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Battlefield Colloquialisms of World War I (1914-1918)

David Tuffley

To my beloved Nation of Four
Concordia Domi – Foris Pax

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“One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans (1888).” — Otto von Bismarck

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About the Author

David Tuffley’s Grandfather Albert Money was a rifleman in the King’s Royal Rifles Corp who was wounded in action at Aubers Ridge in May 1915

David grew up on Brisbane, Australia, in the working class suburb of Cannon Hill.

As a child in the 1960’s, he listened to the colourful speech of the old soldiers who had returned from World War II and the older soldiers who had served in WWI.

Become friends with David Tuffley on Facebook: [facebook.com/tuffley](https://www.facebook.com/tuffley)

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Brothers in Arms

All kinds of groups develop their own slang, and the military is no exception. Slang is an in-group language which has to be understood if you are to be accepted as a member. An outsider can pretend to be a member, but unless they know the slang, they will not be accepted.

On the Western Front, infiltrators and spies were a threat. The battlefield slang that developed over the course of the war helped to validate a person's allegiance.

In strongly hierarchical groups like the military, the enlisted men use slang to have a laugh at the expense of the officers, what linguists call 'diminishing the dignity of the formal language'.

The totality of the British armed forces was diverse. It comprised not just British soldiers. It also included soldiers from English-speaking former British colonies like Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and New Zealand.

The colloquialisms of the British soldier are colourful and often irreverent for the reason mentioned earlier. Many come from Indian and Arabic words acquired during earlier military actions in India and Egypt. Other colloquialisms are anglicised words, phrases and place names learned from their French allies.

The military phonetic alphabet, known as *Signalese*, also contributed substantially to the battlefield colloquiums of

World War I. The term 'Ack-Emma' for example means in the morning, or AM, and comes from the phonetic alphabet as listed below.

In 1918, the British military alphabet was; *Ack, Beer, Cork, Don, Eddy, Freddy, George, Harry, Ink, Jug, King, London, Emma, Nuts, Orange, Pip, Quad, Robert, Esses, Toc, Uncle, Vic, William, Xerxes, Yellow, Zebra.*

Battlefield Colloquialisms

A

A-1. First rate, by 1916 the British War Office had instituted a nine point rating scale for recruit fitness; A-1 to A-3, B-1 to B-3, C-1 to C-3.

ABDUL. Turk, the individual or collective term for Turkish people. Ottoman Turkey was a member of the Central Powers.

ABOUT TURN. Hébuterne, a French village in the Department of Pas de Calais. For much of the war Hébuterne was on the Western Front and occupied by entrenched Allied Forces on the Eastern side of the village facing the Imperial German Army 800 yards beyond occupying the village of Gommecourt.

ABRI. A dugout to shelter from bombardment. Deriving from the French.

ACE. An outstanding aviator, literally a high-card to play against the enemy. Later in the war, it came to mean a pilot who had made at least 25 kills.

ACCESSORY. Poisonous gas deployed from cylinders. Accessory was a code word used in communiqués in an attempt to keep the practice secret.

ACK-ACK. Anti-aircraft (AA) fire. 'Ack' was the first letter of the military phonetic alphabet.

ACK EMMA (1) Military phonetic alphabet for AM as in morning or ante meridiem, (2) Air Mechanic (RFC/RAF).

ALLEY. Go! Get Clear! From the French word *allez*.

ALLEYMAN. German soldier (from French word for German 'Allemagne').

ALLY SLOPER'S CAVALRY. Army Service Corps (ASC). Ally Sloper was a fictional character drawn by W F Thomas that appeared in the popular pre-war paper *Ally Sloper's Weekly*. The ASC with their non-combatant role were held on low regard by the Infantry. In 1919, when the ASC became the RASC their nickname was changed to Run Away, Someone's Coming.

AMMO BOOTS. Standard issue, hobnail boots worn by the Infantry (from the term 'ammunition boots').

ANZAC. Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. The collective name for participating units from these countries.

ARCHIE. Anti-aircraft fire or artillery piece, from a popular music hall character.

B

BABY'S HEAD. Field ration consisting of meat pudding.

BALLOO. Bailleul, a French town near the Belgian border, 20km south-west of Ypres. Bailleul was a rearguard base for the British fighting on the front in Flanders. On 15 April 1918 the Germans captured the town as they advanced westwards. For more than three months, until its liberation on 31 July, Bailleul was heavily shelled by the British and French. More than 100,000 shells landed on the town, destroying 98% of its buildings.

BALLOON GOES UP. The beginning of something, originally, the time when the observation balloon is sent up at the beginning of an action.

BANJO. A spade or other digging implement.

BANQUETTE. Fire-step, a step built into the forward-facing wall of a trench allowing soldiers to fire over the parapet.

BANTAM. A soldier of short stature, specifically one belonging to a battalion made up of men between 5'1" and 5'4" in height. Such men were previously considered too short to enlist.

BARKER. (1) A pistol, from the noise a pistol makes when discharged. (2) A sausage with meat from an uncertain source, possibly a dog that strayed too close to the butcher.

BARRAGE. An excessive amount of something, originally from the often excessive artillery barrage that preceded infantry charges.

BASE RAT. A soldier normally to be found in the relative comfort and safety of Base. Some implications of cowardice. Also known as a base wallah.

BATTLE BOWLER. The standard steel helmet worn by British soldiers after February 1916, so called for its resemblance to the civilian bowler hat.

BATTLE POLICE. The Military Police who summarily executed soldiers refusing the order to advance. It was clear to the men that they had a choice; an honourable death in battle, or a dishonourable death as a coward.

BEER BOY. A poor or inexperienced pilot, a term used by the Royal Flying Corp and later the Royal Air Force. A beer boy was fit only to fetch beer for the experienced men.

BEFORE YOUR NUMBER WAS DRY. A derisive comment directed at inexperienced soldiers needing to be put in their place. It refers to the ink on the junior soldier's enlistment papers.

BELGIAN RATTLESNAKE. The Lewis Gun, a .303 calibre light machine gun used widely by the Allied forces. Being portable it could be carried into no-man's land and used to knock-out enemy machine gun emplacements, among other uses.

BERM. A storage ledge on a trench parapet where ammunition and other equipment was placed readily to hand.

BERT. Albert, the main town behind the lines for the Allies nearest to the 1916 Somme battlefields.

BIG ACK. The FK8, a two-seat biplane built by Armstrong Whitworth. The FK8 proved to be both effective and reliable, being used for reconnaissance, artillery spotting,

ground-attack, contact-patrol and day and night bombing.

BIG BERTHA. A heavy calibre (42 cm) artillery piece made by Krupp and used by the Germans to soften up fortified targets. Named after Alfred Krupp's daughter.

BIG PUSH, THE. The Battle of the Somme in 1916.

BILLJIM. An Australian, a composite of the popular Australian names William and James.

BINT. A young woman, from the Arabic for daughter. Term is often used in a derogatory sense.

BIVVY. Bivouac, a temporary encampment.

BLACK HAND GANG. A trench raiding party, originally from the Serbian terrorist group believed to have been instrumental in Franz Ferdinand's assassination.

BLANCO. (1) Whitening block used to clean full-dress webbing. (2) Informal version of surname 'White'.

BLIGHTY. Generic name for Home, as in England, from the Hindustani *Bilayati*, foreign land.

BLIGHTY ONE. An injury bad enough to get a soldier repatriated to England.

BLIMP RAF. White balloon airships used for submarine reconnaissance over the English Channel.

BLIND PIG. A mortar bomb.

BLOTTO. Very drunk.

BLUEBELL. Metal polish used to keep brass shiny (proprietary name).

BLUECAPS, THE. Nickname of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. When the regiment was based in India, the blue cap was the symbol of an elite force.

BLUE CROSS. German chemical weapon; a respiratory irritant gas. The name derives from the markings on the delivery shell casing.

BOCHE. A German, from French *tete de boche*, or 'blockhead'.

BOKO. Much or plenty, from French *beaucoup*.

BONK. To shell with artillery fire.

BOMBARDIER. Potatoes, from the French, *pommes de terre*.

BOMBER. A soldier trained to deploy hand-grenades.

BON. Good, from the French.

BOOJUM: Tank, probably a reference to the dangerous animal in Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*.

BRASS HAT. A high-ranking staff officer, from the gold insignia and red band on the cap.

BREEZE-UP. Variation of Wind-Up, to become frightened.

BRITISH WARM. A double-breasted, knee-length overcoat of superior quality worn by officers and mounted troops.

BRODIE. A steel helmet, invented by John Brodie. Initially used by snipers only. By 1916 the Brodie was used more widely. The helmet's design derives from the type of helmet worn by English archers at Agincourt in 1415.

BUCKSHEE. Free, from Arabic/Hindustani *baksheesh*, gratuity.

- BUGWARM.** A close-fitting dugout trench.
- BULL RING.** British army training camps like those at Rouen, Harfleur, Havre and Etaples. Soldiers were transferred to a Bull Ring from the front line for refresher training, and to reinforce the fighting spirit.
- BULLSHIT.** Nonsense, empty talk. Believed to be of Australian origin.
- BULLY BEEF.** The tinned corned beef that formed the staple diet of the British Army.
- BUMF.** Toilet paper, which later on came to mean any excessive official documentation. Derives from *bum fodder*.
- BUNDOOK.** A rifle, from the Arabic/Hindustani for firearm.
- BUNKER.** Fortification set mostly below ground with overhead protection.
- BURGOO.** Porridge, from Arabic/Turkish/Hindustani *burghul*, or oatmeal porridge.
- BUS.** Royal Air Force name for an aircraft, from *omnibus*.

C

- C3.** Low grade, worthless, from the lowest British Army classification of fitness, fit only for base duty.
- CAGE.** Prisoner of war camp.

- CANARY.** Instructor, from the yellow armband worn. The natural habitat of the Canary was the Bull Ring.
- CANTEEN MEDALS.** Food or drink stains on the chest.
- CHAR.** Tea, from the Hindustani *char* or Chinese *ch'a*.
- CHARPOY.** Bed, from the Hindustani.
- CHAT.** Louse, possibly from chattell, personal belonging.
- CHATTING.** De-lousing. See also crumbing up.
- CHERB.** Beer, from the Hindustani.
- CHEVEUX DE FRISE.** Defensive barbed wire entanglement, sometimes with sharpened stakes, from French for 'frizzy hair'.
- CHIN-STRAPPED.** Tired, exhausted. A soldier could be so exhausted that in a figurative sense, he is only being held upright by his chinstrap.
- CHIPPEROW.** Quiet, shut up, from the Hindustani *chuprao*.
- CHIT.** Note or receipt. To be excused from active duty, a soldier needed a sick chit, from the Hindustani *cittha*, a note, originally from Sanskrit *citra*, marked.
- CHOKEY.** Jail, from the Hindustani *cauki*, lockup.
- CHRONIC.** Very bad.
- CHUB, CHUP.** Abbreviated form of chipperow.
- CIVVY.** A civilian. To be in civvies meant to be dressed in civilian clothes.
- COAL-BOX.** Heavy German shell, from the black smoke of the shell-burst.

COAL SCUTTLE. German steel helmet, or Stahlhelm introduced at Verdun in January 1916, from the similar appearance to domestic fireside coal container. The square shape of the helmet may have caused the derisive French term *Boche* for a German, which translates to 'blockhead'.

COLD FEET. To become frightened and reluctant to move, possibly due to having trench-foot.

COLD MEAT TICKET. Identity disc, dog tag. Soldiers were issued with identity discs indicating their name, serial number, unit and religion. In the event of death, one disc remained with the body (the cold meat) to identify it on its journey to the grave.

COMIC CUTS. Corps Intelligence Summary. See Divisional Comic Cuts.

COMSAH. Generic name for anything, from French *comme ça*.

CONCHIE. Conscientious objector, a person who refuses military service on moral or religious grounds. Objections were considered by a tribunal, with some objectors given an exemption altogether, while others were assigned to jobs that still contributed to the war effort. If a person refused this option, they were drafted then immediately court-martialled and imprisoned.

COOT. Louse.

CORKSCREW. Steel post twisted into a spiral and used as a barbed-wire support. The screw allowed the post to be silently twisted into the ground in no-man's land, an

improvement on the straight post that needed to be hammered in.

CORP. Corporal, a familiar term used by lower ranks.

CRASSIER. Pile of soil, the product of trench, tunnel and bunker excavations. Crassiers were a prominent sight on battlefields, often exploited by German observers and snipers.

CRICKET BALL. A Number 15 hand grenade, so called for its spherical shape. Superseded in 1915 by the Mills bomb.

CRUMBING UP. De-lousing. See also chatting.

CRUMMY. To be itchy because of louse-bites.

CRUMP. German 5.9 inch shell or the burst thereof. The 'last crump' referred to the end of the war. Derived from the sound made upon detonation.

CUBBY HOLE. Small dug-out shelter in the wall of a trench. A funk hole or place of refuge, possibly derived from cupboard.

CUSHY. (1) Easy, pleasant. (2) A minor wound necessitating some time away from the front line, preferably a wound that would get one back to Blighty, from the Hindustani *khush*, pleasant.

D

- DAISIES.** Boots, from Cockney rhyming slang, daisy roots.
- DAISY CUTTER.** Shell with an impact fuse designed to explode instantly on contact with the ground. Used to clear barbed wire and other obstacles.
- DERBY MEN.** Men, usually young and unmarried, who volunteered under a scheme instituted by Lord Derby. This scheme pre-dated conscription.
- DEKKO.** Look, observe, from the Hindustani *dekho*, look, and *dekhna*, to see.
- DEVIL DODGER.** Army chaplain.
- DEVIL'S OWN, THE.** The Connaught Rangers.
- DICK SHOT OFF (DSO).** The Distinguished Service Order, an 'officers only' award, typically for Majors and above. The enlisted men substituted this phrase when DSO was cited. 8,981 DSOs were awarded during WWI.
- DIGGER.** (1) Australian soldier. (2) Friend, chum. Originally from the miners of the Australian gold fields.
- DINGO.** Mad, insane, from the French *dingot*.
- DINKUM.** (Australian) Genuine, right. Something true was said to be fair dinkum. Among the Australian troops, those who had served at Gallipoli were known as The Dinkums.
- DINKUM OIL.** (Australian) Truth.

- DIRTY SHIRTS, THE.** The Royal Munster Fusiliers. The name originates from the time that the regiment stormed a fort in India, getting their shirts covered in blood, sweat and dirt.
- DIVISIONAL COMIC CUTS.** Reports from Divisional Headquarters (Corps Intelligence Summaries) containing morale-boosting information, often of an exaggerated nature. Comic Cuts was a humorous paper for children.
- DIXIE.** Large oval-shaped metal pot with lid and carrying-handle for cooking. The lid could be placed on the pot for baking, while the pot itself was employed to brew tea, heat porridge, stew, rice etc, from the Hindustani *degchi*, small pot.
- DOCK.** Hospital, to be in dock was to be confined to hospital.
- DODGING THE COLUMN.** Shirking, or the practice of avoiding dangerous or unpleasant duties. The expression originated in India and South Africa, a column being a body of troops sent forward into hostile territory.
- DOG AND MAGGOT.** Bread and cheese.
- DOGGO.** In hiding and keeping quiet. Probably from doggo as in dog.
- DONKEY WALLOPER.** British cavalryman, especially a member of the Household Cavalry. The expression originated amongst the regiments of British Foot Guards, the longstanding rivals of the Household Cavalry.
- DOUGHBOY.** U S soldier. Originally an American flour dumpling.

DRAW CRABS. To attract enemy artillery fire.

DUCKBOARD. Ribbon to the British Military Medal, awarded for bravery in battle. The striped pattern of the ribbon resembled the wooden slats of duckboards, used as walkways in the trenches and across muddy ground.

DUCKBOARD HARRIER. Runner, messenger, from the term for a cross-country runner, originally derived from hare.

DUD. An unexploded shell, or anything of dubious value, particularly a person, especially an officer.

DUG-OUT. (1) An underground shelter. (2) An officer who has been 'dug out' from retirement and recalled to active duty.

DUG-OUT DISEASE. Sarcastic term for fear, which kept those affected within the safety of their dug-outs. Usually only more senior officers could allow themselves the luxury of dug-out disease.

DUFF. (1) Pudding, especially boiled suet pudding. (2) To perform incompetently. (3) To beat someone up.

DUM-DUM. A split or soft-nosed bullet. The tip would open on impact, doing more damage than a regular bullet, from the arsenal at Dum-Dum, a town near Calcutta.

E

EAT APPLES. Etaples, see next entry.

EETAPPS. Etaples, a French town between Calais and Boulogne, the site of many base depots and hospitals, and, of course, the most notorious Bull Ring of all.

EGG. Hand grenade, from the ovoid shape.

ELEPHANT. Small dug-out reinforced with semicircular arches of corrugated iron.

EMMA-GEE. Machine gun, from the initials MG in the phonetic alphabet.

ERSATZ. Substitute, artificial, substandard, from German *ersetzen*, to substitute.

ESTAMINET. A hospitality establishment found in villages and towns, sometimes occupying a converted cow-shed. Soldiers on leave could eat, drink and be entertained. It usually had a low roof, an open iron stove and wooden benches and tables.

F

FANTI. Mad, insane, from the Hindustani.

FASHY. Angry, from French *fâché*.

- FAUGHS, THE.** The Royal Irish Fusiliers. The name is derived from their use of the war cry 'faugh a ballagh' (clear the way) during the Peninsular War.
- FINI KAPUT.** Gone, finished, from French *finis* and German *kaput*.
- FIVE-NINE.** German 5.9 inch artillery shell.
- FLAK.** Anti-aircraft fire, from German the word *Fliegerabwehrkanone*, aircraft defence gun.
- FLEABAG.** Sleeping bag.
- FLYING PIG.** British 9.45" trench mortar bomb.
- FOOTBALL.** Trench mortar bomb, from the shape.
- FOOT-SLOGGER.** British infantryman. Eighteenth century term originally used by cavalrymen.
- FORTY-TENS, THE.** The 2nd Battalion, The Leinster Regiment. The nickname is derived from the battalion's time in India. When forming up for a parade, each man called out the number of his position in the rank in consecutive order. After the forty-ninth man called out his number, the next shouted 'forty-ten'.
- FOSSE.** Pile of excavated soil, from the French, see Crassier.
- FOUR-TWO.** German 4.2 inch artillery shell.
- FRAY BENTOS.** (1) Corned beef, bully beef, named after the popular brand, from the port in Uruguay of the same name, famous for meat-packing. (2) Very good, very well, a corruption of the French *très bien*.
- FRITZ.** (1) a German, from "Old Fritz" Frederick the Great of Prussia (2) Potato chips, from the French, *frites*.

- FUNK.** State of nervousness, fear or depression. Too frightened to fight.
- FUNK-HOLE.** Small dugout or shelter, just big enough to accommodate one or two men, usually scraped into the front wall of a trench. See cubby-hole.
- FUNKY VILLAS.** Foncquevillers, French village in the Pas-de-Calais. Foncquevillers was on the Allied front line during most of the period of hostilities between 1914 and 1918 and was almost completely destroyed.

G

- GAS BAG.** (1) The cloth bag in which a gas mask's respirator was carried. (2) An airship or barrage balloon.
- GASPIRATOR.** British gas mask incorporating a filter, from a combination of gas and respirator.
- GASSED.** To be drunk.
- GIEVES, MATTHEW & SEAGROVE.** Naval slang for the trio of Great War campaign medals (1914-15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal), from the firm of naval outfitters. See also Pip, Squeak & Wilfred.
- GLASSHOUSE.** Prison or detention centre.
- GLORY HOLE.** Dug-out.
- GOGGLE-EYED BOOGER WITH THE TIT.** British gas helmet. The wearer had to breathe in through the nose

from inside the helmet and breathe out through a valve held in the teeth.

GOOSEBERRY. Barbed wire entanglement or reel, from the prickly nature of the gooseberry bush.

GORBLIMEY. Peaked canvas service cap, made sloppy in appearance by removing the wire stiffener from the crown, generally scruffy or sloppy. A Cockney expression, a corruption of God blind me.

GO PHUT. Become unserviceable, cease to function.

GO UP. To go up the line, that is into the trenches.

GO WEST. (1) To be killed, to die, as in go towards the setting sun. (2) To go astray or be stolen.

GRASS-CUTTERS. Small, anti-personnel bombs dropped from aircraft on to camps and bivouacs behind the lines. They were designed to burst on impact and scatter shrapnel balls at low-level.

GREEN CROSS. German phosgene gas, from the marking painted on the delivery shell casing.

GREEN JACKETS. The King's Royal Rifle Corps.

GREYBACK. (1) British army shirt, with sharp-edged tin buttons, from the colour. (2) A louse.

GREY HEN. Rum jar, a grey and brown earthenware jug which contained the rum ration, usually Navy Pusser's rum.

GRIFFIN. Confidential information or warning of trouble to come. The bottom line.

GRUBBER. Spade or entrenching tool.

GUM BOOTS. Rubber boots or waders sometimes worn in wet trenches.

GUNFIRE. Strong tea, usually laced with rum.

H

HARD TACK. A long-life army biscuit ration, eaten cold, usually with bully beef. A staple of the soldier's diet, and principle source of carbohydrate.

HARNESS. An Infantryman's equipment. Two basic types; brown leather and khaki webbing. The webbing did not cut into the shoulders as much as the leather, but it was heavier when soaked with rain.

HATE. Bombardment.

HIPE. Rifle, derived from many a drill sergeant's habit of mis-pronouncing the last word of an order on the parade ground as a way of achieving a sharper delivery. 'Slope arms!' became, in some cases, 'slope hipe!'.

HITCHY-KOO. Itchy from louse-bites, from the chorus of a popular pre-war music hall song.

HOM FORTY. French railway carriage used for troop transportation, average speed one and a half miles per hour, from the capacity stencilled on the side of the carriage - *Hommes 40, Chevaux 8*.

HUN. German. Kaiser Wilhelm II urged his troops to behave like the Huns of legend to instil fear into the enemy.

HUNTLEY & PALMER. Royal Flying Corps term for twin Lewis machine guns. Named after a well-know biscuit manufacturer.

HUSSIF. Housewife, a small canvas roll containing needle, thread, buttons etc, used for the personal maintenance of a soldier's kit. Often used during interior economy.

I

IDDY UMPTY. Signaller, iddy and umpty were verbal expressions of the dashes and dots of Morse code. "Most of [the signallers] trench time was spent in their own dugout, testing lines and sharing private jokes on technicalities with other iddyumpties" - Denis Winter, Death's Men.

IGGRY. Hurry up, from the Arabic. One particular crossing in Bullecourt was named Iggry Corner by the Australians.

IMSHI. Go, be gone, shoo, from the Arabic.

INTERIOR ECONOMY. Quiet periods when men would turn their attention to personal admin - sewing on buttons, darning socks, etc.

J

JACK JOHNSON. German shell bursting with black smoke. After the boxer Jack (John Arthur) Johnson (1878-1946), the first black American world heavyweight champion.

JACKS. Military Police.

JAKES. Latrines, an expression dating back to Elizabethan times.

JAM-TINS. Improvised hand-propelled bombs made from jam-tins, mainly used before widespread introduction of the Mills Bomb. Also used as a nickname for the No.8 and No.9 Double Cylinder grenades of late 1914 and early 1915.

JANKERS. Minor punishment, often consisting of fatigues and performed while confined to barracks (CB). Possibly related to jangle, which had an archaic meaning of 'to grumble'.

JAPAN. Bread, from French '*pain*'.

JERICO. Heavy bombardment.

JERRY. German, an expression that came into increasing usage later in the war and becoming well-established in World War II.

JERRY UP! A warning that a German aeroplane was overhead, with the threat of bombs and/or strafing.

JILDI. Quick, hurry up, from the Hindustani.

JIPPO. (1) Juice or gravy, especially of bacon. (2) The shout given by Army Service Corps cooks to announce mealtimes.

JOCK. Soldier from a Scottish regiment.

JOHNNY. A Turk, from Johnny Turk.

JUDAEANS. Battalions (38th - 42nd) of the Royal Fusiliers, made up of Jewish officers and men. Arrangements were made for Kosher catering and religious observance.

JUMPING THE BAGS. Going over the top. Attacking by going over the sandbags of the trench parapet.

JUMP OFF. To begin an attack. The jumping off point was the start line of the attack in the front line trench.

K

KAMERAD. Friend, comrade, from the German. Used facetiously by British soldiers amongst themselves as a term of surrender, perhaps when a story showed no signs of ending.

KILTIE. A soldier from a Scottish regiment.

KITCH. A British soldier, from Australian and New Zealand slang for Lord Kitchener.

KIWI. (1) A New Zealand soldier. (2) Ground crew of the RFC or RAF - implying a flightless bird.

KNIFE-REST. Movable X-shaped barbed wire entanglement frame, used for filling gaps in no-man's land.

KNUT. A person overly concerned with their appearance, from the music hall song by Arthur Wimperis (1874-1953) Gilbert the Filbert, the Colonel of the Knuts.

KOYLI. King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.

KULTUR. Allied propaganda term applied to uncivilised German behaviour, from the German for culture.

L

LANCE-JACK. Lance-corporal, a junior NCO with one chevron. Between private and Corporal.

LAND CREEPER. Tank, which in WWI were cumbersome and slow.

LANDOWNER. Dead. To be a landowner was to be dead and buried.

LAND SHIP. Tank.

LID. Steel helmet.

LINSEED LANCERS. The Royal Army Medical Corps.

LOOPHOLE. Gap in the parapet of a fire trench allowing directed fire to take place whilst providing head cover. Constructed from sandbags, steel plates or other materials.

LOOSE. Larceny, a thief, from the Hindustani *lus*, thief.

L PIP. Listening post (LP), usually located in a sap, from the phonetic alphabet.

LUKRI. Wooded area, from the Hindustani.

M

MACARONI. An Italian Soldier.

MACONACHIE. Tinned vegetable stew ration, named after the manufacturer.

MACONACHIE MEDAL. Military Medal (MM). The inscription on the back of the MM says for bravery in the field, and some soldiers maintained that the Maconachie ration (see above) was so terrible that only a brave man would eat it and thus be awarded a medal for doing so. Alternatively, an allusion to the notion that the Military Medal was given out so often that it 'came up with the rations'.

MAD MINUTE. Firing off fifteen (or more) rounds of rapid fire aimed shots from a bolt action .303 Lee Enfield rifle in one minute. Many regular soldiers of the BEF were expert shots due to the incentive of extra pay for marksmen.

MAFEESH. Nothing, all gone, from Arabic. Mafeesh was used by troops in Egypt, Gallipoli, Mesopotamia and Palestine in the same way that *napoo* was used by those on the Western Front.

MAFFICKING. Celebrating, from the general air of excitement that followed the relief of Mafeking during the Boer War.

MATLOW. Sailor, from the French *matelot*, although the expression is pre-war.

MESOPOLONICA. Fictitious posting in the East, regarded by soldiers on the Western Front to be a safe destination. The word is a composite of Mesopotamia and Salonica.

MICK. A soldier in an Irish regiment. Specifically, The Micks is the nickname of the Irish Guards.

MICKEY. Louse. Origin of the phrase taking the mickey, to tease.

MILLS BOMB. British No. 5 grenade. Invented by William Mills (1856-1932) of Birmingham in 1915, it remained in service in a modified form with the British army until the 1960s.

MINNIEWERFER. German trench mortar. A variety of calibres were employed, from German *Minenwerfer*, mine thrower.

MOANING MINNIE. Shells fired from a German *Minenwerfer*, from the noise of flight and the name given by the British to the weapon (see above).

MOB. Battalion or other unit.

MONTY BONG. Montauban. French village in the Somme region.

MUCKIM. Butter, from the Hindustani.

MUFTI. Civillian clothes, from Arabic *mufti*, free.

MUTT & JEFF. (1) The pair of Great War campaign medals (British War Medal & Victory Medal) given to those who served from 1916 onwards. Named after the cartoon characters created originally in the United States by Bud Fisher, but popular in Britain by 1920, the time when campaign medals were being sent out. (2) Deaf, from the Cockney rhyming slang.

N

NAPOO. Gone, finished, from French *Il n'y a plus rien*, there is nothing anymore. British troops in Russia or who had returned from German prisoner of war camps often used '*nichevo*', a Russian word with the same meaning.

NON-STOP. Enemy shell that has passed well overhead.

NUMBER NINE. (1) Sick. The British army's No.9 was a laxative pill. Gave rise to the bingo caller's expression doctor's orders - number nine,.

O

OCEAN VILLAS. Auchonvillers, a village in the Somme region of France, just north of Albert.

OIL. Authentic, the truth, from the Australian *good oil*.

OLD CONTEMPTIBLE. Member of the 1914 British Expeditionary Force (BEF) who took part in the retreat from Mons and other early battles of the war, from Kaiser Wilhelm's comment that his forces in Belgium were being held up by 'Sir John French's contemptible little army'.

OLD EYES. Guards division, from the symbol on the divisional sign.

OLD NAMURERS, THE. The Royal Irish Regiment. The name is derived from their participation in the storming of Namur in 1695.

OLD SWEAT. An experienced soldier.

ON THE MAT. To be called before the Commanding Officer (CO) to answer a minor charge.

O-PIP. Observation Post (OP), from the phonetic alphabet.

OVER THE TOP. Make an attack, to go over the top of the trench parapet, or over the bags (sandbags).

P

PANZER. German tank, from the German *Sturmpanzerkampfwagen*, originally from the Old French *panciere*, a coat of mail.

PARNEE. Water, from the Hindustani.

PERISHER. Trench periscope.

PICKET. (1) Metal post used for staking out barbed wire. (2) Sentry-party or patrol.

PIGGY-STICK. The wooden handle or shaft of the entrenching tool.

PILL BOX. Reinforced concrete gun emplacement, usually German and armed with machine guns, so called because of the cylindrical shape.

PIP EMMA. Afternoon. PM (post meridiem), from the phonetic alphabet.

PIPPED. To be hit by a bullet.

PIP, SQUEAK & WILFRED. Trio of Great War campaign medals (1914-15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal). Named after the popular Daily Mirror cartoon characters of the time, created by A B Payne.

PLONK. Wine, from French *vin blanc*, white wine, although the expression may also be derived from the firm of Plonques, importers of a poor quality Algerian red wine.

PLUG. To shoot, to plug with lead.

PLUGSTREET. Ploegsteert, Belgian village north of Armentieres.

PONTIUS PILATE'S BODYGUARD. The Royal Scots, the senior British Infantry Regiment of the Line, so named on account of their history going so far back. They were, in fact, raised in 1633.

POP. Poperinghe, a Belgian town in West Flanders. Captured from the Germans in October 1914, it remained in British hands until the end of the war.

PORK AND BEANS. Portuguese, from the observation that British army ration pork and beans contained very little actual pork, and so a reference that the Portuguese had very few troops on the Western Front.

POSH. Smart, and said to be an acronym of 'Port Out, Starboard Home, the optimum (i.e. shaded) position of a cabin in British ships sailing to and from the East.

POTATO MASHER. German stick grenade. In contrast to the spherical British grenades, the German grenade had a stick handle that allowed it to be thrown further.

POZZY. Jam, included in the British army field ration.

PULL-THROUGH. A tall, thin person, from pull-through, the device used to clean inside the barrel of a rifle.

PUMP SHIP. Urinate, from the naval expression.

PUSHING UP DAISIES. Dead and buried.

Q

QUARTER BLOKE. Quartermaster, the officer responsible for the supply of accommodation, food, clothing and other equipment to the unit, via the Company Quartermaster Sergeants.

QUICK FIRER. Field Service Post Card (Army Form A2042). The card consisted of a number of pre-printed sentences which could be deleted as appropriate. Nothing, except

the address of the recipient, was to be written on the post card in order to eliminate the problems of censorship.

R

RATS AFTER MOULDY CHEESE, RAMC. The Royal Army Medical Corps.

REDCAP. Military policeman, probably the most despised men on the Western Front, from the red covering to their field service caps.

RED LAMP. Brothel, from the red light above the door.

RED TAB. Staff officer, from the red gorget patches on the collar.

REST CAMP. A cemetery.

RIFLES, THE. The Royal Irish Rifles.

ROB ALL MY COMRADES, RAMC. The Royal Army Medical Corps, from the belief that medical personnel went through the pockets of casualties.

ROOKIE. A recruit or newcomer, from the corruption of recruit.

ROOTI. Bread, from the Hindustani *roti*.

ROOTI GONG. British Army Long Service & Good Conduct Medal, from the belief that they were so easily obtained that they were brought in with the bread ration,

or could be earned by eating army rations for long enough.

ROUGH HOUSE. A fight or disturbance, so-called from the type of public house where this type of behaviour was apt to arise after drinking.

RUM JAR. Mortar bomb, from the shape. The rum ration was issued to the troops in earthenware jars, stamped with the initials S.R.D. (Supply Reserve Depot - not Service Rum Diluted as frequently stated). Soldiers argued that it also means Seldom Reaches Destination or Soon Runs Dry.

RUSSIAN SAP. Sap trench dug below ground so that the surface earth was not disturbed.

S

SAN FAIRY ANN. It doesn't matter, it makes no difference, from French *Ça ne fait rien*.

SAP. A listening post in no man's land, connected at ninety degrees to the fire trench by a narrow communication trench. During an advance, saps were often joined together to make the new front line trench.

SAPPER. Equivalent to a private soldier in the Royal Engineers. Originally, a digger of saps.

SARNT. Sergeant is the formal title. Sarge was never permitted.

SATURDAY NIGHT SOLDIER. Member of the Territorial Battalions.

SAUSAGE. (1) Barrage balloon. (2) German mortar bomb.

SEVEN. It's all in the seven was a philosophical expression used by regular soldiers who had enlisted for seven years with the colours (i.e. on continuous day-to-day service).

SHACKLES. Soup made from left-overs.

SHRAPNEL. (1) Shell for anti-personnel use designed to burst in the air and eject a number of small projectiles. (2) Metal balls (usually lead) contained therein. (3) Any metal splinter from a shell, from General H Shrapnel (1761-1842), the English army officer who invented it during the Peninsular War.

SIGARNEO. Okay, from a corruption of all Sir Garnet, an earlier expression named after Sir Garnet Wolseley (1833-1913), Commander in Chief of the British army from 1895-1899.

SIGNALESE. The phonetic alphabet.

SILENT DEATH. The practice of waiting quietly at night in no man's land to ambush a passing German patrol. The patrol was attacked silently with trench knives.

SILENT PERCY. Artillery piece firing at such long range that it could not be heard.

SILENT SUSAN. High-velocity artillery shell.

SKILLY. Thin stew, gruel.

SKINS, THE. The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.

SKIPPER. Officer's informal expression for a Captain commanding a company.

SLACK. Small pieces of debris thrown up by a shell ground burst, from slack, small pieces of coal.

SLING THE BAT. To use the vernacular, to speak in slang.

SNOB. Soldier employed as a cobbler.

SOUP TICKET. Medal citation. A small card presented to soldiers recommended for a gallantry decoration, usually a DCM or MM, giving some details of the act.

SOUVENIR. To steal, from French *souvenir*, to remember.

SPOTTED DOG. Currant pudding.

SPOUT. Rifle breech. Soldiers often loaded the .303 Lee Enfield rifle with ten rounds in the magazine and one up the spout.

SPUD. (1) Potato. (2) Nickname given to a person with the surname Murphy. (3) Metal shoe affixed to a tank's tracks to provide better grip in muddy conditions, from *spudde*, a 15th century word for digging tool.

SPUDHOLE. The guard room.

SQUADDIE. Soldier, from squad, but also said to be a corruption of *swaddy*, an 18th century word for bumpkin.

SQUAREHEAD. German, from the shape of the M.1916 German steel helmet.

STAR. Badge of rank, or pip, worn by British officers on the sleeves or epaulettes of the tunic.

STAR SHELL. Artillery projectile consisting of a magnesium flare and a parachute, intended to illuminate the

battlefield during night operations. Coloured star shells, not always incorporating the parachute, were used for signalling purposes.

STEEL JUG. Steel helmet.

STICK BOMB. German grenade, a potato masher.

STINK. Soldier of the Royal Engineers employed on gas duties.

STINKER. British army goatskin or sheepskin jerkin, first issued in winter 1914, from the smell, especially when wet.

STOP ONE. To be hit by a bullet, shell fragment, etc.

STRAFE (1) To machine gun, especially from the air. (2) General bombardment, from German *Strafen*, to punish. *Gott Strafe England* (God punish England) was a popular song and greeting in Germany during the war years.

STUFF. Shellfire.

STUNT. Any performance of outstanding skill or effectiveness, on a large or small scale.

SUICIDE CLUB. Bombing or raiding party.

SUICIDE SQUAD, THE. The Machine Gun Corps.

SUMP HOLE. Small holes dug at intervals in the base of a trench for collecting water. Sump holes made the baling out of flooded trenches somewhat easier.

SWEATING ON THE TOP LINE. Hopefully expectant of victory. Derived from the game of Bingo (also known as House), where numbers are called out and marked off in lines on a card.

SWEET FANNY ADAMS, S.F.A. Nothing at all, originally nineteenth century naval slang for tinned cooked meat, from the notorious murder and dismemberment of a girl so named. Also means Sweet Fuck-All.

T

TAMBOO. Small trench dugout.

TAPE. (1) Chevron or stripe worn on the uniform sleeves by non-commissioned officers. (2) Line of tape used to indicate the starting line of an attack or the direction it should take.

TAUBE. German aircraft. Although a Taube was a specific make, British troops referred to all German aircraft as 'Taubes', or, more correctly, '*Tauben*', during the early part of the war, from German for 'dove', so named due to the swept back wing tips.

TEDDY BEAR. British army goatskin jerkin, first issued in winter 1914.

TERRIER. Member of the British Territorial Force, a pre-war expression.

THIRD MAN. To go too far. The most widespread superstition on the Western Front was that the third man to light his cigarette from the same match would be killed soon after. It was believed that enemy snipers would need about that long to take aim and fire.

THREE BLUE LIGHTS. Highly improbable, from a story that peace would be signalled by the firing of three dark blue signal flares (invisible against the night sky).

TIC-TAC . Signaller.

TICKET. Official discharge from the army, especially for medical reasons before the full period of service with the Colours had been completed. To work one's ticket was to scheme to get out of the army.

TICKLER'S. (1) Jam, pozzy, from the brand name of a company in Hull, Yorkshire, but synonymous with jam whatever the brand. (2) Improvised hand grenades, usually made from old jam tins packed with nails, glass and explosives. These were made and used extensively before the Mills bomb became widespread in 1915.

TIME-SERVING MAN. Regular soldier who had enlisted in the Colours for a definite period, usually seven years, as opposed to a conscript or one who had volunteered for the duration.

TIN HAT. Steel helmet.

TIN OPENER. A bayonet.

TOASTING FORK. A bayonet, often used for this purpose.

TOC EMMA. Trench mortar (TM), from the phonetic alphabet.

TOFFEE APPLE. Mortar bomb with attached shaft.

TOMMY. British army soldier, from Tommy Atkins, a name sometimes used on specimen forms to represent a typical British army private soldier. Said to have been a British

soldier who distinguished himself at the battle of Waterloo.

TOMMY BAR. Spanner or wrench for unscrewing the base of Mills bombs (to adjust the timing fuse).

TOMMY COOKER. Small, portable oil-fuelled stove.

TOOTH PICK. A bayonet.

TOOT SWEET. Quick, from French *toute de suite*.

TOWN MAJOR. Staff officer (not necessarily a major) responsible for billeting arrangements in a town or village behind the lines.

TRACER. Rifle or machine gun round which can be observed in flight by the (usually) red phosphorescent trail it leaves in its wake.

U

UNCLE CHARLIE. Marching order; full equipment.

V

VAMOOSE. To go quickly, from Spanish *vamos*, let us go.

- VELVET.** Good. To be on velvet was to be in exceptionally fortunate and comfortable circumstances.
- VERMOREL SPRAYER.** An agricultural spraying tool, used in the trenches to spray dispersal chemicals onto low-lying pockets of gas.
- VERY.** A flare or coloured light fired from a Very pistol for signalling at night. After the inventor, Edward W Very (1852-1910), a US naval ordnance officer.

W

- WAD.** Sandwich.
- WALLAH.** Chap, the person in charge of a particular object, duty or task, from the Hindustani *wala*, man or protector.
- WEARY WILLIE.** German shell passing safely, albeit rather slowly, overhead. Expression first used in 1914, from a pre-war Comic Cuts character of the same name. The expression was also used later in Gallipoli as a term for shrapnel.
- WHIPPET.** Specifically, the medium Mark A British tank first seen in 1917, but later applied generally to any type of light tank, including the French Renault, from the breed of dog noted for its speed.
- WHITESHEET.** Wytschaete, Belgian village on the ridge just north of Messines.

- WHITE STAR.** A German mixture of chlorine and phosgene gas, from the identification marking painted on the delivery shell casing.
- WHIZZ-BANG.** High-velocity shell, from the noise of the rapid flight and the explosion. Usually applied to the German 77mm.
- WIBBLE-WOBBLE.** Tank.
- WILLIE.** Tank, from the prototype British tank, Little Willie.
- WIND-UP TUNIC.** British officer's tunic with the pips worn on the shoulders instead of the sleeves, making the bearer's rank less conspicuous to the enemy.
- WINDY.** Afraid, nervous. Such a person was said to have the wind-up, from the production of intestinal wind or gas due to nerves.
- WIPERS.** Ypres (Flemish Ieper), Belgian town in West Flanders, from the pronunciation of a literal 'Y' at the beginning of the word.
- WONKY.** Defective.
- WOODBINE.** A cheap and particularly offensive cigarette.
- WOOLLY BEAR.** German shrapnel shell, bursting with a cloud-like explosion.

Y

- YANK.** American soldier, from Yankee.

YELLOW CROSS. German gas, from the identification marking painted on the delivery shell casing.

YPERITE. French name for mustard gas.

Z

Z Z-HOUR. Zero hour. The time that an attack was to commence.

Poetry

A book on Great War colloquialisms is rounded out through contrast with some of the poetry inspired by that war.

The poems presented here capture something of the spirit of what it was to be a soldier on the Western Front, spoken in finer words than most men could muster, though the sentiment would have been familiar to most.

***The Soldier* by Rupert Brooks**

*If I should die, think only this of me;
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;*

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