

KNAPSACK AND HAVERSACK PACKING 101

by Kevin O'Beirne

"Bring for your men shelter-tents....and drop all excess of baggage."

— Major General John McClelland, Thirteenth Corps, April 21, 1864, Red River Campaign¹

When attending events that portray a troops on campaign, one of the easiest, most satisfying, and least-expensive ways for a reenactor to improve his portrayal is to lighten his load and "carry only what they carried" during the Civil War.

In order of priority, Civil War soldiers carried all of their ordnance stores (gun, leathers, etc.), then their camp equipage (haversack, knapsack, rubber blanket tin boiler, etc.), and finally their personal gear (uniform, blanket, personal items, etc.). The latter two categories allowed the soldier to exercise discretion about items that were important to him. Similar to the soldiers of 1861-1865, reenactors should use no more than what can *comfortably* by carrying in a single trip.

Upon arriving at a reenactment, register, park your vehicle in the participants' parking area, don your uniform and gear, and proceed into camp in one trip. Not only will a short "prove-out march" from the parking area demonstrate whether your load is too heavy, but it will also save the hassles of attempting to bring a vehicle into the bivouac to unload stuff you may not need anyway.

When preparing for an event, pack into your knapsack and haversack only "the essentials" that you will *really* use, like a soldier of 1861-1865 on campaign. What each man packs is up to the individual, but your knapsack and haversack, and your entire "campaign kit" should be light enough for you to comfortably wear for extended periods.

What the Soldiers Said

The extent of a soldier's marching kit was a hot topic of military science during the Civil War. A great deal of insight into the matter is presented in

¹ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (hereinafter *O.R.*) *Series 1, Volume 31, Part 3*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1880-1901, p. 245.

the Army of the Potomac's preparations for the Chancellorsville campaign, in which lightly burdened "flying columns" of infantry marched long distances for up to eight days without being re-provisioned. In the winter of 1863 a board of officers was appointed to evaluate the soldiers' marching kit and make recommendations on how it could be lightened, so that more rations could be carried during the coming campaign. Their recommendations were summarized in General Orders No. 65, dated March 7, 1863, which read in part,

"Considering...the fact that three days' [rations] has heretofore been the maximum amount [carried], the board recommends as follows:

"1. That all extra clothing, except a change of underclothing, be stored.

"2. That five days' rations of bread and small-stores be placed in the knapsack.

"3. Three days' cooked rations in the haversack, and five days' fresh beef upon the hoof.

"4. Two mules per regiment to carry camp-kettles, rice, beans, &c.

"Each soldier will carry—Haversack 5¾ lbs., Knapsack 6 lbs., Blanket 5¼ lbs., Clothing 2 lbs., Total, 19 lbs. Making 13¼ pounds in the knapsacks, being 2¼ pounds less than the weight usually carried by soldiers in this army in their knapsacks."²

Despite these explicit orders, not everyone obeyed them. Following the Chancellorsville campaign, Rufus Ingalls—the chief quartermaster, Army of the Potomac—complained,

"The troops carried through the campaign only those things most necessary for their constant use.... A blanket should have been taken, but no overcoat. Both weigh a man down too heavily, and are not necessary in moderate weather."³

For copious quartermasters' reports on how the Board of Officers' recommendations fared on

² *O.R.*, *Series 1, Vol. 25, Part 2*, p. 488.

³ *Ibid*, p. 545.

campaign see, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Volume 25, Part 2*, pages 544-559.

Insight can also be gained through the words of the soldiers themselves, and certainly there as many variations in “campaign kit” as there were men in the army. A 150th New York soldier wrote in July 1863, while pursuing Lee after the battle of Gettysburg, “The small amount of baggage I can carry on my back, consist[s] only of a rubber blanket and shelter tent with a change of clothing (two shirts)”⁴.



The soldier’s small amount of personal gear was probably typical of Federal troops in the long and arduous Gettysburg campaign. This same soldier, eighteen months and several campaigns later, recounted what he planned to carry into the coming Carolinas campaign in January 1865:

“Our new campaign commences tomorrow ... with nothing more than my summer outfit of Woolen blanket, Rubber blanket, shelter tent, a change of clothing (1 shirt, 1 socks, 1 Drawers) writing material, frying pan and

⁴ Kaminsky, Virginia H. ed., *A War to Petrify the Heart: The Civil War Letters of a Dutchess County, N.Y. Volunteer: Richard T. Van Wyck*, Hensonville NY: Black Dome Press, 1997, p. 108

hatchet, one day or more of rations, these I carry in my knapsack.

“The clothing I wear is simple enough: cap, coat (blouse), pants, and shoes (no overcoat). I slept well by the picket fire with only my rubber around my shoulders last night.”⁵

To lighten their load while on campaign, soldiers occasionally discarded their knapsack in favor of one of the variations known as “the blanket roll”. Blanket rolls were lighter and caused less back pain and abrasion on the shoulders. The disadvantage of a blanket roll was that its contents were scattered when the blanket is unrolled.



A member of the 9th Massachusetts Infantry described how a blanket roll was made:

“The inventive genius of some produced what was termed the ‘horse collar.’ An army blanket was spread on the ground and a few necessary articles of clothing selected from the discarded knapsack and spread thereon; then the blanket and its contents were carefully and tightly rolled up, the ends brought together and firmly tied. This singular roll was put on over the head and rested on one shoulder and against the opposite side under the arm; in this manner it was easily and lightly carried. When tired of carrying it on one shoulder it would be shifted over to the other. At a halt for a few minutes it was used as a cushion to sit on. It was found to be, on fatiguing marches, a great relief from the much despised knapsack with

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 306.

its cutting straps and awkward, back heavy burden.”⁶

A soldier of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia recalled the contents of his blanket roll:

“I had a very good oilcloth haversack to carry my rations in, a tin cup, a splendid rubber cloth, and blanket, a pair of jeans drawers, and a pair of woolen socks; ...The socks and the drawers were placed on the blanket, the blanket was rolled up with the rubber cloth on the outside, the ends drawn together and fastened with a short strap. To carry this, we put it over our head and let it hang from the shoulder.”⁷

While blanket rolls were widely used, knapsacks were hardly universally discarded, as described by a sergeant in the Army of the Potomac’s 155th New York at the 1864 battle of Reams Station:

“I got off [away from the advancing Confederates] with three more from our company. I did not lose one article of my things. All the others flung everything off them [in their attempt to escape]. I took my knapsack, haversack, musket, and canteen all right, besides three days provisions with me.”⁸

Below is a packing “checklist” that the author of this article has used in preparing for living history events. Your “essentials” may vary.

Knapsack

- *Blanket*: One good 5 lb., 100 percent wool blanket is all a reenactor needs, even in cold weather. The blanket should be a relatively good size—say, 57 inches by 80 inches.
- *Gum Blanket*: A gum blanket is essential for use as a ground cloth, raincoat, or shelter. For infantrymen, gum blankets were much more common than ponchos. An effective and lighter-weight alternative to a gum blanket is a painted cloth (“oilcloth”), such as was issued to many

⁶ Macnamara, Daniel, *The History of the Ninth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, Boston:E.B. Stillings, 1899 (reprint ed. by Samito, Christian, New York:Fordham University Press, 2000).

⁷ Worsham, John, *One of Jackson’s Foot Cavalry*, New York:Neal Publishing Company, 1912.

⁸ Tipping, George, letter of September 1, 1864, Katherine Cochrane Keane Collection, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo, New York.

Union and Confederate soldiers. These were basically lightweight cloth, like muslin, painted with a mixture of lampblack and linseed oil, similar to the coating applied to canvas knapsacks and haversacks.

- *Shelter Half*: Many scenarios call for Union impressionists to carry a shelter half. A good reproduction shelter half should weigh only 1.5 lbs. compared to an actual weight of 4.0 lbs. for a heavier-duty shelter half such as those sold by Panther and Fall Creek. Individual enlisted men should *not* carry full tents (e.g., two shelter halves) and evidence that triangular end-pieces for dog tents were available to or used by Federal enlisted men is exceedingly scant. If tent poles are necessary, improvise when you arrive at your campsite, or use your gun bayoneted to the ground as an upright.
- *Journal Book and Pencils*: The writer often carries this non-essential, personal item that comes in handy to record thoughts, write letters,



use as a fire-starter, or to use as “paper” in “an emergency”.

- *Extra Pair of Wool Socks*: Perhaps the soldiers of 1861-1865 did not always have extra socks, but reenactors should consider carrying a second pair for warmth at night and for health purposes. One extra pair of socks is a small, light addition to your marking kit.
- *Extra Shirt*: Completely non-essential in the warmer months, an extra shirt is a good addition to your kit during colder-weather events.

- *Waistcoat (Vest):* The writer often carries this non-essential item, especially for colder-weather reenacting. While they were common, certainly not all soldiers carried one. Vests were not an issue item, and civilian and military-style vests were used in the field.
- *Overcoat:* Leave the overcoat home in warm weather (later in the war, soldiers placed them in storage until the autumn). However, a Federal-issue overcoat for colder events is one of the most useful items in the living historian's kit, serving as both a coat and a blanket, and at night the cape can be used to completely cover your face and head for warmth.
- *Small Towel:* Not of the modern-day terrycloth variety, a period-style towel, such as "Huckabuck" towels sold at Wal-Mart (e.g., unbleached, off-white, plain cotton towels usually sold in a pack of five for \$5.00, in the dishtowel department), or other period-correct reproductions, is useful in washing up your person and gear. Carry a bar of lye soap with the towel.
- *Extra Ammunition:* If more than forty rounds are necessary for the event, pack additional ammunition in paper packages of ten rounds plus one paper tube with twelve percussion caps into



A SERIOUS MISCALCULATION.

the knapsack.

- *Roll of Twine (String):* About 20 to 30 feet of twine or hemp is the soldier's companion for rigging up shelter.
- *Lighting:* While not used by this writer, some soldiers carried a small, folding, tin candle-lanterns that could easily fit in a knapsack.
- *Extra Food:* Food for a two- or three-day reenactment should fit in the haversack but, if it does not, put the extra into the knapsack.
- *Hygiene Items:* The writer carries a muslin poke bag with a wooden toothbrush, comb, and two small glass vials with corks; one vial contains baking soda for tooth powder, and the other is for sunscreen.
- *Miscellaneous:* These might include a CDV, tintype, or ambrotype of your family, razor, religious items such as a pocket Bible, sewing kit, a few pieces of dry kindling, pipe and tobacco, and other personal items. Critically evaluate all these items and determine if they are "essential"; chances are, after some soul-searching, you may decide that many "stuffers"—especially "necessary" flasks—uselessly that take up important room in your pack. "Stuffers" and personal items can also be conveniently carried *in your pockets*; Civil War soldiers loved pockets and often field-modified their uniforms by adding pockets.

Haversack

The principal purpose of the haversack was to carry **rations** and **mess furniture**.

- *Rations:* Limiting campaign-rations primarily to salt pork, hardtack, coffee, and sugar both improves your "authenticity" and occupy less space and weigh less than the rations consumed by many reenactors. Canned food existed in the Civil War, but was rarely available to or used by enlisted men on campaign.
- *Tin Plate:* A good tin plate is a serving dish, frying pan and, if necessary, digging implement. Assuming it fits into your bread bag, a plate adds rigidity to your haversack. A canteen half will serve the same purpose as a plate.
- *Eating Utensils:* A knife, fork, and spoon are essential, and reenactors may want to consider wrapping them in a rag or in a small canvas sack. Also, a pocketknife in your pants pocket or haversack is essential.
- *Boiler or Tin Can:* An issue boiler and/or a period-style tin can with a wire bail is essential. If the tin can is carried in addition to the boiler, it

can serve well as a coffee cooler and or supplemental mess furniture.

- *Candle:* One beeswax candle is essential. A common, soldier-improvised candleholder was an upside-down boiler or can.
- *Matches and Match-safe:* It is a good idea to carry one box of matches in a match-safe (i.e., a small box that protects the box of matches from being crushed). Match-safes are also easily carried in a jacket pocket. Careful shopping at an antique store or relic vendor can turn up a fairly inexpensive period match-safe.
- *Rags:* Carry one or two period-style rags—not the modern blue or red bandannas sold by many vendors of reproduction wares. These will come in handy as potholders, clean-up wipes, &c.



A commissioned line officer wearing a “hobo-roll” blanket roll

Gear Shared by a Mess

During the Civil War a group of two to eight or so men who were pals often shared several items of “communal” gear, which could also be reflected in a reenactor’s kit. Such items might include a sheet-iron skillet, small coffee pot, small lantern, or other items.

Each mess should also consider having amongst them one “larger” knife (say, with a blade six inches long or so) for carving larger pieces of meat and other foods.

Blanket Rolls

Perhaps the most familiar blanket roll variation was the “horse collar”—similarly named items like the “mule collar” were identical to it—in which the soldier’s gear was wrapped up in a blanket that was tied like a tube and carried diagonally over one shoulder across the chest and back to the opposite hip. While comfortable in cooler weather, horse collars can be extremely hot in warmer weather.

An alternative to the horse collar is to make a “hobo-roll” or “tump line”, by rolling the blanket and its contents into a short (18 inches or so) log-like roll, and tying off each end with rope or overcoat straps from a knapsack. The hobo-roll is carried by running a U-shaped line (hemp rope, or a musket sling) through each strap on the blanket roll, and carrying the blanket on the back with the strap or sling over one shoulder. A hobo-roll may wear on your shoulders more—particularly if rope is used for the sling—but the load can be moved easily while marching and it allows your torso to “breathe” in warmer weather.

As a practicality, do not carry your gum blanket rolled up with your blanket roll, because it will be hot in the sun and, in the rain, it is unavailable for use while marching.

Weighing the Load

To evaluate the items listed in this article against the Army of the Potomac’s marching load at Chancellorsville, the author of this article packed his knapsack and haversack and weighed them.

The haversack contained two days’ rations of salt pork, hardtack, and coffee with a total weight per Army Regulations of 3.7 lbs., along with a few miscellaneous items and mess gear, including a 32-oz. tin dipper. The haversack’s total weight was 5.7 lbs.

The knapsack was packed with a blanket, gum blanket, period-correct shelter half, overcoat, towel,

one pair of socks, forty “blank” cartridges, a small journal book and pencils, sewing kit, hygiene items, and a rosary. The weight of the full knapsack was 17.5 lbs.; when the greatcoat was removed, the knapsack’s weight was 14.0 lb.

The reenactor’s packing list stacks up fairly well against the Army of the Potomac’s marching load at Chancellorsville. The reproduction items included only two days’ rations, plus a gum blanket and the weight of the haversack and knapsack themselves. The Board of Officers’ recommendations included three days’ full rations in the haversack; in the knapsack were five days’ rations of hardtack, 2 lbs. of clothing (which the writer assumed were of approximately equal in weight to a pair of socks and a shelter half), and a wool blanket.

Note that the Board of Officers’ recommended load includes neither a gum blanket, which was carried by virtually all soldiers of the Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville, or the weight of the haversack and knapsack themselves. The Board’s recommended load includes about 7.9 lbs. of food not in the reenactor’s haversack and knapsack, while the weight of the reenactor’s gum blanket, haversack, and knapsack totaled about 7.5 lbs. The reenactor’s journal book, forty blank cartridges, and other items more than account for the difference of 0.4 lbs.

Therefore, it was concluded that the packing list presented above is fairly accurate to the period. Further, the writer asserts, based on personal experience, that it is sufficient for protection from the elements and includes sufficient food for a two-day living history event.



Conclusion

The items listed above are gear that many Civil War soldier would have carried on campaign. The list does not include a whiskey flask, box lantern, ammunition box, tent poles, camp stools, multiple blankets, canned food, railroad-spike tent stakes, or other useless items that add bulk and weight to your kit with minimal real functionality, and detract from an otherwise accurate portrayal.

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