



Saperstein Novel Tells Vivid Story of U.S. Sharpshooters

Civil War News, Feb/Mar 2004

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Sharpshooters: The Story of the United States Sharpshooters in the Army of the Potomac 1861-1865 by Stanley D. Saperstein. Illustrated, novel, maps, endnotes, 386 pp., 2003 Longstreet House, P.O. Box 730, Hightstown, NJ 08520, \$35 plus shipping.

Mark Carnes, in his book *Novel History* (2001) observed, “Historians and Historical novelists do many of the same things and in much the same way. They research old documents and materials; they work with words...they seek perspective on the human experience...” Like an historical novelist, Stanley Saperstein, in his historic novel *Sharpshooters*, accomplished all of the three characteristics as enumerated by *Carnes*.

Due to the intensive research of a historical novelist, often the line between fact and fiction tends to become blurred and shadowy. Many have accepted Michael Shaara’s *The Killer Angels* version of the events at Gettysburg as authentic. Tim O’Brien’s *If I die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*, for example are semi-autobiographical accounts of his tour in Vietnam, however they were written in the medium of fiction. Although *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is a fictional account, the first edition of the Dell paperback versions cites it as non-fiction.

Perhaps not intentionally, the title of Saperstein’s book is misleading since it is only on the back of the dust jacket that the reader is made aware that this is a novel.

Sharpshooter by Stanley D. Saperstein is a fine example of historical fiction. The author, a re-enactor in Berdan’s Sharpshooter unit, incorporates his personal knowledge of the weapons and equipment of the era along with a judicious use of first-hand accounts of sharpshooters and his ability to relate a story well told. Although a fictional account, the author made use of actual figures against a background of historic events to make his “history” more realistic.

The author, in chronological format, relates the history of the unique 1st and 2nd United States Sharpshooters, organized by Hiram Berdan and Casper Trepp, from the unit’ formation to the conclusion of the war.

To give credibility to his narrative, Saperstein relied heavily on Charles Stevens’ 1892 history of the unit and the diary of Wyman White published by Butternut & Blue. The account is related through the adventures of two fictional cousins, Sam and Levi Price, along with historical figure, Wyman White, who actually served as a member of the 2nd USSS.

The author’s knowledge of the literature and his experiences as a reenactor add depth to his characters, their engagements, and camp life of the sharpshooter. One area that is somewhat controversial is the author’s suggestion that the role of the sharpshooters in driving the Alabamians off the flank of Chamberlain’s 20th Maine on July 2, 1863, has been largely ignored and was more significant than previously thought.

Written as a historical novel *Sharpshooters*, however, has some historical inaccuracies. Birney’s Third Corps Division, for example, did not rest on Little Round Top on July 2; the sharpshooters did not “delay” Longstreet’s advance at Pritzer’s Woods; and Evander Law, not Jerome Robinson, ordered the 15th and 48th Alabama toward Little Round top. There are also some grammatical errors and quotation marks missing.

Saperstein’s book is highly recommended for its vivid imagery, its realistic portrait of army life, experiences, and tactics of the members of this elite unit. Written in a chronological style, the main characters are well developed and appear genuine since the author researched them all well. The plot revolves around the day-to-day life of the sharpshooters. While *Sharpshooters* certainly does not offer the profound emotional insights into men at war as a novel of the caliber *The Red Badge of Courage*, it does present a readable depiction of the daily grind faced by the men of this unit.

Reviewer Michael Russert, a member of the Capital District Civil War Round Table of New York, received his B.S. in history at SUNY and his MALS in Civil War Studies from Empire State College, SUNY. He has written about New York’s role in the war.

Sharpshooters is available through:

Artisans of the Valley

103 Corrine Drive Pennington, NJ 08534

Order now through our website at www.artisansofthevalley.com.

