

# Fritz and Tommy: Across the Barbed Wire

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**Abstract.** Interest in the *Soldatensprache* or ‘trench slang’ was evident before the end of the Great War. In Britain, ‘trench slang’ quickly moved from the front to the newspapers in 1914, and later featured in compilations and early dictionaries from 1916 concurrent with the growth of the citizen armies, who adopted a mix of slang derived from India and the colonies, mixed with the new slang of the trenches. In Germany, there is evidence to suggest that soldier slang derived from the mass professional armies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – but without the colonial flavour of the British. Interest in German slang at home was less pervasive in popular circles, though much studied by philologists. This paper compares British and German trench slang as a first step in a deeper study of the topic, and focuses on concepts of friends and enemies, of *Heimat* and ‘Blighty’, and of the nature of the artillery war on the Western Front.

The war between ‘Fritz’ and ‘Tommy’ – respectively German and British soldiers<sup>1</sup> commenced once the British Expeditionary Force, landing in France in early August, took up its pre-determined position in the line in support of the French. From this point on, the armies of both nations would develop their own soldiers’ speech – *Soldatensprache* or ‘trench slang’ – that would be continuously shaped through four years of war. It is interesting to compare the nature of these languages, of their differences, their similarities, and their emergence through the shared experience of the war. In this essay, we examine aspects of the language of the two foes, considering both its commonality and its differences. This paper represents, as far as we know, the first attempt to compare the development of ‘war slang’ in both armies. As such it very much represents a first step in the wider comparative exploration of two distinct ‘trench languages’.

In writing this essay, we draw upon our work exploring the shared experience of the British and German troops on the Western Front<sup>2</sup>.

### **Britain and Germany**

Arriving on the continent, the British soldiers were taken in by the sights sounds and smells, the waving crowds, the strange accents. Regulars, many of the British troops had experienced the rigours of international duties, and had acted as guardians of Empire in far-flung outposts, across India, in Africa, the Caribbean and even the Mediterranean. They were used to foreign postings; after all over half the British Army of 1914 was spread overseas. And they were well trained. In the aftermath of the disastrous opening campaigns of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, when the Boer citizen-soldiers had painfully exposed the inadequacies of the British regular army, things had been tightened up considerably. And yet, that next foe would be one of the most highly organised, efficient and powerful of European nations – one that had been described in the British Press just seventeen years previously as ‘a perfect machine’, a machine only too capable of defeating Britain on the field of battle. The first British soldiers to be captured in 1914 saw for themselves the power of their enemies. Lt Malcolm Vivian Hay, of the 1st Gordon Highlanders, had chance to examine it first hand.

Once we passed a train with heavy artillery on specially constructed wagons, and we saw several trains of ordinary field artillery. These trains of troops, munitions, motor-cars, coal, and a hundred other weapons of war that were hidden from view, the whole methodical procession of supplies to the Front, were most suggestive of power, of concentration, and organisation of effort. Most impressive was this glimpse of Germany at war. It is difficult to convey the impression to those who have not seen Germany in a state of war. Men who have been at the Front see little of the power which is behind the machine against which they are fighting.<sup>3</sup>

In summer 1914, the German Army in the west stood at about 1.6 million strong. This machine, programmed to win, swept through the borders of Belgium

as it took its part in unleashing the Schlieffen Plan, the German war plan that had been developed in 1904. With a wary eye on revenge-hungry French to the west – allied to the Russians in the east – the plan envisaged a great arcing movement, that would involve seven armies wheeling around constrained only by the channel coast. When the Germans crossed the Belgian border, the British guarantee to support the independence of the one-hundred-year-old state was tested. Britain was to support the French, and come to the aid of ‘gallant little’ Belgium. From August 1914, the miniscule British Army faced its toughest enemy in the Germans, who outnumbered them ten times, and who was an unfamiliar foe. This was the first time they had met in battle.

### **Armies, nationalities and language**

What was the actual relationship between the Germans and the British troops? Though shaped by the virulent propaganda at home, this relationship was also born from the actions of the soldiers at the front. The armies of Britain and Germany were distinctly different. In organisation, national characteristics, recruitment and logistics, the two armies moulded and shaped their soldiers in ways that would influence their attitudes, approaches and beliefs<sup>4</sup>. It would also affect the development of identifiable idioms and slang terms.

Tim Cook has discussed the nature and development of trench slang, discussing its purpose and imperatives<sup>5</sup>. According to him, the new language of the trenches developed as soldiers became increasingly separated from those at home in attitude and experience. This alienation, so commonly described in the war literature of the great outpouring of ‘trench writers’ some ten years after the end of the war<sup>6</sup>, helped sponsor and create languages that marked the frontline soldier from the civilian. The language of the trenches uttered by soldiers and veterans alike would set out those who had seen the worst that humanity could muster, experiencing unimaginable conditions. The appropriation of this language by those not qualified to use it, by the men of the rear areas or *Etappe*, or even by civilians and the domestic Press was instantly identifiable as a fraud. As we will see, trench slang also represented a means of coping with the unimaginable, of the destruction of men’s bodies through artillery fire, or of the

randomness of death while in the frontline. This was true of both nationalities, but there are distinct differences to be considered in comparing the two.

The Germany of 1914–1918 was forged from the wars of unification, the *Reichseinigungskriege*, fought between 1864 and 1871, which led to the creation of the *Deutsches Reich*. In particular, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 saw the total defeat of the French army and the reputation of the armies of the newly unified German state, the *Deutsches Heer*, was second to none. The German military system was superbly efficient and was locked into everyday life. It committed almost all males to a period of service that would carry them through from young man to older reservist. And every man was efficiently trained according to a system that prepared the German Army for its ultimate challenge when world war erupted in August 1914.

For Britain, a maritime nation with a significant array of overseas possessions, the events on the continent were seemingly remote, and there was a reliance on the Navy to represent its greatest force of arms. While the German forces were engaged in Europe, the purpose of the British Army was very different; it was there to simply to provide an Imperial police force, used to maintain borders and put down insurrections or unrest. The regular infantry divisions that were embodied in 1914 and destined to serve overseas were supplemented by others that were assembled to carry forward the British responsibilities that deepened as the war progressed. First, there was the assembly of regular battalions recalled or returned from overseas service as new regular divisions. Second, the ‘first line’ territorial battalions were formed into divisions of men who had volunteered to serve overseas; second line battalions, formed to serve at home, would wait their turn. Finally, there were ‘New Army’ divisions, composed of the volunteers for Kitchener’s Army from 1914. They would amass some 74 infantry divisions by the war’s end.

The origins of soldier’s slang drew from differing antecedents. The British army existed to serve the needs of Empire; each regiment consisting of two regular battalions with the intention that one would serve at home, the other in one of the many outposts of Empire, with India having the greatest call upon them. In consequence, it is perhaps not surprising that the regular soldier would

import pidgin versions of the languages of his posting, and consequently the languages of the Indian subcontinent became the most widely used.

Strange to relate, Tommy has always shown himself to be strongly in favour of Hindustani, with the knowledge of which language he has considerably increased his vocabulary. Hindustani appears to have always been the most favoured language, for even in the days of the Boer War, the words 'posee', 'rooty', and 'pawnee', meaning jams, bread, and water respectively, were freely used and understood by all our soldiers.<sup>7</sup>

One variety of "slanguage" derives from foreign tongues, splitting Babel into worse confusion than of yore. The soldier who has served his time in India brings back a medley of hybrid Hindustani.<sup>8</sup>

Though this language was adopted by regular soldiers, brought back from their international service, it was quickly assimilated by all. In a book published in 1916, evidently intended as a guide to the recruit or conscript (and his family), Thomas O'Toole identified distinct 'languages' used in the British army, distinguishing 'languages' of the bugle, semaphore, Morse code, signals, drill sergeant and 'bad' language. In his view "The Tommy, therefore, in view of his extensive vocabulary, may be truly termed "something of a linguist"<sup>9</sup> In view of this, O'Toole noted that 'it takes Tommy himself a year or two to learn them all' – including what he terms the 'language of the Barrack Room' – the language used by the old soldier and assimilated as a means of distinguishing himself as a soldier.

The language of the barrack-room...is hardly understood at all outside the precincts of the barracks, except, of course, by ex-soldiers and those whose business has brought them into contact with soldiers. Yet Tommies, forgetful of the fact that civilians do not understand, often use it in their ordinary conversation.<sup>10</sup>

The international flavour of the British Regular soldier's speech contrasts markedly with the speech of the average German soldier. The nature of German soldier's speech only started to develop in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of compulsory military service. There was soldiers' slang before, but that only developed from within a sealed group of professionals to which outsiders had little access. Early soldier's speech, the language of the *Landsknecht* – those German mercenary soldiers of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries – had a lot in common with the language of tramps, criminals and thieves; a mixture of Latin, Hebrew, French, standard German and a large number of local dialects. Like *Rotwelsch*<sup>11</sup>, early German soldiers language was not only a 'class' language but also a secret language, one that outsiders did not understand. The advent of compulsory military service in Germany led to a drastic change. Soldiers from all aspects of life joined the ranks and brought the language of their class and trade with them, thereby turning the former 'secret' language into a soldier's jargon.

Soldiers from all counties and kingdoms of the German Empire brought in their local dialects; students, artisans and craftsmen brought in the language and technical terms of their trades and fields of study; soldiers from the lower classes of society, travelling day labourers, tramps, but also thieves and criminals added elements of their languages<sup>12</sup>.

We recognise a time line of development of trench language, which, though broad brush in approach, coincides with the development of trench warfare. With trench warfare a function of many factors, strategy, weapons development, the need to halt an invader, the need to stand on the defensive to list but a few, we can map on to this timeline the creation of a shared language of frontline soldiers (Table 1) that would be recognisable to all combatants.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Origins</b>	<b>Influences</b>
1914	Open warfare	Prior military and colonial experience	Language from regular/professional soldiers' slangs
1914-15	Transition to	New experiences	Comparisons with the

	trench warfare		everyday
1915-17	Trench warfare	New realism	Acceptance of position; fatalism
1918	Armistice	Cementing of wartime language	Development of postwar record

Table 1: Time line of language development

Though the language of the trench and barrack-room was meant to be exclusive, it did not prevent journalists and other writers from expressing an interest in the new slang. As we will see later, with the war so evidently distilling down into an extended siege in which artillery played the largest part, the use of nicknames for artillery shells (and their impact) was adopted relatively early in 1914.<sup>13</sup> ‘Trench slang’ was evidently fascinating; and grew in popularity so that in early 1916, *The War Budget*, a spin-off publication of the *News Chronicle* newspaper devoted a page as a ‘glossary’, which was amongst the first to examine the diversity of the new tongue – with a view to recording it for the future. The article provided several examples ‘enough to show how greatly a prolonged war, with constant flux of strategy and fresh forms of chemical and mechanical slaughter, would ‘enrich’ our inexpressive vocabulary.’<sup>14</sup> At face value, it could be argued that the awareness in Britain of the ‘new language’ reached a new height in 1916-17, perhaps coinciding with the growth of the citizen army and the introduction of conscription. Quite apart from the article in *The War Budget*, already discussed, and in the edited book *Made in the Trenches* – purporting to represent the words of serving soldiers, also published in 1916<sup>15</sup>, there was a glossary of 57 words in Thomas O’Toole’s 1916 book *The Way they Have in the Army*.<sup>16</sup> Though most, if not all of the words listed by O’Toole derived from pre-war slang (it is not known whether the author had himself served), as discussed it is evident that there was a mission to inform new recruits of army language. The new language was not to everyone’s tasks, however. Rifleman William Taffs (who would be killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme) wrote home in February of 1916 lamenting his adoption of slang.

I expect when you see me again you will think I am awfully slangy, as there is such a terrible amount of newly invented slang out here such as “Humpteen”, which means a great number, “Wind up” which means “Funky”, “Stunt” which means idea or operation, and so on. As a matter of fact I have got rather fed up with some of the terms and use them as seldom as possible, but I expect when I get back I shall long to use them.<sup>17</sup>

William Taffs was also conscious of profanity, and resolved not to use it for fear of taking it home when he returned from the trenches.

One of the things the chaps cannot stand about me is the fact that I very rarely swear. We were having a heated argument about swearing on Wednesday and one of the reasons I gave for not doing so was that I felt if I swore while I was in the Army when I got home I should swear without thinking at all perhaps before girls. As a matter of fact I have sometimes had a word come to my lips automatically, which I should not like anyone to hear. Well anyway one of the chaps laughed at me and said I lacked self control, but as for him he could go a week easily without saying anything he would not like his people to hear. Well I said he couldn't as he swears rather frequently but as he was so cocksure about it I bet him ½ franc he would swear before lights out the same day. This was at 8.30. At 9.15 I had won the half franc. From this you will see that I do not always stick to my principles in fact I often depart from them.<sup>18</sup>

Profanity and swearing in the context of the war has been discussed by other authors<sup>19</sup>, and though worthy of much greater study in the context of the Great war, is a complex subject and is beyond the scope of this study.

Probably the most authentic dictionary of trench slang published during the war formed a significant appendix to Arthur Guy Empey's book *Over The Top*, published in 1917<sup>20</sup>. Empey was an American citizen who served with the Royal Fusiliers. His dictionary was substantial, and comprised many of the old and most of the new terms in common usage 'the pet names and slangy definitions, which Tommy Atkins uses a thousand times a day as he is serving in France'. It



has an authentic voice as Empey 'gathered them as I lived with him in the trenches and rest billets, and later in the hospitals in England where I met men from all parts of the line.'<sup>21</sup> It could be argued that Empey's was the first substantial dictionary of trench slang available to the public – and the tone taken by Empey in his definitions seems to reflect a growing fatalism with the war.

**Digging Party.** A detail of men told off to dig trenches, graves, or dug outs. Tommy is not particular as to what he has to dig; it's the actual *digging* he objects to.

**Dugout.** A deep hole in the trenches dug by the Royal Engineer Corps; supposed to be shell proof. It is, until a shell hits it. Rat and Tommy find it an excellent habitation in which to contract rheumatism.<sup>22</sup>

In Germany, there is evidence of much philological interest in the developing language, though less so of general public interest. Though some terms were used (typically *Feldgrau* – Field Grey, for the German soldier after his uniform colour, first introduced in 1910), in the main – and as far as our research can demonstrate – there appears to have been far greater interest in the development of language in academic circles. Karl Bergman's 1916 *Wie der Feldgrau Spricht*<sup>23</sup> is amongst the first, discussing in themes the variety of new terms that had arisen since the war began. Graff and Bormann's *Schwere Broden* (1925) has much in common with contemporary or near-contemporary British post-war compilations by Fraser & Gibbons (*Soldier & Sailor Words and Phrases*, 1925) and Brophy & Partridge (*Soldiers' Songs and Slang*, 1930) – all set about creating a record of the words used by soldiers, of *front speak*, before it was too late<sup>24</sup>. Compiled by former soldiers, they nevertheless lack the immediacy of the earlier versions, recording fossilised words, rather than developing ones. As Brophy & Partridge recorded in their preface: 'If one left such a book any longer, it would be very difficult to collect the slang, and still more difficult to remember and collect the songs.'<sup>25</sup>

The surviving dictionaries and compilations provide us with evidence that the special language that developed from the four years of a unique

experience – the war in the trenches – mattered both to the combatants and those who sought to record what could simply have been transient words from the battlefield. These works provide a means of direct comparison; but it is perhaps the words of the soldiers themselves, not those compiled by lexicographers, that have the most impact. For this reason we identify a number of areas that are worthy of consideration, a foundation of further study. While the subject is vast, we pick out just a few terms and phrases we feel are significant. These are discussed below.

### **Friends and enemies**

Our research suggests, interestingly, that Germans had fewer names for their British enemies than the British had for them. Leutnant Karl Pressel, of *Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr 120*, wrote of his understanding in 1916, boiling it down to simply one

The French call us *Boche*. It does not translate into German, but it is a term to describe a contemptible and degraded character. The English call us *Huns*, which is not a particularly endearing term. We still call the English soldier *Tommy*, which is the nickname (Thomas Atkins) they have always used themselves. The French soldier has various names: *Franzmann*, *Parlewuh* and *Tulemong*.<sup>26</sup>

Pressel's view, that 'Tommy' – borrowed as it was from British speech, was almost universal slang for the British soldier, seems to be born out by the work of Bergmann and Graff & Bormann<sup>27</sup>, who list only *Engländer* as a viable generic term, as well as the more unusual *Fussballindianer*. While picturesque, and interesting, we have yet to find an example of this term in practice. Tommy was much more pervasive – and this is supported by the propaganda leaflets left behind by the Germans in 1918, putatively addressing their friend 'Tommy', and signed 'Fritz'.<sup>28</sup> The term use of the term 'Tommy' for the British soldier has some antiquity, in use at least a century before its application in the Great War, and made universal by Rudyard Kipling in *Barrack Room Ballads*, published in

1892, with its bitter message of double standards applied to soldiers in war and peace.<sup>29</sup>

While the names the Germans gave to their enemies is seemingly very simple; the ones British used for their enemies is much more complex and nuanced. It is quite clear that the diversity of names used takes in a diversity of factors including class, status and the influence of shared experiences of trench warfare.<sup>30</sup>

Name	Influence
Hun	Antagonistic, reflective of links to marauding tribes and uncivilised behaviours; though also linked to an 'ideal of warfare'. C. 1914–1915, but continued throughout the war.
Boche/Bosche	Hatred of the invader, derived from the French, and difficult to define. Used from the war's beginning through to its end; though more often than not used by officers.
Alleyman/Allemand	Borrowed term from French, but one that is suggestive of 'bogeyman'; certainly it appears this way in soldiers' songs <sup>31</sup>
Fritz	A means of personifying the German soldier; used from at least 1915.
Gerry/Jerry	Perhaps a recognition of the shared experience of the war, and certainly used from 1916 onwards

Table 2: British terms for their enemies

Taking a cross section of quotes, these themes can be drawn out – though it cannot be claimed to be a scientific survey. Two officer's voices use the detached terms Hun and Boche.

The Hun, too, is often brave. I heard from a man who saw it—a Gunner Major – of a case of a quiet nerve that served Germany in good stead. Hill No.—had fallen, and the Huns launched a counter attack in seven waves led by an officer on a horse, until the horse fell dead.<sup>32</sup> [1916]

I had a lovely view of two Boches this morning about 5.30am. It was on my tour of duty that at one part of the trench I looked over, I saw two Boches standing in their trench. I seized a rifle from one of the sentries and had a pot shot at one of them, who moved quickly but unhurt. Needless to say I got one back that was a bit too near my head to be pleasant.<sup>33</sup>

The other terms were widely used by officers.

The Allemands are drawing off from here a bit to strengthen their line further south so I expect we shall have it quieter. Poor Germans, at times I feel sorry for them as they loved their country very much and now they are surrounded by enemies on every side and new ones keep threatening.<sup>34</sup>

The use of Fritz and Jerry was often used in the form of 'old Jerry', one step, perhaps, away from 'Good Old Jerry', reflecting the shared experiences of the trenches – especially from 1916 onwards, used here by private soldiers.

I have had no time to write to [you] before because we have been after old fritz as [he has] been retreating ever since we went into the line we followed him up for about six mile and he kept running away all the time...<sup>35</sup>

We stayed in there until morning, when it came daylight old Gerry started to shell heavy again dropping them very near us, in fact he dropped one on one of our dugouts but I don't think he hurt anybody.<sup>36</sup>

Early war, British propaganda<sup>37</sup> was merciless in displaying a cowardly, brutish and stupid enemy; though such depictions continued throughout, by the end of the war, and in the mind of the average soldier at least, the shared common experience of the trenches had transformed the 'ravaging Hun' to '[dear] Old Gerry'.

### ***Vaterland, Heimat, Blighty***

What were the soldiers were fighting for? Ostensibly, it was for King and Country, *König und Vaterland*. In a letter home, sent on 5 August 1914, Leutnant Emil Bartels was under no illusion of what he was fighting for.

Just a short note to let you know I am well. Today we have crossed the border into enemy territory to defend *Heimat* and *Vaterland* for *König* and *Kaiser*.<sup>38</sup>

In Britain, Lord Kitchener's 'Call to Arms', the beginning of the raising of a mass volunteer army, was published in the press on 8 August 1914, and bore the headline text 'Your King and Country Need You'<sup>39</sup>. The phrase was repeated on numerous posters and official correspondence<sup>40</sup>, but there is little evidence that it survived the transition 'to the front'. In its place was 'Blighty'. This name, derived from Indian service and from the Hindi *bilati* – 'foreign'<sup>41</sup>.

Talking of slang, the Tommies' name for England is 'Blighty'. This puzzled me for a bit, till I remembered one of Kipling's stories in which 'Belait' occurs as a Hindustanee word for Europe. I suppose they brought it from India.<sup>42</sup>

To the British soldier at the front, it became a more personal rendering of home.

In the one word was gathered all the soldier's homesickness and war-weariness...Blighty to the soldier was a sort of faerie, a paradise which he could faintly remember, a never-never land.<sup>43</sup>

More often than not, achieving the soldiers' hoped for return to this 'never-never land' required the receipt of a wound that would not be life threatening, but which would be serious enough to carry him across the English Channel to home away from the trenches, Achieving such wounds was a matter of 'luck', a term so often encountered in soldiers letters.

Yesterday I was orderly so I had to go to the 'Dump' where our transport people drop our rations and bring them to various trenches. A couple to [sic] poor chaps got shot on this job yesterday and I expect the lucky beggars are on their way to Blighty now perhaps.<sup>44</sup>

We had 35 casualties this last time we was in the trenches, we have just come out again for four days. I only wish I could get a nice Blitie but there is no such luck. I am glad that some one has some luck, but I suppose I must not grumble for what I have been through I should like to see the War through now I have been out so long.<sup>45</sup>

Neither correspondent would be 'lucky' enough to receive such a liberating wound; both would be killed in action. This phenomenon was not limited to British soldiers, of course; the natural and inevitable equivalent for the average German was the *Heimatshuß*. Here, 'Blighty' has been replaced by another nirvana, *Heimat*.

Dear Mother, many thanks for your parcel with the cake! I even got an Easter present from Tommy, namely a wonderful wound with the name of 'penetrating shrapnel wound in the right lower leg'. As it looks we will have the pleasure to see each other in the *Heimat* soon!<sup>46</sup>

Dear colleagues, after a long period of silence I take the liberty to send my best wishes from inside our dear fatherland. On the Somme, on 8 August, the English presented me with a headshot and thus with a ticket to Germany.<sup>47</sup>

The obvious shared experience of the 'liberating wound' underscores the obvious parallels to be drawn between *Heimat* and 'Blighty' as concepts. *Heimat* refers, like *Vaterland*, to one's place of origin. But it is, and was, more deep-seated than this. Whereas *Vaterland*, the *Land der Väter* (the land of one's father) refers explicitly to a genealogy, the belonging that is implied by *Heimat* is far more complex. *Heimat* is in effect the land where one stays and settles. It is a place that is one's own, that defines one as a person, the place where one belongs and feels at home. A person is bound to the *Heimat* by their birth, childhood, language, personal experiences or acquired affinity. Unlike *Vaterland*, it refers to the proper place, in a sense that is ontological rather than genealogical. In contrast, *Vaterland* is a political community one belongs to by birth. It is the territorial state into which a man is born and which he is obligated to defend.

On 2 March the company has lost 23 men; they died a hero's death for the *Vaterland*. All the old hands have gone and I am surrounded by people I do not know. Who knows if I am allowed to see the *Heimat* again.<sup>48</sup>

Both *Heimat* and 'Blighty' appear often enough in soldiers' speech to represent the same concepts of home and family to the men of the trenches.

### ***Kamerad/Comrade***

If ever there a word was misconstrued, it was *Kamerad* – quite simply the term for comrade. The term has a long history of German usage, and the song *Der gute Kamerad* (the good comrade), has been the traditional lament of the German army since the 1870s. Embued with deep meaning, the song opens with the line *Ich hatt' einen Kameraden* – I once had a comrade – and links directly to the experience of the soldier in battle: 'I once had a comrade, You will find no better.' This lyric, first penned by Ludwig Uhland, was extremely popular and appeared on many patriotic postcards of the Great War period. These reproduced heroic images of wounded soldiers in the romantic style<sup>49</sup>, and tuned into the prevailing concept of the good comrade, one who would not leave his fellow soldier in the

heat of battle. Lt Malcolm Vivian Hay, wounded in 1914, was to experience this first hand, when picked up by a German stretched bearer in the wake of battle.

He offered me a drink from his water-bottle, and pointed to the Red Cross on his arm. I can never hope to convey to any one what a relief it was to see the cross even on the arm of an enemy. The man asked me if I could walk, tried to lift me up, and when he saw I was paralysed said he would go for a stretcher. 'You will go away and leave me here,' I said. 'I am of the Red Cross,' he replied; 'you are therefore my *Kamerad* and I will never leave you.' ....'Kamerad, Kamerad, I will come back; never fear, I will come back.'<sup>50</sup>

This strong sense of comradeship felt by the German soldier also extended to frontline soldiers in general, and it was understandable that in a foreign tongue those soldiers facing their enemies and required to surrender would do so by calling out the one word that they new would align them with fellow soldiers – *Kamerad* – comrade. But with the British propaganda machine in full swing, the repeated entreaties of surrendering soldiers, expressed in this one word, would be manipulated to belittle his enemy. 'To kamerad' became 'to surrender'.<sup>51</sup>

As luck would have it, I jumped into a part where there wasn't a German, but within a few minutes I saw plenty. I couldn't say for sure how many they numbered, but I estimated about 30, and they came running up to the trench on my left. It is a good job they were in a trench and a narrow one at that – they could only come one at a time. They were unarmed, had their hands up and were shouting 'Kamerad'. I was standing with rifle and bayonet, and I motioned them back over the trench with it.<sup>52</sup>

### **In the battlezone**

The mundanity of trench life was recorded by soldiers of both sides, who employed the uniform terminology of warfare. In a 1916 *Dictionary of English & German Military Terms* <sup>53</sup> standard terms are given in their prosaic, unembellished forms – military terms used by military men. Trenches or *Graben*,



were replete with terms that became familiar at home, reported through the press. There was the parapet or *Brustwehr*; trench revetment or *Verkleidung*; the humble sandbag the *Erdsack*; or a trench traverse, *Querwall*. There were many others – though in few cases did the German and English forms mix across no man’s land – *Niemandsland*. For the British, the defining moment of the attack was to become expressed as a rising from the trench to literally vault over the parapet and its sandbag revetment, ‘Over the top’<sup>54</sup>. This phrase does not appear to have a German equivalent; the attack was *Der Sturm*, or *Der Angriff*. There was no symbolic rising from the trenches. But if there was a paucity of terms to encompass the trench architecture, there was no shortage of new names to give expression to the artillery duel raging overhead. The scale of the artillery battle was staggering; the British alone fired over four million rounds of artillery ammunition in the opening bombardment of the Third Battle of Ypres, 17–30 July 1917 (at a cost of £22 million), and twice as much again in the preparations for the final assaults in 1918<sup>55</sup>.

Arriving in the battlezone for the first time, soldiers were very soon to experience the artillery fire in one form or another. The effect could be shocking, and the first introduction to the randomness of death on the Western Front more often than not followed on its heels. Very soon, the new men picked up the slang of the old hands, a means of coping with the extreme experience. Shells would no longer be known by their calibre – instead they would be ‘Jack Johnsons’ and ‘Schwarze Sau’, ‘Whizz-bangs’ and ‘Ratsch-bumm’, Coal-boxes or ‘Kohlenkasten’.<sup>56</sup> The slang served its purpose; it allowed soldiers to share the experience of the sights, sounds and smells of these weapons and their bursting effects – and ultimately to reduce their impact on the relentless drumfire that played on men’s nerves. Otto Kiefer recorded his feelings in 1917, and the onset of ‘shellshock’, that condition so much a part of the relentlessness of modern battle.

I don't know if I can continue to serve, I do not feel right anymore. In the ears I can constantly hear the sound of *Trommelfeuer*, even though there is hardly any firing here. In the nights I dream the most horrible things and when I wake up I feel dizzy. I will wait for a while and if there is no improvement I will have to see the doctor again.<sup>57</sup>

Very quickly the bursting shells were named by the men who were on the receiving end of them. Fewer nicknames are recorded of those shells that were actually lobbed at their enemies. These names were picturesque, and quickly picked up by the press<sup>58</sup>. For the British, one of the earliest is the Jack Johnson – named after the heavy-hitting black heavyweight boxer.

That day witnessed one of the worst battles I have ever experienced, as we were badly equipped with guns, having mostly only eighteen-pounders–‘pop-guns,’ as the boys called them–whilst it was the first day on which we met the really big guns of the Germans–those promptly dubbed ‘Jack Johnsons’.<sup>59</sup>

Others were defined by the speed of their arrival.

We have had rather an excited week here. After 20 hours in the train we arrived here... We were taken out to do a little firing. We were formed up and marched off in a field. We had not been on the move mins when Wizz Bang, our first shell made a hole where we had just stood. So that was a bit of a scare. They shelled us all that day and night intermittently and the next day fairly fiercely so when we were told B coy were to go up to the 1st firing line that night we had our baptism of fire, and it was not strange when we got there.<sup>60</sup>

The black smoke emitted by some explosions led to the soldiers’ identifying the shell bursts with their experiences at home, with coal boxes in the house, farm or colliery.

Took the lorry to place called Ploegsteert to pick up gun platforms. While we were doing so we were being heavily shelled with ‘coalboxes’, coming over two and three at the time One of them hit a large house that had been used as hospital but luckily it had been cleared out earlier in the day. At another house a young woman was doing her hair near the window and a piece of shell struck her behind the ear and passed out above the eye. <sup>61</sup>

These terms were not restricted to the British experience, however, and the shared experience of the British and German troops under shellfire led to a convergence in their slang terminology.

Leutnant Karl Beck, of *Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 120* wrote home on 22 June 1916, like so many soldiers, interested in preserving the developing language of the front. With artillery so much part of the trench warfare, his letter expresses the richness of the language that had evolved to try and encompass the sights, sounds and impacts of the incoming artillery shell.

Here in the machine gun course I finally have the time to send the promised assortment of soldier's language for *Vati* [daddy]. I will begin with the shells the enemy fires at us and which are known by a multitude of different names. One type of French low-trajectory shell is called *Kettenhund*, as it jumps at you without warning. Another one comes in so fast that it detonates as soon as one hears the discharge of the gun; that type is known as a *Ratschbumm*. Heavy, low velocity shells of large calibre are known as *Blindschleichen*, while gas shells are called *Stinkewiesel*. A certain type of heavy shell is known as *Kohlenkasten* as it throws up a huge amount of black earth and smoke when it detonates. Shells of other calibres are known as *Leiterwagen*, *Hochbahnen* and *Omnibusse*. Infantry projectiles are *Bienen*, *Bohnen* and *Spatzen*. Ricochets, which make a humming sound when they fly by are *Maikäfer* and *Singvögel*. The machine guns we use are *Stottertanten* or *Hackfleischmaschinen*, while our company is known as the *Mördergesellenclub* (MGK). Handgrenades are *Äpfel* and *Eier*; a special type with protruding fuses around it is known as a *Taschenkrebs*....<sup>62</sup>

With artillery the great leveller, there was much in common between the two sides. Our survey has been necessarily brief; but sufficient to suggest that the comparison of the languages of Fritz and Tommy – across the barbed wire – is worthy of much more in depth study.

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'Fritz' and 'Tommy' were in widespread use by the British army in 1914. While there seems to be little evidence that 'Fritz' was adopted by German soldiery for themselves, 'Tommy' was used universally by British and German soldiers alike.

<sup>2</sup> Doyle, P. & Schafer, R., *Fritz & Tommy, Across the Barbed Wire*, The History Press, Stroud, in press

<sup>3</sup> 'An Exchanged Officer' [Lt Malcolm Vivian Hay], *Wounded and a Prisoner of War*, William Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1916

<sup>4</sup> Discussed by Doyle, P. & Walker, J., *Trench Talk: Words of the First World War*, History Press, Stroud, 2012

<sup>5</sup> Tim Cook, Fighting words: Canadian soldiers' slang and swearing in the Great War. *War in History*, v. 20, pp.323-344, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Common to so many of the classics of the literature of the war, including Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Faber, London, 1930; and, from the German side, in Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Western Nichts Neue* [*All Quiet on the Western Front*], Im Propyläen-Verlag, Berlin, 1929.

<sup>7</sup> 'Tommy Atkins, Linguist', in Sir Frederick Treves (ed.) *Made in the Trenches*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1916

<sup>8</sup> 'Trench Slang' *The War Budget*, 23 March 1916

<sup>9</sup> Thomas O'Toole, *The Way They Have in the Army*, John Lane, London, 1916, p. 29

<sup>10</sup> O'Toole, *ibid*, p. 38

<sup>11</sup> *Rotwelsch* was formerly common among travelling craftspeople and vagrants. The language is built on a strong substratum of German, but contains numerous words from other languages, notably from various German dialects, including Yiddish, as well as Romany languages.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Bertsch, *Wörterbuch der Kunden- und Gaunersprache*, Berlin, 1938

<sup>13</sup> There are many examples of this; according to Fraser & Gibbons, the official correspondent 'Eye-Witness' was first to introduce the term 'Jack Johnson' (for a heavy calibre German shell) to the British public in September 1914. (Fraser, E. & Gibbons, J., *Soldier and Sailor Words and Phrases*, Routledge, London, 1925, p. 129).

<sup>14</sup> *The War Budget*, *op cit*.

<sup>15</sup> Treves, *op cit*.

<sup>16</sup> O'Toole, *op cit*.

<sup>17</sup> Rifleman W. Taffs, letters. Private Collection

<sup>18</sup> Taffs letters, 23 February 1916, *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> Cook, *op cit*

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Guy Empey, *Over the Top, By an American Who Went*, A.L.Burt, New York, 1917. Empey served with the Royal Fusiliers, as did his fellow countryman James Norman Hall, who published his memoirs in the previous year *Kitchener's Mob, The Adventures of an American in the British Army*, Constable, London, 1916. Hall makes reference to the peculiarities of British army speech throughout. Both men were discharged as American citizens.

<sup>21</sup> Empey, *ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> Empey, *ibid*.

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- <sup>23</sup> Karl Bergmann, *Wie der Feldgraue Spricht*, Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, Giessen, 1916
- <sup>24</sup> Sigmund Graff & Walter Bormann, *Schwere Borden. 1000 Worte Front-Deutsch*, Stahlhelm-Verlag, Magdeburg, 1925; Fraser & Gibbons, *op cit*; John Brophy & Eric Partridge, *Songs and Slang of the British Soldier, 1914-1918*, Eric Partridge, London 1930.
- <sup>25</sup> Brophy & Partridge, *op cit*.
- <sup>26</sup> Letter, Private Collection
- <sup>27</sup> Bergmann *op cit*; Graff & Bormann *op cit*
- <sup>28</sup> Private collection; such propaganda leaflets were widely distributed in the battlezone in 1918.
- <sup>29</sup> Doyle & Walker, *op cit*; Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918*, London, 2004.
- <sup>30</sup> Discussed in detail by Doyle & Walker, *ibid*
- <sup>31</sup> 'I want to go home' reported by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt F.T. Nettleingham RFC, in *Tommy's Tunes*, London, 1917: the song went 'I don't want to go to the trenches no more, Where there are shells and Jack Johnsons galore. I want to go home, Where the Allemand can't get at me.'
- <sup>32</sup> Captain G.M. Brown ['G.B. Mainwaring'] *If We Return. Letters of a Soldier of Kitchener's Army*, London, 1918
- <sup>33</sup> Letter, 2Lt Arthur H. Lamb 1<sup>st</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers, 28 August 1916 (Europeana [Martin Lamb], CC-A-SA-3.0)
- <sup>34</sup> Letter, 2Lt Arthur R. Stanley-Clarke, 1st Dorsetshire Regiment, 15 March 1915 (Europeana [Jonathan Irwin], CC-A-SA-3.0)
- <sup>35</sup> Letter, Pte P. Edwards, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers, 10 September 1918 (Private Collection)
- <sup>36</sup> Diary entry, Pte Philip Whitehead 3<sup>rd</sup> Royal Welsh Fusiliers, April 1918 (Private Collection)
- <sup>37</sup> There is evidence to suggest that the denigration of British soldiers was frowned upon by the German High Command and the Kaiser himself; Anti-British propaganda was certainly less brutal.
- <sup>38</sup> Letter, Leutnant Emil Bartels, *Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 54*, 5 August 1914, Private Collection
- <sup>39</sup> *The Times*, 8 August 1914, p. 5
- <sup>40</sup> *Catalogue of War Literature issued by H.M. Government 1914-1919*, HMSO, London, 1921
- <sup>41</sup> Doyle & Walker, *op cit*.
- <sup>42</sup> [D.H. Bell] *A Soldiers' Diary of the Great War*, 26 January 1915, London, 1929
- <sup>43</sup> Brophy & Partridge, *op cit*, p, 99
- <sup>44</sup> Letter, Rifleman William C. Taffs, 1/16 Queen's Westminster Rifles, February 1916, Private Collection
- <sup>45</sup> Letter, Pte Robert W. Price, 10th Welsh Regiment, 26 March 1917 (Europeana [Micheal Payne], CC-A-SA-3.0)
- <sup>46</sup> Letter, Unteroffizier Johann Herrman *14. Königlich Bayrisches Reserve Infanterie Regiment*, 11 April 1916, Private Collection
- <sup>47</sup> Letter, Wilhelm Thuir, *Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 79*, March 1917, Private Collection

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<sup>48</sup> Letter, Friedrich Weitze, *Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 127*, 24 April 1918, Private Collection

<sup>49</sup> Private collection; such postcards were very popular and prevalent in the early part of the war.

<sup>50</sup> Hay, *Wounded and a Prisoner of War*, *op cit*

<sup>51</sup> Fraser & Gibbons, *op cit*, p. 134; according to them, and in common with the tone taken up by the press in the day 'the word was taken up amongst our men in jest and used more or less derisively'

<sup>52</sup> , Diary entry, Pte John H. Benn, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, June 1917, Private Collection

<sup>53</sup> Captain C.F. Atkinson, *Dictionary of English & German Military Terms*, London, 1916

<sup>54</sup> The title of Arthur Guy Empey's (1916) book; Empey described 'Over the top' as 'A famous phrase of the trenches. It is generally the order for the men to charge the German lines'. Fraser & Gibbons *op cit* and Brophy & Partridge *op cit*, have other forms, too: 'over the bags' and 'hop over' amongst them.

<sup>55</sup> *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War*, HMSO, 1922

<sup>56</sup> Amongst many others in the contemporary lexicons of Graff & Bormann *op cit*, and Fraser & Gibbons *op cit*, both published in 1925

<sup>57</sup> Letter, Otto Kiefer, *Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 87*, 20 October 1917, Private Collection

<sup>58</sup> The 1916 *War Budget* article makes a theme of them; but they occur much earlier.

<sup>59</sup> Letter, Pte Frederick Bolwell, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, 1914 (Europeana CC-A-SA-3.0)

<sup>60</sup> Letter, Rifleman William C. Taffs, 1/16 Queen's Westminster Rifles, 25 December 1916, Private Collection

<sup>61</sup> Diary entry, Pte Henry W. Talbot, Army Service Corps (Motor Transport), 1 November 1914, Private Collection

<sup>62</sup> *Kriegsbrieife des Leutnants Karl Beck 1914-1917* (privately published) Stuttgart 1918, pp. 114. Translations: *Kettenhund*: chained dog; *Ratschbumm*: whizzbang; *Blindschleichen*: slow worm; *Stinkewiesel*: 'stink weasel' (skunk); *Kohlenkasten*: coal box; *Hochbahnen*: elevated railway; *Bienen*: bees; *Bohnen*: beans; *Spatzen*: sparrows; *Maikäfer*: maybug; *Singvögel*: songbirds; *Stottertanten*: stuttering aunts; *Hackfleischmaschinen*: mincemeat machines; *Mördergesellenclub*: murder fellows club (MGK – *Maschinengewehr-Kompanie*); *Äfel*: apples; *Eier*: eggs; *Taschenkrebs*: crab.