GENERAL HARNEY AND SHARPS CARBINES

By Edward W. Marron, Jr.

Prologue

The discovery of primary source material to support the history of Sharps firearms is ever ongoing. Following is a transcription of General William S. Harney's letter of December 11, 1855 and his Board of Officers report of October 23, 1855. The letter and report compare components of the Model 1851 and Model 1852 while in actual field service and combat. The General's letter covers his Board of Officers examination of arms used during the "Sioux Expedition" of 1855. This correspondence was provided by military historian and author Fred Gaede. Gaede, who has researched and written extensively about early U.S. military accoutrements, has generously shared the works of James S. Hutchins[1] whose research at the National Archives is unparalleled.

Figure 1. Brigadier General William Selby Harney (1800 -1889)

General Harney (Figure 1) was an early military proponent of Sharps firearms. He saw the need for Sharps' advanced design and the advantages it brought to mounted troops. He, as was Christian Sharps, confronted a tradition bound and financially constrained military.

Several years ago, the Sharps Collector Association's "Sharps Collector Report" published "The First Sharps on the Texas Frontier".[2] The article began with the comments made by General Harney on January 30th of 1851 before the United States Senate's Committee on Military Affairs. Harney's statement, which was first and foremost an endorsement of Colt revolvers, also mentioned the possible use of Sharps by mounted troops. Harney's comment about Sharps were based on reports of the Model 1850 Sharps carried by the survey party of Commissioner John Russell Bartlett. Bartlett was charged with resolving the boundary between the United States and Mexico in accordance with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. That treaty ended the Mexican-American War in early 1848. Bartlett and at least one other member of his party demonstrated their Model 1850 Sharps (Figure 2) for members of the military they met along their route. Harney likely would have seen and possibly used the Model 1850 Sharps carried by Bartlett and his party as he was stationed in Texas between 1848 and 1854.[3] Harney noted:

> *"It is the only weapon with which we can ever hope to subdue those wild and daring tribes, unless we have at least three regiments of dragoons on the Texas frontier alone; and those officers who have recently returned from the frontier corroborate this statement by declaring that a dragoon armed with Colt's repeating pistol and a musquetoon [sic], or perhaps Sharp's* [sic] *rifle, would be the most formidable for frontier service; and particularly when encounters with savages occur, as they generally do, in prairies, defiles and mountain gorges. The advantages of repeating arms in such encounters are incalculable. A few bold men, well skilled in the use of these weapons, can, under such circumstances, encounter and scatter any number of savages."*[4]

Harney's reference to a Sharps was made a year prior to the Ordnance Department's test and trials of the carbine that would eventually become the Model 1851 (Figure 3), and two years before the first Sharps were delivered to the Army's Ordnance Department. A veteran of the Black Hawk and Second Seminole Wars, Harney also "won acclaim for charging up Cerro Gordo to clear Winfield Scott's way to Mexico City" during the Mexican-American War.[5] Clearly a seasoned and respected commander, Harney was an innovative tactician who embraced technology. Sharps held a special attraction eclipsing Harney's apparent satisfaction with the Colt revolving rifles that he and his troops used in Florida.

Following is General Harney's letter of December 11, 1855,[6] it is addressed to Lt. Colonel Lorenzo Thomas (Figure 4). The letter reviews the performance of the "first generation" of Sharps and it also covers his Board of Officers examination of arms used during the "Sioux Expedition", which included the Battle of Blue Water Creek (Figure 5). The letter was located by James S. Hutchins in the Adjutant Generals correspondence records and is Hutchins' transcription of approximately thirty-five years ago. Harney noted many of the same concerns about Maynard's priming system (Figure 6) as expressed by other officers reviewing the use of Sharps during field service. He also noted the need to improve the sights and his preference for Sharps' pellet primer system. The Model 1852 was unique in that it incorporated Sharps' percussion pellet primer devise, a system designed and patented by Christian Sharps. The lock incorporated a mechanism to throw a small

Figure 2. Sharps Model 1850 Carbine. Members of Commissioner John Russell Bartlett's survey party carried Model 1850 Sharps through Texas. One of the Sharps was an 1850 carbine; it is estimated that six carbines were produced during 1850 -1851. Model 1850 Sharps may have been examined and fired by General Harney as he was stationed in Texas at the time of the Bartlett survey. (Author's collection/Ron Paxton photograph – note – the fore-stock is an older replacement)

Figure 3. Sharps Model 1851 Carbine. This is an example of the first Sharps purchased by the Ordnance Department; one hundred fifty, including this carbine, were delivered to Ordnance during January of 1853. It is fitted with Maynard's tape primer. These Sharps were immediately issued for field test and trials in the West. (David Carter collection/Ron Paxton photograph).

percussion disk which would be captured between the nipple and falling hammer when the carbine was discharged. Alternatively, the Model 1852 could be primed with a standard percussion cap. (Figures 7 and 8). His Board of Officers commented on the weak swivel rings and heavy trigger pull.

General Harney's Letter of December 11, 1855

AGO 663.H.Hd. Qrs. Sioux Expedition

Fort Pierre, N. T. Decr. 11. 1855

W. S. Harney

Bvt. Brig. General &c.

Enclosed is a Report of a Board of Officers on the subject of the Armament of the Expedition

BBG WS Harney to Lt Col L Thomas, AAG, HQA, New York, dtd Hq Sioux Expd'n, Ft Pierre, NT, 11 DEC 1855

Colonel: I have the honor to forward for the consideration of the War Department, a copy of the Report of a Board of Officers on the subject of the armament of the troops of this Expedition; made after the ending of the late campaign; but later information received from Capt. Pleasonton, of the 2nd Dragoons, who was not present at the meeting of the Board; induces me to communicate some further alterations and changes, as assisting to perfect the equipment. Captain Pleasonton agrees in the recommendations of the Board, & I feel fully satisfied, from my own conviction, the Board would have endorsed the observations of the Captain, founded as they have been, upon a long and varied experience with both the Sharp's [sic] carbine and rifle, and with the Maynard primers and Sharp's [sic] primers, mounted and on foot.

Instead of the Maynard primer, at present in use, the Sharp's [sic] primer, as used upon the rifles made by Sharp [sic], should be adapted to consist in its simplicity of arrangement, its better security from exposure, its greater force of percussion, and its greater certainty of explosion. Each primer, bring entire in itself, is not affected by any injury its neighbor may receive, which is an objectionable feature in Maynard's primer, where the different pustules being connected, readily communicate to each other the slightest chemical reaction,

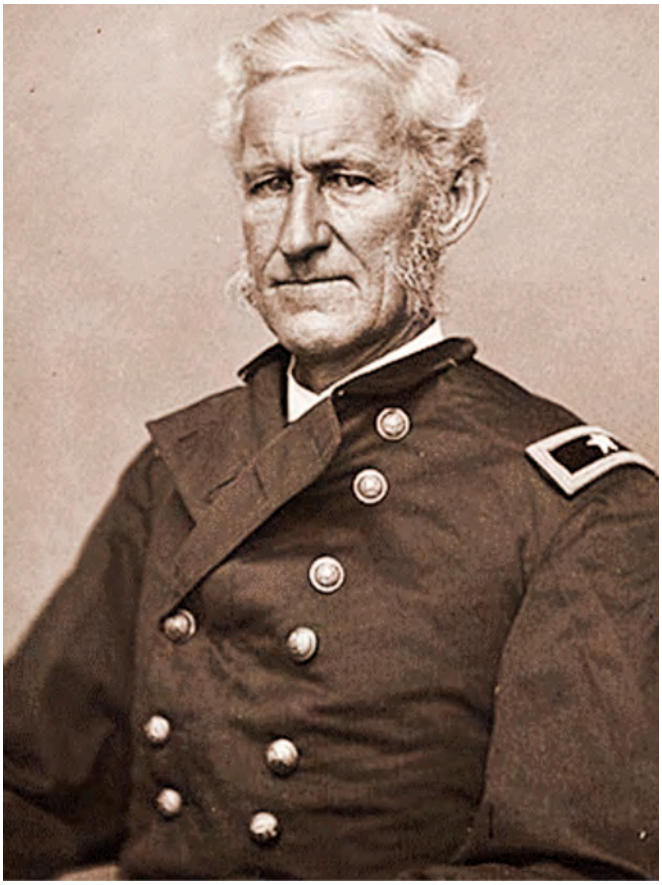

Figure 4. Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas (1804 –1875)

Figure 5. Battle of Blue Water Creek. General William S. Harney's troops during the Battle of Blue Water Creek during the "Sioux Expedition" in September of 1855. The conflict took place in Nebraska and was also known as the Battle of Ash Creek.

and consequent injury. The present mechanism for applying the Maynard's primer, is defective, in its inability to throw the last three pustules under the hammer from the chamber—the Sharp's [sic] primer has no such defect.

The present necessity for the issue of caps would be removed by the use of Sharp's [sic] primer; in which case, the nipple now in use, should be changed to some simple form, that would not admit a cap, and thus render the arm useless to the Indians, when it falls into their hands.

The sights for Sharp's [sic] carbine and rifles, for long-distance, are susceptible of great improvement, by substituting "the globe sight," for the present front sight, and, having three, or four, leaf sights graduated to different distances, in place of the single leaf sight now in use.

The cartridges for Sharp's [sic] carbine, are not durable, being made of thin paper that they may be the more easily cut by the lever; and experience has proved that a great waste of this ammunition, in consequence, is caused for the want of a proper cartridge box to carry this delicately constructed charge.

To remedy this defect, a cartridge box should be made after the old pattern cartridge box, containing a block of wood with holes bored in it of the diameter and length of each cartridge. Twenty cartridges is a sufficient number to be placed in the box.

The necessity for the cap box being removed, by adopting the Sharp's [sic] primer; the cartridge box above recommended should be worn by mounted troops in the present position of the cap box.

Board of Officer's Report

Fort Pierre, N. T. Oct. 23, 1855.

Report of a Board of Officers made in compliance with Orders, No 10, Head Quarters, Sioux Expedition, on the subject of the armament of the troops of the Expedition

Head Quarters, Sioux Expedition

Fort Pierre, N.T. October 21, 1855

Orders, No 10)

A board of officers will convene at this post at 11 o'clock tomorrow for an examination of the various arms now in the use of the troops of the expedition. It will report upon the efficiency of Sharp's [sic] rifle, also the expediency of substituting an additional revolver for the sabre in the Dragoon service. It will also express an opinion as to the advantages, if any, that the rifle may have over the musket, in the Infantry Service.

The Board will consist of the following named officers, viz: ---

Bvt. Major S. Woods, Captain, 6th Infantry, Capt. J. B. S. Todd, Captain 6th Infantry, Captain Williams Steele, 2nd. Dragoons, 1st Lieut. G. T. Balch, Ordnance Dept, 1st Lieut. B. H. Robertson, 2nd Dragoon.

By order of Bvt. Brig. General Harney:

S. Wood

Bvt. Major 6th. Infy.

A.A.A. General

Fort Pierre N.T. Oct. 22, 1855.

The Board met at Fort Pierre (Figure 9) in pursuance of the above order at 11 o'clock, A.M., and there being but three of the members present . . . the Board adjourned, until 2 o'clock P.M. of the 23rd inst.

Fort Pierre N.T. October 23, 1855

The Board met at 2 o'clock P.M., all the members being present, and proceeded to make a careful examination of the subjects mentioned in the above order.

They have the honor to make the following report.

The new arms used by the forces of the expedition and to which the attention of the Board was particularly called, were Sharp's [sic] breech loading Carbine, Colts pistol Navy pattern and the long-range rifle.

The first has been in use by Companies E. & K. 2nd Dragoons since the 20th of August last and were used by these companies at the action with the Sioux Indians on Blue Water Creek, N.T.

As a weapon for mounted troops they are light, handy and efficient, easily, and rapidly loaded and superior to any arm yet issued to these companies.

But as furnished in its present form it is entirely too weak in the parts for attaching it to the sling—the ring and swivel bar, being too small and not sufficiently well fastened to the stock. As a consequence of this defect several were lost at the battle of Blue Water by the breaking of the rings, in the charge. The locks are also "too hard to trigger" as it is technically termed, thus preventing any nicety of aim, the coarseness of the sights also in a measure defeat [sic] the last object. Were these defects remedied, the weapon could be far more effective in service than in its present form.

The Navy pattern of Colt's pistol not having been used in the commands of any member of the Board, except in that of one of them for a short period only, they do not feel authorized to judge of its merits.

The Board are of the opinion that the advantages which the long-range rifle has over the common musket for accuracy of fire and greater range, render it a most valuable weapon for service such as that on which the Expedition is engaged, as it will often enable troops to act effectively against Indians when a musket armament would be useless. There being many occasions however where the musket might be of great service, they would respectfully recommend two thirds of each Infantry company be armed with the long-range rifle, and the remainder with the musket.

That only buck-shot cartridges be supplied for the muskets. That in future no blank cartridges be issued to the troops of the Expedition as practice with them is of no service whatever to the men.

That to each Infantry company there be issued ten Colt's pistols Navy pattern, for the use of small detached parties on the frontier, such as those on escort or express duty and small scouting parties.

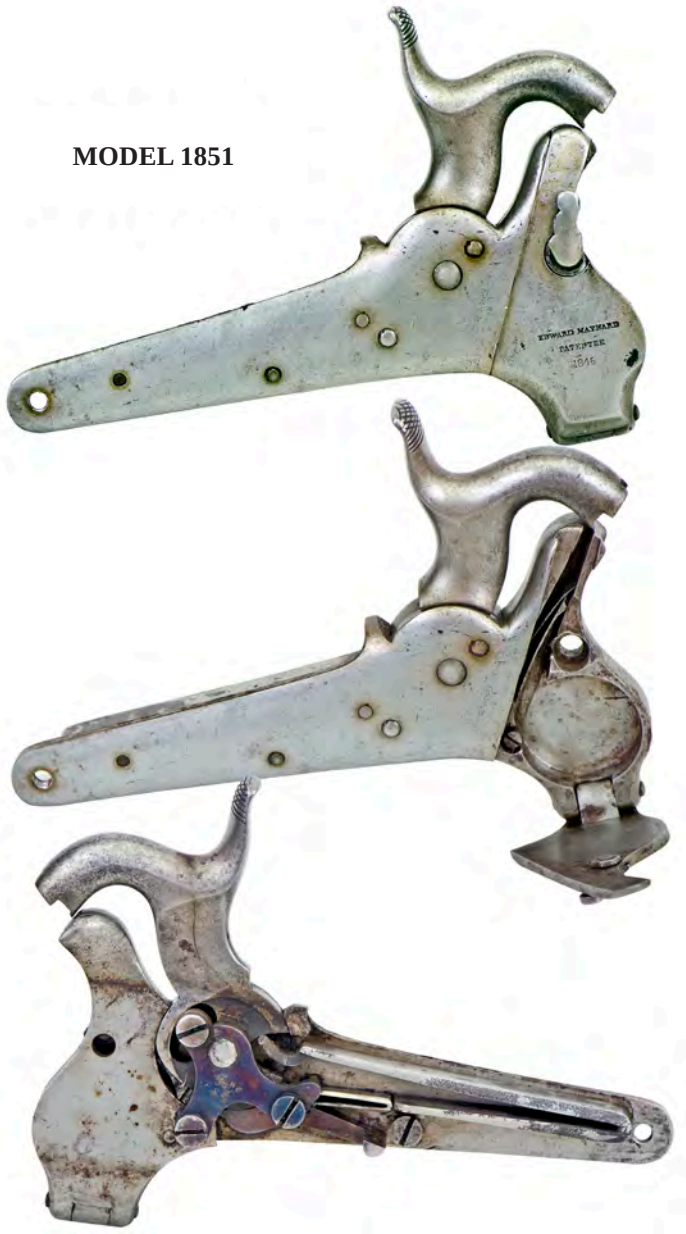

Figure 6. Model 1851 Lock. Officers reported two primary concerns with the function of the lock. The first was the reliability of the primer tape feed and the second was the inconsistent quality of the primer tapes which varied depending on their manufacture. The latter problem was compounded by moisture, which would render a portion of the tape, or the tape in its entirety, useless.

That the sword bayonet for the long-range rifle being a large additional weight in marching and a weapon which can rarely be made available against Indians, its use in the field for the Infantry of the Expedition be dispensed with. The Board with the exception of Lieutenant Robertson respectfully recommend that for the Dragoon service it would be expedient to substitute an additional army revolver for the sabre—but only when serving
against Indians.

Signed --- S. Wood, Bvt. Major 6th Infy., J. B. S. Todd, Capt. 6th Infy., William Steel, Capt. 2nd Dragoons, B. H. Robertson, Lieut. 2nd Dragoons, Geo T. Balch, 1st Lieut. Ord: Corps

Official

Head Quarters Sioux ExpeditionFort Pierre, N.T.

Decr 10th 1855

A. Pleasonton

Capt. 2nd Dragoons

Asst. Adjt. Gen'l.

In late January of 1856 and at the direction of Major General Winfield Scott, Harney's correspondence was forwarded to Colonel Henry Craig and then Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis. Word of the failure of the swivel rings had already reached Col. Craig who had written to the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company[7] with a similar letter sent to James T. Ames, who was manufacturing Greene carbines for the Army. Craig's letter to Palmer reads:

J.C. Palmer, Esqr.

Presdt. Sharps Rifle Manf. Co.

Hartford, Connt.

Sir,

It appears that in the recent action with the Sioux Indians, the Swivel Rings on the Sharps Carbines were found to be entirely too weak, many of them were broken, the Carbines dropping on the ground, and some of them it is supposed being irrecoverably lost in the high grass and bush. The wires of these rings are not quite stout enough, and it appears they were brazed instead of welded. Those you are preparing for the Carbines last ordered, should be made of stronger wire, and should be welded in the strongest manner.

With much Respect. etc.

H.K. Craig, Col. of Ord.

These were just several of a series of letters between officers in the field, the Ordnance Department and the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company, all which contributed to the evolution of Sharps firearms. Despite repeated criticism, primarily for the continued use of the Maynard primer, Sharps had won the praises of those serving on the frontier. The essence of which is captured in Major William Thornton's letter of June 1856 when he wrote the following to Colonel Craig at the direction of General Garland[8]:

Ordnance Office

Santa Fe, New Mexico

June 25,

Colonel H.K. Craig

U.S. Corps of Ord.

Sir:

Owing to the utter-worthlessness of the Cavalry Musketoon from Service, in the estimation of experienced Dragoon Officers: and the frequent applications for Sharps Carbines for Mounted Service, I am directed by General Garland, the commander of this Department, to request a Supply of 500 of Sharps Carbines, with a suitable supply of Ammunition, say 50,000 rounds.

In a country like this, where the Indian has every advantage, account of deep canons or ravines, the Dragoon should be supplied with the efficient arms, so that he may contend suc-

Figure 7. Sharps Model 1852 Carbine. Fifty carbines fitted with Sharps' pellet primer, a system that places a fulminate of mercury disk over the nipple when the carbine is fired, were part of the Ordnance Department's first Sharps order. Generally considered more reliable than Maynard's tape primer, the system was later modified with introduction of the Sharps' Model 1859. When received by Ordnance, during October of 1853, forty-nine Model 1852 carbines were shipped to Texas for test and trials under field conditions. The fiftieth was retained by Ordnance. (Linda and Stephen Evans collection/Ron Paxton Photography).

cessfully against Indians in close action, by rapid and accurate firing: or force them by the long range of his arm, from positions almost inaccessible.

If the Rifle Musket can be furnished General Garland will be glad to obtain 200, with 200,000 rounds of Ammunition from this Department: and he is anxious of placing said arms, in the hands of the most experienced Infantry Soldiers, of each Company of his command.

Respectfully, I am Sir, Your Obt. Sevt.

W. A. Thornton, Bvt. Major U.S.A.

Figure 8. Model 1852/1853 Lock. This lock incorporates Sharps' pellet primer. Small primer disks were loaded into the lock via a copper tube, which held twenty-five to thirty-two primers. The primary concern expressed was that a percussion cap could not be used once the disks were loaded, a defect corrected with the introduction of the Lawrence pellet primer which incorporated a "cut-off" in the Model 1859. A second comment was that the disks were difficult to load in cold weather with numb fingers.

Figure 9. Map of Fort Pierre

Endnotes

1. James S. Hutchins (1923-2008) graduated the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1946. After his military service he eventually decided to pursue his passion for military history as a career. Hutchins joined the staff of the Smithsonian, becoming the Assistant Director of the Division of Armed Forces History. With his retirement he was named "Historian Emeritus". Hutchins was a consummate researcher over his fifty-five-year career. He transcribed thousands of documents found in the National Archives and had unique talent to explore areas overlooked by others. His transcriptions are now in the care of Fred Gaede, a fellow member of the American Society of Arms Collectors and the Company of Military Historians. As new Sharps material is found in Hutchins' files it is made available for review.
2. Marron, Edward. *"The First Sharps on the Texas Frontier"*. Sharps Collector Report Vol. 19, #2. Page 23 – 29.
3. Adams, George Rollie. *General William S. Harney - Prince of the Dragoons.* University of Nebraska Press 2001, page 106.
4. Congressional Records, January 30, 1851. 31st Congress, 2nd Session. Report of Mr. Shields to the Committee on Military Affairs. Page 257. 1851.
5. Adams, George Rollie, preface XV.
6. AGO—Letters Received, 1855 (#633-H) AGO—Letters Received, 1855 (#633-H), OCC, Register Letters, Rec'd, v. 26 (1856), NARS RG 156 (James Hutchins' last references and notes for the materials presented)
7. National Archives, Record Group 156, Textual Records of the Chief of Ordnance, Entry 3, Letters, Endorsements, and Circulars Sent ("Miscellaneous Letters"), 1812-1889, Volume 46, 5 Jul. 1855 to 21 May 1856
8. National Archives, Record Group 156, Textual Records of the Chief of Ordnance, Entry 21, Letters Received, 1812-84, Box 213, 1856S-1856V