

Historical Notes to accompany letter dated:

04/09/62: 015

Historical Notes

On April 5th, 1862 Berdan's Sharpshooters Regiments were ordered to advance upon Yorktown, Virginia as part of the general assault upon the fortifications erected by the Confederates to defend the Confederate capitol Richmond, Virginia. The Confederate fortifications were well designed and defended by considerable Rebel artillery. Many of the fortifications were adaptations and re-workings of the original breastworks remaining from the concluding battle in the Revolutionary War's Battle of Yorktown in 1781.

The 1862 Battle of Yorktown was handicapped by the Union Commander, George B. McClellan's, indecisiveness in attacking the Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's smaller forces. McClelland mistakenly assumed that Johnston's forces were far larger than were actually present and cautiously ordered the creation of massive siegeworks. McClelland's lack of aggressiveness resulted in a prolonged siege of Yorktown from April 10-May 4, 1862. This 30 day delay in attacking the Yorktown fortifications and its 15,000 confederate soldiers by the 100,000 men of the Union Army, permitted the Confederates to withdraw in an orderly fashion from Yorktown to Richmond. Upon entering Yorktown, McClellan pronounced the campaign and siege as, "the success is brilliant." In fact, McClellan had been tricked by the Confederates marching the same troops back and forth to the point that estimates of their numbers were grossly exaggerated. While Union troops labored creating siegeworks, the Confederates reinforced Yorktown, and furthered the defensive works near Richmond.

During this *Peninsular Campaign* the legend of Berdan's Sharpshooters was further enhanced. During one phase of the campaign, a company of sharpshooters were particularly annoyed by a black Confederate rifleman, who was quite skilled at long range shooting. After much effort, a sharpshooter was able to discover the hideout and bring down the sniper with an extraordinary telescopic shot. Another sharpshooter, George Chase of Company E, affectionately referred to as "Old Seth," singlehandedly isolated and held at bay an enemy field gun for two days.

Hardaway's letter home confirms the skirmisher's tactics previously described. His description of crawling far forward of Union lines so that he and his fellow sharpshooters might suppress artillery and other enemy action, while both Union and Confederate artillery shells whistle over their heads, is a powerful battlefield description.

As an additional historical note, Lt. Hardaway also states, "Professor Lowe is here with his balloon and has been up several times so we have shows here without paying a quarter for it. . ." Professor T.S.C. Lowe's Federal observation balloon, *Intrepid*, was extensively used by Federal forces to reconnoiter Civil War battlefields. The farmboy from New Berlin/Pittsfield was witnessing a revolution in warfare : railroads, iron clad warships, and balloon reconnaissance.