

Missing the Mark....A book review by Randon Bartley

In his book, "Sharpshooter, The Story of the United States Sharpshooters in the Army of the Potomac, 1861-1865," author Stanley Saperstein suggests he has written an "historical" novel that is based on true characters who served in the United States Sharp Shooters. This book is neither historical nor novel.

The book is in no way novel, in the true sense of the word. It is a rehash of the excellent diary written by Wyman White who was an actual Sharp Shooter; Mr. Saperstein added material from the regimental history of Stevens to supplement White. Mr. Saperstein's almost total use of the White diary is painfully obvious. Where White has nothing to offer, Saperstein does little to fill the void. Therefore, the reader is left with very wide gaps in the narrative when White was not present for duty. The use of the regimental history for the introduction of the fictional characters to the Peninsula campaign is contrived, (as the author admits), and does no justice to the men of the First Regiment. The suggestion that the First Regiment needed a special team of Second Regiment men to accompany them on the campaign as scouts is just silly.

I may add here that it is a total fabrication that two Jewish upstate New York cousins were welcomed with open arms by the Sharp Shooters from New Hampshire. It may be uncomfortable to admit in today's politically correct society but there was a great deal of prejudice in the Civil War era, (as evidenced by the Know Nothing movement), against Catholics, Jews, Blacks and others who were not native born. The author's introduction of his two major characters and their ethnic roots is a bad case of imposing today's mores on a very different society.

Nor is this book good history. I began by listing errors in this book but gave up on that effort after filling two pages of a legal pad. Instead I concentrated on the major errors. There are many errors in this book that would not have been committed by even a novice historian on the Civil War. To a person who has, (according to the author), done a great deal of research on the Sharp Shooters, the errors are unforgivable. It would appear Saperstein's research ended after the publication of the White diary and has not incorporated any new material. Even the color photo on the dust jacket of the book displays a complete disregard for the Troiani green coat. The neon green First Sergeant's stripes state eloquently the state of Mr. Saperstein's research, and are stark contrast to the Dark Green, almost Black, stripes on the Troiani coat. The pose of the two sharp shooters on the dust jacket just simply defies logic.

There are technical mistakes as well. Mr. Saperstein takes justifiable pride in his original target rifle. The target rifle is discussed in his book at length. His characters use the target rifle in a variety of situations. Including sniping from a tree. I wonder if Mr. Saperstein has ever tried to load a target rifle while sitting in a treetop. It is a difficult proposition.

I found the character's use of the Sharps rifle to be curious. At times it appears they are wielding a modern assault rifle. They fire away ammunition as though they had clips dangling from their belts. The Sharps rifle did have an improved rate of fire but only a fool would blast away every round he possessed not knowing where his supply train may be. Using a special caliber weapon meant that you were not able to take rounds from the wounded in an emergency. Once the rounds you carried were gone, you were finished as a Sharp Shooter.

The Sharps Shooters encounters with Rebel cavalry are also amusing. The unerring accuracy of the Sharps Shooters in hitting stationary targets does not translate into making the same ratio of hits on a man moving on a horse. A horse moves fast and not always where the rider wants it to go. Hence, knocking down rebel riders as though they were lined up on a target range is ludicrous. It is common knowledge that the way to stop cavalry is to shoot the horse, (a BIG target), rather than the man. Nor is it advisable to go into a skirmish line when encountering cavalry. The proper tactic is to rally, not deploy into a skirmish line.

Mr. Saperstein states he is fond of the LeMatt revolver so he adds this weapon to his character's already impressive armament. Anyone who has marched any distance with a Civil War infantryman's kit understands the reluctance to add any more weight. The pistol would be a burden more than a blessing. In addition, the LeMatt was, like the Sharps rifle, a different caliber and, therefore, hard to find balls for unless the infantryman was prepared to carry a mold for the ball, caps for the pistol, etc.

Infantrymen often posed for photographers holding pistols and large knives but not many carried them into combat more than once.

It was disappointing to read Mr. Saperstein's account of Gettysburg. He obviously has made no effort to cover the ground as others have done. If he had, he would have realized the Second Regiment men regrouped in several areas after the Snyder Farm encounter. He discounted the struggle up the face of Big Round Top, totally misrepresented the efforts of the 20th Maine's B Company, (and the Sharp Shooters with them), and, finally, incorrectly stated the deployment of the Sharp Shooters in relation to the 83rd Pennsylvania. The author chose again to ignore other sources on this battle that could have materially aided the reader.

The book does not work for some very basic mechanical reasons. The editing is simply atrocious. I gave up listing the typographical errors and simple syntax mistakes. I would have been embarrassed to be listed as an editor for this book. Secondly, the typographical errors made this book disconcerting for the reader. Even if the text had been engrossing, the lack of indentation at various places, the missing quotation marks, etc. tend to draw the reader away from the message.

The book is confusing to the reader because of Saperstein's tendency to have it both ways as an author. He tends to drift in and out of his characters. On one page he is the all-knowing, post war historian informing the reader that Grant and Meade should have faced court martial after Cold Harbor. On the next page he is back into character, allowing his hero to tell the story. This also confuses the reader. These commentaries should be noted outside the text. Mr. Saperstein also tends to use his character's dialogue only to reinforce the conclusion he has already made for the reader.

These conversations are stilted. It was amusing to read as two of the characters discussed how shit tastes. This conversation droned on longer than the depiction of the battle of Fredericksburg! Having worked on a dairy farm in my youth, I can safely say that he who milks a cow with his face towards the tail, deserves what he gets! (I may also add nature provided even the unwary milker with a warning device to avoid getting a mouthful of shit. The tail goes up before anything comes out!)

One particularly objectionable tendency is for the author to put modern profanity into the words of his characters. I am not naïve enough to believe no one in the Sharp Shooters used profanity but I seriously doubt if any of them used the F-word to such a degree. It has only been since the Vietnam era that this word has assumed the universal usage Mr. Saperstein gives it. Certainly White talks to the subject but he does not spell out the profanity. The author gives the word his own meaning and it adds nothing to the text.

The last point I wish to address are the use of illustrations in this book. A number of historical illustrations are used but no credit is given to any artist or publication save one. The Homer drawing of a "sharpshooter" in a tree which Mr. Saperstein transforms into a sketch of his hero. Mr. Saperstein neatly forgets the man in Homer's drawing is clad inappropriately for a Sharps Shooter on that campaign. The only other illustrations in the book are by Mr. Saperstein himself and are so amateurish as to be laughable. Mr. Saperstein does take pains to attribute his own artwork.

This book is a lazy attempt. It lacks the depth to make it a creditable source for additional research. In reading the work of master craftsmen like the Shaara, Cornwell, Forester or O'Brian I have always been intrigued by the source of their research and have never been disappointed. Mr. Saperstein's lack of research cheats the reader.

Nor does this book work as a novel. An author must allow his characters to express their own ideas. This breathes life into them. Mr. Saperstein does not give his heroes life. They remain, as Mr. Saperstein's artwork, without depth.

Hopefully, the unwary reader will not purchase Mr. Saperstein's book. It would be unfortunate for anyone to base their entire knowledge of the Sharp Shooters on this book. They would be far better served to buy the source of Mr. Saperstein's book, Wyman White's diary.

In conclusion, as an author of historical fiction, Mr. Saperstein makes a fine cabinetmaker.