

Military Speak

A glossary for *Soldiers and Chiefs*



Soldiers have a language of their own. Some of these words and phrases are technical descriptions of aspects of the military life. Others are slang or metaphors that have found their way into everyday speech. You might be using military terms without even realising it!

As you explore the displays in the *Soldiers and Chiefs* exhibition, you might find some unfamiliar terms. This information booklet provides definitions for a number of military words, grouped into these categories:

- **Kinds of Soldiers**
- **Army Ranks**
- **Army Weapons**



Kinds of Soldiers

This set of military terms for different kinds of soldiers will help you to become familiar with the terminology used in the exhibitions. Some of these terms are no longer used in today's armies.

Civilian

a non-military person: a soldier's life starts as a civilian

Soldier

a soldier serves in an army, wearing a uniform and carrying a weapon

Infantry

soldiers who are trained to fight on foot
in the past, included such types as fusilier, grenadier and rifleman

Cavalry

soldiers who were trained to fight on horseback
the common types of cavalry were hussar, lancer and dragoon

Artilleryman

a soldier with specialized training to operate artillery (cannons)
a term used since the 16th century

Rifleman

an infantry soldier trained to use an accurate weapon (a rifle) and to operate in small groups to harass the enemy
a term used since the 18th century

Specialist Soldiers of the 18th and 19th Centuries

Hussar (pronounced 'who's-are')

an elaborately uniformed member of a light cavalry unit (relatively small men on small horses), trained to scout for enemy positions and to charge in battle

Lancer

a member of a light cavalry unit with a special weapon, a lance, intended to intimidate and defeat enemy cavalry and infantry

Dragoon (or Dragoon Guard)

a member of a heavy cavalry unit consisting of big soldiers on big horses; when they charged, the shock overwhelmed the enemy and broke their formations

Fusilier

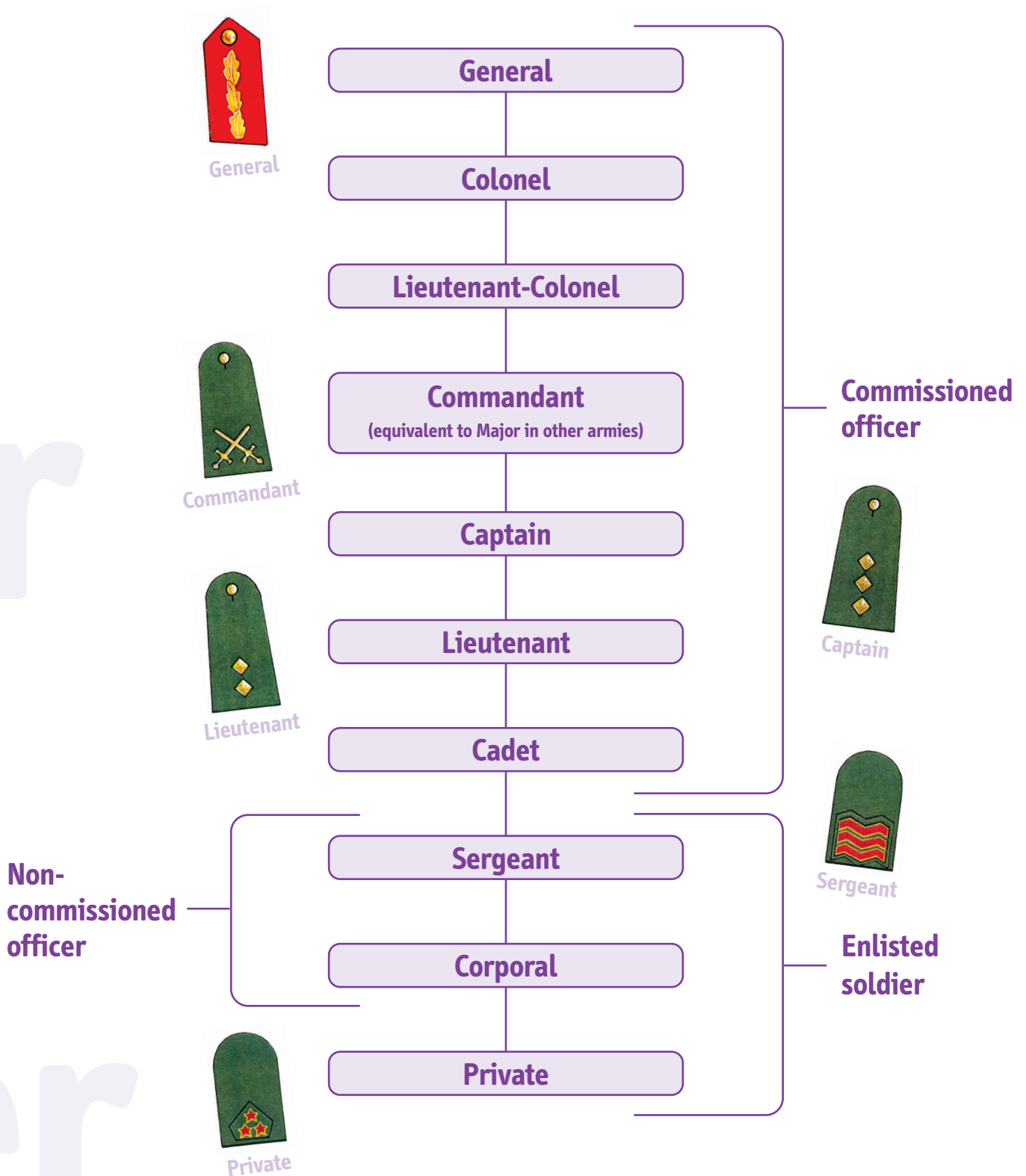
originally, a soldier who used a fusil (a kind of musket); later a member of a particular infantry regiment given elite status; fusiliers wore distinctive furry dress hats

Grenadier

the biggest and strongest men in an infantry unit, who were trained to carry and throw grenades

Army Ranks

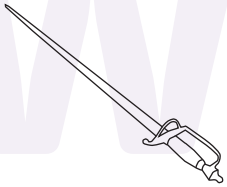
This illustration demonstrates the hierarchy of ranks in the Irish Army, from general to private.



Men and women join the Army in two ways:
They can enlist as an ordinary soldier.
They can be commissioned to the post of officer.

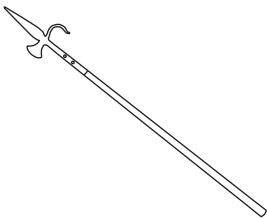
Army Weapons

Do you know the difference between a pike and a lance, or a rifle and a carbine? This list of definitions with illustrations will clarify the distinctions among the weapons on display in the *Soldiers and Chiefs* exhibition. The list is organised in rough chronological order, from early to recent types of technology – from edged weapons to firearms and to weapons of the 20th century.



Sword

a hand weapon with a long, sharp, pointed blade



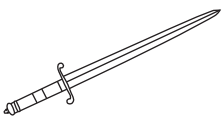
Pike

a long wooden shaft, tipped by a metal spearhead, used by a foot soldier



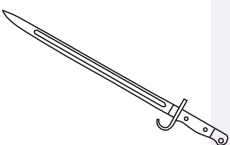
Lance

a weapon with a metal spearhead on a long wooden shaft, used on horseback by cavalry soldiers



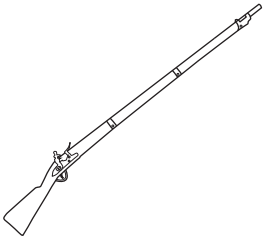
Dirk

a dagger or small knife, worn by junior officers in the army or navy



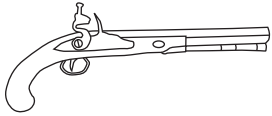
Bayonet

a long knife or short sword, which is attached to the end of a rifle to turn it into a kind of pike



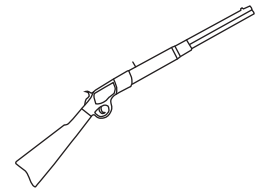
Musket

a gun with a long barrel and a smooth bore (barrel interior), loaded from the muzzle and fired from the shoulder



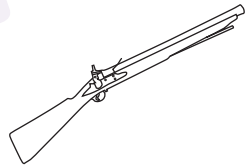
Pistol

a small gun that can be held and fired with one hand



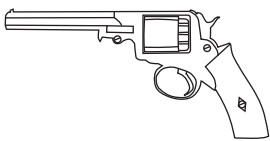
Rifle

a long-barrelled gun, fired from the shoulder, with grooves (called rifling) in the barrel, which spin the bullet for greater range and accuracy



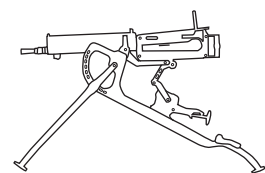
Carbine

a lightweight, short-barrelled version of a musket or rifle, intended for use on horseback



Revolver

a hand-held gun with a revolving cylinder for bullets, allowing it to be fired several times without reloading



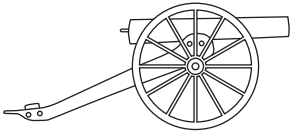
Machine-gun

a heavy automatic gun that fires a rapid and continuous stream of bullets



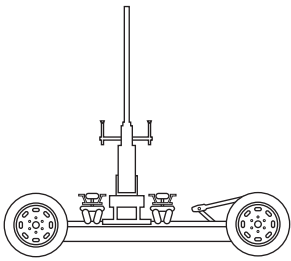
Sub-machine-gun

a portable automatic gun that fires brief bursts of bullets



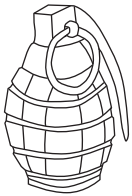
Field Artillery

large cannons that require animal or engine-power to move around; they are often named by the weight of the projectile they throw, such as a 12-pounder cannon



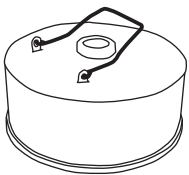
Anti-aircraft gun

a mounted rapid-firing cannon used for defence against enemy aircraft



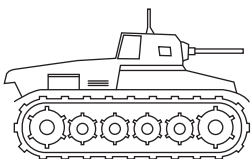
Grenade

a small bomb, thrown by hand or fired from a rifle, and detonated by a timed fuse



Landmine

an explosive device hidden beneath the surface of the ground, which is triggered by the pressure of troops or vehicles going over it



Armoured Vehicle

a wheeled or tracked vehicle (often mounting weapons) that has armour protection against small arms fire

Military Metaphors

A metaphor is a figure of speech that is not meant literally but is intended as a comparison. In everyday speech we use metaphors that have a military origin. Have you ever used any of these words or phrases?

A flash in the pan

Everyday Speech: a spectacular event without effect in the long term

Military Origin: what happens when the spark from flint fails to ignite the gunpowder in a flintlock firearm

AWOL

Everyday Speech: absenting oneself from duty without permission

Military Origin: Absent **With**Out **Leave**

Biting the bullet

Everyday Speech: facing up to an unpleasant consequence

Military Origin: legendary method of dealing with the pain of amputation, by biting down on the soft lead of a bullet

Carte blanche (French for blank page)

Everyday Speech: permission to act without restraint

Military Origin: the term given to a surrender without conditions; i.e. the victors could write their own terms for the losers on a blank sheet

Closing ranks

Everyday Speech: collecting people or resources to deal with an external threat

Military Origin: in the past soldiers marched shoulder to shoulder during a battle; the closer together the ranks were, the more formidable their appearance to the enemy

Commandeer

Everyday Speech: to seize or appropriate something, perhaps illegally

Military Origin: a term borrowed ('commandeered') by the British Army from the Boers in the late 19th century; originally *kommandeer*, from the Afrikaans language

To dragoon

Everyday Speech: forcing someone to do something they don't want to

Military Origin: reflects the bad reputation of the cavalymen called dragoons, who in the 17th and 18th centuries often mistreated civilians

To draw a bead

Everyday Speech: aiming carefully at some target

Military Origin: the bead is the front sight on a firearm

Facing the music

Everyday Speech: face up to an unpleasant consequence

Military Origin: when a soldier was dishonorably dismissed from his unit, the band played 'The Rogue's March', a tune signifying dishonour

Flak

Everyday Speech: criticism or trouble

Military Origin: abbreviation of the German *Fliegerabwehrkanone*, meaning anti-aircraft cannon; usually refers to the fire from such a weapon

To go off at half cock

Everyday Speech: act in a premature or unprepared manner

Military Origin: flintlock weapons had two settings to cock (or set) the spring-loaded hammer; if the gun went off at half-cock, it would fire prematurely

Grog

Everyday Speech: alcohol (particularly rum)

Military Origin: from the nickname of Admiral Edward Vernon who watered down the sailors' rum ration; he was known as 'old grogram' for the fabric of the cloak he often wore

Hanging fire

Everyday Speech: something expected which fails to happen

Military Origin: refers to the failure of a weapon to fire

Last ditch

Everyday Speech: final, often desperate attempt or situation

Military Origin: in defending a fort, the soldiers were in a bad way if they were forced back to the last defensive barrier or ditch

Long shot

Everyday Speech: a hopeful but unlikely trial or attempt

Military Origin: the effective range of cannons was limited, but some damage might result from a shot at extreme range

No names, no pack drill

Everyday Speech: without relevant details, individual responsibility cannot be assigned for a misdeed

Military Origin: pack-drill was a minor army punishment

Rank and file

Everyday Speech: ordinary or lower-status individuals

Military Origin: soldiers on parade were organised into ranks (from side to side) and files (from front to back)

Recce (pronounced 'wreck-y')

Everyday Speech: the process of exploring the possibilities

Military Origin: short for reconnaissance, the process of finding out what the enemy is doing

To ride roughshod over

Everyday Speech: to treat with disregard

Military Origin: cavalry horses were sometimes given special sharpened horseshoes (shod rough) to harm any infantry they charged

The scuttlebut

Everyday Speech: rumour or gossip

Military Origin: the scuttlebut was the water barrel where sailors gathered to drink and gossip, just as people do today at the office water cooler

To steal a march

Everyday Speech: obtain an advantage by a ruse or trick

Military Origin: opposing armies once camped by night and marched by day; if one began the march during the night, it would gain an advantage

(Not enough) space to swing a cat

Everyday Speech: a confined space

Military Origin: the cat is the cat-of-nine-tails (a whip with multiple strands) used to punish sailors; below decks on the ship the space was very limited, so the punishment took place on deck

Spiking his guns

Everyday Speech: invalidating his arguments

Military Origin: muzzle-loading cannon had a touch-hole used to fire the gunpowder within; if a nail was hammered in this hole, the gun became useless

Turncoat

Everyday Speech: a traitor

Military Origin: supposedly, the process of dismissing a renegade soldier involved making him wear his coat inside out; another explanation suggests that a German prince kept a jacket that was Saxon blue on one side and French white on the other; he could 'turn his coat' to match that of the prevailing power

Watchword

Everyday Speech: principle governing all activity

Military Origin: the password for the 'watch', the soldiers on sentry duty around the camp

With flying colours

Everyday Speech: great success

Military Origin: warships returning from a victory at sea would decorate all their masts with flags (colours) as a sign of their success

Words from the Wardrobe

Some terms for clothing have a military origin.

Balaclava hat

Everyday Speech: a knitted head covering, protecting the ears and face

Military Origin: first introduced during the Crimean War, which included the Battle of Balaclava

Camouflage

Everyday Speech: to disguise or conceal from view

Military Origin: disguising the appearance of troops and equipment to conceal them from the enemy

Cardigan

Everyday Speech: knitted jacket with buttons down the front

Military Origin: named after Lord Cardigan, the leader of the Light Cavalry Brigade during the Crimean War

Khaki

Everyday Speech: a dull, yellowish brown cloth

Military Origin: from the Urdu word for dust or dust-coloured, originally adopted by the British Army in India; Urdu is an Indo-Aryan language spoken mainly in Pakistan and India

Raglan sleeve

Everyday Speech: a sleeve that has no defined shoulder seam

Military Origin: the one-armed Lord Raglan, commander of the British forces in the Crimea, wore garments with this kind of sleeve

In Other Words

These terms entered common usage as a result of soldiers stationed overseas talking to local people.

Buckshee

Military Meaning: something for free, often a tip or bribe

Original Language: from the Persian word for a present

Mingy men

Military Meaning: the term used by the Irish Defence Force soldiers to refer to shopkeepers in the Lebanon

Original Language: from a local dialect in the Congo, meaning 'many'; sellers of goods to Irish soldiers told them: 'I have 'mingy' gifts for you to look at'

Mufti

Military Meaning: British Army slang for civilian clothing

Original Language: from the Arabic *mufti* (holy man); the soldiers were joking about the contrast between the loose, informal civilian clothes of the Arabs and their own tight uniforms

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Want to know more?

For more information on exhibitions and education programmes, contact the Education and Outreach Department of the National Museum of Ireland.

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