

## **HYGIENE**

By Oliver Cameron  
with Ole Wik

### **What did you do about bathing?**<sup>1</sup>

I learned what a spit bath is in Yugoslavia.<sup>2</sup> We stayed overnight at a farmhouse. An old man and two women past middle age were living there. I could hear them in the kitchen part. The floor was hard, and I had no air mattress of course, so I was ready to get up. I went into the kitchen. There was no door, just a doorway.

The old man was getting ready to go out and do some chores. He grabbed a piece of cloth and draped it over something there. He took a big mouthful of water, spit a little into his cupped hands, and rinsed them off. Then he spit another squirt into his hands and washed his face, or at least wet it. He did the same to his hair and the back of his neck. Then he grabbed the cloth, wiped himself off, and was ready to go.

He was dripping some water the whole time he was doing that. He was leaning over somewhat, and kept moving around. The water dripped at various places on the dirt floor and kept it damp. It probably helped to keep the dust down and to prevent muddiness. That soil was of the type that packs down tight if you keep it damp. They kept it swept.

### **How about washing the rest of your body?**

I was 28 days walking through Yugoslavia, and in that time I never had my clothes off. If you have to, you can go a long time without washing the rest of your body. It helps if you are fortunate enough to have a change of underwear.

There were some women with us, and ordinarily we had no privacy. If you were in a barn and sleeping in the hay or something, and if you had the energy, you could take the time to rub yourself somewhat. But when you were traveling on no food and were exhausted all the time, those niceties just didn't get done.

The one exception was my socks. I had GI boots or shoes that were large enough that I could easily fit two pairs of socks inside of them. The rest of the crew didn't carry their GI shoes on the flight. They had electric suits and electrically heated boots inside of an overshoe type of thing that wasn't ideal for walking. They kept slipping on your feet and making blisters.

After we had gone for a couple of days, the partisans took some rough measurements of our feet—not mine, but the others'—and had shoes made up out of semi-tanned leather. I don't know how they treated it, but it was not much different from rawhide.

When they brought those shoes, there were none that Darrin, a huge fellow, could get his feet into. My feet were a couple of sizes smaller than his, and there was one pair of homemade shoes that I could get on. They were a bit short and a bit wide, but I could make out with them, so I gave my shoes to Darrin.

Then I had to find some kind of material, folding up bandanas or cardboard or whatever I could find to ...

At the first place we came to after we got those boots, there were some extra cardboard boxes. I didn't have a whole lot of fabric that I could spare, but I stuffed the shoes. I put in some cardboard insoles that had to be replaced quite frequently, and then on top of my arches I put whatever I could get so that I could pull the lacings up tight. That way my feet wouldn't work back in forth in the shoes, endwise.

The cloth material was part of that, and also my socks. Whenever I got a chance, I would wash them out. We didn't have soap, of course, but water is a pretty good solvent.

**How did you bathe at the lake?**

All you need is a wash basin and a towel or something to stand on, so you don't make too big a mess on the floor. I also used a washcloth. I'd heat water, put it in a big bowl, and take a sponge bath. Then I'd rinse with another cloth and just plain water. I didn't use a whole lot of soap. My skin seems to be allergic to soap.

**I put a little baking soda into the water, and skip the soap.**

At one time I had a five-gallon bucket of ashes. I made a little depression in the ashes and filled the bucket with water, to the top of the ashes. In that depression, that water was reasonably clear, and I could dip a cloth into it. That did more or less the same as the baking soda.

**Ash water is very alkaline. An alkali plus a fat, such as skin oil, makes soap.**

**How did you wash your hair?**

The same thing goes for that. I have a big stainless steel bowl, maybe 2' in diameter and 8 or 10" deep. It has a flat bottom, not near as big as the top. I use that for both bathing and for washing my hair.

**Did you use store-bought shampoo?**

Nothing commercial. I just use Ivory bar soap.

**Ivory soap made my scalp itch.**

Most soap makes my skin itch, but I never had it make my scalp itch.

**I just used more baking soda, maybe a couple of tablespoons. I'd get the water as hot as my scalp would stand, put about half a gallon in the hand basin, wet my hair, and scrub with my fingertips. I found that if I melted snow or caught rainwater, I could actually raise a lather by the action of the mild alkali on the natural oils in the hair. I'd rinse in clear water three or four times.**

**The soft water made all the difference. I also learned to use an enameled basin, not an aluminum one.**

I use rainwater in the summertime and snow water in winter, so I have mostly soft water for bathing. If I'm out on the trail, I seldom get around to bathing at all, even if I am out for a month. But I have a couple of bandannas sewn end to end, long enough to make a towel that can reach across my back and shoulders. I just dampen it and rub down when I undress, and wash it out. That's good enough until I get home.

I quite often use ashes. I'm not very fastidious. I put a few pieces of charcoal in the water and let it soak a little while, then lift it out, and use the water.

**Where did you learn that?**

I don't know.

**What did you use for a slop bucket?**

I had a five gallon bucket that had held maybe dog feed. I kept the feed in the cache, and when I was running low in the house, I'd take two five gallon buckets, fill them with feed, and bring them in.

I had another five-gallon plastic container that sat on top of one of those. That was my spill pail. It had two slots, one on each side, cut in such a way that I could set the rim of the hand basin upright and let it drain. The basin would also sit level on the bucket and seal it if it was getting a little stinky.

I tied a rag around the end of a stick and hung it up in a tree where I dumped that stuff. I'd spill out all but a gallon or so, and then use that swab to get the scum off the bottom and sides. Then I'd dump it all out. If sun was shining, I'd leave the bucket where the sun could shine in, dry it up, and more or less sterilize it.

I also had some Betadine, an antibiotic [*antiseptic*] used a lot in hospitals. It comes in fairly tall containers—maybe something more than a pint. There was also a Betadine scrub that was thicker and more concentrated. That was good to carry on the sled on in my pack whenever I was doing butchering, because if you happened to cut yourself or scratch yourself, you could get a virulent infection that was hard to clear up.

I used just a little bit to rub around on my hands if I was out. But if I had water and could wash my hands, I put a little squirt into my wash water.

If I was at home and dressing small game or cutting meat, I especially liked to use some Betadine in the water. I fixed it up first, before I got to work, so that when I came in, I could wash my hands and knives right away. When I put that water into the spill pail, it tended to sterilize that too. When I was a youngster, we used to use Lysol that way.

If I was out and had done something like that, moss was my preference for wiping my hands, cleaning up my knife blade, and so forth. Moss is an antibiotic. It's not good to wipe your hands on grass, especially some kinds of grass that grow in damp places. They have sharp edges, and you can end up with little scratches on your hands.

**What did you use for drinking water?**

Where the camp is, we sometimes get a real good fall of snow. Then there'll be a while without snow. If you cut down into the snowbank and get a cross section of the way the snow built up, you'll find definite horizons with darker colored, dirty snow. Some of it will be soot from fires and so forth.

If I wanted snow for laundry, I didn't pay so much attention to that. But for drinking and cooking, I would dig a hole down through the deepest snowdrift I could find, and shovel out between the layers, discarding the layer that was dirty.

I usually try to get the clean snow that's down close to the ground. Snow near the bottom is older and more crystallized, and has more water in it than the fresher snow nearer the top.

#### What did you use for a snow container?

I used a bucket or a dishpan or whatever I happened to have. If you fill a tapered bucket with snow, pack it down somewhat, and set it on the stove, the snow in the bottom will melt before the rest of it slides down into the bottom. The bottom of your bucket can then overheat. You need to be aware of that, and use a big spoon or a stick to keep the snow pushed down against the bottom.

Once you get some melt water in the bottom, you can add more snow to it. If there's enough water to saturate that snow, it will melt a lot quicker. Just keep adding more snow until the container is full, or until you get what you need.

There's usually no place to get really good snow except among the trees, and then there will be spruce needles and so forth. Sometimes you get a little dab and another and another, but there's so much trash in it that you need to strain it through a cloth before you can use it. Then it doesn't always taste so good. That's why I would cut down into the snow and try to find a layer 6, 8, or even twelve inches thick that all fell during one major storm.

I have an area around my place that's big enough that I know where the drifts build up around the buildings. I just get snow out of those drifts, and then strain it.

I have a couple of galvanized metal garbage cans. In the springtime, I fill them up with snow before it gets too wet and is too far gone. At that time of year it's a bummer to get to the lake, because the trail is getting punchy. A couple of those 30-gallon garbage cans give me some extra water to use until the snow is melted and the trails are a little better.

Along the same line, I had a neighbor who didn't have garbage cans. In the springtime he laid out a tarp and propped up the edges on a framework of logs. He'd shovel that full of snow in the springtime.

I have a reservoir, sort of a shallow pit, where the water is about 18" deep. The dirt of the pit is thrown up on the edges, and the pit is lined with a tarp. I have some wooden channels that catch the drip off the cache roof when it's raining or the snow is melting, and that fills the little pond. I suppose it holds maybe 200 or 300 gallons of water altogether. I use that water mostly for laundry and whatnot. Sometimes it tastes all right and sometimes it doesn't, depending on what's on the roof, how often it rains, and so forth.

I have two caches up in the air. One of them is the only building that has a roof suitable for catching water. It has a metal roof. The other buildings have plastic tarps or a couple of layers of Visqueen<sup>3</sup> covered with sod and so forth. That is not a suitable way to catch water.

The other cache is covered with several layers of plastic tarps. When I put it up, I tied the edges of the tarp down to the floor of the cache, which extends out a little bit beyond the poles that it is laid on. The water runs down and drips off of that tarp. I have a trough on one side that catches it pretty well. On the other side there are a few places where it tends to run down a little more than at other place, and I will put a barrel or a five-gallon bucket under those places as well.

**Do you ever use lake water for drinking purposes?**

Not ordinarily, without boiling it.

**Do they have that *Giardia* out there?**

Yes.

In Norway, most of the lakes have acid in the water. They laid that to industrial pollution at certain times that was coming in from other areas. We were trying to leach the acid out of reindeer moss so that it could be used as people food. Since we were using litmus-type paper to test the acidity, we realized that we could get only so much of that acid out, because the water was acid to start with.

I suspect that would also have something to do with how rapidly plain iron would rust if it was used in that water.

In the springtime I usually collect birch sap. I've also drunk a lot of swamp tea—that brownish water that's been lying with moss, etc. There again I usually boiled it.

Without good water, you're at quite a handicap.

**How did you do laundry?**

I have a kind of clothes plunger, a cone shaped thing. I would usually soak my clothes in a tub, put some soap in the water, work it in with that plunger, and let it soak overnight. I also have a scrub board. Clothes that are really dirty or pitchy take strong soap and a little extra rubbing.



Laundry "Stomper" Plunger, in common use in the 1930s.

Image source: <https://www.lehmans.com/p-2643-rapid-laundry-washer.aspx>

When I was younger, every service station had a tub with a hand-cranked wringer on it. Those wringers had a wooden frame and hard rubber rollers. In some places the service station attendant would wash your windshield, but in the earlier days the customers did it themselves. They'd take a rag out of the tub, crank it through the wringer, and wash their own windshields.

I have one of those wringers. It had been discarded long ago, but I rebuilt it using local woods. I even had to make a wooden bearing or two. It's been working now for several years.



Simple wooden clothes wringer

Image source: <http://www.etsy.com/listing/99187840/primitive-antique-lovell-clothes-wringer>

I rinse the clothes, run them through the wringer into another water, and run them through again. I'm not too particular, actually. Things don't have to be really white. If you get the sweat out of them, that's the main thing.

When I haven't had laundry soap, I've used lye. I've never made soap, except helping my mother as a child. That's a pioneer skill, but I think there's an aspect of that that is not well known. Those pioneers were quite often struggling for something to eat. Fat is a very valuable addition to the diet, especially when it's hard to get carbohydrates, so you don't make soap out of fat that is needed for food.

The first pioneers didn't have enough soap to last for long. They wouldn't have had an abundance of fat, and unless they were raising fatted animals, they might not have had any. So laundry was often done with just diluted lye, from ashes.

So you save your ashes. You can make a regular ash hopper, drill some little holes in the bottom, pour some water on the ashes, and catch the water that runs down through.

Ordinarily I fill a five-gallon bucket with ashes, pack them down, and then fill the bucket with water until the water comes to the top of the ashes. I let it set, and then scoop a little of a bowl-shaped hole in the top of the ashes. The water that comes in there has enough lye in it so that you can use it just like soap.

You mentioned a few days ago that sweat and body fluids have some of the other ingredients you need for making soap. When I use ash lye for laundry, it doesn't suds up like commercial suds do, but it cuts the grease.

This is a good place to mention that I always have a use for my ashes. They are very valuable as fertilizer. The only thing it cost me to use ashes for laundry was the fact that when I used them that way, I had a little less to put in the garden.

### What did you do about toileting?

In the summer the problem with using an outdoor outhouse is mosquitoes, and in the winter, it's the cold.

One method, since I'm living alone and not near neighbors, was just to squat and crap on some layers of newspaper, catalogs, or junk mail, that sort of thing, and burn it. I catch the urine in a small container,

In the summer I crapped in a big cutoff plastic bottle, and peed in another one. I'd put a handful of grass or paper in the container, crap on it, then take it out and dump it.

Eventually I made a toilet seat for a five-gallon bucket and had a deluxe commode. In the summertime I had a kind of Quonset shed covered with a tarp and I kept it there; in the wintertime, in the house.

When it was half full of wet and dry material, I would take it out and dump it. I figured that someday I might want to use that for compost, but I never have.

In the summer I would cut grass and put a layer in the bucket every time I emptied it. I'd take a little jug of water, rinse the bucket after dumping it, and then put two or three inches of grass in the bottom. That made the dumping quite easy, and the chlorophyll in the grass seemed to neutralize the odor to some extent.

Sometimes when folks figure out that in the North a honey bucket is the only way, why, they'll figure it out.

I been around Eskimos quite a bit, and out in camp, and I never saw any of them with toilet paper. Finally I asked one, "How do you wipe your butt?" He said, "We use a snowball."

### What did they do when there was no snow?

I suppose they used some vegetation. I don't really know.

One time when we were walking through Yugoslavia, we were out in a huge open area that had been grazed off very short. Paper was something hard to come by, although I managed to have some part of the time, but on that occasion I was completely out. I went off to one side, behind a little hump, but there was absolutely nothing to use for TP. So I did the next best thing. I wiped with my finger, wiped my finger on the ground, and got by all right. I washed my hands at the first opportunity.

When I was a kid, we never had toilet paper. There were western magazines made out of cheap paper. Those cheap magazines were the best material we had, and were quite adequate.

If we had to use a catalog, the pages were thinner, and it took a lot of wrinkling and rubbing back and forth to make them usable.

I used to cut squares of paper out of the thinner pages of a Sears catalog, put them in the back pocket of my jeans, and let the normal activity of iglu building rub them down and soften them.

Some of the Iditarod racers save Kraft grocery bags then they're getting ready. They cut them into small squares and crinkle and rub them to make them flexible, and carry a package or sack of that on their sled. That's what they use rather than toilet paper.

A dog feed bag is made of several layers of paper. The inside layers are just the brown paper that is quite suitable for that use, and of course people with a bunch of dogs have a good supply of that.

When I first went out to the lake, I used dog feed bags. After I was settled out there and was getting resupplied, I used toilet paper, but not the way many people do. They wrap a whole bunch around their hand, use it once, and then get another bunch. I'm conservative—it is paper, and it is made out of trees.

We had some house guests for about a week one time. I had a toilet with a fairly good sized pit. They used a tremendous amount of TP and dumped paper on top of their crap, and the next time, they'd pee on it and it would freeze. Soon after they left, I realized what was happening. I had to go and punch all that wet paper down as good as I could. When the ground thawed, I had to move the toilet.

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1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) Oliver had been aboard a bomber that crash-landed in Yugoslavia during World War II.

3) "Visqueen" is a brand of polyethylene plastic sheeting, and has become a generic description for any plastic sheeting. It is commonly between 4 and 10 mils thick and is available in clear, opaque, and black. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visqueen>)