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 Billjim. 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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