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Parameters Editors

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From the Archives

The Military Roots of Civilian Sayings

Many popular expressions used in politics, business, fashion, and other arenas have their origins in the military arts. Take a look at the source of these sayings frequently used in conversations among civilians.

By the numbers: How the Union Army taught recruits to load and fire muskets, step by step.

Chow: A meal. Possibly a corruption of the Chinese word chia (“food”).

Filibuster: The nickname given to individuals waging war without government sanction in mid-nineteenth century Latin America, from the Spanish *filibustero* (“freebooter”).

Go the whole nine yards: When a World War II fighter pilot fired off all his ammunition—nine yards of it loaded in a belt—in one burst.

Scuttlebutt: The cask of drinking water on board a ship, around which the sailors would gather and gossip.

Show one's true colors: From men-of-war that would approach an enemy ship while flying a friendly flag, then hoist their real flag immediately before opening fire.

Son of a gun: In the days when women were allowed to live aboard naval vessels, children born at sea of unknown fathers were entered into the ship's log as “son of a gun.”

Turncoat: A duke of Saxony whose lands bordered France supposedly once dressed his men in blue coats with a white interior, so they could switch when he wanted them to appear to be acting in the French interest.

Uncle Sam: During the War of 1812, a New York butcher named Samuel Wilson shipped meat to the Army in kegs stamped “U.S.” Wilson was known as Uncle Sam; the white-haired figure familiar from World War I recruiting posters was modeled after Dan Rice, a professional circus clown.

Under the yoke: The Romans forced members of a defeated army to pass under a yoke (archway) of three spears to demonstrate their submission.

V for Victory: The two-fingered victory salute originates from the gesture used by English archers to taunt the French at Agincourt in 1415. Captured yeomen had their index and middle fingers amputated so they could never draw a bowstring again.

Sources: Paul Dickson, *War Slang: American Fighting Words and Phrases since the Civil War* (2d ed.; Washington: Brassey's, 2004); Nicholas Hobbes, *Essential Militaria: Facts, Legends, and Curiosities about Warfare through the Ages* (New York: Grove Press, 2003); *Webster's II New College Dictionary* (3d ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).