

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Picketing, Skirmishing, and Sharpshooting in the Civil War

By Fred Ray

“It is a post of honor, not one of ease.” Captain Shepherd Green Pryor, 12th Georgia. <sup>1</sup>

“Sharpshooters, like fiddlers, are born and not made.” Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill, CSA. <sup>2</sup>

### Picketing

The security of an army depended on its pickets – the sentinels who provided early warning of infiltration or enemy attack. Without them an army was in constant danger of being overrun without warning. So important was this that a negligent soldier, especially one who fell asleep, was severely punished and might even be executed. A Union officer left a vivid description of a picket line, which might have applied to either army.

A picket line is always one of the most picturesque sights in an army, when it runs through woods and fields. You know it consists of a string of ‘posts,’ each of half a dozen men, or so, and, in front of these, a chain of sentries who are constantly on the alert. The squads of men make to themselves a gipsy bough-house in front of which they make a fire in cool weather. They must always have their belts on and be ready to fight at a moment’s notice. In the woods, you follow along from one rustic shelter to another, and see the sentries, out in front, each standing behind a good tree and keeping a sharp lookout for Rebel scouts, bushwhackers and cavalry. A short distance in the rear you from time to time come on a ‘reserve,’ which is a large body, perhaps of fifty or a hundred, who are concealed

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<sup>1</sup> Shepherd Pryor to Elizabeth Pryor May 23, 1863 in Charles R. Adams, Jr., ed. *A Post of Honor: The Pryor Letters, 1861-63* (Fort Valley, GA: Garret Publications, 1989). 338.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald L. Early, *The Second United States Sharpshooters in the Civil War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 31.

and who are ready to come to the assistance of the posts, if they are attacked .... A picket line, judiciously posted, in woods or swamps, will oppose a formidable resistance, even to a line of battle. There was careful Mr. Corps, officer of the day, with his crimson scarf across his shoulder, inspecting his outposts and reserves; each one falling in as he came along and standing at a shoulder.<sup>3</sup>

## Skirmishing and Sharpshooting

In the wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century pickets and skirmishers had a similar duty – to warn the army of the approach of an enemy and to keep them from observing and interfering with its operations at rest, on the march, or in a battle. Although it often went unremarked in the histories, this task, the *petite guerre*, was a vital one and often put one side or the other at a grave disadvantage before the battle proper started. At its most expansive the *petite guerre* included small-scale warfare conducted away from the main army, including independent cavalry operations. In general, the cavalry was responsible for the distant security of the army, with the light infantry doing the close-in work. Here we will concern ourselves with the infantry only, and more specifically with the light infantry, defined as those soldiers who conduct the army’s scouting, picketing, and skirmishing.

US Secretary of War Jefferson Davis (1853-57) abolished separate light infantry and rifle units, introduced rifles to the line infantry, and pushed the concept of the universal infantryman who was equally at home in the line of battle or on the skirmish line. This was greatly facilitated by the development of the Minié ball, which allowed the rifle to be loaded as fast as the smoothbore musket, as well as to hit targets at hitherto unprecedented ranges. The new light infantry tactics developed by the French (sometimes called Zouave tactics) were codified into a manual, which was translated into English by American colonel (and future Confederate lieutenant general) William Joseph Hardee. In 1855 the War Department adopted Hardee’s *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* (later simply *Tactics*) as its standard manual, and it would be the reference for both sides during the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

“There is nothing in this world that is more exciting, more nerve stirring to a soldier,” claimed one Southerner, “than to participate in a battle line of skirmishers, when you have a fair field and open fight. There it takes nerve and pluck; however, it is allowed each skirmisher to take whatever protection he can in the way of tree or stump. Then on the advance you do not know when to expect an enemy to spring from behind a tree, stump, or bush, take aim and fire. It resembles somewhat the order of Indian

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<sup>3</sup> Theodore Lyman, George R. Agassiz, ed., *With Grant and Meade from the Wilderness to Appomattox* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 300-1.

<sup>4</sup> Brevet Lieut.-Col. W. J. Hardee, U.S. Army, Prepared Under the Direction of the War Department, *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics: for the Exercise and Maneuvers of Troops When Acting as Light Infantry or Riflemen*. (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1855).

warfare, for on a skirmish line ‘all is fair in war.’” A Union officer thought the skirmish line “the favorite position of the experienced soldier” since men were allowed to take cover and protect themselves.<sup>5</sup>

In practice a skirmish line typically deployed by a regiment was composed of two companies in groups of four comrades in battle, five paces apart with the groups separated by no more than forty. A small body called a support (and in practice usually a company) was positioned about 150 yards behind “to fill vacant places, furnish the line with cartridges, relieve the fatigued, and serve as a rallying point.” All skirmishers were instructed to “carefully profit by any accidents of the ground to conceal themselves from the view of the enemy, and to shelter themselves from his fire.” Four hundred yards behind the skirmish line was the reserve, usually formed in close order, upon which the skirmishers could fall back if pressed. This could be the main body of the regiment if close or another specifically formed for the purpose. The regulation stressed that strengths and distances could be adjusted as necessary. Rifles were in short supply early in the war, so these usually went to the flank companies, which, under the command of the two most experienced captains, were tasked with establishing the skirmish line. Later in war when breech loaders and repeaters became available, these were given to skirmishers. The line infantry fired by volleys and were more concerned with putting out a large volume of fire quickly, but skirmishers picked their shots and needed a more precision weapon, making the rifle a necessity.<sup>6</sup>

Skirmish drill differed considerably from that of the line of battle and added yet another training requirement for the raw recruits who filled the ranks early in the war. A strung-out line of men was difficult to control, especially in wooded terrain, and a leader’s voice did not carry very far. Some of the more specialized units used bugles, but few line units had them. Early in the war skirmish lines were relatively ineffective and were brushed aside early in the action. One Confederate officer complained about

the miserable system heretofore existing of calling for details from each company hurriedly when approaching the enemy—who arrived at the head of the column in march all breathless, and utterly ignorant of the duty required of them—and besides company officers when called upon in this manner in entering battle, did not wish to lose a good man & so sent the worst they had. Thus the indifferent men in the brigade, indifferently commanded by any detailed officer, who knew not one of his men or any thing of the skirmish drill, were sent to protect the front. The consequences were inevitable—a feeling of insecurity in the main body —

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<sup>5</sup> D. Augustus Dickert, *History of Kershaw’s Brigade, with Complete Roll of Companies, Biographical Sketches, Incidents, Anecdotes, Etc.*, Morningside Press 1976 ed. (Newberry, SC: Elbert H. Aull Company, 1899), 421-2; Aldace F. Walker, *The Vermont Brigade in the Shenandoah Valley, 1864* (Burlington, VT: Free Press Association, 1869), 56-57.

<sup>6</sup> Hardee, *Tactics*, 171-2.

the necessity of keeping a second line for protection, the incessant alarms made by the men in the front, who mistook every movement.<sup>7</sup>

The Confederate solution was to form special skirmishing and picketing units called sharpshooters. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the term sharpshooter applied both to precision marksmen (who would be called snipers today) and light infantrymen. To add to the confusion, many units on both sides also used the term sharpshooter regardless of their actual employment on the battlefield.

Although authorized in early 1862 the first Confederate battalion was not actually organized until just after the battle of Fredericksburg in January, 1863. The man behind it was Brigadier General Robert Emmett Rodes, who was to be one of the Army of Northern Virginia's foremost exponents of light infantry. He placed Major Eugene Blackford of the 5<sup>th</sup> Alabama in charge of a battalion drawn from the brigade's five regiments, and they began training that winter in skirmish drill and marksmanship. Initially the battalion was one man in twelve from each regiment, or about 100 men, but later that summer it was doubled to one man in six for a 200-man unit. Blackford's battalion had five companies—one from each regiment—but in other battalions the number of companies would vary. Although the battalion's primary purpose was to screen the brigade's front and flanks, it could also be used as a tactical unit for flank guards, special missions, or as a provost screen behind the brigade to keep men from deserting the line of battle. To control his strung-out skirmish line, which sometimes extended for nearly a mile, Blackford used four buglers.

When in contact with the enemy the sharpshooters often sheltered themselves in rifle pits. Sharpshooter Berry Benson described them: "There were logs lying about and these we took to make rifle pits. From the general method of constructing protection for sharpshooters by digging a hole in the ground and throwing up earth in front of it as a breastwork, arose the use of the word 'pits' as applied to any construction serving the same purpose. A pile of rails was called a 'rifle pit,' and so with the logs. No hole was dug; the rails were simply arranged in low piles behind which the men lay." If forced to fall back they often formed on the enemy's flanks, where they could pour in a deadly enfilade fire.<sup>8</sup>

Rodes' innovations were soon copied, and a number of other infantry brigades formed their own sharpshooter battalions. Blackford's battalion got its first test at Chancellorsville on May 2, 1863 providing flank security to Stonewall Jackson's flanking column, "marching their laborious way thru swamps & pine thickets." Blackford used his bugles frequently to create the illusion that he led cavalry rather than infantry. When Jackson reached his assembly position on Major General Joseph Hooker's flank, he

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene Blackford Diary/Memoir, Manuscript in possession of the author.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Benson, ed., *Berry Benson's Civil War Book: Memoirs of a Confederate Scout & Sharpshooter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 68.

ordered Blackford to throw out a skirmish line about 400 yards in front while the rest of the corps filed up and deployed. When Second Corps attacked, Blackford's sharpshooters led the advance until they hit the troops of the Union XI Corps, then fell back to let the line infantry through.<sup>9</sup>

A large part of the Confederate emphasis on sharpshooting was due to their unpleasant experiences in the Peninsula campaign of 1862, where Union colonel Hiram Berdan's sharpshooters bedeviled them incessantly and they were hard pressed to respond. When the war began Berdan, a wealthy inventor and entrepreneur (as well as being one of the country's top rifle shots) organized two regiments of sharpshooters. He outfitted them in distinctive green uniforms and eventually saw that they got customized breech-loading Sharps rifles, while retaining a certain number of heavy target rifles for specialized use. In addition, the Federals also fielded several other independent sharpshooter companies, usually assigned to regiments from the states from which they came. Although initially equipped with heavy civilian target rifles, they eventually received the Sharps also. Unlike the Confederates, they were usually not deployed as tactical units but were instead split up into groups of ten to fifty men along the battle line to harass the enemy. Like their counterparts in gray they concentrated on officers and artillerymen.

Both sides continued to evolve the concept during the war. Later in the war commanders used increasingly stronger skirmish lines much more aggressively to tear away the enemy's skirmish screen in order to find out his strength and dispositions, shape the battle, and even to press attacks. Commanders in the defense used them to degrade and disorganize enemy advances, and to mask their dispositions and movements. There were even several instances of well-placed skirmish lines repelling an attack by a full line of battle. Later in the war contending skirmishers fought some sizable battles, notably just outside Washington at Fort Stevens on July 11 and 12, 1864, and at Charles Town on September 21 of that year.

In 1864 General Lee ordered sharpshooter battalions formed in every infantry brigade based on the pattern established by Rodes and Blackford. On the Federal side, each infantry division of the Union armies in Virginia organized a sharpshooter company in mid-1864 after the Overland Campaign. These consisted of 100 men, divided into two sections: one armed with service Springfield rifles (and later with Spencer 7-shot repeaters), and a smaller one equipped with heavy target rifles. These units were used not only for sharpshooting but also for reconnaissance and even as assault troops.

In the West both Blue and Gray relied mostly on skirmishers supplied by the infantry regiments rather than on specialized units as in Virginia. Both sides did have designated light infantry sharpshooter units, but they never assumed the importance they had in the East. Nevertheless, skirmishing assumed a major role in both the Atlanta and

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<sup>9</sup> Eugene Blackford to My Dear Mary, May 21, 1863, Gordon-Blackford Papers, Maryland Historical Society

Overland campaigns in 1864. Indeed, both campaigns featured an almost constant *petite guerre* between major engagements. In many cases this was necessitated by the forested terrain, which tended to mask troop movements and make constant reconnaissance necessary. Major General William Tecumseh Sherman even went so far as say that “we were generally in a wooded country, and, though our lines were deployed according to tactics, the men generally fought in strong skirmish-lines, taking advantage of the shape of ground, and of every cover.” The Confederates did, however, organize special units of sharpshooters equipped with long range rifles such as the Whitworth and Kerr, and these operated much like modern snipers and not as light infantry. Organized at division and corps level, they were deployed where needed. The Army of Northern Virginia’s First Corps formed such a sharpshooter corps during its sojourn in the West and apparently kept it in place when it returned to Virginia.<sup>10</sup>

The Federals never had as extensive a light infantry program as did the Confederates, they did recognize its necessity. Although the Army of the Potomac had a credible light infantry force in 1862, this was allowed to atrophy and politics frequently trumped military necessity. Federal policy was to form sharpshooter companies rather than larger units, which were assigned to line regiments. In some cases, this worked well, but in others the line commanders had no idea how to use these specialized units. In addition to the division sharpshooter companies formed in 1864, the army also tasked veteran but depleted line regiments such as the 43<sup>rd</sup> New York as light infantry, habitually using them for picketing and skirmishing. In the West, however, Union skirmishers reached an exceptionally high level of proficiency, perhaps due to the frequency with which they were employed.

While by mid-1863 both sides had equipped their soldiers with rifles capable of accurate fire at several hundred yards, marksmanship training for line units was spotty. Lack of practice, poor visibility from black powder smoke and the wooded terrain in which most battles were fought meant that the engagement ranges for most line units, who fired in volleys, was 200 yards or less. The sharpshooters, however, had much more extensive marksmanship training and were capable of engaging targets at considerably longer distances, in some cases up to 600 yards.

By mid-war sharpshooters had become an ever-present danger for soldiers everywhere, but especially so for officers and artillerymen. Although they did not produce the casualties of the clash of the lines of battle, their psychological effect and disruption of the chain of command was palpable. Their victims also included high-ranking officers such as Union Major General John Sedgwick, killed on May 9, 1864, most likely by a sharpshooter armed with a Whitworth rifle; and Confederate Brigadier General George Pierce Doles, felled three weeks later at Cold Harbor by a Yankee bullet.

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<sup>10</sup> William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of Gen. W.T. Sherman by Himself*, 2 vols., Charles L. Webster 1891 ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1875), 394.

As the armies drew closer together into a sustained conflict at Atlanta and Petersburg, their toll became a steady drain on both armies.

Overall the light infantry skirmishers, who had been of little account in the first two years of the war, came into their own by 1863 and continued to gain in importance until the end of the war.

### **A Sharpshooter's Weapons**

Since a sharpshooter operated as both a light infantryman and a marksman, he mostly needed a weapon that was light, accurate, reliable, and that had a fairly high rate of fire. There were times, however, when a more precision weapon was called for. Although sharpshooters used many weapons, the most common were:

#### **Enfield P53 series Rifle**

This nine and a half pound, single shot, muzzle loading, .577 caliber rifle was as close to a standard infantry weapon as the Confederacy ever got, and was used in large numbers by Federal forces as well. Sixty grains of black powder pushed a 530-grain Minié ball (about the same weight as eleven copper pennies) down a 39" barrel at about 850-900 feet per second. While the British-made Enfield's flip-up blade sight was graduated (depending on the model) to 900-1100 yards, in practice a good marksman could hit a man-sized target at about half that distance. The Enfield's superior accuracy and ruggedness made it the top choice for Confederate sharpshooters. When available, they preferred the shorter 33" barrel P56, 58, or 60 "two-band" model with English-manufactured ammunition.

#### **U.S. Model 1861 Springfield Rifle-Musket**

The standard U.S. infantry arm was functionally nearly identical to the British Enfield except for a fractionally different .58 caliber bore size. Line infantry on both sides used this sturdy rifle in greater numbers than any other, but it lacked the pinpoint accuracy of the Enfield and Whitworth rifles, making it second choice for the skirmish line.

#### **Whitworth Rifle**

Sir Joseph Whitworth, one of the premier inventors of his age, designed and manufactured this singular rifle in Britain. It fired a unique .451 caliber hexagonal-sided bullet (often called a "bolt") with a very long aspect ratio that gave it superior performance at long ranges. Featuring an optional telescopic sight and a high muzzle velocity (1300 fps), the Whitworth could strike at a thousand yards and beyond. While a soldier could easily carry the 9 lb. 10 oz. weapon around the battlefield, its light weight meant a heavy recoil. Although some of the hard-kicking Whitworth rifle's exploits are probably exaggerated, it was a very effective weapon in the right hands. So far as is known it was used exclusively by Confederate forces in both eastern and western theaters.

### Model 1859 Sharps Rifle

This light (8 lbs. 8 oz.), breech loading, single shot .54 caliber rifle combined a high rate of fire with excellent long-range accuracy. Pulling down the trigger guard dropped the breech and allowed the soldier to insert a linen or paper cartridge, which the breech then sheared open when it closed. A trained rifleman could put ten 370-grain slugs a minute down the 30-inch barrel in the same time it took a soldier with a muzzle loader to get off three, and the breech-loading feature allowed him to easily reload while prone, a considerable advantage for a sharpshooter. Sighted to eight hundred yards, the Sharps was quite accurate and could reliably hit a man-sized target at about half that range. Overall it was a sturdy and effective design that held up well in the field. The most famous versions were the two thousand made expressly for Berdan's Sharpshooters, which sported a double "set" trigger. Pulling the rear trigger would "set" the front one, which would then fire at the slightest touch. Sharps also made a carbine version for cavalry use with a 22" barrel, which was often issued to infantry units as well. As a skirmisher's rifle, the Sharps was hard to beat, and it was issued in considerable numbers to Federal light infantry late in the war.

### Model 1860 Spencer Rifle

The .52 caliber Spencer repeating rifle held seven shots in a tubular magazine the stock. Pulling down the trigger guard rotated the breech block, ejecting the spent case and allowing the magazine spring to push a metallic rimfire cartridge forward. Returning the trigger guard pushed the bullet home. The hammer had to be manually cocked for each shot. To reload, a soldier opened the buttstock, dropped in seven rounds, and replaced the spring-loaded follower. With its modern one-piece metal cartridges, the Spencer was virtually immune to moisture and required no separate primer. If a ready supply of pre-loaded magazines was available, a soldier could fire fifteen aimed shots a minute. By the end of the war this had become a preferred sharpshooter weapon even though its long-range accuracy left something to be desired.

### Henry Rifle

The Henry "sixteen-shooter" was a revolutionary weapon for its day. The tubular magazine beneath the barrel held fifteen .44 caliber metallic cartridges, plus one in the chamber. Like the Spencer, it was a lever action weapon capable of putting out a large volume of fire quickly, as well as being waterproof. The US government bought only a few, however quite a number were privately purchased by soldiers who wanted something better than the standard arm, especially in the West. Although the Henry was rather expensive and somewhat delicate in the field, and lacked both power and accuracy at longer ranges, its close-in firepower was very effective in a standup battle and on the skirmish line. Eventually it became the iconic Winchester of Western fame.

### Target Rifles

For sniping duties, the Federals fielded a wide variety of civilian target rifles, most of which were heavy and not very mobile. One soldier, reviewing the sharpshooter's weapons in his unit, observed that each rifle has a telescope running the entire length of



the barrel. The average weight is about 35 lbs., the lightest weighing 17 lbs. and heaviest 50 lbs. While their accuracy was excellent, loading was a slow and cumbersome process. Many of these rifles used a false muzzle, a protective metal cone that slipped over the muzzle to protect the lands when loading—and rendered the weapon nearly useless if lost. Though quite effective in a static situation, these rifles were unsuitable for a field campaign, and their slow rate of fire made them of little use in an open battle. In practice these rifles usually stayed in the wagon train until circumstances permitted their use, and the soldiers used a more suitable rifle such as the Sharps for normal duties. Although some states did purchase target rifles for sharpshooters, in most cases a prospective sharpshooter was required to provide his own.

### Accuracy

How accurate were these guns? In a modern test conducted in 1971, various rifles fired fifteen shots at 400 yards at a 72" X 72" wooden target. A US-made Springfield rifle-musket managed only 7 hits while a British Enfield scored 13. By contrast the .69 caliber M1842 smoothbore made *no* hits at that distance. The .45 caliber Whitworth sharpshooter's rifle, however, got 15 hits out of 15 shots.

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