

Reenacting How-Tos: Methods

THE GREAT LONG WALK Or, Marching Order Reconsidered

by Rob Willis

Several years ago I was fortunate to acquire a 1961 Smithsonian Institution re-print of the *Uniform Regulations for the Army of the United States 1861*. This booklet includes the famous series of photographs featuring a model demonstrating the proper wearing and arrangement of a variety of regulation United States Army uniforms.

After close study of the photos, one image in particular captured my attention—Photo No. 1 accompanying this article. Appearing on page 27 of the booklet, the model is shown wearing a forage cap, fatigue jacket, full knapsack with a blanket rolled on top, and all of the other sundry



Photograph No. 1

his knapsack, almost centered to his rear at the small of his back.

At the time I noted this anomaly I suspected that this was a more sensible way to carry the standard load on long marches for the simple reason that it provides a more balanced, and in the case of hunger or thirst while on the move, convenient set-up than what is usually practiced by living historians. Unfortunately, I possessed no other evidence to make the case that this may have been a (the?) proscribed method, or even prove that the photo was worth further study.

Recently however, a few images crossed my desk that renewed my interest in the matter. Armed with these photos, I revisited my modest library and found several images that *seem* to suggest that indeed somewhere, at some time, at least some recruits were trained to wear their gear in such a fashion when outfitted in “full marching order” (a term not used in the photograph’s caption).

equipment an infantry private was expected to tote during the Civil War, and is captioned “Private, Infantry, Fatigue, Marching Order.”

What stuck me as odd was the arrangement and position of some of his gear, specifically his haversack, canteen, and cartridge box. The canteen is slung forward and hangs well to his front, while his haversack is slung similarly to the front, only to the opposite side, hardly the “usual” arrangement seen or described in other sources.

Additionally and importantly, his cartridge box is just visible underneath

Photo No. 2 is obviously of early-war provenance, but the image speaks for itself: The soldier wears his haversack and canteen in the identical fashion to the army “model”, though unfortunately his cartridge box is hidden from view.

Photo No. 3 again portrays a soldier in marching order with his gear thrown at least partially forward, though certainly not in the exact fashion prescribed in the “official” photo; in this case, his canteen strap is actually around his neck, suggesting a shift from its original (right front?) position for the sake of the camera. Also compelling about this image is the position of his cartridge box, again centered at the small of his back. For some reason his bayonet scabbard is also thrown well to the rear.

Image Nos. 4, 5, and 6 are taken from period artwork, usually a source information which merits little serious historical study due to the



Photograph No. 2

opportunity for the artist to misinterpret or simply invent details. However, I also believe that some works can reveal a wealth of interesting information if they are viewed in context and with healthy skepticism. It is this approach I took when evaluating these latter three images.

Image No. 4 is a detail from an Edwin Forbes etching, depicting a detail marching back to camp after pulling outpost duty. Forbes’s drawings are enormously detailed and boast an authenticity that so many artists seemed to lack. Note in this image the position of the cartridge boxes, and the relative position of the canteen on the leading soldier. The canteen’s position merits little attention until we examine the object projecting from the same fellow’s right hip, which appears to be a tin cup strapped to a hidden haversack (note the cup suspended from the knapsack of the man to his rear). It is possible that this interpretation is incorrect, but the position of the boxes at least is quite clear.



Photograph No. 3

Image No. 5, a detail of the Storming of Fort Donelson, Tennessee and Image No. 6, detail of the battle at Champion Hill, Mississippi (artists unknown), are typical examples of those after-the-battle depictions so prevalent during the war, and arguably bear little resemblance to the actual battles themselves. However, what is interesting about both images is the level of detail present on the uniforms and, for our purposes, the position of the cartridge boxes and other gear, especially the “crossed” straps shown in Image No. 6. It is absurd to imagine that troops would be charging into battle with their boxes still positioned at the rear, but this is less important than *what compelled the two artists in question to draw them in this position in the first place*. Perhaps the artists included details that they had directly observed in less chaotic circumstances, and simply neglected to modify equipment placements to depict their battle arrangement, something few artists would have been willing to observe close-up in any event.



Image No. 4

The author fully admits that these few images hardly craft a compelling case, although careful observation of other period images reveal many more examples of the rear-positioned cartridge box. Clear-cut confirmation of the forward-thrown and crossed haversack/canteen has been more difficult to find. However, it seems clear that when an “official” manual depicts a particular arrangement which can be confirmed to have been mimicked on a minor scale, there may be good cause to investigate the matter further.

I have yet to locate a written account of a soldier adopting the arrangement crossed canteen/haversack arrangement, or found mention in other official sources. However, the position of the cartridge box may be a different matter. In my booklet reproduction of *Hardee's Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics (1862)*, the following cryptic footnote appears at the bottom of page 32: “Whenever the loadings and firings are to be executed, the instructor will cause the cartridge box to be brought to the front.” To the front, from *where*? Anyone who has worn infantry accoutrements knows that the box is usually positioned on the right rear hip or side, but also recognizes that the belt plate and cap box generally prevent the box being moved “to the front” of the torso to any great degree. Could Hardee have been suggesting that the usual position of the box, i.e. *at the small of the back*, required the prescribed shifting of the box to the front? This is hardly solid evidence, but it is an interesting morsel.

Another bit of circumstantial evidence helps support this box arrangement, at least early in the war. Examination of pre-Civil War regular and militia soldiers indicates that the small of the back was a typical location for the cartridge box when in marching (not battle) order. Thus we may simply be looking at the vestige of an older tradition.

If the crossed haversack/canteen combination was prescribed at some point (as the official photo suggests) why isn't the arrangement more commonly seen in photographs or mentioned in period documents? Perhaps the method wasn't widely adopted for practical reasons (although I have experimented with it twice during event marches, and it is remarkably comfortable), or because the method was poorly communicated to and by ignorant volunteer officers/instructors, and thus passed into oblivion. On the other hand, perhaps the



Image No. 5

arrangement was widely used, so much so that it was second nature and deserved no more mention than certain other mundane details of army life. The lack of plentiful photographic evidence could be explained away for the obvious reason that images were rarely struck when troops were actually moving on the march at the time. Conclusive findings are elusive.

Certainly the arrangement would be impractical during inspections or drill, and impossible when actually engaged in battle or other activities where discharging a weapon could be imminent. But when a long and uneventful road march was expected, it does appear to have its merits. Of course, some of these images could simply portray the soldier “showing off” his gear in the most obvious fashion possible, but this doesn't seem to ring true; it makes more sense to suggest that they were wearing the gear the way they were instructed. As suggested, without further research it is impossible to come to valid conclusions one way or the other, and I have simply presented evidence of what I consider a minor mystery. However, I welcome your comments and any pertinent evidence you may have uncovered, feel free to email me at: pa3hawk@earthlink.net.



Image No. 6

Rob Willis is a member of the Columbia Rifles from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

