



For students of the uniforms and material culture of the American Civil War, few items spark as much fascination as the Union Army's corps badges. They bedeck countless artifacts, feature prominently in period photographs and modern-day artwork, and are cast or chiseled into the monuments standing sentinel over several battlefields. Remarkably, however, these popular pieces of Civil War ephemera have their origins in a careless mistake and efforts to fight a lack of order.

When the Union Army of the Potomac set off to capture Richmond in 1862, Brigadier General Philip Kearny commanded a division of the army's Third Corps. Before the war, Kearny had not only fought with distinction in the Mexican-American

War, but also graduated from the French army's cavalry school at Samur. He served as an observer with the *Chasseurs d'Afrique* in Algeria, and on the staff of the commander of the Imperial Guard cavalry at Magenta, Montebello, and Solferino in 1859, becoming the first American to be awarded the *Légion d'honneur*.¹ With the reputation for being a ferocious warrior came a fiery temper, which, one day in the summer of 1862, was unleashed on some unsuspecting officers whom the general assumed were avoiding orders he had given. To Kearny's embarrassment, the men waited until the general finished chastising them to inform him that none of them were from units under his command.²

Determined to not to make the same mistake again, Kearny quickly issued an order for the officers of his division to affix a red flannel square to their hats to aid in easy identification.

Following the division's performance in the Peninsula Campaign, the pride of the unit swelled and the badges began appearing within the ranks, despite not being part of the initial order. The soldiers sported these patches when the armies clashed for a second time at Manassas, as well as when Kearny was killed at Chantilly on 1 September. They continued to do so in their late general's memory into the autumn and winter.³

By the time General Joseph Hooker took command of the Army of the Potomac in January 1863, the Union troops had been through seemingly continuous ordeals in the months since Kearny's death. From the bloody fight along Antietam Creek, to the fruitless assaults at Fredericksburg, and the ill-fated "Mud March," repeated reverses had caused morale to plummet and desertions to rise, but with General Robert



ABOVE
General Philip Kearny. Kearny was born into wealth. At the outset of the Mexican-American War he raised a troop of cavalry (1st U.S. Dragoons, Company F) with his own money, acquired 120 matched dapple gray horses.

At the Battle of Churubusco, 20 August, 1847 Kearny led a daring cavalry charge and suffered a grapeshot wound to his left arm which later was amputated. General-in-Chief Winfield Scott called him "a perfect soldier" and "the bravest man I ever knew." Kearny quickly recovered from his wounds returned to the saddle. In September of that year, Mexico City fell and Kearny had the distinction of leading the U.S. Army and being the first man through the gates of the city.

TOP
A stylized white trefoil denoting the 2nd Division, 2nd Corps on the 106th Pennsylvania's monument at Gettysburg. Picture courtesy of the author



Federal Captain Richard S. Dillon, 24th Michigan Company A, 1863
No. 31232

Union Infantry Iron Brigade Reaching for Cartridge No. 1
No. 31095

Each wear the Red Circle of the 1st Corps