

The Commodious “A” Tent.

by Jason E. Twiss

Some die-hard campaigners will undoubtedly get their dander up over the inclusion of an article on Common (wedge) tents in this book. The fact is, however, that almost every original soldier probably spent some time in one, and there is photographic evidence of their use throughout the war in various situations. The shelter tent did not become general issue in the Army of the Potomac until the Peninsula campaign (and some units in the East had to wait even longer than that) prior to which they had to rely on the common tent or some other large variety. For example, common tents were very common among the Federal troops engaged in the spring campaign of 1862 in the Shenandoah.

The use of common tents was not strictly an early-war event. They were also photographed in use during the Atlanta campaign in the fall of 1864.

Although called a “Common Tent” by the Quartermaster, the soldiers often called them “wedge” or “A tents.” A soldier in the Eleventh US Infantry, wrote his sister in March of 1863 from his camp in Virginia, “Our Co. have wedge tents 5 to each tent.” And to his father on 13 June 1864 while performing guard duty on the railroads near Alexandria, “We are encamped near the depot in commodious “A” tents.”¹

Appearance and Construction.

The diagram on the following page shows a reconstruction of a common tent using specifications contained in the unpublished 1865 *Quartermaster’s Manual*.² Some notable details are as follows:

Maker’s Logo—Seen in a number of period photographs, tents often had makers’ markings placed above the door in the position shown in the drawing.

Material—The specifications called for 28.5 inch wide cotton duck, ten-ounce weight. Even with a two inch seam allowance per side of each panel, a common tent will be slightly shorter than four panels wide, causing some or all of the panels to be narrowed. A photograph taken on the

Peninsula in 1862 shows a common tent that has four panels of equal width per side. It is not known whether this particular tent has been made of narrower material, is longer than regulation, or has wider seams. The reconstruction shows two narrow panels in the center, similar to the technique used in the three-panel shelter halves.

Cotton duck was not the *only* material used, for Jewett & Company had at least one contract for common tents made of linen duck.³

Sod Cloth—Specifications called for the sod cloth to be made of lighter material than the rest of the tent. In the case of the photograph shown above, the sod cloth is even a different color. Note how the sod cloth is even present on the bottoms of the doors.

Poles—Visible in period images, they are usually octagonal in cross-section, and dark enough to have been painted or oiled. When pitched, the 3/8 inch diameter iron rod will protrude 1.5 inches above the peak, passing through a grommet-worked hole. The specifications called for the rod and bands to be *galvanized*, that is, coated with zinc. According to the specs, the uprights are made of ash “or some other suitable wood,” and the ridgepole is pine.⁴

Sewing—The specifications called for the tents to be sewn with stitches no greater than 2.5 stitches per inch, using waxed double thread, four-fold cotton twine.⁵ This would seem to indicate hand sewing. Given the government’s propensity for making up shortages through manufacturing expediency, machine-sewn versions were probably used as well. Sewing machines existed that would have sewn through a quarter-inch of leather; five layers of canvas would have been no problem.

“Stays”—These nine inch square reinforcements were placed at the “end and ridge.” In fact, the stay pieces were probably shaped like an “L,” with each leg nine inches long, and each leg about 4.5 inches wide. This shape can be sewn into the peak of a tent as shown in the drawing.

NOTES AND SOURCES:

The drawing is courtesy of John E. Tobey.

1. Letters to Petit’s sister dated 7 March, 1863 and to his father dated 13 June 1864 in J. P Ray, ed., *Diary of a Dead Man* (New York: Eastern Acorn Press, 1981).
2. [Colonel George Crosman], *Quartermaster’s Manual* (Washington: Government Printing Office, galley proof, 1865), 52.
3. Found in the listing of Civil War contractors at the end of Francis A. Lord, *Civil War Collector’s Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Secaucus, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1965).
4. *Quartermaster’s Manual*, (1865), 54.
5. *Ibid.*, 52.

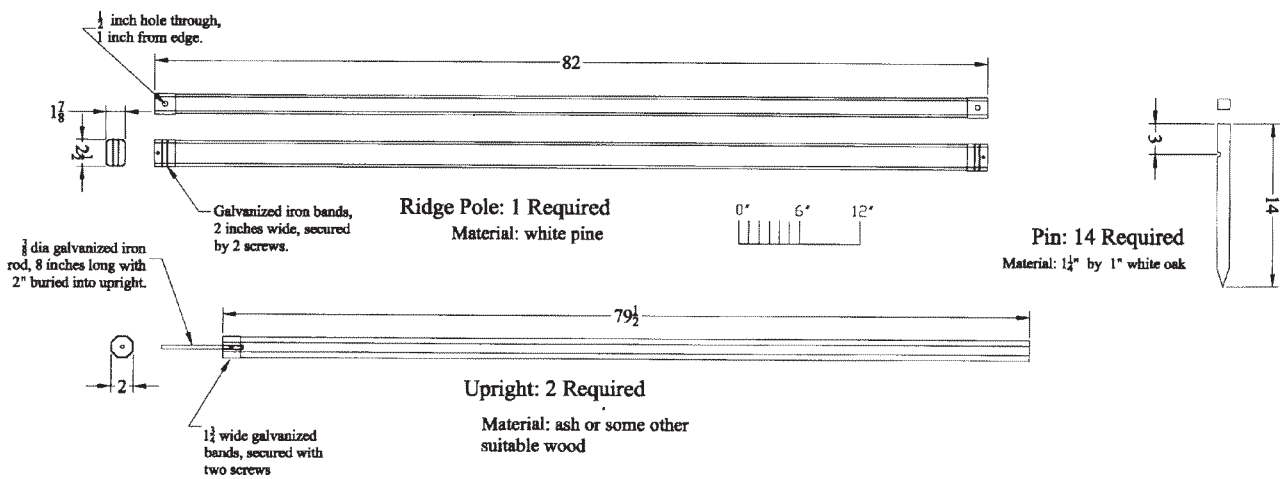
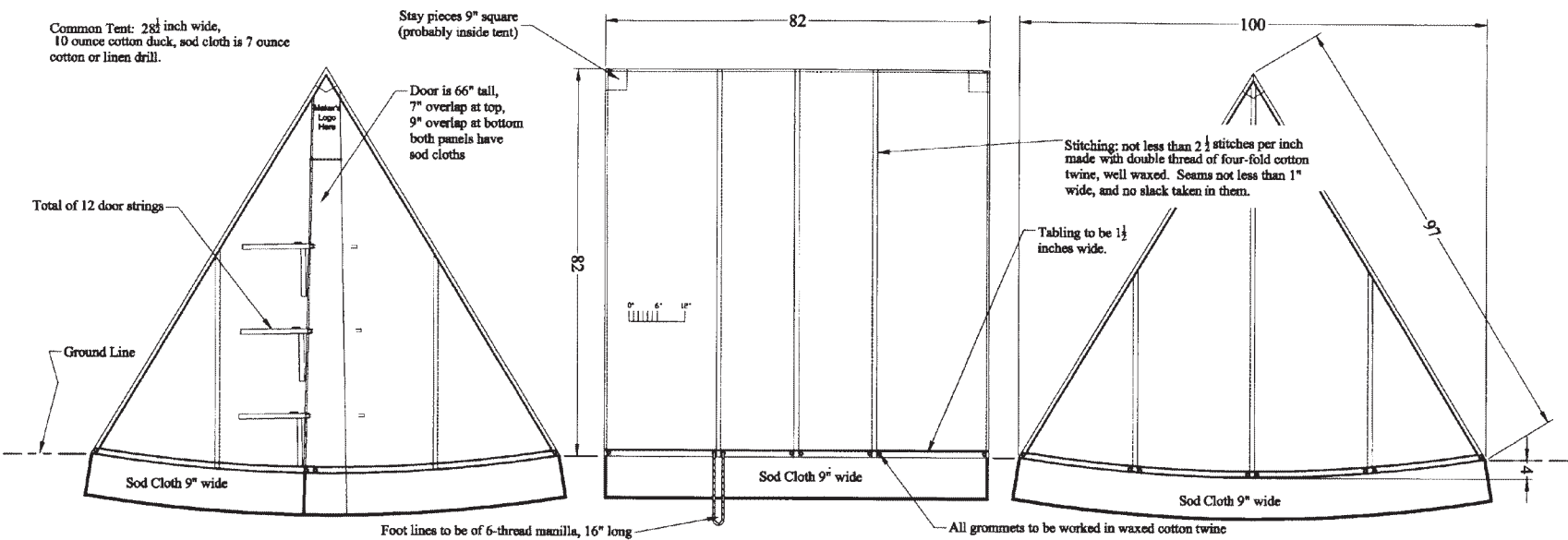


Plate II.32
U.S. Army "Common" Tent

Drawing made by specifications found in Orsman, Stephen, "Commonly Known as the Common Tent", *The Watchdog*, and various wartime photographs.

drawn by J. E. Tobey, 2001