

The Entrenching Tool

by

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Very few people know that one of the greatest technological developments between the two great wars was the entrenching tool. Persons ignorant of this fact would probably call this implement a shovel. There is no question that this development was as important to the combat success of the U. S. Army as the Norden bombsight was to the Air Corps, or the aircraft carrier to the Navy.

The entrenching tool has saved uncounted infantrymen's asses. It is puzzling that there is not some kind of marble statuary on the Mall to memorialize it. I have always wondered why you don't see any, or many, shovels in photographs or paintings of the Civil War. We live on the Wilderness Battlefield, and the trenches dug at that time wrap themselves around the terrain for miles. In fact, we have a trench traversing our front yard. This action was a three day "meeting engagement" between two armies on the move. They clashed, recoiled, and moved on to fight again a few days later at Spotsylvania Court House. Having dug a few foxholes myself I can appreciate the extensive amount of digging in such a short time by the infantrymen on both sides of this engagement; however, nowhere in a pictorial representation of this battle do I see any shovels. The Civil War soldier of either side certainly didn't have a portable shovel that hung from his belt or pack, as did the WWI infantryman.

Trench warfare was the dominant form of combat in WWI in Europe. The firepower of automatic weapons, improved indirect fire artillery, and mortars forced the infantry to go underground. No longer could there be masses of ranked troops with regimental flags, drums beating cadence, marching toward each other in a glorious panorama. The "dirt soldier" was born, and he learned that his survival depended in large part on the shovel. The WWI shovel was just that, a short spade with a T-handle that fit into a canvas carrier. This prototype tool was improved by some unsung genius prior to WWII, and it became a utilitarian device of great merit.

The improvement was simple: it was a knurled nut at a joint created where the handle was fastened to the shovel blade. This permitted the blade to be folded against the handle, which shortened the tool when it was slipped into its canvas carrier. The carrier had hooks that permitted the assembly to be attached either to the cartridge belt or the haversack. This jointed shovel blade could be moved at right angles to the handle, the nut tightened against a squared flange on the blade and voila, you had a pick. Using the same nut you could move the blade parallel to the handle and create a shovel.

This two-in-one tool gave the WWII "dirt soldier" the options he needed to increase his digging proficiency to a very high level. If he was under heavy fire he could lie on his side and scoop out a slit trench using the pick configuration without raising off the ground. If he was not under fire he could stand, use the tool as a shovel and really disappear into the ground in a hurry. This tool, as a pick, could also be used as a weapon under extreme circumstances. When all else failed, and hand-to-hand combat was required, it became a sharp club.

So all hail to the entrenching tool unrecognized, unappreciated, and unsung. If I have done anything here to pay tribute to this saver of lives, and the infantryman's best friend, then I am grateful.

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