

THE LOWLY SHELTER TENT

Tim Shaw

Perhaps one of the most utilized but under-rated items in our Hobby today is the lowly reproduction shelter half. Many of us in the past have merely picked up a catalog and ordered what was claimed to be an "authentic reproduction half," and were disappointed with what we received. With all of the suppliers currently crowding the Civil War reproduction market, how do we know just what is correct and what is not?

It has always been my personal "rule of thumb," when looking for information that concerns military goods, to check the United States Quartermaster Department specifications for the item in question. The government's description of "Shelter Halves" is as follows:

Dimensions of each half when finished:

Length (measuring along foot or top) five feet, six inches.

Width (measured along the seam) five feet, five inches.

To be made of cotton duck 22 1/2 inches wide, clear of all imperfections, and weighing eight ounces to the linear yard.

To be made in a workmanlike manner in every respect, with strong, well-worked button holes, made with waxed thread of sufficient size and strength to make them durable. All other holes to have good strong grommets well-worked with wax thread or twine.

Top buttons - Nine metallic (tinned, galvanized, or zinc) buttons, in a line parallel to, and four inches from the upper edge or head of each tent, at intervals of eight inches from center to center, the extreme buttons being one inch from the side edges of each half tent.

End buttons - Seven metallic (tinned, galvanized or zinc) buttons, in a line parallel to, and four inches from, each side edge of end of the half tent, at intervals of eight inches from center to center, the first button of the row being three inches from the lower edge or foot of the half tent.

Button holes on each half tent, twenty-three in number, along the upper and side edges, at a distance of a half inch therefrom, opposite the buttons of their own half, and corresponding in position to the button on the tent.

Three loops to each half tent, at lower corners, and foot of seam of six-thread Manilla line, small, soft and pliable.

Guy lines, one with each half tent, six feet ten inches long, of six thread Manilla line, small, soft and pliable.

The pole and rope holes must be placed so as to correspond when the half tents are put together.

The corner and stay pieces to be made of same material as the tent, and to be four inches square.

If the tent be sewed by machine, it must be a lock stitch machine.

No force should be used to bring the tent to its required measurements.

(General Orders #60, Quartermaster General's Office, December 12, 1864, corrected, February 1, 1865. Description of Shelter Tent.)

Another way to check if any reproduction article is comparable to originals is to locate an original example and take a good look at it. As with any antique that is made of fabric, one will soon realize that they have sometimes become scarce. Luckily in the basement of the Gettysburg Museum of the Civil War (better known to most reenactors as simply, the "visitor's center") a complete dog tent is on display.

When examining the two shelter halves that make up the display, you will quickly see some slight differences between the run of the mill reproduction half and the originals. One variation has to do with the material that buttons are made of. On one original, the buttons are well-formed, detailed and are manufactured of bone. Buttons of this style were common on some contract pieces but proved impractical during heavy or prolonged use. To collectors, this shelter half is known as the "B. Hansell [,] Phila[.] half," so named after the manufacturer whose name (known as a "maker's mark") is stenciled on the upper left-hand corner of the shelter {accession #5058}.

The buttons attached to the other half on display are of metallic composition, which is more commonly seen on the majority of surviving tents. Another aspect of construction to be considered is that ALL of the button holes on both halves are **hand sewn**.

When comparing a reproduction shelter half to originals, it is important to consider the size of the tent. Regulations state that each half should be 66 inches in length and 65 inches in width. The "Hansell" half is 64 inches long while being only 57 inches wide. Other surviving examples (from the collection of the Smithsonian Institution and from private collections) measure between 64 and 63 1/2 inches in length and 60 1/2 to 57 inches in width. Why the slight difference?

In answering that question one must take into consideration that there can be many variations among specific artifacts. These variations can be caused by differences in materials used, patent changes, the manufacturing process, or in some cases a blatant disregard for quality once the contract was signed! When dealing with canvas, it is general knowledge that items made of this material which are used on a regular basis will eventually stretch or shrink, depending upon a number of variables, thus changing the original "issued" size.

The next variance recorded is the method in which the tent

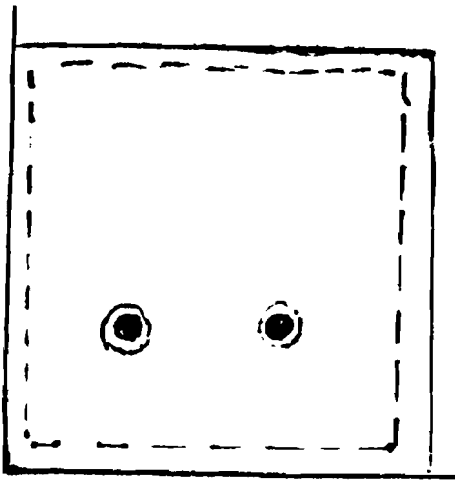


Illustration 1.

Correct, hand-sewn grommet holes.

was "staked" down. Most reproduction shelter halves in use today have three brass grommets of one inch diameter located along the bottom edge of the half, through which a metal stake is driven into the ground. On close inspection of original examples, you will notice instead of the brass grommets, three "sets" of reinforced hand-sewn grommet holes, approximately 1/4 inch in diameter. (See **Illustration 1**) These grommet holes are roughly the same size used on military-issue ponchos, and are placed two per set with a reinforced canvas backing. Waxed rope would be threaded through these holes to form a loop that secured it to the stake. You can see good examples of the above mentioned half on page 214 of *Echoes of Glory: The Arms and Equipment of the Union*, published by Time-Life.

Recently I have compared reproduction shelter halves from various suppliers with the originals on display in Gettysburg and in the *Echoes of Glory* series. While all the reproductions have similarities to the originals, only the shelter halves pro-

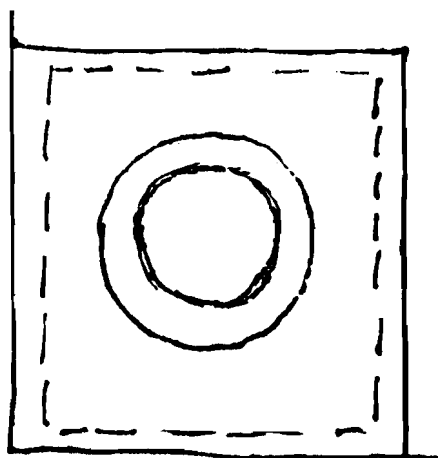


Illustration 2.

Incorrect brass grommet holes found on most reproduction shelter tents.

duced by Artifakes (Don Rademacher, 1608 West Pearl Street, Steven's Point, WI 54481; phone 715-341-5893) come close to being truly accurate copies.

Artifakes shelter halves have hand-sewn button holes, while those by other makers have machine-sewn ones. (You can check by looking at the back of the button hole. Hand-sewn button holes are not as evenly defined as machine-sewn ones.)

The manner in which the halves are to be staked down is very important to examine. The originals and the Artifakes tents faithfully follow the Quartermaster's specifications. Other reproductions use those three large single grommets.

A final touch of accuracy is to be found on the Artifakes half. Stenciled in two places are maker's marks similar to an example found in *Echoes of Glory*.

As for the cost...most shelter halves cost around \$25.00 plus shipping. The cost of an Artifakes half is \$63.00 plus shipping. In the writer's opinion the Artifakes shelter half may cost more, but it is well worth the price in order to own a truly "authentic reproduction" shelter half.

Publisher's Note - Artifakes shelter halves use a fabric of lighter weight than that in most commonly available shelter halves. This weight of fabric appears to be more accurate, and it is certainly easier to carry in the knapsack or blanket roll. Mr. Rademacher now offers pins and two-piece poles for his shelter halves, which he thinks may be appropriate to the Civil War era.

Bibliography

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- American Goods Dealers and Makers, reference from Gettysburg National Military Park resource library.

Tim Shaw is a member of the Fredonia Light Militia, part of the "Campaigner Battalion." He serves as editor of *The Guidon*, the newsletter of the Fredonia Light Militia, and hails from Cheektowaga, New York.