

# THE SOLDIER AND SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH

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I must stress at the outset that this is not my world and I enter it and see it only as an outsider. I am aware too that usage among National Servicemen differs from base to base - even from year to year - and that what I say therefore can only be impressionistic.

I am particularly indebted to the inspiration of two people for exploring troepie language a little further than might be expected of a respectable lexicographer and a female one at that. One is Brigadier J.H. Picard, Director of the Language Service of the SADF, whose article 'Roofies and Oumanne: is South African Military Language being Gyppoed?' spurred me on to find out a little more.<sup>1)</sup> My other inspiration was my publisher, Mr Neville Gracie of Oxford University Press, Southern Africa, at whose particular request I went hunting troepie-talk for the second edition of *A Dictionary of South African English*.<sup>2)</sup>

For the terms I have learnt, however unmentionable some of them may be, I am grateful indeed to many young servicemen and ex-National Servicemen, some of whom still appear in my office at Rhodes with 'Say Doc, have you heard this one?'

Before we read Brigadier Picard's article we had a few items of military usage in the dictionary files, like *vasbyt*, *mindae*, *parabat*, *troepie* and perhaps *varkpan*; but after 1975 the new language became a sharply focussed part of our brief. I was also

fast approaching the time when I would be an Army mum - and in for surprises. To most housewives and mothers *basics* are what one keeps in the store cupboard, *intake* something one tries to keep down when on diet, and *contact* what one tries to keep with one's friends. When my son went into the Armoured Corps and I heard of *ratel*, *eland*, *olifant*, *buffel* and others, it seemed to me to be strange and terrible that the names of familiar animals should become those of the vehicles of war, and to find the *gharry* of safari-style hunters, or the British Raj in India, a common mode of transport in a sterner context. Today *ratel*, *olifant*, *bosbok* and *buffel* feature regularly in the press and one has grown accustomed to new words and ideas.

To digress a moment from this it is perhaps worth noting that while animal names for combat and transport vehicles appear to be relatively new, feminine names for guns go a long way back in time. To the troopie in the infantry his R1 (or R4) is his *vrou*, as was his musket, *Brown Bess*, to the British soldier in the Peninsular War. *Ousanna* features in many accounts of the early days in this country, as do the larger pieces like *Ou Grietjie*, comparable with the British *Big Bertha* and *Muckle-mouthed Meg*. Admittedly our *Long Cecil* and *Long Tom* somewhat spoil the symmetry of the picture!

To return: one can compare our own familiarization with these new terms with the way in which South African words spread into the English of England in the Anglo-Boer War. To the stay-at-homes in England the *Khakis* were their own men who were fighting in the *koppies*, *kloofs*, *dongas*, *drifts*, *kranses*, *dorps* and *veld* of an alien land, and it was their letters and press reports of actions that really spread South African words abroad. On the literary side there was also, of course, the Boer War poetry of Kipling published in 1903.<sup>3)</sup> There was too, what Charles Pettman, a Methodist minister, austere described as 'the large amount of war literature directly or indirectly dealing with South African doings and misdoings, which has not yet ceased to flow from the press.'<sup>4)</sup> Now many of us are in a similar position to that of those families who waited for news and letters. Our boys and men are fighting in an environment most of us have never seen, and words like, *The Yati*, *cuca shop*, *red area*, *witpad* and *bossies* come out of it.

For the South African boys of today military service is not the group, family or community affair that it was in the *burgher commandos*, where men tended to know each other, to have similar backgrounds and ideals and all spoke the same language. Today *Boere* and *Engelse*, and other South Africans of various groups, are called up from every quarter with virtually nothing in common but their age, lack of experience, and the fact of their being South Africans.

Is it surprising that all speedily acquire the same lingua franca to describe every activity of an unfamiliar day? It has little in common with the *blou taal* (English), or *the Code* (Afrikaans) spoken on certain days by the Navy. It is what Brigadier Picard described as 'not merely a taal for takhare and backvelders, neither is it a language for *lang hare and dik brille* or *In-doenas*. It is a practical means of communication spontaneously accepted, and used by thousands of National Servicemen.' It is here I think that the *Taal as Wapen* theme comes into its own, because this common language is for them a weapon against isolation from their fellows, a safety valve defusing some of the frustrations of unfamiliar military discipline and over-zealous corporals, and a unifying factor among young men from every walk of life. (The inexhaustible ingenuity of SADF corporals in devising pejorative descriptions would fill a book on its own and I will not touch on it here!)

Troopies standing in the *chow queue* waiting for the *pot tiffy* or *opspepper*, *varkpan*, *grazing spanners* and *blinkbakkie* in hand, or on the *border* with *ratpack*, *ezbits* and *firebucket*, are a far cry from the burghers on commando on the veld, or even in *laager*. There they were often several generations together - the first of *Dad's-* and *Grandad's Armies* of Southern Africa. *Oupa*, his sons and their *penkoppe*, and probably some of their neighbours, and neighbours' neighbours, could fry their *stormjaers* or *maagbomme* and eat them in company and surroundings not too strange to them.

Yet many National Servicemen are the descendants of those *penkoppe* that went out with their fathers to fight, and the names which they give to their food are as lively as *maagbomme* and *stormjaers* described by General de Wet, though some of them would have shocked Oupa - as would being told to '*Sluk nou kou later*' - from *panserkarre* (hard meat balls), mangled *mortier hoender*, *katkop*, *mindae chips*, *skrapnel*, *kojaks* and unmentionable baked beans and even worse wors, to the *Tarzan bars* and *doggies* in their *rat-packs* - all of them named to lighten and bring a touch of humour to boring institutional food. Indeed the *ratpacks* themselves, far more hygienic and nutritionally sound as I don't doubt they are, are a long way from those saddlebags lovingly packed by the hands of wives and mothers with what Kipling described as 'is Boer bread an' biltong, an' 'is flask of awful Dop.'<sup>5)</sup>

The language of our young men shows both inventiveness and good humour: in the bungalow *squaring off* a *gyppo bed* (with unmentionable mattress cover), polishing their *areas*, skidding about on cloth *taxis* to protect the floor from the impact of their heavy boots, and even unpacking every article of their gear for an *uitpakparade*. The clothing in *trommel*, *kas* and *balsak* is

named piece by piece: the *staaldak* with its *mosdoppie* and *doibie* inside, the *seven single* of whatever colour, *browns*, the inevitable *bosdrag* and 'bushat', billowing *Santa Marias*, *mooi-moois*, *step-out shoes*, which always sound like an advertisement, and overalls with *gyppo seams* to help the ironing along. I would even suspect that the begrimed, self-washed, cardboard-like socks have a name worthy of them, though I have never learned it.

Their particular inventiveness is shown too in the naming of the *tiffies* who surround them, from the *pot tiffy* in the mess, to the *pill* (or unmentionable) *tiffy* in the sickbay, to the *soul tiffy* who conducts church parades, when they would rather *gyppo out* keeping clear of the *sheriff* (a *wit ou, ek se*) or the *Meat Pies*.

All these terms speak somehow of the very young. The *Aapkas*, *pampoens*, *marbles* and *hondjies* of the *parabats'* equipment make light of sometimes irritating or grim reality, like *chicken parades* in camp, *spookloop*, *bobbejaankruip* and *leopard crawl* in training or the *blood* (and other) *budgets* on the border.

Troopie-talk is something which gives me great pride in our young men. They may not *tree aan* singing like Cromwell's New Model Army, nor (most of them) bring to their compulsory service the fiery and dedicated zeal of their Boer forbears, but they make the best of it and of themselves, and their *taal* is a reflection of this. Bakgat - and bless them.

## VOCABULARY SAMPLE

1. VRYHEIDSOORLOG	dorp	(ii) <i>Uniform</i>
	(ou) sanna	
Boere	Ou Grietjie	browns
Khaki		'bootse'
burgher commando	2. NATIONAL SERVICE	staaldak
laager		doibie
Oupa	(i) <i>General</i>	mosdoppie
penkop		bosdrag
stormjaer	intake	'bushat'
maagbom	roofie	seven single
Boer bread	troepie	mooi-moois
biltong	basics	step-out shoes
dop	vasbyt	santa marias
veld	blougat	gyppo seams
kloof	ou man	
krans	mindae	
drift	klaar out	
donga		

(iii) <i>Bungalow</i>	(iv) <i>Training and Action</i>	pill tiffy
area	tree aan	t - tiffy
balsak	chicken parade	soul/siel tiffy
trommel	spookloop	parabat
kas	bobbejaankruip	panserou
square off	leopard crawl	bokkop
gyppo bed	afk-kparade	bok-etc.
p... vel	motivation PT	(viii) <i>Off duty</i>
taxis	border	
uitpakparade	The Yati	on pass
	blood budgies	gyppo out
(iv) <i>Mess</i>	K-budgies	(cuca shop)
	locpop	Louis
chow queue/tools etc.	cuca shop	
varkpan	contact	(ix) <i>Other</i>
blinkbakkie	witpad	
grazing spanners	to spook	aapakas
opskepper	Red area	pampoens
pot tiffy	buddy-aid	hondjie
katkop	bossies	marble
panserkarre	'boy'	die blou
mortier hoender	vrou	taal/rooi
skrapnel	ratpack	Engelse
kojaks	Tarzan bars	the Code
mindae chips	doggies	bosbok
p... boontjies	ezbits	flossie
Owambop...	firebucket	sprinkaan
sluk nou kou later		spinnekop
	(vii) <i>Personnel</i>	Dad's Army
(v) <i>Vehicles</i>		wit
	Indoenas	bakgat
cars/karre	lang hare en	hande skut
ratel	dik brille	kla on, etc.
eland	Meat Pies	
buffel	sheriff	
olifant	tiffy	
gharry	pot tiffy	

#### REFERENCES

1. *English Usage in Southern Africa*. Vol. 6, No. 1, May 1975.
2. Oxford University Press (Southern Africa), 1980.
3. Rudyard Kipling. *The Five Nations*. 1903.
4. The Revd. Charles Pettman. *Africanderisms*. 1913.
5. *Piet* (Regular of the Line), *The Five Nations*, 1903.