

"Raised Upon Two Poles"

A Primer on Civil War Shelter Tent Poles

On St. Patrick's Day in 1863, Corporal Samuel Storrow, Forty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, wrote home from his camp in Washington, North Carolina:

I wish you could see our camp of shelter tents. They are made in three pieces about 5 feet square, of stout drilling, one of which each man carries rolled up with [his] woolen blanket in his rubber one. Two of them are buttoned together and raised upon two poles 4 ft long for the main body of the tent; the third buttons behind like a sort of hood. The poles are secured by two cords which accompany the tents. Thus you have a tent which accommodates three brothers, who must literally be in-arms when they are all within. [1]

Here, Corporal Storrow provided a rudimentary description of tent poles used to raise the *tente d'Abris* or the shelter tent of the Civil War period. Storrow's description is somewhat vague; could he not be referring to the abundance of forked sticks seen in today's re-enacting "encampments?" Certainly, there are dozens of soldier accounts and period images that support the use of locally found forked sticks to erect one's tent.

However, the Storrow account does not mention the use of a ridgepole, or similar device, which normally is placed in the forks to provide shape and strength to the ridge of the tent. Storrow relied on the "two cords" to secure the poles. This suggests some sort of pole other than the ubiquitous forked stick. Is there authoritative evidence that REAL tent poles specifically designed and designated for the shelter tent were available?

According to a research lead provided by Mr. Stephen Osman, at least two Federal government purchases of shelter tent poles occurred during the Civil War. Both were from firms located at Cincinnati, Ohio [2]:

17 Oct. 1863: 20,000 poles purchased @ .95 from Frederick Grier & Sons, Cincinnati, for the Cincinnati Depot.

5 June 1864: 140,000 poles purchased @ .75 from J & P Grier, Cincinnati, for the St. Louis Depot.

During the fiscal period beginning July 1, 1864, the St. Louis Arsenal posted the June 15 purchase in its inventory as "Tent poles, Shelter, sets." at a total cost of \$10,500.00. The cost of \$0.95 and \$0.75 respectively, per set of shelter tent poles indicates that the poles were made of an inexpensive material like wood, and were quite likely unfinished. [3]

Of all the major and minor arsenals and depots, only the St. Louis Arsenal was recorded as procuring this piece of equipment in the *Official Records*! The records on Federal Arsenal availability of this item prior to this period are thus far confined to the Cincinnati Depot purchase in October 1863. The inventories of purchases for the fiscal year starting July 1,

1864, do not mention shelter tent poles for the Cincinnati Depot. This does not necessarily indicate that the poles had been issued. Rather, it is more likely that this depot did not make further purchases of the item in the fiscal period being considered. A second, larger purchase made by the St. Louis Arsenal suggests (but does not prove) that contracts were let and purchases made in response to some sort of demand for shelter tent poles.

Interestingly enough, there is evidence of the availability and use of shelter tent poles from state sources. A document found by Mr. Mike Thorson in the Wisconsin State Historical Society stated that the limited procurement of shelter tent poles by the State of Wisconsin was a reality. A letter dated October 24, 1861, from State Assistant Quartermaster General A. Van Slyke to Colonel John C. Starkweather, First Wisconsin Regiment (then encamped at Camp Scott, Milwaukee) stated in part:

I send... for your Regt. 6 new style of "la petite" picket tent, weighing only 9 lbs. all complete & packs so that 3 men going off on picket duty can each take 1/3 of it. [P]oles, pins, and cord all complete... the poles going together by [a] fish pole socket & the end pieces buttoning on when required. Let us know how you like it.

Also enclosed with the document is a sketch of the "la petite picket tent." It clearly shows the tent staked down at four corners; two stakes (or "pins" in period parlance [4]) used to secure the two cords. Each cord is tied to the tent at a hole near the insertion hole for the tent poles, one of which is seen. The cords, when staked down, allowed the tent to be set up without a ridgepole.

This early description of the tent pole: a two-piece item, which fitted together with the use of a "fish pole socket" (of presumably tinned iron), is both interesting and compelling. Here is a clear description of a state quartermaster official indicating that three pieces of the shelter tent, plus poles and pins, were issued together as a set -- the third piece buttoning on as an end piece "when required." Clearly, the tent was designed and constructed to be set up with a set of poles, which were provided. This description dovetails nicely with Corporal Storrow's recollection, and the writings of other veterans like David Thompson, Co. G, Ninth New York Volunteers, albeit without the mention of tent poles. [5]

One additional piece of evidence is worth examining. Many thousands of shelter halves were manufactured before the Quartermaster General's Department published General Orders No. 60 on December 12, 1864 (corrected February 1, 1865). These codified specifications for shelter tents, which included a specification for "pole and rope holes" which "must be placed so as to correspond when the half tents are put together." Clearly these features would not be mentioned if they were not expected to fulfill some function. The "pole and

rope holes" were, in fact an integral part of the shelter tent -- included as a feature in shelter halves long before the codifying regulations were enacted and specifically intended to accommodate a tent pole and cord. Mr. Patrick McDermott, in his "A Survey of Civil War Shelter Halves," studied several surviving war time shelter halves and verified these assertions. [6]

We know from the facts presented here that:

- 1) Civil War era shelter tents were specifically manufactured to accept tent poles.
- 2) Shelter tents were both available and issued with pins and poles from at least one state sources as early as late October, 1861. Shelter tent poles were possibly in use in the field in Spring, 1863.
- 3) The tent pole was made of wood, in two pieces, that fitted together with a "fish pole socket" probably of tinned iron, and was perhaps four feet in height when assembled.
- 4) The Cincinnati Depot purchase 20,000 sets of shelter tent poles in mid-October, 1863 and the St. Louis Arsenal purchased 140,000 sets of shelter tent poles in mid-June, 1864. The St. Louis Arsenal purchase was on-hand in the government fiscal period starting July 1, 1864.

Mr. McDermott indicated in his article that perhaps few quartermasters requisitioned the shelter tent poles, and fewer soldiers drew them. This makes sense, given the abundance of available wood to make one's own tent poles and the fact that shelter tents were only occasionally carried on active summer campaigns. Why carry something you won't use?

While we search for compelling records of issue and use of shelter tent poles in the field, we do have a growing body of evidence that suggests the availability and use of shelter tent poles from at least autumn of 1861, and certainly availability in the West from late-1863 through the end of the war.

Notes:

- [1] Bell I. Wiley and Hirst D. Milhollen, *They Who Fought Here*, p. 84.
- [2] Earl Coates and Fred Gaede, "US Army Quartermaster Contracts 1861-1865," (unpublished manuscript).
- [3] *Official Records*, Series III, Vol. 5, p. 273.
- [4] We are searching for tent pin specifications and an original sample. Secondary evidence indicates that they resemble IW and WW1 wooden pins.
- [5] *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. 2, p. 556.
- [6] Patrick McDermott, "A Survey of Civil War Shelter Halves," *The Company Wag*, (Thomas' Mudsills, Inc.), Vol. 1, No. 2, unpaginated. The dates of the codifying specifications are important. These specifications were issued too late in the war to have any meaningful effect on production of this item of equipment, except to specify weight of materials, buttons, etc.

RB

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