

OFFBEAT



SNUGPAK

Reprinted with permission from
S.W.A.T. Magazine

To order a Softie Merlin 3 Online [CLICK HERE](#)

BY BRENT T. WHEAT

Choosing a sleeping bag for serious field use is an exercise in trade-offs. With increasing warmth comes more weight and bulk so that it often becomes a choice between comfort during the night versus comfort during the day when the bag is inside a pack on your back.

The two choices of sleeping bag insulation are waterfowl down and synthetic fibers. Down is nature's perfect lightweight insulation, but becomes useless when wet. Synthetic fibers are better in many situations, especially where moisture may become a problem, but many times they are heavier and bulkier than down. However, there is one bag on the market that offers the light weight and minimal size of a down bag and the advantages of synthetic fill the Snugpak line of sleeping bags.

Snugpak bags are used extensively by the British military and have gone to war in several places around the globe. The bags have been available in this country for several years and after repeatedly marveling at catalog pictures of the lightweight bags stuffed into tiny sacks smaller than a loaf of bread, S.W.A.T. decided to ask the important question, "Do they really work?"

Our test bag was the workhorse and lightest-weight bag of the Snugpak line, an olive-drab "Softie Merlin 3." At just twenty-seven ounces, the Merlin 3 is a general-purpose, three-season bag intended for use in the majority of weather conditions down to freezing. The name Softie comes from the insulation of the same name, made by the Swiss company Hardi and used exclusively by Snugpak.

Softie is a synthetic fiberfill that claims to have thirty percent more loft than comparable insulations, translating into more warmth for less weight. Snugpak then uses the insulation in a "No Stitch Through" construction system that reduces cold spots by eliminating exterior seams. The bags also feature a reflective barrier in the insulation that the manufacturer claims to add at least fifteen percent more warmth with virtually no gain in weight or size. The barrier looks very similar to a lightweight space blanket, but does not affect the breathability of the bag. This layer reflects heat without making the sleeper feel they have spent the night in a plastic garbage sack.

After using the bag nearly twenty nights over a period of months in conditions ranging from drafty military barracks to hot summer nights in a hammock to the frosty bare ground, the weight versus warmth question is settled-the Merlin bag passes the test with flying colors.

Determining the warmth rating of a bag is a subjective matter and ratings from manufacturers should only be considered as guidelines. However, the Merlin bag was tested in nighttime temperatures ranging from seventy-



five down to forty degrees Fahrenheit and it appears that the manufacturer's suggested range of comfortable sleeping down to forty-one degrees is accurate for the average person. The thirty degree "extreme" rating might indeed prove extreme without further clothing, such as a stocking cap and long underwear.

The only real concern about the bag is sizing. To save weight and bulk the bag dimensions are cut to bare minimums, leaving little spare room inside, especially along the lower chest. In fact, sleeping with your arms alongside your body is nearly impossible if you are a larger individual such as the six foot tall, 240-pound author.

There seems to be almost an excess of space in the upper third of the bag, making it most comfortable to sleep on the side with the arms crossed in front of the chest. Indeed the bag almost seems cut for this precise position. The hood is very ample and makes it easy to adjust the bag opening for warmer sleeping conditions. The stated length is eighty-six inches, and should fit the majority of users.

Bag construction is robust if not heavy-duty. Keeping in mind the goal of minimum size and weight, the lightweight nylon shell, liner and zipper seem strong enough to stand up to long-term use provided the owner uses reasonable care. Workmanship appears impeccable. The zipper can sometimes eat the draft tube fabric in spite of the webbing liner immediately behind the zipper, but this is also the case with virtually every other sleeping bag. The shell is available in both olive and black depending on your needs and the bag comes with a well-made and easy-to-use stuff sack that compacts the whole package down to a wad the size of a youth football.

The final factor to consider is cost. At \$179 suggested retail price for the basic model, these are not cheap sleeping bags but in this instance cost takes a back seat to minuscule size and insignificant weight. The Merlin bag is quite simply a professional grade tool for the person who plans to spend considerable time bouncing between the field and barracks, grabbing sleep whenever the situation presents itself. In the long run, the cost would be reasonable, especially after a twenty-mile hump.

The Snugpak line is exclusively distributed in the U.S. and Canada through Lewis International. Snugpak also makes a full line of tactical sleeping bags, lightweight clothing and military backpacks, along with civilian outdoor apparel.

SOURCE:

Lewis International
Dept. S.W.A.T.
2201 Northwest 102nd Place
Suite 1
Miami, FL 33172
(305) 436-7984
www.snugpakusa.com