

Words and Their Stories: Military Expressions

This is Phil Murray with WORDS AND THEIR STORIES, a program in Special English on the Voice of America. We tell about some common expressions in American English.

A leatherneck or a grunt do not sound like nice names to call someone. Yet men and women who serve in the United States armed forces are proud of those names. And if you think they sound strange, consider doughboy and GI Joe.

After the American Civil War in the eighteen sixties, a writer in a publication called Beadle's Monthly used the word doughboy to describe Civil War soldiers. But word expert Charles Funk says that early writer could not explain where the name started.

About twenty years later, someone did explain. She was the wife of the famous American general George Custer.

Elizabeth Custer wrote that a doughboy was a sweet food served to Navy men on ships. She also said the name was given to the large buttons on the clothes of soldiers. Elizabeth Custer believed the name changed over time to mean the soldiers themselves.

Now, we probably most often think of doughboys as the soldiers who fought for the Allies in World War One.

By World War Two, soldiers were called other names. The one most often heard was GI, or GI Joe. Most people say the letters GI were a short way to say general issue or government issue. The name came to mean several things. It could mean the soldier himself. It could mean things given to soldiers when they joined the military such as weapons, equipment or clothes. And, for some reason, it could mean to organize, or clean.

Soldiers often say, "We GI'd the place." And when an area looks good, soldiers may say the area is "GI." Strangely, though, GI can also mean poor work, a job badly done.

Some students of military words have another explanation of GI. They say that instead of government issue or general issue, GI came from the words galvanized iron. The American soldier was said to be like galvanized iron, a material produced for special strength. The Dictionary of Soldier Talk says GI was used for the words galvanized iron in a publication about the vehicles of the early twentieth century.

Today, a doughboy or GI may be called a grunt. Nobody is sure of the exact beginning of the word. But, the best idea probably is that the name comes from the sound that troops make when ordered to march long distances carrying heavy equipment.

A member of the United States Marines also has a strange name -- leatherneck. It is thought to have started in the eighteen hundreds. Some say the name comes from the thick collars of leather early Marines wore around their necks to protect them from cuts during battles. Others say the sun burned the Marines' necks until their skin looked like leather.