

"Letters Home"

The Civil War Letters of Lt. Cyrus J. Hardaway

Historical Notes

01/01/62: 004

Included among the many "letters home" sent to his mother in New Berlin/Pittsfield, was a newspaper article entitled "Sharp Shooting." The article details the process by which applicants for Berdan's Regiments of Sharp Shooters were chosen. To qualify for membership in this legendary and elite group of marksman, recruiting officers had scoured the loyal northern states visiting towns, cities, and small villages in search of the local legendary "crack" shots. All applicants, including Hardaway, had to place ten consecutive shots inside a ten inch circle firing from a distance of 200 yards without the benefit of any telescopic sight.

The concept of recruiting marksmen into organized regiments was promoted by a wealthy inventor named Hiram Berdan. Berdan was one of the best known sport shooters in the nation prior to the Civil War. He lent his support to the project and was appointed Colonel of the two regiments. The First Regiment consisted of 10 companies; the Second Regiment was comprised of eight companies.

Berdan's Sharpshooters was the only such United States Army regiment and were uniformed in a most unique fashion. In the last published letter dated January 5, 1862, Hardaway commented, "I do not think you would know me if you should see me now, we have the best uniforms there is in the service." Trained to serve as snipers in advance positions, the Sharpshooters were camouflaged and uniformed in forest green frock coats, blue/gray trousers, and forage caps. Brown leather leggings, a Prussian style knapsack made of hair covered calfskin, and black ostrich plumes in their caps completed the outfit and promoted the nick name "Greencoats." Given their military tactic as advanced skirmishers, it is possible to see Berdan's as a precursor to several forms of elite military "green beret" units.