

Mess kit

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A **mess kit** is a collection of silverware and cookware used during camping and backpacking, as well as extended military campaigns. There are many varieties of mess kits available to consumers, and militaries commonly provide and have historically provided them to their troops.

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United States Army mess kits, pre-World War I and during World War I, exhibited in the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Civilian camping mess kit

A civilian mess kit, which may serve from one person to a family of eight, is a collection of common kitchen wares designed to be lightweight and easy to store. Such kits are typically constructed from aluminium, though enameled steel is also common, and some items (such as cutlery or plates) may be made of more expensive materials, such as titanium, to further save weight, or of plastic. A civilian mess kit usually contains at least a skillet, a kettle (which may also serve as a coffee pot), a plate, a cup (typically a Sierra cup), and cutlery. Utensils usually consist of forks, knives, and spoons, as at home, but may be replaced by specialty items like sporks or folding chopsticks. Kits usually come with either folding handles or a detachable handle which can be used with other cookware. Items are stored compactly by nesting them in other components (like a Russian doll); the whole kit may be placed in a stuff sack.

Military mess kit

While functionally similar to a one-man civilian mess kit, military mess kits are designed to be even more compact, using their space as efficiently as possible. Thus lids will almost always be used for preparing, cooking, and/or eating, and usually come in two or three pieces. As such, it may sacrifice certain features, or use other features to complement it.

When in a large camp, it is common for soldiers to use either normal dining wares, or a multi-compartment mess tray similar to a TV Dinner tray, but much larger.

U.S. Military mess kit

In the years prior to World War II, two factors influenced the design of the U.S. Army's M-1926, M-1932, and M-1942 mess kits. First, unlike most other armies of the day, the U.S. mess kit was designed to serve men queuing in feeding lines and served in unit formations from large garrison-type field kitchens when not in actual daily combat operations. Secondly, U.S. soldiers in the field were never expected to either forage or to completely cook their rations, even in daily combat or frontline service. Instead, when not used as a serving tray for company-size or larger units, the mess kit was used to re-heat pre-measured servings of the canned Reserve Ration. After 1938, it was used for the new C-ration, a canned combat ration with several menu precooked or dried food items. Today, though canned and dried combat rations have further evolved into the MRE, these can now be self-heated, and thus only a containment tray is required for most units.

The U.S. Army's flat ovoid M-1932 wartime-issue mess kit was made of galvanized steel (stainless steel in the later M-1942), and was a divided pan-and-body system. When opened, the mess kit consisted of two halves: the deeper half forms a shallow, flat-bottom, ovoid *Meat Can Body*, designed to receive the *Meat Ration*, the meat portion of the prewar canned *Reserve Ration*. The *Meat Can Body*, with its folding handle extended, can double as a crude skillet. The *Mess Kit Plate* (lid) is even more shallow, and is pressed to form two compartments, with a center divide wide enough to accommodate the folding handle. The plate also has a very secure ring that is held in place by friction.

When stored, the *Mess Kit Plate* is placed on top of the ovoid *Meat Can Body*, while the stamped folding handle is folded over the inverse side of the plate's center divider, and latched onto the edge of the *Body*. It is further secured folding the lid's ring toward the center of the mess kit, which locks onto another latch. In use, each piece may be used individually, or as a unitary three-compartment mess tray, accomplished by sliding the lid-plate's center divider onto the folding handle, and securing it to the handle by the ring-and-latch mechanisms. When latched, the kit can be held in a ready position by the user in one hand to receive U.S. Army's 'A' or 'B' field kitchen rations. As the soldier passed along the mess line, food service personnel would dole out hot items first, often meat followed by vegetables,



Armed Forces of the Philippines mess kit similar to US military mess kits



Open mess kit contains skillet, food tray, canteen and cup

potatoes and other side dishes, ostensibly separated by the tray dividers. Dessert was piled in the center of the accumulated portions — if the soldier was lucky. While a soldier could use the handled *Meat Can Body* from his kit to cook raw food, it is really too shallow and thin to serve as an effective skillet, and was usually restricted to heating the canned *Meat Ration*. After 1938, the *Meat Can Body* was used to heat the meat and vegetable component of the *C-ration*, or to reconstitute breakfast items such as *C-ration* powdered eggs.

To complement the mess kit, soldiers used a stamped cup especially molded to fit over the bottom of the U.S. Army's standard one-quart (950 ml) canteen. This cup could be used as a boiling vessel, when boiling water for coffee, or for heating or reconstituting soup and other foods. During World War II, units preparing heated combat rations in the *Meat Can Body* or canteen cup mainly used locally procured combustible materials or Sterno fuel units of jellied alcohol. The latter could be stored within an issued folding stove for deployment when heating food, soup, or coffee in the field.

After World War II, a specially-designed Esbit stove was issued to fit over the cup-and-canteen unit, similar to designs used in other armies.

German and Japanese Army mess kits

During World War II, the German and Japanese Imperial Army used mess kits that were similar in some ways, and different in others. In storage, their dimension were similar to the American mess kit's storage dimension; however, instead of splitting along the length of the side, they were split along the width, around two-thirds of the body, creating a pot with handle and a cup.

The German Mess kit (Essgeschirr) was designed in 1908. Originally the base held two liters, marked into 1/4 sections, and the lid holding another 1/4. This model replaced the 1850 Kochgeschirr. The new 1908 Essgeschirr was made of aluminium and not designed to be cooked in but to have food distributed from field kitchens.

The early models of the 1908 were painted in a distinct matte black. In the year 1910 improvements were made to the handle, which was no longer made of aluminium but of galvanized iron. The aluminum handles conducting the heat had gotten hot in the soldiers' hands. The 1908 model was in production till the year 1940. In the year 1931 the Reichswehr changed the Mess kit by making the bottom smaller, holding only 3/4 liter. With only very minor changes this model remained in service with the German military (both east and west) as well as with the German disaster relief services (THW), the disaster relief models being painted gray.

They were mainly used in conjunction with a folding Esbit stove, which, when folded, could store Esbit pellets and occupy a very small area. The German mess kit was usually held together with a leather strap, which was used to fasten the mess kit to the soldier's Bread bag in combat order or assault pack of the webbing equipment in marching order.



Bundeswehr mess kit



Japanese Mess kit of cylinder type

The Japanese Army enlisted men's mess kit, or *Han gou* differed from other armies' mess kits in several respects. No attempt was made to conform the *Han gou* to the Japanese one-liter M-94 oval water bottle, which was larger than that issued to the armies of some other nations. The *Han gou* consisted of a kidney-shaped, brown-painted, oval-bottom, heavy-gauge aluminum rice cooker pot with lid, containing a soup pot, lid, and tray which stored inside the pot. All of the lids also doubled as serving trays for side dishes of pickled vegetables or other items.^[1] With its thick-gauge aluminum construction and individual serving trays, the *Han gou* was ideal for cooking rice, fish, stews, and vegetables (frequently obtained from local sources).^[2] A simplified model, the *Ro*, was introduced later in the war, which lacked the soup pot insert.

A couple of hours before darkness, Japanese soldiers would supplement their rice and other rations by catching fish, collecting peppers and legumes, then cooking them, either using open fires or with one or two cans of jellied alcohol.^[3] The *Han gou* also facilitated food service to men feeding individually or in small groups (while on operations, the Japanese Army did not generally use large field kitchens and messes capable of feeding company-size or larger units).^[3] In addition to its usefulness as a cooking vessel, the *Han gou* was useful for storing and reheating rice.^[4] It was later adopted by many members of the Chinese Army which had captured Japanese equipment, and later, by the Viet Minh.

Soviet/Russian mess kit

During the Great Patriotic War the Soviet army mess kit was a two-piece design similar to that used by the Wehrmacht forces that consisted of a large main canteen part, and a smaller saucepan component that also doubled as the mess tin lid. The kit also had a wire handle which many soldiers used to hang the mess kit from their web equipment or backpack. This design was supplemented in the mid-1980s with a second design that featured a metal water bottle held in the middle. The next layer of the set was a large canteen / cooking pot with a wire handle, then a smaller saucepan-type component with a folding metal handle. This last component fitted over the base of the larger cooking pot, the handle was then folded up and clipped over the cooking pot and the lip of the water bottle. The mess set was sometimes issued with a pouch, although this was by no means certain and many soldiers simply hung it onto their equipment from the wire handle. Officers were often issued a satchel-type bag for their mess kits in keeping with their smart image. This latest design of mess kit continues to be used today in the army of the Russian Federation and doubtless is still used in the armies of former Soviet republics.

Swedish mess kit

The Swedish (m/42) mess kit is a complete package, similar in design to a German mess kit, but larger. It breaks down into two parts, the first part being a steel stand/windshield/wood-burning stove (with a Svea alcohol burner unit), whilst the other part consists of two pots (usually aluminium). The larger pot has a wire handle, or bail, for suspending over a fire; the smaller has hinged handle. The two pots nest together and stow inside the windshield. The set is completed by a small plastic fuel bottle. It is recommended that the fuel bottle and burner unit be stored separately, outside the pots (since alcohol may otherwise seep out). A Swedish army plastic mug can also be fitted inside the pots.

The stove works very well with small sticks, wood chippings and pine cones as fuel. When using the alcohol burner, the Svea burner unit may advantageously be replaced with a Trangia replacement burner, which appears to be more efficient.

Swiss mess kit

The Swiss mess kit (French *gamelle*) design is closer to the Canteen-cup system design: a tall, one liter canteen, with a stove (burns woodchips, etc.) that cups the bottom of the bottle and a cup/pot that goes over the canteen; the cup can fit inside the stove, better heating its contents.

British Mess Kit

1908 Pattern Mess Tin

In the First World War, the British Army used a metal, two-piece, kidney shaped mess tin.

The 1874-model was made of tinned steel and had a "D" plan view with rounded corners. The tray or cup piece had a folding handle that opened to the side. The tray also functioned as a deep lid for the pan. This change from the 1854-model allowed the use of the narrow and tighter curved side of the cup rim for drinking. It also permitted the tray to briefly be held over a fire. The corners of the square shaped bail were also more rounded.

The geometry of the older British mess tins was substantially different. The 1854-model was "D" shaped in plan view and was made of tinned iron. It was fabricated from front and back panels of sheet metal. The tray or cup nested inside the pan. The handle of the tray or cup folded inside but was on the flat "back side" forcing the user to drink from the broadly curved front. The lid was intermediate in depth, could be used as a plate, and set down securely on the pan. The bail was square shaped and the corners were tight curves.

The 1810 (1813 – 14)-model is semicircular or "C" shaped in plan view and is made of tinned iron. The tray of the 1810-model had no handle but nested inside the pan or lower section. The lid covered the pan and had a pull ring for easy removal, but apparently had no other intended use. The bail was curved.

1937 Pattern Mess Tin

A new pattern of mess tin was developed for the Web Equipment 1937 Pattern, which was a nested, two-piece rectangular mess tin with long, folding handles. An enamelled tin mug was used for drinking hot liquids. The water bottle of the 1908 Pattern Web Equipment was unchanged, though the web carrier was changed to incorporate the 1-inch-wide brace ends of the 1937 gear.

Contemporary

The British Armed Forces generally use mess tins for cooking in the field, although with the British Armed Forces primarily using Boil in the Bag rations, many soldiers prefer a single large metal mug, as one item can be used to cook food and to make and consume hot drinks, thereby cutting down on equipment weight. As such cups fit beneath the standard water bottle, they also take up less space in the soldiers' equipment. The mess tin or cup is usually used with the standard issue hexamine stove.



Swiss Army "gamelle"

Canadian Mess Kit

Historical

Canadian mess equipment was similar to that used by the British in the first half of the 20th Century, i.e. that issued with 1908 and 1937 Pattern Web Equipment. Canada issued its own 1951 Pattern Web Equipment, 1964 Pattern Web Equipment and 1982 Pattern Web Equipment.

Contemporary

The use of aluminium in mess equipment has been identified as a health hazard, and plastics and disposables have become more common. In particular, the use of Individual Meal Packs (IMP) have become common, with chemical cooking bags. Messing from hayboxes/fresh rations in the field is often accomplished with disposable mess gear (i.e. paper plates).


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