

“Material Culture” — Reenacting / Living History How-Tos

HOW WELL DOES YOUR UNIFORM FIT?

by Don Williams

Most of us in the Columbia Rifles are justly proud of our appearance in the field. While attention to historical authenticity of the material and manufacture of our clothing and equipment is critical, perhaps we should be careful not to look *too* good when it comes to the way our uniforms fit. Recall that the average soldier was stuck with the clothing he was issued and had to suffer whatever indignities and discomfort might occur thereafter.

I was recently reminded of this when I came across an account from Private George W. Peck, who enlisted in the 4th Wisconsin Cavalry late in the war, mainly for what he readily admitted was the attraction of the bounty money.* As he states in his humorous memoir titled *How Private George W. Peck Put Down the Rebellion*, “I thought the war was nearly over, and the probabilities were that the regiment I had enlisted in would be ordered home... I would get my bounty, and a few months’ pay, and it would be just like finding money.”

Not long after enlisting, Peck was issued the regulation cavalry uniform, after which he recalled,

“One day it was announced that the quartermaster sergeant had received a quantity of clothing, and the men were ordered to go and draw coats, pants, hats, shoes, overcoats, and underclothing, as winter was coming on, and the regiment was liable to move at any time. Something happened that I was unable to be present the first forenoon that clothing was issued, and when I did call upon the quartermaster sergeant, there was only two or three suits left, and they had been tumbled over till they looked bad. I can remember now how my heart sank within me, as I picked up a pair of pants that was left. They were evidently cut out with a buzz-saw, and were made for a man that weighed three hundred [pounds]. I held them up in installments and looked at them. Holding them by the top, as high as I could, and the bottom of the legs of the pants laid on the ground. The sergeant charged the pants to my account, and then handed me a jacket, a small one, evidently made for a hump-back dwarf. The jacket was covered with yellow braid. Oh, so yellow that it made me sick. The jacket was charged to me also. Then he handed me some undershirts and drawers, so coarse and rough that it seemed to me that they must have been made of rope, and lined with sand-paper. Then came an overcoat, big enough for an equestrian statue of George Washington, with a cape on it as big as a well tent. The hat I drew was a stiff, cheap shoddy hat, as high as a tin camp kettle, which was to take the place of my nobby, soft felt hat that I had paid five dollars of my bounty money for. The hat was four sizes too large for me. Then I took the last pair of army shoes there was, and they weighed as much as a pair of anvils, and had rawhide strings to fasten them with. Has any old soldier ever forgotten the clothing that he drew from the quartermaster? Those inverted pots for hats, the same size all the way up, and the shoes that seemed to be made of sole leather, and which scaped the skin off the ankles. Oh, if this government ever goes to Gehenna, as some people contend it will, sometime, it will be as a penalty for issuing such ill-fitting shoddy clothing to its brave soldiers.”

One wonders whether some of the old veteran non-commissioned officers in the regiment deliberately arranged to issue the leftovers to late-war bounty men like Peck as a sort of revenge. Even so, there are enough similar accounts of issue clothing to suggest that Peck’s experience was not atypical of what many other soldiers encountered as well.



* These excerpts from Peck’s memoir appeared in *Military Images* magazine, Vol. 23, No. 1.

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