



Army Heritage Center
Foundation
*Telling the Army Story...
one Soldier at a time*

Voices of the Past

CIVIL WAR

Highlights:

- Civil War Soldiers carried fifty pounds or more of equipment necessary to travel, camp, and fight.
- Over time Soldiers would discard unnecessary equipment to lessen their loads.
- Union Soldiers usually had better equipment than their Confederate counterparts.
- Confederate Soldiers acquired Union equipment whenever they could.

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Part of the Army Heritage Center Foundation's Educational Series

Answering the Call: The Personal Equipment of a Civil War Soldier

(United States, 1861-1865)

The Union Army in the Civil War had a distinct advantage over the Confederacy when it came to equipment. The North had more factories to produce supplies, more people to work in the factories, and more railroads to deliver the supplies to the Soldiers. In the end, the North's industrial might played an important factor in the Confederate defeat.

For a Soldier, equipment is a matter of survival. Even something as simple as a button can make the difference between victory and defeat if it fails to function properly at the wrong time. For this reason Soldiers have a strong tendency to become attached to equipment they like, and to modify or discard equipment they find unreliable or useless. Among the Infantry, who have to carry their equipment wherever they go, this tendency is even stronger.

Soldiers must carry everything they need for combat operations with them at all times. Individual load carrying equipment is designed to allow the Soldier to carry a basic load of ammunition, food, water, and first-aid gear. The exact make-up of this load varies from conflict to conflict. In more modern times the load has grown to include additional equipment such as gas masks, maps, compasses, and radios. Civil War Soldiers carried enough ammunition to fire about 60 shots into battle. Today Soldiers carry hundreds of rounds of ammunition.

At the beginning of the Civil War each regiment was raised, trained, and equipped by the state of origin, leading



Union Soldier in full field gear.
Image Courtesy of the Center of
Military History.

to a great deal of variation in equipment and uniforms. As the war progressed, uniforms and equipment became more standardized in order to simplify the process of resupply.

Every Union Infantryman wore a belt set with a cartridge box and sling, cap box, and bayonet scabbard. The leather cartridge box held forty cartridges, paper tubes filled with a Minie ball and black powder issued in small packs of ten. The cartridge box, with a removable liner made of tin that kept cartridges in order, was the safest way to protect the cartridges from sparks that could set off an explosion. Each cartridge box also had a small pouch for a cleaning kit. Union Soldiers carried sixty to eighty rounds of ammunition. Extra cartridges that did



Pictured above are the accoutrements and equipment used by the U.S. Army during the first two year of the Civil War. The items shown are (left to right): the P1855 two-bag knapsack with original period blanket; the Pattern 1851 infantry equipment belt with oval "U.S." belt plate (see detail), scabbard for the M1855 Socket Bayonet (early war production with two rivets), and cap pouch; the P1861, .58 Caliber Rifle-Musket Cartridge Box with tanned leather shoulder sling, brass oval "U.S." box plate and round brass eagle breast plate; P1851 haversack; and pattern 1858 canteen, with tinned iron cup.



Shown here are the accoutrements and equipment used by the U.S. Army during the last year of the Civil War. The items shown are (left to right): the poncho and blanket formed into a blanket roll; the infantry equipment belt with oval "U.S." belt plate now with a retaining clip on one end in place of the leather loop, scabbard for the M1855 Socket Bayonet (late war production with eight rivets), and cap pouch; the Pattern (July) 1864, .58 Caliber Rifle-Musket Cartridge Box with tanned leather shoulder sling, embossed oval "U.S." on the flap and a round brass eagle breast plate; P1851 haversack with tinned iron cup; and pattern 1858 New York Depot canteen, with metal chain attached to the stopper loop.

not fit into the cartridge box were carried in pockets or a knapsack. The cap box, a small leather pouch worn on the front of the belt, held percussion caps, which had to be handled carefully because they were also very explosive. Soldiers carried a bayonet in a black leather scabbard on their left hip.

Union cavalymen wore a belt set designed to accommodate equipment used by the mounted Soldier. The cavalry belt included a cartridge box for carbine cartridges, a cap box, pistol holster, and had special straps and hooks that clipped onto the cavalry saber. Artillerymen did not wear belt sets except for special ceremonies or if they were in special units called heavy artillery regiments. Many heavy artillery regiments served as Infantrymen in the latter part of the war.

Union Soldiers carried their personal belongings on their backs in a knapsack made of cotton cloth or canvas and painted black to repel water. Called the "Soldier's trunk" it was large enough to hold a Soldier's extra clothing, personal items, a gum blanket and shelter half (or "dog tent") with a rolled-up blanket or overcoat strapped on top. Union Soldiers were also issued a haversack made of painted canvas and with a removable cotton liner to carry food. Worn over the shoulder, haversacks were handy for carrying rations of pork, hardtack, coffee, personal items, and extra ammunition. After several weeks loaded with salt pork and other food, haversacks tended to become foul-smelling and saturated with grease, but the liner was easily removed for washing or replacement. Union

haversacks were superior, and were prized by Confederates Soldiers.

Union canteens were also superior to most Confederate-made canteens. The body of the canteen was made of two pieces of tin with a pewter spout and cork carried over the shoulder on a leather or cloth strap. The body of the canteen was covered with a cotton and wool cloth which, when wet, would help keep the water cool. Early canteens were flimsy and easily dented or crushed.

Every Soldier carried a tin cup or boiler for their coffee, a metal plate, knife, fork, and spoon. Some carried small frying pans or half of an old canteen for cooking their salt pork and hardtack.

As with everything else, a large variety of small arms were used by U.S. soldiers during the Civil War, including a large number of obsolete weapons, both in their original configuration and modernized versions, and a variety of weapons imported from Europe. Most Soldiers carried a muzzle loaded rifle-musket that fired a bullet called a Minie ball, which had a slightly smaller diameter than the bore of the rifle barrel to allow rapid loading. Upon firing, the hollow base of the Minie ball expanded to engage the rifling grooves. Because of this innovation the rifle-musket combined the quick reloading capacity of the musket with the superior accuracy of the rifle.

The Cavalry used carbine rifles. The short, easy to load weapons were more practical for mounted troops than the longer, heavier rifle-muskets. Three carbines in particular were widely used: the Sharps, which fired a .54 Caliber paper combustible cartridge or could be loaded with a



M1861 Rifle-Musket with bayonet



Sharps Carbine

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bullet and loose powder; the Spencer, with a magazine that held seven .56 caliber metallic cartridges in a tube in the butt stock; and the Burnside, which used a unique tapered .54 Caliber metallic cartridge fired with a standard percussion cap.

Both Cavalry and Light Artillery used cap-and-ball revolvers. Loading a cap-and-ball revolver involved placing a percussion cap on one end of the chamber and pouring loose powder in the other end followed by a bullet. Most revolvers were six-shooters, and could provide rapid fire until they needed reloading. Some revolvers like the Remington pictured below could be reloaded by quickly switching out the empty cylinder for a spare.

With a full cartridge box, three days of rations, rifle-musket, and extra clothing, the typical Soldier's load weighed about fifty pounds. Soldiers quickly learned what they did and did not need and would lighten their burdens over time. Soldiers on the march left roadways littered with cast off overcoats, blankets, extra clothing, and tents. Quartermaster wagons followed the troops to scoop up discarded items which would be cleaned and re-issued when needed. Often troops were ordered to move in "light marching order". Leaving their knapsacks behind in wagons, the men wrapped their blankets and gum blankets into a roll with personal items and slung the roll over their shoulder.

Thus equipped, the Civil War Soldier was prepared for whatever the day brought them, whether marching, training, or fighting a pitched battle.

Source

Article and images adapted from:

"Survey of U.S. Army Uniforms, Weapons and Accoutrements", Courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History: http://www.history.army.mil/html/museums/uniforms/survey_uwa.pdf

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Colt M1860 New Army Model Revolver



M1851 Navy Model Revolver



Remington Army Model Revolver



3rd Division Cavalry Corp Ordinance Train. In the Civil War, as in all wars, the ability to resupply quickly was crucial. Photo Courtesy of USAHEC, MOLLUS-MASS Collection.