

Warrior 60

# Sharpshooters of the Civil War



Philip Katcher • Illustrated by Stephen Walsh

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## Editor's note

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# SHARPSHOOTERS OF THE CIVIL WAR

## INTRODUCTION

Americans have long made their ability with rifles, something required on a frontier where most of one's food came from what one hunted, a matter of national pride. In the mid-18th century the short, large-bored hunting rifles of German forests became long, slender, small-bored rifles used on the frontiers by men who were keen shots. When the American Revolution broke out it was natural that men used to these weapons would disdain the smoothbored, inaccurate musket, and pin their faith on the Pennsylvania rifle.

In 1775 frontiersmen in Pennsylvania flocked to join Edward Hand's Rifle Regiment of the Continental Army, then besieging the British at Boston. Other rifle units were quickly raised, including one from Virginia, about which George Washington wrote, "These are all chosen men, selected from the army at large, well acquainted with the use of the rifle and with that mode of fighting, which is necessary to make them a good counterpoise to the Indians. ... I expect the most eminent services from them."

While these riflemen concerned British officers at first, in action their weapons were slow to load and, lacking the ability to be mounted with the bayonet, riflemen made easy prey to quick-moving British light infantry. Still, some rifle units stayed in the American service throughout the war. Washington even requested them at Yorktown to pick off enemy cannons in their fortifications. Although riflemen did little to win the Revolutionary War, they entered American mythology thereafter.

Indeed, US military authorities created a military version of the Pennsylvania with the army's M1803 rifle, a 0.54 caliber, half-stocked, flintlock rifle. In 1808, on threat of war, the army created its first regular army rifle regiment. The regiment did well during the War of 1812, with the official report of the taking of York, Canada, noting, "Too much credit cannot be given to Forsyth's [Rifle] Corps for their conduct in this affair. They displayed great coolness and undaunted bravery." In 1814 Congress authorized three additional rifle regiments for the army, which were reduced to one regiment after the war. In 1821 a government more concerned with saving money than with military preparedness folded the 1st US Rifle Regiment.

Hiram Berdan in his colonel's uniform.



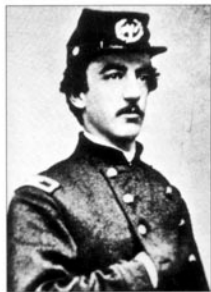


The Mexican War had no special sharpshooter units, although rifles using percussion locks had been made by US Armories starting in 1841. The Mississippi Volunteer Regiment, commanded by later Confederate President Jefferson Davis, managed to receive these weapons and use them to great advantage at the battle of Buena Vista during the Mexican War. However, most troops used smoothbored muskets, many of them still flintlock. It would not be until 1855 that a long-barreled rifled musket would be authorized for general use. In theory such a weapon, accurate to at least 500 yards although capable of killing far beyond that, would enable every soldier to be a sharpshooter. However, very little target practice was allowed, and the average soldier was little better a shot with an M1855 rifled musket than his Revolutionary War ancestor was with a smoothbore musket.

Therefore, when the Civil War broke out, experts on both sides decided that specialized sharpshooter units would be required in the field. During the American Civil War both sides raised special sharpshooter units, although the Union got off to a much earlier start than the Confederacy. The men on both sides often considered themselves, with some reason, as elite units, marked by special uniforms and insignia, armed with special weapons, and receiving special training in marksmanship and related topics. However, they were used not as modern sniper units, although from time to time individuals from their ranks were designated for this job. Most reports of individuals such as generals being "hit by "sharpshooters" are incorrect; the individual concerned was usually hit by either a stray shot or a lucky shot by a line infantryman.

Instead, Civil War sharpshooter units were largely used as skirmishers, an elite shock force of the kind that in the late days of World War One the Germans would call storm troopers. It was largely their job to attack strong enemy positions and defend weak friendly ones. They fought, not in two lines shoulder to shoulder as line infantry, but consistently as light infantry in open order, taking cover wherever possible. Confederate sharpshooter John D. Young later described the Civil War sharpshooter unit's function as acting "as Kinglake aptly puts it, as 'the spike-head of the division,' being used either to push in, or else to ward off attack."

**Colonel Francis Peteler, 2nd US Sharpshooters, wears one version of the special USSS cap badge, crossed rifles and the Old English USSS within a wreath.**  
(David Scheinmann collection)



**Colonel Henry Post was the first commander of the 2nd US Sharpshooters.**



## UNION SHARPSHOOTERS

### Recruiting

On the war's opening an expert shot, Hiram Berdan, proposed raising in the north a special unit of US Sharpshooters. Born in New York in 1823, Berdan was a noted wealthy inventor, most of whose work had been with firearms. He was known as the top amateur rifle shot in the United States. Moreover, he had a special flare for marketing, although he totally lacked military experience.

Berdan proposed a unit in which each potential recruit would have to pass a shooting test to become a member. A correspondent of the *New York Times* noted in August 1861:

Some idea of the rigidity of the test may be gathered from the fact that no man is admitted who does not shoot, at 600 feet distance, ten consecutive shots at an average of five inches from the bull's-eye. That is, the aggregate distance of the whole ten shots must not exceed fifty inches. Not a man is accepted under any circumstances who varies a hair-breadth from the mark. Remarkable though it may seem, many of the men exceeded this proficiency. Colonel Berdan himself has, on a windy day, with a strange rifle, put ten balls within an average distance of one inch and one-tenth each from the bull's-eye, at 600 feet. At 1000 feet the Colonel made a

Recruits for the 1st USSS demonstrate their shooting skills to civilians. This sort of bench rest was also used in training its members in marksmanship. (Harper's Weekly)



string of 22 inches. Sergeant-Major Brown, under more unfavorable circumstances, made a string of 33 inches, with a strange rifle. In testing the applicants at Albany, about two-thirds were found unfitted, and indeed the general average of incompetent applicants is more than that. The American riflemen prove generally superior, especially in the hunters of new England and the West. ...

It is the design of the Colonel to have the regiment detached in squads on the field of battle to do duty in picking off officers and gunners on the European plan, by which they take the risk of being cut off by cavalry, or executed, as they certainly would be, if taken. It is the first regiment of rifles ever formed worthy of the name - *i.e.*, that subjected each member to the rifle-shooting test.

Berdan's suggestion was approved by the Secretary of War on June 15, 1861, and testing ranges were set up across the north. In fact, this regiment would be different from the average volunteer unit in that different companies would come from different states and serve together in one unit. As it turned out, enough expert shots were found to raise two regiments of US Sharpshooters. In the 1st US Sharpshooters, Companies A, B, D, and H came from New York; Companies C, I, and K came from Michigan; Company E came from New Hampshire; Company F from Vermont; and Company G from Wisconsin. In the 2nd US Sharpshooters, Company A came from Minnesota; Company B from Michigan; and Company C from Pennsylvania; Companies E and H came from Vermont, while Companies F and G came from New Hampshire.

From the beginning recruits regarded themselves as being the elite of the army. As First Sergeant Wyman White, 2nd USSS, later recalled, when his company was first gathered together at a local hotel, none of them knowing each other, "it was no trouble at all to tell which of the guests were Sharpshooters, as most of them acted as though they felt the safety of the Union was hanging on their shoulders. And that company of one hundred men seemed to give a considerable number of the men a feeling of strength and power which ought to be acknowledged by all outsiders present."

This meant that the men believed all promises made to them should be kept, and kept immediately. Once recruited there were problems in getting the advertised Sharps rifles to the USSS, and this created morale problems in the camp of instruction outside Washington. Private William Greene, 2nd USSS, wrote home on January 12, 1862:

Have you heard anything about the sharp shooters being armed? There was an order read the other night for rifles enough to arm this whole brigade but they don't believe there has been any rifles ordered. The boys think all they read it for was to keep them from deserting after they were paid off. I should not be surprised if some of the sharp shooters were missing in a few days.

A recruit loads his own target rifle. (*Harper's Weekly*)



<b>United States Sharpshooter Units</b>			
<b>Unit</b>	<b>Raised</b>	<b>Served in</b>	<b>Disbanded</b>
66th Illinois Regiment	1861	Western Theater	1865
1st Maine Battalion	1864	Army of the Potomac	1865
1st Massachusetts Company	1861	15th/19th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment	1864
2nd Massachusetts Company	1861	22nd Massachusetts Infantry Regiment	1864
1st Michigan Battalion	1863	Midwest, Army of the Potomac	1865
Hall's Independent Battalion	1864	16th Michigan Infantry Regiment	1865
Birge's Missouri Regiment	1861	14th Missouri Infantry Regiment	1862
1st New York Battalion	1862	Army of the Potomac	1865
1-10 Ohio Companies	1861-64	Western Theater	1865
1st US Regiment	1861	Army of the Potomac	1865
2nd US Regiment	1861	Army of the Potomac	1865

The arms problem was resolved before mass desertion took place, and the USSS went on to serve with the Army of the Potomac in all its campaigns. Specific companies began to be mustered out at the end of their service in August 1864, and companies were consolidated thereafter. On December 31, 1864, the 1st and 2nd USSS were consolidated into one battalion. The 2nd was officially discontinued on February 20, 1865, and the remaining companies were transferred back to line regiments of their home states.

In the meantime, other units were also recruited as sharpshooter battalions. Yates's Sharpshooters was organized as a battalion of four companies in Illinois in December 1861, and another two companies were soon added. It was taken on the official rolls as the 64th Illinois Infantry and served in the western theater, the March to the Sea and the march through the Carolinas, before being mustered out in July 1865.

The 1st Maine Sharpshooter Battalion was organized in late 1864 and sent to the siege of Petersburg, serving through Appomattox. It was transferred to the 20th Maine Infantry in June 1865.

Massachusetts authorized two companies of sharpshooters known as Andrews' Sharpshooters, which were organized in that state in September 1861. The first company was attached to the 15th Massachusetts Infantry in July 1864, and then to the 19th Massachusetts Infantry in September 1864, by which time it consisted of two non-commissioned officers and 13 privates. The second company was attached to the 22nd Massachusetts Infantry and mustered out of service in October 1864.

The 1st Michigan Sharpshooter Regiment was organized in mid-1863 and saw service with the Army of the Potomac until it was mustered out on July 28, 1865. Many of its members were native Americans.

Birge's Regiment of Western Sharpshooters was organized in Missouri in late 1861 and was mustered into service as the 14th Missouri Infantry Regiment. It saw service in the west until November 20, 1862, when it was taken onto Illinois state rolls as the 66th Illinois Infantry Regiment.

The 1st New York Sharpshooter Battalion was organized by consolidating four independent sharpshooter companies in late 1862 and early 1863. It was sent to the Department of Virginia and then saw



service with the Army of the Potomac through Appomattox Court House. It was mustered out of service in July 1865, save for one company that had mustered out the previous August.

Ohio recruited ten independent sharpshooter companies between 1861 and 1864. Most of these were attached to regular infantry line regiments, although several were assigned to the headquarters of the Army of the Cumberland.

Major General David Birney had a regiment recruited in eastern Pennsylvania in late 1864 to serve as his division's sharpshooters. The regiment was designated the 203rd Pennsylvania, but Birney died soon after they reached the field, before they could be used in the traditional sharpshooter manner, and they were thereafter treated as regular line infantry.

### **Training**

At first Berdan, who had no military experience, figured his men were such good shots that they could go immediately into action. Accordingly he sent his first companies to be armed into Virginia shortly after arriving in Washington. However, they got the worst of a small skirmish, losing two men in the process. Captain Rudolph Aschmann, 1st USSS, wrote, "This experiment showed very clearly that courage alone does not make a soldier and that competent elementary training is a necessary preparation for active service."

Training for the Sharpshooters was more specialized than for line infantry, which basically drilled to maneuver as two lines of soldiers in combat. The average infantryman received very little practice in firing his

One of the most colorful characters in the USSS was nicknamed "California Joe." Here he shows how he finds cover while carrying the Sharps rifle he brought with him from home. (Woodcut in *Harper's Weekly* from a photograph)



The regimental color of the USSS.  
(West Point Museum collections)

musket at all; indeed many only fired the rounds they had loaded their weapons with when they went on guard duty as they came off that duty.

On the other hand, Captain CA Stevens, 1st USSS, wrote:

The time was occupied in [the unit's first] camp [of instruction] in target practice, learning the company drill and battalion movements, guard, patrol, and camp duties; and, under the instruction of Lieut. Mears, U.S.A., lieutenant-colonel of the regiment, they were soon able to execute the most difficult regimental drills, and were probably unexcelled, therein by any regiment, particularly in skirmishing, a service they were destined to perform at the front, in all the great battles of the Army of the Potomac, up to the time of their expiration of service.

In the target practice, a matter of the greatest importance, many excellent scores were made, and under the supervision of Col. Berdan, great improvement was made in their marksmanship.

The unit could call on a US Army manual published by the War Department, *A System of Target Practice*, which had been translated from a French Army manual. The manual called for the soldier to first aim his weapon, which was placed on a rest. An officer standing behind him could then point out any errors in his aiming methods. Each soldier was required to take his weapon apart and put it back together and to practice estimating distances. For bayonet drill they used a *Manual of Bayonet Exercises*, another translation of a French Army manual, this done by George McClellan who would soon command the Army of the Potomac.

Since they would be used more as skirmishers than snipers, skirmish drill was one of the most important aspects of their training. Skirmish drill was covered in a 42-page section in the most common manual of the period, William Hardee's *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*.

First Sergeant Wyman White, Company F, 2nd USSS, later recalled how much his company enjoyed skirmish drill:

Skirmish drill is an open order drill. Men form line in two ranks, then at the order deploy by fours, two files of both ranks would take distances twenty feet apart. Then at the order deploy in line, each man on the left of the four would take distance five paces to the left of Number one in the front rank, he standing fast. Number one if the rear rank standing five paces to the left of the Number one in the front rank. Number two in the front rank being five paces to the left of Number one in the rear rank, and Number two in the rear rank taking distance five paces to the left of Number one in the front rank. The squads of fours taking distance still further to the left and deploying to the distance of five paces apart until the whole company or regiment was in a single line five paces space between each man.

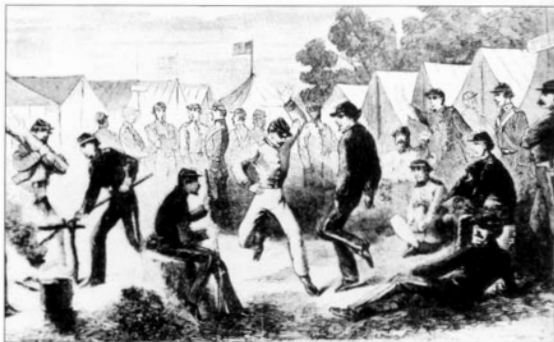
Thus deployed, three hundred fifty men would make a line about a mile long. We took our orders from the call of the bugle as no man's voice could reach the length of the line. We had calls to advance, to commence firing, cease firing, by the right flank, by the left flank, lay down, rise, halt and retreat and finally every movement necessary to move the command.

There was a call to rally by fours which is a very pretty movement and the order to resist cavalry. Each man knew his place; Number one of the front rank stood fast, the other three faced to the right and double quick their step, Number one of the rear rank taking his place in the rear of Number one in the front rank and facing the rear, Number two of the front rank taking his place on the left of Number one of the front rank and Number two of the rear rank taking his place to the left of Number two of the rear rank. All face out with bayonet fixed; each man bracing his left

Second Lieutenant Perrin Judkins, Company G, 1st USSS, wears the plain dark blue SASS coat noted as being worn in the field in place of the green frock coat by some regimental officers. (Bob Zinkgraf collection)



Until the men in the USSS received weapons, they spent time in camp as best they could. (*Harper's Weekly*)



foot and his left shoulder solid against his comrade on the opposite corner making a solid group of four. And four cool men drilled in bayonet exercise need have no fear of cavalry.

There were also movements and bugle calls to rally by sections, rally by platoon, and rally by company and regiment. Our regiments generally were engaged in skirmish line all throughout the war. Of course, we were drilled in bayonet exercise and infantry drill and when the army moved in the spring our regiment was quite a well drilled command.

Private William Greene, 2nd USSS, wrote home on January 27, 1862, describing his first experience with skirmish drill:

So after we had got out into the woods (Co. B was the 7th Co.) the 2nd and 7th Company in the regiment were sent out as skirmishers to see if we could spy any rebels. Mind you we were on drill, not in the region of rebels. We went out a little way, deployed as skirmishers and went on at double quick time. We had not gone far before the order was given to halt just as if we had seen some of the enemy. When the order to halt is given when we are skirmishing we halt and run for the nearest tree and if there is none lay down flat on our bellies so to get out of the reach of the enemy's fire.

Berdan and his officers recognized that men who took long marches across battlefields to fight battles in strictly skirmish order would have to be in top-notch physical condition. Therefore, they set up organized football games and jumping, racing, wrestling, boxing, and fencing matches. In the winter they also organized snowball contests between units.

Orders in line infantry units were given by drum beats. However, the wide regimental fronts of the skirmishers called for bugles to be used instead of drums for commands. Each company was assigned two buglers who were trained by Chief Bugler Calvin Morse until they were noted as being excellent musicians with not just calls, but "very fair dress parade music," according to Sevens.



Training for all ranks continued in the field. William Greene wrote home from camp in Falmouth in August 1862, "The Capt. is out taking lessons in sword practice. A man from Washington is here and has a class of 12 officers." And, when Major Charles Mattocks took over the 1st USSS in April 1864 he "instituted thorough and systematic schools of officers and non-commissioned officers." Mattocks found the regiment poorly disciplined and was determined to improve this situation. Later he wrote, "I have schools of officers three times a week and Lieut. Rilliet, Act. Adjt., has the Sergeants over the coals as many times also. I fancy I can already see a great improvement in my lawless command."

Still later Mattocks reported that, "I still keep up the recitations in Tactics. The officers recite Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to me. The Sergeants are put through by Capt. Aschmann on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Lieut. Rilliet, Acting Adjutant, drills the officers in Bayonet Exercise each day from 11 to 12."

### **Weapons, equipment, uniforms**

In August 1861 Berdan wrote to New York's governor asking that the state clothe its sharpshooter company. The uniform, he wrote,

consists of a green cloth coat, with black metal buttons – pants of same color & material, Goatskin leggings, & hair outside. 2 pair strong low shoes – with leather gaiters. Grey felt hat. Grey overcoat with cape moveable & india rubber lined. The fatigue dress will be green flannel "round about" [jacket] & pants – 2 pairs grey russia linnen pants & proper under clothes. My reasons for selecting this uniform are that the men composing this regiment will not consent to wear the common U.S. uniform; and as they will be skirmishers, they should not be conspicuously dressed – the green will harmonize with the leaves of summer while the grey overcoat will accord with surrounding objects in fall & winter.

The goatskin leggins are to protect the legs against snakes and briars.



Officers had an easier time in camp, often having servants to take care of their needs.  
(Author's collection)

An article in the *Detroit Daily Tribune* described a 1st USSS company, when it was formed, as wearing a "complete outfit of the sharpshooters, which consists of a regulation undress blue jacket and Austrian grey pants, a frock and fatigue cap of green cloth, an extra felt hat with a leather visor and cape to cover the neck, and a seamless cloth overcoat with cape." The *Detroit Daily Advertiser* added that the uniform included "Austrian blue-grey pantaloons, gaiters and a green kepi."

The *New York Times'* correspondent wrote in August 1861:

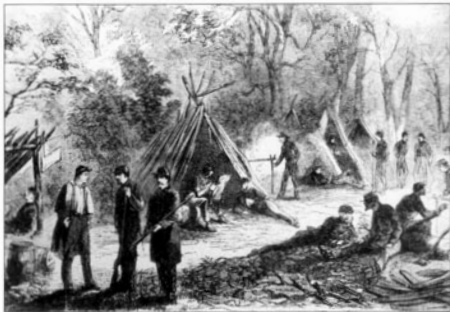
The uniform of the sharpshooters will be green in summer and gray at other seasons, to assimilate as nearly as possible the colors of nature. ... They will be armed with the most improved Springfield rifle, with a plain silver pin sight at the muzzle, and a notch sight, or the globe sight at the breech for long range, or on a dark day, or night shooting. It was intended to arm them with the Northern target-rifle, but it was found that there were not enough in the country. Colonel Berdan has invented a ball which is superior to the old Springfield rifle ball. It will carry with great accuracy a distance of 3000 feet. It is a grooved and conical ball, and is almost certain for a horse at the distance of three-fifths of a mile. Each man may take his own rifle if he wishes.

The original uniform was described in the *New York Herald* of November 10, 1861, as "a green frock coat, with emerald green cord trimmings, green cap, sky-blue trousers - everything else according to army regulations." By May 1862 the sky blue trousers were replaced with green trousers that matched the coat, although from time to time regular army dark blue blouses and sky blue trousers were issued when green ones were not available.

Captain C.A. Stevens recalled:

Our uniform was of fine material, consisting of dark green coat and cap with black plume, light blue trousers (afterward exchanged for green ones) and leather leggins, presenting a striking contrast to the regular blue of the infantry. ... By our dress coats were we known far and wide, and the appellation of "Green Coats" was soon acquired. ...

We wore for a time, principally on outpost duty or in bad weather, what were called "Havelocks," a gray, round hat with a wide black visor, good enough around Washington far within the lines, but after our first appearance before the enemy the following spring, they were discarded as endangering a fire from the rear. Certain gray felt, seamless overcoats were likewise abandoned, although they were good rain shedders, only they became when wet stiff as a board.



Evenings in camp were largely spent reading, chatting, and cooking. (*Harper's Weekly*)

Private Abner Colby, Company G, 2nd USSS, holds what appears to be a James target rifle, probably his personal weapon, in this rare image. (Bill Whisler collection)



The blue-gray stiff felt caps, which had a visor and a brim that reached around to the back to protect against sun and rain, were known as "Whipple hats," after their designer and manufacturer. These were replaced by standard-pattern forage caps, made of green, starting in November 1862. The overcoats, made to a pattern studied by the army in 1859, were replaced with standard foot-pattern sky blue overcoats in 1862. There were practical reasons for abandoning these two uniform issue items; Captain W.Y.W. Ripley, 1st USSS, noted that fighting in the early battle of Big Bethel "had taught them one lesson, however, that certain grey overcoats and Havelock hats of the same rebellious hue were promptly exchanged for others of a color in which they were less apt to be shot by mistake by their own friends."

Swiss-born Captain Rudolf Aschmann of the 1st USSS recalled that, "The officers' uniforms, though made with more care and of finer cloth, were not much different from those of the soldiers and just as simple by comparison. The insignia were no glittering epaulets, only a narrow band edged with gold braid and fastened on the shoulder, showing the different badges of rank. For daily use or so-called lesser tenue we had a blue flannel jacket which was worn in the field even by officers."

The first buttons issued were bright brass general-service buttons, but soon New York manufacturer Thomas F. Carhart supplied plain ball buttons made of black thermoplastic. As well, the sutlers obtained black thermoplastic general-service buttons that bore the eagle and shield design, which they sold to individual officers and men who had lost their issue ball buttons.

In fact, the independent nature of the Sharpshooters showed itself in the way they often dressed in the field. A reviewing officer in December 1862 reported that they were "perfect slouches and slovens in appearance [of whom] hardly any two are uniformed alike." Major Charles Mattocks, then commanding the 1st USSS, described his regiment on taking command in March 1864: "They are clothed in every shape (some of them), and present anything but a martial appearance."

Indeed, Company F, 1st USSS was issued with two flannel sack coats, five pairs of cavalry trousers, and 11 pairs of privates' foot trousers, probably of regular army dark blue for the coats and sky blue for the trousers. This eventually created problems when the army attempted to maintain the men in distinctive green dress, often to the complaints of the sharpshooters themselves. On April 8, 1864 Mattocks wrote to the Quartermaster General in Washington that:

Several men of this Regt. refused some time since to receive green clothing upon the ground that the blue clothing had been issued to them but a short time before, and it was subjecting them to a double expense to draw green when they had a supply of blue. Charges were at once preferred against them

**A Winslow Homer drawing of a sharpshooter in the Peninsula Campaign with his target rifle. The woodcut from Homer's drawing appeared in *Harper's Weekly*.**



and the cases have been ordered before a field officers Court Martial. There has been much trouble in this Reg. on this point and I had hoped that one of the cases might be brought before a G.C.M. so as to establish a precedent for a field officers Court to act upon. I trust you will see the propriety of having such a point settled by the highest legal authority. The ground taken by the defense is that a man cannot be compelled to draw a new suit of green when he has already drawn of blue, which is still in good condition – in Quartermasters dept. at Washington or *elsewhere* green clothing can not *always* be obtained.

In fact, making sure green uniforms were issued was so important that the regiment actually recycled used clothing. In November 1864 Private White described his wardrobe as including “four woolen shirts, 2 prs draw[er]’s, 2 prs home made stockings & 3 prs army draw’s. I have my vest (the one I had when at home) yet. I wore it all summer & it is good yet. I have put a new back into it. Our green coats that were sent to Alexandria last spring have come back & I have a new one, one that belonged to a boy that died. I have got a new pair pants (I wore the ones I had at home all summer) & a pair of boots.”

Mattocks also reported on April 27, 1864 that “the Sutler of this Regiment has been taxed 10 Cents per (man present) monthly. The money thus obtained has formed a Regimental fund which has been applied to the purchase of gutta percha buttons, green stripes, and green Chevrons, which are not furnished by the Government, also red cloth for the Div badges requisitions not having been filled by the Quart Mst Depot.”

The final change was the return of the brown russet leather leggings first issued the regiments, which were found useless. On the other hand, they retained the so-called “Prussian pattern” calf’s hide knapsacks that were originally obtained by a New York maker in mid-1861 at a cost of \$3.50 each. An additional thousand of these knapsacks were later supplied by Tiffany, New York, at \$3.75 each.

“The knapsack,” Stevens wrote, “was of hair-covered calfskin, with cooking kit attached, considered the best in use, as it was the handsomest, most durable and complete.” Ripley wrote that, “The knapsacks were of a leather tanned with the hair on, and although heavier than the regulation knapsack, fitted the back well, were roomy, and highly appreciated by the men. Each had strapped to its outside a small cooking kit, which was found compact and useful.”

Another specialized piece of equipment was the “climbers,” equipment strapped to the leg with which the user could climb trees to be on a high point to work as a sniper. Two sets of these were issued to each company.

A target rifle made for US military cadet instruction in 1860 by Morgan James of Utica, New York. (West Point Museum collections)



Green uniforms designed for the USSS were also issued to the 203rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry (Birney's Sharpshooters) in 1864, as well as some of the New York Independent Sharpshooter companies. This was as much due to the fact that the Quartermaster Department had enough green uniforms on hand to so clothe these units according to the term "sharpshooter" in their designations. In fact, the 203rd was never armed with anything but issue rifle muskets and did not actually serve as sharpshooters, although so clad. Regular army blue uniforms were worn by other sharpshooter units, although Birge's Western Sharpshooters wore pins with the initials W.S.S. as cap badges, while the 1st Michigan Sharpshooter Regiment wore old rifle regiment horns placed vertically on their caps.

The men from Companies C and E, 1st USSS arrived at their first camp fully armed with target rifles. However, these were usually heavy, weighing between 15 and 30 pounds, and fired a small ball that would not be deadly at longer ranges. Company A's men arrived with Colt rifles, but the other companies arrived in the initial camp of instruction unarmed.

Berdan's original idea was simply to accept the standard issue M1861 Springfield rifled musket. However, a muzzle-loader such as the Springfield would be difficult to reload when firing prone or even kneeling. The manual called for it to be reloaded by rolling onto one's back, but this movement broke eye contact with the target, and made it a poor weapon for sharpshooters.

Therefore, Berdan himself tested various military weapons and decided that the Sharpshooters would be best armed with breech-loading 0.52 caliber Sharps rifles, a longer version of the Sharps carbine. But in this he ran into immediate opposition from the Ordnance Department's Brigadier General James Ripley, who felt that anything other than muzzle-loading weapons were simply ammunition wasters. On top of that, the Sharps rifles cost \$42 each, compared to \$13 for the standard issue rifled musket, something that caused the miserly Ripley pain. Moreover, neither the army nor Sharps had enough weapons on hand to immediately equip both regiments until mid-1862. Until then, the men had to make do with Colt revolving rifles, save for two companies who used target rifles.

This did not make the men happy. Private William Greene, 2nd USSS, wrote home that his company commander went up the chain of command to see "if they could oblige us to take any other gun except Sharps Improved and if they cannot he says his men shall take no other. So I guess they can't put Colt's revolving rifles on to us. They had Colts revolvers here shooting yesterday and Berdan said if we did not except [accept] them we should take muskets, but they can't quite cover it."

In January 1862 things almost came to a head when the men gathered in their camp, hanging up an effigy of Berdan that was hanged and then kicked apart by the men. Berdan, in fear for his life, posted



**A sharpshooter with his target rifle. (Author's collection)**

Company A, 1st USSS, armed with Colt rifles, around his own headquarters. Berdan promised the men would eventually get Sharps rifles, and said that for the time being they would get Colt revolving rifles, but this was no more than a stop-gap measure. On February 6, 1862 Greene added, "We have received our rifles today. They are Colts revolving-five shooting ones. Some of the regiment refused to take them at first but concluded to at last."

As Stevens recalled, "it was thought at first that these Colts would not shoot true, but this proved not exactly the case as they were pretty good line shooters, although there was some danger of all the chambers exploding at once." The Colts were made like shoulder versions of Colt revolving pistols, and a spark flying between the cylinder and the exposed rounds in the other chambers could set them off. Hence it was not a good thing to rest the part of the weapon forward of the cylinder on one's hand when firing. This made the weapon somewhat untrustworthy.

Ever the marketing master, Berdan announced a major shooting match in October 1861 to which he invited President Abraham Lincoln. The President himself shot, and shot well, but was outdone when Berdan put out the right eye of an effigy of Confederate President Jefferson Davis at a range of 600 yards. Lincoln called it a "lucky shot," but added, "Come down tomorrow, and I will give you the order for the breech loaders." At the same time, New Hampshire's governor, visiting his company, learned of the problem and visited the Secretary of War, the President, and McClellan to press for the issue of Sharps rifles.

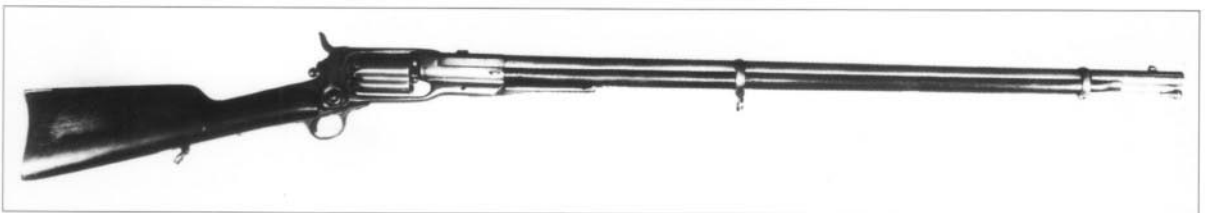
The Sharps came with a special pellet primer that was designed to feed pellets that ignited the charge without the use of caps. These were rarely used except one time when C.A. Stevens recalled, "It was a bitter cold morning, the men's fingers were too benumbed to quickly cap their pieces, and the Sharpshooters resorted to the primers, which was seldom done excepting in cases of necessity."

With this top-level pressure, the Ordnance Department ordered 1000 Sharps rifles and special cartridge boxes, along with otherwise standard infantry equipment, on January 27, 1862. The boxes were designed to be worn on the waist belt, rather than slung from a shoulder belt, and held two tins with wooden blocks that held 10 cartridges each, with another 20 cartridges in their wrappers in the bottoms of the tins.

In April 1864 the inspector general of the division in which the 1st USSS was assigned recommended replacing these unique boxes with standard rifle musket 0.58 cartridge boxes. Maddock fought this with a petition from the regimental officers that he sent to higher headquarters.

The unit was on its way and the men were happy to finally get the Sharps rifles that they had been promised originally. Indeed, the Sharps

**A Colt revolving rifle. (West Point Museum collections)**



proved to be an excellent sharpshooter's weapon as it came with double-set triggers, in which pulling the rear trigger tightened the front one so that it became essentially a hair trigger. The weapon could also be fired as often as ten times a minute, compared to the three times a minute of a good rifled musket shot. The Sharps also came with a handsome, brass-hilted saber bayonet, although one inspector reported that many of the men had thrown their bayonets away as being useless. The down side was that the Sharps was only sighted up to 800 yards, although on one occasion sharpshooters made their own wooden additions to the issue sights and cleared a tower of Confederate signal men at a distance of some 1500 yards.

Although it was rare for sharpshooters to do any long-range shooting, heavy target rifles fitted with telescopes were kept in regimental supply wagons at the rate of one per company. On a halt, the best shot in each company would draw this weapon and then return it when the unit was preparing for the next march.

Out west, Birge's Western Sharpshooters, later designated the 66th Illinois Infantry, was armed with the Dimick "American deer and target rifle." These were half-stock, muzzle-loading sporting rifles with various calibers and rear sights made by the Sharps Company and had been obtained by a St Louis gunsmith, Horace E. Dimick, from a number of western gunsmiths. Each man received his own bullet mold that fired a special "Swiss Chasseur" bullet. These weapons were sometimes fitted with either a socket, clasp, or sword bayonet. Later many men in the 66th bought Henry repeating rifles, which were quick-firing weapons but not especially accurate at any distance.

Ohio sharpshooter companies recruited in 1862 received Spencer rifles, which, like the Henry, was a quick-shooting repeater, but not terribly accurate. The Spencer, designed by Connecticut native Christopher Spencer and made by a number of New England factories, was a 0.56 caliber breech-loading weapon that held a 7-round magazine.

The two companies recruited in Massachusetts and assigned to the 15th and 20th Massachusetts Regiments retained their own target rifles, although offered the use of Sharps rifles.

The 1st Michigan Sharpshooters received standard issue 0.58 caliber rifled muskets and, indeed, mostly served as a standard infantry unit.

### **In camp**

The first camp of the US Sharpshooters was about a mile and a half from the US Capitol building in Washington. It was an unusual mixture of tents that had been supplied by the different states, with mostly either Indian-teepee-like Sibley tents or "A" tents. Company D was especially proud of the circular wall tents that their state quartermaster provided. The men were assigned to their tents, 20 men to each Sibley tent and four to each A tent. That first evening the men got acquainted with each other. "It goes without saying," Aschmann recalled, "that there were men of diverse kinds and characters in our company, and each one



**Sergeant James Staples wears the original gray overcoat issued to the USSS and holds a Colt revolving rifle.**

made use of his talent to divert himself and others. One was a storyteller, another played some musical instrument, a third delighted everybody with the work of his pencil, and it was amusing indeed when such a person drew one or the other or several of his colleagues in the most comical postures."

Aschmann later described this first camp:

The fields were cleared of stubble, the rocks removed and the ground smoothed. Since the companies still missing from our regiment were expected soon to arrive the camp was laid out right then for an entire regiment. The tents were arranged in ten long parallel rows. One row each was to serve one company. At the upper end of the streets formed by the tents, about 35 steps removed from the others, the officers' tents were put up, one for each captain or two lieutenants. In between these and the enlisted men's tents the mess kitchens were set up. A large field next to the camp was turned into a parade ground. Colonel Berdan and his staff took up headquarters in a nearby dwelling.



A private holding his Colt revolving rifle. (Kean Wilcox collection)

Before the USSS received arms, camp life was slow indeed. Private William Greene, 2nd USSS, wrote home on January 18, 1862,

What we have to do ... is nothing – only read, write, mend clothes. I have not done enough in the last two weeks to hurt a mosquito. I suspect I shall be lazier when I come home than I was when I left. I do some of my washing and some I let the washwoman have. She charges 6 cents a piece. Our bread we draw by the loaf and have meat for breakfast, dinner and supper with coffee for breakfast and supper. We eat in our tent.

This is not to say that Greene had no complaints. He found that he could not sleep in mornings or retire early:

You have to wait for roll call at 8.30 and you have to get up to answer roll call at 6.30 in the morning but then we don't have much to do in the day time. We have a little stove in our tent which heats up good. I tell you it rained tonight and the mud is two inches deep but I am as comfortable as if I were at home. I don't have the conveniences for writing as I should if I was there. I have to sit on a pile of blankets with a knapsack on my knees for a writing desk.

Once the camp was set up and weapons were issued, a busier routine set in. Stevens recalled:

The general routine of duty ... was as follows: The day began with "buglers' call" at daylight, to be followed by "reveille". ... Then the orderly-sergeants order their companies to "fall in for roll-call,"



Company A, C, G, etc. Every member was expected to turn out and take his place in the ranks, excepting the sick and those otherwise detailed. The company falls in, in two ranks facing outward – to the right – comes to a “front,” and to “attention to roll-call,” which is called in alphabetical order, usually by the last name. ...

After calling the roll, details were made by the Orderly [sergeant], such as guard duty, police, water squad, etc.; members dilatory in turning out being put on these details; otherwise they were made up in regular order. ... After roll-call, streets were cleaned up, tents put in order, all before breakfast call. With us, the instructors required the company cooks, two in number, who were located with fire, pots and kettles, at the foot of the company streets, to have coffee ready and served in the first thing after roll-call, to guard against malaria in the winter weather.

Guard mount was held at nine in the morning, and drills were held once in the morning and again after dinner in the afternoon. A regimental dress parade was held in the late afternoon, followed by retreat at sunset, tattoo at 9pm, and taps, when all lights were to be out, at 9.30pm.

The main work at this first camp would be the preparation of the sharpshooters for action, and this would take long hours. “When one considers that drill was rigorous, that guard duty had to be performed, and that each man had to do his own laundry, also that tents and camp streets had to be kept clean and neat at all time, one can understand that we had our hands full,” Aschmann wrote. “After a hard day’s work we rested comfortably, or a few comrades got together and passed the otherwise often dismal evenings having fun and enjoying card games.”

Of course the men had to eat:

The rations were brought in from the city and consisted of 1½ lbs of fresh or corned beef or ¾ lbs of bacon and 1½ lbs of bread daily for each man. For each 100 men we received 15 lbs of beans or 10 lbs of rice, 8 lbs of roasted and ground coffee or 1½ lbs of tea and 15 lbs of sugar. Vinegar, salt, syrup, soap and candles were distributed twice a week. Occasionally we had potatoes and other vegetable instead of peas or rice.

“On Sundays we had, besides our regular cleaning up, Sunday morning inspections, which included dress, general appearance, packed knapsacks, etc.,” Stevens wrote. “Also, during the forenoon church call brought the entire regiment, excepting those on duty, to the parade ground, where the chaplain officiated. In bad weather these duties and services were dispensed with.”



A sergeant of the USSS in frock coat showing the goat skin leggings and Sharps rifle. The trousers appear to be sky blue, while it is impossible to say if the coat is dark blue or green. (Richard Carlile collection)

This Sharps rifle was carried by an officer in the 1st USSS. (West Point Museum collections)



Relatively plentiful rations continued whenever the sharpshooters camped. For example, Greene wrote home from camp at Falmouth, Virginia, in August 1862, "We have potatoes just when we want them. We have eggs and ham, a butcher comes into camp most every day. We have tea or coffee every meal. Fresh bread every day. Sugar and milk. Beans, and in fact, most everything you can buy there in R[aymond, New Hampshire]."

Each regiment was authorized a sutler, a civilian merchant who followed the unit into the field with a wagon filled with items for sale to the soldiers. These items ranged from cigars and smoking tobacco, to tinned sardines, wooden combs, soap, cheese, pocket mirrors, toothbrushes, needles, watch keys, pencils, sausages, pickles, pens, ink, pens, and paper. W.T. Brown was the sutler of the Michigan Battalion of Independent Sharpshooters; W. Leach was sutler to the 1st New York Sharpshooter Battalion; James G. Taylor was sutler to the 1st Maine Sharpshooter Battalion. The 1st USSS had three sutlers during its career: James M. Miller, C.G. Walsh, and E. White. A.J. Sweetzer was sutler to the 2nd USSS.

Most men thought ill of sutlers, accusing them of exorbitant prices. Private Greene, however, called the 2nd's sutler "a nice man. I think he asks a fair price for his goods and he sticks to one price which is the only way a man can get along with such a body of men as there is in any Regt."

In December 1863, however, Greene complained about high costs. "Tobacco is very dear here," he wrote. "Navy is worth \$2.00 a plug." He suggested home folks should send him eight pounds, obviously for resale to his comrades. Sergeant White thought that sutlers' goods were sold "at prices that were the next thing to robbery."

At the same time, White wrote, soldiers often got revenge for being overcharged. "One of the most decisive ways to get square for some mean trick worked on a soldier was for one wronged to give the call, 'Rally, rally' and make a run for the tent of the offender and in less time than it takes to tell, the tent would come down and the goods would be going in all directions. The crowd of excited soldiers striving to get all they could and not be caught by the guard or the officers." In addition, soldiers often stepped up to the counter and took what they requested without paying for it.

Soldiers had to be paid in order to patronize the sutler, unless of course they didn't pay for what they obtained there. Aschmann recalled that:

Privates and noncommissioned officers were paid from 13 to 21 dollars monthly, officers upward of 105 dollars. Payments were made every two months but often only every four months, and a few times it even took six months before we received our pay. In May 1864 Congress approved an increase of three dollars a month for the rank and file. A soldier had a yearly allowance of 42 dollars for clothing. If he needed more clothes their cost was deducted from his pay while in the reverse case the balance was paid out to us.

This sharpshooter with his Sharps rifle appears to wear the issue leggings and dark green trousers of the USSS, but oddly had himself photographed in an undershirt. (Richard Carlile collection)



The men kept busy in camp even after actual fighting had finished with the surrender of Lee's Army in April 1865. Major Charles Mattocks, commander of the 1st USSS, wrote from this final camp, "We now have battalion drills in the afternoon and company drills in the forenoon. Dress Parade comes off at 5 o'clock, the Band gives us music at sunset, and our guard duty is being done very fairly."

During his enlistment each man was bound to spend some time in hospital, disease sweeping through the camps as a result of poor sanitary conditions and bad cooking. Private Greene was in the Lincoln General Hospital in December 1864, which was staffed by:

the Sisters of Charity. There is about fifty at this hospital. All young ladys & I assure you it looks queer to see them around without hoops, with their long brimmed linen bonnets. It seems like home to have their soft hands to smooth ones pillow, to feel & wet our heated brows. They wear a gold cross & a string of beads by their side & twice a day a bell is rung & they retire in solitude to pray.

### **On campaign**

Since sharpshooter skirmish work made the individual walk and run further and work harder than the average infantryman of the line, sharpshooters burned more calories in the field. One of the main problems sharpshooters reported when on the march or camped in the field was a lack of proper rations. Private Henry Crowell, Company E, 1st USSS, wrote home on September 29, 1863, during the Army of the Potomac's fall campaign,

We are all well I believe to day, but are short of rations and the boys are almighty cross this morning. They have porked and hard tacked us to death for about a week past. We have not drawn a bean or any molasses, potatoes, onions, rice or a durned thing but pork & hard bread, coffee & sugar, fresh beef twice for over 3 weeks, but I guess we shall get soft bread to day or to morrow if we don't move.

In the beginning, men often got sick from this food, which they prepared poorly. "For while the Americans were great hands to fry everything - fried pork, fried beef, fried hardtack swimming in grease," Stevens recalled, "[Swiss national and Crimean War veteran Captain] Trepp's men boiled their meats and, with plenty of vegetables, made soups, rarely if ever, eating fried food. It was really forbidden. This, the captain claimed, was the principal cause of their really small sick list. The others understood this after awhile, and resorted more to boiled food than formerly."

Men also supplemented their food with items obtained, by means fair or foul, from local civilians. Corporal William Kent wrote home from the Peninsula on July 28, 1862, that he had been on the march



**A reproduction of one type of USSS officer's cap badge. The other style had the letters USSS in silver in Old English script within a wreath on a black oval. (Author's collection)**



This volunteer wears the horizontal horn insignia worn by members of the 1st Michigan Sharpshooter Battalion, although his exact organization is today unknown. The insignia originated with the US Army's mounted rifle regiment. (Richard Carlile collection)

and "under the circumstances foraging was not considered unpardonable, and rebel cattle, poultry and pigs did good service with more impunity to the eaters than former general orders would give us reason to believe." After another long march, "A short halt enabled some of the boys to forage a little, and they got a little pig which they ate without salt and without much preparation." Still later Kent "made a good meal of raw wheat as an article of diet together with garlies. Can't recommend it except in cases of extreme hunger." Finally, a couple of days later, Kent "made a respectable dinner of sugar and garlic."

One interesting item the Union Army issued in an attempt to get vegetables to its men in the field was called "desiccated vegetables," a dried compressed block of mixed vegetables, including turnips, the only identifiable vegetable, that was to be soaked to expand and then cooked to form a sort of pea soup. Kent received a square of this item and it "answered for our supper, when one got time to eat it."

Coffee was one item that the Union Army made sure its men got in sufficient quantity. This also came premixed with sugar and dried milk in it as a sort of 19th-century instant coffee. It was greatly appreciated, and many men became known as "coffee boilers" from their habit of starting small fires at every halt of the line of march to boil water for coffee.

At the head of the column, sharpshooters found their marches were often long and hard. Kent recalled in one such march, "At every little halt on that road the men would lie down in their tracks, and would snore at a second's notice. When we started they would stagger into the ranks and sleep as they walked. Our canteens had been empty early that evening, and finding water was out of the question in the darkness."

Officers had their food prepared by servants, either civilians, often runaway slaves, or men from the ranks. Greene was the servant to his company's officers, even though a regular enlisted soldier, and wrote home from Virginia on March 23, 1862, "I have the cooking to do for the Capt. and two Lieuts. The first Lieut. has a boy here that brings the water, gets the wood, etc. ... I have sausages, beef steak, etc. We buy our bread at the Comasary's [Commissary's] and at the sutlers. I had a good sausage super [sic] tonight - I tell you it went first-rate. We have butter, cheese, coffee, tea, sugar, molasses, etc."

Tents disappeared after the first campaign, although in late 1862 the USSS were issued with shelter halves, each man getting half a small tent that was designed to be buttoned together with another half to form a tent for two men. Before that men simply roughed it. Greene wrote home in April 1862 of how they had been marching and lay down under an open sky to sleep when it began to rain:



Although many sharpshooter officers did not carry swords in the field, preferring the rifle and pistol, officially they were to carry this type of regulation foot officer's sword. (Author's collection)

I thought I could stand it so I went to sleep and slept until midnight. When I awoke I found I was in a puddle of water, the Capt. and other fellow gone. The rain was pouring down good and I thought I would not be drove up so I turned over out of the water and went to sleep again. I woke at about 4 o'clock and through I would get up and dry myself. I went out where the rest of the boys were and they had not slept a wink.

Much marching was done in hot weather under a broiling sun. Many men put wet leaves in their forage caps to cool them down during the march.

Sharpshooters, whenever marching through potentially dangerous territory, tended to keep more alert than did line units. Greene wrote home from Northern Virginia on July 27, 1862, that his unit's line of march halted for the night:

And all of them were making coffee with their guns stacked and belts off, all except our company's. The Col. would not let them take them off, but made them stay within reach of their rifles.

Thus they were (the 2nd Wis. washing their feet, a part of them) when the spy, or rather scout, of Gen. Gib[b]on's came dashing down the road with the news that a body of cavalry was coming down on them. But he was not quick enough for scarcely had he told it when down out of the woods came a large body of rebel, or Ashby cavalry. All was in confusion.

Top, the brass NCO belt plate with its silver wreath. Bottom left, the brass cartridge box plate not used with the Sharps' box. Bottom right, the oval brass enlisted man's belt plate was made from thin sheet brass with a lead backing. (Author's collection)



The major of the 2nd Wis. ordered his men to run for the woods but the sharp shooters, like men, grasped their rifles and not waiting for orders, poured a most deadly fire into them killing 5 men and wounding the officer commanding. Upon receiving this volley, the enemy wheeled and dropped on to their horses necks. Another volley started them on a retreat with the Indiana cavalry (now mounted) at their heels.

At other times the two sides suspended hostilities. Greene noted in his diary on June 5, 1864:

At about 3 o'clock we made the agreement to have no more shooting & then, we that had done all in our power to kill one another during the day, met & in a friendly manner exchanged coffee, tobacco, etc. & while we were between the two lines we buried a dead horse which had been rather offensive to both sides. The Johnnys remained on their side & the yanks on the other side. After talking to them for nearly two hours we retired to our places & every thing remained quiet until dark when the enemy opened along the whole line.

Tobacco, a southern staple, was often hard to obtain by Federal soldiers and many of them picked up the smoking habit in the service. Occasionally one could trade northern newspapers for southern tobacco but more often one had to patronize the sutler. Aschmann mentioned a rare time when,

For several days there had been a lack of tobacco. This inconvenience was remedied by accident, for not far from our place the men found a barn filled with good Virginia tobacco which was immediately confiscated and distributed among the smokers. We had a few cigar-makers in our company who went to work without delay and supplied us with aromatic Virginia cigars. Moreover, everyone took along a goodly quantity of the long-craved-for leaves.

#### **In battle**

In battle the sharpshooters were generally used as Berdan originally planned, in small groups no larger than one or two companies. New commander Charles Mattocks wrote home in March 1864, on taking command of the 1st U.S.S.S., to say their function was to "go ahead and 'kick up the muss'".

Private William Kent wrote home on July 28, 1862 from Harrison Landing, Virginia, about his first combat experience:

We piled our knapsacks and blankets and then formed the line of skirmishers in the

An issue canteen made after July 1862 and supplied through the Philadelphia Quartermaster Depot that has "circular indentations on each side" for added strength. Canteens issued through this depot habitually had strings to retain the cork, a wide variety of cloth covers, and, until 1862, a russet leather strap. (Author's collection)



edge of the woods, parallel with the valley, and then advanced down the hill, through the swamp and up the other side to the edge of the woods where we could see the approach of the rebels. ... The "ninth" [Massachusetts] was now drawn in behind us, and drawn back half way up the hill on our side, where we took cover behind trees and stumps, and so watched until 3 P.M.

Then a brisk firing commenced on our right [the battle of Gaines' Mill] and scattered along until it come opposite of me. Tremendous volley of small arms, and the peal of heavy guns were the last things I heard before I went in. We fought pretty much on our own hook the officers being far to the right, and the human voice was of no account. The rebels rushed down the hill in line of battle, but it wasn't quite so easy rushing across a swamp, waist deep in thick mud, and as they tried it we tried Sharp's rifles at eight rods, firing as fast as we could put in cartridges, the distance being so short that aim was unnecessary. We couldn't help hitting them and our vigorous fire held them in check for some minutes - minutes are hours at such a time - and they were thrown into some disorder. Meanwhile, things were not very still. The bullets came like hair, and the trees looked like nutmeg graters, but our cover was pretty good and their aim, feet too high, so that our company lost only one killed and three wounded.

After the campaign was done, he added, "As far as I can remember I was perfectly cool, though sometimes I had a most ardent desire to try my legs, instead of my eyes, and I would have to pray most earnestly for strength, to do my duty. I did not exactly like to say, 'Oh God, help me to shoot that man' but substituted 'do my duty' and shot at men as well as I knew how."

This became the standard method of combat for the sharpshooters. Lieutenant Thomas Connington, Company K, 1st USSS, wrote home:

If the Gen. commanding has an idea the enemy is in a certain place and don't know their strength or position exactly, he orders skirmishers thrown out and in our corps it comes on the Sharpshooters because we have better guns and have drilled more in that than anything else.

It depends upon the front they want to cover as to the number thrown out, sometimes one or two Co's and sometimes half the Regt. always saving half the Regt. as reserve. Those thrown out deploy 5 paces apart and move forward in line, always keeping that together. We advance cautiously and are allowed to take the advantage of trees, stumps or anything that will make a cover.



**An issue canteen as provided by the New York Quartermaster Depot, which was the only quartermaster depot to have chains that retained the cork to the canteen. It has a brown jeans cloth cover. (Author's collection)**

Captain C.A. Stevens later described how skirmish warfare changed the role of the individual soldier in warfare:

Going into action as skirmishers five paces apart (oftener ten), and frequently in brushy places of thickets out of sight of the comrade right and left, often far ahead of the regular battle line, each man looking out for himself, making of each skirmisher a separate and distinctive body or force, taking the place in a measure of a company, is a performance that brings out to the fullest intensity all the perceptive qualities of the individual; while the enemy in the largest possible formation, watches this isolated skirmisher with the same degree of interest for the time being, as they do afterwards the approaching columns. So that the skirmisher becomes a very much noted character in spite of himself.

Their Confederate opponents were well aware the sharpshooters' abilities, and treated them with great respect. Private Alexander Hunder, 17th Virginia Infantry, recalled their being across the lines from their defenses at Williamsburg in 1862. "Some of these sharpshooters had holes dug in the ground close to our trenches, within which they had every comfort, while they kept a close and constant watch over us. We used to place a hat on a stick and lift it above the embankment just to see them put a bullet in it," he wrote. "We lost in the Seventeenth, by these sharpshooters during our occupancy of the trenches, a sergeant killed, one private killed, and two wounded."

Still, two killed and two wounded is not a great number of casualties out of an entire regiment, leaving one to wonder how effective the sharpshooters were in battle. Some evidence suggests that they were not as effective as originally believed. For example, on the second day of Gettysburg the 1st USSS ran into remainders of the 10th and 11th Alabama Regiments. At a distance of some 300 yards, the 11th Alabama took cover



**The men of Andrews'**  
Sharpshooters possibly received Massachusetts-issue haversacks such as this one. The food bag on the right buttoned inside the bag by the same type of bone buttons used to button the flap closed. (Author's collection)





Most sharpshooters served in small groups such as this picket post. (*Harper's Weekly*)

behind a rail fence in an open field – hardly fully protective cover. Even so, the regiment lost only one officer and 17 men wounded at this range to the sharpshooters' billets. In fact, in that fight some 66 Federals and 56 Confederates were reported killed, wounded, and missing.

The two regiments of US Sharpshooters suffered from another problem at the highest command level. Berdan himself, while an excellent manager and organizer, quickly earned the dislike of all ranks. Totally without military knowledge, he was forced to bring in a regular army officer to train his troops in basic drill. Moreover, he was arrogant, temperamental, and dictatorial. Above all, he appeared to be cowardly, in an age when bravery was considered vital to a man. In heavy fighting in the Peninsula Campaign he often found excuses for going to the rear to "protect the sick," or "procure ammunition." Despite this, his official reports exaggerated his own role greatly.

On July 4, 1862 five company-grade officers sent a petition to Berdan's superior asking for his relief. Although he managed to avoid this, he was placed under arrest on March 2, 1863 by his divisional commander and court martialled. Berdan again escaped a guilty finding. On the other hand, the 1st Regiment's commander, Caspar Trepp, a professional Swiss soldier who had seen action in the Crimean War and Garibaldi's Italian campaign, was an excellent officer. The two were bound not to get along, and Berdan eventually arrested Trepp on a trumped-up charge. The court martial found Trepp not guilty and he returned to do excellent service.

On August 7, 1863 Berdan was placed on medical leave for a relapse of a minor wound that he had received at the second battle of Bull Run, when he was struck in the chest by a stray shell fragment while in the rear, as usual. He would never return to active duty and was honorably discharged on January 2, 1864. Trepp continued in action, only to be killed by a shot through his red corps cap badge at Mine Run in November 1863.

## CONFEDERATE SHARPSHOOTERS

### Recruiting

"Probably the most effective troops in the late civil war," wrote Captain John Laughton, Jr., a member of the sharpshooter battalion of Mahone's Brigade of the Army of Northern Virginia, "for the number of men engaged, were the sharpshooters. The value of this branch of the service became so apparent that companies and battalions were organized in most of the brigades of infantry."

At first no provisions were made in the Confederate Army for sharpshooter units. However, troops soon saw the value of such units, and in April 1862 the Confederate Congress passed an act to organize battalions of sharpshooters:

SECTION 1. The Congress of the Confederate States of America do enact, That the Secretary of War may secure to be organized a battalion of sharpshooters for each brigade, consisting of not less than three nor more than six companies, to be composed of men selected from the brigade or otherwise, and armed with long-range muskets or rifles, said companies to be organized, and the commissioned officers therefore appointed by the President, by and with the advice, and consent of the Senate. Such battalions shall constitute parts of the brigades to which they belong, and shall have such field and staff officers as are authorized by law for similar battalions, to be appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate.

A sharpshooter with a target rifle peers through the brush as if on picket or skirmish duty. (Author's collection)



### **Confederate Sharpshooter Units**

<b>Unit</b>	<b>Raised</b>	<b>Served in</b>	<b>Disbanded</b>
17th Alabama Battalion	1862	Army of Tennessee	1864
23rd Alabama Battalion	1863	Army of North Virginia	1865
1st Arkansas Battalion	1862	Mississippi	1863
12th Arkansas Battalion	1862	Mississippi	1863
1st Georgia Battalion	1862	Army of Tennessee	1865
2nd Georgia Battalion	1862	Army of Tennessee	1865
3rd Georgia Battalion	1863	Army of North Virginia	1865
4th Georgia Battalion	1863	Army of Tennessee	1865
14th Louisiana Battalion	1862	Army of Tennessee	1865
1st Mississippi Battalion	1862	Army of Tennessee	1865
9th Mississippi Battalion	1862	Army of Tennessee	1865
15th Mississippi Battalion	1862	Army of Tennessee	1863
9th Missouri Battalion	1862	Mississippi	1865
1st North Carolina Battalion	1862	Army of North Virginia	1865
1st South Carolina Battalion	1862	South Carolina	1863
1st Texas Battalion	1862	Western Theater	1865

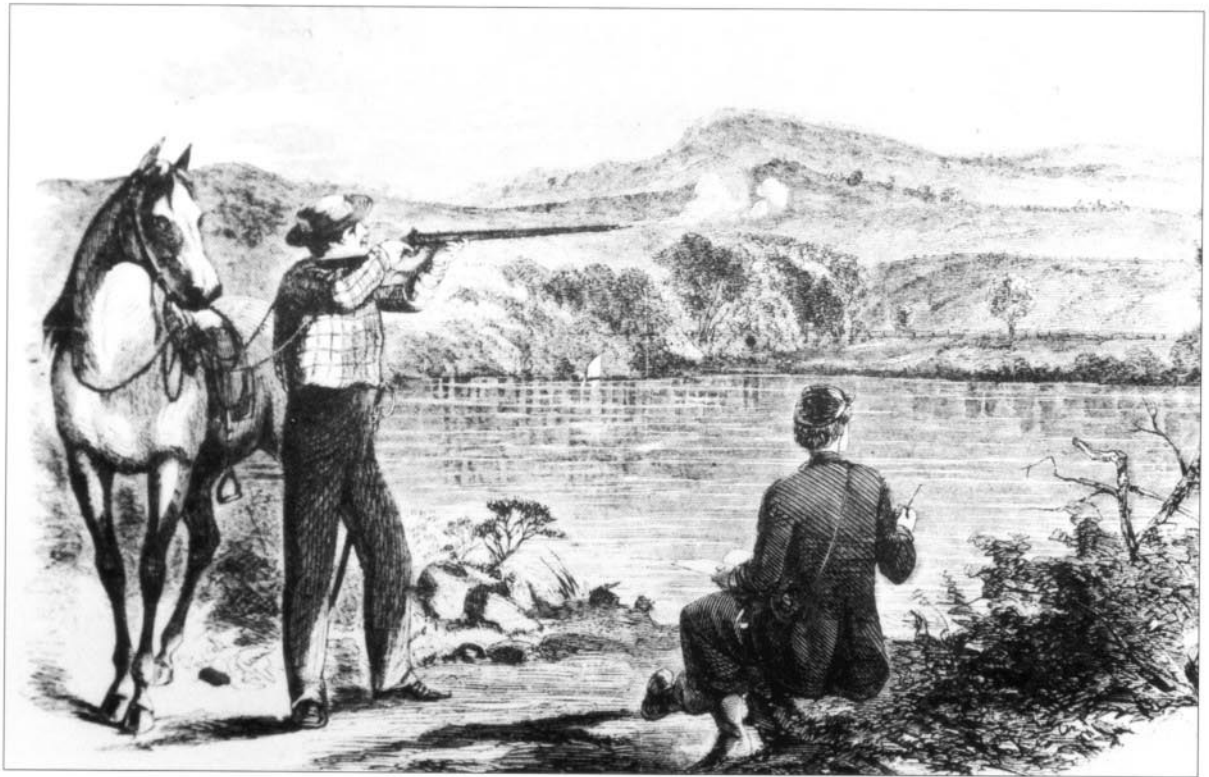
SEC. 2. Be it further enacted, That for the purpose of arming the said battalions, the long-range muskets and rifles in the hands of the troops, may be taken for that purpose: Provided, The Government has not at its command a sufficient number of approved long-range rifles or muskets wherewith to arm said corps.

II. Gen.'s commanding military departments may cause to be organized within their commands battalions of sharpshooters, as provided in this act, in such numbers as they may deem necessary, not exceeding one such battalion for each brigade, and will report to the Department the organization of such corps, recommending for appointment the commissioned officers allowed by law.

III. In organizing such battalions generals commanding may cause such details or transfers to be made as will not reduce any company or corps below the minimum number required by law, taking the men for each such battalion so far as possible from the particular brigade of which it is to form a part.

IV. Requisitions will be made upon the Ordnance Department for the arms for such battalions, and until the said requisitions can be filled the generals commanding may cause such exchanges and transfers of long-range muskets and rifles to be made as may be necessary to arm the said battalions, returning surplus arms when such requisitions are filled to the Ordnance Department.

These units were further defined when on May 22 it was ordered that each sharpshooter battalion should consist of men strictly from a single state, rather than being mixed companies as was the case with the 1st and 2nd USSS. The men, however, were not recruited from civilian life into sharpshooter units but rather were transferred for specific campaigns from regular line infantry units.



**A sharpshooter fires across the Potomac River from the Maryland to the Virginia side. The author of this sketch suggests that the man hit his target. (*Harper's Weekly*)**

Such companies were formed in the western theater fairly early, and were in the field by the 1862 campaign. The two-company-strong 17th Alabama Sharpshooter battalion was formed in the summer of 1862 and served in the Army of Tennessee until disbanded in August 1864. The 1st Arkansas Sharpshooter Battalion, originally a cavalry unit, was organized in the summer of 1862 and served in the west until captured at Vicksburg in 1863. After it was exchanged it was reconstituted as a cavalry battalion.

The four-company-strong 1st Georgia Sharpshooter Battalion was formed in spring 1862 in Georgia and was sent to the Army of Tennessee in mid-1863. It served until it surrendered on April 26, 1865 in North Carolina. The 2nd Georgia Sharpshooter Battalion, six companies strong, was formed in the summer of 1862 and sent to the Army of Tennessee, surrendering in North Carolina in 1865. The 4th Georgia Sharpshooter Battalion was not raised until 1863, then served with the Army of Tennessee before surrendering in North Carolina in April 1865. The 14th Louisiana Sharpshooter Battalion was raised in summer 1862 with three companies drawn from the 11th Louisiana Infantry Regiment. It surrendered on May 4, 1865.

The 1st Mississippi Sharpshooter Battalion was formed from three companies drawn from the 2nd Confederate Infantry Regiment and served with the Army of Tennessee through to its surrender in April 1865. The 9th Mississippi Sharpshooter Battalion (Chalmers' Sharpshooters) was formed in fall 1862 with three companies. It surrendered with the Army of Tennessee in April 1865. The 15th Mississippi Sharpshooter Battalion was formed in summer 1862 with two companies. It was disbanded as under strength in December 1863. The



A: US Sharpshooter

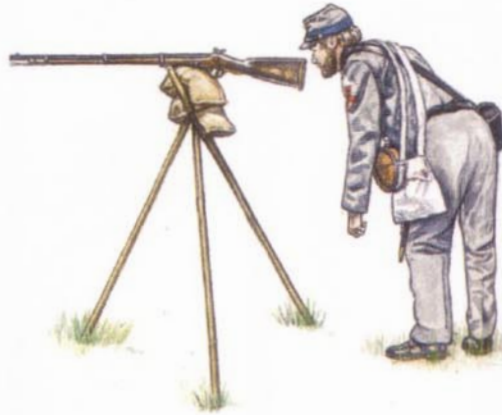






B: Passing the Test

C: Training



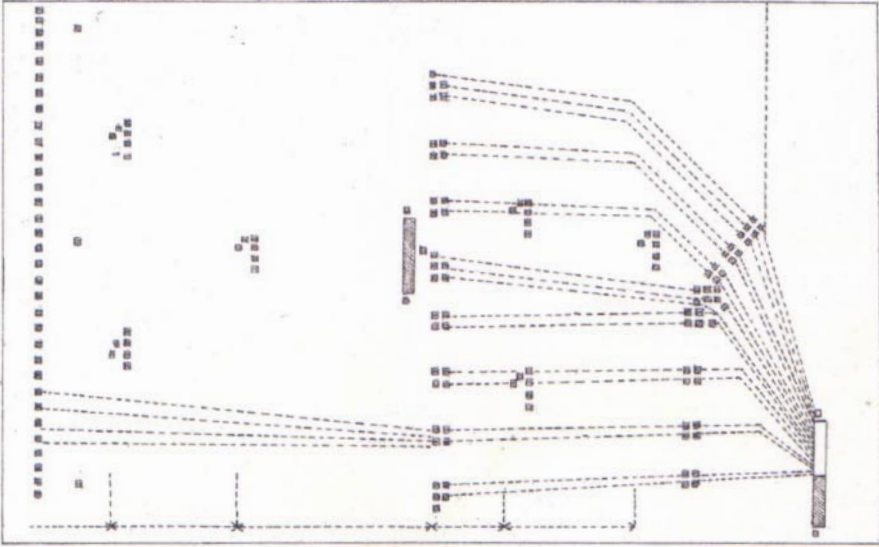


D: Sharpshooter's Weapons





E: Skirmish Drill





F: A Picket Post



110004  
GRAV. CAP. 57-58  
LONGFIELD  
BALL  
WATERBURY







H: Private, 1st Georgia Sharpshooters, Army of Tennessee



3



4



1



4



4



5



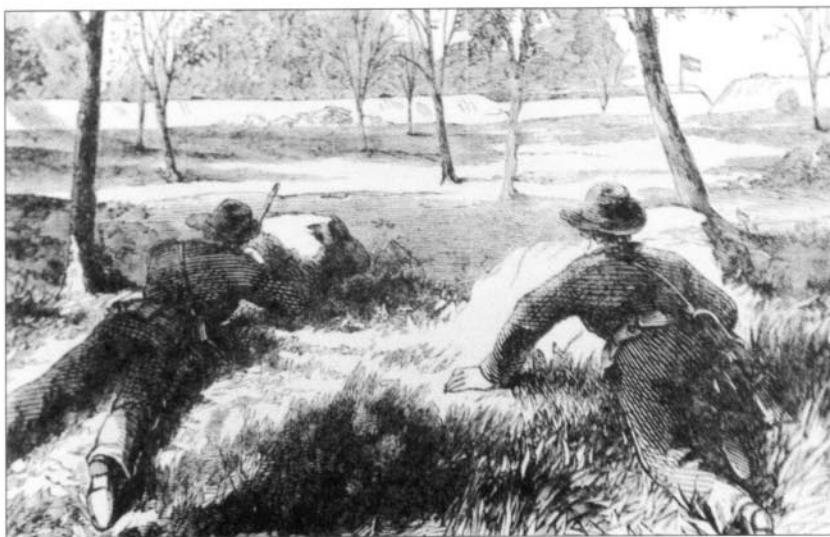
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24th Tennessee Sharpshooter Battalion was formed in May 1863 and served with the Army of Tennessee until it surrendered in 1865.

After Murfreesboro, in early 1862, an Army of Tennessee divisional commander, Major General Patrick Cleburne, ordered a sharpshooter company to be formed in his brigade. Staff officer Irving Buck recalled, "he first directed that each commander should send him names of a certain number of the best marksmen in their regiments. From out of these, making the highest practice score, the required number was selected, detached from their regiments, and placed under command of a lieutenant." The company became known as the "Whitworth Sharpshooters." According to Buck, "It was an *elite* corps, and while the service was dangerous it was exciting and had immunity from the drudgery of camp and guard duty, and a place in it was eagerly sought. It had its own wagon, reported to division headquarters, and received orders direct from division headquarters near which it habitually camped."

Confederate territory west of the Mississippi River was termed the Trans-Mississippi Department. It was virtually independent of Richmond's control after the fall of Vicksburg. Sharpshooter battalions were also raised soon after being authorized in this department. The 12th Arkansas Sharpshooter Battalion was formed in the spring of 1862 and was also captured at Vicksburg. After being exchanged it was reformed in the Trans-Mississippi Department until disbanded towards the end of the war. The 31st Arkansas Infantry Regiment, raised in summer 1862, was considered a sharpshooter battalion. It was assigned to the Department in mid-1863 and was later consolidated into the 4th Arkansas Infantry Regiment. The 9th Missouri Sharpshooter Battalion, a five-company unit, served in the Trans-Mississippi Department after being raised in late 1862. It disbanded in the spring of 1865. The 1st Texas Sharpshooter Battalion, which was mounted for a time in 1864, was formed in the spring of 1862 and surrendered in June 1865.

The 1st South Carolina Sharpshooter Battalion was raised in mid-1862 with four companies. It served in the Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida until merged into the 27th South Carolina Infantry Regiment in September 1863.



A *Harper's Weekly* artist sent back this drawing of Berdan's Sharpshooters firing on Confederate works during the siege of Yorktown in 1862.

Although there was some discussion about it, the Army of Northern Virginia did not have a large number of sharpshooter battalions even in the 1863 campaign. The 1st North Carolina Sharpshooter Battalion was raised in May 1862, with two companies drawn from the 21st North Carolina Infantry, and was assigned to the Army of Northern Virginia. It surrendered at Appomattox. The Palmetto (South Carolina) Sharpshooter Regiment was drawn from the 2nd, 5th, and 9th South Carolina Infantry Regiments in April 1862. However, as one of its officers later wrote, "The [Palmetto Sharpshooters] was originally intended for special service as the name indicates, but the exigencies of the army prevented the consummation of this design and the regiment was thrown into [R.H. Anderson's] brigade as formerly, instead of acting as an independent, separate command, filling the place of sharpshooters, as practiced in the Federal army." The 30th Virginia Sharpshooter Battalion, a six-company unit, was formed in August 1862 and served in the Valley of Virginia until disbanded after the battle of Waynesborough.

"I forgot to tell you about the Sharp Shooters," Private William Montgomery wrote home to Georgia from Virginia on May 7, 1863. "Gen Wofford had 50 men detailed from each Regt in the Brigade (5) to form a battalion of Sharp Shooters. ... We are in camp to ourselves & are known as the 1st Geo 'sharpshooters' but have no commissions yet."

Several sharpshooter battalions that originally formed out west ended up in the Army of Northern Virginia almost more by chance than design. The three-company-strong 23rd Alabama Sharpshooter Battalion was formed in November 1863 and ended up with Longstreet's Corps in the Tennessee Campaign, returning with that corps to Virginia where it surrendered in April 1865. The 3rd Georgia Sharpshooter Battalion of five companies was formed in spring 1863, and served with Longstreet's Corps in Tennessee, staying with them in Virginia and surrendering at Appomattox.

However, the sharpshooter battalions did not take the field with the Army of Northern Virginia in great numbers until the 1864 campaign. In the winter of 1863-64, J.F.J. Caldwell, an officer of McGowan's



Another part of the drawing of Berdan's men firing on Confederate works at Yorktown shows how muzzle-loading rifled muskets had to be loaded when the user was prone. Taking the eye off the target caused problems in relocating the target quickly under fire.





Sharpshooters fought traditionally in open skirmish order, as do these men shown moving on Confederate works. (*Harper's Weekly*)

Brigade of the Army of Northern Virginia, recalled that, "The brigade battalion of Sharpshooters, latterly fallen into disuse, was revived. A detail of six commissioned officers, ten non-commissioned officers, and one hundred and sixty privates constituted the corps. Capt. Dunlop, of the Twelfth regiment, was placed in charge."

Some men found the duties proposed appealing and volunteered. Sergeant Barry Benson recalled how he and a friend volunteered, but as his friend was a lance corporal and only one non-commissioned officer and one private were required from his company, his company commander would not let them both go. His friend, however, offered to go as a private, so much was his desire to get into the sharpshooters, and the pair went into their brigade's battalion together.

There was no specific regulation table of organization for Confederate sharpshooter battalions.

Captain W.S. Dunlop was awarded command of the Sharpshooter Battalion raised from McGowan's South Carolina Brigade over the winter of 1863-64. He recalled:

The battalion of sharpshooters of McGowan's brigade was permanently organized on or about the 1st day of March, 1864, and was composed of three companies of about sixty men each, rank and file; with one commissioned and three non-commissioned officers to the company.

A draft was levied upon the regiments of the brigade for three or four men from each company to make up the number requisite for the new organization, to be selected from the best men in the company, with due regard to the peculiar and hazardous service for which they were designed. The regiments promptly responded to the call and detailed the men, with two non-commissioned officers, according to the terms of the requisition, while the brigade commander selected the company commanders, together with the commandant of the corps. The companies of the battalion were designated "first," "second" and "third," and were assigned to their positions in the line according to number, reckoning from the right.



Lying in open order, Federals prepare to move forward against Confederates in the woods in this *Harper's Weekly* woodcut.

In Mahone's Brigade orders were issued to each regiment to create a company consisting of two commissioned officers, two sergeants, two corporals, 30 privates, and two men assigned to Ambulance Corps duty. One of these officers recalled, "The officers and men were to be detailed from their regular companies for this permanent organization, and to be selected with a view of their special fitness for such service, the qualifications being that the men should be veterans of established reputation for faithful and reliable dependence while in action; capable of enduring the extra hardships expected to be entailed, and also a proper use of the rifle; the officers to be of experience and ability, and having the implicit confidence of their men."

So organized, Mahone's Brigade's sharpshooter battalion consisted of five companies with 11 officers and 180 enlisted men. On the other hand, Captain John B. Young, who served with a sharpshooter battalion under Cadmus Wilcox, recalled that his "battalion was composed of one commandant, eight commissioned officers, ten non-commissioned officers, one hundred and sixty privates, four scouts, and two buglers, specially selected, and drafted from each brigade. These were divided into four companies, equally officered."

Supposedly only the best shots and skirmishers should be transferred, and new battalion commanders tried their best to make sure this would happen. Young recalled that:

As it was a matter of the utmost importance that men should be chosen of tried courage and steadiness, who were good marksmen, and possessed of the requisite self-confidence, great care and caution were exercised in the drafts. Company commanders were ordered to present none for duty with the sharpshooters who did not come up to the standard; while the commandant of each battalion, assisted by his lieutenants, personally superintended the examination of all recruits offered for this branch of the service. The company officers in the corps were equally set apart for their military reputations with respect to zeal, intelligence, and personal gallantry.



It was natural, however, for regimental and company commanders to want to keep their best men, so filling sharpshooter units with nothing but the best was not always the case. Colonel John Pressley, 25th South Carolina, exposed the problems of creating such units through transfer rather than specific recruiting, as was done in northern sharpshooter units:

The men ... had enlisted under laws which guaranteed to them the right to select their own organizations and elect their own officers. ... Men were to be torn from their comrades, friends, neighbors and officers of their choice, and turned over to the tender mercies of strangers whose ability for command was untried. ... Every regiment in the department was invaded and where volunteers could not be obtained (and very few were found willing to go) compulsory details were required.

Pressley allowed each captain to choose the men to go the best way he saw fit. One captain allowed the men to vote on which of their comrades should go, while in another company the men chipped in to hire two volunteers.

"Unfitness for a sharpshooter was the quality most looked after," Pressley thought. "The consequence was, that as a whole, General Pemberton's sharpshooters were the rivals of 'Falstaff's army.' When they were gotten together it was found that after the maimed, the halt and the blind were discharged there were men enough for two pretty good companies out of a whole battalion."

Even so, Pressley wrote, "Notwithstanding every subterfuge which the captains could with honor devise, some good men were lost. Though a good shot could not be selected by draft, which was resorted to in some of the companies, it was sometimes impossible to prevent the lot falling on a good man."

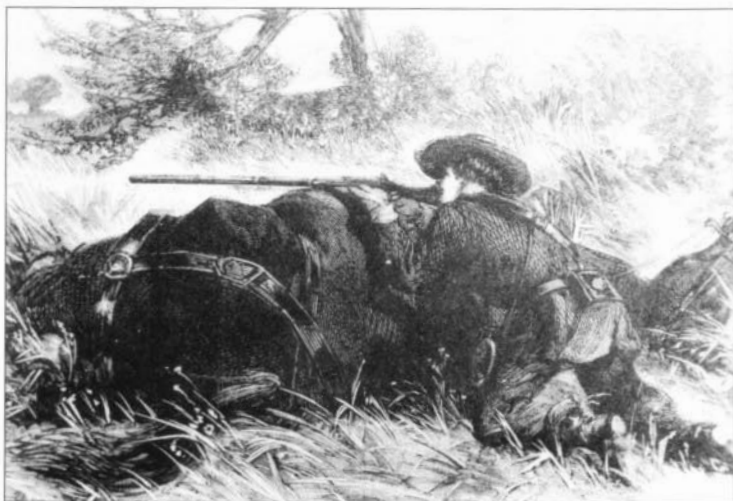
## Training

Since Confederate sharpshooters were already veterans by the time they were transferred into sharpshooter companies, they already knew company and battalion drill, as well as the basics of soldiering. This saved a great deal of time in preparing them for active service. However, sharpshooter service required more than basic infantry knowledge, and the new units were quickly trained in additional skills.

Irving Buck of Cleburne's Brigade of the Army of Tennessee noted that in early 1862, when a sharpshooter company was first raised in the Brigade,

Major [Calhoun] Benham, of the division staff, instructed them first in the exact working

Sharpshooters had to fire from whatever cover they could find, as does this one shown in *Harper's Weekly*.



of every part of the rifle, then in marksmanship, and to judge distance by the eye (no range finders were in use) by marching them to ground of different topographical features. An object would be pointed out, and distance to it estimated, after which the actual distance would be measured. By constant practice the men became quite expert in doing this, over hills and across ravines or level ground.

Benham, who had been an attorney before the war, became the Army of Tennessee's expert in training potential sharpshooters, and in 1863 was sent to Richmond to have a manual he had written published on the subject. The manual, largely drawn from the British Army's *Regulations for Conducting the Musketry Instruction*, consisted of a section on the weapon, noting effects of sun, wind, powder charge, etc. on firing; a section on how to actually fire the weapon, including blank firing; and one on judging distances. What it did not include was a section on actual live firing target practice, Benham noting that, "The situation of our armies, and the economy necessary in ammunition, render it impossible to practice at the target to any great extent." The manual was finally published in September 1863.

While Benham's manual was used in the Army of Tennessee, it was not apparently the manual of choice in the Army of Northern Virginia. The Confederate sharpshooter officer John Young wrote that the men in the Army of Northern Virginia battalions were trained from "a *brochure*, translated from the French by General C.M. Wilcox, and comprised the skirmish drill, the bayonet exercise, and practical instruction in estimating distances."

Barry Benson recalled that "On the 6th of April [1864], the Battalion of Sharpshooters were officially organized, and inspection held. After that we used to practice shooting at a target. We practiced judging distances also, for it is essential for a soldier to know how far his enemy is from him, in order to adjust his sights properly."

John Laughton, Jr. wrote that the early spring of 1864 was spent:

in perfecting ourselves in the skirmish drill by signals and in rifle-target practice at different ranges – from fifty yards to 1,000 yards – and so proficient did the men become in estimating distances that, although the chain was used to confirm their calculations, its use was finally discontinued as being unnecessary. Every day these practices were kept up under strict discipline, and systematic regulation and improvement in marksmanship noted, and such men as failed to make satisfactory progress were returned to their companies and others substituted.

Dunlop described training, which was to last six hours a day, in rather more detail:

To meet the purposes of the organization, as well as to secure the highest degree of skill and efficiency in movement and action, an unique and concise system of tactics was prepared and compiled from the American skirmish and French zouave drills and introduced by the commander for the government of the



battalion on the field, while a "manual of arms" in the form of a brochure upon the subject of rifle training was furnished by Maj. Gen. [Cadmus] Wilcox. These, together, became the standard par excellence of the sharpshooters, both upon the drill ground and in active operations on the field.

Estimating distance, target practices, movements and dispositions against cavalry, bayonet exercise, etc., were prominent features of the system.

The battalion was first put upon drill in estimating distance. It was drawn up in line in open field; a man or an object the size of a man was stationed in front at an unknown distance, about one hundred yards off, and the roll called; at the call of each name the man stepped forward ten paces, surveyed carefully the object in front, calculated the intervening space, and deliberately announced in exact figures his estimate of the distance between, and a record was made of his judgment; then the next in the same way, and so on through the entire command. The distance was increased from time to time, from one hundred to two, three, five and nine hundred yards, and an accurate account kept of each man's judgment in each drill. The practice in this drill was continued from day to day until every man could tell, almost to a mathematical certainty, the distance to any given point within the compass of his drill. A few, however, were naturally and hopelessly deficient in their powers of estimating distance, and hence were exchanged for others.

**When field operations slowed to full siege, such as this time at Vicksburg, sharpshooters began firing from behind whatever works they could find. Officers took their turn picking off enemy cannoneers as much as enlisted men.**

The target practice was conducted in the same way. The battalion was formed on the range, a target about the size of a man was placed in front at a distance of one hundred yards, with a bullseye in the center of about five inches in diameter enclosed within an inner circle of about fourteen inches and an outer circle of about twenty-four inches; a tripod was constructed of convenient height, with a sandbag lodged in its fork on which to rest the heavy rifle while the soldier aimed and fired, and the practice began.

The target for 100 yards, pine plank one inch thick, 2x6 feet.  
The target for 500 yards, pine plank one inch thick, 4x6 feet.  
The target for 900 yards, pine plank one inch thick 6x6 feet.

The bullseye was enlarged, as well as the circles, as the distance was extended.

The roll was called, as in the first drill, and each man in his turn stepped forward to the tripod, aimed and fired; the flag man at the target announced, by signal, the result of the fire, which was recorded; and the practice continued until the entire battalion had taken part in the drill. This practice was continued from day to day, and the distance increased from time to time up to 900 yards, with a complete record kept of each drill, until the results achieved in estimating distance and rifle training were as amazing to the brigade commander as they were gratifying to the officers and men of the battalion.

In addition, Dunlop trained his men in field practice. "The sharpshooters were carefully and thoroughly instructed in all the rules of rapid and extraordinary formation, and were ready to move promptly to the front, flank or rear, as the exigency required," he wrote. "They were trained to advance in full breast, en echelon, by the right, left or center; and could strike at any angle, as well with the left hand as with the right; so that they were equipped for the conflict, whether in field or forest, or in the streets and lanes of a town or city."

Even after initial training, some training continued. Dunlop recalled at Petersburg:

The study of military tactics was enjoined by general officers upon all officers – commissioned and non-commissioned – with schools of recitation established at company, regimental and brigade headquarters, in which at stated periods lessons in the school of the company, battalion and evolutions of the line, were recited to the commanding officers and discussed. Drills were kept up daily, with marked improvement in the ease and accuracy with which the more difficult evolutions were performed. Examining boards were also established, before whom every applicant for promotion was required to appear and pass his examination before his commission was issued.

**As siege works grew, as here at Vicksburg, engineers, sappers and miners created more solid field works using wicker baskets filled with earth known as gabions. This sharpshooter has placed his hat next to his firing port as a target for enemy shots.**



## **Weapons, equipment, uniforms**

Lacking an adequate industrial base, the Confederate Ordnance Department was unable to supply weapons as sophisticated as the Sharps or Colt rifles to their sharpshooters. There were some Whitworth rifles already in service in the Confederate Army, but these were expensive and had to be imported through a blockade that was growing increasingly effective. Still, they were the weapon of choice for snipers, and, as they were essentially the same weight and size as the standard infantry rifled musket, they were easier to use and transport than the heavy target rifles that Federal snipers used. In fact, the 0.45 caliber Whitworth ammunition weighed less than the 0.577 Enfield ammunition carried by line infantrymen.

The vast majority of Whitworth rifles, moreover, were made for the British Army and were therefore unavailable to the Confederate government. Instead the Confederates had to accept essentially civilian models, such as had been made for sale to British rifle volunteers. As an indication of the quality of these weapons, some had been stamped on the trigger guards "2d quality." Most of them were made prior to the spring of 1862, and therefore before serious organizing of sharpshooter battalions. An arms and ammunition report dated June 25, 1864 from General Johnston's command of the Army of Mississippi indicates there were 32 Whitworth rifles in that command, and these were later assigned to the Army of Tennessee. A report dated July 13, 1863 indicates that 13 Whitworth rifles with telescopic sights were sent from the arsenal in Augusta, Georgia, to Charleston, South Carolina.

Charles Vanderford, who had been a sharpshooter in the Army of Tennessee, later described his weapon:

The Whitworth rifle was made in England and was imported by the Ordnance Bureau of the Confederate States at a cost of about \$1000 in the equivalent of gold for each rifle and 1000 rounds of ammunition. A telescope, about ten inches long, fitted with lenses of great power and exquisite finish, could be instantly hinged upon the breech end of the barrel, the eye piece adjusted so as to be at the proper distance from the left eye of the rifleman. The front, or object-glass, end of the telescope, was furnished with an arc sliding easily, but close, in a guide-piece fastened upon the barrel of the gun. The axis of the telescope and that of the rifle barrel were exactly parallel in vertical line whatever the elevation of the muzzle; the aim was always made by sighting through the glass. The cartridge was made with great care; the bullets of compressed lead, 1.5 inches long, and of precisely uniform weight; the charges of powder precisely of the same weight, the grains somewhat coarse, of uniform size, finely glazed; the cartridge wrapped in parchment and coated with paraffine.

When using a Whitworth, Vanderford wrote:

When firing, these men were never in haste; the distance of a line of men, of a horse, an artillery ammunition chest, was carefully decided upon; the telescope adjusted along its arc to give the proper elevation; the gun rested against a tree, across a log, or in





Once the siege had fully developed, trenches were built with wooden walls, firing steps, and slots in the earthworks for sharpshooters to use, as in this *Harper's Weekly* woodcut of Vicksburg.

the fork of a rest-stick carried for that purpose. The terrible effect of such weapons in the hands of men who had been selected, one only from each infantry brigade, because of his special merit as a soldier and skill as a marksman, can be imagined. They sent these bullets fatally 1200 yards and were unpleasant a mile off.

Confederates also pressed some civilian "country rifles" and target rifles into service, often reboring them to 0.54 and 0.58 calibers to use standard issue ammunition. Eleven sharpshooters in the Kentucky Orphan Brigade received British-made Kerr rifles. One of these brigade sharpshooters, Edward Thompson, recalled, "The Kerr rifle was a long range muzzle loading rifle that would kill out the distance of a mile or more, requiring a peculiar powder; and there was some difficulty in charging it, so that it was not likely to be effective except in the hands of a cool composed man. The use of ordinary powder made it necessary to swab out the barrel after every fourth or fifth shot."

The Kerr rifle, made by the London Armoury Company and invented by the company's superintendent, James Kerr, was a 0.44 caliber rifle that used a novel ratchet form of rifling and a quick twist. The problems Confederates found with the Kerr was that it fouled more rapidly than the standard rifled musket and was somewhat inaccurate at long ranges with its issue ammunition. To solve this problem, Confederate sharpshooters acting as snipers appear to have used Whitworth ammunition with their Kerr rifles. In the spring of 1863 Major General Patrick Cleburne of the Army of Tennessee organized a

sharpshooter company that was issued with 20 Whitworth rifles, fitted with telescopic sights, and ten Kerr rifles, "more than was given to any other division," Cleburne's staff officer Irving Buck later boasted. Kerr rifles were not made to accept a bayonet.

However, few Confederate sharpshooters served as snipers; instead their units were given the role of brigade skirmish battalion. As a result, Confederate sharpshooter commanders had to pick a standard issue weapon for their units.

In McGowan's Brigade's sharpshooter battalion of the Army of Northern Virginia, the various weapons underwent accuracy tests. Captain Dunlop wrote:

In the target drill the Minnie rifle, the Enfield, the Austrian, Belgium, Springfield, and Mississippi rifles were put to the test. And while each and all of them proved accurate and effective at short range, the superiority of the Enfield rifle for service at long range, from 600 to 900 yards, was clearly demonstrated, both as to force and accuracy of fire. The ulterior range of the Enfields proved reliable and effective to a surprising degree to a distance of 900 yards, while the other rifles named could only be relied on at a distance of 500 yards.

Mahone's Brigade's sharpshooter battalion, wrote battalion officer John Laughton, Jr., "was armed with long-range, small-bore Enfield rifles, and used a long English-made cartridge. We never used any ammunition made by the Confederate Government. There were, besides, two globe-sighted rifles for use on special occasions, which were valuable addition to our armament. I have frequently fired these with entirely satisfactory results."

Because sharpshooters had to be free to range across a battle line, they stood in danger of being confused with a regular infantryman shirking his duty by a staff officer or provost guard. Therefore they had to have some distinguishing uniform or insignia to mark them. In contrast with Union sharpshooters, it was impossible to provide special uniforms because of southern supply difficulties. Therefore, special badges were devised.

This illustration from *Harper's Weekly* shows the uniquely American rifle dress that many of the first southern units that called themselves "sharpshooters" wore. Left is a man identified as being in the "Kentucky Rifle Brigade," while the other man was described as a "Tennessee Sharp-shooter."



Kentucky Rifle Brigade.

Tennessee Sharp-shooters.

These badges were not branch-wide. Instead, each command designed and obtained its own badges, although they appear to have been somewhat similar. An original 1.5 inch, eight-sided black cloth bearing a scarlet felt cross was worn as a badge by Henry A. Wise, Company B, 2nd Maryland Infantry, and was given to the Maryland Historical Society after the war with a note that it was a "Sharp Shooter's Badge." A Union soldier described prisoners taken on April 2, 1865, noting that "The sharp shooters had a red cross on their arms." Finally, a member of Dunlop's Sharpshooter Battalion recalled that he and his comrades were "privileged characters" who were distinguished "by a badge consisting of a red band running diagonally across the left elbow of the coat sleeve with a red star just above the band. This badge would pass the sharpshooter anywhere."

At times such badges appear to have been ad hoc affairs. First Sergeant Barry Benson, a South Carolina sharpshooter in the Wilderness battle of May 1864, saw that "the Sharpshooters too had become scattered. Seeing one or two, I called to them, telling them to stay close by me and keep watch for others. Soon we collected eight men. Breaking off twigs of pine, we set the green bunches in our hats to help us hang together."

### Camp and field life

Winter put an end to active campaigning, and Confederate skirmishers built wood log huts and settled in to a routine. "We were awakened in the morning by the reveille, and at the tap of a drum we formed the ranks and went out to drill and dress parade, and the tattoo sang us to sleep," Benson recalled.

Major Dunlop described his sharpshooter battalion's camp inside the lines of Petersburg:

Our camp was laid off in the form of a square, three sides of which were occupied by the three companies of the battalion in comfortable shanties covered with tents, facing inward. the second or center company running parallel with the line of the brigade; the first and third companies in reverse order on the two sides of the gulch, running back their full length and facing each other across the square. The foundation for each shanty was made level by digging into the face of the hill and drawing the earth back on the lower side. Chimneys were cut into the wall on the deepest side of the excavation. The lower side was built up to a level with small timbers and a fly tent stretched over the whole. The openings or doors of entrance were all on the inside, which was our parade ground. We were soon as comfortable and happy as soldiers could be, with nothing to do but drill, drill, drill.

The standard infantryman's belt plates were worn by Confederate sharpshooters. Although the oval copper plate, backed with lead, on top is generally considered to be a western army style, this particular example was dug up in eastern Virginia. (Author's collection)





The battalion was mustered for roll call, inspection or drill several times during the day, and for roll call occasionally at uncertain hours during the night, that the men might always be ready for duty when called on. Between drills during the day, and after the duties of the day were ended, the men were allowed to ramble, forage or visit their neighbors of other commands; only they must be on hand at emergency call, day or night. They were always on hand when needed.

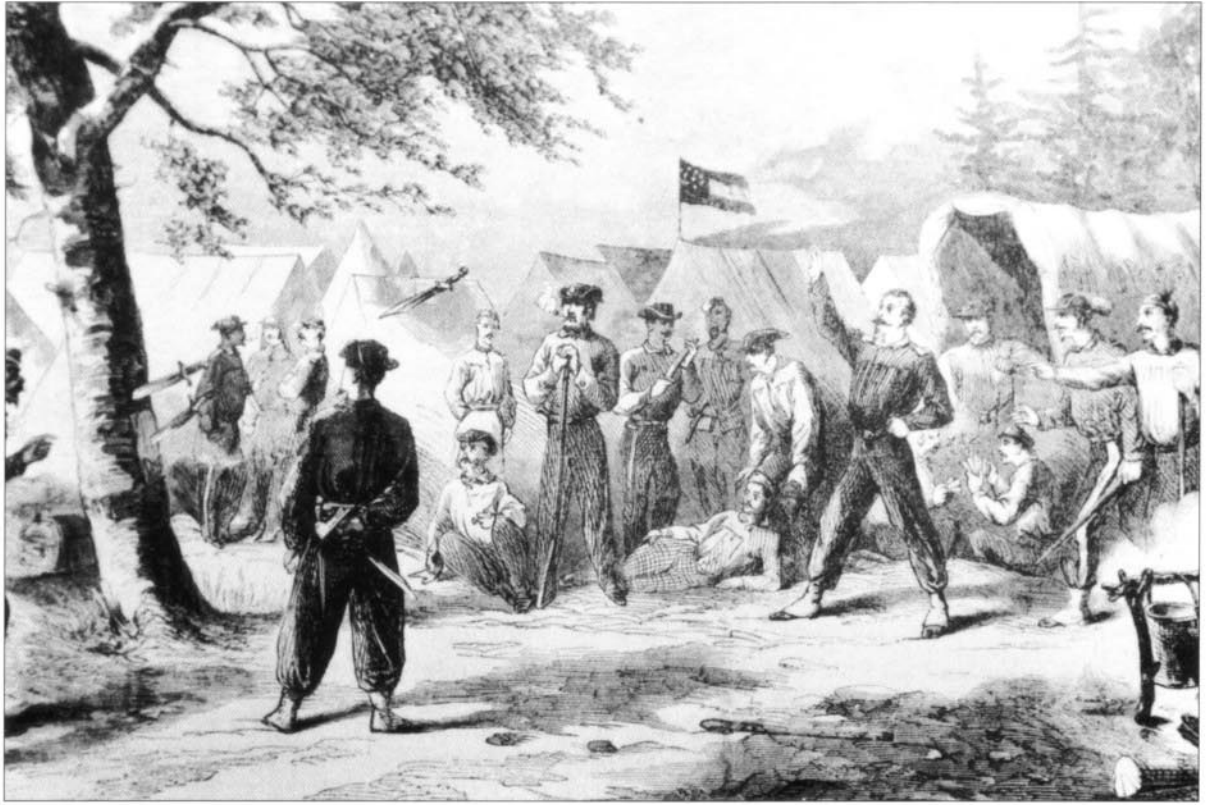
Camp life was easy, then, for Confederate sharpshooters. John Young noted that they were "exempt from all regiment or camp duty. ... This freedom from the irksome and distasteful duties of the camp, which were always especially detested by the average Confederate soldier – unaccustomed as he was to do any menial service for himself – made a place in the ranks of the sharpshooters an honor much to be desired."

While most infantry had a chance to rest during the winter months when in regular camps, some skirmishers were still in the field. Dunlop wrote, "During the winter and intervals of rest their position was in front on the outposts and picket lines." This did allow some time for sharpshooters to forage to supplement their diets, which were not all that good in the Confederate Army, consisting largely of occasional meat and a constant supply of flour. Benson recalled in March 1864 that he "obtained permission to forage on the other side of the Rapidan [River, Virginia]. Crossing early in the morning, I went as far as the Robinson River. I returned with two cabbages given me by a lady, who gave me also a mug of milk and some bread and butter."

Once the bugle sounded to form up and move out of camp, life became less pleasant. Often the men sang on their march, Benson recalling even on the march from Petersburg to Appomattox how his little company of 17 men "marched in order, as neatly as on drill, keeping step to the song that Reuben Ruff sang in a clear, ringing voice, one of the best voices in our camp. The song was 'Jubilo,' a negro song first sung by the Yankees, later becoming a favorite amongst Confederates. Like schoolboys on a holiday, we joined in Ruff's chorus at the top of our lungs so that woods and hills along our march fairly rang with shouts of 'Jubilo.'"

The Confederate Army always traveled light, with little in the way of impedimenta. As sharpshooter John Long wrote:

They carried absolutely nothing, save their arms and haversacks. The last were but of little use. The sharpshooters found it much less burdensome to make a raid for supplies on the line of the enemy than to carry knapsacks. When rations were ordered for three days, they were generally cooked and eaten at the same time; not a difficult thing to do in the Confederate service, where the ration was scientifically calculated to the least that a man could live on. Sometimes blankets and fly-tents were carried, but only when there was to be a long march, and no immediate prospect of a fight. In the face of the enemy these daring corps usually threw away everything but their arms, and relied for provision on the chance of war.



Men in the 1861 Confederate camps carried large Bowie knives, which they expected to use in fierce hand-to-hand combat. Instead they saw more use in knife-throwing matches such as this one. (*Harper's Weekly*)

Indeed sharpshooters were often lucky in getting food. "One of our wagoners came in last night & brought me an old hen, so you ought to have seen me eat chicken & dumplings," Montgomery wrote home on October 24. "You may be sure they were good, a little tough though." Even officers ate badly. Dunlop recalled that in the fighting towards Petersburg in early 1864:

Our rations were scant and sometimes unsavory, but our appetites bold and aggressive. I devoured the hindquarter of a muskrat with vindictive relish, and looked with longing eyes upon our adjutant general's fat young pointer. One day, during these fights at Spottsylvania, when the Federals were making an assault on our lines and the onset was persistent and furious, while passing along the lines to encourage the men, I discovered in a little branch a turtle of the loggerhead variety. I stopped, threw him out of the water with my sword, turned him on his back, and when he poked out his head to recover his all fours I popped my sabre through his neck and pinned him to the ground, and went on. When the fight was over and the hour of relief came, I went and got him, and such a stew as I had that night!

Generally, according to Dunlop:

The sharpshooters, however, were not seriously affected by the scarcity or poor quality of grub furnished [by] the army; for, be it known, they were just as faithful foragers as they were furious

fighters. A chicken, turkey, goose or pig, prowling about their camp or picket lines, night or day, or trespassing upon the territory over which they exercised jurisdiction, was in just as much danger as the full panoplied bluecoat who was so unfortunate as to fall within their clutches.

When Longstreet's Corps was detached from the Army of Northern Virginia to help the Army of Tennessee, Montgomery's sharpshooters went with them. "It has been raining for three days & the whole face of the earth is about shoe mouth deep in mud & water," Montgomery wrote home from near Chattanooga, Tennessee, on October 15, 1863. "I have not been dry since the rain commenced. We have but one tent to the company & I gave mine up to the sick, so I have no shelter only what I can make of my blanket which I assure you is very poor."

Not only were they exposed to the elements, and often badly fed, they were also in constant danger on campaign. According to Dunlop, "in the active campaigning of the summer they occupied the front in the advance, and the rear on a retreat, as skirmishers." Indeed, John Young wrote that, "They were also assigned to the right of the column – the front in advance, the rear in retreat."

This meant that many of the ordinary niceties of life were ignored. For example, at one time in the 1864 campaign in Virginia, Major Dunlop recalled that the sharpshooters finally got a day off "to wash their shirts, which had not been off their backs for more than five weeks."

### **In battle**

Confederate sharpshooters were usually the first to go into action when a battle began. "The duty expected of the sharpshooters was to establish and occupy the skirmish line, while the enemy was in front," noted John Laughton, Jr. of Mahone's Brigade's sharpshooter battalion, "and to serve on the picket line in all day duty – being relieved at night by one of the regiments of the brigade and to serve as rear guard when on retreat. Its officers were also required to serve as scouts when the opportunity was presented."

According to Dunlop, "When the opposing armies met upon the field it became their [skirmishers'] duty to open and bring on the fight, or to stand like ushers on the vestibule of battle and receive and welcome our friends in blue whenever they choose to visit our lines." Indeed, his battalion was mentioned by J.F.J. Caldwell, an officer in the same brigade, who recalled at the Wilderness that in moving to the attack his sharpshooters, "deployed as skirmishers on the right flank, saw and opened fire upon the skirmishers of the enemy." Later he recalled the brigade being some 200 yards behind the sharpshooters.

Montgomery wrote home:

We are always in front of the Brigade, about 300 to 400 yds, to clear out the way & I tell you we done it too, to perfection. You ought to hear Gen Wofford praise us. Saturday evening our little Battalion charged the Yankees breast work, one whole Brigade behind it, charged three times, but the fire was hot from the enemy. We had to fall back. Our loss was quite heavy. Soon Sunday morning the Gen sent us in again. We charged again under the



**Major W.S. Dunlop, commander of the sharpshooter battalion of Gregg's South Carolina Brigade of the Army of Northern Virginia.**

most deadly fire. Got within a few feet of the works, but it was fixed brush that we could not climb then & had to fall back. Our loss was again more.

Montgomery was again in the besieging forces around Knoxville, Tennessee, in November 1863, when he wrote home, "We Sharp Shooters are in front all the time from 100 to 500 yards of the Yankies. We keep up a prettie heavy fire all the time, take a shot whenever a Yankee shows his head." Laughton recalled that the skirmishers moved out in groups of three, always firing by file so that one gun was always loaded.

D. Augustus Dickert, a veteran of the sharpshooter battalion of Kershaw's Brigade in the Army of Northern Virginia, recalled moving to the attack at Cedar Creek in 1864: "The James' or Third Battalion having some months before been organized into brigade sharpshooters, adding two companies to it, preceded the brigade, and was to charge the fords and capture the pickets." This was dangerous work, and Dickert

paid the price at that battle when he was ordered to take the survivors of his company and head to a point on the extreme left of the division as the Federals counterattacked.

When I arrived at the point designated, which was in thick woods, to my horror I found the place literally alive with yankees. I had double-quickd right into the midst of the "blue bellies." "Surrender," came in tones of thunder. I stood amazed, astonished beyond conception. "Surrender," again came the command. There was absolutely no alternative. There was no chance to fight and less chance to run. My brave boys and I were prisoners of war.

Other sharpshooter fights were even more fierce. George Bernard, commander of a sharpshooter company at the battle of the Crater, later wrote,

I was desperately wounded in three places when within thirty feet of the breastworks, and at the first volley from a concentrated fire of several lines massed for a forward movement. The fire was not only from a direct front, but was also an enfilading fire, which came from those of the enemy in the crater, this being to our right. The proportion of wounded and killed in the sharpshooters was exceedingly large, probably without a parallel. The battalion went into the fight with 104 men and officers, and of these ninety-four men and officers were killed and wounded; of the nine officers present eight were shot through the breast.

Captain Wallace Broadbent, commander of the sharpshooter battalion of Mahone's Brigade, was found after the Crater fight with 12 to 15 bayonet wounds through his body.

At times sharpshooter battalions were sent forward with more than just general skirmish duties. For example, along the Weldon Railroad, during fighting in August 1864, the skirmish battalion of McGowan's Brigade was given a specific target: "The object of our sharpshooters was, principally, to disable the horses and gunners of the Federal artillery; and they are said to have succeeded beyond what was expected at the long range of fire," Caldwell recalled. Major Eugene Blackford, commanding the 5th Alabama Battalion then serving as the sharpshooter battalion with Rodes' Brigade, reported that at Gettysburg his men started picking off Federal cannoners. "One battery near us," he reported, "after firing several shots at us, was removed out of our sight."

Sharpshooters were sometimes used to gather intelligence by taking prisoners. The commander of Lane's Brigade of the Army of the Potomac, for example, was once asked. "Can't you catch a Yankee tonight for General Lee? Some of the enemy are moving, and he wants to know what command it is." General Lane sent for his sharpshooter battalion's commander, who took some of his men out that night towards the enemy's rifle pits. As Lane described it, "the men had to crawl towards the enemy in the moonlight, but finally commander Major J.T. Wooton leaped up and shouted out, 'Boys, we have got them.' Away they went, at a run, in double ranks, and wheeling right and left, just as you would open the lids of a book, they came back, bringing their prisoners with them."

Sharpshooters delighted in this sort of operation. Major Dunlop wrote:

There existed an active spirit of rivalry between the different battalions of sharpshooters, as to which should perform the greatest number and the most daring feats in the line of legitimate duty, to the annoyance and damage of their opponents operating in their respective neighborhoods; and each kept a sharp lookout for opportunities to make a dash into the enemy's lines, stampede their pickets, or capture their men.



**The P1858 Enfield rifle musket was picked as the best available weapon for Confederate sharpshooters. (Author's collection)**

Confederate high command sometimes massed their sharpshooters for special efforts. For example on March 27, 1865 Barry Benson recalled all the sharpshooter battalions of his divisions being gathered together, some 400 men. They were sent in a line into some woods and told not to make any noise until discovered. Eventually a Federal picket called for some of them in his front to halt. "In the same instant a wild Confederate yell split the air," Benson remembered. "A solid rush, and we leaped over the works amongst the half awakened foe, who barely fired a score of shots as they fled in confusion. To the right and left we swept, clearing the line as we went. A few scattering shots, and our surprise and victory were complete." No effort was made to capitalize on this victory with a reinforcing column, and after holding the line all day the sharpshooters were retired that night and line infantry regiments came to take their place.

After the battle, many sharpshooters took advantage of their posts in the front to search the dead. "I do not think there was much robbing of the dead in the beginning of the war," Barry Benson wrote, "but as time went on and the men became hardened, and their necessities greater, the pillage of the fields extended not only to the taking of articles of value, such as money, watches, and rings, but even to coats and trousers. Blackwood says that he has seen dead men stripped entirely naked, but this I am sure I have never seen."

Such front-line work always cost men, but high commands made sure their sharpshooter battalions were constantly at full strength. As John Laughton recalled, "when the casualties of battle decimated the ranks, other details were made up from the regiment in which the loss occurred, thereby keeping up the full maximum of strength."

At the same time, as the war continued to go against the south, line regiments began to suffer heavy losses from desertion. John Young, however, believed that, "There were, I am glad to say, no deserters from the sharpshooters, as was natural; for they were the *elite* of the army."



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A detail of the lock plate of a P1858 Enfield-style rifled musket made under contract for American Civil War forces. (Author's collection)

## MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS

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There are no museums devoted to Civil War sharpshooters. There are, however, museums that have specific items relating to the subject.

Arradcom Museum,

Pictinny Arsenal, Dover, New Jersey 07801.

This museum concentrates on small-arms ammunition, including the types of ammunition used with sharpshooters' weapons.

Chickamauga-Chattanooga National Military Park,

PO Box 2126, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia 30742.

The museum features the Fuller Gun Collection, including some 355 American longarms that includes sharpshooters' weapons.

Confederate Research Center and Museum,

PO Box 619, Hillsboro, Texas 76645.

A fine place for research using printed matter on Confederate sharpshooters, as its library has over 3500 books, brochures and pamphlets on the subject, while its archives contain many original letters, documents, maps, and photographs.

Gettysburg National Military Park,

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania 17325.

Not only are monuments to various actions of the US Sharpshooters on the battlefield here, but the museum also has an original US Sharpshooters cap and frock coat.

Museum of the Confederacy,

1201 E. Caly St., Richmond, Virginia 23219.

The most important collection of Confederate-related material under one roof, ranging from flags to uniforms, is housed here. It includes the frock coat worn by Colonel James Perrin of the 1st South Carolina Rifles, among a huge number of other uniform items.

**A Pattern 1863 Whitworth. (West Point Museums collection)**





National Rifle Association Firearms Museum,  
1600 Rhode Island Ave., NW, Washington DC 20036.  
One of the largest collections of guns in the United States, it has on display the types of weapons used by sharpshooters.

US Army Military History Institute,  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013.  
The Army's official repository of military history, the Institute has a large collection of copies of Civil War soldier photographs, including those of sharpshooters, as well as written material on them.

West Point Museum,  
US Military Academy, West Point, New York 10096.  
One of the country's finest military museums, its collection features not only sharpshooters' weapons and equipment, but also the original color of the US Sharpshooters.

## GLOSSARY

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- Battalion:** Eight or fewer companies in an organization generally commanded by a major.
- Cloth:** When used in a description of period clothing, wool.
- Division patches:** Cloth plain patches cut in different shapes, each corps receiving a unique shape, i.e. II Corps a clover, and in different colors for each division: red for the first, white for the second, and blue for the third, and green or orange for the fourth.
- Falstaff's army:** A motley crew of soldiers, nicknamed after the poor soldier, but great partier, Falstaff in Shakespeare's *Henry V*.
- Foraging:** Informally searching for needed material, largely food, from local civilian sources, either paying or just taking what was needed.
- Forage caps:** The undress cap made with a black visor or peak, and a high crown that flopped forward towards the visor, as well as a black chinstrap and side buttons.
- Hardtack:** A square cracker made from plain flour, water, and salt and slowly cooked. As such it could remain in that form virtually indefinitely, although many would eventually become infested with vermin.
- Sack coat:** The undress blouse-length coat issued by the US Army for fatigue wear. It was made of a dark blue wool of medium weight, lined with cotton, and had an inside breast pocket, with four buttons down the front and a lay-down collar.
- Sibley tents:** Indian teepee-style white canvas tents designed by an Army officer named Henry Sibley, which were made with a sheet iron stove and chimney in the center, around which up to 14 men would sleep in a circle.
- Skirmish:** A skirmish line is an open line sent in front of a regular battle line; also a small battle.
- Thermoplastic:** A plastic material made from materials including shellac, coloring such as lamp black, and animal blood compressed together.

## COLOR PLATE COMMENTARY

### A. US SHARPSHOOTER

A sergeant of the US Sharpshooters, in his unique green coat and trousers, with his special issue knapsack, cartridge box, and Sharps rifle. The first uniforms had a trim that was so dark that it was almost impossible to pick it out from the rest of the coat. Since the Quartermaster Department did not have any green cloth on hand initially, the first uniforms were made by dyeing dark blue dress coats dark green, the resulting clothing being so dark as to be almost black. Caps were made from a different cloth than coats, and the manufacturer used yellow cloth, already on hand, dyed green for the first caps. Eventually the army's Philadelphia Depot received "wool dyed, fast color green kersey" from Elk Mills, near Newark, Delaware, for the unique first issue "Tilson" coat (2) and trousers. The sharpshooter would carry his cartridges in two tins within a leather cartridge box (1a) which was worn on the waist belt (1b). Also shown is the hair-covered cowskin knapsack (3); this was lined with linen except for the sides which were made using heavy composition board. Also shown is the special knapsack (4a) and mess kit issued to the 1st and 2nd US Sharpshooters; here we see the mess kit attached to the back of the pack, and standing alone next to the pack (4b).

### B. PASSING THE TEST

A group of men, dressed in civilian clothes, show off their shooting abilities as officers of the US Sharpshooters watch. Special shooting ability examinations were held in most of

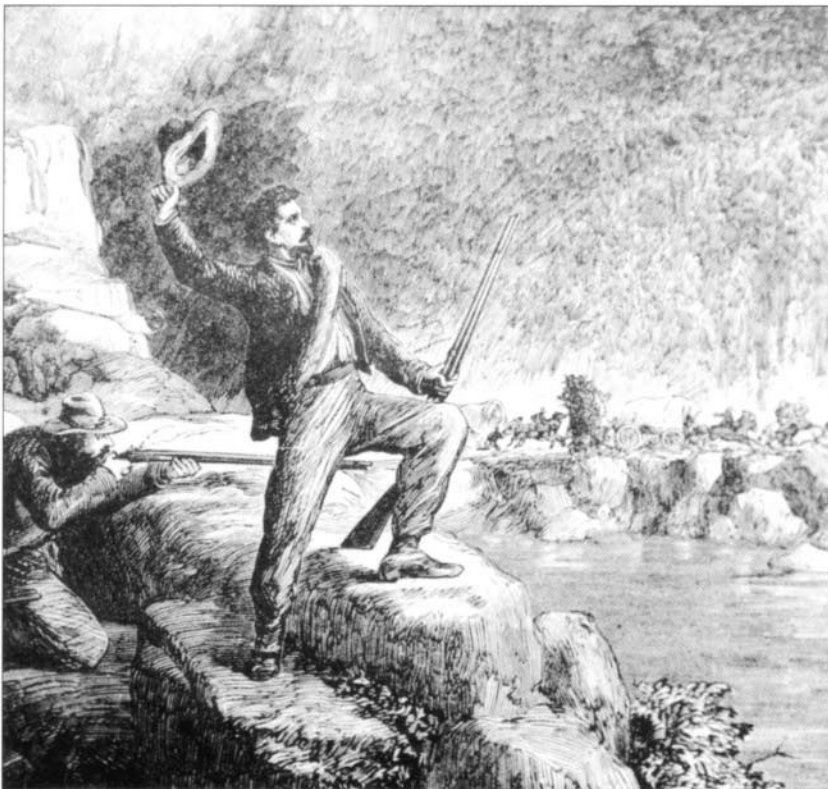
the Northern states to find the best shots for the US Sharpshooters. These drew a crowd of local inhabitants who attended just to see the show. Those who shoot well enough will be allowed to join the regimental ranks. The men were allowed to bring their own personal weapons, although in the field they would receive government-issue long arms. The shooting is done from a bench rest made of wood, set up under a cluster of trees that provide shade. From them two full regiments of highly qualified marksmen were raised.

### C. TRAINING

One of the things most prized in sharpshooter service in both armies was the ability to estimate distances to targets. The US Army's *A System of Target Practice for the Use of Troops*, printed in Washington in 1862, called for a specific method of so doing. In the Confederate Army, the issued training manual was *A System for Conducting Musketry Instructions*, printed in Richmond in 1863. According to it, a squad was to "proceed to estimate the distance of men within the limits of 300 yards, in the following manner: After having marched the squad on to a different ground from that on which the appreciation of distances has before taken place, the instructor is to place at any unknown distance, unobserved if possible, by the squad formed opposite said man, who is to stand at ease. He is then to order the men to observe the soldier facing them, and to estimate the distance, cautioning them at the same time to recollect the appearance of the men just seen at known distances.

Taken from plates in the US Army manual *A System of Target Practise*, this shows a variety of steps in training. 2 shows an officer of US Sharpshooters standing behind a private of the same unit as the private sights a Sharps that has been mounted on a sandbag on a chair. 3 shows a private aiming at targets at various distances away. 4 shows a squad drill in which the instructor lines up men at 50-foot intervals and then shows each soldier what of the target's dress, arms, equipment, and figure can be made out at these different distances. Such will give a man in the field an idea of the distance of human targets.

**A typical Confederate infantryman of the Army of Northern Virginia in early 1865. Sharpshooters of this army wore the standard infantry dress with special badges on their sleeves. (Smithsonian Institution)**



**Longstreet's Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia received sharpshooter battalions. This Harper's Weekly woodcut shows "sharpshooters of Longstreet's Corps" firing on Union wagon trains outside Chattanooga during the siege of that city.**

The top illustration (1) shows how a falling trajectory means that if a weapon with a range of 200 yards is fired at a man's chest who is 100 yards away, it will actually hit him in the head. The straight line of sight; the rising line is the line of fire, while the curved line falls down to the right, showing where the bullet will actually hit.

#### **D. SHARPSHOOTERS' WEAPONS**

This plate shows the various weapons that sharpshooters used or trained with. The Colt percussion revolving rifle, M1855 (2) and detail (6) was prone to exploding. The Sharps breechloading percussion rifle (3) and detail (7) was used by Union forces: the model shown is the full-length rifle (there was also a cavalry issue carbine). The Whitworth rifle (5) and an Enfield rifled musket, M1853 (4) and detail (8) were used by Confederate forces. The Target Rifle is also shown (1); these custom-made rifles were specially designed for accuracy in competition, and there was significant variety in manufacture. One characteristic was the heavy, reinforced octagonal barrels. They had a shorter barrel length than the Springfield or Enfield, and used a smaller caliber bore.

#### **E. SKIRMISH DRILL**

Skirmish drill was a standard system used both by sharpshooters and line infantry. It called for a company to be broken into small groups of four men, who then spread out two in front and two some five paces to the rear. The pairs would leapfrog forward on the advance and backward in the retreat. The diagram taken from a period infantry tactics manual uses a black square for each individual soldier and shows how in breaking down into skirmish drill the men operate in groups of four.

#### **F. IN THE TRENCHES**

Skirmishers were used in the trenches in sieges such as Knoxville, Atlanta, Petersburg, and Nashville, to pick off enemy troops as they became exposed for a short time. They made living in the trenches especially unpleasant for the enemy. These sorts of redoubts were made of wicker round gabions, filled with earth, topped with horizontal gabions with logs and earth and firing holes placed above that. An empty 0.577 caliber ammunition crate lies open on the bottom right-hand side; these crates were marked on the end with the type and amount of ammunition inside, the producing arsenal, and the date of manufacture.

#### **G. IN BATTLE**

At Gettysburg a company of the 2nd USSS ended up on the far left of the Union forces and ambushed an attempt to turn up the union left by Confederates on the second day of battle. They distracted the Confederate commander, who did not know their numbers, and greatly aided the eventual Union victory. The kneeling, firing officer in the center carries a small revolver for additional protection, but does not carry a sword into the field, instead arming himself with a rifle just



as his men. His tall boots suggest that when not on the skirmish line, as here, he is otherwise a mounted officer, possibly a regimental staff officer who has come up to the front to see a little action.

#### **H. PRIVATE, 1ST GEORGIA**

##### **SHARPSHOOTERS, ARMY OF TENNESSEE**

A typical Confederate sharpshooter (1) of 1863 in the western theater wears the standard uniform issued through Georgia depots without any special markings. Also shown in this plate is the flag of the 2nd Battalion (2), with its battle honors displayed. The flag of the 1st Battalion is now lost, but would no doubt have been similar in appearance. This color has had several stars removed, probably by veterans who cut them off to save. The color is one of a group issued throughout the Army of Tennessee to conform to orders dated March 11, 1864. The percussion cap pouch (3) (shown top, back and sides) is made with a painted canvas top, rather than being made all of leather, to preserve precious resources. The knapsack (4) was only one of a number of different varieties southern makers produced, and it is essentially a large canvas bag for clothes with an outside flap that a blanket can be inserted into. The cartridge box (5) is a 0.58 caliber model, while the stamped brass belt bears the arms of the State of Georgia (6). This was a pre-war contract type, made in Massachusetts that saw a great deal of war-time use.

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When the Civil War broke out in 1861 both Confederate and Union experts decided that specialized sharpshooter units should be formed. These highly trained marksmen served in a front-line role and, due to the technological developments of the 1850s, were equipped with weapons that could guarantee greater accuracy over increased range than traditional muskets. This title examines the recruitment, training, tactics, and deployment of sharpshooters from both sides of the conflict. It also takes a close look at the specialized personal weaponry of the sharpshooter, the rifle, and its

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