

Historical Notes to accompany letter dated:

03/03/62: 011

Historical Notes

Lt. Cyrus Hardaway's "letters home" to his mother in Pittsfield/New Berlin are of considerable interest, if for no other reason, for the descriptions of camp life as Berdan's Sharpshooters prepared for war. It is curious however, that this premier elite group was delayed in its assignment to active military status. Other regiments arrived after and left much earlier than Berdan's April 1862 departure from training camp. Many reasons can and have been advanced for its rather leisurely departure from the "Instruction Camp."

In addition to the usual suggestions that the delay in departure was in the regiment's non-receipt of their "as advertised" Sharps rifles, an additional reason may be found in the extensive newspaper coverage focusing on the Colonel Berdan and his Sharpshooters. Literally from their inception in the summer of 1861 and through the spring of 1862, Berdan's regiments were the subject of scores of newspaper columns, magazine articles, and other public relation opportunities.

In Hardaway's letters published on earlier dates it is evident from either the newspaper articles or visits from famous personages that Berdan and his two regiments were seen as not only an elite sharpshooter unit, but also as a public relations resource. One of the more celebrated public relations moments occurred when President Lincoln, General McClellan (Commander of Union forces near Washington, D.C., and Assistant Secretary of War Thomas Scott visited Berdan's regiments. Invited to watch the sharpshooter's practice, Colonel Berdan proceeded to have the Sharpshooters aim and shoot at a canvas target over 600 yards away. One hundred men from Berdan's regiments each fired one shot; when the target was examined it was determined that every shot had stuck the target.

Charles Stevens in his regimental history of Berdan's Sharpshooters, recounted another remarkable display of personal shooting by Colonel Berdan. In response to a challenge by the Assistant Secretary of War Thomas Scott to hit a target some 600 yards away (a life size figure of the Confederate President Jefferson Davis), Berdan managed to hit a "lucky" shot right on the target's right eye. Abraham Lincoln, comfortable with hunting and handling firearms, particularly enjoyed the exhibition and promised Berdan the delivery of his Sharp rifles. Lincoln visited the Sharpshooters on at least two more occasions and referred to Berdan's "lucky shot" at subsequent public appearances.