it quickly became more than that. The 17th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment, under Brigadier General (Brevet) John T. Wilder, was part of what became known as the “Lightning Brigade”, a mounted infantry brigade consisting of several infantry regiments that altered existing warfare methods. The unit’s use of horses and mules to position for combat and its being equipped with Spencer Repeating Rifles rather than muskets, while still being trained to fight as infantrymen rather than cavalry, was a radical change in warfare. The point of this project is to prove that John T. Wilder, and by extension his “Lightning Brigade”, made a

¹ Richard A. Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning: Wilder’s Mounted Infantry Brigade in the Battle of Chickamauga*. (Huntington: Blue Acorn Press, 1997), 37.

² *Ibid*, 37.

conscious decision to develop a unique fighting method, one that proved effective against outdated Napoleonic tactics. Not only were these changes effective, they had great effect on warfare, even if they would not be recognized as such at the time.

II. Historiography and Methods

From a historiographical perspective, my thesis will be from the standpoint of military history. While the unit's demographics will be examined to give a better understanding of the men who made up the 17th Indiana and the rest of the Lightning Brigade, and to see if the different cultural contributions had an effect on the unit's high morale as well as to test whether their demographics were typical or unique, the key focus will be the military tactical changes made and whether or not such changes were original, effective, and transformative. To help find evidence for this argument, the sources that I will focus on most will be primary sources, specifically diaries, letters, unit histories, and military tactical manuals.

Diaries are the best source for any sort of historical research, as they offer first-hand accounts, their respective viewpoints, and often thoughts on historical figures who are otherwise thought to be above reproach. They also give a grimmer, more honest view of the various battles immediately or even as they were fought, than later "official" accounts. The lack of a broad view of the various conflicts is minimally important as the grand scope of a particular battle is secondary to the unit's contribution to it. While often the diarists' military observations are vague or undeveloped, as these were entirely volunteers and not career military men, they still give important accounts on the changes in which the Brigade was involved from a layman's perspective.

The next important source is soldiers' letters, the men's only contact with family and friends back home. While often written several days after the battles, and usually lacking context

of the responding letter or the letter that came to the soldiers prior to their writing the letter being sent, they were often more thoughtful and detailed about military goings-on. Perhaps this was because they realized their audience knew little to nothing about military life, the places they were visiting or the problems they faced on a day-to-day basis. Their letters were often the best source of news to their local communities, and they frequently provided more detailed accounts of the unit's actions as well as the armies to which they were a part. Arguably there could be a danger of exaggeration and embellishment, but such issues are easy enough to pinpoint with official accounts and accounts from other men present. The fact that the letters are generally longer and more detailed than diary entries is also a benefit.

Probably the most helpful source for information on a particular unit are the unit histories. Evidently, it was not only common for units to publish histories of their exploits, as was the case for most of the "Lightning Brigade"³, the 17th Indiana actually had two published, by different men, and published literature from their various unit associations long after the war. While it is apparent that reusing another's work without mentioning them (plagiarism) was not uncommon, each history contains unique information and provides additional background and evidence. They also contain letters, written by unit members after the war, detailing their memories of the battles, skirmishes, even in one instance giving resolution to what exactly happened to the 17th's battle flag after its capture by the enemy at the Battle of Munfordsville, 1862.⁴

³ Due to the number of the various supporting units important to the examination of Lightning Brigade, I only examined the various unit histories of the 17th.

⁴ W. H. H. Benefiel, *Souvenir- The Seventeenth Indiana Regiment. A History From its Organization to the End of the War: Giving Descriptions of Battles, Etc.* Section: Battle of Munfordsville. (Call number E506.4 C5 fiche nos. 202-203. Pendleton, IN: WHH Benefiel, 1913. Indiana Historical Society Library Microfilm Collection), 3.

The final primary sources that will be key to the argument of examining the effect the 17th and the “Lightning Brigade” had on military doctrine and warfare are military tactical manuals from the periods before, during and after the American Civil War. Examples like “Hardee’s United States Infantry and Rifle Tactics” printed before the war, “Revised System of Cavalry Tactics for the use of Cavalry and Mounted Infantry, C.S.A.” by Major-General Joseph Wheeler (CSA) during the war, and “A New System of Infantry Tactics, Double and Single Rank; Adapted to American Topography and Improved Firearms” by Major-General Emory Upton post-Civil War give an excellent view of not only how the various armies thought they would be fighting the struggle, but what they actually learned after four bloody years of conflict.⁵ While I used other sources, secondary and primary, my goal was to base my argument on as much primary documentation as possible.

My examination of the “Lightning Brigade” seeks to prove four things with regard to the Brigade: that the changes made were deliberate; that the changes made were effective; that they were noticed by men within and without the units; and that these changes effected military tactics in the future. The evidence shows clearly, I argue, just where the Lightning Brigade fits in the annals of the Civil War. The organization of the thesis will focus on the Wilder Brigade’s effectiveness. After surveying the unit’s history, presenting the decision to mount, the men’s individual backgrounds and the background of Wilder himself, we can examine how the units viewed these changes, how their allies in the Union army viewed them, what the Confederates who fought them thought of these “Mounted Infantry”, and finally, how their tactics were used

⁵ Numerous secondary sources back these up: *United States Infantry and Rifle Tactics (Hardee’s) War Department 1861* (Reprint. South Carolina: B&B Historical Research, 1985), Emory Upton, *A New System of Infantry Tactics Double and Single Rank Adapted to American Topography and Improved Fire-Arms* (New York: Appleton, 1867), and Joseph Wheeler, *Revised System of Cavalry Tactics For The Use Of The Cavalry and Mounted Infantry, C.S.A.* (Mobile: S.H. Gortzel & Co., 1863)

after the war. Analysis of these factors should prove that the unit made great strides in modern warfare tactics, while shattering notions about their methods and the doubts of the weapons they carried.

III. The term “Mounted Infantry” and Word Vectors

When word reached the 72nd Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment that they would be mounted, Alva C. Griest wrote in his diary, “We are to fight as infantry, but are to do all our marching on horseback. On some accounts I like it, on some others I dislike it”⁶. To most observers this would seem a contradictory statement; how can infantry “marching on horseback” be infantry, for would they not be cavalry? This contradiction in terms is the first issue that needs to be explained before the story of Wilder and the Lightning Brigade can be analyzed.

First, we need to look at just what the term “Mounted Infantry” tells us, both about the unit, their skill set, and the men making it up as well as about the *expectations* they faced on their actual functions. By utilizing “the vectors of soldier-words”, advanced by Professor Stephen Morillo, we can better break down and emphasize why this designation tells us so much about the unit and why they are not simply another unit of cavalry.⁷ Morillo writes, “...what we see depends crucially on the words we use”, and there are few places where that is more true than with Wilder’s Brigade.⁸ The theory attempts to explain and bridge the gap between descriptions

⁶ Alva C. Griest, Collection 1862-1865. Call Number SC 0656 Folders 1-3. Bib Number 36486. (Indiana Historical Society Library Manuscript Collection), 62.

⁷ Stephen Morillo, “*Milites*, Knights, and Samurai: Military Terminology, Comparative History, and the Problem of Translation.” in B. Bachrach and R. Abels, eds., *The Normans and their Adversaries at War: Essays in Honor of C. Warren Hollister* (Boydell and Brewer: 2001), 170, 167-172. This theory perfectly illustrates why mounted infantry is such a novel term and is important to any discussion about Wilder’s Lightning Brigade. I would take it further to explain why exactly the term ‘mounted infantry’ and ‘dismounted cavalry’, when used correctly, but conjure images of similar things.

⁸ *Ibid*, 167.

of different cultures and languages of military men and units with three different “vectors of soldier-words”: Functional, Organizational, and Social.⁹

Functional word vectors refer to, “...how soldiers perform some military function...” with the broad categories being infantry or cavalry, but these classifications can be further broken up into specialties, like artillerymen or “pioneers”.¹⁰ This first distinction should permanently label the Wilder Brigade as infantry, as that was the unit they all joined at the war’s onset. However, another function the brigade performed was movement on horseback, a valuable strategic asset. But even though they could perform the function of a “mounted” unit, the expectation was that they were still performing infantry duties. The term “mounted infantry” encompasses both of their functions as a unit while also taking into account the expectation that they are still infantry. So while they are not “true” infantry, they are still closer to infantry than cavalry due to their own expectations.

This brings us to the second category, which has to do with organizational word vectors, “...a unit of soldiers in terms of their usual or “standard” mode of operation...” which is set by the organization to which a particular unit is a part.¹¹ It is this definition that Morillo brings up the Brigade, specifically the 17th and 72nd Indiana Mounted Infantry Regiments, to demonstrate his point that while they are described as “mounted”, they are defined by how they are organized, which, according to the United States Army, was as “infantry”.¹² So a functional vector refers to how they generally fight (mounted and on foot) and the organizational vector refers to how they are organized to fight (as infantry).¹³ This makes the idea of “Mounted Infantry” meaningless

⁹ Morillo, “*Milites, Knights, and Samurai*”, 170-171.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 170.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 170.

¹² *Ibid*, 170.

¹³ *Ibid*, 170.

from an organizational standpoint, yet perfectly describes their dual functional duties (as well as being a self-prescribed label), while as an organizational vector they remain “institutionally” assigned as infantry.¹⁴

While not consistent through all sources, many including (more importantly) official sources like the National Park Service guide on the “Chickamauga and Chattanooga Battlefields” make the distinction between “Minty’s Cavalry” and “Wilder’s Mounted Infantry”¹⁵. It would be simple enough to discount as the writer James R. Sullivan likely was referring to the brigade as they referred to themselves, but if they were interchangeable, wouldn’t they have saved the paper space and put in ‘Cavalry’ instead? Such wording suggests that because the organization of the Brigade remained infantry, it was necessary to refer to them as such.

Another example of this would be a scholarly collection of works on the campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee in the middle part of the war (1862-1864); here the former officer H. V. Boynton refers to multiple cavalry units but then describes the actions of “Wilder’s mounted infantry” above Chattanooga.¹⁶ An educated military man like Boynton, former Lieutenant-Colonel in the 35th Ohio Volunteers, was also apt to make the distinction because of the differing functional actions and expectations of a unit like Wilder’s Brigade.

Finally, the editor of the book “Morning to Midnight in the Saddle: Civil War Letters of a Soldier in Wilder’s Lightning Brigade”, points out that the 123rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment was a part of an “Elite unit of mounted infantry”, thus further discounting the idea of

¹⁴ Morillo, “*Milites, Knights, and Samurai*”, 170-171.

¹⁵ James R. Sullivan, *Chickamauga and Chattanooga: Battlefields* (Washington DC: National Park Service, 1956), 15.

¹⁶ H. V. Boynton, “The Chickamauga Campaign” in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee including the Battle of Chickamauga 1862-1864: Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts Vol. VII. Ch.IX* (Boston: Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1908), 331.

dismounted cavalry and mounted infantry being interchangeable terms in any way.¹⁷ This difference across these and many other sources shows that the distinction being made is more than just words, and has more to do with the word vectors of the terms and what they imply about the units, both from a functional and organizational standpoint. Despite the meaning that can be inferred from the term “mounted infantry”, its origins are entirely social, which carries with it certain inferences about who made up the unit.

The final word vector is the social vector which refers to separation of soldiers by “class rather than function”, meaning the vector has more to do with self-perception and labelling than with any other factor.¹⁸ While this distinction of class would be less pronounced in the Civil War era than, say, the medieval era, it still comes into play more acutely when discussing a unit like Wilder’s Lightning Brigade of Mounted Infantry. In addition, the social vector, mounted infantry units vs. cavalry units, also denotes their different training and background. The class divide I refer to is the description of the men making up Southern cavalry units vs. the men making up Northern mounted infantry units like Wilder’s Brigade. Southern cavalry units were described by General William T. Sherman as, “The young bloods of the South: sons of planters, lawyers about towns, good billiard-players and sportsmen, men who never did work and never will. War suits them, and the rascals are brave, fine riders bold to rashness and dangerous subjects in every sense”¹⁹. In short, an upper-class aristocracy, which neatly sums up Sherman’s views on cavalry in general as those who believe themselves “above” others, something that likely perturbed Midwesterners like Sherman, Wilder and their men. While some Southern Generals were like Nathan Bedford Forrest, whose men were described as “...some of the best mounted infantry of

¹⁷ Christopher D. McManus, Thomas H Ingalls, and Otho James Hicks, eds. *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle: Civil War Letters of a Soldier in Wilder's Lightning Brigade*. (US: McManus, Inglis, Hicks, 2012), 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 171.

¹⁹ H. C. B. Rogers, *The Confederates and Federals at War* (Pennsylvania: Combined Publishing, 2000), 49.

the war”, others were like General J.E.B. Stuart, who seemed, “...to have had little interest in his men as mounted infantry”²⁰. Conversely, Wilder’s men are described as “active, rough-and-ready men” who “always wanted something to do,” part of the typical “farm boys” that populated the Western Union armies, quite a change from the gallivanting cavaliers of a typical cavalry unit.²¹ Nothing emphasizes this social difference from cavalrymen more than the actions of the men in the Brigade; upon receiving their new cavalry uniforms, all the men promptly removed the “yellow-piping”, “Cavalry trim” or “cavalry yellow” to distinguish themselves from the regular cavalry they had no affinity with, as their time in the infantry had instilled in them a poor view of such men.²² The social vector of the word “mounted infantry” would seem then to mean a great deal to the men in the unit, because not only did they see themselves as unique and new, but because they truly were a different entity down to their very equipment.^{23 24}

The term mounted infantry, then, would seem to be entirely a social construct, a self-prescribed title to make clear to all others (and themselves) that they were not the aristocratic cavaliers of the Southern cavalry that they loathed, but rather a new and unique force still firmly rooted in the working classes from which they all came.

When it came down to it, dismounted cavalry were not synonymous with infantry, and mounted infantry were not the same as cavalry. They entered combat with a different mindset

²⁰ Joseph G. Bilby, *Civil War Firearms: Their Historical Background, Tactical Use and Modern Collecting and Shooting* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Publishing, 1999), 144.

²¹ Claire E. Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois: The Civil War Diary of John M. King* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1999), 101, and Glenn W. Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap: Wilder’s Brigade in the Civil War*. (New York: Thomas Yoseluff, 1969), 11.

²² Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 57, McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 69, John C. McQueen, *Spencer: The First Effective and Widely Used Repeating Rifle and Its Use in the Western Theatre of the Civil War* (Columbus, GA: Communicorp, 1989), 44, John W. Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen: Through the Civil War with Eli Lilly’s Indiana Battery* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 61, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 26.

²³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 57, McQueen, *Spencer*, 44, and Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 61.

²⁴ Aside from the different uniforms, the standard cavalryman carried sabers and pistols, Wilder’s men had rifles and Hatchets (due to training deficiency concern), though some self-equipped with pistols. See above for citation.

and training background and socially they were not the same. While Cavalry units used horses as the source of identity, the men of Wilder's mounted infantry saw their mounts from an entirely utilitarian perspective. The mounts simply allowed them to perform better as infantrymen. Their label of "mounted infantry" was self-prescribed (social) and referred to their functional duties. Therefore, the key part of their designation came from their organizational assignment, and, despite the changing methods and missions they were given, the army continued to organize them as infantry.

Now that we have a point of reference to what exactly "mounted infantry" refers to, we can discuss the history of the various regiments that made up Wilder's Lightning Brigade.

IV. The Regiments: Their Histories and The Brigade's Finest Moments

Wilder's Lightning Brigade was comprised of a number of infantry regiments and one artillery battery during its service from inception to the end of the Civil War. The units considered to be the "core" members of the Brigade were the 17th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the 72nd Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the 98th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment and the 123rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, with the 18th Indiana Battery added during the campaign leading-up to and just after the Battle of Chickamauga.²⁵ Other units to pass through the brigade included the 75th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment, who left several months after Wilder took command due to voting against mounting their men, and the 92nd Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, who were "temps" and often pulled away from the Brigade during the Chattanooga campaign until they were permanently assigned to another unit shortly thereafter.²⁶ Other units fought with the brigade officially on a number of occasions such as Col. Robert H. G. Minty and his Cavalry Brigade, with whom Wilder and his brigade stood shoulder

²⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 18.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

to shoulder at Chickamauga and fought repeatedly with during the Atlanta campaign and Wilson Raid till the end of the war.²⁷ Others, like the 39th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment (later the 8th Indiana Cavalry²⁸) under Colonel Thomas J. Harrison, were another mounted infantry unit equipped with Spencer repeating rifles who had their moment side-by-side the Lightning Brigade for the brief but crucial hours on the second day of the Battle of Chickamauga.²⁹ These units, however distinguished and storied their respective histories, are outside the scope of this paper as they never joined in the Brigade's effort at innovation, even if they came up with unique tactics of their own. That said, it is important to give brief histories of the various brigade members to get a context of their experience during the war. The 17th IN, 72nd IN, 98th IL, and 123rd IL will be considered the "core" units of the Brigade, while the 92nd IL and the 18th IN Battery will be considered "supporting" members.

The 17th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment (later the 17th Indiana Mounted Infantry Regiment) was authorized on May 3rd, 1861, and formed (mustered in) for service June 12th, 1861 under Colonel Milo S. Hascall.³⁰ Hascall served as regimental commander from June 4th, 1861 until March 25th, 1862; other regimental commanders included John T. Wilder from March 27th, 1862 until October 5th, 1864 and Jacob C. Vail from November 18th, 1864 until the end of the war.³¹ The regiment proudly attested that they served in nearly every state of the South east of the Mississippi and that the unit had, "Every county represented in the State, 20 other states,

²⁷ Glenn Tucker, *Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West* (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1961), 16, 112, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 139-210. (Campaign history after the beginning of 1864 made with Minty nearby, though they were always distinct units and did not share any kind of tactics on the battlefield, each had their part).

²⁸ Turned into cavalry regiment when they were transferred under the command of General Hugh Judson "Kill-Cavalry" Kilpatrick' cavalry brigade during the "March to the Sea".

²⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 283-289, and Joseph G. Bilby, "The Guns of 1865: The Spencer Comes Of Age." in *The American Rifleman*, Vol.163, No.3 (March 2015): 58.

³⁰ William E. Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana from its Organization to the End of the War*. (Indianapolis: Holloway, Douglas & Co., 1865), 1, and Arville L. Funk, *Hoosiers in the Civil War*. (Chicago: Adams Press, 1967), 168.

³¹ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 29.

almost every country in Europe” within the ranks of the 17th.³² Further attention will be brought to this point later as many other units not only came from very small geographic areas (relatively) but took pride in being free from “foreign influences”. Prior to joining the Brigade, the 17th IN fought at Fort Greenbrier, VA (now WV) during the Battle of Greenbrier (or Fort Greenbrier depending on the source) on October 3rd, 1861, before being transferred west to what would be their rendezvous with history.³³ The unit could claim two Medal of Honor winners: Private John Davis, Co. F from Marion County and Private Aaron Hudson from LaPorte County, and collected an impressive number of war trophies in the form of Regimental colors that they captured on the field of battle.³⁴ They also proudly proclaimed, “We boast of having accomplished more with the least loss of life than any other regiment in the service”.³⁵ This is truly an amazing claim. In addition, two members of the brigade had encounters with historical figures of note during their campaigning: Sergeant J. J. Weller, Co. E, shot an enemy Colonel while on a scouting mission in West Virginia, 1861, a Colonel who turned out to be Col. John A. Washington, descendant of George Washington and Chief of Staff to General Robert E. Lee; Captain James A. Taylor, Co. G, nearly killed General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest during a brash charge at the Battle of Ebenezer’s Church April 1st, 1865, and though Capt. Taylor was killed in the fight, the General commented later at a flag of truce that, “If that boy had known enough to give me the point of his saber instead of the edge, I should not have been here to tell you about it”, still with his arm in a sling from the severe injuries sustained.³⁶ Despite their confidence and

³² Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 1.

³³ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, 3, W H. H. Benefiel, *Seventeenth Regiment Indiana Veteran Volunteer Mounted Infantry: Roster of Surviving Member and Sketch of History*. (Call Number E506.4 C5 fiche no. 201. Pendleton, IN: 17th Indiana Regimental Association, 1912. Indiana Historical Society Library Microfilm Collection), “Three Year Service”, 1, and Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 6-7.

³⁴ Funk, *Hoosiers in the Civil War*, 111, and Benefiel, *Seventeenth Regiment*, 9.

³⁵ Benefiel, *Seventeenth Regiment*, 9.

³⁶ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, “Personal Encounters”, 1, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 200.

proud accomplishments, the “boss unit”³⁷ of the Lightning Brigade needed equally motivated support. Their fellow Hoosiers that made up this support included the members of the 72nd Indiana Mounted Infantry Regiment.

The 72nd Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment was the other Hoosier unit in the Lightning Brigade. Authorized on July 7th, 1862, they were formed on August 16th, 1862, with Colonel Chris Miller commanding, who would serve in the post until he was given permanent command of the Brigade in June 1864.³⁸ They were organized and the unit was raised in the “8th Congressional District” of which Lafayette was a part and where the unit was mustered in at.³⁹ Prior to joining the Brigade, they had spent a great deal of their time skirmishing with General Braxton Bragg’ forces in Kentucky before moving on to Tennessee where they began their service as mounted infantry.⁴⁰ Alva C. Griest, a Quaker from Crawfordsville, IN, kept a diary that chronicled the unit’s history from his enlistment until the war’s end. This was unique, as the author notes, due to the fact that he wrote of the events as they happened and he did not make changes later to correct his narrative.⁴¹ It was noted that during their garrison duty at Macon, GA, they nearly captured Jefferson Davis, former President of the then defunct Confederate States of America, and did have him there briefly while they manned provost duty at the end of the war.⁴² They then mustered out in Indianapolis on June 26th, 1865, short nearly half the number they had begun with.⁴³ The 72nd IN was with the Brigade for most of its major actions and the 72nd IN’s men often found themselves in the thick of battle at key moments. Hoosier

³⁷ Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 105.

³⁸ Funk, *Hoosiers in the Civil War*, 169 and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 151.

³⁹ Griest, Collection, “Historical Sketch”, 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid, “Historical Sketch” 1.

⁴¹ Ibid, “Forward”, “Historical Sketch”, 1.

⁴² Ibid, “Historical Sketch”, 3.

⁴³ Griest, Collection, “Historical Sketch”, 3.

units alone did not make up the entirety of the Brigade as Illinois provided the other half of the elite unit.

The 98th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment was the first of two Illinois regiments that formed the “core” Lightning Brigade regiments. Organized on September 3rd 1862 in Centralia, IL (southern Illinois), under Colonel John J. Funkhouser, the regiment’s first taste of war involved a train derailment that was probably the result of sabotage, killing 8 and injuring 75 men, before they marched the rest of the way to Frankfort, KY, to participate in a feint during the Perryville Campaign.⁴⁴ This however covered the extent of their combat experience during their 4 months of service, having been mustered in only several months prior to their joining the Brigade.⁴⁵ They also had the distinction of being the only unit of the Brigade equipped with “imported Austrian muskets” while other units mostly had Springfield rifles, underscoring the difficulty of matching equipment alone presented the brigade. Following the end of the war, they were mustered out on June 27th, 1865, having proudly served with the Brigade for almost the entire war.⁴⁶ Their sister Illinois unit served beside them with equal distinction.

The 123rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment nearly failed to join the Brigade, but they ended up as a replacement regiment following the 75th Indiana failing to vote in favor of Wilder’s mounting scheme.⁴⁷ The 123rd spent a good deal of time “subbing” for the 75th with the Lightning Brigade before joining according to then Sergeant Otho McManus of the 123rd, Co. G, before their incorporation was official.⁴⁸ Recruited and mustered at Mustoon, IL (central Illinois), Sept 6th, 1862, under Colonel James Monroe, they fought about one month later at the

⁴⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 151.

⁴⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 26-28.

⁴⁶ Ken Baumann, *Arming the Suckers, 1861-1865: A Compilation of Illinois Civil War Weapons* (Milan, MI: Morningside, 1989), 186.

⁴⁷ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 70.

⁴⁸ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 48.

Battle of Perryville, where they suffered a great number of casualties due to their lack of experience despite giving a good account for such a green unit.⁴⁹ They later participated in the Battle of Vaught's Hill during March 1863, where they again gave a good account of themselves, where they inflicted far more casualties than they suffered.⁵⁰ Soon after they were officially brought into Wilder's brigade and equipped accordingly.⁵¹ After their service with the Brigade for the remainder of the war, they were mustered out on June 27th, 1865.⁵²

These "Core" regiments make up what would be referred to from June 1863 until the end of the war as "Wilder's Lightning Brigade", but there were other who contributed to this famous brigade's legend. One of these "Supporting" units, the 92nd Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, figured extensively at the most famous Lightning Brigade battle, the Battle of Chickamauga, while the 18th Indiana Battery under Captain Eli Lilly contributed heavily to all actions the Brigade was involved in from Hoover's Gap until just after the Battle of Chickamauga. Both units are important to the history of the Brigade, but were not with the brigade throughout its service.

The 92nd IL was mustered in on September 4th, 1862, with Colonel Smith D. Atkins commanding, and was transferred to the Wilder Brigade following a concerted effort to be assigned a different unit to get away from the reserve corps command under General Granger, finally succeeding in July of 1863.⁵³ They served with the Lightning Brigade throughout the Chattanooga Campaign that culminated with the Battle of Chickamauga, though they often were

⁴⁹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 18.

⁵⁰ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 57-58.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 65-70.

⁵² Baumann, *Arming the Suckers*, 213.

⁵³ Baumann, *Arming the Suckers*, 178, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 51-52, Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 97-100, and McQueen, *Spencer*, 43.

selected for alternative duties and away from the Brigade.⁵⁴ An effort to retain their Spencer rifles after General H. J. Kilpatrick threatened to remove them resulted not only in him being impressed by their demonstration of its effectiveness, but altering his views on the weapon and incorporating their regiment into one of his Brigades during the famous “March to the Sea” where Gen. “Kill-Cavalry” Kilpatrick utilized tactics similar to the ones demonstrated so effectively by the Lightning Brigade during the march with the 92nd IL, the 8th Indiana Cavalry (formerly 39th Indiana Infantry), the 46th OH and the 66th IL to great acclaim.⁵⁵ The regiment was eventually mustered out on June 21st, 1865, ending their distinguished service.⁵⁶

Finally, the 18th Indiana Battery under Captain Eli Lilly mustered in at Indianapolis on July 7th, 1862.⁵⁷ The dynamic Capt. Lilly and the Lilly Battery were attached to Brigade on Dec 24th of that year, and served with them until “The Split” of the Brigade for several months from the end of November 1863 until April 1864.⁵⁸ During their tenure, the Lilly Battery served with distinction and often received commendation alongside Wilder.⁵⁹ Lilly also equipped his battery with 6-inch Rodman guns and several mountain howitzers that were lighter and could better keep pace with the fast moving mounted infantry, an early example of what modern military forces call combine combat arms.⁶⁰ Due to the lack of work for the battery during raids, they often found themselves acting as foragers in support of the brigade.⁶¹ A great contributor to the

⁵⁴ Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 100-186. Pattern of treatment, often doing picket, lone guard duty while the “core” Lightning Brigade off elsewhere.

⁵⁵ Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 204-205; Bilby, *The American Rifleman*, 58.

⁵⁶ Baumann, *Arming the Suckers*, 178.

⁵⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 18-19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 120. The term, “The Split” refers to the period during which Wilder was home on one of his sick leaves for chronic health issues and the various parts of the Brigade were split off for other tasks, the 18th IN battery and the 92nd IL were never reattached to the Lightning Brigade.

⁵⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 88-89.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 51-52.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 52-53.

Brigade's success both at Hoover's Gap and Chickamauga, the 18th IN Battery was mustered out on June 30th, 1865 after a 3 year term.⁶²

All six of these units made contributions to the great history that chronicles the exploits of Wilder's Lightning Brigade. While they are all a part of the story, the exploits of the Brigade as a whole are the key questions to this story that need to be answered. Namely, they center on a look at the battle record history of the brigade, to chronicle both their exploits and their actual record, which despite the boasting remains one almost entirely of victory and successes.

The Lightning Brigade's history spreads across several campaigns during the course of the war: the Tullahoma Campaign, the Chattanooga Campaign, the Atlanta Campaign, and the Wilson Raid through Alabama and Georgia. Each campaign contained at least one battle and one large-scale raid that the Brigade participated in; smaller skirmishes containing less than a regiment of the brigade, are ignored for the sake of brevity as the Brigade members often wrote home, "I don't know how soon we will go scouting again - We will go oftener than before no doubt and that will make it nearly all the time".⁶³ Basically, the brigade was out so often that they skirmished with some group of Rebels on nearly a daily basis, accounting for probably hundreds of encounters throughout the war, making it beyond the scope of this paper to try and document them all. By discussing the major actions and encounters during the four campaigns, the history of the Brigade should become clearer and the reason for their fame self-evident due to their essentially unbeaten combat record. Their war record could also be broken up into before and after the event that I have termed "The Split", when in Nov of 1863 Col. Wilder went home on sick leave and the various parts of the Brigade were assigned elsewhere for the winter months, until April when Wilder returned and the Brigade was reunited (minus the 92nd IL and

⁶² Funk, *Hoosiers in the Civil War*, 170.

⁶³ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 68.

the 18th IN battery) just before the Atlanta Campaign began.⁶⁴ This will figure in more importantly in analyzing their tactics later on as the average cavalry or infantry officer never utilized the Brigade in the manner to which the men were accustomed, and certainly not to their full potential. It also marks the only point since their inception where the unit's combat experience differs. The four campaigns encompass a number of battles/large skirmishes which I would term key to the unit's history: 10 battles/large-skirmishes, 9 raids, 2 counter-raids and one capitulation.⁶⁵

The Tullahoma Campaign was short (June 23rd- July 7th, 1863), termed later as "One of the war's most notable military achievements"⁶⁶, and the first instance of the Lightning Brigade (still almost derisively called the Hatchet Brigade⁶⁷ due to the issuing of two-foot long hatchets for field fortification construction) was able to demonstrate their abilities with their newly arrived Spencer repeating rifles and recently "acquired" mounts.⁶⁸ The major actions the Brigade participated in during the campaign were termed the Liberty Raid (June 4th-13th, 1863) and the Battle of Hoover's Gap (June 24th, 1863).⁶⁹ While the Liberty Raid was considered outside the Tullahoma Campaign, due to the brief period of the campaign and the Brigade's limited participation in it, it will be included for this paper. The so-called Liberty Raid occurred from June 4th until June 13th, 1863 and included one major skirmish on the 4th.⁷⁰ Termed the first major demonstration of the Spencers, the Brigade rode into Liberty, TN on the 4th about 6pm and

⁶⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 120, and Samuel C. Williams, "General John T. Wilder." *Indiana Magazine of History*. Vol.31, No.3 (Sept.1935), 195.

⁶⁵ Summary taken from body of works consulted, but mostly, Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 11-27, 72-74, who had the complete list of dates and actions listed.

⁶⁶ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 96.

⁶⁷ Williams, "General John T. Wilder.", 179, and McQueen, *Spencer*, 44.

⁶⁸ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 33.

⁶⁹ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 11.

⁷⁰ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 11 and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 33.

drove out two regiments of rebel cavalry that were seated for supper.⁷¹ They chased them from town and captured 20 men of the 1st Kentucky Cavalry, a famous unit founded by President Lincoln's Brother-in-law General Ben Hardin Helm.⁷² This would not be the last time they encountered the 1st Kentucky. The next engagement was the unit's most famous: the Battle of Hoover's Gap on June 24th. The opening act of the campaign to force General Bragg from Tullahoma, Wilder's Brigade was charged with opening the way to Tullahoma by taking one of several mountain gaps between the command and Tullahoma which General Bragg had fortified.⁷³ This first "sizable test" of the Spencer Rifle turned out to be a resounding victory; the campaign was meant to contact the enemy around 10am with infantry support close behind Wilder's men to help consolidate any gains, but Wilder and his men quickly outpaced any speed estimates with their mounts.⁷⁴ At 10 am the first of Wilder's scouts make contact with pickets of the 1st Kentucky Cavalry; they, along with supporting companies from the Brigade, rapidly "sweep aside" the defending rebels and scattered them.⁷⁵ Surprise was total and an effort that was expected to take days was over in hours. Wilder deployed his four regiments and Lilly's artillery battery, and efforts by the rebels to dislodge Wilder's Brigade met with repeated failure as rebel regiments encountered Spencer Repeating Rifles for the first time, leading one to ask later, "what kind of Hell-fired guns have your men got?"⁷⁶ This proved the shock value the weapons had against unprepared and unaccustomed troops. Despite being outnumbered and being ordered out under threat of arrest, Wilder and the Brigade held the Gap until relief arrived, first in the form of an additional artillery battery (the 21st IN Battery) and finally additional

⁷¹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 33-34

⁷² Ibid, 33-34.

⁷³ McQueen, *Spencer*, 45.

⁷⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 36-37.

⁷⁵ McQueen, *Spencer*, 45, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 75-77, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 37.

⁷⁶ Joseph G. Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms: A History of the First Repeating Rifles* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2015), 103.

infantry divisions, who relieved the Brigade and held the gap for several days before the rebels gave up and soon after were forced to withdraw from Tullahoma to Chattanooga.⁷⁷ The Wilder Brigade, Lilly's Battery and Col. Wilder himself were all heaped with praise for their actions. General George Henry Thomas went so far as to say, "You have saved the lives of a thousand men by your gallant conduct today. I didn't expect to get to the Gap for three days".⁷⁸ Gen. Thomas also dubbed the men "Wilder's Lightning Brigade" for the speed with which they initially took the gap, a moniker that the men would proudly embrace and carry with them through the rest of the war.⁷⁹ While this engagement would be the one the Brigade would be best known for, the war was far from over and the Brigade still had much to contribute.

The second stage of the Lightning Brigade's actions included the events of the Chattanooga campaign (June 1863-September 1863). While the campaign itself ground to a halt after the defeat of the Union army at Chickamauga, the Lightning Brigade participated in several operations in the aftermath before they were separated into different commands following Wilder's health relapse in November of 1863.⁸⁰ Their first sizable action after Hoover's Gap was their raid on Chattanooga (August 21, 1863), once again part of General Rosecrans's effort to attack across a wide front to force General Bragg from his position.⁸¹ Elements of the Brigade approached Chattanooga so rapidly on the 21st that they not only captured the picket and 100 "dumbfounded teamsters", but sunk their relief force on the river, sunk or damaged two steamers and began shelling the city, all while the populace attended church service and initially refused to

⁷⁷ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 88-96, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 43-44.

⁷⁸ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 91, and Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 83.

⁷⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 92, Peter Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 18, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 43.

⁸⁰ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 124.

⁸¹ Steven E. Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee: The Chickamauga and Chattanooga campaigns*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 53-54.

believe they were under attack, until a shell clipped the church steeple.⁸² Following this successful operation and crossing of the Tennessee River, the next significant action the brigade found themselves in was the Battle of Rock Springs (September 12th, 1863).⁸³ Several actions (including a pitched skirmish on Taylor Ridge by the 72nd IN) occurred in and around Ringgold, GA, that resulted in a number of casualties on the 12th; Col. Wilder realized they were surrounded by a superior force and effected a withdrawal after nightfall, building many false fires, then probed for and located a weak point in the lines and punched through without alerting the rebels, effecting their escape.⁸⁴ During the early morning hours of the 13th they had the satisfaction of hearing gunfire as the rebels assaulted their false encampment.⁸⁵ Following what would be the first of many narrow escapes by the Lightning Brigade, the next major action was the Battle of Chickamauga (September 18th-20th).⁸⁶ One of the bloodiest battles of the war, the action for the Brigade began the day prior to the official engagement's start. Tasked with guarding/picketing several crossings along Chickamauga Creek with one cavalry brigade in support to the north, the Brigade found themselves engaged by over five brigades of rebel infantry and an artillery battalion on their section of the line.⁸⁷ Still they managed to delay what was supposed to be rapid crossing until the late afternoon, and then checked the advance several miles back that evening as rebels streamed across the creek.⁸⁸ What followed was a massive battle and one of the few instances where Union forces were outnumbered on the field by the Rebels; Wilder's men spent September 19th supporting many other brigades along their front by

⁸² Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 35-36.

⁸³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 174.

⁸⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 164-180, Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 13, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 62-63.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 164-180; 13; and 62-63.

⁸⁶ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 13.

⁸⁷ Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 112-115.

⁸⁸ Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 112-115, and Unknown Author. Civil War Diary April 30- October 27, 1863. Call Number SC 828. Indiana Historical Society Library Manuscript Collection, Sept 18th Entry.

holding the line as other fell back, breaking every rebel unit that approached, then driving them back to their original positions.⁸⁹ By the 20th, the Brigade had been moved to a position to the far right and rear of the Federal Line, a position to keep them in a supporting role, but they ended up being in the thick of the fighting as the right wing of the Army of the Cumberland broke and ran back towards Chattanooga. Only Wilder's aggressive tenacity kept the Rebel army occupied long enough for General Thomas to mount his famous stand around Snodgrass Hill.⁹⁰ It is at this point an encounter occurred that prevented the Wilder Brigade from making an assault on the enemy rear that surely would have catapulted the Wilder Brigade into the forefront of history, for good or ill, but the questionable orders that led to their withdrawal will be examined later.⁹¹ Following the disastrous battle where the Wilder Brigade remained one of the few intact units, they were withdrawn back across the Tennessee River where they ended up in pursuit of Rebel cavalry in what became known as the Wheeler Raid (October 1st-9th, 1863) which encompassed several skirmishes, including one major action called the Battle of Farmington (October 7th, 1863), that again demonstrated the Brigade's combat prowess.⁹² In addition to contributing significantly to the pursuit of General Joseph Wheeler and limiting his damage to one wagon train, the Battle of Farmington demonstrated the effectiveness of the Lightning Brigade in engaging cavalry in a running battle that routed the opposing force and sent them fleeing through Farmington, tossing their gear aside the whole way in an effort to expedite their escape from the Lightning Brigade, who chased them for a mile out of town before darkness ended the pursuit.⁹³ Shortly after the Wheeler Raid, the Wilder Brigade again participated in the pursuit of Rebel cavalry during the

⁸⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 217-244.

⁹⁰ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 280-293, Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 127-130, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 119-124, and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 288-316.

⁹¹ Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 119.

⁹² Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 14-15.

⁹³ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 105-110.

Roddey Raid (October 13th-22nd, 1863). Though their close pursuit could not bring General Roddey to battle, they prevented him from effecting any noticeable damage to Union forces, effectively ending the threat of Rebel raiders.⁹⁴ With this, the “Core” brigade completed their final mission together before being split following Wilder’s next (but not final) departure for health reasons.

During this period I have termed, “The Split” (November 1863-April 1864), the brigade was broken up with the 18th IN battery being permanently assigned elsewhere and the 92nd IL’s loose affiliation being ended for good; the 17th IN and 98th IL were sent to a separate command and the 72nd and 123rd remained as a “Brigade” without a commander.⁹⁵ Both detachments from the Brigade participated in actions in the theatre but both continued to run into a similar problem: they ended up being the rearguard in a delaying action to prevent a rout following poor decisions made by the operation commanders they were assigned to.⁹⁶ In both instances they blamed poor generalship and bad decisions in the face of inferior forces. But this detachment would not last more than several months, as they were reunited after Wilder returned during the spring of 1864 in the lead-up to Sherman’s Atlanta Campaign. The campaign, while not the resounding vindication that the previous ones had been, still gave ample opportunity for Wilder and his men to demonstrate their skills.

The Atlanta Campaign had a large number of notable engagements for the Lightning Brigade: the Kingston/Rome Raid (May 18th-19th), the Dallas Raid (May 24th-28th), the Battle of Big Shanty (June 9th), the Battle of Noonday Creek (June 20th), the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain (June 27th), the Roswell Crossing (July 9th), the Covington Raid (July 21st-24th), the

⁹⁴ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 15, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 114-117.

⁹⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 120.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 125; 135-136.

Stoneman Raid (July 27th-30th), the Battle of Rome (October 13th) and the Battle of Yellow Creek (October 21st).⁹⁷ The Kingston/Rome Raid was an occasion for the Wilder Brigade (with supporting cavalry) to demonstrate their effectiveness against wild rebel charges and still accomplish their mission objectives.⁹⁸ Several days later, the Dallas Raid showcased the Brigade's ability to rapidly adjust to changing combat conditions, rapidly coming on line, containing assaults then flanking around to gather Intel and dislodge the enemy.⁹⁹ Immediately upon returning to the Union lines and trenches, they easily repelled an enemy assault while inflicting grievous casualties.¹⁰⁰ Their first large-scale engagement, the Battle of Big Shanty, was an assault on multiple enemy trenches at the urging of General William T. Sherman's staff officer who the General had instructed to bring back positive proof of enemy infantry holding the position.¹⁰¹ After assaulting three lines of trenches the officer was still not satisfied, so Colonel Miller gave him a spyglass and asked him if he believed that men occupying the 4th line appeared to be infantry?¹⁰² He agreed they were and Col. Miller ordered the assault and took the works, returning with prisoners to prove that the rebels facing them were infantry.¹⁰³ Colonel Miller later quipped that, "It took Sherman five full days of fighting before he could get his infantry as close to Kennesaw Mountain as the Lightning Brigade had been on June 9th".¹⁰⁴ Despite several skirmishes afterwards, their next action occurred on June 20th, 1864 at the Battle of Noonday Creek as it would later be called. Their sister brigade of cavalry under Colonel Minty had crossed the Noonday Creek and ran smack into two cavalry divisions, routing his forces and

⁹⁷ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 19-25.

⁹⁸ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 144-145.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 145-150.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 145-150.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 151-152.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 151-153.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 151-153.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 153.

driving him into a box away from the ford. Colonel Miller spotted this as he was moving up to support him, rapidly had three of four regiments charge across a rickety wooden bridge and met the teeth of the assault head-on.¹⁰⁵ Nearly overrun, first by Minty's retreating forces and then eight brigades of enemy cavalry, the Lightning Brigade got on-line and engaged the enemy. They held on despite close-in fighting and even netted several prisoners, Minty rallied behind them, and during the later charges the Lightning Brigade's remaining regiment moved in, with an artillery battery also adding their weight, all during a torrential downpour.¹⁰⁶ They all managed to pull back across the creek and withdraw, still having inflicted greater casualties on the enemy.¹⁰⁷

The Brigade then participated in the ill-fated Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, where they manned the trenches, covering the assault that was ill-fated for the army as a whole.¹⁰⁸ The next encounter of note was their crossing at Roswell on July 9th. Moving to assault the enemy position across the Chattahoochee River in Georgia, they crossed four companies as skirmishers across the armpit deep ford following a cannon blast to kick-off the assault.¹⁰⁹ With the remainder of the Brigade and an artillery battery covering them, they advanced under fire from the Rebel sentries, though the fire inflicted no casualties due to the advance force ducking into the water for cover, and the fact that the Rebels were stunned when the Hoosiers of the 17th and 72nd rose out of the water and fired with no ill effect.¹¹⁰ This unique incident of "bedazzling" their opponents allowed the Brigade to rapidly cross and hold the ford as the disorganized Rebels fled

¹⁰⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 155-156.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 156-158.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 158.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 158-159.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 162.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 162-165.

in the face of what they thought was as superior force.¹¹¹ In addition, the Brigade suffered zero casualties.¹¹² Soon after, the Brigade participated in the Covington Raid (July 21st-24th) that was a great success in rapid movement and destruction of enemy property, but unfortunately was overshadowed by the fact that the Battle of Atlanta occurred concurrently and led to a near defeat for the Union Army.¹¹³ Immediately after, the Brigade was attached to the ill-fated Stoneman Raid (July 27th-30th). The mission was to destroy enemy material and communications, but was sidetracked by the commanding General's desire to liberate Andersonville Prison, so he left the division containing the Brigade to, "do the fighting while Stoneman does the raiding".¹¹⁴ The Brigade ultimately was the force selected to "cut the way out" for the division, due to their reputation, and they successfully smashed through the enemy encirclement, fighting for 600 yards, then remounting and riding to safety with the remainder of their division's cavalry; the other divisions attached to the raid were all captured.¹¹⁵ After yet another perilous escape by Wilder's Lightning Brigade, they continued to alternate between raids, scouts and trench duty before their next notable encounter, the Battle of Rome (October 13th, 1864).¹¹⁶ Following an inconclusive and confused skirmish the day before, the Brigade, as part of General Kenner Garrard's cavalry division, pushed the enemy through several miles of brush and overgrowth before assaulting an entrenched and fortified position of enemy cavalry and artillery.¹¹⁷ They charged across the field and drove the enemy from the position just in time for Col. Minty to mount a "textbook" saber charge that utterly routed the enemy, all while the 'doesn't like

¹¹¹ McQueen, *Spencer*, 47.

¹¹² Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 169.

¹¹³ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 167-169.

¹¹⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 169-170; 170.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 169-170.

¹¹⁶ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 24.

¹¹⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 184-185

cavalry' General Sherman's aide watched, earning them his praise in a rousing speech soon after the action.¹¹⁸ The final action the Brigade saw during the campaign was the Battle of Yellow River (October 21st, 1864), where their division contacted with entrenched enemy forces. The Brigade was brought up to assault the position, they took it and dug in, but upon seeing their cavalry support on their flanks retreating were forced to withdraw, but in "good order".¹¹⁹ The brigade continued skirmishing and foraging but turned in their mounts on the 1st of November to General Kilpatrick as he had been chosen to accompany General Sherman's army on his "March to the Sea".¹²⁰ After a short rest period in Louisville, they were remounted and sent on their final campaign of the war: Wilson's Raid through Alabama.¹²¹

While a number of raids and skirmishes marked Wilson's Raid, the Brigade participated in three actions of note: the Battle of Ebenezer's Church (April 1st 1865), the Battle of Selma (April 2nd, 1865), and the Fall of Macon (April 20th, 1865).¹²² The short list of engagements is easy enough to explain, the war was on its final legs in the spring of 1865 and the enemy knew it. The Battle of Ebenezer's Church was fought outside of Selma against the famed southern cavalry commander, General Forrest. Following contact with Rebel scouts, the Brigade pushed in Rebel skirmishers before assaulting Forrest's 2000 man force; the Wilder Brigade's new (and very green) sabre companies charged without orders, sowing confusion and nearly killing General Forrest, severely wounding him before the rebels withdrew from their position with heavy losses (mostly captured).¹²³ The following day they approached Selma as a single division as the

¹¹⁸ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 184-185.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 186.

¹²⁰ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 26, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 188.

¹²¹ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 227.

¹²² Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 67-77.

¹²³ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 199-201.

remaining forces were pulled from the command to deal with cavalry forces active in the rear.¹²⁴ General Wilson ordered the Lightning Brigade to lead the assault, confident in their infantry skills; in about 25 minutes the Brigade carried the works and drove the rebels into the city and the secondary works, easily dislodging them from there with their support brigades as they entered the city.¹²⁵ The Brigade suffered its highest casualties of war, especially their officer cadre, but Col. Miller later remarked on the battle, "...the history of the war will not show another instance where such formidable works, manned and defended with men and artillery, have been stormed and captured by single line men without support," referring to the lack of reserve forces.¹²⁶ The gamble in the face of delay and risk of facing a more sizable defending force led to a great victory and the destruction of the last great arsenal and industrial city of the South. The Brigade's final action was the Fall of Macon (April 20th, 1865). Following a number of successful skirmishes in the days prior, the Lightning Brigade, with the 17th IN leading, drove off a Rebel force of cavalry, saved a bridge from destruction and rode rapidly into Macon, only to have large numbers of Rebels surrender to them without a shot fired.¹²⁷ Shocked at the ease of the fall and uncertain of the rumors of the war's end, they waited. That evening official channels delivered to them the good news that the war had ended.¹²⁸

The Brigade fought through a number of intense engagements, not all of which are well known in the annals of the Civil War, but often served to illustrate the great effect their unique weapons and tactics had on the enemy, almost always leading to victory. With a history of the

¹²⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 203.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 203-206

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 208.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 209-210.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 209.

Brigade already discussed, the background needed most strongly to understand their tactics is of the man who formed them in the first place, John T. Wilder.

V. John T. Wilder

The man who commanded the legendary Lightning Brigade, John Thomas Wilder, was born in Hunter's Village, Greene County, New York, up in the Catskill Mountains on January 31st, 1830.¹²⁹ Of English heritage, Wilder's ancestors had fought in all major conflicts on the continent since their arrival: his great-great-grandfather Edward Wilder fought in King Philip's War, his great-grand uncle Ephraim Wilder fought in the French and Indian War, his great-grandfather and grandfather (both Seth Wilder) fought in the Revolutionary War, and his father Reuben Wilder had served in the War of 1812.¹³⁰ In 1849, at the age of 19, he headed west to Columbus, Ohio to make his fortune, learning the trades of draftsmen, patternmaker, and millwright under Joseph Ridgeway while becoming skilled in mechanical and hydraulic engineering.¹³¹ Declining an offer to co-own the mill, Wilder continued west and set up shop in Greenburg, IN, where his scale, foundry and mill-wright establishment brought him "pronounced success", leading him to build a number of mills in the Upper South and be recognized as an authority on hydraulic engineering.¹³² Married to Martha Stewart, a Greenburg founder's daughter, in 1858, the "handsome young man, of fine physique" held a number of patents and had, "an estate of magnitude for the day".¹³³ It was about this time the war broke out, and Wilder was not one sit home and observe from afar.

¹²⁹ Williams, "General John T. Wilder.", 169.

¹³⁰ James M. McPherson, "Wilder, John Thomas." in *Encyclopedia of Civil War Biographies Vol. 3*. 811-812 (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Reference, 2000), 811.

¹³¹ McPherson, "Wilder, John Thomas", 811, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 53, and Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 170.

¹³² Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 53, and Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 170.

¹³³ Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 170.

When describing Wilder, author Steven Woodworth stated, “Wilder seems to have believed he could lick the world, and his men were inclined to agree”.¹³⁴ As in his civilian life, this proved to be a very apt statement. Not waiting for permission or request, Wilder forged two cannons and reported to Indianapolis with a company of men to form an artillery battery.¹³⁵ The state declined to utilize them as such at that time, instead making them Company A of the 17th IN, of which Wilder was elected Captain.¹³⁶ This company was later detached to form an artillery battery dubbed “Wilder’s Battery”, but Wilder’s fortunes lay elsewhere.¹³⁷ Wilder was quickly promoted to Lt Col. for his actions in West Virginia, entirely skipping the rank of Major, making Colonel several months later after their Regiment commander, Milo S Hascall, was moved up to Brigadier General.¹³⁸ During the early months of command, Wilder would end up commanding a force equivalent to an under-strength brigade against the entire Army of Tennessee and emerge not in victory but shrouded in honor.¹³⁹

Col. Wilder was on recruiting duty in August of 1862 and returning to the front via Munfordsville, TN, when he was stopped there due to the movement of General Bragg’s army.¹⁴⁰ Wilder, despite being outnumbered and barely half of the 3500 men present being armed (one source claims only 1200), denied an offer to surrender and successfully repulsed an assault by a far greater force under General James Chalmers on September 14th following a second demand to surrender.¹⁴¹ Two days later, after a large Rebel reinforcement and a small

¹³⁴ Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 21.

¹³⁵ Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 171.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 171.

¹³⁷ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 54, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 19, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 171.

¹³⁸ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 29, McPherson, “Wilder, John Thomas”, 811, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 54, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 19.

¹³⁹ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 54.

¹⁴⁰ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 48.

¹⁴¹ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 48-49, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 174-175.

Union reinforcement that led to a temporary change of command (until that officer was ordered arrested by army command), Wilder was asked to surrender for a third time on the 16th by General Bragg himself, whose entire army surrounded the city.¹⁴² Wilder, after consulting with the officers present, took the “unusual” step to ask to meet with General Bragg to counsel with him, admitting to him that he was not a military man by profession, he requested being advised on his situation and ascertain his predicament.¹⁴³ Upon seeing the vast amount of men and artillery arrayed against him, Wilder agreed to surrender his command and General Bragg was impressed enough to let their colors march out, officers and men to keep personal property (horses and arms), and paroled them back to Union lines.¹⁴⁴ It was noted by author Samuel Williams that General Carlos Buell should have relieved the siege, reinforced Wilder or ordered him out, but multiple authors note that Buell was relieved of command soon after, whether or not is was at least a contributing factor is debatable but Wilder’s prestige was raised by his bold defense and he soon acquired early exchange, and returned to the front.¹⁴⁵

It is at this moment in the fall of 1862 that Wilder was on the cusp of what would arguably be his greatest accomplishment during the war: the idea to mount infantry forces and equip them as well as he could. Author Glenn Sunderland describes Wilder stating, “His military success stemmed from his burning desire to be a winner and from his successful background as an engineer and businessman,” as the reason for his accomplishments in the war.¹⁴⁶ Author John W. Rowell, in writing about the 18th Indiana Battery, claims, “Wilder’s intelligence, imagination,

¹⁴² Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 22-23, Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 49-50, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 175-176.

¹⁴³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 22-23, Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 49-50, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 175-176.

¹⁴⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 22-24, Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 49-50, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 54, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 175-176.

¹⁴⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 24, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 176-177.

¹⁴⁶ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 5.

mechanical knowledge and topographical intuition were revealed in the activities of his brigade,” something further discussion should prove unequivocally.¹⁴⁷ Historian and Author Richard Baumgartner describes Wilder as “forward thinking and aggressive”, traits that, again, are demonstrated in Wilder’s definitive attempts at problem solving.¹⁴⁸ Even with all these wonderful descriptions of the man that would command the Lightning Brigade, the most telling comes from author Samuel C. Williams in his article on Wilder: a “strong element of the unique” was “imparted to the Brigade by its leader”.¹⁴⁹ “Unique” would be a great understatement for what Wilder attempted in the midst of the Civil War, but his efforts would prove to be decisive. But to have a solution, you must have a problem to be addressed, and that problem, from the Union perspective, was perfectly embodied in the form of General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest and his elite cavalry raiders.

VI. The Decision to Mount

In 1862, the Union had chronic shortages of cavalry in Tennessee. General Rosecrans had, on paper, 6356 cavalry but effectives numbered closer to 5000 men; these men were opposed by 6-8000 enemy cavalry.¹⁵⁰ While this even match-up to slightly outnumbered match-up could be considered a minor problem, in reality Union cavalry were widely considered to be inferior to Rebel cavalry in all respects, with Generals like Forrest, Morgan, Roddy and Wheeler striking fear in the hearts of many a union soldier.¹⁵¹ But this was not a problem isolated to Tennessee; in the armies, Confederate cavalry outnumbered Union totals 3-4 times and proved themselves to be a great impediment.¹⁵² These raiders often got into the Union rear areas,

¹⁴⁷ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 54.

¹⁴⁸ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 179.

¹⁵⁰ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 60.

¹⁵¹ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, Wilder’s Brigade Monument, Chickamauga section, 1-2.

¹⁵² Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 14.

attacked supply trains, any Pro-Union forces they encountered, cut communication lines and were able to do so by foraging off the land.¹⁵³ Back in Tennessee, Gen. Rosecrans was struggling to find a solution to the enemy's seemingly unstoppable cavalry. Desperate, he was approved by the War Department to mount 5000 of his infantry, but received zero resources to do so, leaving him stuck, until a young officer brazenly walked into his command post with a novel solution.

Col. Wilder, for several months prior to entering the General's office, had been charged with chasing down Gen. Forrest in the fall and then Gen. Morgan following his latest raid in December of 1862.¹⁵⁴ The pursuit of Morgan's cavalry was particularly grueling and futile from the start; through cold, rain and snow, the Brigade under Wilder fruitlessly pursued Morgan through Tennessee, unable to catch the bold cavalier even with his determined infantry.¹⁵⁵ The only bright spot of the campaign was the locating of an "applejack still" that gave the men a moments respite from the grueling march.¹⁵⁶ The rest of the campaign, in addition to the absolutely miserable conditions and little food even to scrounge, saw at least one garrison fall and Morgan's raiders return to Rebel lines at their leisure.¹⁵⁷ The pursuit went through the New Year's and caused the Brigade to miss the Battle of Stone's River, something that would be particularly frustrating for a young colonel looking to prove himself with an equally young and eager brigade.¹⁵⁸ It was during this unreasonable pursuit that Wilder, more out of frustration than anything else, ordered his men to attempt to mount the mules of the wagon teams and catch Morgan; this led to what was later described as a "comical scene" of men trying to get aboard

¹⁵³ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, Wilder's Brigade Monument, Chickamauga section, 1-2, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 60, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 14.

¹⁵⁴ *Indiana at Chickamauga: Report of Indiana Commissioners Chickamauga National Military Park* (Indianapolis: WM. B. Buford, 1901), 141.

¹⁵⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 31-33.

¹⁵⁶ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 34.

¹⁵⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 21-23.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

angry mules.¹⁵⁹ One of the unit's biographers, William Doyle, beautifully noted later that the "Mules objected and thus prevented to the scout of Morgan".¹⁶⁰ Sunderland describes the scene; "The mules bucked, jumped on each other's backs and tried to run under each other's bellies in order to dispose of their riders".¹⁶¹ While it is safe to describe this little experiment as a failure, Wilder did not forget the lesson in futility of chasing a sharp cavalier like Morgan on foot, but he was not dissuaded by the failure of the mules; rather, he was convinced that the solution lay in mounting.¹⁶² Upon returning to Murfreesboro, Col. Wilder went straight to Gen. Rosecrans for an encounter that would lead to a historical decision.¹⁶³

Colonel Wilder could not have picked a better time to approach Gen. Rosecrans about mounting his men. The Battle of Stone's River had been a near catastrophe and cavalry had been the chief impetus to the General's plan.¹⁶⁴ Described by one author as a "logistical master", Gen. Rosecrans had written General Halleck at the War Department on Jan 14th, 1863, stating, "I must have cavalry or mounted infantry. I could mount infantry had I horses and saddles...with mounted infantry I can drive the rebel cavalry to the wall and keep the roads open in my rear. Not so now...Will you authorize the purchase of saddles and horses for mounting, when, requisite, 5000 or more infantry?"¹⁶⁵ Still unable to get the support to mount the men available, let alone the actual horses to do it, Wilder strode into the General's Headquarters and in passionate terms¹⁶⁶ stated, "If you will mount my men on horses and furnish them with the kind of arms I want, we will chase John Morgan and Bragg's cavalry to hell."¹⁶⁷ Gen. Rosecrans,

¹⁵⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 35-36, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 23.

¹⁶⁰ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 10.

¹⁶¹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 23.

¹⁶² Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 177.

¹⁶³ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 24.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 25.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 25.

¹⁶⁶ Exact words unknown but several accounts approximate this.

¹⁶⁷ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, Wilder's Brigade Monument, Chickamauga section, 2.

impressed by this display, first offered Wilder the horses rejected by the cavalry; knowing them to be broken down and unsuitable for riding, he asked instead to “capture from the surrounding country”.¹⁶⁸ While the different authors and sources all cite the conversation and decision making thoughts similarly, they agree Wilder wanted to “fight like the devil”¹⁶⁹ and that Rosecrans responded “enthusiastically”, with Special Field Order 44.¹⁷⁰ This Special Field Order 44, like many military communication documents from the period, is not exciting to read for lack of any fluff or additional language, but this order had immense ramifications for both the brigade Wilder commanded and future military tactics. The order, dated February 16th, 1863, simply stated, “Brig Gen. J. J. Reynolds, commanding Fifth Division, Fourteenth Army Corps, is authorized to mount the Second Brigade (Wilder’s) of his command” , signed by Gen. Rosecrans’ adjutant.¹⁷¹ This directive spawned a drive to mount his brigade, one that would be accomplished efficiently and with great results down the line, but the order itself sheds no light on just how exactly this was to be accomplished. The order very clearly commanded Brigadier Gen. Reynolds to mount his second brigade, going so far as to indicate clearly that they referred to Wilder’s brigade to avoid any confusion, dawdling or push back.¹⁷² But the official order, which was without a doubt clear on the point of mounting an infantry brigade, was silent on the method. What is clear from other testimony was that this didn’t stop Wilder from accomplishing the task.

¹⁶⁸ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, Wilder’s Brigade Monument, Chickamauga section, 2. This incident of refusal is confirmed in Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 57, footnote again by Benefiel.

¹⁶⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 38.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 39

¹⁷¹ Henry M. Lazelle, Lt. Col. *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 74.

¹⁷² Lazelle, Lt. Col. *The War of the Rebellion*, 74.

Now with orders in hand, Wilder set about mounting the brigade. His method, which he had articulated to Gen. Rosecrans, was to “impress” horses from the surrounding counties from “loyal rebel civilians”.¹⁷³ This effort to “forage” off of the “disloyal inhabitants” of the region was a first in the Western theatre of war where the issue of property rights still weighed heavily on the operations of the Army, but it was not without precedent, as in the East requisition had already been going on for some time.¹⁷⁴ With this in mind, Wilder sent the first patrol to “acquire” mounts for his Brigade; they returned with 43 prisoners, 300 horses and mules, and 50 beef cattle, at the cost of five men missing.¹⁷⁵ It took some time but after the first companies received their mounts, capturing mounts for the rest of the Brigade became easy. On March 2nd, 1863, Private Horace Hobart of the 17th IN wrote that “Our regiment is now Mounted Infantry”, noting that they took some horses refused by a cavalry unit.¹⁷⁶ Alva C. Griest of the 72nd IN wrote that his company received theirs on March 22nd, 1863.¹⁷⁷ By mid-April, the entire brigade had been mounted.¹⁷⁸ While “persuading” the locals to “give” their horses to his brigade had been a relatively easy task for Wilder, he did have a real challenge convincing some of his men that their efforts to mount were worthwhile.

The rumors about Wilder’s plans began to circulate in January, prior to the actual order to mount, and the word was that the Brigade would be turned into cavalry.¹⁷⁹ They persisted through March as Alva C. Griest of the 72nd wrote in his diary. “We are to fight as Infantry, but are to do all our marching on horseback. On some accounts I like it, and on some others I dislike

¹⁷³ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 60, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 177-178.

¹⁷⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 39.

¹⁷⁵ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 60-61.

¹⁷⁶ Horace Hobart, *Civil War Letters*, 1863. Call Number SC 0759. Bib Number 22952. Indiana Historical Society Library Manuscript Collection

¹⁷⁷ Griest, Collection, 62.

¹⁷⁸ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 15.

¹⁷⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 19, 39.

it.”¹⁸⁰ Wilder made very clear from the beginning that the brigade would be “*mounted infantry*” and not cavalry, a distinction that was very important to the men in the unit due to infantry’s prejudices against cavalry, and allowed all the regiments in the brigade (at this time the 17th IN, 72nd IN, 75th IN and 98th IL) to vote on the decision to mount.¹⁸¹ The assurance that they would be fighting as infantry and not become cavalry was enough for the men from the 17th IN, 72nd IN and 98th IL, who voted to mount, but proved too much for the men of the 75th IN who opted to not mount. They were soon replaced by the eager and willing, sometimes “substitute”, regiment of the 123rd IL, who were enthused about the prospect of mounting.¹⁸² Their first act on receiving their new uniforms was to remove the yellow piping that would have marked them as cavalry.¹⁸³ Baumgartner cited the letter of one soldier who wrote that they removed the markings, “so that we might not be taken for regular cavalry. We were a new branch of the service, simply mounted infantry”.¹⁸⁴ The letters from the period often mentioned their excitement about their mounts and the emphasis on the fact that they considered themselves mounted infantry, a distinction they were apt to enforce.¹⁸⁵ Their distinction from cavalry did not however spare them the new responsibilities that went along with being a mounted unit; in addition to the standard infantry drill and responsibilities, they accepted the daily chores for horse care and all men learned to ride, a difficult task as few had experience at it.¹⁸⁶ This grand design of Wilder’s, mounting infantry on horse, mule or pony to ride into battle and then fight dismounted, was not always credited to him. However, despite others fielding a similar strategy for engagements, Wilder’s

¹⁸⁰ Griest, Collection, 62.

¹⁸¹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 39.

¹⁸² McQueen, *Spencer*, 43.

¹⁸³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 57, McQueen, *Spencer*, 44, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 26.

¹⁸⁴ Benjamin F. Magee, *History of the 72nd Indiana Volunteer Infantry of the Mounted Infantry Brigade (Lafayette, Ind: S Vater & Co., 1982)*, 98 in Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 57.

¹⁸⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 40-44, 57.

¹⁸⁶ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 26, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 57.

method was unique in one very important manner: the idea that the mounts were simply for conveyance.

The most difficult argument to counter with Wilder is whether or not his “mounted infantry” concept was really his concept at all. Historian Jay Luvaas notes that, “Dismounted tactics were not new, for dragoons had existed since the sixteenth century, but never before had mounted infantry, as the Civil War cavalry was called, been employed on such a large scale---to the incidental bewilderment of most foreign military observers”.¹⁸⁷ His work on the Civil War’s legacy in Europe cited the famed Confederate General Forrest as a cavalry men who spent every battle after Shiloh fighting dismounted, but he also brings up the point that cavalry during the war learned the futility of fighting with swords when other advancements had been made, changes that the Europeans paid little mind to.¹⁸⁸ So why then was Wilder’s Brigade different? Samuel Reid published a propaganda piece shortly after the battle of Chickamauga in 1863 that describes “squadron of cavalry” during a raid leading up to the battle.¹⁸⁹ Glenn Tucker’s excellent piece on the battle of Chickamauga again described Wilder as one of the great cavalry commanders of the war, while the official government work on the battlefield clearly differentiated between “Minty’s Cavalry” and “Wilder’s Mounted Infantry”.¹⁹⁰ Benjamin Magee is quoted in the Otto McManus biography and history as stating that, “They took their system of drill from that devised by Confederate cavalryman John Hunt Morgan”.¹⁹¹ While the interchangeability of the terms to refer to Wilder can be confusing and the use of another’s

¹⁸⁷ Jay Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 5.

¹⁸⁸ Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War*, 4-5.

¹⁸⁹ Samuel C. Reid, *Great Battle of Chickamauga: a concise history of events from the Evacuation of Chattanooga to the defeat of the enemy*. Mobile: F. Titcomb, 1863), 4.

¹⁹⁰ Sullivan, *Chickamauga and Chattanooga*, 15, and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 115.

¹⁹¹ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 122.

method of drill does suggest he drew on others, interchanged terms only proved the difficulty in classifying the Brigade and the use of Morgan's drill system simply means Wilder used an available solution to add to his method. The chief aspect of this drill that Wilder emulated was the "number four man" designator; the men would be counted off and one man out of every four was designated to hold the horses for the group.¹⁹² Other sources confirmed that Wilder's men used this method, and weapons historian Joseph Bilby noted this by using this method: "A dismounted cavalry regiment immediately lost one fourth of its potential combat strength when it deployed to fight on foot".¹⁹³ Though Forrest was still fond of this tactic, Major General J.E.B. Stuart of the Confederacy had "little interest in his men as mounted infantry".¹⁹⁴ Though probably more for pride than anything else, it would be easy to cite this as a reason to keep men mounted to maximize effectiveness.¹⁹⁵ A number of other sources name this method, as do most accounts of the Brigade in action mention "the fourth man" remaining with their horses while other went forward to fight.¹⁹⁶ And yet the claim of Wilder that, "He is credited with having originated mounted infantry in the Civil War,"¹⁹⁷ should be accepted because his men started out as infantry. While famous cavalymen did utilize similar methods, they started out as cavalymen, their training and instinct would always spring from cavalry tactics, which would make them more prone to galloping from danger¹⁹⁸, whereas Wilder's men were infantrymen to their core. This dictated their reactions and encompassed their entire mindset, meaning they were more accustomed to standing under fire than cavalymen were. But the problem of losing that

¹⁹² McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 66.

¹⁹³ Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 145.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 144.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 144.

¹⁹⁶ Rogers, *The Confederates and Federals at War*, 61 and McPherson, "Wilder, John Thomas", 811, in addition to passing mention in combat accounts.

¹⁹⁷ McPherson, "Wilder, John Thomas", 811.

¹⁹⁸ Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 12.

fourth man is noted in Bilby's book on Civil War weapons, since that fourth man represented a quarter of a unit's combat firepower.¹⁹⁹ Wilder could not have been unaware of this, as he was fixated on making his brigade not only fully mounted, but arming them with the best weapons possible.²⁰⁰ Despite a furious letter exchange to Oliver Winchester to get Henry Repeating Rifles, the waiting list was long and the numbers that would have been available per month were too small.²⁰¹ Col. Wilder was fortunate that another source of repeating rifles happened to stroll into camp in February of 1863, roughly the time he began mounting his Brigade.²⁰² This solution came in the form of the Connecticut-Yankee Christopher Spencer peddling his Spencer Repeating Rifle.

VII. Spencer and His Rifle Change the War

In Col. Wilder's alleged statement to Gen. Rosecrans, Wilder had one other demand aside from the mounting. His alleged words were, "If you will mount my men on horses and *furnish them with the kind of arms I want* (emphasis mine), we will chase John Morgan and Bragg's cavalry to hell".²⁰³ The second part of Wilder's plan was the more crucial of the two, as it wasn't enough to simply put everyone on horseback and call it a day. Wilder wanted to make his tactical advantage overwhelming. Wilder is spoken of as wanting, "...to make themselves the most effective command in the service...", therefore he sought what he saw as the most effective rifle at the time.²⁰⁴ That rifle was, and nearly turned out to be, Winchester's Henry Repeating Rifle.²⁰⁵ This rifle could hold 16 cartridges, was breech loading and would end up being the forerunner to

¹⁹⁹ Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 145.

²⁰⁰ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 89.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 86.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 89.

²⁰³ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, Wilder's Brigade Monument, Chickamauga section, 2.

²⁰⁴ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 65.

²⁰⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 62.

the later historic Winchester Repeating Rifle.²⁰⁶ While this rifle was widely considered to be the best, and Wilder was in negotiations to acquire them directly from Oliver Winchester, it was not to be as the contracts kept Winchester's roughly 200 per month fabrication out of the hands of private buyers.²⁰⁷ Wilder's need for 900 per month simply could not happen.²⁰⁸ During the early months of 1863, about the time Wilder was beginning his mounting of his brigade, Christopher Miner Spencer entered the camp with his version of the repeating rifle.²⁰⁹ His timing could not have been better for a sales trip if he had tried. His demonstration to Gen. Rosecrans was seen by many officers in the Army of the Cumberland, including Col. Wilder.²¹⁰ The "forward thinking and aggressive" Wilder eagerly placed an order for what would become the, "...most advanced breech-loading repeating rifle available in significant numbers..."²¹¹ But what was it about Spencer and his rifle that Wilder found so appealing and the perfect solution to his problem? To best explain why Wilder ended up going through so much trouble to get it, we must first examine the man behind the weapon, and what exactly this weapon meant for warfare.

Christopher Miner Spencer was born on June 20th, 1833 to Ogden and Asenath Spencer in Manchester, CT.²¹² Schooled there until 14, he entered manufacturing, working mainly in textile mills, but also spending time working in machine shops at tool-building and locomotive factories, with several fortuitous stints at the Colt Armory over his career that mainly centered around the Cheney Silk Mills.²¹³ The time at Colt Armory should not have come as a surprise, as his maternal grandfather had schooled him in woodworking and Spencer had possessed an

²⁰⁶ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 62.

²⁰⁷ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 89.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 89.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 86-88.

²¹⁰ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 63-64.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 11.

²¹² Dumas Malone, Ed. "Spencer, Christopher Miner." in *Dictionary of American Biography: Volume IX: Sewell-Trowbridge*, 446-447 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 446.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 446.

interest in firearms from a young age, two things that would be important to a firearms designer.²¹⁴ Spencer spent about five years (1854-1859) working on his design, perfecting a “lever actuated rolling block action” with a buttstock tube magazine.²¹⁵ A short explanation of how that worked is that you could load 7 waterproof cartridges (self-contained bullet and powder in waterproof copper case) from a tube contained in the rear part of the rifle (the buttstock) by working a lever to load a round and eject the spent casing of the previous one.²¹⁶ The weapon could then be fired by cocking the hammer and then pulling the trigger.²¹⁷ His “boyhood passion” led to the first prototype being patented on March 6th, 1860, patent no. 27,393.²¹⁸ This rifle would prove radically advanced in a war where many were still using smoothbore muskets identical to the ones used in the Revolutionary War, with only the minor change of a percussion cap instead of a flintlock.²¹⁹ But despite his achievement and the perception by many that Spencer was on to something, many in the War Department refused to accept the new technology, forcing Spencer to work hard to lobby for his new product.²²⁰

The road that ended up placing Spencer in Gen. Rosecrans’s Headquarters had everything to do with the pushback his new weapon was getting in Washington DC from the War Department. Despite the war being on and weapons being difficult to find, Spencer struggled to get government contracts. Granted, the War Department was besieged with people peddling new inventions, but despite several positive tests, including one before President Lincoln himself, Spencer was unable to secure more than a small contract with the Navy.²²¹ Not satisfied with the

²¹⁴ McQueen, *Spencer*, 8.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 8-9.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 9-10.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 9-10.

²¹⁸ Malone, Ed. “Spencer, Christopher Miner”, 446.

²¹⁹ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 65.

²²⁰ Robert Barton, “Lincoln and the Yankee Gunsmith.” *Yankee*. Vol. VIII No. 2 (Feb 1942): 26-27.

²²¹ Barton, “Lincoln and the Yankee Gunsmith”, 25-28, and Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 70-91.

small contract, Spencer made a trip to Murfreesboro in Feb 1863.²²² The demonstration appealed to Wilder, who was like-minded to Spencer in that they both worked in engineering fields and were self-made men.²²³ A vote by his men shortly thereafter went far smoother than the mounting vote; while the men had been divided on mounting and votes had been somewhat close, the vote on the Spencer rifle was unanimous to buy them.²²⁴ It's at this point Wilder began his "unorthodox" attempt to secure the rifles for his Brigade. Unwilling to wait to for the hesitant ordinance department and ordering directly from Spencer his repeating rifle, Wilder set up a personal order for 2000.²²⁵ Originally, he tried to secure a loan from his hometown Greensburg Bank, mortgaging his factory and home along with co-signed promissory notes from each of his men to pay the \$35²²⁶ for the purchase of the rifles.²²⁷ It should also be noted that this inflow of capital to the Spencer factory led historian James M. McPherson to credit Wilder with, "...the introduction of *Spencer Repeating Rifles* by financing their manufacture".²²⁸ Wilder's goal was finally near fruition, and was finally realized on May 15th, 1863, a date specifically noted by the 17th IN's biographer as the day the Spencers arrived to the Brigade.²²⁹ The 72nd IN was armed first, then the 17th IN on the 15th and 16th, next the 98th IL on the 31st.²³⁰ The late arrivals to the

²²² Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 84-86.

²²³ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 89-90.

²²⁴ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 15.

²²⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 65.

²²⁶ Some sources claim Wilder asked his men for these, other claim the bank asked for it from Wilder. It's not clear whether the co-sign came up after the initial offer, but what is clear from the sources below is that after his offer the bank agreed to give the loan without "security" as long as he co-signed the promissory notes from his men. At some point though the government stepped in to pay for the rifles, immediately following their success at the Battle of Hoover's Gap, (Benefiel, *Souvenir*, Wilder's Brigade Monument, Chickamauga section, 3).

²²⁷ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 65, Benefiel, *Souvenir*, Wilder's Brigade Monument, Chickamauga section, 2, Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 15, Hubert Jordan, "Battle of Chickamauga: Colonel John Wilder's Lightning Brigade Prevented Total Disaster." *America's Civil War*. (July 1997): accessed August 12th, 2015, <http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-chickamauga-colonel-john-wilders-lightning-brigade-prevented-total-disaster.htm>, 2, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 65, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 29.

²²⁸ McPherson, "Wilder, John Thomas", 811.

²²⁹ Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 11.

²³⁰ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 68.

Brigade, the 123rd IL, received theirs soon after mounting upon joining the Brigade on May 6th.²³¹ The Wilder Brigade now had the distinction of being the first mounted infantry unit in the Army of the Cumberland. Several days later on June 4th they awarded the designation of being the, "...first military unit in history of warfare to meet a force armed with repeating rifles," to the 1st Kentucky Cavalry, but this would not be the last time the Kentuckians encountered the Wilder Brigade.²³² The 1st Kentucky would again be driven from the field by the "heavy firepower", when at Hoover's Gap the Brigade drove off the 1st Kentucky as they guarded the gap, then held the field against overwhelming forces, earning the appellation "Wilder's Lightning Brigade" for their "rapid movements and efficient work".²³³

While the Spencer was considered about even in the contest of whether it or the Henry Rifle was "the best", the Spencer ended up becoming the most prolific due both to Christopher Spencer's ability to more rapidly turn out firearms, and also because of the ease to repair in the event something did break down.²³⁴ The men themselves even attested to the regard they held their new weapon of choice, describing how they immediately took them to the woods to "master" them, how the sound it would make in combat was "the sweetest music" during the war, but firmly state that, "No rebel could stand the racket of those repeating rifles when once brought to bear upon them".²³⁵ Historian Peter Cozzens cites one Civil War officer who deemed the Spencer Repeating Rifle, "the most effective and complete weapon for actual service ever

²³¹ Mounting took the other units roughly a month to get each regiment situated so probable they weren't armed until early June. Otho McManus states in a diary entry on May 31st, 1863, that they were "to be" armed at some near but future date.

²³² Jordan, "Battle of Chickamauga", 2, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 33. It should also be noted that the 1st Kentucky was not a bum unit, they had a great reputation going into this skirmish.

²³³ Sullivan, *Chickamauga and Chattanooga*, 22; Griest, *Collection 1862-1865*, 2.

²³⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 67-68, and Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 13.

²³⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 33; Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 180; Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 97.

placed in the hands of soldiers”.²³⁶ The testimonies from the soldiers themselves on the guns are unique and colorful, but nearly unanimously positive, with the only detractor stating they were too easy to fire.²³⁷ W. H. H. Benefiel, soldier and 17th IN biographer, asserted that after acquiring the rifle that, “...we were never defeated,” a mostly true statement as the engagement record for the 17th IN and most of the rest of the Brigade never were driven from the field or defeated, though they on several occasions covered withdrawals to prevent routs and retired in good order.²³⁸ Otto McManus, schoolteacher-turned-soldier of the 123rd IL, confidently wrote home to his wife that, “I’ll bet all my land in Minnesota that forty of us can take iron Spencers (7 shooters) and whip 300 of them in open field or in woods,” referring to the “Butternuts” that were troubling loyalists in the North.²³⁹ An errant margin note by a forgotten ordinance officer of the 92nd plainly stated, “Weapon: ‘Spencer I think it the best arm I have ever seen.’”²⁴⁰ But it wasn’t just the men of the Brigade pouring praise on the Spencer. Colonel Smith D. Atkins, commander of the 92nd Illinois who passed through service of the Brigade briefly, remarked after the war on the Spencer: “the best arm for service in the field ever invented, better than any other arm in the world then or now, so simple in its mechanism that it never got out of order, and was always ready for instant service”.²⁴¹ But the most resounding endorsement of the Spencer Repeating Rifle came from the Colonel himself. Wilder remarked,

“The Spencer magazine rifle...a most formidable weapon. I believe them to be the best arm for army use that I have seen. No line of men, who come within fifty yards of another force armed with Spencer Repeating Rifles, can either get away alive, or reach

²³⁶ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 15.

²³⁷ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 65, 67-68.

²³⁸ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, Wilder’s Brigade Monument, Chickamauga section, 2.

²³⁹ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 76.

²⁴⁰ Baumann, *Arming the Suckers*, 179

²⁴¹ Smith D. Atkins, “Chickamauga: Useless, Disastrous Battle.” (Paper presented at Meeting of Women’s Relief Corps, G.A.R. February 22, 1907), 3.

them with a charge, as in either case they are certain to be destroyed by the terrible fire poured into their ranks by cool men thus armed. If the government would expend the large sums now used to induce men to enlist, in arming the men now in the field with this kind of weapon, the rebellion would be in my opinion, speedily crushed".²⁴²

Such resounding endorsements, particularly up and down the chain of command, confirmed that the men of the Lightning Brigade believed in their decision to equip with the Spencer Repeating Rifle and that it made an impact on their fortunes. While this would confirm the belief the Brigade had in their mounts and their Spencers, what was the opinion of others, friend and foe, of the effect they had on warfare?

VIII. Perspectives on the Brigade: The Union

While Wilder's Lightning Brigade never rose to the post-war fame that units like the Stonewall Brigade or the Iron Brigade enjoyed, during the war there were few in the Union's Western armies who hadn't heard of Wilder's boys.²⁴³ But it's the thoughts and opinions on the unit itself that really tell of their impact on the war and the tactics it bred. From their inception the Lightning Brigade had to prove its worth. The War Department had set up some hurdles with their unofficial position that, "Mounted Infantry are neither good infantry nor good cavalry".²⁴⁴ Add this to a Department that feared using repeaters for the ammunition waste they assumed it would cause (a belief they clung to even after the war's end) and it is obvious the Brigade had a large challenge to overcome.²⁴⁵ This left the men of Wilder's Brigade one option; prove them wrong. Confident in their commander and their new weapons, the Lightning Brigade mounted

²⁴² Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 64-65.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 15-16

²⁴⁴ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 65.

²⁴⁵ Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 193-196.

and stepped off in June of 1863 for what would end up being the first of many resounding demonstrations of their abilities.

The Battle of Hoover's Gap would be not only a great Union victory, one described by some after the war as, "One of the War's most notable military achievements," but the first time that the Lightning Brigade demonstrated their new equipment and tactics.²⁴⁶ Part of Gen. Rosecrans larger plan to take Tullahoma, the Lightning Brigade was charged to be the lead-brigade of Gen. Thomas' push through Hoover's Gap, one of three above Tullahoma, TN.²⁴⁷ Wilder had been "rankled" by Major-General David S. Stanley of the Union army several days before the June 24th attack when he pushed to send a cavalry unit with the "tadpole" cavalry of Wilder's Brigade, to which Gen. Thomas assured Gen. Rosecrans that cavalry would not affect the outcome one way or the other.²⁴⁸ With this resounding endorsement of his new effort in mind, Wilder and his Brigade smashed through the Gap and held it for several hours until relief arrived in the form of an artillery battery and two infantry brigades.²⁴⁹ This stunning victory led the campaign to be completed in only 9 days, an amazing feat considering it was thought it would require 3 days to take the one Gap!²⁵⁰ General Thomas was quoted later as having told Wilder, "You have saved the lives of a thousand men by your gallant conduct today".²⁵¹ General Rosecrans was alleged to have ridden up with Generals Reynolds and Thomas (essentially the chain-of-command between Wilder and himself) and upon hearing Wilder's explanation of his conduct and observing the momentous results, turned to Gen. Reynolds and said, "Wilder has

²⁴⁶ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 96.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 86-87

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 86-87.

²⁴⁹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 42.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 42.

²⁵¹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 91, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 83, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 42, and Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 183.

done right. Promote him, promote him”.²⁵² This engagement was also where the Brigade officially picked up the name “Lightning Brigade” (much to the pleasure of the men) per an official commendation from General Thomas to the Army, one that also directed other units to “emulate” them.²⁵³ Their first, but certainly not last, appearance in print was carried in the Cincinnati Gazette at the time, stating, “Thus the first and most critical step of the campaign was won by Wilder’s soldiership,” a rather boisterous but not inaccurate account of the Brigade’s efforts.²⁵⁴ The next major demonstration of their abilities would be at the Battle of Chickamauga, but that would be almost three months later, and there was plenty to do meanwhile.

Prior to the movement on Chattanooga, Wilder’s Brigade came under scrutiny for their foraging habits, not long after Wilder went home on one of his frequent sick leaves. Following “reports” made of “depredations” and “outrages” committed by the Brigade on their forage expeditions, Gen. Reynolds launched investigations, court-martials and general orders to the command to stop the supposed offenses, with Generals Thomas and Rosecrans weighing in.²⁵⁵ While every unit will have individuals involved in less than acceptable behavior, Lt Col. Henry Jordan noted in his letter to Wilder warning him of the allegations that Gen. Reynolds has made no secret that he was upset that he was often skipped in the chain of communications that Wilder made to command, which he and the author Baumgartner noted was probably the reason for the witch hunt.²⁵⁶ This was simply officer politics at its worst, since only one officer was ever charged and those charges were later dismissed.²⁵⁷

²⁵² Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 42.

²⁵³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 92, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 43, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 183.

²⁵⁴ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 83.

²⁵⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 111-116.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 112-114.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 112-114.

In the meantime, Gen. Rosecrans had an encounter with several of Wilder's men following the Chattanooga crossing, but before the Battle of Chickamauga. The men were brought in as stragglers but they claimed to be from Wilder's Brigade and out foraging.²⁵⁸ They were disbelieved as it was thought that the Wilder's Brigade had been cut-off and captured.²⁵⁹ Eventually convinced by their adamant insistence they were from Wilder's Brigade, Gen. Rosecrans told the detail, "Wilder's men beat the devil, anyhow; take them to Wilder---he's the only man that can manage them".²⁶⁰ Several days later on the 18th of September, the Battle of Chickamauga began for the Lightning Brigade when they contested several bridges over the creek and delayed the rebel army for several hours before being forced to withdraw back several miles. Wilder sent word to General Crittenden that they were attacked by a large rebel force who was now crossing the creek in great numbers, but this was disbelieved by the General, who went so far as to deny that the enemy was in any noticeable number anywhere in the vicinity and disbelieved a second report from a different unit that the rebels were attacking across the creek.²⁶¹ Gen. Crittenden then learned the hard way that the Lightning Brigade did not exaggerate: Crittenden ordered forward a Brigade under Gen. Wood, even going so far as to tell Col. Wilder, "Colonel, we expect to hear a good report from you," still chastising Wilder only this time in front of his men, who were now dug in across Vinard Field.²⁶² Well, the General soon got his report from several thousand rifles and muskets on Gen. Wood's Brigade's front and flanks, breaking it, scattering them and driving them from the field.²⁶³ A shocked Gen. Crittenden rode for his life in utter disbelief, while the Lightning Brigade jeered him for his lack

²⁵⁸ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 63-64.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 63-64.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 64.

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, 74.

²⁶² Jordan, "Battle of Chickamauga", 12.

²⁶³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 215-216.

of faith in their reports.²⁶⁴ The Lightning Brigade's word vindicated, they dug in and continued to fight as the combat worsened.

Despite the negative outcome for the army as a whole, Wilder's Lightning Brigade was one of the few bright points of the engagement, holding their own far longer than any other command under difficult conditions. Gen Rosecrans described Wilder's efforts after the battle: "His command merits the thanks of the country for his noble stand at the crossing at Chickamauga," as the delay had allowed the Union army to reposition and avoid being totally routed and destroyed piecemeal.²⁶⁵ General Thomas went so far as to write a recommendation (sent Nov 27th, 1863) for Wilder's promotion due to the Brigade's actions.²⁶⁶ On Sept. 30th, 1863, Gen. Thomas sent a direct cable to Washington informing them of Wilder's action in driving Gen. Wheeler's Confederate cavalry from Tennessee, "...without his having materially interfered with Gen. Rosecrans communication".²⁶⁷ Despite a hard fight less than a week prior and a nearly shattered Union Army in Chattanooga, the Wilder Brigade continued to be a force on the field. Gen. Thomas continued to make use of and praise the results of the Lightning Brigade, acknowledging a dauntingly long front he had assigned to them for defense and noting their fatigue and lack of rest, but also that, "...all of which I take into notice. Knowing your former zeal and integrity..." signed by Gen. Thomas.²⁶⁸ Despite the hardships and continued demand on the Lightning Brigade, their General held them in high esteem and didn't just expect that the task will be completed, but knew so. But even after the great efforts around Chattanooga, there was still another year-and-a-half of fighting to go.

²⁶⁴ Jordan, "Battle of Chickamauga", 12-13, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 74-75.

²⁶⁵ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 115.

²⁶⁶ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 319, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 91-92, and Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 192.

²⁶⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 112.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 118.

Though Wilder would often be down with illness for the remainder of his career, before he was sent home in 1864 his brigade continued to earn Union praise wherever they went. During the Battle of Big Shanty during the Atlanta Campaign, the cavalry-hating General William T. Sherman sent one of his staff officers to observe their new division commander Gen. Kenner Garrard during the operation. The ludicrous scene unfolded where the Lightning Brigade was forced to assault four lines of enemy entrenchments due to the staff officer not being convinced each time that they had really attacked entrenched infantry.²⁶⁹ Perturbed, Gen. Garrard handed his spyglass to the officer and asked if he believed the men in the next line were infantry. Upon replying in the affirmative, Gen. Garrard ordered Col. Abram Miller (acting Brigade commander) to take the position and bring back prisoners, which he did and returned to General Garrard with a company of men as prisoners, to which the staff officer replied, “Well, if that does not convince Sherman where Johnston’s army is, he will find out when he occupies the ground we are now on with his infantry”.²⁷⁰ While a demonstration of the callousness that could develop when commanders wanted intelligence very badly, the staff officer’s terse reply demonstrates that the Brigade had earned his respect, but such respect would be even harder won from Sherman. On October 13th, 1864, during the Atlanta Campaign around Rome, GA, Sherman’s General Cox arrived on scene with two infantry divisions thinking he would need to assist Garrard’s cavalry, only to find the Lightning Brigade taking a fortified position with great speed and the oft-sister command of Minty’s Cavalry executing a “picture book” sabre charge that utterly routed the rebels and “...so widely scattered them...” that Minty’s men were forced to return to the command for lack of any sizable force to pursue.²⁷¹ General Cox, extremely

²⁶⁹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 151-152.

²⁷⁰ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 152-153, excerpt from B.F. McGee’s, *Regimental History of the 72nd Indiana Volunteer Infantry*.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, 184-185.

impressed by the “aggressiveness and effectiveness” of the action, gave a well-received speech to the Brigade and the rest of Garrard’s command.²⁷² While Sherman was not present for any of these actions, continued glowing reports about “mounted units” should surely have softened his position, even if there was no evidence that they’d changed it. Even though Sherman never acknowledged the Lightning Brigade specifically, the men who encountered them personally were almost always won over by their efforts.

With the war drawing to a close, Wilder’s Lightning Brigade had earned wide acclaim across many different battlefields, but the most telling of their effectiveness comes not from leading generals, but from their final on-scene commander, General James H. Wilson, and the other men-in-ranks. General Wilson was a famous, albeit young, cavalry general from Illinois who was assigned to lead an attack on Selma, Alabama to knock out the South’s ordinance production and arsenals located there.²⁷³ Prior to the attack, Col. Miller, the new Commander of the Lightning Brigade, was ordered by General Wilson to lead the attack on the city: Col. Miller was extremely honored and delighted in the “confidence” the General held in him.²⁷⁴ In reality, Wilson had chosen the Lightning Brigade as they were, “most accustomed to fighting on foot”.²⁷⁵ The General’s faith in their abilities as infantryman was a long advancement from the War Department’s belief that, “Mounted Infantry were neither good infantry nor good cavalry,” a belief that was quickly dispelled by any officer who encountered the men of Wilder’s Lightning Brigade.²⁷⁶ It was not just the officers who had come to know the reputation of Wilder’s Lightning Brigade, but most men in the ranks of the Union Army. An incident

²⁷² Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 185.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, 201.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 202.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 202-203, excerpt from the *Official Records*. (location in the records not specifically listed but Vol. 30 most likely based on author’s citation choice)

²⁷⁶ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 65

recounted in Benjamin McGee's *Regimental History of the 72nd* best illustrates the reputation the Brigade carried with them wherever they went. During the Atlanta Campaign near Resaca, Georgia about the 16th of May 1864, the Brigade was passing by a number of infantry units on the road.²⁷⁷ As infantry had right of way on the road, Wilder's men attempted to pick their way through the brush, crowding the roadside; as infantry don't have any love of cavalry, they began jeering the mounted men in the dark, and the mounted men began to give it right back, until the 2nd Minnesota Battery (who had been rescued from capture by the Wilder Brigade at Chickamauga²⁷⁸) told their comrades to hush up as that was Wilder's Lightning Brigade of Mounted Infantry.²⁷⁹ Holding great respect for a mounted unit that had fought dismounted with infantry at Chickamauga, the division quieted down and the Wilder Brigade passed peaceably to their destination.²⁸⁰ This story splendidly illustrates the reputation and respect that Wilder's Brigade had acquired with their actions, a good indicator of the effect and value they had to the Union Army. But there is a better indicator of the skill and prestige of a unit, and that comes from how one's enemy views you.

IX. Perspectives on the Brigade: The Enemy

The esteem which an enemy holds their adversary can often be a good measure of the quality of the men they face. The first major interaction between members of Wilder's 17th Volunteer Infantry Regiment came several months before the Battle of Cheat Mountain. In August of 1861, Company E of the regiment was acting in support of Federal Outposts in West Virginia, and sent 10 men on a patrol.²⁸¹ While on that patrol they spotted an enemy officer and

²⁷⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 142.

²⁷⁸ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 206-207.

²⁷⁹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 142-143.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 143.

²⁸¹ Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 171-172.

Sgt. Weiler of the Company E fired on and felled him.²⁸² Upon examining the body they discovered General Robert E. Lee's battle plans on him, and quickly determined that the officer was Colonel John A. Washington, Lee's adjutant and nephew.²⁸³ Knowing the identity of the man they had felled was not only a relation of General Lee, but a descendant of George Washington himself, Col. Wilder sent word through the lines to return the body to General Lee and rode in the ambulance with Sgt. Weiler to Lee's Headquarters to return the heir of Washington's house to his uncle.²⁸⁴ Gen. Lee was extremely touched and sent word back to Wilder thanking him for the courtesy.²⁸⁵ Such acts of honor would fade towards the end of the conflict but Col. Wilder encountered one of the war's top commanders very early in the conflict, and earned his gratitude for his actions. Whether or not Lee would recall this incident in later years is unknown, but that Wilder would win praise and gratitude from the enemy's top General speaks much of the man's quality, as well of the men of the 17th who rode with the Col. to return the body of the man they had felled. While such encounters speak well of the men's character, later encounters speak far greater volumes about their combat skills.

The first account by the rebels of Wilder's Brigade came around June 13th, 1863, when the brigade, recently having acquired their Spencers, attacked and captured 20 men of the First Kentucky Cavalry, a unit that until that point was renowned for skill and known for its founding by President Lincoln's Brother-In-Law, Benjamin Hardin Helm.²⁸⁶ The next day they skirmished with a greater force of the First Kentucky as well as the 8th and 11th Texas and 2nd Regular Confederate Cavalry and drove them from the field, with only the addition of a regular Federal

²⁸² Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 171-172.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 172.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 172.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 172.

²⁸⁶ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 102.

Cavalry unit.²⁸⁷ After the second engagement, a captured Rebel Lieutenant offered the first historical analysis of the Wilder Brigade: “what kind of *hell-fired* guns have your men got?”²⁸⁸ It would appear that the most readily apparent advancement of Wilder’s Lightning Brigade was their use of the Spencer Repeating Rifle, whose early usage would seem to have the advantage of shock-value as few men had encountered such weapons, an effect they would enjoy through much of the war. While a good first outing for the Lightning Brigade, the first major engagement would come at the Battle of Hoover’s Gap, where Wilder’s Brigade would earn their official title, and many Confederate messages, official and personal, would be devoted to those ‘hell-fired’ rifles.

The 1st Kentucky Cavalry’s second encounter with Wilder’s Brigade on June 24th, 1863, went even more poorly than the first, and as author Steven E. Woodworth describes they were, “wondering what the war was coming to, with powerful infantry formations suddenly transforming themselves into powerful cavalry formations”.²⁸⁹ This second poor encounter with the Wilder Brigade for the 1st Kentucky started what would be Wilder’s finest hour, a rapid advance followed by holding a position against a numerically superior force for several hours. One of the rebel horseman during the engagement was quoted saying to his fellows, “Those Yankees have got rifles that won’t quit shootin’ and we can’t load fast enough to keep up.”²⁹⁰ The Rebel General William B. Bates, who faced off with the Wilder Brigade that day, later described the encounter: “a bloody engagement here ensued with great odds against us, and after futile but persistent and gallant effort to dislodge him, Colonel Rudler properly withdrew his command under cover of the bank...the enemy turned our already extended left flank giving and

²⁸⁷ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 102.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 102.

²⁸⁹ Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 22.

²⁹⁰ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 103.

enfilading fire to the Twentieth Tennessee.”²⁹¹ General Bates was also quoted later that he had believed the opposing force of “Yankees” (as rebels continued to mistakenly call Hoosiers throughout the war) outnumbered him 5-to-1.²⁹² This engagement was also allegedly the source of the quote attributed to a Rebel officer: “Yankees could load on Sunday and shoot all the rest of the week,” one that had been previously listed as, “load on Sunday and fired all week”, in another source and adorns an exhibit at the Civil War Museum underneath the War Memorial in downtown Indianapolis today.²⁹³ While rebel forces repeatedly mentioned the previously un-encountered and powerful Spencer’s firepower in most engagements, it should be noted that it was always attributed after an engagement and that Gen. Bates still continued to attack Wilder’s Brigade despite earlier failings against the new weapon.

The most interesting mention of Wilder’s Lightning Brigade came in, of all places, a Confederate publication about the Battle of Chickamauga (spelled Chicamauga in this source). The author describes Gen. Wilder, an unsurprising mistake as the Rebels always had an excess of Generals and sometimes assumed they encountered higher ranking officers because of it, as having driven off General John Pegram’s cavalry.²⁹⁴ General Pegram’s own recollection of the engagement was of an “unequal contest” mostly stemming from the firepower the Lightning Brigade could bring to bear, despite forcing the Brigade to withdraw, as the casualties were lopsided against the Rebels as Gen. Pegram described later he, “maintained for several hours with notable obstinacy and gallantry”.²⁹⁵ And also, “For a time the fight was almost hand to

²⁹¹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 41.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 43.

²⁹³ Funk, *Hoosiers in the Civil War*, 5, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 41. The quote recalled from the exhibit in Downtown Indianapolis says something to the effect, “those damned Yankees can load on Sunday and fire all week.”

²⁹⁴ Reid, *Great Battle of Chicamauga*, 4.

²⁹⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 174-175, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 188.

hand. My loss was about fifty killed and wounded, their's thirty killed or wounded. We fought for two hours Wilder's Lightning Brigade---the picked brigade of the corps".²⁹⁶ General Pegram's account is very closely aligned with other accounts of the battle from the federal perspective and gives an unveiled compliment and opinion of the Brigade: 'the picked brigade of the corps'. Such a view shows that Pegram believed Wilder and his Lightning Brigade to be one of the best in the enemy's service, no higher description could have been given. The next day that Confederate publication claims that, "At mid-day a squadron of our cavalry came dashing through our lines of skirmishers followed by the "Lightning Brigade" of Wilder. Our infantry and artillery immediately opened up with buck, ball, and canister and sent them to the right with many an empty saddle".²⁹⁷ While the dates and location are accurate when compared with other sources, the claim of, "many an empty saddle" strikes me as a propagandist untruth, as records bear out that casualties were low for the brigade in this time period leading up to the Battle of Chickamauga.²⁹⁸ It is during this major engagement that Wilder's Lightning Brigade had some of their most famous interactions with the Confederates of the war.

The Battle of Chickamauga is described as having begun September 19th and ended the evening of September 20th, but Wilder's Brigade was in contact with the enemy starting the morning of the 18th. The gallant defense by Wilder's Lightning Brigade and Minty's Cavalry of the Chickamauga creek crossings was described in a Rebel report after the battle: "The force in our front consisted of Wilder's Brigade, from whom we captured half a dozen or more breech-loading rifles. Our loss was 105 killed and wounded, and I can only account for this

²⁹⁶ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 174-175, and Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 188.

²⁹⁷ Reid, *Great Battle of Chickamauga*, 4.

²⁹⁸ Though what exactly "many" meant to the rebels is unknown.

disproportion from the efficiency of this new weapon”.²⁹⁹ Once again, the unique equipment of the Lightning Brigade was credited for great effect on the Rebel forces, whose tenacity delayed the enemy for some time. Gen. Bragg himself later said the “cavalry” slowed the attack and that, “Alexander’s Bridge was hotly contested”.³⁰⁰ If the commanding General feels compelled to comment on your actions during a battle, you have obviously had some effect on its outcome. During the battle’s first day (Sept. 19th) a shocked rebel officer demanded to know on his capture, “What kind of guns have you got over here? We thought you’d have to reload, but you jus’ kept shootin’ and shootin’”, further testament to the value of the Spencer against those unaccustomed to it.³⁰¹ During the final day of fighting, Gen. Arthur Manigault recorded later the fierceness of the battle against Wilder: “My three right regiments being thrown in much confusion, a large force of the enemy advancing through the field on my center...I ordered the Brigade to fall back about three hundred yards across the Chattanooga and LaFayette Road”.³⁰² From another General’s perspective, “Wilder’s Brigade in furious charge swept down on Manigault’s flank and rear and drove them in wild confusion, etc.”.³⁰³ In a separate incident earlier in the day’s engagement, John Rippetoe (a member of Eli Lilly’s Battery) wrote, “...it is reported that a rebel general when he found out that it was our brigade that he was facing ordered his men to retreat at the double-quick”.³⁰⁴ While not connected to the same units, together these two incidents

²⁹⁹ Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 189. Also quoted in sources: Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 210, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 114, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 74, and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 117. Most of the sources attribute this report to General John T. Lidell, though one accounts Gen. WHT Walker as the author, in either case it was official CSA report that described the Spencer as being the deciding factor in the engagement and the reason for the unanticipated casualties.

³⁰⁰ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 210.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, 228.

³⁰² Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 191. The excerpt is from the footnote 48 on that page and cited as being from, *Bragg Report*, 118.

³⁰³ Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 191. The excerpt is from the footnote 48 on that page and cited as being from, General Gordon’s *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 208.

³⁰⁴ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 118.

illustrate the reputation and, more importantly, the effect Wilder's men had on the field of battle: routing enemy Brigades and compelling others to withdraw to find more reinforcements to tangle with Wilder's men. In addition to this local disruption, General Longstreet himself later stated "the steady and continued racket of these gun led him to think an army corps had attacked his left flank," and the delay is alleged to have given Gen. Thomas, USA, time to make his stand and prevent a total rout.³⁰⁵ General Longstreet also stated later that, "It is my opinion that Bragg thought at 3pm that the battle was lost," referring to the delay caused by Wilder, giving weight to the argument not only that Wilder and his Brigade had an effect on the battle's outcome, but that they are the reason Gen. Thomas was able to make his stand and become known as the "Rock of Chickamauga".³⁰⁶ While the day had ended in a defeat for the Union Army, Col. Wilder and his Lightning Brigade, from the perspective of the Confederates anyway, appear to have prevented the defeat from turning into a rout. While the Lightning Brigade would continue to fight for the remainder of the war, this battle would certainly mark the peak of their fame and arguably be the point where they had the greatest effect on a battle's, and possibly even the war's, outcome. But that said, there were still nearly two years of conflict remaining during which the Brigade was not idle.

While they fought in a number of engagements and raids during the remainder of the war, three encounters in particular seemed to garner the notice of the Rebels they encountered: the Wheeler Raid (Sept. 30th-Oct. 8th, 1863), the Roswell Crossing (June 17th, 1864) and the Wilson Raid (Spring 1865). The Wheeler Raid occurred shortly after the Battle of Chickamauga and the withdrawal of the army to Chattanooga. The Lightning Brigade was sent as part of a Federal

³⁰⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 91; Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 393, and Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 118.

³⁰⁶ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 91.

force after General Wheeler and his cavalry who were attempting to raid the Federal rear after crossing the Tennessee River in order to disrupt supply and communications to force a further withdrawal of Union force from Chattanooga.³⁰⁷ Wilder and the Union Cavalry units assigned pursued and met them in battle on several occasions, ultimately driving them back across the river with losses and not having accomplished any objectives.³⁰⁸ Colonel George Hodge, CSA, accounts one of the engagements later as an attempt to halt the Lightning Brigade's rapid advance on the main force, "but the impetus of the Lightning Brigade's attack carried the entire division back in continued retreat...For five and one half hours over seven miles of country the unequal contest continued; my gallant brigade was cut to pieces and slaughtered".³⁰⁹ The next day the Rebel forces were routed in a pitched battle at Farmington and half of Wheeler's command failed to escape across the river, either killed or captured. This account was in line with many of the descriptions of engagements with the Lightning Brigade, who were known for rapid advance and heavy casualties inflicted upon the enemy. Without a doubt, the methods employed by the Lightning Brigade were effective and utterly devastating in some instances. These methods on occasion though even led to the Rebel forces being 'mesmerized' by what they saw. At Roswell, Ga on June 17th, 1864, the Brigade was ordered to effect a crossing of the Chattahoochee River to establish a bridgehead for a larger crossing.³¹⁰ While advancing under fire, the Brigade members would duck down into the armpit deep water to lever the next round before rising to fire again.³¹¹ The rebels defended the crossing were alleged to have said, "Look at them Yankee son of bitches, loading guns under water! What sort of critters be they, any how?"

³⁰⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 96-112.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 96-112.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 107.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, 162-163.

³¹¹ *Ibid*, 162-163.

It's no use trying to fight agin' fellas that'll dive down to the bottom of the rivah and get that powder and ball!"³¹² The troops were so "bedazzled", too shocked to even fire back that the advance guard quickly crossed, sending the guards fleeing and allowing the remainder of the Brigade to wade across unopposed.³¹³ The final observations on the Brigade came in April of 1865, the final days of the Confederacy, as the Lightning Brigade fought under General Wilson in the famed Wilson Raid to Selma. The Battle of Ebenezer's Church, April 1st, 1865, saw members of the Lightning Brigade, namely the 17th Indiana, nearly alter the course of history. Charging without orders a line of General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest's cavalry, Lt. Col. White realizes his error nearly too late and ordered a turn that saved the four companies from annihilation.³¹⁴ This included all except 16 men under Captain James D. Taylor who continued forward and attacked the General himself!³¹⁵ Despite wounding him severely, Gen. Forrest broke away and shot dead the Captain after a pitched skirmish that resulted in all 16 being killed, wounded or captured.³¹⁶ Days later, the still visibly wounded Gen. Forrest told a Union officer during a parlay, "If that boy had known enough to give me the point of his saber instead of its edge, I should not have been here to tell you about it".³¹⁷ Thus, Gen. Forrest narrowly avoided being added to this list of Generals killed towards the end of the war. While much was said of the Lightning Brigade by the enemy during the war, most of it stands as testament to their abilities and the effectiveness of the new Spencer Repeating Rifles. However, there was one group of people in a position to better observe the actions and effectiveness of the Lightning Brigade, and that's the men themselves. The members of the various regiments and batteries attached to the

³¹² Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 163.

³¹³ McQueen, *Spencer*, 47.

³¹⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 199-200.

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, 199-200.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, 200.

³¹⁷ *Ibid*, 200.

brigade were prolific writers before, during and after the war, leading to several published diaries and unit histories. These accounts lead to many more interesting observations about the Lightning Brigade.

X. Perspectives on the Brigade: The Men Themselves

“We are to fight as Infantry, but are to do all our marching on horseback. On some accounts I like it, and on some others I dislike it,” and so began the Wilder’s Brigades experiments with mounting and repeating rifles, experiments that would prove effective.³¹⁸ The men’s own observations on these actions are often more telling about the perceived effect the men were having. The first action that garnered note in a number of letters and diaries was the decision to mount the men, a decision that one recollection attempts to describe: “attempt to form a mule brigade to chase Morgan was the conception of the idea which resulted in Col. Wilder having the Brigade mounted some months afterward”.³¹⁹ Letters and diaries from this period all show how the men were pleased they are not to be marching everywhere on foot and approved of their new mounts, showing their support of the mounted concept.³²⁰ The final equipping act for the Lightning Brigade was a better rifle: “The 17th Ind. our most enterprising Regt. had intended buying themselves the Henry 16 shot rifle and paying for them out of our wages...Gen. [Colonel] Wilder admiring the Zeal manifested by the Regiment, to make themselves the most effective command in the service has Just Closed a contract with Mr. Spencer the inventor of the celebrated ‘Spencer 7 shooting rifle’ to furnish our entire Brigade with them at the expense of each man”.³²¹ Otho McManus describes this rifle in May of 1863: “every man has a fine Spencer Rifle which can be loaded with eight balls at once and all fired in less time than required to load

³¹⁸ Griest, Collection 1862-1865, 62.

³¹⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 36, from Sgt. Magee’s war writings.

³²⁰ *Ibid*, 40-44.

³²¹ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 65, excerpt from Henry Campbell Diary, March 23rd 1863.

a common squirrel gun”.³²² McManus goes so far in his description of the Spencer to his wife, heavily confident in its abilities, to claim that, “I’ll bet all my land in Minnesota that forty of us can take iron Spencers (seven shooters) and whip 300 of them in open field or in woods,” while discussing Butternuts back home in Illinois.³²³ While McManus slips between saying it’s a seven shooter and that they can fire eight shots, it might have to do with the fact that they had discovered you could have seven rounds in the tube, but one more in the chamber, a designator that they would refer to in modern rifles (or shotguns) as “7+1”. In either case, many of the letters and diaries during the buildup describe a desire to, “try the Spencer’s on the rebs”.³²⁴ Major James A. Connelly, of the 123rd IL, described his regiment and his commander, Col. James Monroe,

“Now the regiment has become a machine, and now comes the hour of trial for its commander---he must ascertain where the enemy is the best way he can---he must see and think for the whole regiment. Must direct every movement, and watch every movement of the enemy---he is responsible for the safety and honor of the regiment, and if it makes a mistake disgrace stares him in the face. He must be cool when all others are excited. Must stand when all others are disposed to run”.³²⁵

It would seem that at this point the more junior officers recognized that all actions for good or for ill rested on their commanders, as they seemed already to believe that the methods of mounting and the new Spencer were more than adequate. Despite successful raiding and a small skirmish, the Brigade’s first real test came at Hoover’s Gap, an engagement that nearly all men of the Brigade mentioned in their writings.

³²² McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 65, 77.

³²³ *Ibid*, 76.

³²⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 85.

³²⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 34.

In the summer of 1863, John M. King wrote of the now-famous Lightning Brigade: “...winning laurels wherever they went...”, “could not be driven from a front charge”, and “No rebel could stand the racket of those repeating rifles when once brought upon them”.³²⁶ We might be able to discount this boasting from a Brigade member, but at this point the 92nd Illinois, of which King was a part, was not yet a member of the Brigade. Efforts were being made to have them join in but, as King puts it, “No one hardly dare hope for success, but were willing to await the results of the effort”.³²⁷ This high opinion of Wilder’s Brigade and their desire to join stemmed from the first major action by Wilder’s boys: the Battle of Hoover’s Gap. The regimental history of the 123rd Illinois describes the battle’s opening: “The farther they went the larger the rebel force of cavalry kept growing before them, but the rapid pace gave the enemy no time to form, until about 9 o’clock in the morning, by which time these two regiments had advanced to and seized Hoover’s Gap, a place of great natural strength...”.³²⁸ The rapid advance came as a result of the units’ mounting and allowed them to deploy to face the inevitable counter-attack. An account by Captain John S. Wilson describes a scene from the battle:

“‘Steady.’ The word came from lip to lip along the line, while the yell of the enemy grew nearer and nearer, and the men awaited breathlessly the quickly following order, ‘Fire!’ A sheet of flame shot from the kneeling line. The assaulting column hardly wavered. Wilder’s men threw forward the butts of their breech-loaders in the peculiar position for charging that weapon. The enemy, now rapidly advancing, within a short distance, saw the movement, and, ignorant of the purpose, mistook it for a sign of surrender, and shouted in triumph. Back to the shoulder came the many-charged rifles, and a second

³²⁶ Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 97.

³²⁷ *Ibid*, 97.

³²⁸ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 81-82.

volley flashed in faces of the astounded enemy. Again! Again! The column wavered, but still passed on".³²⁹

This account best describes the shock value the new technology had against an enemy that was not used to it, and predisposed to headlong charges at enemy lines. Alva C. Griest also describes a scene from the battle, highlighting the Rebels' futile tenacity:

"They seemed determined to capture this battery and in spite of shot, grape and shell kept on advancing with their demonic yells, until within 200 yards, when we opened a murderous fire upon them with our 7 shooters, which effectually checked them and they fell back in the woods and their batteries began throwing shell at us and many a poor fellow was sent to his long account".³³⁰

The great effect they had on the enemy was lost on few. Col. Wilder himself said of the battle:

"The effect of our terrible fire was overwhelming to our opponents, who bravely tried to withstand its effects. No human being could successfully face such an avalanche of destruction as our continuous fire swept through their lines. This was the first battle where the Spencer repeating rifles have ever been used, and in my estimation they were...strong and not easily injured by the rough usage of army movements".³³¹

Capt. Eli Lilly of the 18th Indiana Battery did not dispute this account, describing how the enemy, "fell to the ground to escape the tornado of death," and that, "Their loss must have been considerable at this point from the number they were seen to drag off by the arms".³³² It was readily apparent to all men present that not only had the Spencer been effective, but that it had

³²⁹ McQueen, *Spencer*, 46.

³³⁰ Griest, Collection 1862-1865, 62.

³³¹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 88.

³³² Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 81.

been key to their victory. But this was but the first of many examples of the wonderful advancements that the Brigade was a part of.

Though the next major battle that the Brigade was a part of was the Battle of Chickamauga, the period between Hoover's Gap and that was not idle time for the Brigade. In addition to several raids and skirmishes, the Brigade found themselves engaged on Sept. 12th in what became known as the Battle of Rock Springs, between Chattanooga and the Chickamauga Creek. The Brigade, engaged piecemeal in several locations was nearly cut off before effecting their escape; a Corporal Records stated later that, "Had it not been for our men being armed with the Spencer Rifle, there is no doubt but that the entire battalion would have been gobbled up".³³³ This account is actually in line with the men's descriptions that Wilder had a knack for getting them out of tough spots, as John Rippetoe describes: "...Col. Wilder was a little too sharp for them..."³³⁴ The rebels would continue to get their fill of Wilder and his Brigade's Spencers for a considerable time later. On Sept. 18th, the day before the official start of the battle, Wilder and the Brigade had a desperate stand to hold a bridge and protect crossings over the Chickamauga against what turned out to be the entire Rebel army. Sgt. James H. Barnes, Co. A, 72nd Indiana, gave an account of the action from his section of the line:

"The company held its fire until the advancing enemy were so close that we could see their eyes bat, then opened upon them with our Spencers, which belched such a constant and awful stream of well-aimed balls that the rebels were completely surprised, faltered, wavered, and then retreated. They soon reformed, deployed on the flanks, and came at A's position again, determined to flank and surround it. [We] punished the

³³³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 175.

³³⁴ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 108-109.

enemy so severely in front that they gave way the second time, but on the flanks he still continued to advance".³³⁵

This action was later credited, on both sides, with allowing the Federals to contest the efforts of Gen. Bragg and avoid a complete rout before the battle even began. The unit history for the 17th Indiana also claims that, "The fire from the Spencer Rifle of Wilder's men was so terrible that, notwithstanding the enemy made frequent rushes to cross the bridge as they were often repulsed".³³⁶ Falling back in the face of encirclement, Wilder called for aid and received only vitriol and a dismissive attitude from Gen. Crittenden. As soon as the brigade Crittenden sent in was repulsed and sent fleeing, Wilder turned to Col. Minty and remarked, "Well Colonel Minty, the General has got his report".³³⁷ While Wilder quipped on the General's requested "report", his men called after their Corps commander, "What do you think now? Do you think we were scared of cavalry now? We told you so," giving yet another instance of a general ignoring the word of the Lightning Brigade at their own peril.³³⁸ The battle was not even officially joined and the Brigade was making a mark, but two days hard fight were still ahead.

In a letter home to his wife Sallie, Otho McManus wrote home on Sept 24th, 1863, wrote of the battle, "by nine o'clock was opened one of the hottest battles ever known".³³⁹ While accurate, it would prove to have been a near understatement about the carnage and scope of the battle. Col. Wilder himself gave an account later of the battle's first day at Vinard Field:

"As the rebels entered the field, in heavy masses fully exposed, the mounted infantry, with their seven-shooting Spencer rifles, kept up a continuous blast of fire upon them, while Lilly with his Indiana Battery, hurled through them double shotted canister

³³⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 206.

³³⁶ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, "In West Vinard Field", 1.

³³⁷ Jordan, "Battle of Chickamauga", 12.

³³⁸ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 215.

³³⁹ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 114.

from his ten-pounder rifles at less than three hundred yards. The effect was awful. Every shot seemed to tell. The head of the column, as it pushed on by those behind, appeared to melt away or sink into the earth, for though continually moving it got no nearer. It broke at last, and fell back in great disorder. It was rallied and came on again, and with desperate resolution pushed through the solid fire to the ditch. Here, all who could get it took shelter. Instantly Lilly whirled two of his guns and poured right down the length of the ditch his horrible double canister. Hardly a man got out alive.

When the firing ceased, one could have walked for two hundred yards down that ditch on dead rebels, without ever touching the ground”.³⁴⁰

From this scene comes the most famous quote from the Brigade on the battle: “At this point it actually seemed a pity to kill men so. They fell in heaps, and I had it in my head to order the firing to cease to end the awful sight”.³⁴¹ While things wavered elsewhere on the line, Wilder and his Lightning Brigade were inflicting great carnage upon the enemy. Their new weapons and direct action with Lilly’s 18th Indiana Battery worked to great effect, described by author Steven Woodworth as a “gigantic sawed-off shotgun”.³⁴² This scene on the Vinard Field is also a good early example of combined combat arms, infantry and artillery working in conjunction to great effect.³⁴³ After the action, Major Connolly of the 123rd IL wrote home to his wife, “We think our Spencers saved us, and our men adore them as the heathen do their idols,” a rather pointed and

³⁴⁰ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 237, and McQueen, *Spencer*, 46-47.

³⁴¹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 239, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 81. This quote is attributed to Col. Wilder in Baumgartner and Capt. Eli Lilly in Sunderland; Sunderland cites another secondary source but Baumgartner quotes from an issue of the Indianapolis Daily Journal (Sept. 28th, 1863). So while the Daily Journal would be a better indicator of who actually said the line, it should be pointed out that papers on occasion name the wrong people in stories. The only thing that is different between the two quotes is the Lilly line replaces head with heart, and both refer to the same instance of carnage on the field.

³⁴² Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 96.

³⁴³ I would also point out that this kind of close in support and cooperation was unique as often a battery in support didn’t necessarily consult with Brigade commanders on such a local level nor act in concert with direct infantry support.

rousing endorsement of the effect and powerful nature of their new repeaters.³⁴⁴ While the day's action of September 19th had proved inconclusive for the armies as whole, the Lightning Brigade had met with rousing success as the brutal carnage of a corpse and gore filled ditch would attest. While the second day (Sept. 20th) would not go as well for the Union Army, the Lightning Brigade continued to meet with their own successes.

September 20th is remembered as the day that the Union Army was nearly routed and Gen. Thomas made his now famous "Rock of Chickamauga" stand in the North as the right wing collapsed. What is forgotten is that the extreme right flank, Wilder's Lightning Brigade, held and helped to create the conditions that allowed Thomas to make his stand. Otho McManus describes one of their successful charges as Gen. Sheridan's Corps fell apart and his own brother's regiment was routed: "This would not do---so with a yell, the Brigade dashed into the woods at a double-quick and opened on them with the Spencers at such a rate that they instantly broke and such rebel skedaddling I never saw before; and I have seen several stampedes of rebs".³⁴⁵ The unit history of the 17th by WHH Benefiel later recounts that at one point while the rest of the wing was retreating, they were "charging the enemy and completely driving back their left down Lee and Gordon's Mill road. Taking two guns from the enemy, still loaded with canister, which were emptied into their fleeing ranks".³⁴⁶ Following the infamous encounter with Asst. Sec. of War Dana, the Brigade withdrew, and while many wrote of the incident then and later, an unknown soldier of the 72nd Indiana wrote of the battle of the 20th, "...broke the right Wing and cut our brigade and Jeneral (General) Stanlies (Stanley's?) force of cavalry off from the rest of our force but by good Jeneraling (Generaling) on the parts of our commanders We got back safe

³⁴⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 244.

³⁴⁵ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 115.

³⁴⁶ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, "In West Vinard Field", 1. Also cited in Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 88, which he cites from the Benefiel unit history.

and saved two wagon trains...”.³⁴⁷ Despite the disaster the battle had been, the Lighting Brigade was still confident in their contribution and as Pvt. Alva Griest lamented later, “How I wish our infantry could have been armed with Spencer Rifles today and all the forces of Rebels in dixie could not have forced their way through our lines. We could repulse them easily every time, but our infantry was overpowered by numbers”.³⁴⁸ Col. Atkins of the 92nd IL, one of the regimental Commanders at the time, said of Wilder: “He used his horses to transport his troops rapidly to the point of engagement, and fought his men in line of foot. That had never been done before, and in order to do it he invented his own tactics, and drilled his troops by the same commands on foot and on horseback, and every army of every civilized country in the world has adopted the tactics that Wilder invented. This is high praise, but Wilder deserves it”.³⁴⁹ While he exaggerates and is incorrect about world adoption of such tactics (which will be analyzed later), he was correct as to the methods Wilder used for his Brigade. While the rest of the Army, exhausted and beaten, crawled towards Chattanooga, Wilder’s Brigade defended the retreat, then proceeded across the river to take up position to guard the crossings north of town, heading straight into their next conflict: the Wheeler Raid.

When Wheeler crossed the river and began his attempt to cut Chattanooga off from Nashville, Wilder’s men saw to it that it would not come to pass. Chasing them for nearly a week, they finally caught up to them around Farmington, TN, where the Battle of Farmington commenced and proved decisive in the raid. After a skirmish the day before, the Brigade met the attack of the much larger force of rebels. Otho McManus recalled: “...after taking fire from a fence 100yds ahead, We then let into them with our Spencers and soon they gave way---we went

³⁴⁷ Unknown Author. Civil War Diary, Sept 20th, 1863.

³⁴⁸ Griest, Collection 1862-1865, 102. Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 304, also has the quote, only adding at the end “I believe we have fought 100,000 Rebels today for I never saw the like.” Cites the journal as the source.

³⁴⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 317 (inset).

after with yell. Of course we whipped them. I have not learned our loss yet but it will be about 32=27 wounded and five killed---among the latter our dear Col. J. Monroe".³⁵⁰ McManus conveys the confidence and high morale the Brigade still had following the morale-sapping Battle of Chickamauga, and that their Commander Col. Monroe was a firm believer in and demonstrated by leading from the front. Col. Miller, commander of the 17th IN and acting commander of the Lightning Brigade following one of Wilder's frequent bouts of illness, sent a letter during the engagement following and order from his commanding General, Gen. George Crook, to not engage the enemy: "General---at the time of receiving your order, to prevent an engagement was impossible; the enemy would have attacked me had I not him. I have whipped him and stampeded all his troops; have taken all four cannon and 300 prisoners, but not without loss to my command. Col. Monroe of the 123rd Illinois, with two other officers, are among the killed. Send forward medical aid as soon as possible".³⁵¹ Matter-of-fact and to-the-point, this report again displayed the brigade's professionalism, and more importantly their skill, in the face of superior numbers. This was probably one of the reasons Gen. Thomas credited them almost singlehandedly with preventing the raid from having its desired effect.³⁵² In November 1863, with Wilder again down for sick leave, the Brigade was split up into separate units: the 18th IN Battery and 92nd IL departed and never returned, and the 17th IN and 98th IL served together for a spell as did the 72nd IN and 123rd IL before they were reunited under Wilder in April 1864 for Sherman's Atlanta campaign.³⁵³ But even though they were all still active during the period, of this "Split", they found more often than not other units simply didn't conduct themselves in an even remotely similar manner in combat.

³⁵⁰ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 129-130.

³⁵¹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 110.

³⁵² *Ibid*, 112.

³⁵³ *Ibid*, 120.

Col. Wilder, shortly after returning from sick leave, wrote on Jan 7th, 1864,

“I could enumerate a least thirty fights in which the ‘Spencer Rifle’ has triumphed over other arms in such apparently overwhelming numbers so as to almost appear incredible. They should be made with a ring on the side of the breech-piece so as to be carried as a carbine. The ammunition being water-proof, is not worn out or destroyed like other kinds. I believe that if the Government would arm ten thousand mounted infantry with these guns, and put them under a good enterprising officer, they could destroy all principle railroad lines in the South, and do more damage to the rebellion in three months than fifty thousand troops ordinarily armed could do in a year. I wish I could see those having authority in this matter, that I might impress upon them the great importance of using these arms”.³⁵⁴

Whether or not Wilder thought he was one such “enterprising officer” is irrelevant.

What’s important is that he could not fathom that after all he and his Brigade had accomplished that the Spencer rifle was not ubiquitous for Union mounted forces. But Wilder was not the only person astounded by actions of the government and military establishment. Instead, his men were also finding reason to be shocked and disappointed. The 17th IN and the 98th IL on the morning of December 27th, 1863 were forced to cover their current command’s retreat following a surprise attack by rebel cavalry.³⁵⁵ The sticking point for the former Lightning Brigade members was that it all could have been avoided; their Brigade commander and staff had ignored reports from pickets of the 17th that the enemy was nearby.³⁵⁶ The 17th IN’s men still remembered this shameful display after the war enough to remark on it in their unit’s history:

³⁵⁴ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 145.

³⁵⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 125.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 125.

“The consequence was a disgraceful stampede took place, and I will here say that any of Wilder’s men was ever a party to; this all on account of the lack of diligence on the part of the officers in camp, as they had ample warning hours before the approach of the enemy... Well we got out of that scrape by the skin of our teeth, but we have always since believed that...we could have cleaned out that rebel force, consisting only, as we learned, of small brigade under command of General Kelly”.³⁵⁷

The men of the 17th IN and the 98th IL were accustomed to better officering and more steadfast companions, and their level of unit cohesion shines through from these frustrations. They were very tight-knit, arguably on par with specialty and special operations units today, certainly with modern infantry units, and unenthused about fighting with sub-par regiments. And they weren’t the only former brigade regiments running into this problem. The 72nd IN and 123rd IL, while on an expedition under General Sooy Smith in January of 1864, had a similar experience. In a letter to the Commander of the 72nd IN, “...You were run over by four regiments of your brigade in the morning, in a perfect stampede; yet, nothing abashed, you waited to fight rather than follow those who were retreating”.³⁵⁸ Once again the Lightning Brigade’s old regiments stood their ground rather than scamper off into the trees. Luckily, all four regiments would soon be reunited under Wilder in time for the Atlanta campaign on April 8th, 1864.³⁵⁹ Early in the campaign, prior to any major combat by the Brigade or Northern army as a whole, word reached them of the Fort Pillow massacre. Otho McManus wrote home to his wife about the unit’s feelings on it: “Ever since the massacre at Fort Pillow our boys are anxious to get a chance at For[r]est[’]s Bloodhounds and if we ever do meet, they may expect the mercy they

³⁵⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 125

³⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 136

³⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 137.

gave our boys at Ft. Pillow, doubled and twisted".³⁶⁰ This incident may explain actions by the brigade a year later, when confronting Forrest and his men in Alabama. Rather than making calculated and cautious decisions against the butchers of Fort Pillow, they charged headlong at them. But there was still plenty of combat until the "last western battle of any consequence" outside of Selma, AL.³⁶¹

The Wilder Brigade continued to be in the thick of things wherever they happened to be assigned as part of Sherman's push on Atlanta. On Jun 8th, 1864, around Big Shanty, GA, in an attack commanded by Col. Miller (acting Brigade Commander),

"driving the enemy's skirmishers back through a skirt of timber to his main line, which was formed in open ground, and was protected by a heavy barricade of logs and rails... [I] ordered the whole line forward and carried the enemy's line of works, he falling back to another similar line 400 yards in rear of the first. Following him up, under galling fire, I succeeded in driving him from this line also, from which he fell back to a third line of works, on the opposite side of the railroad...Again the enemy was driven from his works and retired slowly to his fourth line, 200 yds. in rear of the third. Here he made a still more determined stand than at either of his former positions, but I at once ordered a charge, and the line responding promptly, carried the works, while the enemy fled precipitately, leaving his dead and wounded in my hands..."³⁶²

This was yet another example of their rapid maneuvers and effective assaults. Several days later when their oft-sister brigade of Minty's cavalry was imperiled, the Lightning Brigade was ordered up. Otho McManus remembers:

³⁶⁰ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 176.

³⁶¹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 201.

³⁶² McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 186.

“Minty’s cavalry became engaged with a large force of the enemy and were getting the worst of it when our Brigade was ordered out on foot to help him out of the scrape, and we were not a minute too soon, for we engaged the rebels and held them in check till Col. Minty got his horses back over the creek, which he did, while we fought the rebs. We got back to camp safe an hour after dark...”³⁶³

And so continued the Brigade’s excellent effect against cavalry as they prevented disaster wherever they were present. Later during the campaign, the men learned, “From what prisoners tell us they would rather capture us and our Spencers then five times our number from any other command”.³⁶⁴ While Otho McManus did not indicate any fears because of it, I would suggest it to be the ultimate compliment: the Lightning Brigade had such devastating effect on the Southern Army that they would do anything to remove it, though it would also seem they were never up to the task. As the campaign ended and Sherman prepped for his now famous March to the Sea, the Wilder Brigade, having lost their namesake commander for the final time to a medical discharge, moved north to Louisville, KY to remount and reequip before proceeding east with General Wilson for his raid into Alabama from Gravelly Springs.³⁶⁵ This raid would culminate in the Battle of Selma and mark one of the last serious engagements of the war.

The Battle of Selma would mark one of the bloodier engagements the Lightning Brigade participated in. The raid had been fairly one-sided until the Battle of Ebenezer’s Church, where a fantastic yet foolish charge by members of the 17th nearly ended General Forrest’s journey as Otho McManus had promised earlier in the war.³⁶⁶ The Battle of Selma itself was a victory for

³⁶³ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 193.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 207.

³⁶⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 188, 193.

³⁶⁶ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 199-201. The ill-fated charge of the 17th IN’s green sabre battalion.

the Brigade and the rest of the Corps but it was a pitched encounter. Captain Wiley, of the 123rd IL, stated on the battle:

“...at General Long’s, ‘Forward’, the entire line started up with a bound, yelling, shooting and all pushing forward under terrific cannonade and through a perfect storm of bullets, losing officer and men at every step, until we cleared the high picket fence, crossed the ditch, and scaled the high earthworks... When we struck and scaled the works the Rebels, who had fought us so desperately as to club their guns on some of our men...”³⁶⁷

Capt. Wiley was quoted elsewhere as stating, “...planted the regimental standard first of any command on the works of Selma”.³⁶⁸ Alva Griest wrote of the difficulty of the assault: “But invincible courage and Spencer Rifles will accomplish anything; and a portion of their line was discovered to waver and our boys were quick to take advantage of it and rushed forward with irresistible force”.³⁶⁹ George Sandoe, cousin of Otho McManus (who was killed in the assault), wrote that during the follow-on assault when they drove the Rebels back through Selma:

“Many of the rebels in their flight, in attempting to cross the river and a deep stream east of the city, were drowned. They imagined we would show them no quarters, as Forrest has long threatened the 2nd Division a terrible chastisement. Poor fellows! They paid dearly for their threats of showing no quarters. They, expecting none from us, lost their lives in a vain attempt to escape across the river”.³⁷⁰

George Sandoe made the observation that others have made many times: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The men under Forrest’s command had shown no quarter at Fort Pillow and they drowned trying to flee the same fate. Col. Miller spoke later on the battle:

³⁶⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 207.

³⁶⁸ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 250. Will note that both quotes by Capt. Wiley overlap.

³⁶⁹ Griest, *Collection 1862-1865*, 214.

³⁷⁰ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 255.

“...and the history of the war will not show another instance where such formidable works, well manned and defended with men and artillery, have been stormed and captured by a single line of men without support”.³⁷¹ Miller pointed out one of the keys features of the battle: while yes, the men were assaulting a well-entrenched position, with artillery sites and strong works, they had assaulted it without any possibility of support, as all other units were engaged in the assault or in the vicinity but out of range of the battle in the event of trouble. The Brigade’s tenacity won the day and led to one final major victory. While the war was not officially over, the end was near and the large scale engagements were over for the Brigade. The 17th IN’s unit history comments later on the “brotherly love” they felt for the 72nd IN, as well as the 98th and 123rd IL regiments as they departed for home, a bond they would share for many years after.³⁷² As author Glenn Sunderland well states: “They were proud of their service and had a right to be...there wasn’t a man in the army, Confederate or Union, who hadn’t heard of the exploits of Wilder’s Brigade”.³⁷³ But had the Brigade left it all on the field of battle? And what would their reputation actually be, along with their actual effect on warfare?

XI. The Chickamauga Decision

Following the war, General John T. Wilder (retired) had much success and good relations with many former army members, Federal and Rebel alike. These good relations helped him in running down details on his one regret from the war: the withdrawal on the second day of Chickamauga, or “The Chickamauga Decision” as I will call it. Many sources recount that Wilder had observed the deteriorating situation on the Federal’s right wing and had tried to rally support. Finding it not forthcoming, he had organized his command and sought to attack *through*

³⁷¹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 208.

³⁷² Benefiel, *Souvenir*, “Parting of Brother in Arms”, 1

³⁷³ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 214.

Gen. Longstreet's left flank to link up with Gen. Thomas and possibly roll back the rebels.³⁷⁴

However, Wilder never made the maneuver, instead pulling out, exiting the battlefield in good order, protecting Thomas' flank in the process until he could withdraw from Snodgrass Hill.³⁷⁵

Why had he opted against his plan? Wilder himself said after the war:

“I had decided to cut our way through Bragg's Army on Sunday to join Thomas on Snodgrass Hill, and was only prevented from attempting it by peremptory orders from Charles A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, who, having lost his way to Chattanooga, had just come up as I was forming the Brigade in five lines, columns of regiments to make the charge which I firmly believe would have resulted successfully. I would have struck them in flank and rear five lines of Spencer Rifles in the hands of the steadiest body of men I ever saw”.³⁷⁶

What actually happened is the source of some debate and contention.

None of the sources contest the fact that Wilder hesitated to leave the field despite being cut off. One describes it as he was trying to reform when he was ordered off the field by General Sheridan and then Asst. Sec. War Dana.³⁷⁷ Another describes a “bold” plan that Sec. Dana “wrecked” and forced the Brigade to leave the field, albeit unbeaten.³⁷⁸ Other sources give a far more elaborate plan and explanation of the Sec. Dana encounter. Wilder's plan was quite “bold”; never considering to simply leave the field, Wilder devised a formation with his five regiments

³⁷⁴ Atkins, “Chickamauga: Useless, Disastrous Battle”, 11, Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 294-300, Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 394-396, Charles Anderson Dana, *Recollections of the civil war; with the leaders at Washington and in the field in the sixties* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 115-119, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 121-123, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 88-90, Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 123-125, Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 315-319, Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 191-192, and Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 118-119.

³⁷⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 299, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 90, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 192.

³⁷⁶ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 90.

³⁷⁷ Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 191.

³⁷⁸ Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 119.

(17th IN, 72nd IN, 98th IL, 123rd IL, and 92nd IL) and Lilly's 18th IN Battery that resembled a hollow box (two regiments in the front, one on each side, and one to the rear) with the Battery in the middle.³⁷⁹ Wilder was alleged to have said to Col. Atkins of the 92nd IL that he planned on, "charging with his brigade through the center of the Confederate Column, taking regiments in flank and pushing for Thomas on the left," to which Col. Atkins claimed: "I replied to him that it was a desperate and bold movement, but that Wilder's brigade of Spencer rifles could do it."³⁸⁰ Author Richard Baumgartner notes the after-action reports do not support this claim³⁸¹, but letters and accounts later do support that there was such a plan. John M. King noted in his Diary that Wilder had a bold plan of "putting through the rebel lines and fighting his way straight down to Thomas," and that they were forming to do so.³⁸² Col. Atkins would later claim the same plan was in motion.³⁸³ While the attempted maneuver did not make later reports that is not reason to discount the story as false; if anything, it helps, because you don't report on what you wanted to do, you report on what you did. It would be logical to assume Wilder simply reported on what occurred and made no effort to throw more blame "down the pipe" for what might have been. But if Wilder had been forming his men for an attack, why had it not been carried out? As Wilder himself stated after the fact, he withdrew on the orders of Asst. Sec. War Dana. This is confirmed by nearly every source, but presents a significant problem in military discipline.³⁸⁴ Anyone who has served in the US military knows that civilians, no matter their

³⁷⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 295, Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 394, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 89-90.

³⁸⁰ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 395.

³⁸¹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 295.

³⁸² Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 123.

³⁸³ Atkins, "Chickamauga: Useless, Disastrous Battle", 11.

³⁸⁴ Atkins, "Chickamauga: Useless, Disastrous Battle", 11, Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 294-300, Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 394-396, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 121-123, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 88-90, Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 123-125, Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 315-319, Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 191-192, and Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 118-119.

station, do not give orders to military officers; the President (Commander-in-Chief) commands the generals who give the orders. This is true now and was true long before the Civil War, and the rules still applied then. Sec. Dana's own recollection bears out that he had no authority to give orders, which would run counter to the claims of Wilder and Atkins after the war.³⁸⁵ Sec. Dana's memoir is, however, the only source that does not claim Dana gave orders, and presents himself as calm in the face of fire. All other sources convey a very excited and agitated man riding up without a hat, and King recollected very specifically that Dana, when consulted on the attack, "gave positive orders not to do so".³⁸⁶ While Atkins and Wilder had claimed publically after the war that Dana had issued orders, the recollection of one of the soldiers to this very fact proves their claims are not unfounded. I will however note that Sec. Dana's account lies about only on whether he issued orders; the rest of his account lacked truth by being very vague and omitted many details, like his claims of a rout, Rosecrans's death, and the need for an escort which was given by the Brigade.³⁸⁷ It is worth mentioning that this would have been only the second time in history that a civilian gave orders to a military officer in a combat situation, the first having been James Monroe at the Battle of Bladensburg during the War of 1812.³⁸⁸ That fact alone makes this occurrence momentous in its near lack of precedence. Some may try to argue that Col. Wilder should then have known that the orders he was being given were illegal and should have been ignored, but author Glenn Tucker points out that it would have been unnerving for a Colonel to countermand a government official, and that if he had had a star or two on his shoulder he would have been more certain in countermanding the Secretary who had

³⁸⁵ Dana, *Recollections of the civil war*; 116-117.

³⁸⁶ Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 123.

³⁸⁷ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 122, and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 316-317.

³⁸⁸ Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 318-319. It should be pointed out that James Monroe had military experience and was in a situation where the man present to command the battle had demonstrated he was not up to the task, whereas Dana had the background of newspaperman and politician.

overstepped his brief.³⁸⁹ It should also be pointed out that the battle had turned into a near rout and Wilder certainly didn't want to be on the radar of the Sec. Stanton's spy,³⁹⁰ who had the inside connection to Washington and a reputation as an "imbecile", as Col. Atkins put it.³⁹¹ It would have seemed prudent to a field officer to avoid having himself remembered negatively by the War Secretary's man, so Wilder naturally felt compelled to obey. Wilder assigned scouts to escort the Asst. Sec. to safety, and whether "angrily" or "sullenly", began his withdrawal from the field.³⁹² Whether dawdling or being outright defiant, Wilder and his Brigade did slow the pullout to collect abandoned and captured guns, as well as ambulances, wagon trains, and stragglers so that they safely cleared the pass to make their way to Chattanooga.³⁹³ Orders from a legitimate source finally arrived from Gen. Thomas, who learned of Wilder's still organized body and asked him to hold position to protect the flank, basically what Wilder had opted to do of his own volition.³⁹⁴ At the time, the questions of 'what if?' were not relevant. The battle was over and the army was at risk or on the run depending on your perspective, but once the war ended and the generals were left with nothing then to command from their parlors did the speculation and analysis begin.

John T. Wilder swore to his dying day that his plan would have succeeded if he had been allowed to attempt it.³⁹⁵ While many an officer will make claims about their career, Wilder uniquely set out to prove it. While Wilder had been told by Gen. Thomas that his actions had been instrumental in allowing him to make his stand and saved the army from annihilation,

³⁸⁹ Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 317.

³⁹⁰ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 298.

³⁹¹ *Ibid*, 298.

³⁹² Atkins, "Chickamauga: Useless, Disastrous Battle", 11, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 90.

³⁹³ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 396, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 122, and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 317-318.

³⁹⁴ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 122-123, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 90 and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 318-319.

³⁹⁵ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 396.

Wilder was still concerned with his audacious plan.³⁹⁶ Author Glenn Tucker advances the idea that Wilder could have made his assault with six regiments (the 39th IN was in the area and in good order, and similarly equipped) and attacked straight into Longstreet's rear.³⁹⁷ While the ultimate outcome may not have changed, this would have been a radical change for the results of the battle, even against all odds if it had been successful. Imagine, if you will, Longstreet routs one Federal wing only to have his flank smashed and turned by the Lightning Brigade and its Spencer Repeating Rifles. The war's course would certainly have been different. But that still doesn't answer whether or not it would have worked. Wilder was adamant in his past desire, "...to make the charge which I firmly believe would have resulted successfully."³⁹⁸ Wilder was adamant that he had walked the field with many an "ex-rebel" and claimed they agreed that he would have "been fatal Bragg's Army".³⁹⁹ Longstreet had told Wilder after the war that his attack prior to his run-in with Sec. Dana had made so much racket that he thought a fresh corps had assailed him and he had delayed his attack.⁴⁰⁰ Col. Atkins, was cited often as being very positive of the plan and believed it would have succeeded.⁴⁰¹ John M. King, also of the 92nd, stated afterwards in his diary: "Wilder was bold and daring and would have succeeded, and the fortunes of that battle might have been different. Dana was [a] coward and had authority at a time when he should have had no authority," further evidence that the men were at least motivated enough to give it full effort, and that the Secretary had overstepped his brief.⁴⁰² The final endorsement of Wilder's plan comes from one of his fellow Hoosiers, Sgt. George S.

³⁹⁶ Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 318.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 317.

³⁹⁸ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 90.

³⁹⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 299.

⁴⁰⁰ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 121.

⁴⁰¹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 298.

⁴⁰² Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 123.

Wilson of the 17th IN: Responding to a letter where Wilder claims he would have been successful, which he refers to “sanguine expectations”, Wilson noted that at that point the Brigade was in top form and while it is pointless to speculate on the past, “I firmly believe it would have succeeded”.⁴⁰³ While it’s not clear whether the “sanguinary expectations” refer to what the Brigade would have inflicted, or received in kind, it is clear that the plan would have achieved what Wilder intended, smashing through to Thomas. While Sgt. Wilson correctly points out that it is pointless to speculate only because you cannot be wholly certain, there is one aspect we can be sure of about the battle: “...but by good Jeneraling [generalizing] on the parts of our commanders We got back safe...”.⁴⁰⁴ The number one item on any good commander’s mind after completing objectives is the safety of his troops, and Wilder succeeded immensely. While the debate on the Chickamauga Decision can continue with relish, the post war opinions of the Brigade were already settled.

XII. Opinions on the Lightning Brigade after the War

While Wilder’s Lightning Brigade would never have the fame associated with it like the North’s Iron Brigade or the South’s Stonewall Brigade, they still had fame among those who knew of them. Wilder himself ended up in Tennessee around Chattanooga after the war, having been “impressed” by the area and its mineral wealth.⁴⁰⁵ His efforts at study on the Battle of Chickamauga were aided by the high esteem which he was held locally, both with Northern and Southern factions, winning over supporters and burying animosities.⁴⁰⁶ It would certainly seem that a great war hero, even from the other side, would be impressive because of the same skill

⁴⁰³ George S. Wilson, “Wilder’s Brigade of Mounted Infantry in Tullahoma-Chickamauga Campaigns,” a paper prepared and read before the Kansas commandery of MOLLUS, November 4th, 1891, in Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 299.

⁴⁰⁴ Unknown Author. Civil War Diary April 30- October 27, 1863, Sept 20th, 1863.

⁴⁰⁵ McPherson, “Wilder, John Thomas”, 811.

⁴⁰⁶ McPherson, “Wilder, John Thomas”, 812, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 202-203.

and drive that won him accolades in the war in would translate into his civilian endeavors.

Wilder even had good relations with a man to whom he often was compared, General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest.⁴⁰⁷ While historians examine and debate their similarities and whether-or-not Wilder was inspired by Forrest's tactics (or at least his actions), both were held in extremely high regard by opposing officers and biographers.⁴⁰⁸ Because of these comparisons, it would actually come as no surprise that they had an encounter after the war. Forrest was in trouble with authorities and threatened with jail-time during Reconstruction, at which point Wilder stepped in a prevented his incarceration.⁴⁰⁹ While this encounter proved no more than respect for former adversaries, it would be logical to assume that they discussed past engagements they were both involved in, including Chickamauga.⁴¹⁰ Wilder continued work on examining the Battle of Chickamauga for a number of years after the war, but he was not the only brigade member that looked back at this battle in particular.

Colonel Smith D. Atkins of the 92nd Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment (later Mounted Infantry Regiment), despite only briefly fighting under Wilder as part of the Lightning Brigade, did have many thoughts to make on their one major engagement together, Chickamauga.⁴¹¹ At a Women's Relief Corps event in 1907, Col. Atkins discussed the wartime service of the Brigade and Wilder, describing Union soldiers to the assembly: "The soldiers who saved the Republic were citizen soldiers, the best soldiery in the world and it will always be so while the Republic shall endure".⁴¹² While obviously speaking in platitudes for the assembled crowd, Atkins continued on to describe the battle, and the incident were Wilder suggested an attack on the

⁴⁰⁷ Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 202.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, 195-197.

⁴⁰⁹ Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 202-203.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, 202.

⁴¹¹ Atkins, "Chickamauga: Useless, Disastrous Battle", 3.

⁴¹² Ibid, 6.

enemy Corps' rear on the second day of battle, and how Sec. Dana called it off.⁴¹³ Atkins' description of the "sullen" withdrawal by Wilder underscored Wilder's attitude as a fighter and the crushing effect a pullout order had on him.⁴¹⁴ Despite describing in length the bravery of both his men, the Brigade's and the armies', he described the battle as "useless" and a waste of life, as it was a defeat and led to a retreat from the field.⁴¹⁵ While Atkins still held on to his distaste for Rosecrans after the war, he held Wilder in very high regard, mentioning the proposed assault on the enemy rear. While it did not come to pass, Atkins never missed a chance to compliment his former commander. But fellow officers were not the only people paying compliments to Wilder or the Brigade.

While not well known outside of historical circles, the Lightning Brigade garners some of the best compliments and descriptions of any unit from the war. Author and Historian Richard A. Baumgartner includes a Forward in his book from Wiley Sword who describes the Lightning Brigade as "a misnomer", stating he believes that a more proper title would be "the war's killer elite", which certainly has a more direct and useful description of their service record on the whole.⁴¹⁶ Historian and Civil War weapons expert Joseph G. Bilby remarks on Wilder, "Some commanders of Spencer armed troops, like Colonel Wilder, appear to have quickly learned to exercise considerable fire control while at the same time applying their available firepower at the proper tactical moment".⁴¹⁷ An important adaptation in tactics, which Wilder once again needs to be mentioned and credited for. Historian Glenn W. Sunderland gives a twofold assessment of the brigade, first crediting "modern cavalry principles developed by Lightning Brigade" for their

⁴¹³ Atkins, "Chickamauga: Useless, Disastrous Battle", 11.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁴¹⁶ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 13.

⁴¹⁷ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 216.

successes and trend-setting for future wars, and of the Brigade members: “They were proud of their service and they had a right to be...there wasn’t a man in the army, Confederate or Union, who hadn’t heard of the exploits of Wilder’s Brigade”.⁴¹⁸ While an issue to be discussed in the next section, it would be remiss to not acknowledge the effect on modern cavalry tactics the Brigade had, and it’s important to note that at the time the unit was well-known in the Western Armies. But while it’s easy for modern historians to attach ideas and labels to a conflict over a hundred years concluded, it has a basis in the words of the men themselves. In the official unit history, published and approved by the 17th Indiana Regimental Association in 1912, the unit made two claims for history that should tell any reader how the men of the 17th IN, and arguably the brigade as a whole, felt about their wartime service: “We boast of having accomplished more with the least loss of life than any other regiment in the service” and “We ask our country to give us the credit of our actions. We never were defeated”.⁴¹⁹ Almost 50 years after the war and the brigade members were still confident in their victories and their unit’s record. Their boast about accomplishing more with less loss is important due to many units making a name for themselves by taking grievous casualties, though the credit for not be defeated needs a bit of qualification. They were present for defeats but their unit never fled the field in disarray, only withdrawing on several occasions, often after waiting for orders to do so. So while reputations and records are always open for review in history, the record of Wilder’s Lightning Brigade remains positive, because it is hard to argue with the results. But exactly how did this unit manage to become so accomplished, what was their actual record and how does it compare to others?

XIII. The Lightning Brigade’s Combat Record

⁴¹⁸ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 213-214.

⁴¹⁹ Benefiel, *Seventeenth Regiment*, 9.

As mentioned in the previous section, the Brigade was very proud of their combat record and adamant that they were never defeated. It is an interesting claim when placed next to a list of the Brigade's battles (listed earlier in Unit History section), as some of the larger ones were recorded historically as being calamitous Union defeats, such as Chickamauga. Others had the issue of being "smaller skirmishes unrecorded outside of local historians".⁴²⁰ Luckily, the unit's histories, diaries and letters from the men, and later work on the Brigade, collects all such information together into a comprehensible list. While this makes it difficult to get an exact "sport stat" list of their engagements (losses, losses inflicted, results of engagement), accounts of their various activities can give us a more complete look as to their effectiveness. The first engagement that can be described, actually one of their first and fought well prior to their being issued Spencer Rifles, was the Battle of Cheat Mountain, where Wilder describes his men's stand and being "only regiment to remain in order" in their efforts.⁴²¹ This October 3rd, 1861 engagement resulted in the 17th Indiana suffering 10 KIA, 15 WIA, while inflicting 38 enemy KIA and capturing 14, a result Wilder partly attributes to poor work by the enemy artillery in preparing their shells.⁴²² While not a reflection of the entire Brigade, it is proof that their later successes weren't entirely dependent on their new Spencers.

The next well documented engagement, and one of their greatest victories of the war, was the Battle of Hoover's Gap. An undisputed victory for the recently mounted and repeater-armed Wilder Brigade, it was the most tellingly lopsided victory for the unit, suffering 61 casualties and inflicting 146 casualties on the enemy.⁴²³ While not an absolute drubbing, those are still rather

⁴²⁰ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 23.

⁴²¹ Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 172-173.

⁴²² *Ibid*, 173.

⁴²³ Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 24. It should also be noted that this enemy figure is disputed and is the lower of the claims. In Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 83, claims 200-500 casualties for the enemy, but admits not knowing with certainty, but that number would suggest that the 146 casualties figure refers to dead, which would

lopsided figures if you consider Wilder was outnumbered and the great difficulty in knowing exactly how many enemy wounded left the field before the engagement concluded, and acknowledge that the new technology was getting its first large-scale debut. From here the campaign moved past Chattanooga and towards the inevitable conflict at Chickamauga, where in the days leading up to the climactic battle the Lightning Brigade found themselves engaged in what would later be labelled the Battle of Rocks Springs. On the 12th of September, Wilder was able to fight/sneak his way out of encirclement without the enemy crushing his cut off unit.⁴²⁴ The other astounding fact, other than his deceptive campfires and night march out of the encirclement, was that he again inflicted lopsided casualties on the enemy: 30 KIA/WIA suffered, 50 KIA/WIA inflicted.⁴²⁵ While these engagements are positive marks in anyone's record keeping, the Brigade next moment of distinction was overshadowed by the fact that the Battle of Chickamauga was nearly a rout and was a severe loss for the North.

The trickiest part of analyzing the Brigade's actions in the Battle of Chickamauga (Sept. 19th-20th) is that at the time it was impossible for the Brigade to get an accurate idea of the casualties they inflicted. They were forced to withdraw the day prior despite inflicting great damage and delay on the enemy. Then in the first day of battle they covered the same space of field several times, fighting until dark but being unable to retrieve even their own casualties due to sniper fire. Finally, on the second day they were repositioned, remained the only undefeated Brigade on the right and after initially charging into the enemy flank and rear, and eventually had

be easier than wounded to confirm. Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 88, mentions that the rebels lost "25% of men engaged" another larger claim but again probably indications that the 146 figure all KIA's left on the field. Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 43, has the figures 51 KIA/WIA for Wilder and inflicting 200+ casualties on the enemy, which is close to the other figures but deviates slightly on the actual figures from on Wilder's men.

⁴²⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 62-64.

⁴²⁵ Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 188. Again, while sources do agree on rough number of Wilder casualties, vary wildly, with 50 being the lower number. Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 88, claims anywhere from 50-82 casualties, with several in between. Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 83, claims under 20 casualties for the Brigade, but firm on the 50 KIA/WIA for the enemy.

to withdraw from the field.⁴²⁶ The Lightning Brigade's first day's efforts (Sept. 18th, one day prior to the "official" start of the battle) involved an attempt to hold Alexander's Bridge and several other crossings from the rebels; the force Wilder commanded was reduced to about 1000 men⁴²⁷ due to loaning portions to Col. Minty's forces to his north and the entire 92nd IL being away on other duties.⁴²⁸ While holding for half the day before being compelled to withdraw due to overwhelming opposition and advancing flanking forces (estimate 8000 enemy soldiers attacking his section of the line alone)⁴²⁹, Wilder's men managed to withdraw in good order and with only one casualty to the enemy's 105.⁴³⁰ Most modern historians and even generals at the time credited this action with saving the army from piece-meal annihilation, due to the hours Wilder and Minty delayed Gen. Bragg allowed Gen. Rosecrans to consolidate and deploy his forces.⁴³¹ While these figures do not account for the night engagement at Vinard road, Wilder opened up with a devastating tally against the enemy.

The next day, the first day of the battle, was decidedly more chaotic and gory than the previous one for both sides. The battle along Wilder's section at West Vinard Field across LaFayette Road was as bloody stalemate, though to be fair it would have been a Union rout if not for Wilder's actions. The fighting around Vinard field on the 19th was described as a "seething arena" or that the line position "ebbed and flowed", as the Rebels would push the Union forces

⁴²⁶ This brief summary could have been made from many sources, but it is probably from Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 112-124.

⁴²⁷ 17th IN, 98th IL, 72nd IN (2 Companies), 18th IN Battery (2 sections)

⁴²⁸ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 202-203, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 112.

⁴²⁹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 71-73.

⁴³⁰ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 210, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 113-114, and Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 189. Also sources also cite Gen. Liddell confirming this disproportionate casualty spread, stating, "The force on our front consisted of Wilder's Brigade, from whom we captured half a dozen or more breech-loading rifles. Our loss was 105 killed and wounded, and I can only account for this disproportion from the efficiency of this new weapon".

⁴³¹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 210, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 115, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 74, and Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 190.

back across the road and field, only for Wilder's men to push them back over the road again in return.⁴³² This continued throughout the day, with no overall change in their positions and remaining the same by nightfall.⁴³³ While the day's results were inconclusive, Wilder's Lightning Brigade presumably inflicted a great number of casualties on the enemy. This conclusion can be drawn from the multiple occasions that day of repelling determined Rebel advances, advances that were characterized by "their infernal Rebel yell", but the Rebel attacks became "so thin it virtually disappeared", testament to the carnage a line of Spencer Rifles could do to massed infantry.⁴³⁴ The most telling indicator of Rebel casualties from the day's engagements centered on the afternoon attack by Gen. Hood's forces. Due to the heavy fire being put down by the Spencers, the Rebel soldiers clustered up in a large ditch just across the road and "obstinately" clung to that position.⁴³⁵ Wilder, in a stroke of genius that demonstrated an effective use of an attached artillery battery, ordered Capt. Lilly to take a section with 4 companies of the 17th to a position on a spur that overlooked the ditch.⁴³⁶ This enfilading fire caused one of the most effective, but goriest, scenes of the battle. The combined canister fire (at this point "treble" or triple loaded) was utterly devastating to the men in the ditch, raking it from end-to-end.⁴³⁷ The carnage in the ditch was nearly indescribable Capt. Lilly later remarked "At this point it actually seemed a pity to kill men so. They fell in heaps; and I had it in my heart to order the firing to cease, to end the awful sight".⁴³⁸ This was an accurate portrayal of the effect what canister fire can have on men at seven-350 yards. The Rebels finally retreated, leaving a

⁴³² Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 217, and Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 190.

⁴³³ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 118, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 81.

⁴³⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 217, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 81.

⁴³⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 238.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid*, 238-239.

⁴³⁷ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 117. Would also note that this early example of combine combat arms should have been repeated later on with infantry escorting arty around to inflict as much damage as they could.

⁴³⁸ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 239, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 117, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 81. Should note that one source attributes this to Wilder also.

scene of butchery that was so severe that Henry Campbell, bugler of the 18th Indiana Battery, stated that the hundreds of dead and wounded in the ditch made it possible to walk from end to end and never touch the ground, so “carnage-filled” was the ravine.⁴³⁹ A charge had finally compelled the Rebels to leave their choice of false shelter and the position changed hands several times before it ended up in a no-man’s land during the night, making an official tally for the engagement impossible.⁴⁴⁰ While Wilder’s Brigade did not have an official tally just for the first day and the official Rebel tally for the engagement was and is impossible to determine due to the chaotic nature of the attack, we can make several inferences. The first is that several hundred rebels met their fates in that ditch/ravine along the road, and that the sheer number was shocking both due to its morbid nature and the sheer volume of men in the ditch, suggesting (though not exactly proving) that the Brigade had suffered nowhere near that many casualties in the engagement. It should also be noted that this was during one of nearly half a dozen major assaults throughout the day, and while they evidently did not reach the pitch that the ravine encounter did, each time Wilder’s Brigade drove off the rebel force in front of them to rescue fleeing Union forces and drive the Rebels back across the field.⁴⁴¹ While numbers are tough to assign with the lack of data available, we can interpolate that the casualties, as Wilder’s Brigade was able to hold off and repel a number of attacks throughout the day and still remain online for the following day’s conflict, were low for Wilder and extremely high for the Rebels confronting them. While this day had been decisively positive for the Wilder Brigade, the day’s result for the Armies was inconclusive.

⁴³⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 239-241, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 117, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 81, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 190.

⁴⁴⁰ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 117-118, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 81.

⁴⁴¹ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 115-117.

The final day of Chickamauga would go down in history as one of disaster for the Union Army, but also that Gen. Thomas had prevented a total rout with his stand at Snodgrass Hill, earning him the nickname “The Rock of Chickamauga”. Despite this the Wilder Brigade, while certainly present throughout the disaster, was not touched by the panic and defeat that gripped the other units. There was only one way to describe the action on the Union right on the 20th of September, 1863, and that is a panicked rout.⁴⁴² While the rest of the wing ran for Chattanooga, abandoning equipment and their fellows, Wilder’s Brigade attacked, smashing into the Rebel Brigade under Gen. Manigault and driving them from the field before repelling their three counter-attacks, reclaiming the captured 1st Missouri Battery and sending 220 prisoners to the rear with the 39th Indiana Mounted Infantry, who had also joined them in their stand.⁴⁴³ Wilder’s men added needed confusion on Gen. Longstreet’s left flank and forced him to delay his attack towards the north as he needed to rid himself of an organized force to his flank and in his rear.⁴⁴⁴ Wilder realized the predicament, but rather than flee for fear of being surrounded, resolved to attack through Gen. Longstreet’s line and join Gen. Thomas to the north.⁴⁴⁵ The plan was bold, brash, but not to be, as Wilder’s encounter with Secretary Dana ensured. Wilder spent most of the day fighting but by the early evening was forced to withdraw himself from the field.⁴⁴⁶ The final day’s disaster weighs heavily against the Brigade’s claims of never being defeated, but when we look at the Brigade’s experience on the field that day, they routed and repelled enemy Brigades, recaptured full batteries, and captured over 200 prisoners which were sent rearward (with assistance from the 39th IN). They maintained cohesion throughout and only left the field

⁴⁴² Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 86-87

⁴⁴³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 282-289, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 119-121, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 87-89, and Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 190-191.

⁴⁴⁴ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 121.

⁴⁴⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 295.

⁴⁴⁶ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 89-91.

under orders and in good order. While the battle itself was a defeat for the Union Army, the Lightning Brigade was untouched by the stain of defeat, recalling only the positive efforts they made on the engagements. In that sense the battle was a tactical victory for the Brigade, even if they were unable to contribute to any strategic goals from the campaign. So while the rest of the army streamed back to Chattanooga in tatters and confusion, the Brigade rode back into town and across the pontoons to cover river crossings in the vicinity of Chattanooga to prevent encirclement.⁴⁴⁷

In the month following the defeat at Chickamauga, the Lightning Brigade was kept busy chasing down a rebel cavalry raid under General Wheeler, CSA.⁴⁴⁸ Normally these raids had had a devastating impact on the Union supply chain, but Wilder and his Brigade were uniquely qualified to track them down.⁴⁴⁹ They relentlessly pursued and nipped at the heels of the rebel force, who was forced to move too fast to accomplish anything substantial.⁴⁵⁰ Finally, on Oct 7th, 1863, the Lightning Brigade caught up with General Wheeler around Farmington, TN and routed them, driving them through town in a blind panic in under 15 min.⁴⁵¹ The casualty figures for the battle were 13 KIA, 79 WIA for the Lightning Brigade.⁴⁵² However, they inflicted 100 KIA, 150 WIA, captured 4 artillery pieces and captured 300 men, a horribly lopsided encounter.⁴⁵³ Gen. Wheeler escaped with roughly half his force but the Lightning Brigade had ridden hard for 9 days, over 300 miles, fought in 3 skirmishes and 1 pitched battle and cost Wheeler half his force, making the whole operation a resounding success for the Lightning Brigade.⁴⁵⁴ The remainder of

⁴⁴⁷ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 94.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 95-96.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 95-96.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 108-110.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid*, 108-110.

⁴⁵² *Ibid*, 110.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid*, 110.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 112.

the year was slower for the Lightning Brigade and they were split up in November until April of 1864 when Wilder went home on sick leave.⁴⁵⁵ Each section of the Brigade (now consisting of the 17th IN, 72nd IN, 98th IL, and 123rd IL) had poor experiences under other commanders, but never were routed or forced to retreat, though they did each on one occasion have to cover a withdrawal to prevent a rout.⁴⁵⁶ Many other skirmishes occurred during the Atlanta campaign, including the Battles of Big Shanty (casualties not specified), and Noonday Creek (command suffered 67 casualties in all, enemy suffered 94 dead and 351 wounded), each time meeting success despite tough opponents and difficult conditions (including one near monsoon rainstorm).⁴⁵⁷ While present at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, it is unclear whether they participated in the failed assault or simply manned the trenches as they had been during other operations.⁴⁵⁸ The remainder of the larger skirmishes and battles the Brigade participated in 1864 were successful, though some came as part of operations that resulted in failure and the victory came from the Lightning Brigade's ability to escape from certain capture.⁴⁵⁹ In November 1864 they turned over their mounts to Gen. Sherman's cavalry for their use during the "March to The Sea" and the men returned to Louisville to reequip and re-horse.⁴⁶⁰ But the war was not yet over for the men of the Lightning Brigade, and they had one mark still to leave on history.

The Lightning Brigade, while often under differing division level commanders, always fought well for them as long as the brigade fought together. Their final operation under Gen. James H. Wilson, termed the Wilson Raid, was no exception. They marched south and attacked

⁴⁵⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 125.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 134-136

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 151-153, 155-158.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 158-159.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 162-165, 167-169, 169-170, 182-185, and 186. Roswell Crossing (July 9th 1863), Covington Raid (July 21st-24th), the Stoneman Raid (July 27th-28th), Battle of Rome (October 13th), and Battle of Yellow Creek (October 21st).

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 188.

southern arsenals in Alabama before moving towards Selma and then toward Macon, GA.⁴⁶¹ Skirmishing all the way down to attack Selma directly, they neared the city on April 1st. There, at what would be called The Battle of Ebenezer's Church, the Brigade met with victory against their old foe General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest.⁴⁶² According to Alva C. Griest, the losses for their command totaled 70-80 men, while the Rebels had lost 3 guns and 389 men captured.⁴⁶³ While it lacks further information on other casualties for the Rebels (for example, wounded and killed are not mentioned and Gen. Forrest was documented to have been seriously wounded), it does show a very lopsided result regardless. The next day the Lightning Brigade, along with the rest of Gen. Wilson's command, successfully assaulted and took Selma. It was noted that this engagement for the Lightning Brigade was notably deadly, losing slightly more than 20 percent of the men engaged due to assaulting a fortified position directly.⁴⁶⁴ Despite this, Griest noted that casualties inflicted on the enemy also seemed to be "grievous", having broken through a wavering point in the defenses and accomplished the task in under an hour.⁴⁶⁵ This was another victory for the Lightning Brigade, but one that ran into one of the earlier examples of trench warfare that, while successful, demonstrated the future challenges they offered. Despite this, and many other challenges that the Brigade faced, they were successful and succeeded where others failed. But was it solely the providence of repeating rifle usage or the mounting of the Brigade that led to victory, or did the men's background also figure into the successes of the Brigade?

XIV. The Brigade's Men: Social and Anthropological Background

⁴⁶¹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 193.

⁴⁶² Griest, Collection 1862-1865, 214, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 199-201.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid*, 214.

⁴⁶⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 201-207.

⁴⁶⁵ Griest, Collection 1862-1865, 214.

One striking fact about the Civil War is that while it was fought between Americans from the North and the South, there were far more groups involved than two simple geographic labels do them justice. A military historian describes these differences as such: “Thus, whereas the ‘typical’ Eastern Federal is imagined as a Boston bank clerk—a tidy-minded urban teetotaler—and the ‘typical’ Eastern Rebel is imagined as a Virginian from one of the better families, the Westerners of both sides are as big-boned, loose-limbed farm hands”.⁴⁶⁶ He further elaborates saying, “There is a no-nonsense health and robustness about them which admits no role for the closed theoretical systems (whether actuarial or genealogical) of Easterners”.⁴⁶⁷ He closes by describing how the men of the West had little time for “European Values” that the East clung to, and were less enthralled by, drill and appearance than their Eastern-counterparts.⁴⁶⁸ These descriptions of the Western soldier are striking and important in describing the men of the Lightning Brigade, soldiers of Indiana and Illinois. Griffith claims they were mostly farm-hands, that they genetically and “actuarially” different from their Eastern counterparts, no-nonsense and not bound to European tradition, arguably a common trait for men who were not part of the former colonial regions. This description would go hand-in-hand with historian H.C.B. Rogers’ description of Southern soldiers having great respect for two northern groups, the Irish and the Midwesterners.⁴⁶⁹ This sentiment and theory would go along well with the previous comments by Southerners about how the Midwestern men of the North fought much better than their Eastern counterparts. While we can confidently claim that both the Midwestern soldiers themselves and the Southerners they faced counted them as superior to the Eastern soldiers, what sets them apart (if anything) from their fellow Midwesterners?

⁴⁶⁶ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (India: Replika Press, 2014), 41.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 41-42.

⁴⁶⁸ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, 42-43.

⁴⁶⁹ Rogers, *The Confederates and Federals at War*, 27.

The best way to examine the differences of the Lightning Brigade's regiments from other regiments, we should start by looking at each unit's muster location and the type of men that filled their ranks. The units of the Brigade were the 17th IN, 72nd IN, 18th IN Battery, 92nd IL, 98th IL, and 123rd IL, whose stories were very similar. The 17th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment was mustered at Camp Morton, Indianapolis, IN in 1861.⁴⁷⁰ Due to mustering during an early part of the war, the 17th was made up of men, "...not only representing every county in the State and Twenty States of the Union, but had representatives from nearly every nation of Europe," a fact they were quite proud of.⁴⁷¹ By closer examination of the 17th's roster from the war, we can also make some observations about the heritage of the men in the unit.

The state of Indiana printed after the war a list of the men of all regiments and batteries from Indiana.⁴⁷² One of the nuances that made analysis challenging was that while the officer roles listed men in every position they held (some as many as 4 times) the enlisted roles only list men in the position they originally held in the regiment, making it easier to navigate the enlisted roll; officers who started as enlisted men appear on both roles.⁴⁷³ After conducting a last name analysis of the 17th IN⁴⁷⁴, I was able to make several interesting observations. First, while the

⁴⁷⁰ Funk, *Hoosiers in the Civil War*, 168, *Indiana at Chickamauga*, 141, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 18.

⁴⁷¹ Benefiel, *Seventeenth Regiment Indiana Veteran Volunteer Mounted Infantry*, 7, and Doyle, *A History of the Seventeenth Indiana*, 19.

⁴⁷² W. H. H. Terrell, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana: Volume II---1861-1865* (Indianapolis: Samuel M. Douglas, 1866), 145-154, and W. H. H. Terrell, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana: Volume IV---1861-1865* (Indianapolis: Samuel M. Douglas, 1866), 344-371. There are eight volumes in all containing the information, but Vol.2 contains info on the officers of the 17th IN and Vol.4 contains info on the enlisted men of the 17th IN.

⁴⁷³ W. H. H. Terrell, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana: Volume II---1861-1865* (Indianapolis: Samuel M. Douglas, 1866), 145-154, and W. H. H. Terrell, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana: Volume IV---1861-1865* (Indianapolis: Samuel M. Douglas, 1866), 344-371

⁴⁷⁴ Ancestry.com and Forebears.com utilized extensively to look up all 2000+ names. Names not appearing on either, incidence only in the US, or that were extinct were listed as 'unknown' for my analysis. Combined categories include English/Welsh/Mannish (Isle of Man) names, Irish/Scottish names, German/Austrian/Swiss names, and Russian/Ukrainian/Belarusian/Latvian names.

unit was primarily made of men with English/Welsh ancestry, they account for just under 60% of the brigade.⁴⁷⁵ Of the remaining 40% of the Regiment, the men come from all over Europe, with sizable representation of Irish/Scottish and Germanic names.⁴⁷⁶ In addition to this wide swath of European heritage being represented, the numbers also reflect a rather even representation of all groups between the officer and enlisted ranks, meaning that if a group made up 10% of the enlisted ranks, they were likely to represent 10% of the officer slots as well.⁴⁷⁷ While most groups are equally represented in the officer and enlisted rolls, like the English/Welsh and Germanic names, the Irish/Scottish as well as the French and Russian names are over-represented; on the reverse of that, the Dutch are underrepresented in the officer rolls.⁴⁷⁸ I suspect this distribution is not based on any particular efforts on the part of the officers to limit access to some groups and to ease the process for others. On the contrary, it would seem the men had a very egalitarian system. Men who fought and were competent were promoted, no matter what their background may have been.

In addition to analyzing the last names of the regiment, I conducted a survey of the socio-economic background of the men of the 17th IN.⁴⁷⁹ I surveyed 10% of the regiment, as the 17th

⁴⁷⁵ Out of 1965 enlisted names, 1142 (58.11%) were English/Welsh in origin, and for officers 70 of 121 (57.85%) were English/Welsh.

⁴⁷⁶ Last names represent 25 different nations/groups: For Enlisted, English (1115), Welsh (26), Mann(1), Irish (173), Scottish (182), German (204), Austrian (1), Swiss/Swiss-German (9), Italian (5), Spanish (3), French (28), Belgian (1), Frisian (1), Czech (1), Danish (2), Dutch (46), Polish (4), Jewish (9), Swedish (4), Russian (3), Belarusian (1), Ukrainian (1), and Latvian (1); For Officers, English (65), Welsh (5), Irish (15), Scottish (14), German (12), French (3), Hungarian (1), Dutch (1), Norwegian (1), and Russian (1). Unknowns include 144 enlisted names and 3 officer's names.

⁴⁷⁷ Per my own calculations based on information collected. Information represented as Enlisted(%)/Officer(%): English/Welsh, 1142(58.11%)/70(57.85); Irish/Scottish, 355(18.07%)/29(23.97%); German/Austrian/Swiss, 214(10.89%)/12(9.91%); French, 28(1.42%)/3(2.48%); Dutch, 46(2.34%)/1(0.83%); Russian, 3(0.15%)/1(0.83%). Other groups either not represented in officer or enlisted rolls.

⁴⁷⁸ See previous footnote.

⁴⁷⁹ Analysis was conducted using the website FamilySearch.org and their collection of US Census data from 1860 and 1870. Majority were from Indiana but utilized others states census data if the soldier was listed as hailing from elsewhere.

IN had over 1900 men pass through it throughout the course of the war. The two major factors analyzed were their jobs and the attributed wealth.⁴⁸⁰ The largest challenge was finding information on the men as listed on the muster roles. Some companies were very good about listing hometowns/counties for their soldiers while others, particularly for recruits later in the war, were not. While I was still able to locate some names that did not list a hometown, very common names were impossible to locate due to an excess of age appropriate men from Indiana during that time.⁴⁸¹ This made it so that just over half the men I had selected were not locatable with the information provided.⁴⁸² Of those that I could locate, they proved to be a rather diverse bunch. A majority of them did have professions related to Farm work, but there were almost 20 other professions of differing social station that rounded out the group.⁴⁸³ ⁴⁸⁴ Farmer proved to be a misleading profession as some possessed very large holdings (according to the census), while others had very small holdings or even none, suggesting some rented the land as tenants and therefore couldn't count it towards their wealth. The larger take away is that most of the men

⁴⁸⁰ Jobs were analyzed based on what appeared in the census, though in some cases the data was their father's profession (hence listed as Son of Farmer, etc.). For Wealth the census data on wealth it was split into Real Estate and Personal wealth. Both were analyzed separately then combined to give an average wealth for the men of the regiment.

⁴⁸¹ Some names I was able to locate despite having several options to look through because the other men who bore that name were too young to have fought during the war, other times a middle initial could help if the soldier had the same name as his father and the census taker noted it to differentiate the two. Some towns no longer exist or have had their names changed but were located by narrowing it down to the county that hometown was located in.

⁴⁸² The method I used to sample the regiment was to select every tenth man, ignoring all new companies and picking every tenth man on the role. Of 195 men sampled, 100 men could not be located and 95 men could be located with accuracy. Accuracy was based on either the correct county/hometown and/or correct age to go with the name.

⁴⁸³ Professions as listed in Census: Farmer (23), Son of Farmer (25), Son of Merchant, (1), Farm Laborer/Farm Hand/Labor/Day Laborer/Laborer (21), Apprentice (1), Traveling Agent (1), Son of Widow (1), Clerk (2), Carpenter (5), Son of Carpenter (1), Boot/Shoemaker (2), Blacksmith (1), Son of Brick Mason (1), Hotel Keeper (1), Grocery Keeper (1), Coach Painter (1), Printer (1), Manufacturer (1), Cooper (1), Domestic (1), Gentleman (1), School Teacher, and None Listed (1).

⁴⁸⁴ While the sons of particular professions are noted, the income of the parent is included in the economic background as the parent's house was where a particular soldier came from. It can also be inferred that they assisted with the profession of the parent, yet do not quite fall into the category of farm hand or laborer as they are still part of the household.

in the sample were working to middle class backgrounds, with two notable exceptions being the Gentleman and the Merchant's son in addition to several much larger farmers. In terms of measurable wealth, the number analyzed are also interesting. A larger majority (60%) of the men had no real estate wealth to speak of, but the average real estate wealth for the sample was \$674.18.⁴⁸⁵ While many of the men claimed no real estate wealth, most of them could claim some sort of personal wealth; the sample still had a large percentage (~34%) who claimed no personal wealth, but the average for the sample was \$281.16.⁴⁸⁶ When combined, the total wealth average comes to \$1348.60, a misleading number as many of the soldiers possessed little to no wealth and several large outliers move the number upwards.⁴⁸⁷ If you remove the 6 individuals who possessed either real estate or personal wealth far outlying the others, the average comes to \$889.98.⁴⁸⁸ This was still a large amount for a regiment where many men held no wealth at all, but still helps to evidence that the economic background of the men in the regiment was a diverse as their heritage. In addition, the census data also shed light on the diverse origins, who not only came from the adjacent states of Illinois, Kentucky and Ohio, but from Tennessee and Pennsylvania.⁴⁸⁹ The census records also indicate that several of the men were foreign born, with

⁴⁸⁵ Real Estate Wealth raw data: none (57), \$300 (3), \$400 (3), \$500 (1), \$600 (2), \$800 (2), \$1000 (1), \$1200 (3), \$1300 (1), \$1400 (1), \$2000 (4), \$2250 (1), \$2400 (1), \$2500 (2), \$2600 (1), \$2875 (1), \$3000 (5), \$3200 (1), \$4000 (2), \$6225 (1), \$9000 (1), and \$15000 (1). The average above removes 6225, 9000, and 15000 as outliers, otherwise the median/avg. wealth would have been \$971.05, though both are misleading as most of the men owned no real estate. As such the mode for the sample's Real Estate Wealth is \$0.

⁴⁸⁶ Personal Wealth raw data: none (32), \$10 (2), \$30 (1), \$50 (3), \$75 (2), \$100 (6), \$150 (3), \$180 (1), \$200 (7), \$250 (1), \$300 (2), \$330 (1), \$360 (1), \$400 (5), \$407 (1), \$450 (1), \$465 (1), \$500 (4), \$550 (1), \$600 (3), \$680 (1), \$700 (1), \$800 (2), \$900 (2), \$1000 (1), \$1011 (1), \$1050 (1), \$1100 (1), \$1124 (1), \$1200 (2), \$1210 (1), \$2500 (1), \$3500 (1), and \$4000 (1). 2500, 3500, and 4000 were removed as outliers, as the median/avg. with them included was \$377.55. The mode for this was actually \$150.

⁴⁸⁷ Real Estate Wealth total (w/outliers): 92250, Personal Wealth total (w/outliers): 35867, Total Wealth (w/outliers): 128117.

⁴⁸⁸ \$128117 (Total Wealth w/outliers) minus \$48909 (total Wealth of outliers) equals \$79208 (Total Wealth w/o outliers).

⁴⁸⁹ Gleaned both from US Census Records 1860, and Terrell, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana: Volume IV*, 344-371.

men from Canada, Prussia and Ireland amongst the sample.⁴⁹⁰ Another Census record also lists one soldier's ethnicity as black, an unheard of rarity in a place like Indiana or anywhere in the US at that time.⁴⁹¹ Though this shows a great deal of information about the 17th Indiana, it indicates a large group of very different men. Although some of the men have similar experiences, they are all very different in terms of their economic and social backgrounds. This would further evidence that their strength and unity stemmed not from a brotherhood of Hoosier farmhands, as some other units could perhaps claim, but rather a diverse group of men bound together by the strength of their commander. This, along with their cosmopolitan social background set the 17th IN apart from the other units in the Brigade.

The 72nd IN, for example, was recruited primarily around Lafayette, Indiana in 1862, from counties of Tippecanoe, Carroll, Clinton, Boone, Montgomery, and Warren, which surround Lafayette.⁴⁹² These counties were predominately rural at the time and made for a regiment mostly of farmers. The 18th Indiana Battery was mustered in at Indianapolis in 1862. Though a good number of the men came from around Crawfordville, IN, they were still a mixed background unit.⁴⁹³ The 92nd Illinois was mustered in at Rockford, IL in 1862 and made up of "farmers and clerks" from the surrounding areas.⁴⁹⁴ The 98th was mustered in Centralia in Southern Illinois, also described as mostly farm boys, in 1862.⁴⁹⁵ And finally the 123rd IL was mustered in Mustoon, IL, in 1862, from Coles, Cumberland, Jasper and Clark counties, another

⁴⁹⁰ Not all census records were clear enough to determine where all the men were born.

⁴⁹¹ US Census 1860, Gibson County, Indiana, population schedule, Princeton Patoka Township, pg.33 (stamped), Dwelling 218, Family 218, John Boyd and Matilda Boyd; digital images, FamilySearch.org, accessed 4/15/2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GYBY-7X9?mode=g&wc=QZ2C-DP3%3A1589426070%2C1589426366%2C1589426573%3Fcc%3D1473181&cc=1473181>.

⁴⁹² Funk, *Hoosiers in the Civil War*, 169, Griest, *Collection 1862-1865*, 1, and *Indiana at Chickamauga*, 202.

⁴⁹³ James J. Barnes, and Patience P Barnes, ed. *500 Strong: Wabash College Students in the Civil War* (Carmel: Hawthorne Publishing, 2013), 36, 62-63, 160, 263-264, 345-346, 351, and 403, Funk, *Hoosiers in the Civil War*, 170, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 18-19.

⁴⁹⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 102, and Swedberg, Ed. *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, viii.

⁴⁹⁵ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 18.

very rural area where many of the company members were relations and suggested that it allowed them to stand up to fire better than if they'd stood with strangers.⁴⁹⁶ The professions of these men were also predominately farmers and the area had been where Abraham Lincoln's family farm had been, where he'd practiced law, and where the Lincoln/Douglas debates had occurred, making for a very pro-Lincoln regiment.⁴⁹⁷ The unit also had a very low number of foreigners in it (Union Army averaged 25%; the 123rd IL was 3%), and a larger presence of Kentuckians and Tennesseans in the regiment.⁴⁹⁸

This makes for a seemingly diverse grouping of men with little in common to explain their excellent war performance, but that doesn't tell the whole story about the Brigade. While their demographics range from a true melting pot to the fiercely local, the one common denominator was individual regiment cohesiveness. The more locally recruited units (72nd IN, 92nd IL, 98th IL, 123rd IL) were bound by kinship and local ties, while the more pluralistic units (17th IN and 18th IN Battery) were tied together by tough discipline and shared suffering. It's easy for men to bond with people they know in the face of hardship, but it's harder for strangers to do and doesn't always occur. The tough discipline associated with the 17th IN under Col. Wilder and the "tyrannical" command of Capt. Lilly of the 18th Battery, forced them into a tight bond, and, it could be argued, carried them through the war.⁴⁹⁹ What else but tight unit cohesion could explain why they fought with such drive and tenacity? While certainly their confidence stemmed in part from their rather effective Spencer Repeating Rifles, there are many examples of other units equipped with Spencers fleeing the field.⁵⁰⁰ The men of the units themselves

⁴⁹⁶ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 23, 26-29, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 18.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 26-30.

⁴⁹⁸ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 29-30.

⁴⁹⁹ Barnes, ed. *500 Strong*, 403.

⁵⁰⁰ Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 203-205.

acknowledged this bond, but none more deeply than the 17th IN; in a publication for the 1913 17th Indiana Regimental Association meeting, they mention the sad parting from the 72nd IN, and the “brotherly love” they felt between the two units, and for the 98th IL and 123rd IL, claiming that no four regiments were closer.⁵⁰¹ While the men of the Lightning Brigade had no doubts about the closeness of their bond, it can be claimed today that this bond is the best explanation of their great successes. While it is good to be close and have good morale, the tactics used by the Brigade certainly had a great hand in their success; more importantly they were tactics that they had derived themselves.

XV. Contemporary Civil War Tactics vs. Wilder’s Tactics

Defining tactics during the Civil War can be a tricky undertaking, as the terms drill and tactics are synonymous during that time period. Hardee’s *Infantry and Rifle Tactics*, for example, is a drill book, discussing movement for groupings and training of men from companies on up to divisions and beyond.⁵⁰² Detailed with regard to individual movements and facings, it devotes only 4 pages to “street fighting”, really the only acknowledgement of non-standard combat and essentially takes those several pages to tell commanders to stretch out their formations across the lane.⁵⁰³ These formations are all based on Napoleonic era theories, which themselves are based around standing in lines, several ranks deep, and moving as regiments (smaller or larger groups as a situation required) to attack the opposing force then to engage them with smoothbore musket fire.⁵⁰⁴ In the modern era, where you can be “drilled” in “tactics”, drill and tactics refer to two completely different things, drill being there for discipline purposes and basic instruction, whereas tactics are for accomplishing objectives. This kind of rigid “tactical” uniformity and

⁵⁰¹ Benefiel, *Souvenir*, “Parting of Brothers in Arms”, 1.

⁵⁰² *United States Infantry*, 89-154.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid*, 16-88; 385-388.

⁵⁰⁴ Rogers, *The Confederates and Federals at War*, 9, 41.

actually rather simplistic combat approach from the Civil War simply wouldn't work in the dynamic combat environment of modern warfare, and as it turns out was one of the more disastrous aspects of the Civil War. These Napoleonic era tactics, which were lifted verbatim from French drill manuals rather than actually written in America, were "extremely costly" to both sides during the war because the rifle-musket technology itself had made Napoleonic precepts outdated, and yet they were utilized stubbornly long after the war.⁵⁰⁵ But what would they have done otherwise? This emphasis on French manuals by West Point instructors had thoroughly ingrained all of Napoleon's precepts in its graduates, and the timing of Hardee's *Tactics* in 1861 was deliberate so that Confederate officers would have it available for training, meant it was the basis for all training due to it being institutional for all high level officers.⁵⁰⁶

The most shocking aspect from this overarching drill system is what it was lacking: firearms training. While there is debate about which side at the time was more accustomed to the use of firearms, the formal use of live firing and range practice, let alone any official training standards, simply didn't exist at the time.⁵⁰⁷ Drill with dry-firing was common but to actually fire the rifle often didn't happen until the first engagement.⁵⁰⁸ While not expressly mentioned, this probably has to do with the assumption in Napoleonic drill that it doesn't matter how good one man's aim is because they fire as units in volleys. Therefore, it wasn't so much an oversight as a ridiculous notion that you would take the time to teach an individual to hit a target, since he would have men on line with him firing at a line of men at the same time. The folly of this probably reared its ugly head on more than one occasion, since dry-firing does nothing to prepare

⁵⁰⁵ Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 11-12, Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, 21, and Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: IU Press, 1973), 89-91.

⁵⁰⁶ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, 21-22, and Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 8.

⁵⁰⁷ Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 13, and Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 22.

⁵⁰⁸ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, 86-90.

you for how a rifle will handle and you have to add in fear, stress, and the general bedlam around you that the drill field simply doesn't prepare you for. It is easy to imagine the result of an engagement where a regiment of country boys who've been shooting their entire lives comes across a regiment of city boys who, until joining the army, had never held a gun before; all the braveries in the world won't save a unit that can't effectively engage the enemy in a stressful situation. Despite its short-comings, the standard military mindset on-the-whole was utilized by most infantry forces on both sides throughout the war and was standard training practice for all units during the conflict. While there may have been certain drawbacks, experience was a fine teacher and experience was easy to get. There are several factors that made Wilder's Lightning Brigade unique and not prone to all the same weaknesses. One was their Spencer Repeating Rifles, easy to use and operate, and the other being that fact they weren't simple infantry, they were MOUNTED Infantry.

Cavalry tactics had their own methods of standardization, but most of the great commanders learned it 'in the saddle' so to speak. While available to Wilder, like Hardee's Tactics, he would not have utilized cavalry manuals since they didn't apply to him. Gen. Joseph Wheeler's Civil War era manual, "Revised system of Cavalry Tactics, For Use of the Cavalry and Mounted Infantry", is occasionally credited to having inspired Wilder to make his effort to mount his Brigade.⁵⁰⁹ There are however a few problems with that theory, the biggest being that the book was published in 1863, the year Wilder's Lightning Brigade was first entering the scene. It would have been difficult for a copy of the book to influence Wilder because it had been released early in the year.⁵¹⁰ To make its way through the lines and into Wilder's hands before June when the Battle of Hoover's Gap occurred would have been difficult: It is also

⁵⁰⁹ Wheeler, *Revised System of Cavalry Tactics*, full work.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid*, i-ii.

doubtful that the book was released early in the year since the book was published at the behest and approval of the Confederate Congress which is alleged to have moved far slower than their Union counterpart.⁵¹¹ That said, Gen. Wheeler's work is invaluable in trying to explain the difference between cavalry and mounted infantry. Gen. Wheeler defines what "Mounted Rifleman" were:

"In mounted rifle regiments the horses are principally used for the purpose of promptly reaching the point of attack and such troops are almost invariably used in many respects in a manner similar to light infantry. It becomes of great value in covering the retreat of an army, or in obstructing the advance of the enemy; and in broken and wooded countries, where light cavalry becomes almost useless, the mounted rifleman becomes indispensable to an army. By having this arm associated with light cavalry and horse artillery, the organization becomes complete for any enterprise. It is true these troops when dismounted are inferior in compactness to infantry, but their rapid movements enable them frequently to take the enemy by surprise and thus defeat him before he has time to perfect his dispositions for defence. It is of the first importance that mounted rifleman should be taught to mount and dismount with rapidity and without confusion, and that the horse-holders should understand thoroughly the management of horses, so as to prevent their becoming frightened when their riders are fighting upon foot".⁵¹²

I have yet to come across a more perfect description of what the Mounted Infantry were supposed to be doing for the army, and Wheeler could claim to have been the first to put that in print. His observations about the utility of "mounted rifleman" is a pointed one. America was not Europe, and the terrain radically different then what Napoleon faced. The mentioned use of

⁵¹¹ Wheeler, *Revised System of Cavalry Tactics*, i-ii. Citation for the date and official approval by Confederate Congress in 1863, information on slowness of Confederate congress a recurring theme in Civil War classes.

⁵¹² Wheeler, *Revised System of Cavalry Tactics*, 22-23.

“light cavalry and horse artillery” is important because Wilder often had the 18th Indiana Battery with him and Col. Minty with his cavalry brigade, which together would satisfy that supposed requirement.⁵¹³ The weakness he cites, however, for this type of unit is important to note because it doesn’t apply to Wilder’s brigade. The supposed lack of “compactness” and not having the same hitting power as an infantry regiment was not a problem for the Lightning Brigade as they carried repeating rifles, making them a very “compact” force.⁵¹⁴ It is at this point that we get into what made Wilder’s Mounted Infantry so different from their northern counterparts.

The infantry regiments making up the Lightning Brigade all had a lot in common with their “Creative Commander”, Col. Wilder.⁵¹⁵ Their “many marks of singularity” are the reasons they were so different from other units.⁵¹⁶ The general attitude of the men was a huge factor in their successes, equipped with the best rifles available, riding into battle but ditching the horses to fight toe-to-toe with the South’s crack brigades of fighters. The general confidence, both in themselves and in Wilder, stemmed from their mounts and rifles, but their leadership was what made them successful. As one author writes, “Wilder’s intelligence, imagination, mechanical knowledge and topographical intuition were revealed in the activities of the Brigade,” giving him a near super-human reputation with the men under his command.⁵¹⁷ But while confidence is a good thing, it alone does not guarantee victory, as many a valiant regiment learned during Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg. What was important was the way they undertook combat, the tactics that they adopted in battle that led to their stunning victories and shining achievements.

⁵¹³ Wheeler, *Revised System of Cavalry Tactics*, 22-23

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid*, 23.

⁵¹⁵ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 89.

⁵¹⁶ Williams, “General John T. Wilder”, 179.

⁵¹⁷ Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 54.

While no official unit strategy guide survives (not that there is any evidence to suggest one ever existed), you can glean standard practices from the actions of the brigade under fire. While they may have discussed such matters with Brigade staff prior to using them in the field, they appear to be mostly “Ad Hoc”, adapted on their own to meet situations as they arose, much like their initial mounting. Military historian Joseph Bilby notes: “Like men armed with Henrys, Spencer-armed soldiers developed ad-hoc local tactics. The effectiveness of these tactics depended on the creativity of small unit leaders and were never committed to doctrine”.⁵¹⁸ This is a position that would be in agreement with Military Historian Jay Luvaas, who states, “It was a war of improvisation”.⁵¹⁹ That lateral thinking led Wilder to the conclusion that would spawn the unit’s tactical theories, and it had everything to do with mounting, and of course weapons technology and “combat leadership”.⁵²⁰ Wilder was also known for his emphasis on self-sufficiency, salvaging wrecks from the side of the road and rebuilding them to haul Brigade supplies, and as a “Strict Disciplinarian”, branding and marching before the Brigade a deserter.⁵²¹ Keeping a tight rein of the Brigade while still allowing for the outlet that self-sufficiency demands, Wilder would have been able to drill the men hard and expect them to perform to the standard that was essential to a unit like theirs: speed.

The ability to move in rapidly and often take the enemy by surprise is an old military lesson but one the Lightning Brigade learned early and practiced often during the war. Anticipating this, Capt. Lilly of the 18th Indiana Battery acquired two “mountain howitzers” for the express reason that they could be moved into position quickly and easily to keep pace with

⁵¹⁸ Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 205.

⁵¹⁹ Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War*, 1.

⁵²⁰ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 12.

⁵²¹ *Ibid*, 44-45.

the fast-moving mounted infantry regiments of the Lightning Brigade.⁵²² Often battery command decisions were delegated to the commander of whatever infantry commander they happened to be assigned to, leading to ineffectiveness and poor advancement prospects for officers attached to batteries.⁵²³ However, due to the close working relationship that Wilder and Lilly had, this was never a problem while the 18th Battery was attached to the Wilder Brigade, allowing them to deliver rapid and precise support that the brigade required. This speed was the key factor for the brigade in many of their engagements, including their two most famous, the Battle of Hoover's Gap and Chickamauga.

The Battle of Hoover's Gap is easily the best example of Lightning Brigade tactics, for several reasons, but the most obvious was the circumstances of the fight. They had picked the time of their fight and were on the offensive, surprising the enemy and then stopping to hold the objective. Otto McManus described the action: "The farther they went the larger the rebel force of cavalry kept growing before them, but the rapid pace gave the enemy no time to form, until about 9 o'clock in the morning, by which time these two regiments had advanced to and seized Hoover's Gap, a place of great natural strength..."⁵²⁴ Every description has similar language of the early battle: "swept them aside," "rode through", "drove pickets rapidly", "quickly pushed off", "overran", and "quickly dislodged" when referring to the rebel forces, describing an initial scene much closer to a rout than a battle.⁵²⁵ This kind of action is in line with what military historian Paddy Griffith terms, "Shock Tactics": they require highly disciplined command or high quality troops, and involve more rapid, even brazen, attacks that are higher risk but can

⁵²² Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 51-52, and Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 103.

⁵²³ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, 165.

⁵²⁴ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 81-82.

⁵²⁵ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 88, Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 18, McQueen, *Spencer*, 45 Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 77, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 39, and Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 22.

potentially produce high “dividends” if successful.⁵²⁶ With tough disciplinarians like Col. Wilder in charge, you had tough, determined leadership and men of high quality, that quality already raised by their superior weapons and beneficial mounting. What came next was also telling about the Brigades “tactics” or at least their command style. Wilder is cited as repositioning his men to face the developing threats, supporting the guns and having a reserve to back up his other forces.⁵²⁷ Capt. Lilly had enough sense (and leeway) to deploy the sections of his battery where they were needed to support the regiments of the Brigade.⁵²⁸ Wilder was able to quickly respond to threats with his hands-on leadership style and hold the Gap until relief reached them. His firm grasp of enfilading fire and artillery support wreaked havoc on the rebel forces. While not ever mentioned as being expressly discussed by members of the Brigade, this style of combat, rapid assault and stubborn defenses, became emblematic of Lightning Brigade combat. The other great example of this “style” of combat would be the most famous battle due to its infamy on the Union side, Chickamauga.

While Chickamauga is recorded as a 2-day affair in most history books, the battle was a 3-day slugfest for the Lightning Brigade that would see them forestalling disaster at every turn. The first day’s action found them defending a series of fords and crossings around Alexander’s Bridge, an action that was later described as “stubborn” defense and a “valiant stand”; their withdrawal later was forced (and in good order) and occurred only after they had delayed an attempt at crossing for several hours.⁵²⁹ This “close and brilliant” fighting was just that, very closely engaged and well executed; Wilder was deliberate in positioning his forces, but not

⁵²⁶ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, 143-145.

⁵²⁷ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 18, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 78-82, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 39-41.

⁵²⁸ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 18, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 78-82, and Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 39-41.

⁵²⁹ Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 318, Sullivan, *Chickamauga and Chattanooga*, 22; *Indiana at Chickamauga*, 12.

restrictive of their movements, as members of Co. A 72nd IN had the good sense to build a “Lunette” (small fort) out of the planks they’d ripped off the bridge.⁵³⁰ The opening day of Chickamauga was an example of another tenacious defense with an actively engaged commander, who even had the good sense to destroy the bridge behind the brigade as they retreated, yet there was still a lot of battle to be fought.⁵³¹ The 19th of September found the brigade holding a tree line west of Vinard Field facing across LaFayette Road; the rebels attacked in the morning only to discover to their shock that not only was Wilder’s Brigade dug in with breastworks, but repulsed them with heavy fire.⁵³² The day again saw success for the Lightning Brigade, who had repeatedly driven off the approaching Confederate forces, yet the Union forces tried to press the attack only for their attacks to get thrown back.⁵³³ The Rebels attacked again, forcing the Lightning Brigade to once again repulse them.⁵³⁴ Historian Peter Cozzens describes this method as Wilder acting as a “Tactical Reserve”, responding to holes in the assault and countering flanking efforts, which led to much “charge-and-counter-charge” action made possible by their rapid movements and heavy firepower made available by the Spencer.⁵³⁵ This would fall under the mantra of rapid assaults and stubborn holding actions, by stopping an advance, and then sending the enemy fleeing back across the road with bold charges. The final day of battle saw some of the most daring efforts thus far though the ultimate effort (the assault on Longstreet’s rear) was not attempted. The 20th of September nearly saw the Union army routed due to a grave error on the part of the Gen. Rosecrans as a gap was left in

⁵³⁰ Boynton, “The Chickamauga Campaign”, 343, Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 109-114, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 71-74,

⁵³¹ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 113.

⁵³² Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 95-96.

⁵³³ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 217-244, *Indiana at Chickamauga*, 14-18, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 116-118, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 76-83, and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 162-163.

⁵³⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 217-244, *Indiana at Chickamauga*, 14-18, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 116-118, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 76-83, and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 162-163.

⁵³⁵ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 206-221-222.

repositioning of forces which allowed the Rebels to spilt the Union force, scattering all forces part of the right wing of the army, save for Wilder's Brigade.⁵³⁶ Another Brigade, under Brigadier General William Haines Lytle, attempted to make a stand also.⁵³⁷ Gen. Lytle was killed, the unit engulfed and then routed just as Wilder came crashing into the enemy flank and rear.⁵³⁸ Wilder's Lightning Brigade proceeded to "charge in" and send the rebels under Gen. Manigault fleeing for their lives a mile up the road before the Brigade halted their pursuit.⁵³⁹ Otho McManus later described the scene and seeing his brother's unit routed: "This would not do---so with a yell, the Brigade dashed into the woods at a double-quick and opened on them with the Spencers at such a rate that they instantly broke and such a rebel skedaddling I never saw before; and I have seen several stampedes of rebs".⁵⁴⁰ The Brigade was described as, "causing great destruction of life, and driving Manigault's Brigade in disorder back to the Lafayette Road," and acting as, "an island of controlled firepower in the midst of disaster".⁵⁴¹ Once again, bold "shock tactics" that involved charges with heavy weapons fire available to Spencer equipped troops, and holding position if attacked, were highly successful, all due to the hands-on approach Wilder practiced.

While later battles would continue the tactical habits of the Lightning Brigade, the question arises whether or not their successes have to do with Wilder's presence or not. It can be noted that the Brigade continued their bold charges and stubborn defenses as the actions at the

⁵³⁶ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 86-87.

⁵³⁷ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 282, Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 290, and Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 118-119.

⁵³⁸ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 282, Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 290 and Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee*, 118-119.

⁵³⁹ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 283-294, Boynton, "The Chickamauga Campaign", 367, Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 206, Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen*, 119-121, Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 83-89, and Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 288-304.

⁵⁴⁰ McManus, *Morning to Midnight in the Saddle*, 115.

⁵⁴¹ *Indiana at Chickamauga*, 22, and Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 127.

Battle of Farmington and the Battle of Selma can attest,⁵⁴² but it could be argued it's because the Brigade stayed together and was led by a Wilder protégé. I would then draw attention to the 92nd IL, who served so briefly with the Lightning Brigade and at the time were not all equipped with Spencer Repeating Rifles, meaning they feasibly wouldn't have necessarily acted in the same manner as the rest of the Brigade.⁵⁴³ Their first outing with the Lightning Brigade in August of 1863 was very nearly a disaster, as they were stalled by an enemy force, forcing the 72nd IN to step in and show the "greenhorns" how it was done.⁵⁴⁴ However, by the time of Chickamauga the 92nd IL had learned their lesson; they attacked the enemy on the 19th of September and "easily" pushed them back before being forced to withdraw, a more confident and decisive unit than they had been a month before.⁵⁴⁵ But even after they had departed the Brigade for other commands, they held onto their lessons. In May of 1864, long having departed the brigade, the 92nd was ordered by General Hugh Judson "Kill-Cavalry" Kilpatrick to take a fortified position.⁵⁴⁶ Having already made clear his skepticism of both their weapons and ability to make the attack, he ordered them in.⁵⁴⁷ They attacked and easily took the difficult target, keeping the rebels pinned down with their rapid-fire Spencer repeaters all the way to the objective, impressing the now won over Kilpatrick with their novel weapons.⁵⁴⁸ This demonstration remains proof that the lessons of the Brigade stuck with all who fought with them, and all those willing to be flexible with their efforts. Their actions were apparently so successful that General Kilpatrick became a strong proponent of the Spencer's utility for the rest of the war.⁵⁴⁹ The men

⁵⁴² Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 108-112, 205-208.

⁵⁴³ Baumann, *Arming the Suckers*, 178-179.

⁵⁴⁴ Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning*, 123.

⁵⁴⁵ Tucker, *Chickamauga*, 162.

⁵⁴⁶ Swedberg, *Three Years with the 92nd Illinois*, 204.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 204.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 204-205.

⁵⁴⁹ Bilby, "The Guns of 1865", 57-59. The article also discusses the idea of fire and maneuver that the Repeaters allowed, but still this is just out of reach from what the Brigade seem to be on the cusp of discovering themselves.

of the 92nd IL were properly instructed in the applications of the Spencer Repeaters, something their commander, Col. Atkins, couldn't help but comment on: "From the moment that Wilder demonstrated that men could be transported on horse-back rapidly to the important point of military operations in the field and under fire, and could be dismounted instantly and fight on foot with the coolness, steadiness, and bravery of the oldest and best drilled infantry, the cavalry of the army was a byword".⁵⁵⁰ While it may have seemed at the time that this was the case, the advances they had discovered didn't eliminate old-style cavalry, nor were these stirrings of modern "mechanized infantry" adopted in their entirety.

XVI. Long Term Effects on Warfare

Author Glenn Sunderland confidently states of the Lightning Brigade when discussing the forming of the unit, "Now they were together---the brigade that was to set the pattern for modern mounted warfare, and their able ingenious leader" (emphasis added).⁵⁵¹ But could have they really achieved this? In their own time, particularly during the Civil War, the tactics used by the Lightning Brigade that were passed onto the 92nd IL, influenced Gen. Kilpatrick and led to the claim that the Spencer was, "...very useful, even critical, to Union tactical success on occasion during the Atlanta campaign, and they were soon in action during the 'March to the Sea'".⁵⁵² Despite this utility and effective use of the Spencer, wide-scale adoption was not to be. While ordinance and strategy officers agreed that carbine repeaters were useful to cavalry units and that they were already issuing them to infantry units, the War Department opted to begin issuing their infantry units' single-shot breechloaders after the war.⁵⁵³

⁵⁵⁰ Williams, "General John T. Wilder", 181.

⁵⁵¹ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 19.

⁵⁵² Bilby, "The Guns of 1865", 58.

⁵⁵³ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 221-222, Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 206, and Bilby, "The Guns of 1865", 58-59.

While they may have been assisting in making the war shorter, the repeating rifle's new and evolving doctrine had not "solidified" enough by the war's end to be adopted fully into military strategy.⁵⁵⁴ It could be argued repeating rifles were a bold leap forward for military technology, which meant little to a bureaucracy that preferred timid steps. Surely though, the new technology must have had an effect on military drill manuals and tactics due to the radical departure from Napoleonic tradition and obvious failure of these old tactics, but it was not so. Emory Upton's new manual (published and approved 1867), "A New System of infantry Tactics, double and single rank; adapted to American Topography and improved fire-arms," departs very little from Hardee's manual, moving around some sections but remaining essentially the same, but there are several small differences that are key.⁵⁵⁵ Upton does add in a section about loading a "Springfield breech-loader" after its section on rifle loading and firing commands.⁵⁵⁶ The other is at the very beginning in the 'introduction' to the manual, where it states the text, "That it provides for a single-rank formation, specially adapted to the use of breech-loaders".⁵⁵⁷ While a seemingly minor addition, and certainly not confirmation that the Lightning Brigade specifically was in mind, it proves that the effort of units like Wilder's Brigade had forced an acknowledgement of the changing of the times. Unfortunately, the idea of giving standard infantry units rapid-fire repeaters did not breach the bureaucracy, nor did the novel idea of having men ride into battle atop mounts. The Army went so far as to include a passage at the beginning of the manual that states: "To insure uniformity throughout the Army, all infantry exercises and manoeuvres not embraced in that system are prohibited, and those therein

⁵⁵⁴ Bilby, *A Revolution in Arms*, 221-222, Bilby, *Civil War Firearms*, 206

⁵⁵⁵ Upton, *A New System of Infantry Tactics*, 381-392, and *United States Infantry*, 433-450.

⁵⁵⁶ *United States Infantry*, 33-34.

⁵⁵⁷ Upton, *A New System of Infantry Tactics*, iv.

prescribed will be strictly observed”.⁵⁵⁸ The Army was willing to make some changes, but still rigidly hold to the old methods. Military historian Paddy Griffith aptly points out that while Upton is “different” from the European models, he is still very much rooted in the past.⁵⁵⁹ While the men of the Lightning Brigade had demonstrated new possibilities and tactics for the new technology, the age old problem of the military “always wanting to fight the last war” kept the changes from being adopted at the time. But how did this influence shape up outside of the US and in future military tactics?

Author Glenn Sunderland discusses the “modern cavalry principles developed by the Lightning Brigade” at the end of his work on the famous unit.⁵⁶⁰ While it is no stretch to assign labels to the Brigade’s actions, such as precursor to Blitzkrieg or Mechanized Infantry, there is no direct correlation to prove this. The most scathing fact to support this is the refusal of the European militaries to learn from the American experiences of the Civil War. While well observed, militaries often looked only at particular facets that supported their own styles of warfare (for example, the Germans were very interested in rail transport), but most dismissed the war on the whole, particularly in some cases the Spencer and/or the concept of mounted infantry, in a negative light.⁵⁶¹ While many such changes caught on later, or were reexamined to combat perceived weaknesses in their existing strategies, often they had to learn such lessons for themselves on the battlefield.⁵⁶² One later conclusion about the Civil War was, “...that the mounted infantry of the Civil War, might well be the parent rather than a bastard offspring of modern cavalry”.⁵⁶³ Unfortunately, the Brigade does not figure into this conclusion as Gen.

⁵⁵⁸ Upton, *A New System of Infantry Tactics*, ii.

⁵⁵⁹ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, 103-104.

⁵⁶⁰ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover’s Gap*, 213.

⁵⁶¹ Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War*, 45, 50, 54, 73, 95 (52-78).

⁵⁶² *Ibid*, 109, 131-132, 146, 153, 193.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid*, 160.

Sheridan, the man the Lightning Brigade jeered as he was quickly swept from the field at Chickamauga⁵⁶⁴, received credit for mounted infantry tactics because his actions were in the East, where most of the observers were and where most publications described leading up to the Great War (World War I).⁵⁶⁵ While many of the tougher lessons of the Civil War, such as attacking trenches and use of modern technology, were not readily studied or adjusted for, this doesn't change the fact that the Civil War was a good source of information on how the Napoleonic conditions and mindset was being left behind by technology and needed replacement, and how the American experience was not an "oddity" but a warning of things to come.⁵⁶⁶ While it cannot definitively proven that Wilder's Lightning Brigade was responsible for the eventual use of mechanized infantry concepts, their lessons were there in the annals of history to be learned later and applied to new and emerging challenges of the 20th Century.

XVII. Conclusion

When the Civil War ended in April of 1865, the Lightning Brigade and its component regiments humbly returned home. True citizen-soldiers, they marched home in honor and simply went back to their civilian lives, none seeming to have a desire to remain in uniform. While these men may have completed their military service, they still met regularly amongst their various regimental associations, and as the Lightning Brigade, due to the strong bonds they had forged during the war, and reminisced about their many accomplishments. Wilder's Lightning Brigade successfully created a new method of warfare, unbound by existing doctrine and modifying their tactics based on their surroundings and tools at hand. This deliberate alteration was highly effective in an era where repeating rifles were still a novelty or oddity, allowing for devastating

⁵⁶⁴ Sunderland, *Lightning at Hoover's Gap*, 80.

⁵⁶⁵ Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War*, 54. I will note the author uses the word "developing" for the concept, possibly meaning he had gotten it from others.

⁵⁶⁶ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, 15, and Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War*, 203-225.

actions and rapid advances due to their mounting on horseback. Their efforts with mounting the Brigade and equipping it with Spencer Repeating Rifles, and the tactics it spawned, were so effective that not only did they earn the attention and praise of their fellow soldiers, but also soldiers on the other side. While they were on the cusp of greatness with their efforts, their advances and strides in mounted combat fell to the wayside with the war's end, hard fought lessons simply being forgotten. While the achievements of the Lightning Brigade were forgotten outside of the surviving members of the unit and those they had faced, the concept of a rapidly moving and mobile "mounted" force equipped well and able to engage the enemy on foot continued to be examined in later conflicts and often used effectively. While it would not be fair to claim that the Lightning Brigade was the inspiration for Blitzkrieg or modern Mechanized Infantry forces, they do stand as a positive example of the concept long before it was officially institutionalized in military doctrines. While the Lightning Brigade's members and supporters may have been a bit boisterous when they claimed that the Lightning Brigade pioneered the concept of mounted infantry that the Army later embraced, they can confidently claim that they effectively demonstrated the value of a new technology and demonstrated the value of ingenuity when it comes to tackling a problem. Wilder and his Lightning Brigade faced an issue of having to chase cavalry on foot, an issue they found a solution for. In the end, they can confidently claim they solved the problem with any and all means at their disposal. The Lightning Brigade will always be remembered as the men who tackled the problems that faced them, and should be remembered as being instrumental in counteracting the Rebel cavalry menace for the remainder of the conflict.

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