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Article Title: "He . . . Regretted Having to Die That Way": Firearms Accidents in the Frontier Army, 1806-1891

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Article Summary: Firearms accidents were one of many hazards of service in the frontier army. Malfunctioning equipment caused some of the accidents, but most resulted from careless handling of weapons.

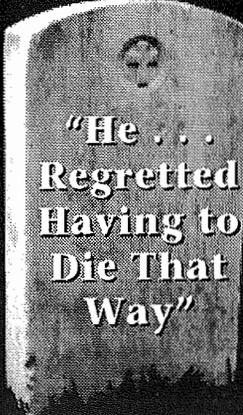
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Causes of Firearms Accidents: malfunctions, mistaken identity, hunting, cannons, dependents, target practice, cartridge reloading, exposed lock mechanisms

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Photographs / Images: Wayman St Clair, Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, posing at Deer Creek Station in present Wyoming; two drawings of the Hall-North carbine; engraving of John W Keller's shattered femur (George A Otis, *A Report of Surgical Cases . . . in the Army of the United States*, 1871); George Armstrong Custer, having killed his favorite horse while buffalo hunting (Elizabeth B Custer, *Tenting on the Plains, or General Custer in Kansas and Texas*, 1887); "Hunting sometimes proved as dangerous to the hunters as to the hunted" (illustration from *Harper's Weekly*, October 10, 1885; soldier at Fort Robinson playfully aiming a revolver at a dog; grave marker of Private George Frey, accidentally shot by a comrade in 1868



"He . . .
Regretted
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Die That
Way"

Firearms Accidents

*in the Frontier Army
1806-1891*

By James E. Potter

When the echoes of gunfire died away on the morning of August 31, 1886, Pvt. William M. Miller lay mortally wounded upon the field, another casualty from the army's many decades of service in the American West. I wish I could report that Miller's sacrifice was rewarded by a citation for bravery in the face of a worthy foe. The truth is, however, the unfortunate soldier accidentally shot himself while hunting at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where he was the post telegrapher. His shotgun discharged, nearly severing his left wrist and firing the birdshot into his brain. Miller was buried the next day in the post cemetery.¹

Private Miller was one of hundreds of frontier army officers, noncoms, enlisted men, and their dependents who were wounded, permanently disabled, or killed in firearms accidents. Spread over the decades and the vast geography of the nineteenth-century military frontier, however, and overshadowed by well-publicized casualties from major engagements, these losses attracted little attention.

This study was prompted, in part, by my earlier review of firearms use by overland emigrants, which revealed that inexperience with guns, carelessness, the idiosyncrasies of nineteenth-century weapons, and fears of a presumably dangerous unknown contributed to many accidents.² Did the same problems prevail in an organization where

strict discipline supposedly governed the use and handling of weapons? It became clear that carelessness and inexperience with firearms also plagued the army. Enlistees generally received little or no training at the recruiting depots,

and during much of the period the army served in the West, the demands of fatigue and campaigning prevented systematic instruction once the men reached their units. In an environment where young men were constantly han-



In 1865 Wayman St. Clair, Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, posed for his portrait at Deer Creek Station in present Wyoming. His Company G suffered its share of firearms accidents during its frontier duty. St. Clair holds a Remington revolver, with a Spencer rifle at his side. Courtesy of Wyoming Division of Cultural Resources, Cheyenne

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dling guns, the most severe discipline could do little to compensate for these shortcomings.³

In looking at the frontier army, I have recorded 120 fatalities and two hundred injuries from firearms accidents between 1806 and 1891. These losses were in addition to many other shootings involving suicides, homicides, or so-called "personal encounters," which I did not consider in this study. Except for records of Nebraska military posts on microfilm at the Nebraska State Historical Society, and several valuable contributions from colleagues, the data for this article has been drawn mostly from published diaries, articles, and reminiscences about the frontier army, the *Army and Navy Journal*, and the annual "Report of the Surgeon General." I have not yet mined the National Archives or other repositories for medical histories and related documents of posts and units, where I would expect to find additional reports of accidental shootings.

One of the most valuable sources of data on accidental gunshot wounds is *Report of Surgical Cases in the Army*, published by Surg. Gen. Joseph K. Barnes in 1871 and covering the period from July 1, 1865, to December 31, 1870. During those five years 3,123 gunshot wounds were reported on the monthly returns of sick and wounded in the army as a whole, which numbered 150,000 in 1865 and declined to 30,000 by 1870. One section of the report presents case studies or reports of 387 patients that sustained gunshot wounds. Seventy-three resulted from some sort of altercation or homicide, fourteen from suicides, and thirty-four from actions with Indians. Of the remaining 266 gunshot wounds, 92 were identified as accidental, leaving 154 not specified as to cause, but many of the descriptions hint at accidents.⁴ It should be noted, however, that the gunshot wounds in the report were selected for their medical interest and not according to the circumstances causing the injury.

By their very nature accidents tend to involve an element of carelessness,

so I will not dwell on the obvious in the discussion that follows. With carelessness as a given, I have categorized most accidents according to the context in which they occurred: accidents relating to malfunctions or gun design; accidents involving mistaken identity; hunting accidents; cannon accidents; accidents involving army dependents; freak accidents; "accidents" that suggest self-mutilation; and accidents involving target practice and cartridge reloading.

If there was any "cause" of gun accidents that did not always involve carelessness, it may have been mechanical malfunctions or faults in the design and construction of nineteenth-century firearms, although even these problems might have been overcome, in part, by training and rigorous attention to safety. The exposed lock mechanisms could easily snag upon holsters, clothing, bushes, or wagon boxes, lifting the hammer and firing the gun. Two dragoon officers met death this way, Lt. William Bradford in 1834, and Capt. Burdett A. Terrett in 1845. In both instances the men shot themselves when their pistol discharged as they pulled it from a saddle holster. Terrett was riding at Fort Scott, Kansas, in April 1845, when a small dog began yapping at his horse's heels. The captain pulled out his pistol and was attempting to dismount, perhaps to shoot the dog, when the lock caught on something and Terrett shot himself. According to Charlotte Swords, the wife of Terrett's friend, Capt. Thomas Swords, Mrs. Terrett witnessed the accident. "All that he said was to his frantic wife 'I know you' [and] 'I'm not much hurt' and bowed his head when she repeated the Lord's prayer over him. He passed without suffering."⁵

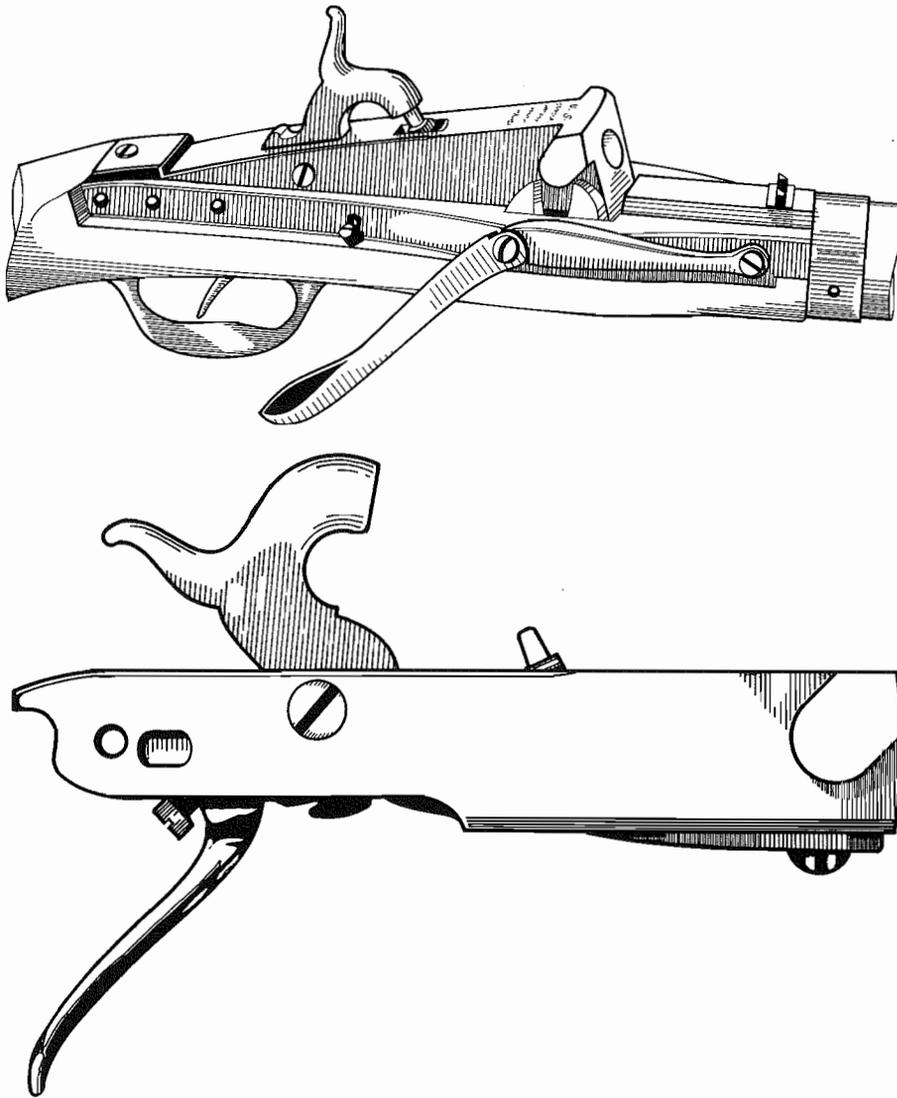
The same year a Private Smith of the First U.S. Dragoons shot himself near Fort Laramie when his gun snagged on a bush. The private laid down his carbine to picket his horse and when he picked it up by the muzzle, it went off. "The whole of the contents of the carbine entered his right arm above the wrist, and ranging upwards, broke

through the bones at the elbow joint, which it shivered entirely into pieces."⁶ A surgeon amputated the arm at once, and the soldier, surgeon, and seven men were left behind to wait until Smith died or recovered. Which it was, I have not been able to determine.

The breechloading Hall carbines carried by the dragoons seemed particularly prone to accidental discharges. Lt. Abraham R. Johnston of the First Dragoons shot himself in the foot in June 1843, when his carbine, slung to the saddle, went off while he was riding after buffalo. Ten days later a private in Johnston's company was mortally wounded when a loaded carbine leaning against a tree was knocked over and discharged.⁷ Along the Platte River in 1844 a dragoon sentry shot himself through the hand with his Hall. Lt. J. Henry Carleton remarked, "Such accidents are very common with this weapon. No less than five men have been wounded in this way, in the companies stationed at Fort Leavenworth within a twelvemonth."⁸ Not only was the breechloading Hall carbine the first percussion longarm adopted for use by the U.S. Army, it was equipped with an adjustable trigger that could be set very light, which might help explain the frequency of accidents with the Hall in the hands of untrained troops.⁹ Other accidents occurred when the carbine's breechblock, which tipped up so it could be loaded with powder and ball, was not securely returned to the locked position. The breechblock contained the entire firing mechanism and resembled a short-barreled pistol when opened for loading. One of Philip St. George Cooke's soldiers in 1843 shot himself that way: "His carbine chamber was sprung and thus it was discharged as from a pocket pistol; the ball was deeply buried in the shoulder, and it is feared injured the joint."¹⁰

The new innovations in firearms did not always prove practical in the field. Lt. George Stoneman was one of a party of dragoons escorting volunteers of the Mormon Battalion to the Southwest in

Firearms Accidents



The sometimes troublesome Hall-North carbine: (top) with its breechblock tipped up for loading; (bottom) the breechblock removed from the carbine. Drawing by Dell Darling

1846, when they encountered wild bulls. In the resulting melee Stoneman's "five shooter," probably some sort of revolving rifle, experienced a multiple discharge, badly injuring his hand.¹¹ Even tried and true designs were not immune from malfunctions. In 1867 Col. Henry B. Carrington was wounded in the leg when his Colt revolver went off as he galloped forward to close up the wagon train of his command. Although the revolver had been repaired at Fort Casper, in present Wyoming, one of the safety pins on the

cylinder had been broken off, and the bouncing of the holster jugged the hammer to fall on a loaded chamber. Carrington was taken to Fort Laramie, where the bullet was removed.¹²

Frontiersman Luther H. North of Columbus, Nebraska, related an accident involving Spencer carbines issued to the Pawnee Scouts in 1867. The guns were old, and many were defective. North and an ordnance sergeant were cycling shells through the actions to see if they would chamber properly, when Gen.

William H. Emory arrived to observe their work. According to Luther, when he rejected one of the carbines, Emory remarked,

"What is the matter with that gun?" I told him the shell stuck. He said, "Let me see it" and I handed it to him. The shell was about half way into the chamber. He took hold of the lever and gave a quick jerk and the breechblock struck the cartridge—they were rim fire—with so much force that it exploded and the whole charge of powder blew out into his face. Fortunately he was wearing glasses and they saved his eyes, but the blood spurted from his face in streams. He did not have anything further to say and left us to select our own guns.¹³

The Springfield breechloading rifles and carbines that had become the standard army firearm by the 1870s were sometimes prone to fire accidentally if dropped or jarred. On January 5, 1885, Lt. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan issued a circular letter cautioning that any pressure against the trigger when placing a Springfield in the half-cock or safety-cock positions made it possible for the sear to become precariously balanced on the edge of the tumbler notches instead of securely within them. In such circumstances "a slight touch upon the trigger or only a jar of the piece will be necessary to free it and permit the hammer to fall upon the firing pin."¹⁴ If the general's admonition reached Pvt. Coney Boyd of the Ninth U.S. Cavalry, it evidently failed to impress him. Boyd shot himself in the left hand by striking the butt of his gun on a rock while walking his post at Fort Robinson that fall.¹⁵

Some malfunctions were the result of stupidity. In 1869 a member of an infantry escort to Indian commissioner Vincent Colyer was cleaning his rifle when buffalo hove into view. The soldier rushed out on the prairie, opened fire, and the gun blew up in his face. He had been oiling the bore with fat pork and in his excitement left a piece of the meat in the barrel. The officer in charge of the detachment caused the soldier to be tied up between two wagon wheels as punishment for firing without orders and destroying a valuable weapon.¹⁶

Often the accidental shooting was a classic case of "I didn't know the gun was loaded." One such accident fatally wounded a Fourth U.S. Infantry private at Fort Fetterman, Wyoming Territory, on December 22, 1869. The incident began when one Private Swift could not find his rifle in the rack when going on guard duty, so he got another one from the sergeant. The next morning Swift's own rifle turned up, and he returned to his quarters, sat down with his gun across his knee, and cocked it without checking to see if it was loaded. The gun went off, and the bullet fractured Pvt. John W. Keller's femur, cut off another soldier's finger, and lodged in a third soldier's knee. Keller was sitting on his bunk with his back turned when the shot was fired from about fifteen feet. Although initial reports had Private Keller resting comfortably and feeling confident of his recovery, he died December 30.¹⁷

First Sgt. George W. Ford, a buffalo soldier in the Tenth U.S. Cavalry, was unpacking a presumably unloaded revolver from an arms chest at Fort Sill, Indian Territory, in 1871, when he shot himself in the leg. Ford recovered, however, and compiled an impressive record before his retirement.¹⁸ Not so fortunate were two members of the Ninth Cavalry. Pvt. David Boyd of Company K was killed by Pvt. Jesse Quarren at Fort Davis, Texas, on March 16, 1870. According to Quarren, the two were "drilling" with carbines, although it was nearly sundown. More likely, according to witnesses, they were horsing around. Quarren had Boyd's carbine, which turned out to be loaded, and it went off when the hammer caught in Quarren's blouse. Boyd died from a bullet in the chest.¹⁹

Pvt. Samuel Devine of Troop A, Ninth Cavalry, was killed at Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, in July 1886, when he and a comrade "by way of innocent diversion on guard . . . were snapping empty pistols at each other. Of course their pieces were not loaded. However, a sharp report brought the contest to a summary close and a military funeral was in order that evening." Opined the editor of the

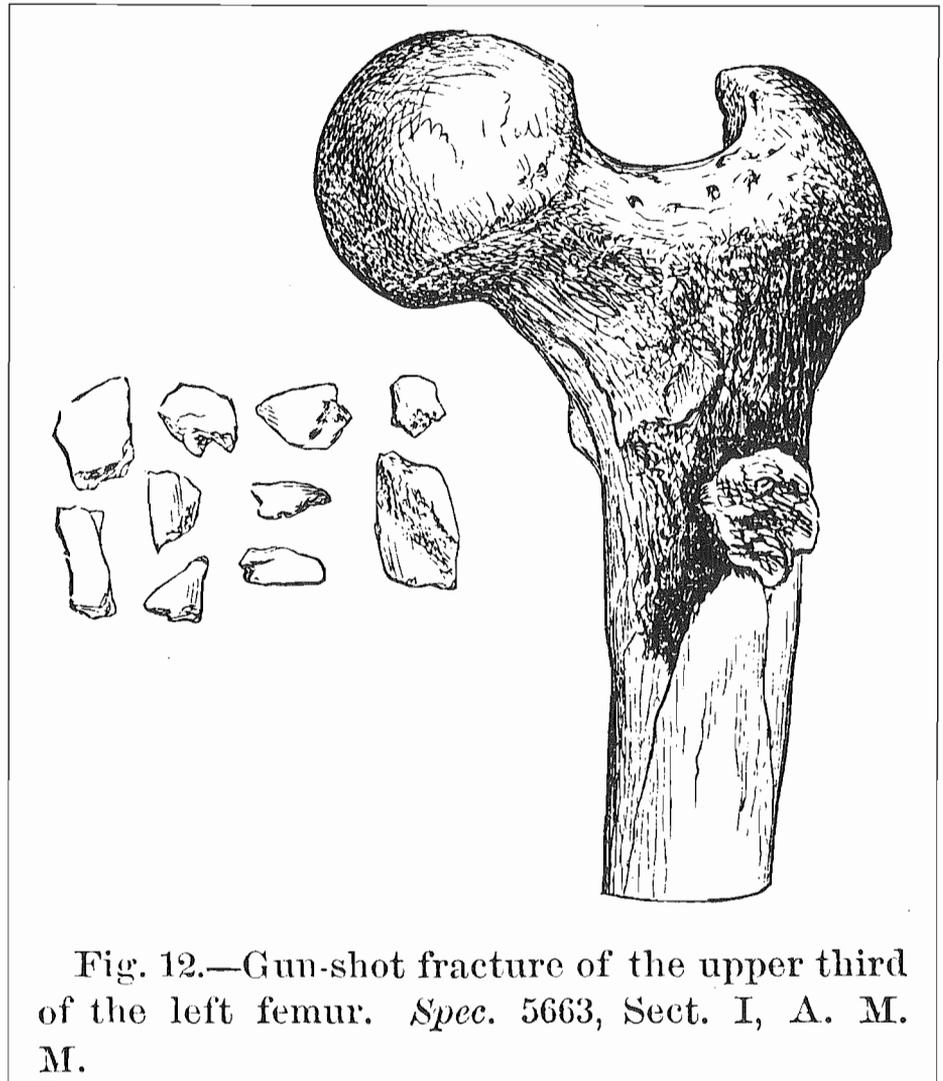


Fig. 12.—Gun-shot fracture of the upper third of the left femur. *Spec. 5663, Sect. I, A. M. M.*

An engraving of John W. Keller's shattered femur was published in George A. Otis's *A Report of Surgical Cases . . . in the Army of the United States*. Keller was shot at close range with a .50 caliber U.S. Springfield Rifle.

Army and Navy Journal, "It would seem that men drilled in the use of arms should know better."²⁰

At Fort Sidney, Nebraska, in 1888 Pvt. Frank E. Murray died when his chum, Pvt. E. E. Brown, shot him accidentally with a revolver that had been used in a post theatrical performance the night before. Although the revolver was supposed to have contained only one blank load, it was found to have four loaded chambers. It was never determined who put in the cartridges.²¹

At Fort Omaha, Nebraska, on April 13, 1888, a soldier forgot to remove a live cartridge from his rifle when he came off guard duty. Later that day when the first volley of supposed blanks rang out during a skirmish drill, Pvt. James T. Hughes of Company I, Second U.S. Infantry, threw up his hands and fell, shot through the body. The unfortunate soldier lingered for almost a year, dying March 11, 1889, of what the post surgeon termed "exhaustion from a gunshot wound."²²

Firearms Accidents

In September 1889, as he frequently did, Maj. Gen. George Crook went hunting. He was accompanied to the Big-horn Mountains by Webb C. Hayes, son of the former president, John S. Collins of Omaha, and an escort from the Eighth U.S. Infantry and Ninth Cavalry. Unfortunately the expedition was cut short on October 3 when a Private Monahan accidentally killed Pvt. Edson Stevens of the Eighth Infantry by shooting the lower part of his face and jaw off. Apparently Monahan was snapping a rifle at Stevens that was not thought to be loaded. The party immediately bundled up the corpse, boarded the train, and reached Fort Robinson, the soldier's station, in time for him to be buried in the post cemetery on October 4.²³

Jumpy sentries who fired at shadows, horses, dogs, and hogs, as well as at their fellow soldiers, took a heavy toll. Accidents involving sentry duty were particularly common when isolated commands were operating in potentially hostile territory, which could be just about anywhere in the West prior to 1891. Much of the blame lies with soldiers who failed to respond to a sentry's challenge or who foolishly wandered around outside the camp after dark. The camp of the First Dragoons near the Washita River in 1834 was thrown into panic about midnight when

a stupid sentinel . . . mistook a horse for a hostile Indian, fired, and killed him, alarmed the camp, and sent off in a stampede the rest of the horses. Recovered all save ten. The men of the regiment are excellent material, but unused to the woods.²⁴

In 1846 William Richardson of Doniphan's Missouri Volunteers en route to Mexico left camp to search for lost horses. Returning,

we heard volleys of musketry in the direction of our camp, and were at a loss to understand the meaning, till on our return, we learned that a dog had been buried with the honors of war. This poor dog had been a great favorite with our captain and all the company; he was most foolishly shot by a soldier on guard last night. The man was made to dig his grave and will be detailed on extra duty as punishment, the captain being much exasperated.²⁵

At Camp Cooke in Montana Territory on the evening of December 30, 1867, the drum beat the alarm after a sentry fired a shot near the stables. "After a long search Col. N[ugent's] fat hog was found roaming around after having been mistaken for an Indian."²⁶

A grim counterpoint to these somewhat humorous cases of mistaken identity is the report of 2d Lt. William B. Hazen of a scout of the Eighth Infantry after Apaches near Fort Bliss, Texas, in the summer of 1858:

This night a melancholy occurrence took place in camp by which two lives were lost. At about 2 o'clock in the morning . . . as the 3rd relief was posted, one of the sentinels of the 2d relief was missed from his post, but as it was quite dark, and all of the men greatly fatigued from the march of the day, it was supposed he had gone immediately to his bed on seeing the relief approaching. . . .

It appears, however, that he had gone about twenty paces outside of his post and had gone to sleep in a bunch of grass before being relieved. When the 3rd relief had been posted about an hour, one of the sentinels hearing a slight rustling in the grass, looked in the direction and discovered what he supposed to be an Indian crawling upon him. Seeing further that he had a gun in his hand, and was about raising it, and knowing that there was strict orders for no one to go outside of camp without informing the guard, he supposed it to be an Indian in the act of shooting him. He immediately fired, probably without challenging, killing him instantly.

He at the same time cried out Indians, thoroughly alarming camp. One of the other sentinels Pvt. Michael Hyer of Co. C, 8th Infy, now taking fright, abandoned his post, running into camp, and screaming at the top of his voice and more hideously than any Indian I ever heard, he also discharged his piece, probably at random, but apparently towards camp. Several pieces were leveled upon him, he being taken for an Indian, and one discharged, killing him also. Some animals having been hit by stray shots now flitted through camp at great speed, completing the confusion, and giving it every feature of a real attack. . . . The first man killed was Pvt. Michael Kellett of Co. D, 8th Infy. The bodies were buried in the best manner possible, having no spades.²⁷

A final example of the problem of mistaken identity was recorded by Lt.

James H. Bradley in his account of the Sioux Campaign of 1876. Bradley was with Col. John Gibbon's column and had a premonition of future events when he learned that instead of challenging, the sentinels were to whistle to anyone approaching their post, and fire if they received no reply. To quote Bradley, "It is an abominable system, more dangerous to ourselves than to the enemy; and seems to be based upon the fallacy that an Indian will have more compunction about putting an arrow into a whistler than a man who talks out in his mother tongue."²⁸

Six weeks later on May 20, 1876, Bradley's "abominable system" fulfilled his expectations when Sergeant Belicke of Company C, Seventh U.S. Infantry, returning to camp with mail from Fort Ellis, was shot in the head by a sentry and instantly killed. Bradley could not resist an "I told you so" comment:

He was buried near the place where he fell—a victim to this wretched method of challenging. There could be but one thing worse: to fire on sight without challenging at all. By either method we would kill about a hundred of our men to one Indian, but, though it would be rather unpleasant to have murdered the hundred in this way, there would be a deal of satisfaction in having got away with that solitary redskin.²⁹

Hunting accidents were common in the frontier army. I identified eleven deaths and thirteen injuries from this cause. Perhaps the most famous casualty was Capt. Meriwether Lewis, who nearly became a corpse in the Corps of Discovery in August 1806 when Pierre Cruzatte mistook him for an elk. As Lewis recorded in his journal,

I was in the act of firing on the Elk a second time when a ball struck my left thye about an inch below my hip joint, missing the bone it passed through the left thye and cut the thickness of the bullet across the hinder part of the right thye; the stroke was very severe. . . . I called out to him damn you, you have shot me.³⁰

Had Cruzatte elevated his gun a little more, Lewis would have received an almost surely fatal abdominal wound, and there would be no debate among

present-day historians and forensic anthropologists about the cause of his death.

Sometimes hunting was a major means of subsistence for isolated outposts such as Martin's Cantonment, established by the U.S. Rifle Regiment on the Missouri River en route to the Council Bluffs in 1818–19. There two men were accidentally shot and killed while hunting.³¹ In 1869 the chief bugler of the Nineteenth Kansas Volunteer Cavalry was killed by a bullet fired by soldiers hunting prairie dogs to supplement rations depleted during the Washita Campaign.³² As the army settled into garrisons in the post-Civil War era, however, the prevalence of buffalo and other game made hunting a pleasant diversion for both officers and enlisted men and provided a welcome supplement to the monotonous army diet. Most are familiar with the hunting prowess of Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, who, among other trophies, shot his horse out

from under himself with a revolver during a Kansas buffalo chase.³³

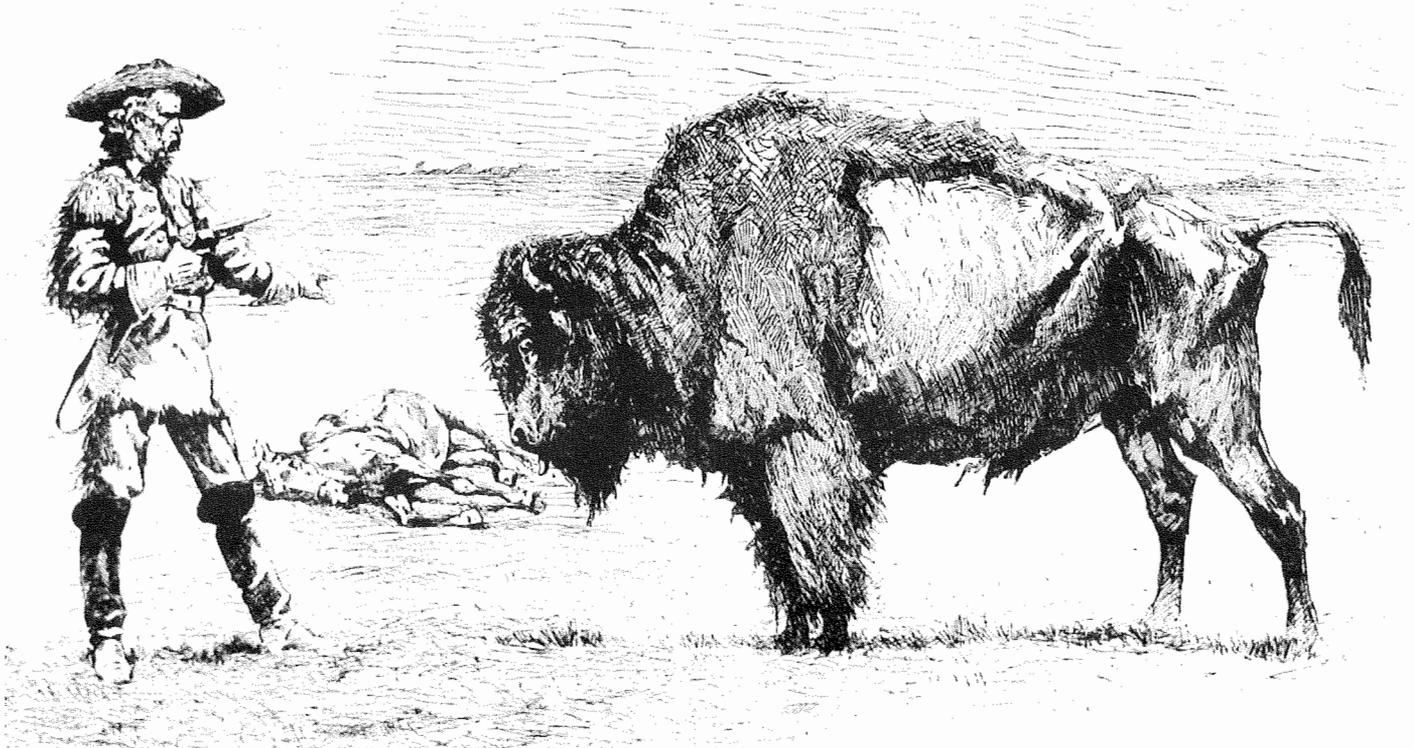
Within three days in February 1868 two lieutenants were lost to the army in hunting accidents, one temporarily and one permanently. Lt. Benjamin Franklin Bell, Company A, Tenth Cavalry, shot himself in the leg with his revolver during a buffalo hunt near Fort Larned, Kansas, and was disabled for more than a month.³⁴ The case of Lt. James A. Rothermel has more to do with the lieutenant's lack of judgment than it does with hunting, but the end result was his leaving the army rather abruptly. His commanding officer reported the incident to the *Army and Navy Journal*:

Yesterday morning [Feb. 15, 1868] Lieutenant Rothermel started on a deer track for the purpose of hunting a deer down, and after following it for some miles, had to return in consequence of depth of snow. Coming back, when about three miles from camp, he saw a rabbit sitting on the mouth of its burrow. He dis-

mounted and attempted to kill the rabbit, which had taken refuge in its burrow, by striking it with the butt of his Henry rifle, when the rifle was discharged, the ball entering under the right jawbone and coming out in the center of the back of his head. . . . His corpse arrived at Fort Boise this afternoon, where it awaits interment.³⁵

In addition to Private Miller, mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, another Fort Robinson soldier was severely wounded in a hunting accident that meant his loss to the army. On September 27, 1883, Pvt. John Jefferds of Company F, Fifth U.S. Cavalry, was out hunting for his company mess when he accidentally fired a load of No. 5 shot into his right leg and foot. The limb was immediately amputated by the post surgeon. Because Jefferds was deemed totally disabled, he was discharged from the service on January 7, 1884.³⁶

Hunting accidents killed two senior officers in command of posts. Bvt. Maj. Robert Patterson Wilson of the Tenth U.S. Infantry, commanding Fort



While buffalo hunting, sportsman George Armstrong Custer accidentally shot and killed his favorite horse. From *Tenting on the Plains, or General Custer in Kansas and Texas* by Elizabeth B. Custer (1887)

Firearms Accidents

Richardson, Texas, in 1878 was out hunting when his muzzleloading shotgun burst, and he died two days afterwards from his wounds. The accident virtually destroyed his left hand and drove a piece of the gun barrel into his knee.³⁷ Ten years later a hunting accident killed Edward J. Spaulding, a veteran of more than thirty years in the army, including significant service with the Second U.S. Cavalry in the Department of the Platte. By 1888 he had been promoted major of the Fourth U.S. Cavalry, and commanded Fort McDowell, Arizona Territory.

On the morning of December 10, 1888, Spaulding and Capt. Charles A. P. Hatfield set off to hunt the Verde and Salt Rivers in a small boat. After a mostly uneventful day, the boat struck a log in some rapids and partially capsized. The men managed to reach shallow water, where the boat grounded. Hatfield, missing his gun, exclaimed,

"I've lost my gun." Major Spaulding answered, "Mine is all right," and reaching down into the water took his gun by the muzzle to raise it. The water that filled both barrels remained in the gun, one barrel of which was discharged by the hammer striking a seat of the boat, sending the charge of shot and water into his abdomen, killing him almost instantly. Throwing up both hands, he exclaimed, "Hatfield, I'm dead," falling back into the arms of his friend.³⁸

The tragedy was made more intense because the two officers' wives planned to meet their husbands in Tempe at the end of their voyage. As the account in the *Army and Navy Journal* put it, "Until nightfall the ladies eagerly waited and watched for their husbands' coming, unconscious until the dawn of next day, that one would never come!"³⁹

Several frontier army soldiers were maimed or killed by an unexpected type of firearms mishap—cannon fire. Most of the twenty-one cannon accidents I found involved ceremonial or patriotic occasions and resulted from premature discharges while loading the gun. One soldier lost an arm and another died from injuries received during the firing of salutes at Fort Kearny, Nebraska Terri-



Hunting sometimes proved as dangerous to the hunters as to the hunted.
Harper's Weekly, October 10, 1885

tory, and Fort Randall, Dakota Territory, to celebrate the fall of Richmond in 1865. A third soldier was killed that year firing a salute at Fort McPherson, Nebraska Territory. At Fort Stevenson, Dakota Territory, a soldier lost his right arm firing the July 4 salute in 1868; two years later, on the same holiday and at the same post, another soldier lost the same arm under identical circumstances. A buffalo soldier lost an eye from a premature discharge on Independence Day 1874 at Fort Davis. Cannon accidents at Fort Washakie, Wyoming Territory, and Fort Crawford, Colorado, on July 4, 1881 and 1887, respectively, maimed two soldiers. The Fort Crawford accident involved a three-inch Parrott rifle, described as a "relic of the war," with an enlarged vent that could not be properly stopped when the powder cartridge was rammed home.⁴⁰

The foregoing accidents involved infantrymen or cavalrymen pressed into temporary artillery service. An artilleryman lost his life at Saratoga, New York, from a premature discharge during the firing of minute guns after the death of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in 1885. A second

artilleryman lost a hand firing a cannon at Alcatraz Island in 1886, while saluting the arrival of a steamship in the harbor.⁴¹ Another cannon mishap in California the same year at a Grand Army of the Republic ceremony prompted correspondence to the *Army and Navy Journal* deploring the assignment of untrained soldiers as cannoneers and indicting the continued use of obsolete ordnance, such as the gun involved in the Fort Crawford accident:

Is not this a strong argument against the "theory" that we can put efficient soldiers in the field in any numbers without any previous training. Not one of the young men mentioned knew a solitary thing about handling a piece of artillery. . . . It is perfect folly to imagine that soldiers can be improvised in a day; the use of arms and engines of war, like every other profession, takes time to learn. . . . Accidents of the sort referred to are all too common, and they are the result, in the first place of laxity in the drill of the men in handling field artillery, and in the second place to the fact that we persist in keeping in service obsolete muzzle-loaders and expose to their dangers imperfectly drilled men, while in every other country with the least military pretensions, the breechloader has for years been adopted as the service arm.⁴²

Surrounded by armed soldiers, and living in quarters where firearms were kept, the wives, children, and servants of officers and enlisted men were not immune from gun accidents. In August 1877 at Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, old friends called on Lt. James and Mrs. Humbert of the Seventeenth U.S. Infantry. Both families had sons, and young John Gibbon Humbert, namesake and nephew of the noted army officer, played with the other boy while the parents visited. “[T]he two boys, while playing together on the parade ground were sent to the barracks on an errand, when unfortunately the visiting little friend snapped a gun at Johnny, supposed by him and others to be unloaded, the contents passed through his neck, severing the vital arteries and in a brief moment, entirely unconscious of pain, the spirit of the dear little boy had flown to God.”⁴³ The grief of the two families can only be imagined.

In the fall of 1880 the wife of 1st Lt. John Kinzie, Second Infantry, had left her home at Spokane Falls in charge of Bessie Quinn, an eleven-year-old baby sitter. While Bessie was sitting on the bed, caring for the baby, the Kinzie’s six-year-old son was playing with a Sharps rifle. Somewhere the child found a cartridge, and in demonstrating the gun to Bessie, accidentally shot her, killing her instantly. The baby received powder burns, but otherwise was not injured. “The boy realized at once what he had done, and was frantic with grief when some neighbors arrived at the house. It is a very sad occurrence.”⁴⁴ At Fort Robinson in 1891 the four-year-old son of Sergeant Donahue, Eighth Infantry, was shot in the head and seriously wounded by a six-year-old, who had picked up a revolver left lying in a room being vacated.⁴⁵

Some accidents deserved attribution to Murphy’s Law. Five hundred recruits en route for New Mexico in 1855 were camped when the prairie caught fire from careless cooking. The conflagration destroyed tents and clothing, and set off many of the muskets. Four or five persons were wounded from these dis-

charges, one of whom later died after his arm was amputated. Fortunately the recruits were so raw that of 325 muskets involved in the fire, only about half discharged with deadly force, the rest having been loaded incorrectly with the ball first, then the powder.⁴⁶

Murphy’s Law got plenty of assistance from a private of the Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry near Deer Creek in Wyoming in 1864. The soldier was escorting a wagonload of corn when his horse became fractious.

[H]e got mad and having no club seized his pistol by the barrel and went to beating the animal over the head. The pistol went off, the ball entering his right side, and lodging in his back. He was brought back to the post where he lingered till next day and died. . . . He told the boys to write to his parents and tell them that he only regretted having to die that way—meaning that he would rather have been killed in battle with the Indians.⁴⁷

A variation on this theme involved a Fort D. A. Russell sergeant who in 1867 shot himself with his own revolver while using it to subdue a drunken soldier by beating him over the head.⁴⁸

Uninvolved parties were the recipients of accidental gunshots. On January 4, 1874, Lt. Charles L. Hudson of the Fourth Cavalry had just returned to Fort Clark, Texas, exhausted after a skirmish with Comanche Indians. While Hudson lay resting, Lt. Augustus C. Tyler entered the room and accidentally dropped his Winchester rifle. The gun discharged and shot Hudson in the abdomen. He died near dark the next day. “He fully realized that he was dying, and went down to the brink of the dark river with the same calm composure that he had so often shown when death shots were falling thick and fast.” *The Army and Navy Journal* correspondent went on to note that Hudson’s widowed mother in “far off Ohio” received word at noon of his successful skirmish with the Indians, followed the same afternoon by a telegram announcing his death.⁴⁹

Pvt. Charles Stimson, the clerk of Company H, Fifth Cavalry, was sitting in a tent doing paperwork on January 3,

1877, when another soldier pulled a loaded carbine from a wagon. The gun went off and mortally wounded the unsuspecting Stimson, who was buried at Fort Laramie.⁵⁰ Pvt. Patrick Wogan, Second Cavalry, was confined in the guardhouse at Fort Lyon, Colorado Territory, in 1868 when a Spencer carbine bullet came tearing through the wall and struck him in the abdomen. Wogan died the next day of internal hemorrhage.⁵¹

The death of a veteran noncommissioned officer in 1877 fits in a category all its own: accidental murder. During a march of Company A, Third U.S. Cavalry, from Fort Laramie, a drunken soldier named Kennedy threatened a sergeant named Schaffer. “Shortly after arriving in camp in the evening, Kennedy procured a carbine, went to the tent where he supposed Schaffer would be found, and opening the flap, fired at the first man he saw, killing him instantly; but instead of Schaffer, it proved to be John A. Van Moll, first sergeant of the company.” Van Moll was a decorated Civil War veteran, greatly respected by his men. Sometime during the night the men guarding the murderer were overpowered, and at daybreak, Kennedy’s body was found suspended, dead, from the ridgepole of the guard tent.⁵²

Significant numbers of gunshot “accidents” involved the fingers of the right hand. The surgeon at Fort Sedgwick, Colorado Territory, in 1871 treated a soldier whose index finger was shattered in an alleged hunting accident, and remarked, “This being the third case of similar injury to corresponding fingers within a few months makes his story somewhat questionable.”⁵³ Pvt. Charles Reynolds of the Ninth Cavalry shot off the index and middle fingers of his right hand while on guard duty at Fort Hays, Kansas, in 1883, claiming the accident happened while he was putting a piece of rag into the muzzle to prevent rust. A statement by the company commander was appended to the discharge certificate stating, “If it was accidental the wound cannot be considered as received in line of duty as the discharge

Firearms Accidents

of his piece was through carelessness and disobedience of orders, and another suspicious circumstance is, why he should have had his carbine in [the] left hand."⁵⁴

Until the 1880s the demands of campaigning and a parsimonious attitude toward the expenditure of ammunition prevented soldiers from achieving much proficiency with their weapons. It seems ironic that once the army began emphasizing firearms training, specifically marksmanship, the level of firearms accidents seems to have increased. Some of this perceived increase may be due to better reporting, as marksmanship came to fill the columns of the *Army and Navy Journal*, and was frequently noticed by civilian newspapers. Nonetheless, it would appear that the army accepted the loss of a significant number of men to accidental gunshots as a price to be paid for making those who survived into better soldiers. By the time this goal was achieved, however, few domestic enemies remained upon which to unleash this army of marksmen.⁵⁵

My research has revealed only a single target practice casualty prior to 1880, and it was not exactly an accident. In 1871 Lt. James Collins of the First U.S. Cavalry was court-martialed and cashiered for an incident at Camp McDermitt, Nevada. His offense was ordering men of his company to open fire at the target with a man exposed downrange. When Collins was notified of the danger, he remarked, "He will get out of the way soon enough when you fire." The court-martial report went on to say "[Lt. Collins] well knew that Trumpeter Keesey was in front of the target, and by this order did cause . . . Corporal Crowley to discharge his carbine, in consequence of which said Trumpeter Keesey received a gunshot wound, from the effects of which he died." To make matters worse, Collins ordered the target practice to continue even though the injured soldier, and others who had gone to his assistance, were in plain view in front of the target.⁵⁶

One can only wonder what the casu-



Carelessness and horseplay contributed to many firearms accidents, often at the expense of one's friends. Hopefully, the dog survived these Fort Robinson hijinks.
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alty rate would have been had Lieutenant Collins remained in the service to become a range officer during the army's marksmanship era. As it was, I recorded sixteen deaths and eleven wounds received on the target ranges during the 1880s. Added to these figures were numerous nonfatal injuries from the reloading of cartridges or from rounds that malfunctioned during firing. Some of these injuries were serious enough to permanently disable the victim. Pvt. Leon Gingras of Company E, Twenty-third U.S. Infantry, was severely burned on the head, body, and extremities by the explosion of powder while reloading cartridges in 1883. He remained under treatment in the post hospital at Fort Union, New Mexico Territory, for 459 days before being given a medical discharge.⁵⁷

For the year ending June 30, 1884, the surgeon general reported three deaths and six injuries from target practice and forty-seven injuries with one death from explosions during reloading. He also noted that during the year there had been no combat related casualties of any kind! For 1885 target practice casualties increased to twenty-one, of which five were fatalities. There were

thirty-one reloading accidents that year.⁵⁸ In March 1886 no less a personage than Gen. George Crook burned off his eyelashes and part of his beard when a loaded shotgun shell exploded as he was inserting the primer.⁵⁹

Although a few target practice accidents injured the rifleman, such as Lt. Harry F. Bateman who shot himself in the foot at Fort Crawford in 1888 while getting into position to fire, the men in the pits sustained most of the casualties.⁶⁰ Target marking was hazardous, unpleasant duty, as described by Pvt. Hartford G. Clark of Fort Niobrara in 1891:

Down in the target pit all day from 6:30 this morning. I don't want any more of it. I think it is the worst fatigue I ever was on to say nothing about danger. The bullets would whistle about a foot over your head in fine style. I tell you several struck the wood work of the target and glanced down in close proximity to our heads. . . . I got struck on the shoulder with one, but it had not enough force to do any harm.⁶¹

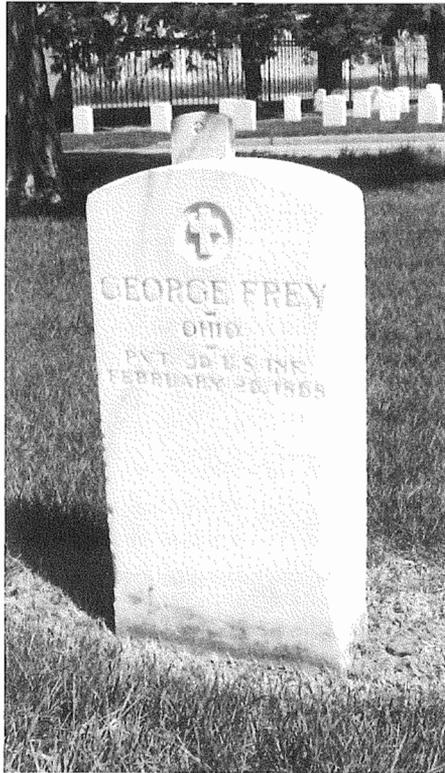
Part of the problem lay in the difficulty of seeing the target markers' signals during long-range firing, particularly when the range was clouded with gunsmoke. At Fort Supply, Indian Territory, in 1888 Corp. Irving Tucker was shot "[after he] put the danger flag to

one side of the target instead of waving it in front of the target and left the pit from behind the target instead of from one side of it; the flag could not well be seen . . . from the firing point at which the shot was fired.”⁶²

More often, however, the target markers carelessly exposed themselves, sometimes without first showing the danger flag. Sgt. Gustave Warnecke, Second Cavalry, lost his life at Fort Custer, Montana Territory, in 1881. “[He] made a fatal error in showing himself above the markers’ shelter without first signaling his intention to do so, and just at the time one of the members of the company pulled the trigger. The ball struck him in the back and he died within two hours.”⁶³ Pvt. R. J. Conway of the Eighteenth U.S. Infantry at Fort Assiniboine, Montana Territory, in June 1884, “while at the target and in a stooping position, was struck by a ball which entered the body in the gluteal region . . . making its exit to the left and two inches below the umbilicus. . . . The autopsy showed wounding of the intestines in two places, in one of which two inches of the gut was carried away.”⁶⁴

The constant pounding by thousands of bullets eventually took its toll on the barriers set up to protect the target markers. Pvt. Charles Helmstreet of the Eighth Infantry was killed at Fort McDermit, Nevada, in 1883 when a bullet passed through a protective, earth-filled mantlet, which had become honeycombed by gunfire or by burrowing rodents.⁶⁵ Joseph Sherley, a tall, Twenty-fifth U.S. Infantry private at Fort Snelling in 1885, was struck in the head by a rifle bullet that cleared the eroded earthen bank in front of the target pit. The slug inflicted a two and one-half inch flesh wound on top of Sherley’s head, from which he recovered, although complaints of persistent headaches and dizziness led to his discharge later that year.⁶⁶

Service in the frontier army provided many opportunities to die or become disabled, and firearms accidents were only one of the hazards. None of my sources provided evidence that the



Twenty-one-year-old George Frey, a private in the Thirty-sixth U.S. Infantry at Fort Sanders in Wyoming, was accidentally shot by a comrade on February 22, 1868, and died a few days later. His grave was later relocated to Fort McPherson National Cemetery, Maxwell, Nebraska. Photograph by author

army hierarchy considered casualties from accidental gunshots as a significant problem or took specific steps to resolve it. Only in the 1880s did the surgeon general’s annual report even begin to distinguish such casualties within the classification of overall losses from wounds, accidents, and injuries.

Regardless of how many firearms-related accidents there actually were, the number of casualties would be modest in comparison to losses from other causes. Yet deaths from gun accidents in my survey alone add up to more than the number of killed in the 1866 Fetterman Fight, or in the Great Sioux War of 1876–77 if Custer’s dead are excluded. Firearms accidents in the frontier army damaged morale, drained

scarce matériel and human resources, disrupted campaigns against and councils with Indians, and destroyed valuable animals. More important, one can only speculate on the valuable service these victims might have rendered if their military careers had been allowed to run their courses.

Death in battle can be accepted as part of the lot of the soldier; death from disease in the nineteenth-century army might have been rationalized as being largely beyond the power of human intervention. Accidental death, by one’s own hand or that of a comrade, surely left deeper scars on the psyches of those in the frontier military community. A hint of this response can be found in the diary of Eveline Alexander, wife of Capt. Andrew J. Alexander, Third Cavalry:

July 2, 1866. A sad accident occurred this morning about seven o’clock. One of the soldiers was cleaning his pistol carelessly when it went off and killed instantly a soldier . . . Edmund Ryan. They brought me his pocket book and watch to put away. He was a good soldier and his sudden death was deeply felt by the men. . . . Andrew had his grave dug in a little grove close by the foot of a large oak. The body was sewed up in canvas and carried on a stretcher by four soldiers. Then came G company followed by Andrew and some of the other officers.

I watched them from the door of my tent and never has the burial of a stranger affected me so deeply. Andrew read the funeral service from my prayer book at the grave, then the “unconfined clay” was lowered and three volleys of musketry proclaimed that a soldier had found his last resting place.⁶⁷

If he could speak from his lonely grave, Edmund Ryan would probably say *he* regretted having to die that way. That choice was denied him, however, and the graves of Ryan and other victims of accidental gunfire dot the cemeteries and landscapes of the West, a bleak and poignant legacy of the everyday life of the frontier army soldier.

Notes

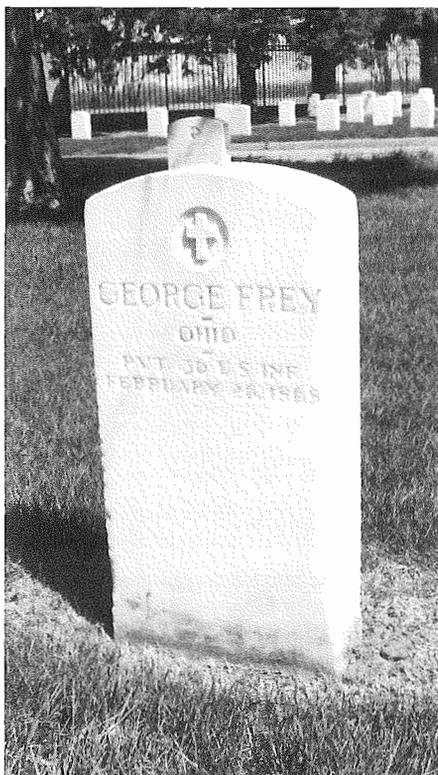
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Firearms Accidents

Buecker, Mick Clifford, Lori Cox-Paul, Tom Dewey, Thomas W. Dunlay, George Elmore, William W. Gwaltney, Wendy Lewis, John Ludwickson, Larry Ludwig, Douglas C. McChristian, John D. McDermott, Laura Mills, R. Eli Paul, Edwin F. Quiroz, Sonny Reisch, Cecil Sanderson, Connie J. Schmeidler, Raymond Scott, Gregory Scott Smith, Dr. James W. Wengert, and Mary L. Williams.

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²⁶ This was Capt. Robert Nugent, Thirteenth U.S. Infantry. Ray H. Mattison, ed., "An Army Wife on the Upper Missouri: The Diary of Sarah E. Canfield," *North Dakota History* 20 (Oct. 1953):215.

²⁷ Report reprinted in William Reed, "William Babcock Hazen: Curmudgeon or Crusader?" in *Troopers West: Military and Indian Affairs on the American Frontier*, ed. Ray Brandes (San Diego: Frontier Heritage Press, 1970), 141.

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²⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

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³⁵ Letter of Col. J. B. Sinclair, commanding Fort Boise, Idaho Terr., Feb. 16, 1868, published in ANJ, Mar. 21, 1868, 487.

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³⁶ Register of Patients, Fort Robinson.

³⁷ *ANJ*, Apr. 6, 1878, 552; Robert P. Wilson's Appearances, Commissions, and Personal (ACP) File, RG 92, National Archives; excerpts regarding the accident in author's possession.

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³⁹ *ANJ*, Dec. 29, 1888, 345.

⁴⁰ Carol G. Goodwin, ed., "The Letters of Private Milton Spencer, 1862–1865: A Soldier's View of Military Life on the Northern Plains," *North Dakota History* 37 (Fall 1970):265; Edgar S. Dudley, comp., *Roster of Nebraska Volunteers from 1861–1869* (Hastings, Nebr.: Wigton & Evans, 1888), 36–37; *Report of Brig. Gen. Nathaniel B. Baker, Adjutant General [Iowa] . . . Jan. 1, 1867* 1 (Des Moines: F. W. Palmer, 1867), 343, and Post Returns, Fort McPherson, Nebr. Terr., June 1865, RG 94, National Archives, file on microfilm in RG503, Records of Fort McPherson, Nebr., NSHS; Lucille M. Kane, ed. *Military Life in Dakota: The Journal of Philippe Régis de Trobriand* (St. Paul: Alvord Memorial Commission, 1951), 307–8; John M. Carroll, *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York: Liveright, 1971), 272; *ANJ*, July 23, 1881, 1066, and Aug. 27, 1887, 83; and Otis, *Surgical Cases*, 787 and passim.

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⁴² *Ibid.*, Aug. 28, 1886, 98.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Aug. 11, 1877, 4–5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Dec. 18, 1880, 91–92.

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⁴⁸ *Cheyenne Leader*, Sept. 18, 1867.

⁴⁹ *ANJ*, Mar. 7, 1874, 468.

⁵⁰ Evangeline S. Stimson Pension File, Cert. #179,735, National Archives, copy in author's possession. See also Homer W. Wheeler, *Buffalo Days, Forty Years in the Old West: The Personal Narrative of a Cattleman, Indian-Fighter and Army Officer* (New York: A. L. Burt Co., 1923), 151. Wheeler said the soldier whose gun went off had failed to eject the cartridge when he came off guard duty.

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⁵⁹ John M. Carroll, ed., "Diary of Charles D. Roberts," in *The Unpublished Papers of the Order of Indian Wars, Book #8* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Privately published, 1977):10.

⁶⁰ *ANJ*, June 2, 1888, 890.

⁶¹ Diary of Hartford G. Clark, Co. G, Sixth Cav., entry for May 22, 1891, typescript copy from Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, National Park Service, St. Louis, Mo.

⁶² *ANJ*, July 14, 1888, 1015.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, May 21, 1881, 868.

⁶⁴ "Report of the Surgeon General, 1885" serial 2369:728.

⁶⁵ "Circular, Military Division of the Pacific, Aug. 28, 1883," *ANJ*, Sept. 15, 1883, 125.

⁶⁶ Report of Five Cases of Gunshot Wounds Treated Antiseptically; Result; Recovery, by Surg. C. H. Alden, U.S. Army, "Report of the Surgeon General," Oct. 11, 1886, in *Report of the Secretary of War 1* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886):664, serial 2461.

⁶⁷ Sandra L. Myres, ed., *Cavalry Wife: The Diary of Eveline M. Alexander, 1866–1867* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1977), 54.