

Paint Your Helmet!

RAF “Battle Bowler” Restoration – A Rough Guide.

Introduction

Sorry about the main heading & you can put away the body paint folks. We are talking Brodie Helmets here - AKA “Tommy Helmets”, or “Battle Bowlers”.

Putting aside the issues over what colour helmets the RAF actually used during WW2 (in short, they used all sorts) there are few if any in what might be deemed the more authentic/appropriate/original RAF grey livery about and those that are will probably be showing their age and perhaps be a bit shabby for re-enacting (or alternatively be prohibitively expensive). So how were we to bolster numbers for the Operations Room display (as not everyone wants to bother carrying a lump of metal hung off their gas mask bag at other events) without breaking the bank? I would add at this point I was recently offered some scabby looking battle bowlers by a dealer for between £40 and £50. When I picked myself up from the floor I walked away.

The solution was to buy cheap and poor condition examples, some just the shells, and put a bit of work in to restore them, so here is the fruit of the experience gained.

Sourcing Helmets

Essentially just get them where you can at the right price. They are out there but it probably means avoiding “antiques” shops where I have seen them at equally toe curling prices to the aforementioned. They do turn up at car boot sales but the bigger Militaria events/fairs and some smaller events like Twinwood Turnout are worth a look.

Just one important point before we go on -

DO NOT deface our countries heritage just because you need a helmet in a different colour!

Buy/think carefully. Is this helmet before you of historic importance? If in doubt ASK first.

Even rather faded or worn helmets with unique or rare markings on the outside are valued by collectors, if you get one cheap sell it to someone who will appreciate it, buy another to renovate and get yourself a few beers or bottles of wine (if you are lucky) with the profit.

Helmet Shells

That’s the metal part and apologies for going a bit “Anorak” on you here. The ones with the 3 or 4 perforations in the side of the brim are “home front” and wouldn’t stop much in the way of shrapnel, however you don’t want them to serve that purpose now do you? So, the lighter weight of these can be welcome when it has been hanging off your gas mask bag all day at some event you have been trudging round. Don’t knock them because any shell of the vintage will do fine and I am informed that “home front” were at one time or another issued to some service personnel when “front line” ones got a bit short on supply. The types were used all over the place, there was such a shortage at one point home front ones were shipped out for some unfortunates to use in the field (some might say that equipment supply practices don’t change much with the times). I have recently seen what I believe to be a genuine painted WW2 RAF one which indeed had the perforations. I wasn’t buying it so there was no hard sell and there was a history with it so I’d say Home Front will do nicely, they

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just dent a bit easier if you are rough with them (but then the dents also come out with less effort too! Just a shell should be really cheap. I paid a fiver each for 3 of them.

Liners

Shabby tin hats are easily sorted but liners (the bit that goes inside and sits on your head) are different. These and chin straps (more on that story later) do deteriorate and can sometimes be way too small. If you get a shabby hat with a good liner great but if you just buy the hat then liners are still available, try Soldier of Fortune - <http://www.sofmilitary.co.uk/> - they are very helpful, but don't try their patience too much. Last check, repro liner was about £20 and a “used” ex Greek Army one (no, really!) just a fiver. The latter were a bit shabby when received but cleaned up OK.

Chin straps

Many are not aware that it's metal springs that do the stretchy bit, not elastic so it's generally the canvass strap that goes first. New ones are amazingly still available for about a fiver. Let me know if you need a source (I'm not on commission).

The bottom Line

So the mathematicians among you will have worked out that you can at time of going to press, get yourself a serviceable helmet with new chinstrap for about £15. If you are offered one for this (or even £20) with a decent liner and chinstrap snatch their hand off.

Renovation

To adopt the Nuffield learning principal, just one important point before we go on.....

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The insides

OK we have a scabby old tin hat we really have to sort out in order to go with our nice RAF uniform. If there is a liner, this unbolts along with the bit of (often crumbly) foam rubber. This cross shaped pad can be replaced with HD foam and you wont need me to tell you how to do that (& if you do don't bother going any further). Liners do get a bit flaky as well – the fabric's leatherette (?) facing is often the problem. Sometimes you can improve this with silicone treatment – like that used on car plastics, not the black stuff unless you want a poor substitute for Grecian 2000 – but if it is really bad think replacement. Does your mum/wife/sister/close friend have a sewing machine?

The outsides

This is the satisfying manly bit, no textiles, you just need a bit of car body repair skill. Most likely your tin bowl will have damaged paint and some (?) rust. Maybe even some dents you can set about levelling out with a hardwood block and a hammer. As long as it's not perforated (or wafer thin) it's salvageable. Have a look at the photos, one of those shown below was pitted like an orange peel all over due to rust but it has come up quite nice.

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Before doing anything, if the paintwork is basically sound – STOP – see the above warning. Do you really want to go on? If so you only need to do a clean, (degrease) rub down and respray.

Strip back to bare metal any helmet that has badly damaged paint, particularly if it has had a few repaints in the past because you need to have a decent, reasonably even, base for painting. Use Nitromores or the Mangers equivalent (watch the safety warnings – its not nice stuff at all!), Clean back with white spirit. Try to clean carefully and retain the profile of the date stamped in the underside of the rim.

If it's not rusty just prime and make ready for the top coat. If rust is present use Hammerite's KURUST – it's brilliant stuff and primes for the topcoat so saves buying a primer. Don't mix paint types – maintain compatibility.

The Respray

Now there is probably a whole article to be had on RAF battle bowlers if you want the full SP but basically as I understand it they used what they had, so they might have even had the same pattern as the Army but let's go all RAF shall we? Best I can do is to suggest you grab hold of a Holts Spray can of Rover Tempest Grey. It looks the part and I have never had any adverse remarks so.....

OK, its gloss and maybe you don't want a shiny hat (cos it looks a bit daft unless you are a Bobby maybe) Simple – last coat, hold the can away and spray light & even – magic, a finish somewhere around silk to matt. That's the finish you don't want when spraying car panels by the way. Remember lots of light coats are better and will avoid the dreaded “paint sag”.

Et Voila! Have a look below at the illustrations.



A Motley bunch of sad tin bowls

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This situation dictates stripping back to bare metal and using kurust.



Perforations (3 or 4) indicate non front line helmet. This one was pretty rusty and completely devoid of paint.

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Same hat, same camera, same light – Kurust doing its thing on the rusty one!



Primed and awaiting top coat.

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Just a bit toooooo shiny. Semi looks better – below.



This was the rustiest and worst of the bunch. Now with a new centre bolt (from Soldier of Fortune). The bolts need trimming to length. Bit uncomfortable/risky if you don't.

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Liners can be a problem – this one is good but quite small.

Sponge inserts can be restored with some silicone car rubber treatment (the clear stuff unless you are going grey and want some help)



The above left original helmet liner replaced – on the right is an Ex Greek Army liner, not precisely the same but.....very cheap at a fiver! Both fitted with new chin straps.