

Authenticity Standards
British and Commonwealth Forces
Tunisia
November, 1942 – May, 1943

British 1st Army, British 8th Army

Uniform

Khaki Aertex “pull-over” desert shirt (see notes)
Khaki drill trousers
Ammo boots
1937 Pattern wool battledress (in cold conditions)
Greatcoat, khaki pullover, or leather jerkin (in cold conditions)

Equipment

1937 Pattern webbing
Web gaiters or short puttees

Headgear

Mk II steel helmet; chinstrap should be early-type khaki canvas with internal springs
Soft headgear as appropriate (typically Field Service Cap, but may be slouch hat, “lemon squeezer”, etc., depending on nationality and unit)

Weapons

Rifle, No.1 Mk III*
Bayonet, 1907 pattern (“sword bayonet”)
Thompson carbine (junior officers and senior NCO’s)
Bren LMG, Mk I or Mk I*
Vickers MMG
Boyes A/tk Rifle (the PIAT was not used in North Africa)

British 1st Parachute Brigade

Uniform

1st Pattern Denison smock
Wool collarless shirt or Aertex desert shirt
Wool Trousers, Parachutists’
Ammo boots

Equipment

1937 Pattern webbing

Web gaiters

Headgear

Jump helmet; chinstrap must be early-type leather

Maroon beret

Weapons

Rifle, No.4

Bayonet, “spike”

Sten carbine (junior officers and senior NCO’s)

Bren LMG, Mk I, Mk I*, or Mk II

Boyes A/tk Rifle (the PIAT was not used in North Africa)

Notes

Uniforms

Troops sent to the tropics were issued khaki drill shorts or the early “Bombay Bloomers”; these were often worn in the sands of Egypt and Libya, but rarely in the rockier terrain of Tunisia. Khaki drill trousers should be worn instead. Should shorts be worn, they are to be worn with hose tops.

The official pattern desert shirt was a “pull-over” style, made of loose-weave Aertex fabric, had detachable epaulettes, two pleated pockets, and long sleeves. However, numerous variations existed with fixed epaulettes, flat pockets and even short sleeves. These shirts were made, not only in Britain, but in Egypt and India, and variations from the official pattern were inevitable. There was also an Australian tropical shirt in drill cloth, not Aertex.

A replacement for the pull-over desert shirt was a button-up “bush shirt” with four pockets; it was often referred to as a “bush jacket”, although unbelted; it was worn either tucked into the trouser like a shirt, or loose, like a jacket. This item was made of Aertex cloth, not the twill of the officer’s true bush jacket. This item appears to have arrived in North Africa in late 1942 or early 1943 and is acceptable for this event.

Troops deployed to the tropics early in the War were issued a pith helmet, also known as a “solar topee”. However, these were unpopular with the troops and rarely worn in the field; they ceased to be issued in 1943.

8th Army included troops from all across the Commonwealth and Empire. A complete list of the units involved, let alone the various forms of regimental and national headgear, is beyond the scope of this document. The most common headgear was the Field Service Cap, typically in wool, although a khaki drill variant did become available.

Wool battledress was worn in the winter months and often in the cold desert nights the rest of the year. For this event, 1937-pattern is the most appropriate. Also, wool greatcoats and/or leather jerkins were commonly worn during colder weather or at night. A khaki wool jumper or pullover (what would be termed a “sweater” in the US) was a popular item in North Africa. They had a “V” neck; some had slits for the shirt epaulettes, others did not.

In 1943, a “tropical battledress” was adopted, but does not appear to have been issued to the troops until 1944 and should be avoided for this event.

Most troops in North Africa wore the standard Boots, Ammunition, or “ammo boots”. Some troops of 1st Parachute Brigade managed to retain the tall, rubber-soled jump boots developed early on for parachute troops, but these were rare (the Army decided that standard hobnailed ammo boots were acceptable for paratroops and abandoned the jump boots). Officers of 8th Army often wore sand-colored, rubber-soled suede “chukka” boots or “brothel creepers”. Irregular troops (SAS, LRDG) were fond of Arab sandals or “chapolis”.

Denims were intended to be worn over wool battledress whilst performing chores in barracks; they were never intended as warm-weather clothing. That said, interviews with veterans of 1st Parachute Brigade indicate denim trousers were worn on the jump into Sicily. While not preferred, they may be worn at this event as an expedient item.

The famous Denison smock and maroon beret of the British Airborne soldier were adopted shortly before 1st Parachute Brigade set sail for North Africa. The Parachute Regiment cap badge had not yet been adopted; troops wore the cap badge of either the Army Air Corps or their parent regiment, or no badge at all. The 1st Pattern Denison smock, with its knit cuffs, was primarily camouflaged in tan and pea green, intended for the Mediterranean. In North Africa, only jump helmets with leather chinstraps were available; the later web chinstrap is to be avoided for this event. Photographic evidence of 1st Para Bde in N. Africa only shows them fighting in wool trousers and Denison smocks. There are photos of paratroops in N. Africa wearing Aertex bush jackets and either KD or denim trousers; however, these were troops of 4th Parachute Battalion, 2nd Para Bde, training for Sicily and Italy after the fighting in N. Africa was over. While possible this method of dress was worn by 1st Para Bde late in the campaign, that is unconfirmed; the existing photos are from winter and early spring 1942/3, which was cold and surprisingly wet in Tunisia.

Equipment

The 1937 Pattern Webbing Equipment consists of the following items:

Pack (or “large pack”)

Haversack (or “small pack”)

Shoulder straps (or “L-straps”), pair

Waistbelt

Braces, pair

Basic pouches (or “general purpose pouches”), pair

Bayonet frog

Water bottle and carrier

Entrenching tool and carrier

Webbing equipment worn by 8th Army was typically soaked in salt water and scrubbed vigorously, giving it a nearly white appearance. Much of the webbing equipment issued in North Africa was made in India and South Africa, and was of poorer quality than the British equivalent.

Infantry must wear the general purpose pouches with snap closures, which were intended for Bren magazines, grenades, and 2-inch mortar bombs. The later tongue-and-loop closure was not widely available until after the war. Rifle ammunition is to be carried in bandoliers. The web ammunition carriers designed for rifle ammunition on chargers (similar to 1908 webbing) was issued to support troops, not infantry.

The early-pattern “skeleton” water bottle carrier should be used; the later “envelope” type should be avoided.

Respirators were rarely worn in North Africa.

Weapons

While the No.4 Rifle and the Sten carbine were adopted in 1942, priority of issue went to those troops preparing for the “second front”, e.g., Northern Europe. 1st Parachute Brigade were amongst the first troops to receive the new weapons and used them in North Africa; there is evidence that other elements of 1st Army may have had them as well. However, the No.4 Rifle did not reach troops of 8th Army until the Italian campaign, and even then, only to replace damaged weapons; many of the “old sweats” soldiered on with the venerable No.1 Mk III* until the end of the war.

Grooming Standards

Under normal conditions, hair was to be worn short, and the men were clean-shaven (although a moustache was permitted). Conditions in North Africa, however, were hardly normal. There was an almost constant shortage of fresh water available. For much of the North African campaign, water was issued to the men of 8th Army on the scale of one gallon per man, per day, for all purposes: drinking, laundry, grooming, vehicle maintenance, weapons maintenance (e.g., the Vickers water-cooled MG). Naturally, shaving and laundry were the first to fall by the wayside; there are stories of soldiers washing their clothes in petrol (gasoline) because it was more plentiful than water.

Troops on long operations, particularly the irregular forces such as the LRDG, ended up with a nearly-piratical appearance, with long hair and beards. Upon return from such long operations, however, the men were required to get a shave and haircut as soon as possible.

As mentioned above, 1st Parachute Brigade primarily fought in the cold, wet winter and spring of 1942-43. There is no evidence that they deviated from normal grooming standards.

For the Tunisia battle, reenactors portraying 8th Army or LRDG may choose to waive the normal grooming standards; 8th Army troops may be unshaven (i.e. showing obvious stubble) and LRDG may wear full beards. However, this must be done consistently within a unit; a bearded man surrounded by clean-shaven comrades is not acceptable. Further, if beards are worn, they must be full beards; goatees or other neatly-trimmed beards are not acceptable. If it is possible to shape a beard or shave the cheeks, then it is possible to shave the chin as well.