

Slangage!

To the wealth of slang terms already existing in the three services, the second World War has added an astounding number of rich and sparkling gems of slangage.

* * * *

What is slang, anyhow, and how does it differ from ordinary speech? Greenough and Kittredge in «Words and their Ways,» say that slang «is a peculiar kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech, but continually straying or forcing its way into the most respectable company.» Not a particularly helpful definition, is it? Perhaps Professor Martin Griffith comes closer when he says «Slang is a continuous attempt by normal people to freshen and enliven speech.» Certainly the chief characteristics of slang are its pithiness, its directness, and its vigorous quality.

Slang is a quick leap to expression, it is the language of situation. It is inevitable, then, that wartime should breed slang arising out of unusual situations and new states of mind.

Many Air Force terms in use in this country are Army in origin. The ubiquitous «browned off» (from overcooked meat; depressed, fed up) with its companions «cheesed off» and «brassed off» (both seldom heard in New Zealand and denoting various degrees of browned-offedness) originated with the British Army. «You've had it,» meaning «you've arrived too late,» seems to be strictly Air Force in origin (compare the civilian «to have had some»), as does «to have gone for a Burton.» The latter term meaning «to have gone missing» is especially interesting as it seems to derive from «to have gone for certain,» thus showing traces of the famous Cockney rhyming slang so popular in the last war—«Cape of Good Hope» for «soap,» «plates of meat» for «feet,» and so on.

A large number of British terms are often heard overseas. For instance, if

a thing goes wrong, the Tommy says it is «ropey»; «a ropey chap» is one who makes frequent mistakes, and «a ropey job» denotes an uncollaborative blonde. Instead of «fine and dandy,» things are «wizard» (this originated in an old American musical comedy, and later had a vogue at Oxford). When everything is under control it is «buttoned up» (amongst New Zealanders it is usually «jacked up» or «teed up»). Anything that turns out badly is a «bad show,» of course, but also a «black.» The «bad show,» «good show» of the R.A.F. prove almost as wearying, by the way, as the fast-dying «that'll be the day» and its numerous variants, «that'll be the bright and sunny,» «that'll be the pleasant Friday afternoon,» &c., all showing the wearisome lengths to which injudicious use will push an apt piece of slang.

However, we are concerned here chiefly with New Zealand Army slang. It has been said by some that New Zealand slang is probably the most conservative of all colonial slang.

Yet an examination of New Zealand Army slang shows not only a vigorous use of current slang which gives it a distinctively local flavour, but the development of several terms which are as colourful as anything America or England has to offer.

Amongst the older expressions still used, «swinging the lead» has not been ousted by the American «gold-bricking,» «on the mat» still means a telling-off; «scrounge» (from a North Country word meaning «to wander idly, to search»); «burgoo» for porridge (from the Turkish *burghul*, wheat—porridge); and «bullring» for the training-ground, still retain their popularity.

But several newer terms have come to light. Perhaps the best of these is «emu parade» for an organised sanitary scavenge (obviously Australian in origin, as is a great deal of standard New Zealand slang). «Maori P.T.» for a sound sleep, usually surreptitious, is self-explanatory. The most important