

The Unknown Kanawha Division

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You could call the Kanawha Division, made up largely of Ohio soldiers, overlooked, unknown and forgotten. It was certainly unsung. Notoriety comes from fighting in big battles, consequential engagements that news reporters and historians write about. The Kanawha Division labored mainly in obscurity in the hills and hollows of western (not yet a state) Virginia. It was rough trade — guerrilla warfare — slogging up and down mountains in pursuit of renegade rebels, irregulars and partisans to prevent them from harassing the loyal citizens of Charleston and the Kanawha River valley.

Even when the division was called upon to move out of the backwater to fight in northern Virginia and Maryland, it received little credit. More on that later.

Recruits for the division, according to Mays, hailed from Cleveland, eastern and southwest Ohio, Cincinnati, Kentucky and Illinois. They trained at Camp Dennison, northeast of Cincinnati, and Camp Chase in Columbus. Jacob D. Cox took command of the Kanawha brigade, composed of Ohio volunteers, on July 1, 1861. Part of the brigade, the 34th Ohio infantry, fought at battles at Kanawha Gap in September 1861 and at Princeton Court House in 1862. Other battles in the valley in 1861 included Scary Creek, Kessler's Cross Lanes, Carnifax Ferry, Gauley River, Sewell Mountain, Hawk's Nest and Cotton Mountain.

In anticipation of what would become the Second Battle of Manassas in August 1862, the Kanawha soldiers, now a division, were transferred to the Army of Virginia under John Pope. But the division's involvement at Bull Run was minimal. Only one brigade under Colonel Eliakim P. Scammon was involved in preliminary fighting on August 27. The division was sent to the defenses of Washington, D.C., with Cox back in command. According to Mays, the division had traveled a grueling 1,500 miles.

During what became the Maryland campaign the division was attached to the IX Corps under Ambrose E. Burnside. Changes in command occurred before the pivotal battle at Antietam on September 17, 1862.

George B. McClellan, recently restored to command after Pope's defeat at Manassas, elevated Burnside to wing commander and added I Corps to his command. Jesse L. Reno had been acting commander of IX Corps, but his death at South Mountain east of Antietam required a replacement. Cox filled the void. Scammon, though only a colonel, took over the Kanawha Division on September 14 and commanded the division briefly, until October. (But Scammon would return in March 1863, for about 12 months, to oppose Confederate cavalry raider John Hunt Morgan's ride through southern Ohio.) The division's two brigades were led by Colonel George Crook, who replaced a captured officer, and Colonel Hugh Ewing.

At Antietam Crook's brigade crossed Antietam Creek near what became known as Burnside's Bridge. Ewing's men crossed at Snavely's Ford. Mays opined that these crossings were likely the high water mark for the division.

Among those who brought some recognition to the division were future presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley. Hayes was severely wounded at South Mountain. Surgeons wanted to amputate an arm, but Hayes refused and kept his arm, though handicapped.

After Antietam Cox transferred to the Department of the Ohio, and the Kanawha Division returned to West Virginia. When Scammon returned to command, what had been the Kanawha Division was designated the 3rd Division of the Department of West Virginia. A period of relative inactivity ensued, though the division scuffled with the famed rebel partisan John S. Mosby. To counter the wily Mosby, a cavalry unit called Blazer's Scouts was created by Colonel Carr B. White. Scammon incurred the wrath of Hayes for his caution. Crook was brought in February 1864, and moved that Hayes applauded. Crook led the division at Cloyd's Mountain and joined David Hunter's unsuccessful action at Lynchburg.

Though internal command shifts continued, Crook led his forces in the Second Battle of Kernstown. On August 8, 1864, Crook joined Philip Sheridan's VIII Corps outside Winchester. Later, at Opequon, Virginia, Hayes made a charge against the Confederate flank. When commanding officer Isaac Duval was wounded, Hayes took command of what was then the 2nd Division of the Army of West Virginia. Hayes and Crook sprung a successful flank attack at Fisher's Hill. Later, at Cedar Creek rebels routed Union forces in a surprise attack. Sheridan rode in and rallied the Union forces. Hayes was wounded and narrowly escaped capture. Hayes remained in command of the Kanawha Division despite the embarrassing attack until December 1864. Cedar Creek was the last major battle in this theater. The second division was mustered out in July 1865.