

WORD OF THE MONTH

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snowball march

- **noun**: a march held during the First World War to encourage army recruitment, particularly from rural areas.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

During the First World War, a method for recruiting soldiers, especially from rural areas, was the **snowball march**. After the outbreak of war, committees were formed in most Australian towns to organise and encourage recruitment. A man named W.T. Hitchen, who lived in the small New South Wales town of Gilgandra, decided to organise a group of men who wanted to enlist and march from the town all the way to Sydney (a distance of 440 km). As the men marched, they gathered recruits along the way.

The term **snowball march** is recorded once in Australian newspapers before the First World War when it was used to describe a trade union demonstration. However, it appears to become much more common during the war in reference to the recruitment marches. The first newspaper evidence explains the *snowball* allusion:

It is expected that the **snowball march** of recruits from Gilgandra will reach 300 by the time it gets to Sydney. The march has been termed 'snowball', inasmuch as it is intended to resemble a snowball which, when set in motion to roll down a hill, gathers in size the further it goes. (*Devonport and Burnie North Western Advocate and Emu Bay Times*, 15 October 1915)

The Gilgandra **snowball march** was called the *Coo-ee march*. A number of others followed, including the *Kangaroo march* in New South Wales from Wagga Wagga to Sydney, and the *Dungaree march* in Queensland from Warwick to Brisbane. These marches passed through a number of country towns picking up men on their way.

Sometimes the term **snowball march** was shortened to **snowball**, as in this example referring to a plan to organise a recruiting march in Victoria from Bairnsdale to Melbourne:

The President of the Bairnsdale Shore has received a letter from the Rev. E.F. Pelletier, of Maffra, suggesting that in connection with the forthcoming recruiting campaign a '**snowball**' be organised to start from Bairnsdale. (*Rosedale Courier*, 7 December 1915)

The **snowball march** continued to be used as a recruiting method, with varying degrees of success, through to early 1918.

In the Second World War, there was a brief attempt to revive the practice, with a First World War veteran proposing to organise such a march in 1941, albeit using motorised transport. *The Murrumbidgee Irrigator* reported: 'That "**snowball**" recruiting should be

initiated at Griffith, is suggested by a resident of that centre, an ex-A.I.F. man.' (3 June 1941) However, it appears that the proposal did not lead to any further attempts.

The term **snowball march** is one of a number of terms that came into Australian English during the First World War and illuminates an important aspect of the experience of the war.

Snowball march is one of the terms discussed in Amanda Laugesen's new book, *Furphies and Whizz-bangs: Anzac Slang from the Great War*, now available from Oxford University Press. It will also be included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.



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