

# WORD OF THE MONTH

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## Billzac

- **noun**: a typical Australian soldier.

### THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

During the First World War a number of terms for the typical Australian soldier appeared. In the early stages of the war a name from the Boer War, *Tommy Cornstalk*, was revived and used, along with *Tommy Colonial*. After the landings at Anzac Cove in 1915, the term *Anzac* began to be used of the soldiers who were at Gallipoli; as the war went on it was applied more generally to any Australian soldier. *Digger*, a term we are very familiar with today, is another word that came to be applied to Australian soldiers during the war. A much less familiar term used during the war is **Billzac**.

**Billzac** was a blend of *Billjim* and *Anzac*; there is also some evidence in the contemporary press of the term *Bill Anzac*. *Billjim* was a term used in Australian English before and during the war years for the 'typical man in the street'. First recorded in 1898, it was often used in *The Bulletin* periodical. During the war, the term was sometimes applied to soldiers, although the soldier periodical *Aussie* expressed their dislike of the term:

I'm worried about this name Billjim that some of the Aussie papers have tacked on to us. I don't like it. Has anyone ever heard a Digger address another as Billjim? If a Digger were to say to another: 'can you tell me the way to the Battalion lines, Billjim?' He'd be almost sure to get a loud ha-ha. The word is certainly not a Digger's word. It doesn't fit. (October 1918)

**Billzac** first appeared in the Australian press in 1916 in articles praising the special qualities of the Australian soldier:

Friendship is **Billzac's** forte. Of mates he is the most true, loyal and generous. But he is a man's man—in men's society he finds true relaxation and enjoyment. ... He is a born rebel, with a deep dislike to any rigidity of discipline and order. (*Port Pirie Recorder and North Western Mail*, 6 November 1916)

This quote attests to the emergence of a mythology surrounding the Australian soldier during the First World War. But it was also clear, as this quote from another soldier periodical, *The Kia Ora Coo-ee*, suggests, that the term *digger* was replacing **Billzac**:

This term Digger is a very universal one in France. ... It has supplanted 'Billjim' and '**Billzac**' as generic terms—and even 'Cobber', as a name by which you accost your friends, is quite out of it. (15 September, p. 8)

**Billzac** was thus one of the terms for an Australian soldier that didn't really outlast the war years. A book published about the war in 1923 by F.E. Trotter was called *Tales of Billzac: Being Extracts from a Digger's Diary*, and there was also a sports correspondent in the *Sunday Times* who wrote under the pseudonym 'Billzac' in the 1930s (perhaps because he was a veteran of the war); otherwise, the term largely dropped out of use.

The story of **Billzac** illustrates the way in which the war experience generated a range of names for the Australian soldier, most of which have been forgotten as *Anzac* and *digger* came to dominate our understanding of the Australian soldier at war.

**Billzac** 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 an updated entry in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.



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