

THE GUM BLANKET IN THE ARMY

Stephen E. Osman

New recruit Si Klegg, questioning the strange rectangle of rubberized cloth just issued him, was informed by his veteran pard Shorty:

You don't want ter stick up yer nose at it, nuther, fer it'll come 'bout's handy to ye's anything ye'll git. It's mighty good ter spread on the ground under yer blanket when ye goes ter bed. Ye know wet won't soak through Injy-rubber, 'n' it'll help pervent ye ketchin' the r u m a t i c s . 'Sides that, when ye have ter lie down 'n the mud it keeps yer blanket clean. Then when ye're marchin' in the rain it beats 'n umbreller all holler.¹



Rubber, a.k.a. gum, blankets and ponchos were provided to troops throughout the Civil War. Although Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs initially resisted widespread issue — no appropriation had been provided — both states and individual units purchased their own and applied steady pressure on Meigs. The powerful rubber industry, marketing its waterproof clothing and even exporting British army gear, also lobbied for contracts. By November 1861 Meigs gave in and authorized the purchase of 100,000 ponchos, with neck slit, for the army. At that time he estimated that 50,000 India rubber blankets were already in use and that about 20,000 painted ponchos of Day's patent, convertible to shelter tents, were on order. Meigs insisted that newly purchased rubber blankets/ponchos not exceed

2½ pounds each and include grommets on the sides.² The ponchos thus authorized, with minor changes, continue to serve soldiers to the present day.

At least 1,893,000 rubber or painted blankets and 1,596,000 ponchos were procured by the Federal government during the Civil War.³ Waterproof ground cloths for soldiers had been suggested as early as the 1840s, but were not part of the massive purchases of rubber knapsacks, haversacks and canteens used during the Mexican War. Army trials in 1855 examined gutta percha waterproof shawls and tent ponchos, but only the talma for mounted troops was adopted.⁴ And manufacturers' catalogs from the 1850s depict a variety of rubberized blankets and ponchos.⁵ The recruit of 1861 was supplied from this commercial stock.



Waterproof cloth was made by a variety of methods. The best was vulcanization, in which large rollers were used to spread heated, sulfur-treated rubber over the cotton muslin base. Makers licensed to use this process patented by Goodyear stamped their products as such. Other contractors painted solvent dissolved rubber

on the cloth, followed by a coat of sulfur chloride. And still other makers, especially in the south, used non-rubber coatings such as linseed oil compounds to waterproof their cloth. The finished blanket, assembled by gluing, vulcanization or sewing, had grommets spaced along the

edges to allow use as a tent or a shawl. These were reinforced with either round or square pieces of cloth. By war's end, most troops were likely receiving ponchos originally designed only for horsemen.

The 1865 *Quartermaster Manual* specified:

Waterproof blankets, and ponchos — the first for infantry, and the latter for cavalry. To be made of a good, strong material, coated with gutta-percha or india rubber, vulcanized. The ponchos to be 71 inches long and 60 inches broad. The grommets to be placed equi-distant, not exceeding 15 inches. They must both be bound all around, or hemmed. The slit or collar in the center of the poncho, must be strongly sewed with 2 rows of stitching, and must be 3 inches wide, and 16 inches long when completed. The water proof blanket for infantry, to be 46 inches wide by 71 inches long, without the slit for the head; but having the grommets arrangement the same as for the poncho. A string of stout webbing, 12 inches long, to tie them on, with extra grommets for it, instead of slit for poncho. The grommets, in all cases to be 1 inch from the center of the grommets to the edge of the blanket on one side and end, and 2 inches from the other side and end. The grommets must be stayed, and be placed equi-distant, so as to match, and to be made of brass.⁶

Ponchos and gum blankets examined in private and museum collections generally follow these specifications, though dimensions vary. And artifacts recovered from the sunken 1864 transport ship *Maple Leaf* show additional differences in construction and neck slit pattern, including one specimen with an elastic closed collar or neck hole!⁷ Consistent, however, is the relative spacing of the grommets at around 14 inches, and the dimension of the brass grommets, usually around .56 inches. In this latter feature modern replica makers are consistently incorrect, supplying grommets much too large. A size “0”, 9/16 inch diameter, ¼ inch hole is the proper size.

Examples of vulcanized and painted ground cloths are clearly photographed in *Echoes of Glory: Arms and Equipment of the Union*. Note the patent stamps, use of

small grommets, and gloss finish to the black rubber. Replica ponchos are usually constructed by gluing on edge strips and neck reinforces. While sewing is also acceptable, it was originally done before waterproofing. Look for strong and neat glue bonds, shiny black finish and solid construction. And if your supplier ignores the grommet size, see if you can buy your ponchos without grommets and add them yourself.

NOTES

¹Walter Hinman, *Corporal Si Klegg and His Pard* (Cleveland: N.G. Hamilton Publishing, Co., 1886), 50.

²Montgomery Meigs to Lt. Col. George H. Crosman, Philadelphia, 29 November 1861, National Archives, Record Group 92, Office of the Quartermaster General, Letters Sent (Clothing and Equipage), Volume 18, 660-661.

³“Statement showing the number of the principal articles of clothing and equipage purchased at the depots of Philadelphia, New York, and Philadelphia since May 1861,” *Annual Report of the Quartermaster General For the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1865* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880).

⁴National Archives, Record Group 92, Office of the Quartermaster General, Letters sent (clothing), Volume 14, 421.

⁵*Ibid.*, Entry 225, Consolidated Correspondence Files, “Rubber.”

⁶George Crosman, *Quartermaster's Manual* (1865, unpublished manuscript).

⁷Matt Russell, “Artifact Analysis of Rubber Blanket and Ponchos from the Union transport *Maple Leaf*, (East Carolina University, 1993, unpublished paper).

Illustrations provided by Stephen Osman.

Stephen E. Osman is director of Historic Fort Snelling, and founder of the re-created First Minnesota Regiment. Maintaining an active research interest in pre-1865 American military uniforms and history, he is currently working through the voluminous papers of the Commissary General of Purchases at the National Archives.