

How to Put Up a Tent

Being the true account of the night Tent Four went for a walk, as told by Theo Marchetti, age 9, who was inside it

Our class went to Camp Wattle Grove for three days in September.

I had been looking forward to it since Year 2. There was a rope course. There was a night walk. There was a canteen that sold hot chips at three o'clock, and my mum was not there to say anything about it.

On the first afternoon, Mr Delaney lined us all up on the oval next to four bundles of poles and canvas, and he blew his whistle, which he did not need to do because we were already quiet and standing right in front of him.

"Groups of four," he said. "One tent each. Instructions are on the sheet. Off you go."

Then he handed each group a photocopied piece of paper, sat down in a camp chair, and started drinking a coffee out of a metal cup like a man who had done this many times before.

I was in Tent Four with Yusuf, Grace and Nina.

Now. I want to say something about my group before I tell you the rest.

We were good. We were *so* good.

Grace read the sheet out loud twice before anybody touched anything, which she said her dad does with flat-pack furniture. Yusuf laid all the poles out on the grass in order of size. Nina found the little bag of extra bits and put it in her pocket so it would not get lost. I held things and passed things and did not muck around, which for me is a personal record.

Here is the sheet we were given. I have kept it. I am allowed to keep it because it is now, according to Mr Delaney, "an important historical document."

CAMP WATTLE GROVE — PUTTING UP YOUR TENT

1. Choose a flat piece of ground and clear away any sticks or stones.
2. Unroll the tent flat on the ground with the door facing away from the wind.
3. Lay out the poles and click each section together until each pole is straight.
4. Slide the long poles through the sleeves on the top of the tent.
5. Cross the two long poles over each other in the middle.
6. Push the end of each pole into the metal ring at the corner of the tent so the tent stands up.
7. Clip the plastic clips on the tent body onto the poles.
8. Throw the fly sheet over the top of the tent.
9. Zip the door closed to keep insects out.

Nine steps.

We did all nine. We did them in order. We did not skip any of them and we did not argue, except a bit at step five, and that was Yusuf's fault.

And when we were finished, our tent was beautiful.

It stood there on the flattest, cleanest patch of ground on the whole oval. Every clip was clipped. The fly sheet was on straight. The door was zipped. It looked like the picture on the front of the bag.

Mr Delaney walked around all four tents with his metal cup. He looked at Tent One, which was leaning. He looked at Tent Two, which had a pole through the wrong sleeve and was the shape of a triangle having a bad day. He looked at Tent Three, which was fine but had the door facing directly into the wind, so it was making a noise like a whoopee cushion every time it gusted.

Then he came to us.

He stopped. He looked at our tent for a long time. He took a sip of his coffee.

"Everybody," he called out. "Come and look at Tent Four."

I am going to remember that moment for the rest of my life, and I would like you to remember it too, because of what happens later.

The whole class came over and looked at our tent. Mr Delaney said the words "gold standard." Grace went pink. Yusuf did a little bow. Nina said, "We just followed the instructions," in a very calm voice, like a scientist on television.

And I stood there next to the best tent at Camp Wattle Grove and felt like the king of the oval.

Here is a thing about Tent Two, by the way, which had the pole through the wrong sleeve and looked terrible.

Two boys in that group had been camping with their families about a hundred times. They did not read the sheet at all. They just did what they had always seen their parents do, which was mostly wrong, except for one part, which they did without even thinking about it, first thing, before anything else, because to them it was as obvious as putting your shoes on before you go outside.

Hold that thought.

THE NIGHT WALK

After dinner we did the night walk, which was excellent. We saw two possums and heard a boobook owl and Nina found a stick shaped like a Y and carried it the whole way.

The wind picked up while we were out. Mr Delaney looked at the sky and said, “Bit of weather coming,” in the flat voice that adults use when they mean “quite a lot of weather is coming.”

We got into our sleeping bags at nine o’clock. Grace and Nina were in the girls’ tent by then, so it was me and Yusuf in Tent Four with all our stuff.

The wind got louder. The canvas went *whump, whump, whump*, and I lay there listening to it and thinking about how safe I was, inside the gold standard.

I went to sleep at about ten.

PART TWO

I woke up because I was moving.

That is a very strange way to wake up. Everything was dark and loud and my sleeping bag was sliding sideways and something soft kept hitting me in the face, and for about four seconds I genuinely believed I was having a dream about being inside a washing machine.

Then Yusuf shouted “THEO,” in a voice I have never heard him use, and I understood that our tent was going across the oval.

Not being blown *about*. Going. Travelling. With us inside it.

Here is what I now know happened.

A gust came across the oval at about two in the morning. It went under the fly sheet, filled the tent up like a sail, and lifted the whole thing clean off the ground, because there was nothing whatsoever holding it down.

The tent went over three times. I know it was three because I counted them while they were happening, which is not a thing I can explain. Everything we owned came with us — sleeping bags, jumpers, a torch, Yusuf’s shoe, and Nina’s Y-shaped stick, which she had left in there for safekeeping and which hit me in the ear.

We rolled about forty metres, past the flagpole, over the little slope, and came to a stop against the fence near the toilet block, where the tent flattened itself out and pinned us both to the ground under a lot of wet canvas.

There was a small silence.

“Are you okay?” said Yusuf.

“Yes,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” said Yusuf.

Then we both started laughing so hard that we could not get out from under the canvas for about a minute, which is how Mr Delaney found us — two lumps in a flat tent at the bottom of the oval, laughing, at two in the morning, in the rain.

He was in a raincoat over his pyjamas and he had a torch and he was walking very fast.

When he saw we were fine, he stood there with the rain running off his hood, and I watched his face do about six different things in a row, and the last one was that he put his hand over his eyes.

“The pegs,” he said.

“What pegs?” said Yusuf.

THE PEGS

There were pegs.

There had been pegs the whole time. They were in a little bag inside the tent bag — the little bag of extra bits that Nina had found and put in her pocket for safekeeping, and had then carefully kept safe, in her pocket, in the girls’ tent, forty metres away.

None of us knew what they were for. There was nothing on the sheet about pegs. We had read that sheet more carefully than any group has ever read anything, and it said nine steps, and we did nine steps.

The next morning, Mr Delaney got the original instruction sheet out of the camp office folder. Not the photocopy. The original.

The original has **ten** steps.

10. Hammer a peg through the loop at each corner of the tent and each corner of the fly sheet, so the tent cannot move.

Step ten was the last line on the page. When somebody at the camp office had photocopied it, that line had come out right at the very bottom edge, and on our copies it had simply not appeared. There was nothing there. Not even half a letter. Just white paper.

We had done nine steps out of ten perfectly.

The missing one was the one that held the tent to the Earth.

And do you remember Tent Two, with the pole in the wrong sleeve? Those two boys had banged their pegs in first thing, before anything else, without reading a word, because that is what their families always did. Their tent looked like a squashed triangle and it did not move one centimetre all night.

Mr Delaney sat down with our group after breakfast and said sorry, properly, the way he does, looking at us and not at the ground. He said it was not our mistake. He said it was his, because he had handed out a set of instructions without checking that it was all there.

Then he said the thing that got written up on the board in our classroom and is still there.

“A set of instructions is not finished when it makes sense to the person who wrote it. It is finished when it cannot go wrong for the person who reads it.”

Then he made us all a hot chocolate and told us that in twenty-two years of school camps, this was the best thing that had ever happened.

THE SAME INSTRUCTIONS, WRITTEN PROPERLY

by Theo Marchetti, Yusuf Rahim, Grace Bell and Nina Okoro, Room 12 — now laminated and kept in the camp office

Goal: To put up a tent so that it stays up, stays dry, and stays exactly where you left it.

This procedure has 11 steps. Check that you can see all 11 before you begin.

You will need:

- 1 tent and 1 fly sheet
- 2 long poles
- 1 bag of tent pegs (you need 8)
- 1 mallet or one flat rock
- 4 people

Steps:

1. Open the tent bag and lay out everything inside it on the grass. Count the pegs. If you do not have 8 pegs, go and get 8 pegs now, before you do anything else.
2. Choose a flat piece of ground and clear away any sticks or stones.
3. Unroll the tent flat on the ground with the door facing away from the wind.
4. Click each section of the poles together until each pole is straight.
5. Slide the long poles through the sleeves on the top of the tent.
6. Cross the two long poles over each other in the middle.
7. Push the end of each pole into the metal ring at each corner so the tent stands up.
8. Clip the plastic clips on the tent body onto the poles.
9. **Hammer a peg through the loop at each of the four corners of the tent.** Push the peg in on an angle, pointing away from the tent, until only the hook is showing. Give it a tug. It should not come out.
10. Throw the fly sheet over the top, then hammer a peg through the loop at each of its four corners as well. That is 8 pegs altogether.
11. Zip the door closed to keep the insects out.

Warnings:

- Do not leave the pegs in somebody's pocket.
- Do not decide a step is unimportant because you do not understand it yet. Ask what it is for.
- If you are given instructions on paper, look at the bottom of the page. Look at the back of the page too. A step you cannot see is still a step.

Our tent is fine, by the way. One pole is slightly bent and the camp keeps it in the shed with a piece of tape on it that says **TENT 4 — THE FLYING TENT**.

Nina still has the Y-shaped stick.

And I still think we did a good job that day. We read the instructions. We followed every single one. We just did not think to ask the only question that mattered, which was:

Is that all of them?

THE END