



## **“Uncle Sam’s Sharpshooters”: Military Marksmanship at Fort Omaha and Bellevue, 1882-1894**

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Article Summary: Between 1882 and 1894 U.S. soldiers fired lead bullets by the ton into the butts of the Department of the Platte’s target ranges first located near Fort Omaha and later near Bellevue. Their story reveals how a system of target practice initiated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century helped produce an “army of marksmen” by the early years of the twentieth.

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Photographs / Images: Fig. 1: looking southeast from behind the target pits at the Bellevue range; Fig. 2: skirmish drill at the Bellevue range, 1889; Fig. 3: competitors and officers in front of the visitors’ stand at the Fort Omaha rifle range, August 1885; Fig. 4: detail of an 1890 military map showing Fort Omaha and the Bellevue rifle range; Fig. 5: detail from “Military Posts and Reservations in the Dept. of the Platte,” c. 1890; Fig. 6: Dept. of the Platte rifle team at the Bellevue range, August 1887; Fig. 7: presentation of awards to the Dept. of the Platte rifle team, August 23, 1887; Major Guy V. Henry Sr. and his son, Guy V. Henry Jr., with the cadre of officers in charge of the matches; Fig. 9: competitors in the army-wide distinguished marksmen’s match held at Bellevue in September 1887; Fig. 10: 1890s image confirming the Bellevue range’s attraction for civilians; Fig. 11: Major Guy V. Henry Sr on his horse during the 1888 matches; Fig. 12: Company C, 22<sup>d</sup> Infantry, on the Fort Crook rifle range, July 1897; Fig. 13: 1888 image of the Bellevue rifle range with men firing from prone or sitting positions; Fig. 14: College Heights Park in Bellevue, March 2016

# UNCLE SAM'S

# SHARPSHOOTERS



Figure 1: Looking southeast from behind the target pits at the Bellevue range. The men hold markers that were raised in front of the target each time it was struck by a marksman's bullet. The discs were visible to the shooters and employed various colors or designs to indicate the location and value of each shot. The enlisted men's camp is in the middle distance, with the officers' camp beyond. The U.S. flag flies above the officers' camp. The Missouri River, flowing just below the bluff where the range was situated, can also be seen. Unless otherwise credited, photos in this article are from the Guy V. Henry Sr. and Guy V. Henry Jr. Photograph Collection, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA



BY JAMES E. POTTER

## MILITARY MARKSMANSHIP AT FORT OMAHA AND BELLEVUE, 1882-1894

# HOOTERS



*Between 1882 and 1894 U.S. soldiers fired lead bullets by the ton into the butts of the Department of the Platte's target ranges first located near Fort Omaha and later near Bellevue, some ten miles southeast of the fort. Some of these missiles probably remain buried beneath the modern landscape. Physical evidence of the ranges themselves, like*

*the clouds of black powder smoke that issued from the rifles of the soldiers who used them, has long since disappeared. Yet their story can be resurrected from the historical record to reveal how a system of target practice initiated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century helped produce an "army of marksmen" by the early years of the twentieth.*



**Figure 2: A skirmish drill at the Bellevue range in 1889. While advancing or retreating, the men halted on command to fire at the targets. This drill was designed to train soldiers to estimate the distance to the objects their bullets were intended to strike.**

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, training soldiers to shoot with accuracy was low on the U.S. Army's list of priorities even as it adopted new weapons capable of doing so. Civil War volunteers received little if any instruction beyond how to load and fire their guns as rapidly as possible. According to the tactics of the day, mass volleys from soldiers deployed in ranks were expected to decimate an enemy force by the sheer number of bullets sent in its direction; taking time to aim at individual combatants would actually slow the rate of fire. Later, during the Plains Indian wars, U. S. soldiers' deficiency in marksmanship became painfully evident during encounters with an elusive foe who fought individually or in small groups and often emerged unscathed by army bullets. Not until the early 1880s, after the Indian wars were nearly over, did the army brass take significant steps to address these shortcomings. They realized that future wars would be waged against foreign armies that were far more disciplined and better armed than the Plains tribes.

In the post-bellum years, Nebraska was within the army's Department of the Platte, whose headquarters were in Omaha. In 1873 department commander Brig. Gen. Edward O. C. Ord took some of the earliest steps to train soldiers to become better shots. He ordered post and company officers to oversee weekly target practice at the department's various stations, and published the results in the *Army and Navy Journal*, including the highest and lowest scores and the names of the

respective company commanders. Another of his orders authorized post commanders to use lumber on hand to build target frames because "Recent campaigns against Indians have demonstrated that it is better to expend lumber for targets than for coffins." After being reassigned to command the Department of Texas, Ord continued to promote target practice and issued a grim but practical admonition: "The soldier is armed so that he may, in battle, hurt somebody with his rifle, and the sooner he learns to do so the better the soldier."<sup>2</sup>

During the remainder of the 1870s, the army took halting steps toward developing a systematic marksmanship training program, spurred on by Indian wars reverses demonstrating that many soldiers still remained ill-prepared to "hurt somebody" in battle. In 1876 the number of cartridges allocated to each soldier for monthly target practice was increased from ten to twenty. A new manual for rifle instruction was adopted in 1879, and the army ordnance department was delegated to provide ammunition and standardized targets, the latter based on those used by the National Rifle Association. The quartermaster's department was made responsible for the funding to build and maintain rifle ranges.<sup>3</sup>

General Order 44 issued by army commander Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman on May 10, 1881, completed the process of formalizing the army's marksmanship training. The program would be underpinned by regular target practice held at individual military posts. Scores made during the "target season" would determine the competitors for an annual contest to select the twelve best marksmen in each of the army's nine administrative departments. The department teams would then compete in the division contest (there were three military divisions in 1882). At each stage, medals and badges would be awarded. The order also provided that the army's commanding general would select the twelve best marksmen in the army, based on the reports from the departments and divisions, for head-to-head competition in alternate years beginning in 1882.<sup>4</sup>

The Springfield rifle adopted in 1873 was the arm used in U.S. Army marksmanship training and competition by infantry soldiers until near the end of the nineteenth century. It was a single-shot breechloader that fired a forty-five caliber lead bullet propelled by seventy grains of black powder, which produced significant recoil and a cloud of white smoke. (See Fig. 13) Hence, the cartridge containing bullet, powder, and primer was designated the ".45/70." Springfield cavalry



carbines were of the same design though shorter and lighter for horseback use; the powder charge for its cartridge was reduced to fifty-five grains.

Initially the soldiers fired from intervals of 100 to 600 yards at circular targets developed by the National Rifle Association. A standing or "offhand" position was used at the shorter distances, kneeling for the mid-range targets, and prone or reclining positions for targets at 600 yards. In each case, the men were firing at "known distances." In "skirmish firing" the soldiers both advanced and retreated and, on command, halted at various points from 500 to 200 yards distant to fire at a line of targets. This drill somewhat simulated combat and was designed to train the men to estimate how far it was to the object they sought to hit with the bullets they fired. In 1885 the circular target used at the fixed distances was replaced by one with elliptical rings that more nearly approximated the vital area of the body, while new skirmish targets simulated human silhouettes in standing, kneeling,

or prone positions. In 1889 separate matches were added to the competitive program for cavalrymen primarily armed with carbines and revolvers; they performed similar skirmish drills, some of them from horseback.<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 2)

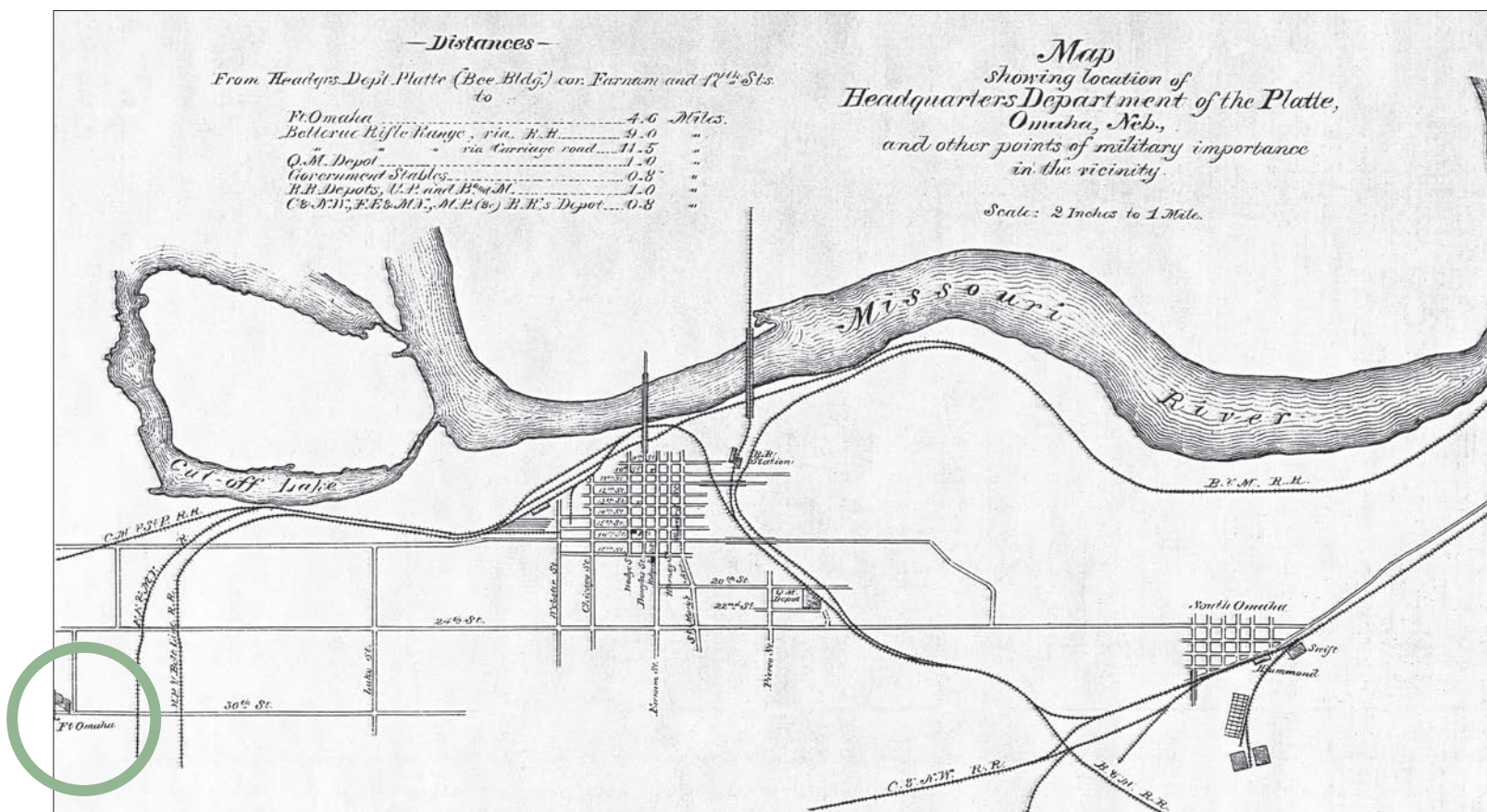
Fort Omaha faced particular challenges in providing marksmanship training for the soldiers stationed there. Established as Omaha Barracks in 1868 and located three miles north of Omaha, the fort's military reservation encompassed only 85.5 acres. By 1878 when the barracks was declared a permanent post and renamed Fort Omaha, the area to the south and west remained primarily agricultural, although several subdivisions had been platted to the east and southeast. The fort's proximity to civilian land holdings and its constricted military reservation made establishing a suitable target range problematic.<sup>6</sup>

Where Fort Omaha soldiers practiced marksmanship in 1881 is unknown, but four men from its garrison were on the twelve-man

**Figure 3: Competitors and officers in front of the visitors' stand at the Ft. Omaha rifle range, August 1885. The Dept. of the Platte matches concluded August 14; a dance was held at the range the next evening. The visitors' stand was decorated with flags and, according to the *Army and Navy Journal*, "a large platform covered with well-stretched (tar) paulins and roofed with tent flies was laid in front of the visitors' stand and made a delightful floor for dancing." The dance floor is visible behind the soldiers, but it has not yet been covered. This range was abandoned and a new one established near Bellevue in 1886.**







**Figure 4: Detail from an 1890 military map showing the geographic relationship of Ft. Omaha (far left) to the Bellevue rifle range (far right).**  
Brig. Gen. William Carey Brown Collection, National Archives and Records Administration

Department of the Platte team that competed in the Division of the Missouri matches at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, that fall. By April 1882 a “new rifle range” had been developed west of the fort and eighteen picked men were practicing there. The matches to determine the Department of the Platte team for 1882 were held in early August with thirty-four competitors. Corp. H. W. Gordon of Company K, Ninth Infantry, received the gold medal awarded to the team member with the highest score.<sup>7</sup>

No description of the range used for the 1882 Department of the Platte matches has been found, but apparently it left something to be desired, or perhaps its use by large numbers of riflemen sparked complaints from nearby landowners. Another range was built south of Fort Omaha for the 1883 target season, this too on land outside the military reservation leased from private parties. In June an *Omaha Daily Bee* reporter visited “The New Creedmoor near Fort Omaha” and described it in a lengthy article. The range lay due south of the fort, was 150 feet wide and 800 yards long, and oriented slightly north of west on rising ground. Five target frames were located at the butts (impact area) on the west end, while five lines of white posts spanned the range parallel to the targets at

intervals of 200, 300, 400, 500, and 600 yards to mark the firing points.<sup>8</sup>

Capt. Charles A. Coolidge, Seventh U.S. Infantry, the department’s inspector of rifle practice, showed the reporter the target-scoring trench or “pit” above which the targets were raised. A bank of earth had been thrown up in front of the eight-foot-deep trench behind which rose another embankment fifteen feet high and ten feet thick to catch bullets after they passed through the targets. Both the trench and the embankments were reinforced with planks. Each set of two targets was mounted on paper secured to wooden frames; they revolved on an axle so one target would be down in the pit when the other was elevated for use. After each bullet struck the target, a soldier in the pit raised a pole topped with a colored disc showing the rifleman where the shot had landed and the score. Rotating the frame brought a fresh target into position while the bullet hole in the previous target was being “pasted up” in the pit (see Fig. 1). A similar layout and scoring system would have been used at other army target ranges during this era, including the future Bellevue range. After visiting the target pit, the *Bee* man was invited to take a few shots with the army rifle from 600 yards.





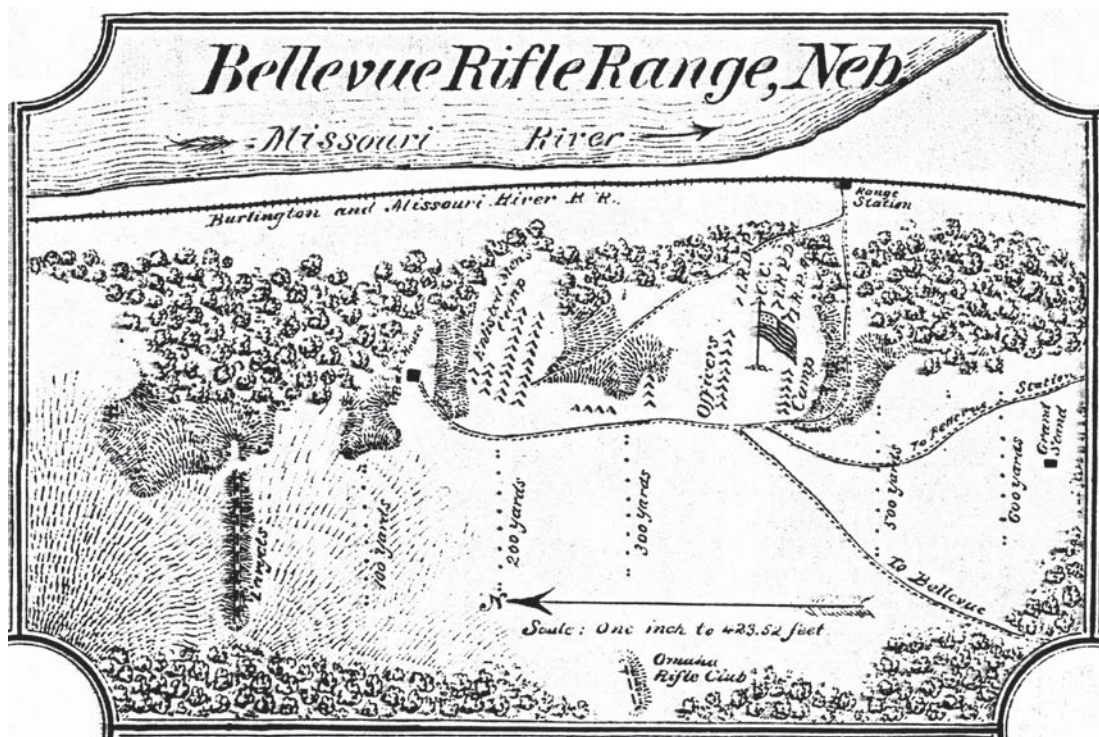
By February 1885 the *Army and Navy Journal* reported that Fort Sidney was being considered to host the Department of the Platte target range. Fort Sidney had space for “an extended range” and was closer to the railroad than Fort Omaha, which was “four miles from the railroad depots . . . and often difficult of access for teams arriving during the annual contests.” Department Commander Brig. Gen. Oliver O. Howard, however, decided to seek a new lease for the existing range despite the “grasping avarice of the farmers who own the land and who are asking triple prices to allow the government the use of it.” When that option fell through, Maj. Guy V. Henry, the department’s recently designated inspector of rifle practice, soon leased a new site about a hundred yards west of the fort. Though its relation to the site of the 1882 range is not known, it likely was at a different location because here target practice could be extended up to 1,000 yards. Army headquarters in Washington D. C. provided a \$1,000 appropriation to cover the cost of construction.<sup>11</sup>

The 1885 department matches on the range west of Fort Omaha, which began on August 10, had an added feature. At Major Henry’s suggestion, Omaha citizens offered to donate prizes valued at \$800 to supplement the usual medals and badges the army provided. The donations included several gold watches, a set of Shakespeare’s works, rugs, cigars, a carving set, a smoking jacket, and cash.

**Figure 5: Detail from “Military Posts and Reservations in the Department of the Platte,” ca. 1890.** Brig. Gen. William Carey Brown Collection, National Archives and Records Administration

After missing a six by six-foot target three times and “almost fracturing his shoulder from the recoil of the gun,” the reporter gave up.<sup>9</sup>

The range south of Fort Omaha hosted the department matches in September 1883 and again in August 1884, but its location on leased land whose further development seemed only a matter of time remained a concern. Shortly before the August 1884 competition was to begin, a civilian secured an injunction against the army’s use of the range but withdrew it after “having been offered a reasonable compensation for the security of life and limb.” At the same time, Omaha residents had begun questioning whether Fort Omaha itself should be relocated to a more spacious site that “would afford all the room wanted for rifle ranges, storehouses, and encampments.”<sup>10</sup>





A “handsome water set” provided by the Union Pacific Railroad and a bronze clock donated by the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad went to the winning regimental team and regimental skirmish team, respectively. After the prizes had been awarded, the officers hosted an evening party at the range attended by a crowd of Omaha citizens. An open pavilion had been constructed for dancing, with music provided by the Fourth U.S. Infantry band.<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 3)

Use of the 1885 range proved short lived when the parties from whom Major Henry had leased it “sold out their interests to real estate dealers.” Resolution of the seemingly constant problem of maintaining a suitable rifle range near Fort Omaha finally came in 1886 when Henry found a site that, while not adjacent to the fort, would well serve Fort Omaha and the Department of the Platte for the next nine years. It was on a plateau overlooking the Missouri River just north of Bellevue in Sarpy County and some ten miles southeast of Fort Omaha. The Burlington and Missouri River rail line passed just below the bluff to the east. Most of the property belonged to Henry T. Clarke, from whom

the army leased it. Henry and his subordinates wasted no time getting the range ready for summer target practice and the pending late summer department competition.<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 4)

Compared to former Fort Omaha ranges, the one near Bellevue was nearly ideal. Not only was it easily accessible via the B & M Railroad, enough land could be cleared for campsites and the firing range itself while still leaving a surrounding belt of woodlands for shade and to break the wind. The area encompassing the target pit and firing stations was some 800 yards long and 500 yards wide, easily accommodating eight shooters at fixed firing points and providing the required 600 yards for both “known distance” and skirmish firing. The targets stood at the north end, insuring that the sun would not be in the marksmen’s eyes at any time of the day. A grandstand for officials and spectators, connected to the target pit by telephone, was at the south end. In its technical aspects, the range conformed well to army requirements. As the campsites signaled, its distance from Fort Omaha meant that soldiers who used it during practice sessions and official competitions would bivouac

**Figure 6: The Dept. of the Platte rifle team at the Bellevue range, August 1887. The men that can be positively identified are 1st Lt. Joseph Garrard, 9th Cavalry (second from left), Corp. Beaman Walker, Co. A, 9th Cavalry, Ft. Niobrara, NE, the only African American in the group (seventh from left), and Musician August Wirtenberg, 21st Infantry, Ft. Sidney, NE (far right). Wirtenberg’s cap bears the musician’s insignia. Others pictured are Pvt. Leonard Deitz, 17th Infantry, Ft. D. A. Russell, WY; Sgt. George A. Lewis, 7th Infantry, Ft. Washakie, WY; Sgt. August Scholle, 7th Infantry, Ft. McKinney, WY; 2d Lt. James T. Kerr, 17th Infantry, Ft. D. A. Russell; Pvt. Harry Annis, 21st Infantry, Ft. Sidney; Corp. James P. Kelly, 6th Infantry, Ft. Omaha; Pvt. Frank Techter, 2nd Infantry, Ft. Omaha; Pvt. George W. Elliot, 2d Infantry, Ft. Omaha; Corp. Lewis W. Handy, 8th Infantry, Ft. Niobrara; Sgt. Luke Romig, 17th Infantry, Ft. D. A. Russell; and 2d Lt. Charles H. Muir, 17th Infantry, Ft. D. A. Russell. The officer at left is believed to be 1st Lt. James B. Jackson, 7th Infantry, designated to oversee the team during the pending division rifle matches.**







**Figure 7: Presentation of awards to the Dept. of the Platte rifle team, Aug. 23, 1887. The men are now wearing the dress uniform. Corp. Beaman Walker stands in the first rank, eighth from left; Musician August Wirtenberg, wearing his musician's jacket with piping down the front, is at far right. The officer holding the papers is Col. Henry W. Morrow, commanding the 21st Infantry at Ft. Sidney, who had been delegated to present the awards. Maj. Guy V. Henry Sr., the department's inspector of rifle practice, is just to Morrow's right. The range flagpole is barely visible at the right edge of the photograph. A target and one of the numbers appear just above the tent at center right and beneath the tree. The view is to the northwest.**

on site. Water was provided by a well; a bake house was built near the enlisted men's camp. In the summer of 1887 the railroad added a "range depot" or platform about 200 yards from the range itself where competitors and spectators could disembark. Supply wagons could reach the range via a mail road from Omaha that skirted it on the west and south.<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 5)

Just before the first Department of the Platte competition was set to begin on the new range, a severe storm threatened the hard work Major Henry and his men had put in getting it ready. Shortly after midnight on August 13, 1886 (Friday, the thirteenth), "a tornado of wind, floods of water, and most vivid lightning" blew down forty-seven tents, swept rifles, carbines, and even a mule into the tops of trees, and injured several men. The anonymous soldier-journalist who reported the storm to the *Army and Navy Journal* joked that he and his comrades were now fully qualified to advise other marksmen about "points on the wind" at the Bellevue range.<sup>15</sup>

The first Department of the Platte competition held at the Bellevue range concluded on August 28, 1886. According to the army's format, the competitors were selected on the basis of scores made during the summer "target season" at the

various posts within the department. The highest scoring marksman in each company, plus the top two officers from each regiment as selected by the department commander, were eligible for the annual contest to determine the twelve best marksmen. Several days of practice preceded the firing for record. Col. Frank Wheaton presented the awards to the twelve winning competitors, who would move on to the division contest, which in 1886 was held at Fort Leavenworth. Major Henry complimented the enlisted men who worked much of the summer preparing the site, and whose reward "is in the praise of those who admire your beautiful range."<sup>16</sup>

Not only did the army's marksmanship activities at the Bellevue range spark considerable press coverage, including reports of the scores being made, they also drew crowds of civilians. The availability of rail transportation to the range's very doorstep was no doubt a factor, as was its park-like setting where citizens could enjoy an "outing." The opportunity to associate with uniformed young men who displayed admirable skill at their profession of arms gave the visits an added aura of romanticism. In fact, Major Henry had encouraged civilian interest in the Bellevue range by helping to organize an Omaha rifle club, which was



**Figure 8: Maj. Guy V. Henry Sr. and his son, Guy V. Henry Jr., are seated at center in this 1888 photograph of what is likely the cadre of officers in charge of the matches. The sign appears to read “Inspector of Rifle Practice,” which would designate this tent as Major Henry’s quarters. The younger Henry’s birth at Camp Robinson, Nebraska, on January 28, 1875, was the first recorded at that post.**

allowed to use a small range constructed adjacent to the army range (see Fig. 5). The citizens’ club was “composed of some of the leading men of Omaha; eminent lawyers, doctors, real estate men, railroad men, and merchants.” Every Wednesday during the summer of 1887 a special car delivered the club members, and “the fair ones of Omaha” accompanying them, to the range. Those who did not wish to shoot could rest in the shade, visit the army rifle camp, or stroll in the woods.<sup>17</sup>

The Bellevue range’s attractions proved particularly strong on August 23, 1887, when awards for the Department of the Platte matches were presented. Among the spectators were many of Omaha’s leading citizens and their wives, as well as Nebraska U.S. Senator Charles Manderson. The range presented a “captivating prospect” with its combination of “brilliant uniforms, snow-white tents, [and] a perfect greensward, terminating in a dense wood.” The Second U.S. Infantry band from Fort Omaha played a few airs before the seventy-nine competitors were assembled and Col. Henry Morrow, standing in for Department Commander Brig. Gen. George Crook, presented medals and praise to the top twelve marksmen (see Fig. 7). Afterwards, Major Henry and forty soldiers demonstrated skirmish firing with volleys that “awoke a hundred echoes in the neighboring woods.” The spectators then adjourned to a shady grove near the officers’ camp for a picnic lunch

including “palatable slices of watermelon.” Before boarding a train back to Omaha the civilians and military dignitaries posed for photographs.<sup>18</sup>

In the short time since its establishment, the Bellevue range and the officers and enlisted men who ran it had earned an excellent reputation, which led to the range’s selection to host both the Division of the Missouri and the army-wide “distinguished marksmen” competitions that followed the 1887 department matches. By the time the Department of the Platte competition concluded on August 23, several of the forty-eight division match competitors had already begun to arrive. One of them reported that the officers’ mess was excellent, vegetables were plentiful, and “excellent bread is made at the camp bakehouse.” What’s more, a camp canteen furnished beer at 5 cents a glass or 25 cents a bottle.<sup>19</sup>

After the Division of the Missouri match was finished, twelve soldiers from throughout the army competed at the Bellevue range in the first biennial “distinguished marksmen” competition from September 19 to September 22. Also attending was Col. Stanhope E. Blunt, the army’s inspector general of rifle practice, who had developed the marksmanship manual adopted in 1885. Blunt was impressed with Bellevue and thought “it was the best range for matches in the country as it is entirely separated from outside influences.” General Crook presented the first place “distinguished marksman” gold medal to a Department of the Platte soldier Sgt. E. A. Stevens, Co. G, Seventh U.S. Infantry. Soldiers from the departments of Texas and Dakota received silver medals for second and third place.<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 9)

Large details of officers and enlisted men were needed to run these competitions. Henry, the Department of the Platte’s inspector of rifle practice from 1885 to 1889 (later renamed inspector of small arms practice) was in charge, aided by another officer appointed as rifle camp commander. Camp medical officers and adjutants were also designated. Officers from regiments at posts other than Fort Omaha were detailed to Bellevue as range officers and statisticians to insure impartiality in scoring and record-keeping. Enlisted men were assigned as cooks and mess stewards, carpenters, teamsters, clerks, and target markers. During the 1887 Department of the Platte competition, ninety enlisted men were detailed to work at the camp and range.<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 8)

By contrast with the army’s parsimonious ten rounds per month allowance to each soldier for target practice during the early 1870s, an enormous



quantity of ammunition was expended in practice and competition during the 1880s. While no information is readily available on how many rounds may have been fired during the practice sessions that were a regular feature at the various military posts, the figures for the 1887 matches at Bellevue are indicative. Over seven days, including preliminary practice and firing for record in the Department of the Platte competition, seventy-nine competitors fired some 34,000 cartridges, according to a report by the range's acting ordnance officer to the Division of the Missouri's inspector of rifle practice. At the subsequent division competition, fifty-three men used some 29,000 cartridges over nine days.<sup>22</sup>

Although the nineteenth-century army was segregated, soldiers from the African American cavalry and infantry regiments were eligible for the marksmanship competitions, including those held at Bellevue. Corp. Beaman Walker, Co. A, Ninth U.S. Cavalry, stationed at Fort Niobrara, earned a place on the Department of the Platte rifle team in 1887 (see Fig. 6). Other representatives of the black

regiments included Sgt. James F. Jackson from Co. G, Ninth Cavalry at Fort Robinson, who garnered recognition as a "distinguished marksman" in 1889, 1890, 1892, 1893, and 1894. William Mason, a private in Co. B of the Ninth at Fort DuChesne, Utah, when he first shot at Bellevue, later transferred to the Tenth Cavalry, where he continued to rank high in carbine and revolver competitions. Spencer Thomas, a private in Co. A, Ninth Cavalry at Fort Robinson, became the eighth-ranked marksman at the Bellevue competition in 1890. After promotion to corporal and transfer to Co. H of the Ninth, Thomas ranked number two on the army carbine team in 1894. As late as 1905, he was still making scores qualifying him as a distinguished marksman.<sup>23</sup>

In 1891 the secretary of war authorized one troop in each of several regular army cavalry regiments to be composed entirely of Indians commanded by white officers. Unlike the Indian auxiliaries the army had previously employed for short-term service, these men were enlisted for five years, issued standard uniforms and arms, and trained



**Figure 9: Competitors in the army-wide distinguished marksmen's match held at Bellevue in September 1887. Their names and units were published in Omaha newspapers and the *Army and Navy Journal*. Several can be positively identified by unit insignia on their caps, by their chevrons, and in one case, by a Medal of Honor. Names followed by (?) are tentative identifications.**

**Front row (l. to r.):** Sgt. G. N. King, 20th Infantry, Dept. of Dakota; Sgt. E. H. Stevens, 7th Infantry, Dept. of the Platte; Sgt. Hugh Griffith, 8th Cavalry, Dept. of Texas. Stevens received a gold medal for first place; Griffith and King won silver medals for second and third places.

**Second row (l. to r.):** Sgt. J. W. Weeks (?), 7th Infantry, Dept. of the Platte; Sgt. A. W. Stay (?), 9th Infantry, Dept. of Arizona; Sgt. J. J. Wolford (?), 19th Infantry, Dept. of Texas; Sgt. W. D. Huddleson, 4th Artillery, Dept. of the East.

**Back row (l. to r.):** Pvt. Henry Hopkins, 1st Artillery, Dept. of California; Sgt. Noah Ray (?), 10th Infantry, Dept. of the Missouri; Sgt. John Nihill, 5th Artillery, Dept. of the East; 1st Sgt. E. A. Hudson, Dept. of the Columbia; 1st Sgt. Thomas Casey, 8th Infantry, Dept. of the Platte. Nihill wears the Medal of Honor in the middle top row of his decorations. He received it for gallantry during an 1872 skirmish with Indians in Arizona while a private in the 5th Cavalry.





**Figure 10:** This 1890s image confirms the Bellevue range's attraction for civilians due both to its park-like setting and the marksmanship contests held there. The officer seated center with the girl on his lap is Brig. Gen. John R. Brooke, who commanded the Dept. of the Platte from 1888 to 1895. NSHS RG2499.PH.1-15

as other soldiers. Troop L of the Sixth Cavalry at Fort Niobrara enlisted Brulé men from the nearby Rosebud Reservation. Although regulations barred the Indian soldiers from participating in the army marksmanship matches, Sgt. Fast Dog of Troop L, who had apparently demonstrated skill on the Fort Niobrara range, was mistakenly ordered to Bellevue for the 1893 cavalry competition. Once he was there, Department of the Platte commander Brig. Gen. John R. Brooke allowed him "to take the prescribed course of firing along with competitors regularly detailed." Fast Dog placed twenty-first out of thirty-seven shooters with the carbine and second with the revolver. When these "astonishing" scores became known, the officers at the range clubbed together to purchase a non-military medal

for Fast Dog. In presenting it, General Brooke remarked, "I want you to wear this medal as a symbol of what the Indian can do under proper surroundings. Let it be a talisman of priceless value because you have won it against white and colored alike. I deeply regret that you could not have been permitted to wear a medal made by the nation." No such episode would happen again, however, because the army ended its experiment with enlisted Indian soldiers in 1894.<sup>24</sup>

For most of the competitors at Bellevue, their accomplishments as marksmen may have been the pinnacle of their military careers. That was not the case with 2d Lt. John J. Pershing of the Sixth U.S. Cavalry, stationed at Fort Niobrara in 1891. At the Platte, East, and California tri-department cavalry



competition at Bellevue that August, Pershing earned fifth place on the carbine team and second place on the revolver team. That same month the army detailed him as commandant of cadets at the University of Nebraska, a post he held until 1895. His leadership of troops while campaigning against Moro tribesmen in the Philippines during the early 1900s led to his rapid rise through the ranks, culminating with his appointment to command the American Expeditionary Forces in France during World War I.<sup>25</sup>

The 1894 Department of the Platte rifle competition and the tri-department cavalry competition was held as usual at the Bellevue range. Again, a crowd came from Omaha by train on September 25 to witness the presentation of awards by General Brooke. (Fig. 10) Sgt. Robert Wilson of the Seventeenth U.S. Infantry at Fort D. A. Russell, Wyoming, was the top rifle shooter with a record score of 350 out of 400 possible points at the known distance targets. All the competitors used the Springfield rifle or carbine that had been the army's staple since 1873. Once the awards ceremony was over Lt. Henry Lyon, also an accomplished marksman, demonstrated the new Krag-Jorgensen bolt-action repeating rifle, which the army had selected to replace the Springfield. Even amateurs could distinguish the Krag-Jorgensen rifle's sharper report and the limited smoke from its discharge by comparison with that of the Springfield's black powder cartridge. Most spectators probably did not realize that the appearance of the Krag-Jorgensen, along with the pending completion of nearby Fort Crook, signaled the end of the Bellevue range.<sup>26</sup>

Developments that brought this result had been underway for several years. First was the July 23, 1888, approval of Senator Charles Manderson's bill to build a new and larger military post in the vicinity to replace Fort Omaha. In February 1890 the government bought 545 acres for this purpose southwest of the village of Bellevue. By March 1891 Congress had appropriated some \$700,000 for the new post's construction, and renamed it Fort Crook in honor of the Department of the Platte's recently deceased former commander, George Crook. Once Fort Crook was completed and occupied, it was expected that a target range would be constructed somewhere within its military reservation.<sup>27</sup>

The second development was the army's adoption of the Krag-Jorgensen as its new rifle and carbine, an arm tested and authorized between 1890 and 1893. Production began at the government armories in January 1894. It was

## Guy V. Henry

Guy V. Henry, the officer responsible for overseeing the Department of the Platte's marksmanship program from 1885 to 1889 and developing the Bellevue Rifle Range, had a distinguished military career. He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1861 just in time for the Civil War. First serving as an artillery lieutenant, Henry was appointed colonel of the Fortieth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and would receive the Medal of Honor for gallantry at the Battle of Cold Harbor in June 1864.


After the war Henry reverted to his original regiment with the rank of captain in the regular army before his transfer in December 1870 to the Third U.S. Cavalry then serving in Arizona Territory. In November 1874 Henry and his company reported for duty at Camp Robinson, Nebraska. On the day after Christmas he and his men left Camp Robinson for the Black Hills to locate and expel miners trespassing on the Sioux Reservation. After traveling through bitterly cold weather and failing to locate the miners, Henry turned his command toward Camp Robinson. A blizzard that began on January 8, 1875, threatened the detachment's survival. After stumbling across an isolated ranche, the men took temporary shelter while Henry and three others set off to summon relief from nearby Camp Robinson, where they arrived the next morning. While all of Henry's command suffered frostbite and were incapacitated for a time, the captain's injuries were the most severe. All of Henry's fingers had been partially frozen and one finger on his left hand had to be amputated. *Continued on p. 103*



**Figure 11: Maj. Guy V. Henry Sr. on his horse, "George," during the 1888 Dept. of the Platte matches. The targets and scoring pits are visible in the background. NSHS RG2499.PH.1-15**

After recovering from his winter march, Henry eventually returned to duty only to be severely wounded at the June 17, 1876, Battle of the Rosebud during the Great Sioux War. Struck in the face by a bullet, Henry lost the use of his left eye. Although he recovered and remained in the army for the rest of his life, the injury caused him chronic pain. In June 1881 Henry was appointed major in the African American Ninth U.S. Cavalry. Four years later he was posted to Fort Omaha as inspector of rifle practice for the Department of the Platte, serving in that role until 1889. He had recently authored a pamphlet entitled, "Target Practice, or Practical Information for the Rifle Range," which the *Army and Navy Journal* on November 1, 1884, noted was available at a nominal price "in order to reach the enlisted men, for whom it is particularly intended."

Sixteen years after his first endurance ride through a Great Plains blizzard, Henry found himself leading soldiers on another wintertime trek in Dakota Territory. This time he commanded a squadron of the Ninth Cavalry sent from Fort Robinson to the Pine Ridge Reservation just prior to the December 29 Wounded Knee Massacre. From December 24 through December 29 Henry and his troops scouted for Indians to the north of Pine Ridge Agency. After receiving word of the massacre, Henry led his men on a nighttime forced march back to the agency. Upon arrival they were dispatched to reinforce the Seventh U.S. Cavalry under attack at the nearby Drexel Mission. Altogether, Major Henry and his Ninth Cavalry soldiers rode some 102 miles across rough country in only thirty hours. Both the 1874-75 and 1890 "winter rides" became an important part of army lore.

In 1897 Henry was promoted colonel to command the all black Tenth U.S. Cavalry, which was sent to Puerto Rico in 1898 following the war with Spain. Promoted again to brigadier general, Henry was military governor of the island for five months. Failing health brought him back to the United States, where he died in New York City on October 27, 1899, at age sixty. Ten days before his death, Guy V. Henry had been named to take command of the Department of the Missouri, with headquarters in Omaha. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. 

Thomas R. Buecker, "'The Men Behaved Splendidly': Guy V. Henry's Famous Cavalry Rides," *Nebraska History* 78 (Summer 1997): 54-63.

Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, V. 1 (GPO: 1903), 523.  
*Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 28, 1899:12

May 1895 before all the army's infantry regiments had been issued the Krag rifle; it took until September before the carbine's distribution to the cavalry was complete. Providing the required ammunition, completely new both as to caliber (.30) and its use of smokeless powder, also took time. In January 1895 the army suspended regular target practice until all units had received the Krag; when practice resumed that summer, the brass realized that the competitive program should also be suspended until the soldiers had been given enough time to use the new arm and learn its capabilities. Accordingly no departmental or army-wide marksmanship competition was held in 1895 and 1896. With competition suspended and Fort Crook nearing completion, the Bellevue range now seemed superfluous and the annual appropriation to lease it, \$600 in 1891 for example, could be saved.<sup>28</sup>

Although troops would not occupy Fort Crook until June 1896, a rifle range was laid out there in early spring 1895 so the Fort Omaha soldiers could begin practicing with the new rifle. Firing began on May 20. A few days later a local farmer living in rear of the target butts asked to meet at the range with Department Commander Brig. Gen. James J. Coppinger. The farmer arrived "with his pockets full of the steel-cased bullets which he had picked up about and beyond his dwelling." While the butts were as high as those at the Bellevue range, the Krag rifle's flatter trajectory and higher velocity sent many bullets ricocheting over the backstop for a mile or more "like skipping stones on a pond." Coppinger immediately suspended use of the range so terraces could be built to stop the bullets.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately the terraces did not solve the problem and the Fort Crook range could not be used with safety. Faced with this reality and needing to give the Fort Omaha soldiers an opportunity to practice with the Krag-Jorgensen rifle, the officers came up with a solution that also provided the men with practice marches. In August and September 1895 portions of the Fort Omaha garrison marched to the Omaha Indian Reservation in Thurston County, where firing practice was held on a site provided by the Omaha Indian agent.<sup>30</sup>

Soldiers actually moved into Fort Crook in June 1896 but they continued to go to the Omaha reservation in lieu of taking target practice at the fort. By early 1897 Lt. Grote Hutchinson of the Ninth U.S. Cavalry, Department of the Platte inspector of small arms practice, lamented the lack of a useable range at Fort Crook. "The command





at Fort Crook is and will be greatly embarrassed in building up its efficiency until a suitable range, convenient for use, is near at hand . . . . At present this command is compelled to go nearly 100 miles to conduct its target practice [at the Omaha Indian Reservation], which then occurs in connection with the annual practice march and field exercises." Efforts to establish a range at Fort Crook that was safe for at least limited use continued because the *Omaha Bee* in July 1897 noted that practice was again being held and more terraces or backstops were being built. (Fig. 12) This range may not have been at the same location as Fort Crook's first range in 1895, but it is clear that it still fell short of expectations.<sup>31</sup>

After a two-year hiatus, department infantry and cavalry marksmanship competition was held in 1897. Because the Fort Crook range would not serve, even though Department of the Platte headquarters remained in Omaha, the cavalry matches were held at Fort Robinson September 24-27 and the infantry matches at Fort Niobrara October 4-9. All department and army-wide matches were again suspended from 1898 through 1901 due to the war with Spain and the subsequent fighting with Philippine nationalists in those

islands. Not until 1903 did the army's competitive marksmanship program fully resume. In the meantime another attempt to use the Fort Crook range in June 1900 resulted in a farmer's horse being struck by a stray bullet; in June 1901 the Department of Missouri authorized Fort Crook's commanding officer to close the range. As late as 1904, the soldiers at Fort Crook were still going to the Omaha Reservation for target practice.<sup>32</sup>

By then, it had been ten years since the Bellevue range "in its garb of green," last attracted the "flower of Omaha" to observe "the relentless possibilities of war that go on there." Notwithstanding the romantic hyperbole by which an *Omaha Bee* reporter once described the Bellevue range, it had served a serious purpose and contributed much to the improvement of U.S. Army marksmanship during the 1880s and 1890s. Being in "rifle camp" at Bellevue likely was a pleasant respite for the hundreds of soldiers competing there. In hindsight, had the army kept control of the Bellevue range until the Fort Crook range's shortcomings had become apparent, the former might have continued to serve the Department of the Platte's needs for years to come, even with the army's new high velocity


**Figure 12: Company C, 22d Infantry, on the Ft. Crook rifle range, July 1897. It is easy to see why bullets from the army's high-velocity Krag-Jorgensen rifle sometimes escaped the range and ended up in farmers' fields nearby.**

*The History of Fort Crook, 1888 - Offutt Air Force Base, 1976 (Offutt AFB, NE: 3902 Air Base Wing, 1981)*



rifle. The landscape beyond the range's impact area was heavily wooded and unsuited for agriculture, unlike the area surrounding Fort Crook, which sparked problems with its target range from the beginning.<sup>33</sup>

The decision to abandon the Bellevue range must have seemed the right one under the circumstances in view at the time. Once those circumstances changed, the decision apparently

could not be reversed. Nevertheless, during its nine years of use, the Bellevue Rifle Range was a critical component of Nebraska's military infrastructure that also attracted attention to and support for the army's mission from the civilian community. Most important, the range provided opportunity for both officers and enlisted men to learn, demonstrate, and be rewarded for their proficiency at one of the basic skills required of a soldier. 

**Figure 13:** In this 1888 image of the Bellevue rifle range, the men are firing from prone or sitting positions. The targets appear in the distance, with the enlisted men's camp visible at right. The black powder cartridges used in the army's Springfield rifles and carbines produced clouds of white smoke. The view is to the north/northwest.



**Figure 14:** College Heights Park in Bellevue, March 2016. The view is toward the north/northwest. Comparison of the timbered bluff line in the middle distance with the similar feature in the historic photographs suggests that the park occupies part of the former Dept. of the Platte range. Photograph by author





## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The best review of marksmanship training during this period is Douglas C. McChristian, *An Army of Marksmen: The Development of United States Army Marksmanship in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Fort Collins, CO: The Old Army Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> *Army and Navy Journal*, Jan. 11, 1873:341, June 21, 1873:712, May 15, 1875:628 (hereafter *ANJ*).

<sup>3</sup> McChristian, *Army of Marksmen*, 34-48, passim.

<sup>4</sup> G. O. 44, Headquarters of the Army, May 8, 1881, *ANJ*, May 14, 1881:847.

<sup>5</sup> McChristian, *Army of Marksmen*, 52, 55, 65, and Edward S. Farrow, *Farrow's Military Encyclopedia* (New York: 1885), 391-403, provide details on training, targets, and shooting positions.

<sup>6</sup> Fred M. Greguras, "Omaha, Nebraska: Command and Support Center, The History of the Post of Omaha, Fort Omaha, Fort Crook, and the Quartermaster Depots," unpublished manuscript, May 17, 1999, 3, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, Apr. 19, 1882:8, Aug. 7, 1882:8; *Omaha Daily Herald*, Aug. 2:8, Aug. 3:8, Aug. 4:8, 1882. For a study of the various medals, pins, and badges authorized by the army as marksmanship awards, see William K. Emerson, *Marksmanship in the U.S. Army: A History of Medals, Shooting Programs, and Training* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, June 15, 1883:5. The "Creedmoor" comparison refers to the famous target range operated by the National Rifle Association from 1873 to 1892 and located in what is now Queens, New York.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, Aug. 5, 1884:8; *Omaha Daily Herald*, quoted in *ANJ*, Aug. 9, 1884:23.

<sup>11</sup> *ANJ*, Feb. 21, 1885:588; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Apr. 23, 1885:8, and June 3, 1885:2.

<sup>12</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, Aug. 17, 1885:5.

<sup>13</sup> *ANJ*, Mar. 27, 1886:708; *Omaha Daily Republican*, May 13, 1886:4.

<sup>14</sup> The range was described in some detail by the *ANJ*, Aug. 21, 1886:68, and *Omaha Daily Bee*, Aug. 22, 1886:9.

<sup>15</sup> *ANJ*, Aug. 21, 1886:72.

<sup>16</sup> Emerson, *Marksmanship*, 107; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Aug. 29, 1886:2.

<sup>17</sup> *ANJ*, June 25, 1887:952.

<sup>18</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, Aug. 24, 1887:2.

<sup>19</sup> *ANJ*, Sept. 3, 1887:101.

<sup>20</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 22, 1887:4; *ANJ*, Oct. 1, 1887:181.

<sup>21</sup> *ANJ*, Sept. 24, 1887:161; Order No. 8, Aug. 6, 1887, Entry 3952, Orders and Rosters, 1887, Inspector of Small Arms Practice, Department of the Platte, 1866-98, RG393, Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, National Archives and Records Administration. In 1889 Guy V. Henry was relieved from his assignment managing the Department of

the Platte's marksmanship training to return to his regular posting with the Ninth Cavalry at Fort McKinney, Wyoming Territory. *ANJ*, Aug. 24, 1889:1066, and Aug. 31, 1889:3

<sup>22</sup> Lt. D. Greene, Seventh Infantry, acting ordnance officer to Lt. Philip Reade, Third Infantry, Insp. Rifle Practice, Div. Mo., Sept. 16, 1887, Entry 3953, Letters Sent, I. S. A. P., DOP, RG393.

<sup>23</sup> *ANJ*, Aug. 27, 1887:83; Frank N. Schubert, comp., *On the Trail of the Buffalo Soldier: Biographies of African Americans in the U.S. Army, 1866-1917* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1995), 221, 337; Irene Schubert and Frank N. Schubert, comps., *On the Trail of the Buffalo Soldier II: New and Revised Biographies of African Americans in the U.S. Army, 1866-1917* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 198, 288-89.

<sup>24</sup> Don Rickey, Jr., "Warrior-Soldiers: The All-Indian 'L' Troop, 6<sup>th</sup> U.S. Cavalry, in the Early 1890s," in Ray Brandes, ed., *Troopers West: Military and Indian Affairs on the American Frontier* (San Diego, CA: Frontier Heritage Press, 1970), 41-61; *ANJ*, Sept. 2, 1893:27; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Aug. 20, 1893:7.

<sup>25</sup> *ANJ*, Aug. 29, 1891:5

<sup>26</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Sept. 26, 1894:2. A sample of the new rifle, but no ammunition for it, had been received by Department of the Platte ordnance officer Capt. J. C. Ayers in early spring 1894. Ayers to Chief of Ordnance, June 30, 1894, *Annual Report of the Chief of Ordnance for Year ending June 30, 1894* (GPO: 1895), 558. Issue of the Krag to the Second U.S. Infantry at Fort Omaha began in August 1894. *ANJ*, Aug. 25, 1894:906.

<sup>27</sup> *ANJ*, Dec. 29, 1888:634; Greguras, "Omaha . . . Command and Support Center," 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> *ANJ*, Jan. 12, 1895:326, and Mar. 28, 1895:490; "Report of the Quartermaster-General, FY ending June 30, 1891," in *Report of the Secretary of War, Messages and Documents, 52d Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess.* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1892), 521.

<sup>29</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 3, 1895:7, May 26, 1895:1.

<sup>30</sup> Fort Omaha post returns, August and September 1895, Microcopy 617, roll 881, Returns from U.S. Military Posts, RG94, Records of the Office of the Adjutant General, National Archives and Records Administration, microfilm at the NSHS; "Report of Brig. Gen. J. J. Coppinger, Dept. of the Platte, Aug. 28, 1895," in *Annual Report of the Secretary of War* (GPO: 1895), 165.

<sup>31</sup> *ANJ*, Jan. 2, 1897:307; *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 4, 1897:4, and July 9, 1897:5.

<sup>32</sup> *ANJ*, Sept. 11, 1897:23, Oct. 9, 1897:93, and Oct. 16, 1897:117; Emerson, *Marksmanship*, 108; *The History of Fort Crook, 1888-Offutt Air Force Base*, 1976 (Offutt Air Force Base: 3902 Air Base Wing, 1981), 23-24, 26; Fort Crook post returns, June 1904, Microcopy 617, roll 272, RG94, NARA, microfilm at the NSHS.

<sup>33</sup> *Omaha Sunday Bee*, Aug. 20, 1893:7.

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