

# THE FIRST REGIMENT OF UNITED STATES RIFLEMEN

*Celeritas et Audeo*  
(Speed and Daring)

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As is so often the case with history, it is possible to write volumes of information for almost any subject. Nonetheless, here is a brief summary of the Regiment of Riflemen during their short existence from 1808-1821.

After the War of Independence, commonly referred to as The Revolutionary War, the United States Army realized the usefulness of troops that operate in unconventional tactics and using rifles, which are more accurate and useful at greater distances due to the twist they impart on the projectile as it leaves the barrel. In 1799, Congress authorized the formation of a regiment of soldiers that were to be a specialized unit that would use the more accurate rifle and tactics that did not constrict them to the common linear battle line.

However, it wasn't until 1808 that funds were granted to actually raise such a body of troops. With the funds allocated, The First Regiment of United States Riflemen was born. Originally known simply as "The Regiment of Riflemen", they were issued the model 1803 Harper's Ferry rifle and uniforms that were unique from all other U.S. military uniforms. The summer uniform was a style of hunting frock that was green with yellow fringe. For winter and dress, a yellow trimmed green wool coat and trousers were issued similar in pattern to other troops. Most of the rest of their uniform was the same as other troops, but with the use of their own insignia where appropriate. In 1814, due to cost, the difficulty of obtaining the green wool and the prospect of having to uniform three more regiments, the winter uniform was changed to gray. However, they retained their summer uniform green and yellow frocks.

Their accouterments, differing from the Infantry, included a waist belt on which they mounted a linen cartridge pouch, an axe or tomahawk, and a large knife which were "not necessarily issue items". After several months, the linen cartridge pouches were literally falling apart and would not hold up under use. Shortly thereafter, a leather belly box was adopted. In addition to these items, the Riflemen carried the common issue haversack, canteen and knapsack of other troops. But this isn't the only items they were

issued. In addition to the belly box for the carrying of cartridges, the Riflemen also carried a bullet pouch and a powder horn.

Tactics and missions for Riflemen were varied. Although they were required to know the tactics of, and could be called to fall in to the battle line with the Infantry, they were contemporary guerilla fighters borrowing tactics from the Light Infantry and even Native Americans. They were consistently sent ahead as an advance guard, and then stayed behind to cover the rear flank. Riflemen were the first in the field and the last out. In battle, they were advanced to mask their own troops by spreading across the battlefield and flanks, and to harass and disrupt enemy movements and positioning. Their mission was generally to snipe and kill officers, NCOs and musicians. When their own troops were in position and ready, the signal would be given to unmask and they would retire to either the reserve or form flank on the battle line and attack with the Infantry or continue to harass the enemy. They were cunning soldiers that frequently faced an enemy many times their number. Their success depended on their speed and daring.

Riflemen were dispatched as scouts and ran advanced patrols to guide troop movement. They were also used as flank guards, spread out around the main body of troops marching in column to protect them from surprise attack and to guide the main body through the easiest area to traverse. While operating independently, typical movement would be in "Indian File" and moving at "Indian Pace". Basically, their movements were by file of one or two stepping at a trot.

## **THE WAR OF 1812: OUR SECOND WAR OF INDEPENDENCE**

With the outbreak of war in 1812, it was believed that the Riflemen would be very valuable in nearly all theaters of operation. In 1813, three more regiments were authorized, and in early 1814 they were recruited and raised. Normally being detached to other regiments by companies or platoons, they performed well in their unusual missions. Although the Second and Third Regiments did not see much in the way of action, the (now numbered) First and Fourth Regiments were very active, especially in the Niagara Campaigns of 1814. At the conclusion of this biography is a list of battles that Riflemen were involved<sup>1</sup>.

Following the war, with the downsizing and consolidating of the entire Army, the Regiment of Riflemen was reduced to one regiment in strength. The Riflemen were then stationed on the Western frontier where they settled into a somewhat mundane garrison life. While performing assignments that included patrolling and scouting the frontier, they also founded a number of western forts.

On July 30, 1817, Acting Secretary of War Richard Graham directed that an Army post was to be erected at or near the point where the Osage boundary crossed the Arkansas River<sup>2</sup>. Troops for this new post were to come from the Rifle Regiment. One company under the command of Major William Bradford started the journey to this place to build the new post in mid-September 1817. The new Army post was to become Fort Smith, in present day Arkansas, named after General Thomas A. Smith.

On July 1, 1818, Talbot Chambers, Colonel Commanding the Riflemen, was notified at Camp Salubriety that he was to assume command of the troops that were to engage in the proposed Yellowstone Expedition to traverse and establish a series of Army posts along the Missouri River. On August 30, 1818, the remainder of the regiment (approximately 350 strong) left Bell Fontaine and proceeded up the Missouri River where they waited for and later rendezvoused with the Sixth Infantry Regiment. The Riflemen and Sixth Infantry, under the command of Colonel Henry Atkinson, established and built Fort Atkinson in 1820.<sup>3</sup>

During the downsizing of the Army in 1821, the Riflemen fell victim to the cuts of bureaucratic politics. The two regiments, Sixth Infantry and First Riflemen, were amalgamated. Some soldiers with enough time in service were discharged while some were transferred to the First Infantry and Fifth Infantry. The company stationed at Fort Smith was absorbed into the Seventh Infantry.

## TODAY

At Fort Atkinson State Historical Park, we portray Company I, which in the time period of the garrison was under the command of Captain Bennett Riley whom the present day Fort Riley in Kansas is named after. When interpreting War of 1812 events, our unit portrays Smith's Company, First Regiment, commanded by Capt. William Smith. As you can see by the list of War of 1812 engagements below, the Rifle Regiment has a rich heritage and battle record.

We are a dedicated group of individuals, and in some cases their families, who strive to accurately recreate the First Regiment of United States Riflemen. Uniforms, weapons, accouterments, drill, etc. are researched and reproduced with the greatest attention to detail and historical accuracy.

Dedicated men of Honour, Integrity, and Reliability wishing to recreate the lifestyle of a frontier U.S. Army Post of the 1820's or the life of a soldier during the War of 1812 through the 1830's, as well as their ladies and families, are welcomed to make inquiry and application to join us. All recruits should be aware that this unit is run like a regular Army unit of the time period. Our guidelines, aside from common sense and the command structure judgment, are the regulations of the time period and the bylaws of the Friends of Fort Atkinson. We invite you to take a step back in time, enjoy the camaraderie of like-minded and dedicated individuals, and be a part of an *esprit de corps* that few other units can claim.

Regards,

Command Structure

Captain Bennett Riley's Company I, First Regiment United States Riflemen  
Fort Atkinson State Historical Park  
(Captain William Smith - War of 1812)

Capt. E.G. Smith, Commanding  
Sgt. Major J. Oien  
Sgt. W.R. Baker



## WAR OF 1812 INVOLVEMENT

### 1811

- ♦Nov. 6 Tippecanoe Hawkins' coy (Baptism by fire).

### 1812

- ♦Apr. Siege of St. Augustine 2 coys.
- ♦Sept. 21 Gananoque, UC Forsyth's coy 1 Rifles.

### 1813

- ♦Feb. 7 Elizabethtown, UC Detach Forsyth's coy 1 Rifles.
- ♦Feb. 22 Ogdensburg, NY 1 coy 1 Rifles.
- ♦Apr. 27 York (Toronto), UC 1 coy 3 Art; 1 Rifles; 6, 15, 16, 21 Inf.
- ♦May 27 Ft. George, UC Detach 2 Lt Drag; detach Lt Art; detachs 2 & 3 Art; detach 1 Rifles; 6, 14, 15, 16, 20, 22, & 23 Inf.
- ♦June 6 Stoney Creek, UC 2 Lt Drag; 3 coys 2 Art; detach Lt Art; 1 Rifles; 5, 16, 23, & 25 Inf.
- ♦Oct. 12 Massequoi Village, LC Detach Art; detach 1 Rifles.
- ♦Nov. 11 Hooples Creek Detachs 1 Rifles.
- ♦Nov. 11 Crysler's Farm 1 coy 1 Rifles.

### 1814

- ♦Mar. 30 La Colle Mill, LC 1 coy Lt Art; 2coys 3 Art; bn 1 Rifles; detachs 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 20, 23, 30, 31, 33, & 34 Inf.
- ♦May 30 Sandy Creek, NY 120 men 1 Rifles.
- ♦June 24 Odelltown, LC Forsyth's coy 1 Rifles
- ♦June 28 Odelltown, LC Detach 1 Rifles; detach 12 Inf.
- ♦July 3 Ft. Erie, UC 2 squads Lt Drag; Corps of Art; bn 1 Rifles; 9, 11, 19, 21, 22, 23, & 25 Inf.
- ♦Aug. 1-31 Ft. Erie, UC Detach Lt Drag; Corps of Art; 1 & 4 Rifles; 1, 9, 11, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, & 26 Inf.
- ♦Aug. 4 Conjocta Creek (Black Rock), NY 240 men 1 Rifles. (Their Finest Hour.)
- ♦Aug. 13-15 Ft. Erie, UC Detach Lt Drag; Corps of Art; 9 & 11 Inf; detachs 17, 19, 21, 22, & 23 Inf; 1 & 4 Rifles.
- ♦Sept. - Ft. Erie, UC (exclusive of sortie and action of Sept. 17) Detach of Lt Drag; Corps of Art; 1, 9, 11, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, & 26 Inf; detach 17 Inf; 1 & 4 Rifles.
- ♦Sept. 6-11 Plattsburgh, NY Detachs Corps of Art & Lt Art; 4, 13, 29, 30, 31, 33, & 34 Inf; 4 coys 6 Inf; detach 1 Rifles.
- ♦Sept. 17 Ft. Erie, UC (sortie) Lt Drag; 1, 9, 11, 19, 21, 23, & 26 Inf; detach 17 Inf; 1 & 4 Rifles.
- ♦Oct. 20 Cook's Mills 1 coy 4 Rifles.

### 1815

- ♦Jan. 13 Point Petre, GA Detachs 43 Inf & 1 Rifles.

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### CITATIONS

- 1 Chartrand, Rene. Uniforms and Equipment of the United States Forces In The War of 1812. Youngstown, NY. Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc. 1992. Fredriksen, Ph.D., John C. Green Coats and Glory: The United States Regiment of Riflemen 1808-1821. Youngstown, NY. Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc. 2000.
- 2 Graham to Jackson, July 30, 1817. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress.
- 3 Johnson, Sally Ann. Military Life At Fort Atkinson. Lincoln, Nebraska. 1957.