



CIVIL WAR SHARPSHOOTERS

FRED L. RAY

“Why, my man, I am ashamed of you, dodging that way,” said Union Major General John Sedgwick, commander of the U.S. Sixth Corps, after seeing one of his men throw himself to the ground to avoid rifle bullets coming in from the enemy position on Laurel Hill, some 500 yards away. “They couldn’t hit an elephant at this distance.” A moment later a Confederate marksman disputed his estimate by putting a bullet through the general’s cheek, killing him almost instantly. By the time of Sedgwick’s death on May 9, 1864, the sharpshooter was an established presence on the battlefields of the Civil War and would continue to exact a heavy toll for the duration of the conflict.

The term sharpshooter had a more general meaning in the mid-19th century than it does today. It could mean either a roving precision rifleman like the modern sniper (a term that did not come into use until late in the century) or a light infantryman who specialized in the *petite guerre*: scouting, picketing, and skirmishing. The modern sharpshooter appeared in Central Europe around 1700 (the term comes from the German *Scharfschütze*) where he specialized in harassing the line of battle with rifle fire in an age where most infantrymen carried smoothbore weapons. As such, riflemen exercised a considerable psychological effect:

“Destroy the mind,” observed one British rifleman, “and bodily strength will avail but little in that courage required in the field of battle.” He might have also added that killing or wounding the enemy’s chain of command, particularly officers, greatly aided in breaking up his attacks and generally upsetting his plans.

In the United States, the Union army began the Civil War with some very effective light infantry units, thanks to the efforts of Hiram Berdan, a wealthy inventor and businessman with extensive political connections. Berdan, who had a reputation as the best rifle shot in the country, required each volunteer to shoot a satisfactory “string” before being accepted. A born promoter, he moved easily in the circles of official Washington, and on Aug. 2, 1861, he received his commission as colonel of the 1st United States Sharpshooter Regiment. So many marksmen responded to his call, in fact, that another regiment of eight companies, the 2nd U.S.S.S., was formed as well. Berdan established a training camp near Washington D.C. where he regularly staged rifle matches and demonstrations for the press and dignitaries, including President Abraham Lincoln. Turned out in their green uniforms, leather leggings, and kepis with an ostrich feather plume, the sharpshooters cut dashing figures on the parade ground. The



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Colonel Hiram Berdan

regiment's training proceeded along the lines of European light infantry, including the use of terrain for cover and bugle calls for maneuver.

It soon became obvious that their civilian target rifles (some of which weighed upwards of 50 lbs.) were not suitable for serious campaigning. Berdan procured, over the objections of the chief of ordnance, a custom-made Sharps breech-loading rifle with special sights and a double "set" trigger. Manufacturing these custom arms required time, so the Sharpshooters had to temporarily accept Colt Revolving Rifles instead — something that nearly provoked a mutiny. The 1st U.S.S.S. joined the Army of the Potomac for the 1862 Peninsular campaign, where they dominated the skirmish line, made life miserable for Rebel artillerymen, and prompted urgent calls in the Confederacy for more rifle-armed troops. Berdan, however, was not a man who led from the front. He was usually to be found behind the lines tending to administrative tasks, something that did not prevent him from making exaggerated boasts about his role in various battles and ensuring that he and his men got an inordinate amount of press coverage.

Tactically, Berdan's sharpshooters seldom operated as a unit — in most cases they operated in groups of 15-20 men, engaging high-value targets like officers and artillery batteries with their Sharps rifles, which had an effective range of about 800 yards. To supplement these weapons the sharpshooters kept a few heavy target rifles, which were extremely accurate at extended ranges but stayed in the baggage trains much of the time.

The Confederates, though they had few rifles at this stage of the war, did have the advantage of having many men who had learned to shoot in "that most perfect school, the field and forest." Not until January 1863, however, did Brigadier General Robert Rodes begin organizing and training a specialized

sharpshooter battalion for his Alabama brigade. Rodes' new battalion initially levied one man in 12 from across the brigade's five regiments, making it about 100 strong. Having no specialized rifles, his men used standard .577 caliber P53 Enfields, which were quite accurate out to 900 yards. The new battalion commander, Major Eugene Blackford, immediately began intensive marksmanship practice and skirmish drills. Target practice was unusual in the Civil War, and few soldiers got any sort of formal instruction. Unlike Berdan's men, the Confederate sharpshooters were expected to be not only crack shots but to operate as a tactical unit, performing light infantry missions such as picketing, scouting, skirmishing, as well as acting as advance and rear guards. They would be first into battle and the last to leave, and in combat would be expected to close with the enemy position and engage appropriate targets. To show their membership in an elite unit, Blackford allowed them to wear a small red trefoil on their pocket — the precursor of today's specialist badges.

Blackford's sharpshooters got their first test on May 2, 1863, when they acted as a flankers for Stonewall Jackson's famous

march around the Union army at Chancellorsville, and as the advance guard for his subsequent attack. After the battle, Rodes, now promoted to major general and division command, doubled the size of the battalion to 200 men. Thus the battalion now had two "corps" of sharpshooters, who could readily be used as picket reliefs or as independent tactical units. Many other brigades formed sharpshooter battalions as well, and that summer each battalion received one or two long-range .451 caliber Whitworth rifles. These extremely accurate English-made weapons, which featured an unusual hexagonal bore, had an effective range of over 1,000 yards. Some models boasted a four power telescopic sight as well, and since they weighed no more than a service musket did not have to be carried in wagons.

Blackford's outfit had proven so successful that in the spring of 1864 General Robert E. Lee ordered all infantry brigades in the Army of Northern Virginia to form a sharpshooter battalion that winter. Rodes continued to innovate by grouping the five sharpshooter battalions in his division into a semi-permanent "demi-brigade," 700-1,000 strong, that could operate on its own. Rodes's *modus operandi* was to back his division sharpshooters with a couple of artillery pieces and feed up reinforcements from his infantry brigades if they ran into trouble. Although a shell burst ended his life at Winchester in September 1864, Rodes' sharpshooter battalions continued to operate until the end of the war.

At Petersburg the sharpshooters proved



Courtesy photo

Major Eugene Blackford, commander of a Confederate sharpshooter battalion, allowed soldiers in his unit to wear a small red trefoil on their pocket — the precursor of today's specialist badges.

especially useful, since with the armies in close contact a nearly constant *petite guerre* went on in between battles. In the trenches around the embattled city they were used for what we would term special operations today: scouting, raiding, and capturing prisoners for information. One Confederate sharpshooter commander, Major Thomas Wooten, came up with an innovative tactic he called “seine-hauling” for capturing whole sections of the Union picket line. Running forward in two parallel columns, Wooten’s men would penetrate the enemy picket line, then swing around and bag everyone in their path from behind.

Although they had begun the war with a noticeable advantage in light infantry, the Federals now found themselves at a disadvantage on the skirmish line. Their best sharpshooter units, the 1st and 2nd U.S.S.S., were by now severely understrength, and these two regiments (plus half a dozen independent companies) were just not enough to deal with the Confederate sharpshooter battalions. Thus in June 1864, they formed a hundred-man sharpshooter company for each infantry division, drawn from across the unit. Seventy-five of these men received 7-shot Spencer repeaters and acted as the division commander’s assault troops, while another 25 men carried the heavy target rifles and provided long-range precision fire against targets like enemy artillery and officers. Although not particularly accurate at longer ranges, the Spencer (which was,

in effect, the assault weapon of its day) was quite well suited to the trench warfare that characterized the last year of the war.

After the end of the war, the sharpshooters disbanded, and the concept fell out of favor in the small postwar army. Although periodically revived during wartime, the twin concepts of sniping and sharpshooting usually went dormant during times of peace. Lately, however, marksmanship has undergone a revival in both the Army and Marines. Campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have once again shown the value of aimed long-range fire, both to demoralize the enemy (“destroy the mind”) and to reduce civilian casualties. Both services now run extremely tough sniper schools that produce elite shooters who have seen plenty of action. The irregular nature of recent conflicts has also seen the resurgence of light infantry and an emphasis on small-unit tactics, which in turn has produced the designated marksman, or DM. Like the Civil War sharpshooter, the designated marksman acts as a light infantryman, staying with his unit but supporting them with precision fire against selected targets. If these men were to be grouped together into a unit, it would be very similar to what the Confederates came up with in 1863.

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Requests to reprint “Civil War Sharpshooters” and “A Sharpshooter’s Weapons” should be sent to the author at info@cfspress.com.

A SHARPSHOOTER’S WEAPONS

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Since a sharpshooter operated as both a light infantryman and a marksman, he needed a weapon that was light, accurate, reliable, and that had a fairly high rate of fire. Although sharpshooters in the Eastern theater used many weapons, the most common were:

Enfield P53 Rifle

This nine and a half pound, single shot, muzzle loading, .577 caliber rifle was as close to a standard infantry weapon as the Confederacy ever got, and was used in large numbers by Federal forces as well. Sixty grains of black powder pushed a 500-grain Minié ball (about the same weight as eleven copper pennies) down a 39” barrel at about 850-900 feet per second. While the British-made Enfield’s flip-up blade sight was graduated (depending on the model) to 900-1100 yards, in practice a good marksman could hit a man-sized target at about half that distance. The Enfield’s superior accuracy and ready availability made it the top choice for Confederate sharpshooters, who preferred the shorter “two-band” model (33” barrel) with English-manufactured ammunition when they could get them.



Photos courtesy of the West Point Museum Collections, U.S. Military Academy

Rifle Musket, Enfield, P1853, Type II, LAC-1

U.S. Model 1861 Springfield Rifle-Musket

The standard U.S. infantry arm was functionally nearly identical to the British Enfield except for a fractionally different .58 caliber bore size. Line infantry on both sides used this sturdy rifle in greater numbers than any other, but it lacked the pinpoint accuracy of the Enfield and Whitworth rifles, making it second choice for the skirmish line.



Rifle Musket, US, M1861, Springfield

Whitworth Rifle

Sir Joseph Whitworth, one of the premier inventors of his age, designed and manufactured this singular rifle in Britain. It fired a unique .451 caliber hexagonal-sided bullet (often called a “bolt”) with a very long aspect ratio that gave it superior ballistic performance at long ranges. Featuring an optional telescopic sight and a high muzzle velocity (1300 fps), the Whitworth could strike at a thousand yards and beyond. While a soldier could easily carry the 9 lb. 10 oz. weapon around the battlefield, its light weight meant a heavy recoil. Although some of the hard-kicking Whitworth rifle’s exploits are probably exaggerated, it was a very effective weapon in the right hands.

Model 1859 Sharps Rifle

This light (8 lbs. 8 oz.), breech loading, single shot .54 caliber rifle combined a high rate of fire with excellent long range accuracy. Pulling down the trigger guard dropped the breech and allowed the soldier to insert a linen cartridge, which the breech then sheared open when it closed. A trained rifleman could put ten 370-grain slugs a minute down the 30-inch barrel in the same time it took a soldier with a muzzle loader to get off three, and the breech-loading feature allowed him to easily reload while prone. Sighted to 800 yards, the Sharps was quite accurate and could reliably hit a man-sized target at about half that range. Overall it was a sturdy and effective design that held up well in the field. The most famous versions were the two thousand made expressly for Berdan’s Sharpshooters (shown at right), which sported a double “set” trigger. Pulling the rear trigger would “set” the front one, which would then fire at the slightest touch. As a skirmisher’s rifle, the Sharps was hard to beat, and was issued in considerable numbers to Federal light infantry late in the war.

Spencer Model 1860 rifle

The .52 caliber Spencer repeating rifle held seven shots in a tubular magazine the stock. Pulling down the trigger guard rotated the breech block, ejecting the spent case and allowing the magazine spring to



Whitworth Rifle



Rifle, Sharps, M1859, Albee, Berdan’s Sharpshooters



Rifle, U.S., M1860, Spencer



Rifle, Target, Morgan James

push a metallic rimfire cartridge forward. Returning the trigger guard pushed the bullet home. The hammer had to be manually cocked for each shot. To reload, a soldier opened the buttstock, dropped in seven rounds, and replaced the spring-loaded follower. With its modern one-piece metal cartridges, the Spencer was virtually immune to moisture and required no separate primer. If a ready supply of pre-loaded magazines was available, a soldier could fire 15 aimed shots a minute.

Target Rifles

For sniping duties the Federals fielded a wide variety of civilian target rifles, most of which were heavy and not very mobile. This Morgan James rifle, typical of the breed, belonged to the Corps of Cadets at West Point. While their accuracy was

excellent, loading was a slow and cumbersome process. Many of these rifles used a “false muzzle,” (shown top right) a protective metal cone that slipped over the muzzle to protect the lands when loading—and rendered the weapon nearly useless if lost. Though quite effective in a static situation, these rifles were unsuitable for a field campaign.

Accuracy

How accurate were these guns? In a modern test conducted in 1971, various rifles fired 15 shots at 400 yards at a 72"x72" wooden target. A US-made Springfield rifle-musket managed only 7 hits while a British Enfield scored 13. By contrast the .69 caliber M1842 smoothbore made *no* hits at that distance. The .45 caliber Whitworth sharpshooter’s rifle, however, got 15 hits out of 15 shots.