

# Tenting Tonight? The Confederate Infantryman on Campaign

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I have long harbored doubts about most progressive/hardcore Confederate campaign camping arrangements. There are those, and bully for them, who just hurl themselves down on the hard ground and fall asleep in all weathers. However, I reckon the vast majority erect shelter-tent-cities that look more like 'Grant's army on the march' than a truly Confederate encampment. Indeed, there has been a tendency, simply because we have so much good information on Federal campaigning, shelter tents and the like, to follow proper Federal hardcore camping procedure while portraying Confederates. This essay is a first stab at trying something different. I hope it will encourage experimentation. (for a good articles on Federal camping see 'Home Sweet Home Away From Home' by John Rees, *Camp Chase Gazette* October 2000, vol.27, no.10 or check out the *Columbia Rifles Compendium*, available from the Jersey Skillet Licker).

## Confederates and the Shelter Half

After years of speculation concerning manufacture and distribution, Frederick Gaede's book on *The Federal Civil War Shelter Tent* (O'Donnell Publications 2001) may be regarded as virtually the final word on the subject. From it we learn that the Federal Shelter tent went into mass production in 1862, with 402,000 being contracted for that year by the Union Quartermaster General (Gaede 2001:109-11). Their issue began at least as early as March, 1862 and at least 15,000 pairs accompanied the Army of the Potomac at the beginning of the Peninsula Campaign (Gaede 2001:19). By the summer of 1862, the shelter tent was widespread in the Army of the Potomac, although it was not a universally used in the western Federal armies until 1863 (replacing the Sibleys and the A-frame). Thus, notionally, the Confederate infantryman's encounter with the Federal shelter tent would have begun in Spring 1862 in the east, and several months later in the west. When they encountered it, did they adopt it, and whatever did they do before it? Bell Irvin Wiley gave an appropriate summary response to this question in *The Life of Johnny Reb* some time ago:

*Poets have delighted to dwell upon the tented field of Confederate days, but canopies were rarely found outside the imagination of the verse makers. During the terrible downpours in Virginia of March and April 1862, the great majority of Johnston's forces marched without*

*raincoats and slept on the muddy ground without benefit of shelter... Later in the war oil cloths [gum blankets] and tent-flies, both obtained largely from the Yankees, were in greater evidence, but even so, the soldier who had such protection was the exception rather than the rule*

*(Wiley 1943, pg.246)*

Wiley's notion of Confederate use of captured Union Shelter Halves was buttressed by a quotation from the unpublished journal of O.T. Hanks (Texas Brigade) after the battle of Gaines Mill:

*"We have had a glorious victory with its rich Booty. A many one of our boys now have a pair of Briches a nice rubber cloth & a pair of blankets also a pair or more of Small Tent Cloths."*

*(quoted in Wiley. 1943. pg.76)*

This may indeed be the earliest Confederate reference to the shelter half. Another early reference comes from the reminiscences of Capt. John H. Worsham, 21st Va, ANV writing of the Second Bull Run (1862) campaign.

*"[T]he 21st Virginia had by this time learned to live without tents, [and] it was easy for the men to move. The only shelter the men had were oil or rubber cloths and cotton flies. The latter were of cotton about four by six feet in size and hemmed around the borders. Button holes were worked around these borders and buttons sewed on at certain places... In moving all that was needed was to roll up our fly or oilcloth to take with us, put our small lot of cooking utensils in the wagons, put on our accoutrements and take arms." Robertson, James J. Jr. 1964. One of Jackson's Foot Cavalry pg.90*

But for many in the Army of Northern Virginia, the situation did not improve after stunning victories in the Peninsula or in the Valley. Private William Montgomery of the 2nd SC, ANV wrote on 7 December, 1862 near Fredericksburg:

*"A great many that I know are entirely barefooted & but very few have over one blanket & you know that one blanket to the man & he is exposed to pelting snow without any tent or shelter of any kind, save what he can readily construct of brush is not enough."*

Montgomery, Georgia Sharpshooter, 1997 pg.74

Nor were things much better for this same soldier on 7 May, 1863:

*"..[along the Rappahannock] it has been raining for two or three days & we have been lying here on the riverbank without tents." (Montgomery pg.86).*

Indeed, the frequent state of affairs for many eastern Confederates, outside of winter quarters, may be concisely summarised by the eloquent memoirist David Holt (Private, 16th MS, ANV):

*"Next we moved on a short distance into a pleasant grove of trees, where after roll call, we broke ranks, laid on the ground, and went to sleep."*

Holt (Cockrell & Ballard eds.), *A Mississippi Rebel in the ANV* 1995, pg.264.

However, perhaps because of years of successful acquisition by capture, Gen. Lee was able to command at the onset of the Wilderness campaign, General Order No.27 (5 April, 1864), that *"Shelter-tents will be issued to the troops as far as practicable."*

Further to the west, for most regiments, the tented field ceased to be a reality once active campaigning began:

Journal entry from Lt. E.A. Pinnell, 10 August, 1862, 8th Mo (CSA), Trans-Miss - *"Not a tent in the Brig. [brigade]"* (Banasik ed.) *Serving with Honor* 1999.

Memoirs of Pvt. J.P. Cannon, on detachment with the 33rd MS, Aug/Sept 1862 KY Campaign:

*"We carried no tents, bivouacking anywhere we were allowed to stop long enough to get a few hours sleep, considering ourselves lucky if it happened to be in the timber where we could have the shelter of a tree."*

And April 1863, with the 27th AL, on leaving a fixed camp at Port Hudson for Jackson:

*as to packing it was a small job, having no tents and nothing to pack except our scanty knapsacks."*

Cannon (Crowson & Brogden eds.) *Bloody Banners and Barefoot Boys* 1997, pp. 10&26

But a few regiments, raised later in the war and equipped by more organised quartermasters departments, managed to maintain a semblance of 'proper' camp life well into mid-war, as these letter fragments from Pvt. Grant Taylor (40th AL) attest:

Near Columbus, Ms 22nd December, 1862 (pg. 137):

*"We are beginning to see something of a Soldier's Life. When we are ordered to move, it is always done in a hurry and everything in confusion. We have lost a good many of our cooking utensils since Mobile. But we have been fortunate enough to keep our tents up and to draw more. My mess has a good wall tent, brand new like the officers had when you were down..."*

Near Vicksburg, 14th Jan. 1863 (pg. 150):

*"We have got all our tents and baggage with us at last and we are doing finely, but I tell you the first 8 days after we got here saw sights for we left everything in Vicksburg but one blanket each and for two nights it rained terribly." Taylor (Blomquist & Taylor eds.) This Cruel War, 2000*

But of course, this idyllic state lasted for the 40th AL, only a few more months. The same writer during the Atlanta campaign, 1864:

Near Marietta, 15 June, 1864 (pg.257)

*"I can hardly imagine how I would feel with all my clothes dry on me. I get wet and let my clothes dry on me and of a night tumble down on the wet leaves and grass and get up wet the next morning."*

In the west, once losing their baggage train by some mishap, soldiers were left to improvise shelter as best they could. I have not yet been able to find any contemporary Western Confederate references to their using captured Federal Shelter halves. I would suspect that this may be due to the lack of opportunities for the unfortunate Army of Tennessee to plunder vanquished enemies after 1862 (excepting Chickamauga).

However, the Confederacy did not rely upon Providence and captured Yankee tentage alone. There were concerted efforts, both improvised by soldiers, and commissioned by the government to provide some overhead shelter for the troops.

## "Stretching Blankets"

In making a systematic trawl through Confederate soldiers' letters and diaries at my disposal in preparing this essay, I found it remarkable how frequently references were made to "stretching blankets" as a campaign camping option. The phrase seemed universal, if more common in the West than in the East. This strategy is certainly far too under-represented in living history. To begin, "stretching blankets" was sometimes systematic, including the laborious modification of blankets to facilitate their conversion into a tent:

*"Three of us have made a tent by sewing to [two] blankets together, which serves us a good purpose, keeping us tolerably dry."*

*"Had considerable rain last night my mess of seven has a tent made of four blankets which shelters us tolerably well."*

Journal entries from Lt. E.A. Pinnell, 8th Mo (CSA), 17 September and 2 October, 1862 respectively, Trans-Mississippi Theatre ; both published in: Banasik, M.E. (ed.) 1999. *Serving with Honor: the Diary of Captain Ethan Allen Pinnell*, pp 12, 15

In other circumstances things seemed still more improvised, though even here one can imagine a few field-made grommets, or stones twisted in corners and tied with twine as being necessary to anchor these contraptions:

*"All our tents being worthless and condemned were burned in Tullahoma. A blanket stretched is a poor substitute for a tent, though it does very well."*

Lt. Hiram Moorman, 13th Tenn. mid-1863, Army of Tennessee from Moorman, Hiram C. 1989. "The Moorman Memorandum." *Confederate Chronicles of Tennessee* 3: 59-95.

*"Having beds of leaves and brush to keep us [above]... the water, and stretching blankets over us, we succeeded in getting a few hours sleep in spite of the torrents all night."*

Memoirs of Pvt. J.P. Cannon, 27th Alabama, June 20, 1864, on campaign with the Army of Tennessee in Georgia, in *Bloody Banners and Barefoot Boys* (Crowson & Brogden eds.), 1997, pp. 75-76

*"We have no tents yet, so we have to make out as best we can by stretching our blankets."*

Letter of 24 Oct, 1863, Lookout Mountain, 1st Lt. Montgomery. 3rd Bat. Georgia Sharpshooters, *Georgia Sharpshooter*. 1997 pg.96

A Lieutenant from the 13th Tennessee noted the following after the withdrawal from Tullahoma .

*All our tents being worthless & condemned were burnt at Tullahoma . A blanket stretched is a poor substitute for a tent, though it does very well.*

Finally, something in this same vein with canvas sheets seems to be indicated by the following letter fragment by Lt. Elias Davis, 4 May 1864, Co.B, 10th Ala, 3rd Corps, ANV:

*"[our sermon was interrupted by an order] to strike tents, cut them up and distribute them among men."*

*from Power, J.T. 1998. Lee's Miserables pg. 17*

The upshot of all of this is that field-modified blankets, or disarticulated A-frames canvas, could very usefully be incorporated into campaign impressions, both east and west, virtually throughout the war. As stated above, however, it would be a mistake to think that Confederate quartermasters ignored a need for tentage by their field armies. Indeed, they had a unique response, which is curiously undocumented in most of the campaigner literature: the tent fly.

## **Confederate Tent-flies**

The first mention that I have found to the requested *manufacture* of Confederate tent-flies comes from the OR, Ser.1, vol.2, pg.939, in a 18 June, 1861 letter from R.S. Garnett (CO Department of Northwestern Virginia) to the Inspector General:

*"Many are without blankets, and I may say nearly all are without tents... I shall ask today for five hundred tent flies, as it will take too much time to make tents."*

This suggestion, or notion, soon became widespread because thenceforth mentions of 'tent-flies' become frequent in ANV correspondence. General Lee himself, in Special Orders No. 22 (1 June, 1862) commanded that,

*"Only sufficient transportation will be retained for carrying the necessary cooking utensils and such tents or tent-flies as are indispensable to the comfort and protection of the troops."*

OR., Ser.1, vol.14,

Another particularly telling example comes from Maj. Gen. R.S. Ewell, 3rd Division ANV, giving orders to his subordinates at the onset of the Spring 1862 Campaign

*"You cannot bring tents; [instead, bring] tent flies without poles, or tents cut down to that size, and only as few as are indispensable"*

OR, Ser.I, Vol.12, pg.892

Tent flies also had a long history in the western theatre, where they remained the principal campaign tentage in that department until the Atlanta campaign. In General Orders no.109 (8 August, 1862), General Bragg specified the following field equipment for the Army of Tennessee:

*"Camp equipage – One tent to each regiment for medical department, 1 tent to each regimental headquarters; 2 tents to each brigade headquarters; 2 tents to each Division headquarters; 6 tent-flies for every 100 men."*

OR, Ser.I, Vol,16, pg. 746

A few months later at the collapse of the Kentucky Campaign and the army's retreat south, Maj. Gen. Hardee wrote a remarkable note to his Corps Commander, General Polk:

*"Your order directing the destruction of tent-flies, &c. has been received and immediately issued. As most of my train is forward of this place its prompt compliance cannot be effected. As we have traveled thus far without hindrance, and as we have empty wagons to assist those*

*which may be overloaded, I would respectfully suggest the propriety of keeping the flies, which I fear we may have difficulty replacing."*

OR, Ser. 1, Vol. 16/2, pg. 961

That Hardee's logic was followed is attested by the verbatim repetition of Bragg's tent-fly order of 6 per 100 men at the onset of the Spring 1863 campaign in Tullahoma (Special Order No. 93; OR Ser. 1, Vol. 23).

The use of tent-flies farther to the west in the Mississippi campaign area is reflected by the following two pieces of correspondence:

*"Near the Willow Spring road we reached a Rebel camp which had been hastily abandoned. The tents were still standing. We burned the camp, saving 6 of the best tent-flies, 1 piano, 1 rebel flag, 1 camp cot marked 'Captain Mackey, Butler's Revengers, Camp Benjamin,' and also many articles of slight intrinsic value, which are properly retained as mementos by those who found them."*

Report of Col. Halbert E. Paine of the 4th Wisconsin, regarding a raid carried out in the vicinity of Port Gibson & Grand Gulf Railroad (24 June, 1862); OR Ser. 1, vol. 15 [whatever did they do with the piano?]

*"Sandbags were made from tent-flies and old tents turned over to me by the quartermasters department."*

Report of Maj. Samuel Lockett, CS Engineers, Chief Engineer of the Confederate Siege lines at Vicksburg (writing after the surrender); OR Ser. 1, Vol. 24

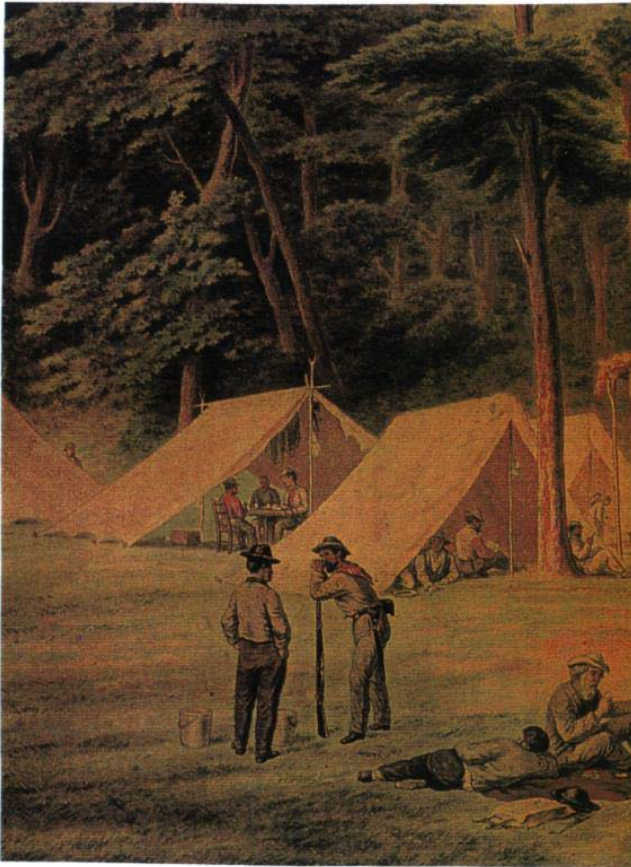
In the Trans-Mississippi, quartermasters reports confirm that tent-flies (as well as "A Tents" and Wall tents) were still being manufactured in that theatre of war late into 1863, and perhaps beyond (Nicholls, *The Confederate Quartermaster in the Trans-Mississippi*, pg. 36)

But what exactly were Confederate tent-flies? T.A. Tooke of Co. C, 9th Louisiana Infantry, wrote from Virginia to his sweetheart on 26th April, 1862 that,

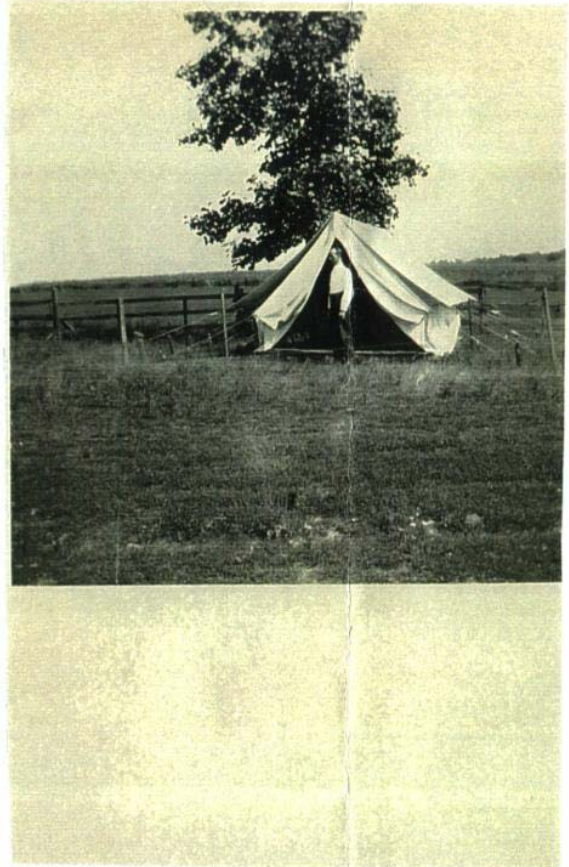
*"We have got fliers (or rather tents with both ends opened) to sleep in."*

From *Brothers in Gray* (Cutrer & Parrish eds.), pg.84

This brief description conforms to what we know about tent-fliers. They were US Army equipage of long-standing, made as separate secondary covers for the peaks of wall tents (see photograph below), for which they also sometimes served as over-hanging porches. I have been able to view an original Union tent-fly of this type in Louisiana, and can state that they were 9' in run, and 12' in rise, with 3 panels running longways across the item, with 4 stitched reinforced grommet holes spaced evenly on each short side, beginning at the corners. The Confederates seemed to have manufactured these as independent items, much like very large shelter tents, thus the ratio of 15+ men per tent-fly specified in Bragg's General orders of 1862 and 1863! If you look closely at some illustrations and photos you can see them in use. A good example, which is pictured below, is one of Private Conrad Wise Chapman's paintings of the 3rd KY infantry camp near Corinth in May, 1862. Here you can see two of these substantial tent-fliers and get a notion of their scale. They differ from A-Frames in that they have no closure at either end and seem to have used only improvised ridge poles. The examples in the painting, like the original Union tent-fly, have four grommet holes for cords & stakes. I am currently searching for more data, particularly from quartermaster sources, for the exact specifications of such Confederate tent-fliers (especially materials & panels, since we can be reasonably confident about their dimensions and grommet hole arrangements).

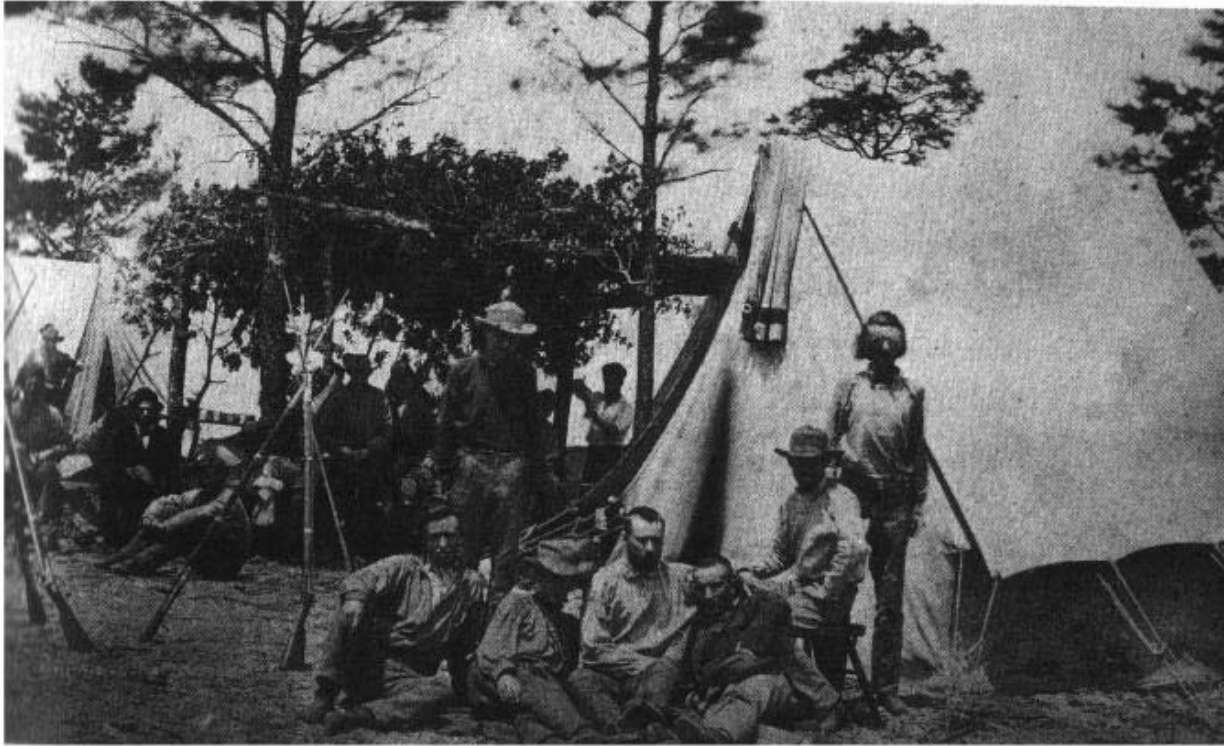


Conrad Wise Chapman's painting of Confederate Tent-fly(s), 1862



Civil War Tent-Fly, used as it was intended!  
Postcard photo from 1908 Allegheny,  
Pennsylvania.

Today mainstream sutlers sell things that they call tent-flies as either part of wall tent equipage or as tentage for artillery batteries which tended to carry them in their limbers and set them up using the limbers as frameworks. Measurements vary: I have seen both 12' squares (using 4 panels) and 12' by 9' items for sale. Happily I discussed this issue with Don Smith of the Trans-Mississippi Depot who undertook to take his best stab at an authentic hand-finished product. In the end his construction follows the model of the Union tent fly mentioned above, and was made out of a light canvas (duck). It looks the business, and will be given a test run this season. Another has been ordered. Realistically, only about one per mess is needed, with the fly comfortably(?) sleeping eight...



Men of the First Alabama pictured at Pensacola camp in April 1861. A tent fly is clearly seen here in use over a wall tent. The four grommet holes are clearly depicted on the left hand side of the fly.



Troops of the 5th Georgia at camp in 1861, again note the use of the tent fly.



Albumen Print from 1862 taken in Fredericksburg, subjects include: Jedediah Hotchkiss, James Briscoe, Fred Briscoe, and 'Smitty'. Notice Tent Fly with 4 lateral attachments on each side and is elevated well above ground level to encourage a draft. This is the same approximate size as the 12 by 9 foot US fly.

### Some Final Thoughts

The foregoing presents some viable options for improving Confederate campaign impression. The key thing to remember is that camping should be appropriate to the time and place of scenarios, and should be differentiated from what is done for Federal impressions. She-bangs of shelter halves with more rigging than a schooner do not seem to be an appropriate Confederate camping strategy (I certainly have never seen anything like them mentioned by the original Confederate diarists). Rather, Confederate camping should be:

1) varied and improvised within 'no wagon' scenarios (think "stretching blankets", - supplemented in the East by captured shelter halves),

OR

2) cohesive and organised within 'wagon-supplied' scenarios (such as Seven Days Battles ANV, or mid war Army of the Tennessee with one Confederate tent fly for each mess, and perhaps a wall tent for the officers).

Of course Winter Quarters is something different, but that's for next time...