

## “Who were they? -Part 1”

Setting the record straight with “*False start at Franklin’s Crossing*”  
by  
Bill Skillman

While researching my ‘Special Service’ articles I poured over numerous books and articles describing the actions of Federal and Confederate sharpshooters at Gettysburg and other battles. During the summer of 2001 I stopped at Border’s Book Store to peruse their magazine offerings, and to my pleasant surprise the July issue of *America’s Civil War* was devoted solely to the Gettysburg campaign. Among the featured articles was a little known action entitled “*False start at Franklin’s Crossing*” by noted author, Andre Noah Trudeau.

This spring I returned to “*False start*” with the hope that I might mine a few ‘sharpshooting nuggets’ for an upcoming article. But like so many projects I seem to undertake, the rereading of Trudeau’s article set me off in a direction I had not anticipated. But first lets understand what was happening during the first week of June 1863. Trudeau opens his article with the following summation: “*Concerned by reports of Confederate troop movements, Union General Joseph Hooker ordered a sally across the Rappahannock River at Fredricksburg. The foray initiated the Gettysburg campaign.*”

While the Army of Potomac recovered from the disastrous defeat at Chancellorsville, Gen. R. E. Lee issued orders for his Army of Northern Virginia to steal away from their positions around Fredricksburg. By June 2, with the exception of A. P. Hill’s III Corps, the ANV was moving towards the Blue Ridge Mountains. Despite a steady stream of information coming from observation balloons, cavalry patrols and deserters, Maj. Gen. Hooker needed to determine if the bulk of Lee’s forces were still concentrated across the Rappahannock River, or if the rumors of a second invasion of the North was true. He decided that a reconnaissance across the river at Franklin’s Crossing, (near the mouth of Deep Run creek), would yield both prisoners and the vital information he needed to determine the Army of the Potomac’s next movement. Franklin’s Crossing was so named for Union Gen. Wm. Franklin. The previous December, Franklin’s men (among them the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps and 2<sup>nd</sup> USSS) crossed over the River and successfully breached Gen. Stonewall Jackson’s lines. However Franklin’s troops were unable to exploit their breakthrough and prevent the slaughter of Union soldiers assaulting Marye’s Heights.

One advantage for selecting the Franklin’s Crossing site was that the Confederates did not have the formidable array of earthworks and artillery positions like they did a mile north at Marye’s Heights. Another advantage was that the Crossing and immediate interior was within range of the Union artillery- which could pound any CSA infantry concentrations and rain down counter-battery fire on any artillery brought up to contest the crossing. Still there was a line of rifle pits scattered along the low land fronting the river and an earthwork was perched on the bluff above. But using surprise, celerity of movement, and veteran troops the reconnaissance should work.

On the north side of the River were the camps of the Union 6<sup>th</sup> Army Corps, under the command of Maj. Gen. “Uncle John” Sedgwick. On June 5<sup>th</sup> he received orders from Hooker to throw pontoon bridges across the river “*and to learn, if possible, what the enemy are about*”. The orders filtered down the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps chain of command to Col. Lewis Grant’s Vermont brigade. Grant’s troops had distinguished themselves during the late Chancellorsville campaign by carrying Marye’s Heights, and later acting as the rear

guard at Salem Church. With the rest of the Army of Potomac bottled up near the Wilderness, Gen. R. E. Lee diverted the bulk of his forces to encircle and destroy the isolated 6<sup>th</sup> Corps. But by skillful maneuvering, Sedgwick slipped out of the trap and recrossed the River to safety. Designated as the “Light Division” Grant’s men served as the shock troops and skirmishers for 6<sup>th</sup> Corps. Despite their formidable name, their numbers were never increased beyond a brigade size.

On the morning of June 5<sup>th</sup> engineers (50<sup>th</sup> NY) arrived with their wagon train containing enough material to construct two-400 foot pontoon bridges. At 4 p.m. Grant’s Vermont brigade and four artillery batteries marched onto the plain. Across the river the Confederates calmly observed all the activity, some standing atop their earthworks while pickets sat on the edge of their rifle pits. After unlimbering, the Federal artillery opened fire, the rebels disappeared into their earthworks, and the Engineers began to drag the heavy pontoon boats down to the river’s edge. Like the previous December, the southern sharpshooters quickly got the range of the pontoon-carrying parties and dropped men right and left. After an hour only 10 boats had reached the waters edge, but the Confederate’s rifle fire had become too accurate and intense for the enterprise to proceed. The Union artillery was ordered to redouble their efforts to silence the sharpshooters, the noise of shells passing overhead was so deafening that the engineers and infantry officers had to use hand signals to communicate.

Despite the intensive bombardment, by 6:30 p.m. it was apparent that Federal infantry were needed to cross the river in the pontoon boats to drive out the stubborn sharpshooters. The assignment fell to the 5<sup>th</sup> VT and 26<sup>th</sup> NJ. The men scrambled across the plain, piled into the boats and cast off, the artillery now concentrating all of their fire on the rifle-pits. The crossing was successful and the Federals quickly rooted out the CSA sharpshooters. The survivors scrambled up the bluff for the protection of the earthworks, with the Vermonters and Jerseymen in hot pursuit. At a signal from a Union officer the artillery ceased firing as the infantry poured over the crest and cleared out the earthworks. The Engineers were already launching and anchoring more boats into the river in preparation to laying the bridgework.

The Vermont skirmishers advanced as far inland as the Bowling Green road when they received orders to halt and consolidate their lines. By evening a horseshoe shaped perimeter was established, one mile long by 1/2 mile wide with both flanks anchored on the riverbank. The Confederates had fallen back to a more defensible position inland, but left a strong picket behind to keep an eye on the Yanks. As the exhausted Vermont skirmishers established their own outposts, the rest of Grant’s brigade marched over the bridges and occupied the perimeter.

Over June 7-8 skirmish fire flared and sputtered, but no significant maneuvers or fighting was undertaken by either side. When the Federal infantry came under sharpshooter fire, they grabbed picks and shovels to throw up earthworks for protection. The sector adjacent to Deep Run came under particularly accurate fire. Having captured some 100 prisoners during the first day, Gen. Hooker issued orders for Grant to monitor the Confederates but not bring on a major engagement. With the prospect of little fighting ahead, the Vermont pickets soon had a brisk trade going with their Southern counterparts, where newspapers and coffee were exchanged for tobacco. During the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup>, Grant’s men were withdrawn and a brigade from Gen. Horatio Wright’s 1<sup>st</sup> Division replaced them. No further effort was made by 6<sup>th</sup> Corps to expand their bridgehead. Gen. Lee rode down to observe the salient and was

satisfied that Hooker's foray was merely a feint, so he issued orders for the rest of the ANV to continue their northward march.

On June 9<sup>th</sup>, as the immense cavalry battle between Union Gen. Pleasanton and Confederate Gen. JEB Stuart raged at Brandy Station, things began to heat up at Franklin's Crossing as well. Trudeau notes: "A Pennsylvanian..observed.. 'sharpshooters were firing at each other all day...[and] the rebel pickets are rather too close to us for comfort. Trudeau adds: 'To help control the enemy sniping offensive, the call went out for some members of Colonel Hiram Berdan's deadly 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Sharpshooters. Trudeau cites a soldier of the 121<sup>st</sup> NY observing "They are shooting all day as an opportunity offers". Trudeau added: "a diarist of the 96<sup>th</sup> PA scribbled approvingly, 'Berdan's Sharpshooters gave them hell". Trudeau concluded that the Sharp Shooters' accurate fire produced the desired effect: "according to one Confederate diarist.. 'Pickets report all quiet along our lines".

Two days later (June 11) Confederate sharpshooters started to pepper the Federals again, causing them to hunker down behind their breastworks. Author Trudeau noted, "...Matters on the northern shoulder of the pocket, along Deep Run required another dose of Berdan's green-clad marksmen, 'Berdans Sharpshooters have been employed, with long telescopic rifle', observed a grateful New Yorker, 'and the rebs have pretty much closed up the business.' A Massachusetts infantryman in the 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment agreed, writing that "Berdan's sharp-shooters have completely silenced the enemy, and not one dares show his head above the pits"

As you can imagine, when I first read these glowing passages I puffed up with an "all in a day's work" pride for my favorite Sharpshooters. But after a few minutes pride gave way to some serious head scratching. For all of the praise heaped on the USSS by Mr. Trudeau, I couldn't recall a single mention of the Sharp Shooters even being at Franklin's Crossing in June 1863. Curious, I decided to undertake a thorough investigation of my library and research papers to see if I had missed something. It was here that things began to get interesting.

In Berdan's United States Sharpshooters in the Army of the Potomac, author C. A. Stevens noted the activities of early June as follow: "In the meantime, Gen. Hooker was kept busy, as the enemy were known to be moving away from Fredricksburg, although a force still remained there, well-fortified on the hill s and capable of making a stout fight if attacked, as was ascertained by troops of the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps, which had crossed over, below town, early in June, (page 280)

Next I consulted the books of W.Y.W. Ripley (Co. F) and Rudolf Aschmann (Co. A), the former authored a book about the Vermont Company experiences, while the latter wrote a post-war memoir of his service in the USSS. Capt. Aschmann has nothing of significance to note in his book during the interval. Aschmann was not only Captain of the Swiss-German Company (New York-'A'-1<sup>st</sup> USSS), but also a close personal friend to Lt. Col. Caspar Trepp, commander the 1<sup>st</sup> USSS. Certainly Aschmann would have been 'on the inside track' if a USSS company were ordered to Deep Run. Lt. Col. Ripley reports: "Drills, reviews and other parades of ceremony were of frequent occurrence, but nothing of moment took place to essentially vary the monotony of their lives." However, he does suggest some men were kept busy: "Occasionally a detail would be made from the Company (F-1<sup>st</sup> USSS) for a day or two of especial service at some portion of the picket line where rebel sharpshooters had become unusually aggressive, but affairs in those parts generally soon became satisfactory, and the men would be ordered

back to camp. These little episodes were eagerly welcomed by men tired again of inactivity of their lives in permanent camp." Wyman White (Co. F, 2<sup>nd</sup> USSS) accounts reflect boredom with routine. He finishes the chapter with: "About noon, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1863 the long roll came almost as a surprise. Our regiment received orders to report to the commander of the Second Brigade, First Division, Third Army Corps".

Okay, since we have nothing among the post-war memoirs to specifically identify a USSS company or platoon being sent to 6<sup>th</sup> Corps aid, perhaps we might discover the information from diary entries made by U. S. Sharpshooters. Besides these 'real time' entries would help us avoid any pitfalls of post-war forgetfulness and revisionism. I pulled out Soldier's in Green that is the Civil War diaries of James M. Matthews (Maine Company 'D', 2<sup>nd</sup> USSS). Let us examine Matthews June 1863 entries to see if there is 'something afoot':

Wed. June 3. Orders come to march in A.M., stack arms to be ready at a moment's notice to march. The order countermanded shortly afterward.

Fri. June 5. Balloons are very watchful. Orders to be ready to start at a moment's notice. The remainder of 5<sup>th</sup> Corps left this morning.

Sat. June 6. Still under orders to march at a moment's notice. There is all kinds of rumors and **artillery is heard in the direction of Fredricksburg.**

Sun. June 7. Still in camp and all kinds of rumors. Orders last night indicated a movement but none has occurred yet.

Wed. June 10. There seems to be but two or three brigades across the river and they are used only as pickets and relieved every 24 hours.

Thur. June 11. Orders came to pack up, as we were to change camp and are to go into the 1<sup>st</sup> Division. The orders were countermanded until 3 1/2 P.M. when we had orders to pack light and move forward. After reaching the road, halted until the 1<sup>st</sup> Division (3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps) came up when we moved forward as far as Harwood church, halting some **two miles north** on the Warrenton road.

While Sgt. Matthews notes the sound of artillery fire coming from the vicinity of Fredricksburg, he fails to mention any 2<sup>nd</sup> USSS details marching off to support the reconnaissance. Since Matthews was detailed as the company clerk at headquarters, he surely would have been privy to such movements.

I sorted through my collections of Sharpshooter letters next. Frank Cobb's (C-1<sup>st</sup> USSS) correspondence has a gap between May 29 and June 17. The same theme of boredom, rumors, frustration with drills and inspections are mentioned by him and other letter writers, but beyond the mention of distant artillery being heard there is nothing about USSS involvement in the action across the river.

Finally, if we examine the Official Records for the actions at Franklin's Crossing (within the Gettysburg Campaign), there is certainly information pertaining to 6<sup>th</sup> Corps involvement there, including a list of 57 men who became casualties during the 5 day period. Compared to the numerous skirmishes and battles that the Army of Potomac fought during the Gettysburg campaign these numbers are relatively small; about the same amount sustained by the USSS/3<sup>rd</sup> Maine action at Pitzer's Wood. But that is all, virtually no USSS involvement is noted by the OR's at Deep Run during this period.

By way of consistency, the one date that all of the USSS authors, journalists, letter writers (both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment) and the Official Records consistently agree upon is June 11, 1863. For it is this date that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps is ordered to depart from their encampment near Falmouth Virginia and begin the march northwards to pursue Lee's army. Both USSS regiments marched 10 miles toward Warrenton by that evening. But to read Trudeau, on this date there should be a detail of U. S. Sharp Shooters engaging Hill's sharpshooters at Deep Run? Something is seriously amiss here.

Okay, if my research has established that no large (platoon or company) details were detached from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiments of U.S. Sharp Shooters to support the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps actions at Franklin's Crossing, then just who were the Federal sharpshooters who served there? Fortunately, I now have an answer. Last year my old comrade in research, Rob Leinwebber, sent me a copy of a memoir entitled The Sharpshooters by L.E. Bicknell, and it is this memoir that holds the answers that we seek.

Luke Emerson Bicknell enlisted in August 1861 into the First Company Massachusetts Sharpshooters. These Sharpshooters are more commonly known as "Andrew's Sharpshooters" in honor of that state's governor. A second company of sharpshooters was raised and both were attached at various times to Massachusetts infantry regiments (15, 19, 20<sup>th</sup>), but also served directly under brigade and division command. The Sharpshooters was based upon the journals Bicknell kept during the War. Bicknell penned his narrative in 1883. During that time frame he also corresponded with the authors of Battles and Leaders (Vol. 3), to describe the role he and a platoon of Andrew's Sharpshooters (along with a 'pick-up' company of infantry assigned to him by Gen. Hayes), played in the repulse of Pickett's assault on July 3<sup>rd</sup>.

It is on page 68 of Bicknell's memoir that finally establishes who the actual sharpshooters were at Franklin's Crossing: "*On June 9<sup>th</sup> we were ordered to send ten men to Deep Run. It is a deep ravine with very precipitous banks, just below the city on the Fredricksburg side. Howe's division of the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps was over the river south of the run. Being annoyed by sharpshooters they sent up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps to borrow us.* (it should be noted that the Sharpshooters had previously served with Gen. Sedgwick's Division of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps at Antietam, and he was familiar with their skills as skirmishers and sharpshooters).

*The Captain went down with ten men and got at work about noon, firing from the breastworks which the division had thrown up for its protection.*" Bicknell noted that Captain Plummer returned a few hours later with 5 of the men (leaving the other 5 to keep watch), but had not silenced the enemy sharpshooters, who were hidden in a fringe of timber on the opposite side of the ravine.

Bicknell returned the next day, "*I accomplished no more than the captain had the day before, and saw that we never would while we let them hold their side of the ravine. I found out during the day that we had at last met our counterparts in drill, discipline and skill, and that they outnumbered us five to one.*"

Bicknell was not to be thwarted and that night he arranged for a detail of 6<sup>th</sup> Corps pioneers to cross the Run and establish three rifle pits on the Confederate side of the ravine. The men silently filled sandbags and hauled them up to the top of the ravine and camouflaged them with fresh greenery. At first light the pits were manned with 21 Massachusetts sharpshooters, who promptly routed the enemy picket line and toppled an officer off his horse "*with one*

*of the old (telescope) rifles*". This stirred up a hornet's nest; the Sharpshooters were promptly attacked by 200 CSA skirmishers advancing across a wheat field that fronted their position. Using their Sharps rifles to good effect, the Bay State boys repulsed the skirmishers, but a few fleet rebels gained the timber on their left flank. Soon accurate, short-range fire cowed the Sharpshooters and forced them to evacuate the nearest rifle pit. Lt. Bicknell retired in haste; jumping off the edge and tumbling to the bottom of the ravine. He detailed two of his steadiest men to return and harass the Confederates and prevent them from getting any closer. One sharpshooter, Crossman, was firing through a hole in a tree when a bullet traveled along his rifle's barrel, split open a finger and passed through his hat. Bicknell ordered Crossman to leave but his partner, Martin, scoffed that it had been a lucky shot and asked to stay put. Despite reservations, Bicknell permitted Martin to return to the tree, only to witness him tumble back down the slope mortally wounded. As the news of Martin's wounding circulated down the lines, an old sharpshooter named Dave Temple appeared on the scene. Although detached as brigade butcher, Temple vowed to avenge Martin's death and he asked where Martin had been posted. Bicknell reports; "*I don't know how he happened at Deep Run that day. Hatless, coatless, bare armed, rifle in hand, he asked to be shown the place where Martin had fallen.*" Stepping behind the tree to reload and then boldly standing in the open, Temple fired a full box of cartridges through his Sharps rifle. When he finished he grimly told Bicknell that he had doubled Martin's score and walked back across the river. The men knew of Temple's skill with a rifle and nobody doubted his claim

Another source that helps us establish that Andrews Sharpshooters were engaged at Deep Run was Roland E. Bowen of the 15<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, whose letters were published by Gregory Coco in the book From Balls Bluff to Gettysburg... And Beyond. On June 11, 1863, Bowen wrote in a letter: "*David Temple is a member of Andrews Sharpshooters, and more commonly known as 'old Dave', is called the best shot in the Company. [He] is a reckless old Cuss and cares nothing for any body. He has been detailed in the Commissary Department for sometime past. Yesterday he volunteered to go over, he says 'and kill a few god damned Johnny's in revenge for the death of Capt. Saunders at Antietam'. So down he goes with two men, gets the most advanced position he can find and proceeds to give them Hell. He bangs away all day. Both men that go with him get badly wounded. He returns at night unhurt himself and glorifying over the fact that he has caused 20 of the damned Skunks of Hell to have a reckoning with their Eternal Creator.*"

The Official Records Supplement notes the names of Andrew's Sharpshooters Crossman and Martin as being wounded on this date. However, the OR's do not recognize that their sacrifice was in support Gen. Sedgwick's mission. Meanwhile, there are no enlisted men from either USSS regiment listed as casualties during this time frame.

### **Conclusion (For now)**

Okay reader, you might accuse me of splitting hairs with my criticisms of "*False Crossing at Franklin's Crossing*". True, the First Company of Massachusetts Sharpshooters was originally designated to join Hiram Berdan's regiments. But they, like one Minnesota company (Co. 'L' 1<sup>st</sup> USSS/1<sup>st</sup> MN), remained independent sharpshooter companies attached to infantry regiments from their native state. This arrangement is not so far-fetched as it sounds. As early as 1862, (while the Sharps rifle controversy raged), one Michigan USSS officer wrote to Governor Blair imploring him to not send any more companies to Col. Berdan. Further, he

requested that the Governor recall those companies already mustered in for the USSS to serve as independent skirmisher/sharpshooter detachments. We find this arrangement occurred with Brady's, Jardine's, Vosper's and Perrin's Michigan sharpshooter companies. The two former companies being attached to 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and the latter serving with the 27<sup>th</sup> Michigan infantry. As described by Bicknell, from time to time a brigade or division commander would request details of sharpshooters be detached and sent to where their skills as skirmishers and 'special service' could be employed to the greatest effect.

In Andre Noah Trudeau's defense, he innocently selected quotes from Union participants who were on the frontlines at Franklin's Crossing and Deep Run 140 years ago. While we would suspect that the original writers should have known better, it would have been easy for the average infantrymen (or their officers) to attribute the effective service of Andrew's sharpshooters to the better known U.S. Sharp Shooters; especially since these later regiments had signally distinguished themselves during the recent Chancellorsville campaign.

To add to the confusion, the Andrew Sharpshooters were armed with a combination of Berdan Contract NM1859 Sharps rifles and 'a few old (muzzleloading target) rifles (with telescopic sights)'. What is interesting in the comments made by the observers is there is no mention of these sharpshooters being attired in distinctive 'Rifle Green' uniform coats, caps or trousers (while Trudeau adds this description before quoting an original observer). Originally, the Massachusetts men were to be outfitted in the uniform of Berdan's regiments, but by retaining their independent status the men were attired in the same dress as the infantry. Earlier in their service, there is an account of members of Andrews Sharpshooters removing the light blue trim from the dark infantry dress coats to reflect their special status as sharpshooters.

The one criticism that might be leveled at Trudeau is that he did not consult the original USSS books, journals and Official Records. For had he done so (like I have done in this article) he would have quickly come to suspect the veracity the original quotes he selected for his article. However, the problems of mistaken identity for Andrew's Sharpshooters didn't end at Franklin's Crossing. Some 23 days later an infantry officer (Capt. Von Fritch of Gen. Ames staff) on Cemetery Hill observed: "a detail of 12 Swiss sharpshooters armed with rifles and telescopic sights" hurrying past to engage CSA sharpshooters firing from town (pg. 140). Harry Pfanz, (who included the quote in his book Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill), speculated that the men were from the multi-ethnic 82<sup>nd</sup> Illinois infantry. However he blithely ignored the begging question as to why infantrymen were armed with target rifles?!

Again, we have Bicknell's book to set the record straight: "about noon (July 3) I saw the aide of Gen. Gibbon who had sent me the day before, leading the rest of the sharpshooters towards the Cemetery, which lay across the Taneytown road to my right". In a 1885 memo the Andrew's Sharpshooters commander, Capt. Plummer, added: "Shortly after I had detailed Lt. B. (Bicknell) I was ordered to take a position opposite the town of Gettysburg, where the Co. did very effective service against the enemy's sharpshooters stationed in the front and the houses near, from which they killed and wounded many of our men". Just how Capt. Von Fritch determined that Plummer and his Massachusetts sharpshooters were Swiss is also open to question, but we can see that it seduced both authors Trudeau and Pfanz into making speculations that were significant errors of fact (at least to us Sharpshooter enthusiasts).

Thanks to Bicknell the speculation of "Who were they?" at Franklin's Crossing now appears to be resolved. Bicknell further lays this controversy to rest when he describes the sharpshooting duel between his men and the Confederates near Ziegler's Grove on July 3rd: "*Our line had been entirely driven from the grove. I entered it by a ravine back of the ridge and we (20 handpicked sharpshooters) worked our way forward from rock to rock and tree to tree until we had fought our way through the grove and looked down into the rifle pits, and Gettysburg behind them. We finally occupied a knoll to the right of the ravine, and the ridge to it's left, as well as the ravine. I found we could hold it as well as a brigade of infantry, even better, but we could not hope to do more than hold the enemy down in their pits, for they were evidently our old antagonists at Deep Run.*"

As we shall see, Bicknell was probably correct on two accounts; there is no doubt that Andrews Sharpshooters were at Franklin's Crossing and Deep Run. But also the men in the rifle pits were members of an elite South Carolina sharpshooter battalion of A.P. Hill's III Corps--among them a man named Blackwood Benson. But that is another story.

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I wish to express my deepest thanks and appreciation to Mr. Rob Leinwebber of the Illinois Co. Sharpshooters. It has been Rob's personal mission to locate, obtain and preserve the records of all of the Sharp Shooters who served the Union from 1861-1865. He freely shares this information with fellow Sharpshooter researchers without any expectation of recognition or compensation. In short, without Rob's assistance this article and our ability to set the record straight for "False Start at Franklin's Crossing" simply could not have been possible. Copyright 12/03~WES.  
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