

A Look at the Accouterment of Company "F" March 9, 1864

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With the return of the Thirty-third Wisconsin to Hebron Plantation after the Meridian Campaign on March 5, 1864, the men enjoyed a couple of days of rest. All too soon, orders directed that regiment prepare for duty in Louisiana as part of Brig. Gen. Thomas Kilby Smith's Division, detached from the XVII Army Corps. With everything in readiness, Major Horatio H. Virgin formed his men on March 8 for the march to Vicksburg and embarkation. Delayed until March 9, the troops filed to the Vicksburg landing and attempted to board the huge marine steamer Autocrat. The vessel was not in a condition to receive passengers, so the soldiers of the Thirty-third endured a torrential spring downpour all night without tents or shelter.

During this time, the regiment was put into a condition to turn in its Pattern of 1853 "Tower" Enfield rifle-muskets and old accouterment, and draw Springfield rifle-muskets and new accouterment. Private John Wray of Company "F" gave a reason for the change, noting that the Springfields were issued because "their caliber being [sic] more uniform with other regiments [of the division]."

Lieutenant Joseph F. Stickel of Company "F" superintended the weapon and accouterment refit of his company. The meticulous Stickel had each man sign for the new issue in the company letter book, including John Wray. Stickel then had his clerk record a recapitulation of the March 9 issue, categorizing items as either "in use," "surplus," and "surplus unserviceable." For our purposes, the most useful information would be those items described as "in use" in Company "F":

- Springfield rifles..... 49
- Cartridge Boxes..... 49
- Bayonets..... 49
- Bayonet Scabbards..... 49
- Gun Slings..... 49
- Cartridge Box Belts.... 23
- Waist Belts..... 49
- Waist Belt Plates..... 49
- C. B. B. Plates*..... 49

*It is reasonable to conclude that "C. B. B." is the abbreviation for "Cartridge Box Belt." The Cartridge Box Belt Plate was most probably the Pattern of 1833 Eagle round plate in brass.

This record appears to be rather straight forward, and indeed it is. However, a few notes of interpretation might be in order:

1. Company "F," along with the rest of the Thirty-third Regiment, received Springfield rifle-muskets with gun slings and new accouterment before embarking steamer Autocrat for the "Red River Campaign."

2. The company drew 23 cartridge box belts, rather than 49. This suggests that a) only 23 belts were needed as a replacement for worn belts, b) 23 were needed for missing belts, or c) perhaps a blend of both situations! The suggestion here is that Lt. Stickel may have been trying to get those men wearing their cartridge boxes on their waist belt to convert back to the practice of wearing them on the shoulder belt.

3. While the company noted 49 "C. B. B. plates in use," the clerk likewise recorded "C. B. B. plates on hand Six" and "Shoulder Belt plates on hand Four." This lends a trifle confusion to the issue of the identity of the "C. B. B. plates: were they the Pattern of 1833 Eagle round plate or the oval "US" cartridge box plate? If the latter, then that indicated that the company has NO cartridge box plates in use... suggesting that the men threw them all away at some point. If the former, it would suggest that the Pattern of 1833 plate was issued in conjunction with the cartridge box belt, and that none were in use. This also means that a sufficient supply of oval cartridge box plates left over from the turned-in accouterment remained to be used with the newly issued cartridge boxes. The notation of "Shoulder Belt plates on hand" does confuse the matter!

4. The record indicated that no new cap boxes were issued to Company "F" at this time.

From this record, we can see that Company "F" began the "Red River Campaign" in good supply, with accouterments complete and worn as indicated in the Army manuals and the martial practice of the period. It is likely that the other nine companies in the Thirty-third Wisconsin closely mirrored this experience.

This record also conjures up the mental image of soldiers in faded, campaign-worn clothing with new rifle-muskets and wearing new accouterment. This picture starkly contrasts with popular images of Civil War soldiers, with their weapons, clothing, and equipage all showing equivalent wear and tear. Such was not always the case, as this information appears to indicate.

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