

A British Blanket Tent

Greg Renault

Extended campaigning in the Peninsula produced some changes in how the British Army managed its equipment. Camp equipment, originally intended to be loaned out for brief periods of field service, began to be treated as longer-term issue.

Canteens were marked, and blankets treated as necessities (that is, they were issued to individual soldiers, who were held accountable by regular inspections).¹ Greatcoats were bundled for the hot season, but blankets were retained—apparently to provide emergency sun shelter:

G. O. *Freneda, 25th April, 1813.*
12 to 17 (See GREAT COATS.)

19. It would be very desirable that the Officers commanding regiments should take measures to have the corners and outside selvage of the soldiers' blankets strengthened; in order that the soldiers may pitch them without injury to the blankets, in case it should, upon any occasion, be necessary in order to shelter them from the sun.

2

So, by 1810 every soldier had a blanket; by general order in 1813 all of these blankets were modified to serve as emergency sun shelters.

Serjeant John Douglas of the 1st Royal Scots, writing of his experiences in the Peninsula in 1812, described the method used for constructing a blanket tent:

*Our tents were very simple, soon pitched and as easily packed up. They (that is, each tent) consisted of 2 blankets, two firelocks and 4 bayonets. At each corner of the blanket a hole was worked similar to a buttonhole, and in the centre another. A firelock stood at each end, to serve as poles. The bayonet of these firelocks passed through the corner holes of both blankets, a ramrod secured the top, and a bayonet at each end fastened in the ground completed our house.*³

Intrigued, I resolved to recreate what every soldier under Wellington was supposed to have, but which few reenactors seem to carry (rather like those other necessities, greatcoat slings and knapsacks). Here is what I came up with:



I started with a surplus British hospital blanket⁴, to which I sewed corner reinforcements.

I used wool blanket scraps left over from another project, choosing to omit the selvedge reinforcements. Linen canvas might be another likely choice for reinforcement material.

For sewing I used: Double-threaded, unbleached cotton; backstitched; bar tacks on the corners.

Use a hollow single-hole leather punch (1/2")

...to make a hole in the corner.

Handsew a grommet by working a buttonhole stitch around the hole. I used a heavy shoemaker's waxed linen thread (Barbour's #18).



What the finished grommet looks like close up.



And further away.



The bayonet of these firelocks passed through the corner holes of both blankets

The grommet can be moved up to the bayonet shank to increase ventilation. Small rope loops can also be added for additional air flow.



A firelock stood at each end, to serve as poles. a ramrod secured the top,

...and you have a shelter.



Notes:

¹ Despite a June 1811 Board of General Officers clothing report which states that blankets are to be conveyed by the Commissariat, not carried by soldiers, the following orders show that Wellington strived to ensure that a blanket was issued to—and retained by--each soldier:

G. O. *Badajoz, 30th Oct. 1809.*

1. A certain number of blankets having arrived, they are for the present to be issued to the infantry at the rate of one for two men; the Commanding Officers of regiments will make requisitions for them accordingly upon the Quarter Master General, and the Quarter Master General will take measures for issuing the blankets without loss of time to the troops at the several stations.

2. These blankets are to be considered as articles of regimental necessaries, and are to be carried by the men to whom they are delivered; they are to be accountable for them, and to produce them at every inspection of necessaries: as soon as a larger quantity of them shall arrive from Lisbon, a sufficient number will be issued for one blanket to each soldier.

G. O. *Badajoz, 16th Nov. 1809.*

7. An additional supply of blankets having arrived, the Officers commanding regiments of infantry of the army are to make requisitions for one for every fourth man of the non-commissioned officers and soldiers under their command respectively: this supply will complete three-fourths of the number of each regiment of infantry.

G. O. *Badajoz, 8th Dec. 1809.*

4. An additional number of blankets having arrived, the Officers commanding regiments are to make requisitions on the Quarter Master General for a sufficient number for one-fourth of their strength, which will complete the regiments to one blanket for each man. The Quarter Master General will inform the different corps of the army in what manner they are to receive those allotted for them.

Lt. Col. Gurwood, *The General Orders of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington*. London: Clowes & Sons, 1837.

For a range of quotes that indicate soldiers in the Peninsula carried their blankets in their knapsacks, see the "My Knapsack" discussion thread on the 95th Rifles Forum: (<http://2nd95thrifles.myfastforum.org/ftopic814-0.php>).

² Ibid. The same order stipulates the marking and storage of great coats.

³ Douglas, *Tale of the Peninsula and Waterloo*, quoted in Keith Raynor, *British Army Blanket Tents, War of 1812 Website* (http://www.warof1812.ca/b_tent.htm). See Raynor's article for more information about this curious item of military kit.

⁴ According to Robert Henderson, blankets issued by the Barracks Department were 6' x 7½'. My blanket is 3" short of 6' wide, and exactly 7½' long, so should replicate the dimensions of a period blanket shelter. He notes that the pre-war uniformity of blankets was altered once the Department began purchasing from merchants in Quebec City in 1813. Robert Henderson, "*Lights Out!*" *British Army Beds and Bedding During the War of 1812*, War of 1812 website (<http://www.warof1812.ca/bedding.htm>).

Toronto
August 2012