

# 53rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry

Company C

"The Sentinel" March 2019

Newsletter of The James Creek Guards



"Clubs Are Trump!"

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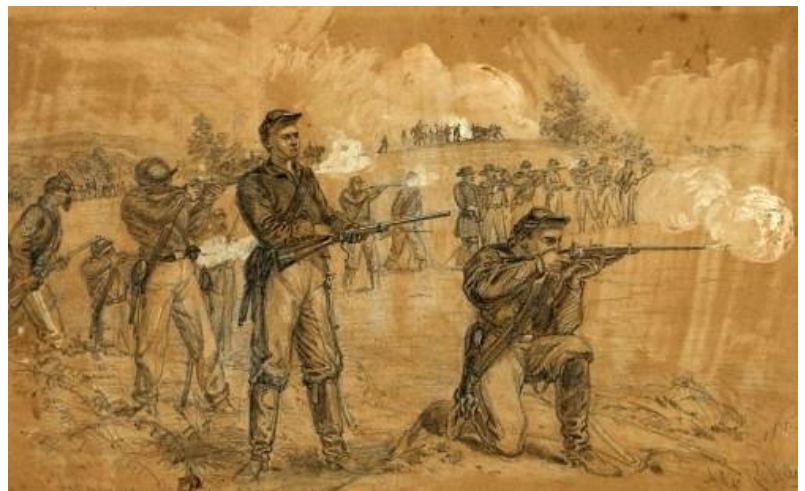
*I am always looking for newsletter content, so please forward your articles, book reviews, photos, stories, etc. and your "Get To Know Your Pard" profile (if you have not done so already) to me for inclusion in a future edition of "The Sentinel". – Matthew Steger, editor*

## Light Infantry

by [The Jersey Gallinipper](#) (reprinted with permission)

### **SHARPSHOOTERS, SKIRMISHERS — SHOCK TROOPS?**

Someone recently asked for a column on light infantry vs line infantry. Great idea. First, it's just good information. Second, we can use the distinction to our advantage, differentiating among reenactors according to age, agility, physical conditioning, etc.



## OVERVIEW

An overview: We are all using manuals that imply we are light infantry. A lot of what we do is line infantry. What they did 1861-65 was also a mix, starting the war with certain ideas and shifting to re-adapt guidelines from earlier eras while simultaneously introducing some innovations while simultaneously refusing to adapt line infantry even after an entire regiment had replaced muskets with rifle muskets. Going in every direction, pretty much. So it's a vast topic, and all today's post will do is provide a broad picture. We'll tackle individual aspects of it in the future. And note that this is closely related to target practice.

**Scott's Infantry Tactics**, the prewar manual, had battalions arranged in heavy and light companies. The light company is on the left, the "grenadier" company is on the right, and eight other companies, the "line infantry," are in between. In this system, the light company is the designated skirmish company, with the men working in pairs – one loaded at all times – to form a screen in front of the battalion as it advances. (We'll get into grenadiers some other time.) The light company could function as line infantry, but line infantry normally was not expected to function as skirmishers.

In "our" war, the "new" book of tactics (Hardee/Casey) any company could be called upon to do skirmish duty, even though Hardee and Casey both included diagrams showing two light companies designated as skirmishers and eight "line infantry." This was especially possible when entire regiments, not just the "light company," had Springfield or Enfield rifle muskets rather than smoothbores. Even at the beginning, however, there were specialized units, men who were, or claimed to be, excellent shooters. Much of this came from tradition – riflemen who were good shots, who pegged the British from behind trees, starts as a tradition right after Concord Bridge. Also, initially, these were men who came to the army as good shots already. Later, marksmanship training produced more, with the best shots going into "light" companies for skirmish duty.

## TERMINOLOGY

It seems manuals and reports used *sharpshooters*, *skirmishers* and *light infantry* somewhat interchangeably.



*32nd Indiana, Salt River. Note the bugler, on the line, sounding the maneuver call just given to him by the officer, also on the line. Sketch by Augustus Metzner*

Records show that sometimes regiments would call for companies to send their best shots to form an ad hoc skirmish company. That evolved into permanent skirmish

companies, and the next evolution was to combine them into "sharpshooter" battalions.

## DIVERGING PATHS

Confederates seem to have been more innovative than the United States armies. They were the first to deliberately field grouped sharpshooter companies as "light battalions" and, while Union sharpshooting languished as the war progressed, Confederate sharpshooting evolved.

Union forces seem to have stopped at the level where good shots routinely were put in a company within a regiment, which acted as skirmishers for the regiment and then, when full battle was joined, became another company of line infantry. Even though the United States army early-on fielded two battalions of sharpshooters (Berdans, which became the 1st and 2nd U.S. Sharpshooter regiments) there is little history showing them used as full battalions with special missions. They were instead parceled out, one company serving with each regiment in a division, for instance. The same with other specialized units, including sharpshooter companies recruited in Massachusetts and Michigan.

Not only were these men above-average shots, they were also expected to be able to function as skirmishers without the close supervision that characterized duty in the “line” companies, the men who marched and fought from two dense lines, shoulder to shoulder, under the hawk eyes of officers and noncoms. And there is some evidence that some regiments, especially smaller, veteran ones, advanced and attacked as skirmishers, in a fairly dense line but without the rigidity of linear tactics, making them somewhat more elusive targets. More on that in the future.



*Rough sketch by Alfred Waud of late war Union infantry in the Wilderness, assaulting hasty Confederate works in a loose formation.*

A line of skirmishers ahead of an advance was expected to push in the other guy’s sharpshooters and ease the way for the line infantry behind them, which could take a position with the bayonet and hold it. Confederates took an

innovative approach to light infantry, as they did with so many aspects of the war. For an excellent treatment, get **“Shock Troops of the Confederacy”** by Slim Ray. In brief, though, the Confederate armies early-on used sharpshooters in battalions, which had screening missions in an advance, delaying missions in retreat, and, late in the war, even more training in what approached German shock troop training of World War I.



*The prolific Alfred Waud again, showing late-war Union skirmishers advancing at Fisher’s Hill and using the tall grass for concealment.*

Very small groups of Confederate sharpshooters, late in the war, would have specific objectives beyond screening and delay, including capturing batteries, seizing debouchements into earthworks, and even seizing forts. They were formed into “special action groups,” each with one or more tasks in a specific mission, and they were all trained in what they would do. They would use guile –

posing as deserters, for instance, to silently seize an outpost as the first step in an assault. (Fort Stedman, before Petersburg, 1864.) They would, although dressed in Confederate uniforms, take advantage of darkness to march in as if they belong there, even giving orders to Union troops. (Usually, "Retreat!") They evolved special tactics for getting information, by quickly and quietly seizing entire lines of Union pickets. (Special interest for me, my great grandfather was swept up in one at Barker's Mill, Va., during Meade's relentless lunges to the left.) That will be the subject of a future post.

### WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR US?

There's an opportunity here to do things differently. A lot of reenacting "clubs" with three to 12 actively participating members are joining forces at event after event, whether they are campaigners, authentics, progressive or mainstreamers. It requires only a generic uniform impression and a willingness by a club's stripes and straps to alternate company leadership at events with officers from other clubs – putting on the slick sleeve rather than the braid, from time to time. It's already happening. A logical next step, which almost happened accidentally at the Gettysburg GAK fest two years ago, would be to create a light company for each regiment made up of young, agile, enthusiastic and ambitious reenactors, specializing in skirmishing, led by young officers and noncoms. For the Union, use them the way they were used then, clouds of trained sharpshooters between the main force and the enemy. Drill them in the morning on skirmish drill by the bugle and use them in the set-piece battles.

Ditto Confederates but, especially in the late-war events, work some of those special operation groups into the mix.

The light company can come from within an umbrella unit, or it can have a core from one of the growing number of "campaigner" groups out there.

So, the young fellows leap and cavort and, as "light infantry," can have minimal baggage. Those of us somewhat less energetic can help create 32-musket line companies, and make this look and maneuver more like a "real" unit.

**A video** on this topic. (link: <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/videos/sharpshooters-skirmishers-civil-war>) Just keep in mind that *sharpshooter*, *skirmisher* and *light infantry* are in many respects the same reality: Better shots, nimble and athletic, specially trained, clever, resourceful, maneuvering by the bugle, and capable of functioning under duress without constant orders.

### Drill Summary

On Feb. 2<sup>nd</sup>, the 53<sup>rd</sup> held our annual winter drill held at Landis Valley. We had a good turnout where we covered numerous topics including basic drill (including stacking of arms, wheels, etc.). Sgt. Fasnacht did a presentation on guard mount and guard duty. Due to recent security issues at some past large events, the NR is making guard mount a more common occurrence and we all need to know how to do it properly. This means that the individual units under the NR need to train on this topic so that we are all prepared when asked to do it for real at events. To keep us fresh, as noted in the past, the 53<sup>rd</sup> will be instituting guard duty at our own events more often. The most important thing that Corporals do in the service of the Federal Army pertains to guard duty. Guard mount in and around camp now has more than a 'cosmetic' function like in the past. We need to use it for actual camp and site security and we need to take this job seriously as your comrades depend on you.

Sgt. Benedict gave a presentation on caring for shoes, how period sewing repairs are done (including buttons), etc.

Several of us stayed over Saturday night at Landis Valley in the cabin as some of us also did in 2018. We had a good dinner and breakfast and shared a night of good camaraderie.

Link provided by Sgt. Benedict about proper wearing of the Federal CW uniform:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQFka93-HW8>

The below photos were provided by Alec Bohnenblust (first) and the last 2 by Steve Dillon.



### The Civil War Letters of Levi J. Fritz

(thank you to Rich Sauers for providing this series)

[Note – any grammatical and typographical errors were kept intact as they are original to the letter - editor]

Levi J. Fritz served in Company A, 53rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. He enlisted in 1861 and was mustered out with the regiment in July 1865. During the course of the first three years of the conflict, Fritz wrote a number of lengthy missives to the *Montgomery Ledger*, a Pottstown newspaper.

Headquarters, 53d Penna. P. V.  
Camp at Shipping Point, York Co.  
Sunday, April 13th, 1862.

Mesers. Editors:—This is Sunday, but at the present writing to us it differs in no particular from any other day. While in Camp California all drills were suspended on the Sabbath, divine services were held, and the day seemed, in some respects at least, like a day of rest. But since we have been on the march, we have nothing to remind us that one day out of the seven has been set aside for holy purposes; even the chaplains appear to be moving along in every day routine, for they keep mum.

We landed at this point on Sunday last, that is all the brigade, except eight companies of our regiment, that were on board the Robert Morris, that boat not coming up until the following day. There is no wharf here. The boats were run as near shore as possible while the tide was up, and we waited five or six hours for the low water, when we waded ashore. The vessels conveying our brigade were the Daniel Webster, having on board General French and staff, 52d N.Y., and A and F companies of the 53d Penna. The 57th N.Y. on board the Nantucket, and the 66th N.Y. on the Sally Jones and Ariel, 8 companies of our regiment on the Robert Morris, and the Battery on board the Erie. Each of the steamboats had in tow two schooners containing companies of the 6th Pa. Cavalry. We were the first brigade that landed at this Point, which is distant from Fortress Monroe about fifteen miles. It was near twilight before we were all disembarked. We marched a short distance from the shore, halted, stacked our arms, built fires, cooked coffee, eat supper, spread blankets, and bunked in for the night. The next morning the Robert Morris arrived, and the balance of our regiment came ashore, and the 53d was once more all in line. We understood they had a very pleasant trip on board the "Bobby Morris." At ten o'clock the brigade was marched about half a mile inland and put into camp. We were lucky enough to be placed on the edge of a pine wood, and it was not long after we were dismissed ere we had shanties built out of pines and copse. They were put up just in time, for by sunset a rainstorm had set in which lasted two days. Of course our insufficient shelter of twigs and grass would not keep out the rain after such a long assault of the watery elements, and many of the boys on getting awake in the morning found themselves lying in water several inches deep. But we were not as bad off as other regiments in our brigade. The 66th N.Y. were encamped in a cornfield, and they had scarcely any shelter. We had wood at our doors, and large fires were kept burning, around which we crowded, and thus managed to keep warm and comparatively dry. For the last few days it has been very pleasant. At noon it is quite too warm to sit in the sunshine, but the nights are cold—owing to the close proximity to the Bay. We are furnished with a sufficiency of rations, consisting of hard bread, salt pork, occasionally ham, beans, rice, coffee, sugar, salt, and vinegar. We draw no fresh meat or soft bread. The commissariat is evidently managed in a superior manner.

Shipping Point battery consists of a line of earthworks, running along the river beach, for perhaps half a mile. The works were evidently built under the supervision of a competent engineer, and are better constructed than any we saw at Manassas. There is but three places where guns could be put into position, and the rebels never had more than one mounted, but field artillery could be used effectually behind the breastworks. The position of the battery is no doubt a fine one. It gave the rebels complete command of the York river at its mouth, as well as a wide sweep for their guns in the bay. The inland approaches to the battery are protected by low earthworks, ditched on the outside, a fact that appears to show that Gen. Pillow had nothing to do with it. Within the fortifications are well built huts, ample enough to accommodate 5000 men. The rebels fell back from this position to Yorktown, ten miles up the York river. The rebels are there, rumor says, 60,000 strong. McClellan is here and our forces have already besieged the place, we have been exchanging shots every day.—We have over 100,000 men here, and thousands are arriving daily. We have not less than one hundred pieces of artillery. Ere you receive this letter one of the grandest battles of the war may have taken place. Berdan's Sharpshooters have for the past few days been distinguishing themselves. They crawl up to within a good range of the rebel batteries and pick off the gunners as fast as they show themselves, and as they are unerring marksmen their shots tell. Day before yesterday they succeeded in completely silencing a rebel battery. We expect the ball to open in warmth in a few days. Here Washington gained a victory that made the Republic, with the suffrages of Heaven on our side, here will McClellan gain a victory that will prove beyond peradventure that the Republic is preserved.

Since our brigade landed here we presume 40,000 soldiers have been shipped to this place and thousands are arriving every day. For miles around it is one dense camp of infantry and cavalry, the artillery as soon as landed is taken to the front. In the evening at reveille for more than an hour there is a continuous roll of drums, blasts of bugles, and sweet music from numerous bands.

This is a very pleasant place for a camp.—The river is full of inlets and coves in which there are numerous oyster beds. When the tide is down they can be gathered along the beach. They are the finest oysters we have ever seen. We have seen several which weighed half a pound. Years ago when we sang a then popular melody called "Old Virginia Shore," we little thought that we would ever be "working among the oyster beds, to us it was but play." But so it is; we are ransacking the oyster beds around here in high old style. As we close this letter, there is heavy firing heard in the direction of Fortress Monroe. The Merrimac has perhaps come down the James river to pester our shipping in Hampton Roads. There has been no firing towards Yorktown to-day up to the hour we cease writing, 12 o'clock A.M.

Yours &c.,

L.J.F.

[Ledger, April 22, 1862]

Honoring the Original 53<sup>rd</sup> PVI —submitted by Marc Benedict

**Private George Mason** - Co. G, 148th PVI is most likely the Geo. M. Wasson of Co. B, 53rd PVI. Buried in Hublerburg Cemetery, Hublerburg, PA. Born Sept. 24, 1846, died May 31, 1878.



**Sgt. Martin Weimer, Co. G.** - Enlisted as a Private on 29 October 1861. Enlisted in Company G, 53rd Infantry Regiment Pennsylvania on 29 Oct 1861. Killed Company G, 53rd Infantry Regiment Pennsylvania on 3 Jun 1864 at Cold Harbor, VA. Buried in Cold harbor, Cold harbor, VA.

**Sgt. Edward K. Weand, Co. A** - Buried in Pottstown Cemetery East, Pottstown, PA



**Capt. John J. Whitney, Co. F** - Born: 1837. Residence: Luzerne Co, PA. Enlistment: Age-24. Enlisted: Sep 28, 1861, Luzerne Co, PA. Mustered in Oct 12, 1861, Camp Curtin, PA. Mustered into Co "F" 53rd PA Infantry. Killed at Spotsylvania Court House, VA May 18, 1864. Promotions, 2nd Lt, Sep 6, 1862. 1st Lt, Jan 30, 1863. Captain Apr 23, 1864. Buried: North Flat Cemetery, Laceyville, PA.



## *A word from our president.....*

Gentlemen,

There's not a lot to report on this month since we're not quite into the season yet. Five of us will be attending the NR school in Gettysburg this weekend. Anyone who wishes to attend is welcome and encouraged to do so. If you can make the event, touch base with Matt or I as soon as possible so we can get you registered.

Our first official event is the program coordinated by Michael Fedorshak at the Ephrata Middle School on April 5th. Please reach out to Michael as soon as possible if you're able to assist so he can plan the program. I know it's a work day so even if you're only able to attend for a portion of the day it will be a huge help. The NR's camp of instruction is the first max effort event on the horizon. I'm hopeful that we'll have a strong turnout for this one since it's the only NR event on our schedule until October. Let me know if you are committed to going and we can work out carpooling options if needed. Otherwise, take this down time ahead of the season to prepare your kits, roll rounds, and make any repairs so you'll be ready to go. We'll have a busy year once we get started.

Keep the newsletter contributions coming. Matt's doing a great job with it but it makes the job a lot easier if you can submit some content. Photos photos photos! We have thousands between us all. Please share them so we can keep the website fresh as well.

See y'all soon.

Eric

## Upcoming events –

2~3 March - National Regiment School of Instruction (Gettysburg Firehall)

School put on by the NR for officers and enlisted men to learn more about commands, positions, procedures, and more for officers and NCOs. Training sessions about how to pack your knapsack, food, cleaning your weapon, caring for your uniform, proper methods for stacking arms, where officers and NCOs position themselves for dress parade, and much more have been topics from past years. The class is open to all NR members and privates may attend. The 53<sup>rd</sup> PVI pays for the per attendee cost. If you're interested in attending, please let me know immediately ([n3ntj@comcast.net](mailto:n3ntj@comcast.net)) as time is running out to attend. As of press time, we have 5 members attending this weekend.

5 April – Ephrata Middle School Event -

See details above in Eric's information and contact Michael ASAP if you are able to assist.

## For Sale -

All items in good shape unless noted otherwise. Listed by Rick Kramer for a friend; contact Rick directly for any inquiries/questions - [auction8@comcast.net](mailto:auction8@comcast.net)

Unlined Sack Coat (approx. xlarge)	30.00	CnD Jarnigan Great Coat (approx. Exlarge)	100.00
Keune McDowell Kepi some brim cracking	20.00	Grey Blanket with black stripe	50.00
Rubber Poncho	20.00	Older shelter half with brass grommets	5.00

*If you have not submitted your "Get To Know Your Pard" profile yet, please send it to the editor ASAP for inclusion in a future newsletter! We still have quite a few members who have yet to share theirs with their pards. This isn't meant to pry into your private life, but simply a fun way of letting your pards get to know you more.*

A sampling of 10 questions you can answer as part of your 'Get To Know Your Pard' profile (you may substitute your own questions if you'd like):

1. Where were you born?
2. How long have you been re-enacting?
3. What is your favorite part of the hobby?
4. What was the first Civil War-related kit item that you bought?
5. Have you ever taken part of a Civil War movie, TV, or other production?
6. Do you have a favorite or most memorable CW event?
7. Do you have any other non-Civil War hobbies?
8. Do you have a Civil War photo (wet-plate or tin-type image) to share?
9. What do you do (or did you do, if retired) for a living?
10. Favorite Saying?

### *Note from the Treasurer -*

2019 member dues were due by 31 January. If you have not paid your 2019 dues (\$40), please contact me ASAP if you'd like to join the unit for 2019. All payments are payable to: 53<sup>rd</sup> PVI.

### *2019 Calendar of Events -*

- 12 Jan. Annual Holiday Party — Dobbin House (Reservations/Payment due by 31 Dec.)
- 2 Feb. Winter Drill — Landis Valley (weather back up date is 16 Feb)
- 16 Feb. Cartridge Rolling Party — Mark Fasnacht's home (9 March back up date)
- 2-3 March — NR School of Instruction — Gettysburg Fire Hall
- 5 April — Ephrata Middle School — Civil War Day event with Michael Fedorshak
- 6 April — Spring Adopt-A-Position
- 13-14 April — NR Camp Of Instruction — Ft. McHenry **NR MAX EFFORT**
- 18-19 May — USAHEC (Carlisle, PA) — PAID Event **53<sup>rd</sup> MAX EFFORT**
- 27 May — Hummelstown Memorial Day Parade
- 5- 7 July — Gettysburg GAC - 2ndary Event
- 20-21 July — Landis Valley Civil War Days - **53<sup>rd</sup> MAX EFFORT**
- 28 July - Gruber Wagon Works (Reading, PA) **53<sup>rd</sup> MAX EFFORT**
- 24-25 Aug. — 53<sup>rd</sup> Gettysburg Living History — Spangler Spring **53<sup>rd</sup> MAX EFFORT**
- 14-15 Sept. — C&O Canal (ELF event)
- 4-6 Oct. — Shenandoah 1864 (Lovettville, VA) **NR MAX EFFORT**
- 19-20 Oct. — Cedar Creek (Middletown, VA) - 2ndary Event
- 2 Nov. - Autumn Adopt-A-Position — spring cleanup at the 53<sup>rd</sup> PVI Monument
- 16 Nov. — Remembrance Day Parade — Gettysburg
- 7 Dec. — 53<sup>rd</sup> PVI Annual Meeting (Mark Fasnacht's home)



### **53rd PVI Contacts**

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