



BIVOUAC

KENT CIVIL WAR SOCIETY * P.O. Box 3671 KENT, OH 44240

<https://www.kentcivilwar.org/>

Meeting Hotline (330) 474-9362

**ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING
SHELTER HOUSE, FRED FULLER PARK, KENT
TUESDAY, AUGUST 12, 2025, AT 7:30 P.M.**

We'll have our annual business meeting at the shelter house. Come one, come all! Bring ideas (we need them)! Look forward to seeing you there!



“Suffocating at Each Step”—Sunstroke in the Civil War

Excerpted from <https://www.civilwarmed.org/sunstroke-in-the-civil-war/>

During the Civil War, a soldier could expect to march an average of 15 miles a day. Since most military campaigns occurred during the warmer months of the year, it was not surprising that heat became another deadly enemy to fight. There were over 7,000 cases of sunstroke recorded during the four years of the war, with over 300 resulting in death. The majority of those cases occurred on the march. Sgt. Benjamin Hirst, of the 14th Connecticut Infantry remembered a forced march during the 1862 Battle of Cedar Mountain: “We seemed to be suffocating at each step . . . strong men wilted as though blasted by something in the air.” A soldier from the 7th Maine Infantry, another participant in the march recalled “ . . . the men fell out by the road-side in scores overcome by the heat and exertion. Numbers died from sunstroke.”

There were several factors that caused an attack of sunstroke. One was clothing. Unlike today’s military, Civil War soldiers had one uniform issued to them that they had to wear year-round. While Confederate uniforms were often a combination of cotton and wool, Union uniforms were 100% wool—a decided drawback in hot weather. Since clothing manufacturers did not have the synthetic materials that are available today, wool was chosen over cotton or linen for its durability and ability to shed water. This was an advantage on cold winter days, but during summer marches, it could be deadly.

Free play for the lungs and a light body-covering are necessary to the perfect operation of the heat dissipating processes. Unfortunately, the load carried by a soldier during the marches . . . covered the surface of his body to prevent the process of evaporation. His blanket, rolled into a long cylinder, was slung from one shoulder to the opposite hip; his canteen and haversack were similarly suspended by straps from the opposite shoulder, while a waist-belt kept the cartridge-box in position on his loins and the bayonet-scarabard by his side. Not a cooling evaporation, but a profuse loss of water in bulk from the system was the result of exercise under this heavy accoutrement.

Private Randolph Shotwell of the 8th Virginia Infantry remembered in his memoirs the stifling effect caused by his equipment: “Flesh and blood cannot sustain such heat and fatigue as we have undergone this day. It is terrible! All along the roadside since 9 o’clock this morning I have seen men dropping, gasping, dying—or already dead! ...when one’s clothing is utterly saturated with perspiration mixing with the dust in a grimy paste; and above all, weighs the heavy musket, the muffling blankets, gripping waist band and belt (upon which hang the heavy cartridge and cap boxes) and the chafing canteen straps—is it strange that one sees hundreds of men gasping for breath, and lolling out their tongues like madmen?”

Adding to the soldiers’ misery were the clouds of dust stirred up by thousands of marching feet, horses, wagons, and artillery. A member of Colonel Charles Candy’s brigade remembered his march to Gettysburg on July 1, 1863: “The sun was hot. The ground was hot, and the men panted like dogs on the chase and sweat and sweltered through clouds of dust that came from Knapp’s Battery in our front.”

A surgeon describes the typical experience of a marching soldier on a hot day: “While toiling away under the weight of arms, knapsack, blanket, and rations . . . the back of his head feels painfully hot, notwithstanding he may have draped it with a silk handkerchief, reversed his cap or filled its crown with leaves as an infallible protection against the scorching rays. His heart

beats violently . . . He breathes rapidly, open-mouthed . . . the hot air he inhales rendered hotter still by the dense clouds of dust with which it is laden . . .”