



In white hat, yellow bandanna, and yellow suspenders — none likely to have been official issue — the late John Wayne leads the charge against the bad guys. He autographed the photo for a staffer on a visit to *ARMOR* years ago.

The Cav Hat

*From John Wayne to Robert Duvall,
The “Cav Hat” Has Become a Hollywood Legend...
Unfortunately, the Truth Was a Little More Complicated*

by Major Mark Farrar

“That smell...That smell like gasoline....”

I am sure all of us are familiar with that famous scene from the movie, *Apocalypse Now*. What a scene! Robert Duvall, the mad air cavalry commander is kneeling in the sand on a Vietnam beach, extolling the virtues of napalm.

What makes this scene so memorable? Was it the topic? Was it the backdrop of exploding napalm? Well, for me it was neither. What I remember was the pristine black Cav hat with the gold cord rakishly perched on Duvall’s head!

Others must have felt the same way. When I joined the Army, I frequently saw exact copies at clubs and social events. Most of the owners assumed they were wearing a direct copy of a

relic from the Indian Wars. It wasn’t until I started doing research on the subject that it became clear just how much Hollywood had created its own image of the Cavalry, and in particular the Cav hat. In fact, from the pictorial and written evidence left to us, there were very few, if any, pristine-looking Cav hats, the most popular one wasn’t black, and very few had a gold hat cord!

The true story behind this famous piece of Army headgear is much less glamorous than Hollywood has led us to believe. From 1872 to 1912, when broad brimmed hats were worn as combat attire, there were only three official models. They were the 1872 Campaign Hat, the 1876 modification of the 1872 hat, and the most popular, the 1883 model.

Trial and Error: The 1872 Campaign Hat

In 1872, the Army clothing board wanted to provide troops with a hat that was multi-purpose, provided an adequate sun block, and could be folded. To accomplish all this, the Army approved an elliptical-pattern hat with an extremely wide brim. The material was black fur felt, despite the clothing board’s request for light colored material to reflect the sun. It was ornamented with an inch-wide silk band around the base of the crown.

Here is how the hat was described:

“The crown of the fatigue hat is made lens-shaped, so as to fold with the crease in center lengthwise of the hat. The brim turns up at each side and is

Evolution of the “Cav Hat”

hooked at the outer edges in front and rear of body of the hat, thus giving the outline a sweep nearly semicircular from extreme point of front to extreme point of rear. The brim is flat and is 4½ inches wide — outer edges slightly concave where the hooks and eyes are sewed.”¹

The hat was doomed from the start. The material was so shoddy that the hat literally came apart after only a few days in the field, according to troop reports. These complaints were not just limited to the lower ranks. MG Edmund Schiver, the Army Inspector General, commented: “Ridiculous in design and faulty in manufacture...better suited to a wet nurse than a soldier...”² The condemnation was universal. Less than three years after the 1872 model was issued, the Quartermaster General told the Secretary of War: “The campaign hats adopted for the Army have not been received with favor, and measures are being taken to procure suitable ones for adoption in their stead.”³

The 1876 Campaign Hat

One of the weaknesses of the '72 model was its fur felt construction. After much deliberation, the clothing board decided that a wool hat would be more durable. This was the material used in the 1876 model, which had a round brim turned over and stitched along the edge, for durability.

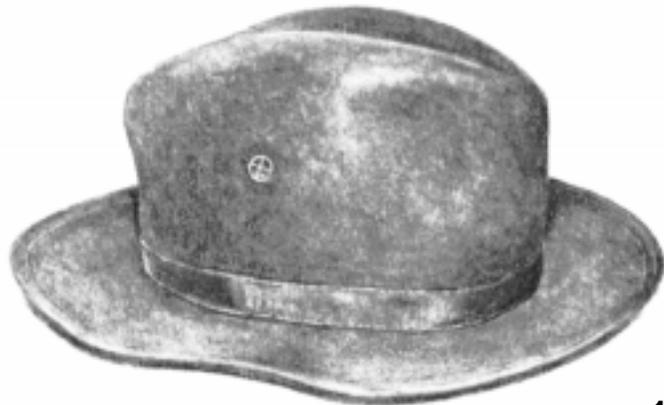
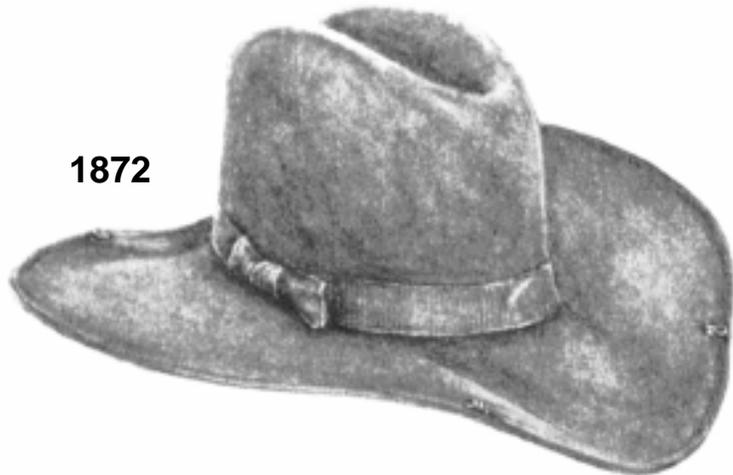
It also had a truly novel innovation — crown ventilators, one on each side. It was officially adopted by the Quartermaster Department on 14 June 1876. The '76 model had a relatively long lifetime, from 1876 to 1887, when supplies ran out. There were few real complaints about this model, other than the color. Despite the improvement in design, the hat was basically an ugly, utilitarian black hat.

This was the description of the 1876 hat in Army specifications:

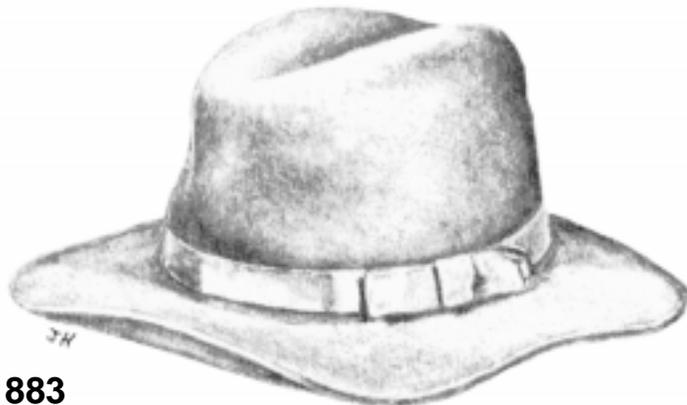
Mixture - to be of clean wool, of fine grade, equal in quality to XXX fleece. No waste or shoddy to be used in mixture.



1872



1876



1883

Weight: hat bodies to be weighed out, five and one-half (5½) ounces heavy, of clean wool.

Shape: The 7⅛ - size to be six inches deep to center of tip, and five and one-half (5½) inches deep at front and rear. Other sizes in proportion, varying one-sixteenth (1/16) of an inch to each size.

Brim: Edge of brim to be turned over three-eighths (¾) of an inch on the upper side, and stitched down with two (2) rows of stitching, and to measure two and a half (2½) inches in front and rear and two and five-eighths (2⅝) inches in width at sides.

Trimming: Trimmed with eight (8) ligne Union Braid, same quality as on sample hat; to be sewed on by sewing machine.

Sweat to be brown Japanned leather, turned on top, one and three-quarters (1¾) inch wide, and sewed in hat by sewing machine. Two of "Bracher's Patent Ventilators," one on each side of crown, three and one-half (3½) inches from brim. The hat to be velvet finished, soft and pliable, same as standard sample. Not more than six (6) hats to be packed in each band-box.

Adopted, 1876. M.C. Meigs, Quartermaster General.

The 1883 Model

Despite the durability of the 1876 model, criticism continued over the color. Troops in the Southwest felt that a lighter colored hat would be more practical. So, on 14 December 1883, the Army adopted the "Drab" campaign hat, which proved to be the most popular hat of the three. It remained in service until 1912, when the Army adopted the "Montana peaked" hat for general wear, the hat we know as the Drill Sergeant or "Smoky the Bear" hat. Most of the Frederick Remington, Russell, and Schreyvogel paintings were done when the drab hat was popular. Hollywood would later mistake the color depicted in these paintings and outfit the Hollywood cavalry in white hats. Even the great John Ford made this mistake.

The 1883 model was worn on some of the last great campaigns of the Indian Wars, in the Boxer Rebellion, and in the Spanish-American War. It should



A detail from Remington's "A Cavalryman's Breakfast" shows troopers wearing the 1883 hat with brims up, the most reasonable mode when firing a rifle. Remington's "Old Bill," for many years the symbol of the U.S. Armor Association, also indicates this style of wear was common.

be familiar to most readers as the hat worn by "Old Bill" in the Remington sketch.

Note that on the 1883 model, the original intent had been for the brim to be blocked "up" (i.e., brim slightly dipped towards the crown) in the front and back. The specifications for the hat were as follows:

Mixture: To be composed of two-thirds best coney (rabbit) and one third fine blown nutria.

Weight: hat bodies to be weighed - 4¾ ounces heavy.

Shape: Block to be 5¾ inches deep to center of tip.

Brim: To be 2¾ inches wide in front and rear, and 3 inches wide at sides; to double thickness, and to have two rows of stitching, as shown on sample.

Color: To be a drab or other suitable color, as per sample.

Trimming: To be trimmed with 8-ligne union band — same quality as on hat — to be sewed on by hand. Sweat to be an imported lined leather, 2¼ inches wide, sewed to the reed by zig-zag stitch. A wire gauze ventilator to be on each side of the hat, 3¼ inches from

brim — to be of size as on sample. To be packed three hats in each bandbox.

Adopted December 14, 1883. S.B. Holabird, Quartermaster General, U.S.A.⁴

Another historical error frequently made by Hollywood costumers concerns the shape of the Cav hat. As evidenced in *Apocalypse Now* and other films, they seem to think the traditional Cav hat sloped down in the front and back. Actually, most hats, particularly the 1883 model, were originally blocked so the brim would slope towards the crown. The reason was very simple: a hat that slopes down impedes vision (it is almost impossible to fire a trapdoor Springfield with a hat in your way). Despite the best intentions of the Army to maintain a uniform hat block, soldiers would still alter their hats from the original shape.

Apparently, things came to a head in 1899. On July 10, 1899, the Adjutant General ordered: "The wearing of these hats (drab campaign hat) in any other than their original shape is prohibited."

Remington's painting, "A Cavalryman's Breakfast," shows all the subjects wearing the 1883 model campaign hat. Remington very accurately portrayed the condition that the hat could be reduced to after extensive field use. All the subjects in this painting are very obviously choosing to ensure that the brim of their campaign hats are up.

Hat Cord and Letters

Hollywood has perpetrated many cavalry uniform fallacies, such as the yellow scarves (which were never issued) and yellow elastic suspenders (which were not issued until 1883, and were not yellow, and only the back strap was elastic!). Another fallacy is the depiction of cavalymen with gold hat cords and bright gold crossed sabers. It is

true that yellow hat cords existed, but they were not popular. This fact is obvious in contemporary photographs and paintings, which seldom show the cord. Two reasons for this might be that the hat cord would have a tendency to fall off, unless it was tied on to the hat (this happened with the 1912 model), or until the Army became firm about the wear of regulation items. In fact, the "cords and tassels" were so unpopular that the Quartermaster General made this report in 1887:



The "Montana Peaked" hat, first issued in 1912, is still in use in the Forest Service and by drill sergeants. Seen here is Colonel Julien Gaujot, commander of the 1st Cavalry, in 1919.

"From the requisitions of clothing and equipage received at this office during several years past, ...there was scarcely any demand for hat cords and tassels. Only 3,049 were issued during the last fiscal year. It is recommended...that those on hand be issued gratuitously to the enlisted men. Notwithstanding this free issue, there is scarcely any demand for them."⁵

The official origin of wearing hat cords and brass letters/insignia on campaign hats can be traced to General Order No. 128, which required all enlisted men to wear the campaign hat "of drab colored felt with worsted hat cords conforming in color to arm of service, with letter of troop or company and number of regiment in front...."

This regulation was issued **after** the Spanish American War, when the practice had already become the norm.

Other Hats

So, what accounts for the wide variety of campaign hats seen in nineteenth century photographs. The fact is that, despite the gratuitous issue of hats, many soldiers chose to buy their own. Most people make the mistake of looking at one old photo and assuming that the subject is wearing an official hat, but before 1883, many troopers deliberately went out of their way to avoid wearing an issue model. This practice continued unabated almost until the twentieth century.

Also, oddly enough, straw hats were quite popular, so popular that the Army eventually made it legal to wear them: "During the warm season department commanders may authorize an inexpensive straw hat of such pattern as they may prescribe to be worn by officers and enlisted men...."⁶

Major Reno of 7th Cav fame (or infamy, depending upon which side of the argument you're on) wrote this after the Bighorn campaign: "Previous to us leaving the mouth of the Rosebud, I had been wearing a felt hat, and it was dusty and dirty, and some of the officers went on a boat to where a

trader sold some broad brimmed straw hats, which we paid 25 or 50 cents for. They had no band, but they were a very shelter from the sun. I wore one of those."⁷

Conclusion

The photographic and historical record regarding the "Cav" hat is quite different from the Hollywood version. Although it may be uncomfortable for some to acknowledge this fact, the pursuit of truth and accuracy should always be the primary objective of both the amateur and professional historian. Even though the campaign hat is just a minor contribution to Army genre, in this age of revisionism and reinterpretation of Army history, the correct depiction of even small items such as the Cav hat is, nonetheless, important.

Notes

¹ *Army Journal*, Quartermaster report, 1872.

² Comments of Quartermaster General.

³ Excerpt from *Army Journal* dated 1876.

⁴ *Army Journal*, 1883.

⁵ *Army Journal*, 1887.

⁶ General Orders No. 128, para. 46.

⁷ Recollection of Major Reno.

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