

MILLBANK BAGS TO THE RESCUE

Do you remember the old Millbank bag? This was a light turquoise fabric bag used the world over by the military to filter muddy water.

Commonplace in surplus stores, they were used by campers, scout groups, 'bushcrafters' and the like until supplies started to dry up. Prices increased and people were paying between £19 and £28 for new or used models from army surplus, but there are now very few left.

Turbid water is water with sediment suspended in it, so if the water that you have access to is muddy or cloudy you could have matter such as decomposing organic materials, sand, mud or silt in it. These alone can upset the balance in your digestive system, but more importantly are known to reduce the effectiveness of chemical purification.

The Millbank bag was never intended to be a complete means of purification, in the past iodine was used after filtration, later replaced by the recommendation to boil the water on a rolling boil for 10 minutes. The Millbank bag prefiltered turbid water removing any organic material and sediment. Today, even with the advances in modern purification systems the Millbank bag is just as useful and necessary. You will have heard the adage that you should always start with water that is as clean as possible, but most if not all of the systems available today to purify water have just a basic sponge pre-filter.

Sediment and organic matter hinder effective chemical treatment but this is not the only benefit of the Millbank bag, as pretreating water also reduces the wear and tear on purification systems and prevents them from clogging up. Simon Ellar, editor of this magazine said "Millbank bags are an invaluable tool when it comes to processing 'dirty' water to drink. They are particularly useful in sandy and dusty regions. When I was in the Sahara I witnessed a number of leading brand purification systems fail. This was due to the amount of sediment in the water from our well, made worse by a series of sand storms. Pre-filtering the water through a Millbank bag and careful selection of a purification system meant that for over a week I had and was able to assist others with filtered, purified water to drink – a necessity in the desert!"

How do you use them?

Simple:

1. Soak the bag thoroughly by squeezing it under water
2. Fill the bag to the top with 'dirty' water
3. Hang the bag up and allow water to run as waste until the water reaches the fill line
4. Place a collecting vessel under the bag to collect the pre-filtered water
5. Boil the collected water or use a chemical treatment or purification system to purify it
6. Raise your glass and say cheers!



The 'original' Military Millbank Bag

So, where can you get them now? A few people have tried to reproduce the bags using standard canvas, there are often some on a leading auction site which are roughly cut with a wavy line of stitching, stating that they are made from 12oz canvas, some state 'old tent canvas'. The problem is that tent fabrics, be they new or old may have been treated with chemicals for water repellency. By its very nature this fabric is designed to not let water through as the fibres expand to create a barrier to penetration by the rain. A leading retailer of surplus and new military and outdoor equipment told us that after a discussion with one of their distributors they were presented with some Millbank bag samples, but upon testing they did not function so the project was abandoned.



A selection of the failed trial bags

Rupert Brown who owns and runs a Bushcraft School in France said "I have always used and demonstrated the original military Millbank bag as part of my courses as I believe it's such a simple but effective piece of equipment". Three years ago, frustrated that the supply of the bags had dried up he started looking into manufacturing a new filter bag that would perform as well as the MOD issue bag. He said "Over the course of two years I tested every type of weave and weight of canvas and found that nothing performed as well as the original MOD canvas. What I ended up with was a pile of bags that would allow some water through, then swell and hold the water".

After much research and trying to source some old stock Millbank canvas in the UK, Rupert found that all the existing stock of canvas had been used and was no longer produced. This prompted him to trace the original weavers of the canvas and have it woven to exactly the same spec as the MOD canvas, producing a new filter bag that performs as well as the original. The advantage of the new bags is that the canvas is a more subtle brown colour and also the canvas meets the current MOD specification with regards to toxic treatments and coatings. The earlier Millbank bags had a Cuprammonium (CA) chemical treatment that is not used on the new canvas as it may be hazardous. The end result is a proven, high quality product in infinite quantities.

The bags are 100% UK made, the canvas is woven in the UK and the manufacture is UK based too!

The bags do what they say, they filter out large particulate matter and are not designed to remove bacteria or parasite eggs (Cryptosporidium). However, some fluorescent beads were used in the testing which are slightly larger than bacteria, mimicking



The Brown Filter Bag



The Label has clear instructions for use and care on the rear



UK based manufacture

parasite eggs and these were decreased by two thirds in number by filtration. So whilst all water passed through the bags should be boiled, chemically treated or passed through a water purification system, it is good to know that they are already assisting and taking the pressure off the next step.

So what makes these bags the real deal?

- Same proven spec as the Military version
- Same fabric as the Military version
- Rot resistant fabric
- Brand new and in good supply
- Patrol (Group) size available
- Durable, Compact, Lightweight, Unbreakable
- No fixed lifespan
- Length of paracord 56" to stand in as an emergency boot lace along with a multitude of other uses...



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