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Shelter Tents in the Civil War Will Eichler

In every part of our hobby, we are trying to do the best job recreating the life, experiences and equipment of the men we portray. To do that, it helps if we know as much as we can about those experiences and items. When it comes to material culture, often we know more about the equipment because we have to reproduce copies for our use than the Boys of '61 knew about their gear. In the case of the Shelter Tents we camp under or wrap up in as an extra blanket, that Fred Gaede has synthesized knowledge in his book “The Federal Civil War Shelter Tent.” While I do recommend the book as an excellent source of information, honestly it is one of the driest reads I’ve ever gotten through! If you get the book, keep it by your nightstand and if you wake up, read it – you’ll be counting sheep very soon. ☺ That said, the information is wonderful and this article will be a “cliff notes” version of the book.

The shelter tent is new to the United States Army in the Civil War. During the 1850’s, George McClellan, then a Captain, went to observe the Crimean War. He came back with several recommendations for improvement to the army’s equipment based on what he saw. This is where the model 1859 McClellan saddle comes from as well as the shelter tent. He referred to it by its French name, the *tentes d’abri*. It was authorized for service and copies were ordered from contractors in 1861. The first units got their shelter tents in late 1861, though regular distribution didn’t seem to pick up until April 1862. On April 9, 1862, Lieutenant J. M. Favil, adjutant of the 57th New York, wrote in his journal,

“This day the army was supplied, or at least our division, with shelter tents, the tent d’abri, of the French soldier, which is the greatest boon thus far granted the enlisted men. It is so very important, and necessary to health as well as comfort, that I wonder we have not had them sooner. Up to this time, the only shelter from the elements the men have had was such as pine or cedar branches have afforded, and in consequence of the great amount of rain that has fallen they have all had a hard time of it, many giving way, and going back to the hospitals. Now they will always have their tents with them, ready for immediate use.” (Diary of a Young Army Officer, p. 77)

The shelter tent is a huge improvement for both the men and logistical planners of the army. This is the first time when soldiers carried their own shelter in the US Army. To the benefit of the soldier, they knew that at the end of a long day’s march they had their tent in camp rather than stuck miles to the rear in a baggage wagon delayed by congestion, bad roads or weather. The supply system was also able drastically reduce the number of wagons needed to move a regiment, shortening the supply trains and freeing much needed wagons and teams to move other supplies.

As we look back at the shelter tents issued to the soldiers, we recognize them as falling into three basic categories. They are called the Type I, Type II and Type III. Just like the forage caps, these “Types” are a modern way of talking about the tents and NOT period. Soldiers would not have referred to a “Type IIb shelter half” so you shouldn’t either in first person.

Type I came first. The first soldiers received tents made of linen. Quickly, cotton became the most common material used because of its availability, even in the North. These were made very closely to the specifications of the original brought back by General McClellan. We do now know of any of this style that still exists.

The type one quickly was changed and the Type II started being made. Type II shelter tents are easily identified because they are made of three panels of fabric per half. There are two subtypes. Type IIa shelters have seams that run vertical to the tent (toward the top and bottom). Type IIb shelters have seams that run horizontally (towards the front and back). This tent came first as early in the war there was some problem getting cotton duck material, so drill was used instead. Drill cotton comes in widths of 28 1/2” and since tents were to be 66 1/2 “ a small filler piece was needed to complete the dimensions. Type II tents came with only two loops for stakes. During the Civil War, shelter tents were issued with a loop of hemp rope at each end of the tent to hole the stakes.

Type III tents were all made of two-piece construction, with the seams running either horizontally or vertically. Type IIIa tents had a third tent stake loop made in them by the contractor or arsenal that built them.

Tent halves generally had 23 buttons around them on three sides. The side to the ground did not have buttons and buttonholes on it. Sometimes the seams were machine sewn, often they were hand-sewn. When making a reproduction, either could be correct. That said, all surviving examples have hand-sewn buttonholes and grommets to accept stake loops. Often the ends with the grommet stake holes were reinforced with an extra piece of material.

In summary, what makes a good reproduction shelter tent? It should be of light enough material (the entire tent, both sides, should weigh 4 pounds). Most had bone buttons, not metal and certainly not brass. All grommets are hand-sewn and do not have metal reinforcements.

We will soon have patterns for both a Type II and Type III tent. The necessary material is available at JoAnn’s and we’ll be able to make our own! See you at drill.