

Sharpshooters

By Stanley D. Saperstein

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“The fascinating and thrilling story of the elite green clad Union troops known as the “widow makers,” the United States Sharpshooters.”



**The story of the United States Sharpshooters in the Army of the Potomac
1861 – 1865**

Prologue

Hiram Berdan sat across from his business associate Captain Casper Trepp. They were sitting in plush leather chairs in the smoking room of the New York City Rifle Club. The room was paneled in fine walnut and its walls were covered with plaques and trophies of its accomplished members. The air was filled with tobacco smoke from cigars and pipes. Berdan and Trepp were enjoying some fine cigars. Trepp was a retired military veteran of the Crimean War, and had been a drillmaster under Guiseppi Garibaldi, as well as Captain of Infantry and as a Royal Engineer in the British Army.

Hiram Berdan was a wealthy engineer, originally from Ohio, who had invented and sold the first gold amalgamation machine that separated gold from the ore. He was also a renowned rifle shot and champion of the New York City Rifle Club for fifteen straight years. The champion of the New York City Rifle Club was considered the best shot in the country. Berdan was also considered a good teacher of the art of target shooting.

Trepp drew on his cigar and blew a stream of smoke into the air. Berdan savored his cigar, lost in thought. Trepp spoke breaking Berdan's thoughts.

"Hiram, what are you going to do for the war effort?"

"You must be reading my thoughts, Casper. I was just thinking about that exact thing. I think a commission in the engineers would be appropriate, being I am a professional engineer."

"What do you think of this idea, Hiram," Casper went on, "a regiment of expert rifle shots to be expert skirmishers and sharpshooters? If we could recruit from all the area rifle clubs, we could fill out a regiment. With my military background and your political connections, I think it would have a chance of happening."

"Hmm," mumbled Hiram. "You know, Casper, that is a capital idea. A regiment of expert rifle shots the best in the nation!"

We would have to recruit in all the loyal states. I don't think even New York could fill a whole regiment."

Casper, leaning toward in his chair, said, "What would have to be done, Hiram?"

Hiram thought a minute and said, "The regiment would have to be United States troops sponsored by the Federal government. Companies could be raised in the loyal states and outfitted by the U.S. government. A proposal to the Secretary of War would be necessary."

Casper, getting more excited, said, "Do you have the connections to be successful, Hiram?"

"Yes, I think I just might. You start planning the requirements; make them tough. We only want the best. If I'm going to be a colonel, I want the best regiment in the army."

In June of 1861, Hiram Berdan received the following letter:

H. Berdan, Esq.

Dear Sir: The General-in-Chief, under the reference of sharpshooters, by his Excellency, the President, and Hon. Secretary of War, as set forth in your letter of May 1861, desires me to say he was very impressed with you personally, that a regiment of such sharpshooters as proposed by you and instructed according to your system, would be of great value, and could be advantageously employed by him in the public service.

Respectfully yours,

Schuyler Hamilton

Lt. Colonel and Military Secretary

Casper Trepp read the letter from the War Department with great satisfaction and said, "Hiram, this is wonderful. I have everything ready to go, including letters to all the governors of our loyal states. The printer has the draft of the recruitment posters. All recruits must shoot a string of fifty at 200-yards distance at the bench.

They must stand five feet, eight inches, and weigh a minimum of 150 pounds. How does that sound?"

"Perfect, Casper. You will start recruiting Company A, of which you will be captain."

"Thank you, Sir," replied Casper. "I have a great source of fine shooters from the Swiss community, recently arrived in the past decade."

"Capital" replied Hiram. "Oh, and before I forget to tell you when the companies are raised, our camp of rendezvous will be in Weehawken, New Jersey."

"Very good, Colonel."

On September 24, 1861, with only about half the companies assembled, they left for Washington, D.C. The rest of the companies formed during the fall. There were so many qualified riflemen that a second regiment of eight companies was formed after the first regiment's ranks were filled. The 2nd Regiment arrived by companies starting in November 1861 and finishing January 3, 1862.

Chapter 1
The Beginning
September 1, 1861

Sam Price felt a drop of sweat run down his neck. It was a hot late summer day, typical of upstate New York. The sky was clear blue, not a cloud in sight. The sun shown bright on the white six-foot square target on the target range on the Albany County Fairgrounds, which was the largest fair in New York State and considered the State Fair of New York.

Sam's thoughts were slowly fading as he went into the shooter's zone; a state of such concentration that the only perception was the target 400-yards distant, and his eye. Everything else was blocked out. Sam needed his final shot out of ten to be no more than four inches from the center of the fifteen-inch black circle on the white six-foot square backboard. This was an extraordinary shot at the distance with no scope, just a peep sight.

Sam had already won the 200-yard competition by a quarter of an inch over his rival, Carl Van Hester, with a string of seventeen inches. That was an average of 1.7 inches from the center of a ten-inch target.

Van Hester had beaten Sam in last year's shooting competition in the 400-yard event. While Sam had won the 200-yard prize, Sam wanted a sweep of both long distance competitions. No one had accomplished this feat for ten years, since Sam's father had done it back in 1851 with the same seventeen pound Wesson Target Rifle. Sam's father had retired from competition two years back when his eyesight fell off.

Sam's father, Abe, stood not twenty feet away, and was a judge and scorekeeper.

Sam squeezed the set trigger, one of two triggers on a target rifle. The second trigger called the "hair trigger" clicked into place. He touched it with a small pressure, and the hammer fell. It struck the

fulminate of the mercury firing cap, which sparked and sent its small flame through the nipple into 120 grains of black powder, which then exploded sending forth a 41-caliber picket ball. Sam felt the rifle jolt his shoulder, smelled the acrid white smoke that belched from the barrel. The bullet sped to the target at 1,200 feet per second, and one second later struck home.

The target was retrieved and all ten shoots were measured. Van Hester finished a half-hour ago and had measured a string of forty-nine inches. That was an average of 4.9 inches from the center of the target. Sam knew from the spotting scope that his shots were within five inches, and a four-inch shot would win the contest.

Van Hester stood with his telescope and watched the bullet strike home. "Damn," he muttered.

Sam looked up at Van Hester and then Sam's spotter said, "Looks good, Sam."

Van Hester snapped his glass shut and said to Sam, "Good shot" and turned away towards the judge's stand.

Sam's spotter was his first cousin Levi, called Lev for short. He was from Green County, New York, across the Hudson River from Sam's hometown of Greenport, just outside of Hudson, New York, the county seat of Columbia County. Lev was Green County Champion at 200-yards and had made it to the quarterfinals in both the 200 and 400-yard events. The cousins were very close, and they were thought by many to be brothers because of a close family resemblance. Sam and Lev both stood five-feet ten inches tall, and were twenty years old, weighing 180 pounds, and sharing the same dark blue eyes. Their faces had light features with thin lips, and average oval shaped faces. Lev's eyes were rounder and he had a small cleft in his chin.

Both were farmers' sons. Sam's father had a prosperous dairy farm and owned properties in the city of Hudson. Lev's father had a 300-acre apple farm in Catskill, New York.

Sam was a high school graduate and had few ambitions outside of the custom gun shop he managed for Simon Goldsmith. Guns and target shooting were his passions. He had taken a four-year

apprenticeship with Mr. Goldsmith after he graduated high school and later took over the management of the shop to allow Mr. Goldsmith to do more artistic work on the guns he made.

Lev was a wheelwright apprenticed at fourteen by his father, who had two older sons that would share the 300-acre farm in Green County. Lev was already at the judge's stand when Sam came up behind him lugging his rifle box.

Sam said, "What's happening? They done measuring?"

"Looks so," replied Lev. "Old man Hollenback is writing in his book, and that means he is recording all the scores."

Just then, Joannus Hollenback stood up and shouted, "Quiet! Gentlemen, may I have quiet?" The crowd hushed as the old patriarch of target shooting, eighty-seven years old, announced the winners. "In the 400-yard event, third place goes to Marcus Reed of Washington County." The crowd applauded. "In second place, Carl Van Hester, Albany's own."

Lev let out a shout and bear hugged Sam.

Hollenback continued. "And in first place, Sam Price of Columbia County."

Sam went forward, the crowd cheering. Sam's father shook his hand as he stepped on to the judge's stand and said "I'm real proud son, real proud."

"Thanks, Pa."

Old man Hollenback was shaking Sam's hand saying, "You're only the second one to take both the 200 and 400-yard events. That entitles you to the one hundred dollar grand prize. What are you going to do with all that money?"

Sam did not get to answer. His father said, "Save it, the boy is going to save it."

When the backslapping was done, Carl Van Hester came up to Sam and said, "Great match, Sam. Can I call you Sam?"

Sam looked surprised. Van Hester had said nothing to him all during the match.

He said, "Don't look so surprised. I can talk. I just don't socialize during a match."

"Sorry," replied Sam as he appraised Van Hester, who was an impressive figure of a man. He was just over six feet tall, and weighed 200 pounds, and was very good looking, clean shaven, with dark hair, and steel gray eyes, a strong square chin and a straight nose. He was a Harvard graduate and studied law under his father. At twenty-four years of age, he was Albany's up and coming lawyer. His father was a state senator and a political power in Albany. Carl was expected to follow in his father's footsteps and was being groomed to run for the state assembly. The family was old Dutch stock that settled in Albany in 1640; Carl's grandfather was a captain of artillery who fought at Saratoga.

Carl said, "Let's get a free drink before it's all gone. I want to talk to you."

They went to the refreshment stand where drinks were being given out to all the contestants. Carl had a beer and Sam took the root beer variety of beer.

Carl said, "Don't drink alcohol?"

"Nope. Never acquired a taste for it."

"That's good, real good. I like a soda man, especially around guns. Don't like the hard stuff but a beer on a hot day is about my speed. Sam, what I want to talk to you about is the War. You going to join a regiment?"

"Well, Lev and I have talked about it. I even asked my father. He said to wait and see how things develop. It might not last very long."

"Don't bet on that Sam. Let's sit down at the table over there in the shade."

They walked over to the table; no one else was sitting there. Carl continued, "It's going to be a long war, three years at least. Those Southern boys are real stubborn and cocky. I knew quite a few at Harvard. The loss at Bull Run proved they can fight."

“You joining up?” asked Sam. “Already have. In fact, I have been offered a 2nd Lieutenant commission in Company F, 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters. They are forming in Concord, New Hampshire.”

“How come a New Hampshire Unit? Aren’t there any New York companies?”

“All filled. I waited to finish my law studies and be admitted to the bar before going. My uncle on my mother’s side is a state Senator in New Hampshire. He introduced me to the captain of Company F. They are still recruiting and I thought you and your cousin might be interested. I can get you at least a corporal rank, seeing you are this year’s New York State champion shooter. They are only taking on the best. It’s a real honor to be accepted.”

“I’m interested but I’d have to talk to my Pa. I’m not twenty-one yet.”

“OK, let me know. Here is my card. Telegraph me if you want to join. Think about it. A man with a good war record can go far.”

“My Pa’s here. He was a judge. I’ll talk to him.”

“I know, anyone who shoots hereabouts knows Abe Price. If his eyes didn’t go on him, you wouldn’t be champ now. Nobody is going to shoot a string of ten inches at 400 yards!”

Carl was smiling a big grin. Sam laughed and replied, “Never know, I might. I am my father’s son.”

Carl got up and said “Go talk to your Pa.” They shook hands and Carl walked away.

Sam talked to his father that day, the next and the next. His father was evasive and then argued against his joining outright. Finally, on September 5, Sam just said he was joining and that it was his duty. Abe finally gave in and said he would not stop him if his mind was that made up. Sam’s mother just cried but finally said she was proud of him.

Sam’s younger brother, Ben who was twelve, said he wanted to join too. “Can’t,” said Abe, “need you here; and besides, you can’t go until you’re bigger than the rifle you would have to carry.”

“So,” said Abe, “what’s all this fuss about going to New Hampshire to join; what’s so fancy about this regiment? There’s regiments right here to join.”

Sam replied that, “U.S. Sharpshooters are an elite unit for target shooters. Everyone has to qualify and shoot a string of fifty at 200 yards, stand five feet, eight inches, weigh one hundred and fifty pounds, pass a medical exam and be recommended by an upstanding member of the community. We’re going to get special training as skirmishers, no guard duty.”

“Sounds too good to be true. Be careful of those kinds of promises. Who told you all this?”

“Carl Van Hester, he’s the company’s lieutenant. His uncle arranged it for him.”

“Humph, figures his father is a state senator. How come he did not make his son a captain of a New York company?”

“According to Carl, the 1st Regiment had four New York companies and was filled. He says he can get me a corporal rank on my reputation as a state champion.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear, boy. I told you don’t trust no one but your own.”

Two days later, Sam was working at his job in the gun shop. Mr. Goldsmith looked at Sam and said “What a schnook. I thought you had a better head, Sam.”

Sam looked up from his work at his boss, who was an oval faced, portly man of fifty-seven with silver gray hair, always looking jolly and full of great parables. Sam thought to himself, “Here comes one now.”

“What?” he said.

“You heard me, schnook. You know what a schnook is?”

“Yea, I know. My Pa uses it along with putz and schlemiel”

“I didn’t know you knew any Yiddish. Your family has been here since the Revolutionary War?”

“No, not quite, War of 1812, and I only know the expressions. My father was born here. It was grandpa who came from Germany.”

“Ya, what part?”

“The Rhineland.”

“Oh, my grandparents came from Austria, then went to England. My father was born an Englishman, a gunsmith by trade. Did I ever tell you that I fought against Napoleon at Waterloo? I was fifteen years old.”

Sam, looking very surprised, said, “No, you never did.”

“You know why? It’s too terrible to talk about. You have no idea what the terror is like. All these years later, I don’t like to think about it. War is man’s stupidest folly. It is not a glorious adventure. It’s pain, suffering, and death! Sam, you should not go, let others save the Union.”

“Mr. Goldsmith, it’s every citizen’s duty to save the Union. Slavery is wrong. The South has no right to secede.”

“And, you’re willing to be crippled or killed?”

“Yes.”

“And, worse, take another’s life?”

“You did it if you fought.”

“I don’t know if I did. I pointed the musket and pulled the trigger.”

“If you hate war so much, why do you make guns?”

“Because my father made them, so I had to make them. The guns we make aren’t weapons, they are works of art.”

“Yes, your engraving is beautiful. But I have to serve my country.”

“Then you are a schnook. I hope that when the time comes you are a brave schnook and don’t piss your pants. Remember this, if you go, you take up the responsibility of a soldier. You stand, no matter how scared you become.”

“I won’t have to stand in line. I will be a sharpshooter.”

“Ah, a rifleman, light infantry. Even worse! You will be out in front as a skirmisher. You will be a greenback like the 95th Rifles. They were the best. You will be the best if you can make it. What kind of rifle will you use?”

“A target rifle.”

“Bah, a target rifle! Are you meshage [crazy]? You cannot skirmish with a thirty-pound rifle, which loads so slowly. You need the new, fast-loading breechloaders or even a repeater. Ah, the Sharps is the one, an accurate breechloader. I have one just came in from Hartford. Let’s try it.”

“But Mr. Goldsmith, I thought you said I was a schnook for going to war?”

“Yes, a schnook, but you will be a well armed schnook.”

“How much is the Sharps? I have money to pay for it.”

“Who said anything about paying! I want you to come home alive and marry my Sarah. Yes, yes! I know all I need to know about you and Sarah. The googley eyes, I can see easy enough.”

“But I never said a word to her. She’s only fifteen years old.”

“So, in two years she will be plenty old enough. The googley eyes are hers not yours, but I know you like her. She is a real beauty and smart. I need someone to take the business, she can’t. You’re a good boy, Sam. You will make a fine son-in-law. Besides, Sarah will do what her father says. It’s tradition. Beside, she thinks the sun sets on you. You tell her before you go that when you get back from the war, you marry her. OK?”

Sam, stunned to his bones, could only say, “I’ll talk to her.”

“Fine, fine,” beamed Mr. Goldsmith. “Now let’s see what this fine rifle can do,” as he lifted it from its box.

Outside, Mr. Goldsmith had a 200-yard range. He set the 52-caliber Sharps on the firing bench and opened a cartridge box containing ten linen cartridges. The Sharps breech loading rifle, an invention by Christian Sharps, was considered the most accurate rifle of its time, next to a target rifle, with the advantage of being able to be loaded at ten rounds a minute and weighing only nine pounds. It loaded by pushing the trigger guard, which was attached by a hinge to the block that covered the firing chamber, forward pulling down the block, and exposing the firing chamber. Then a linen cartridge was shoved into the chamber, the trigger guard was pulled back and the block rose back into place, while a sharp cutter, attached to the block,

cut the back of the cartridge off, exposing the black powder. Next, the hammer was cocked and a fulminate of mercury cap was placed on the firing nipple, making the rifle ready to fire in six seconds.

Mr. Goldsmith took aim and fired in the standing position, the bullet striking the target just outside the ten-inch circle at ten o'clock. He sighed and said, "the old eyes aren't so good anymore."

Sam replied, "If that was a man, you would have hit him."

"Now you try, Sam."

Sam loaded and fired and hit five inches below the center of the target.

"Not bad, Sam," said Mr. Goldsmith, looking through his spotter scope. "I think it shoots a bit low."

"Seems so, let's do another round."

Sam fired two shots from the bench rest two inches off center low. "Not bad at 200," Sam exclaimed. "At 400, if I sight a little above the center, she will be right on."

Mr. Goldsmith said, "Figure on shooting up to 600, Sam?"

"She's that accurate?"

"Sharps advertises accurate up to 1,000 yards, but I would recommend a scope at over 600 yards. A skirmish will not be much over two hundred, Sam. It's the speed in loading that will give you a big advantage. In my war with Napoleon, fifty yards was skirmish distance."

"This is a prime rifle, I hope they equip the whole regiment with the Sharps."

"If they are smart, they will. When do you leave, Sam?"

"End of November."

Personal Note from the Author

I hope this separation of fact and fiction will make this book more useful as a reference guide. As you can judge from the above, it is more fact than fiction.

This book could not have been written without the excellent regimental history and the three diaries used, especially Wyman White's.

I endeavored to tell an accurate history of the USSS in an easy to read novel. Any mistakes are my fault and if you can find any, you may let me know through the publisher.



**Author Stanley Saperstein in USSS Uniform
by Henry Schweber**

About the Author

Stan Saperstein was born in 1946. Graduating from Rider University in 1968, he holds a BA in History and Political Science, and he obtained his MA in History/Education from the College of New Jersey in 1971.

Stanley's specialty is military history, which he has kept up with for over thirty years, reading, research, and doing living history. He is a colonial furniture maker, having served a seven-year apprenticeship as a wood carver/furniture maker, and reenacts a Revolutionary War cannon artificer, a US Sharpshooter, and acts out an excellent impression of Wyman White.

Stanley finished a thirty-year career as a Personnel Manager in New Jersey State government at the end of 2001, and is now pursuing his hobbies. Much of his time is now spent overseeing the completion of his son Eric's apprenticeship in 18th Century Woodworking, volunteer teaching, indulging in historical research, and serving various museums and historic organizations focusing on the Civil and Revolutionary Wars.

He was married to Cynthia Popkin in 1972 and has two grown children, Eric and Jonathan.

Stan can be seen at local living histories as a US Sharpshooter showing his antique 1851 Wessen Target Rifle.

He is available for lectures and demonstrations including book tours, educational programs, interactive lectures in full costume, Revolutionary War artillery demonstrations, and woodworking demonstrations.

Additional biographical information and details about Stanley's interactive lectures, characters, and details describing his life and woodworking are available at www.artisansofthevalley.com.

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Longstreet House

Established in 1987, Longstreet House is the publisher of Civil War histories with specific expertise in the areas of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. Dedicated to historical scholarship, Longstreet House books have been used for reference and academic study at numerous high schools, colleges and universities. Longstreet House proprietor Douglas Mariboe, is a graduate of the University of Vermont and longtime instructor of history at the renowned Peddie School. Longstreet's editor David G. Martin, received his Ph.D. from Princeton University. His knowledge of the Civil War has made him one of the leading experts and authors in his field.



Hand Crafted Custom Woodworking

Author Stanley Saperstein founded Artisans of the Valley in 1976 and enjoyed over twenty years perfecting his skills producing museum quality period reproductions and providing antique conservation services. With his retirement from the State of NJ Stanley also transferred the business to his oldest son Eric in 2001. Eric has since expanded his own skill set and began to accept commissions and restoration projects.

Artisans of the Valley offers museum quality period reproductions and antique conservation services. We are formally trained 18th century craftsmen offering authentic hand crafted pieces and hand rubbed finishes. Our unique style creates warm artistic pieces including hand carving and details.

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