WEAPONS AND WARFARE IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

ZOLTÁN Ildikó Gy.[1]

Abstract

Weapons may have evolved from the primitive axe made of chipped stone to the more 'sophisticated' means of mass-destruction, but they have undeniably accompanied humankind all through its history, just like the wars that have been fought with them. Most of these weapons are no longer in every-day use, but they have been preserved and kept alive in that colourful keepsake album of language: idioms.

Keywords: **weapon, war, word, idiom, origin**

The noun 'war', as late Old English or Middle English *wyrre, werre*, comes from Old Northern French *werre* (variant of Old French *guerre*), of Germanic origin, where the original sense was 'to bring into confusion'. It is cognate with Old High German *werra* 'strife, broil, confusion'; Old Norse *verri*, Middle English or late Old English *werrien* (tr.) 'to make war upon', related to the German *verwirren* 'to confuse, perplex'. It appears in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (originally late 9th century) and can also be found in Cnut's Law Code of 1018: 'armorum oneribus, quod Angli war-scot dicunt'. This word was not a common choice, the usual Anglo-Saxon correspondents being the more poetic *wíg, hild, winn, gúð, heaðo*. There was no common Germanic word for 'war' in those early days, and the Latin 'bellum' was translated with the Germanic *gewin* 'struggle, strife' because the former was felt to be too close to 'bello', i.e. beautiful. The word *warfare* is a derivative, meaning war-expedition, from the Anglo-Saxon *faran*, to go.

The word 'weapon' is from before 900. In Old English (or Aglo-Saxon) *wǣpen*, in Middle English *wepen,* meant 'instrument of fighting and defense', from the Germanic *wæpnan*. It is related to Old Saxon *wapan*, Old Norse *vāpn*, Icelandic *våpn*, Danish *vaaben*, Old Frisian *wēpen*, Middle Dutch *wapen*, Old High German *wāffan*, Gothic *wēpna*, German *Waffe*; all from *webno-m*, of unknown origin with no cognates outside Germanic. The word is allied to the Anglo-Saxon *wǣpman*, a full-grown man, a male. The word today denotes any instrument or device for use in attack or defence in combat, fighting or war, such as a sword, rifle, or cannon.

[1] Assistant, *Petru Maior* University, Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)

A Brief History

War is described as a state of armed conflict between two or more entities. These can be states or nations, in which case we speak of international war; or they can be rival political factions within a state, when it is called civil war. It can have political, economic, ideological, racial or religious conflicts as its cause. Wars have been fought for various reasons throughout history: in the name of some ideal or in necessary self-defence, but mostly (though usually not so declared) for territories, resources or other means that would ensure power and supremacy.

Whether we like to admit it or not, war has been present in the history of humanity since the dawn of our kind. From primitive times to ancient states, it used to be a joint effort of all members of the community. The separate warrior class emerged when society divided on a functional basis, and these fighting forces became themselves more varied and specialised, as war became more of a science – or art – with the development of strategy and tactics.

The earliest weapons used by hominids five million years ago were probably wooden clubs and unshaped stones. The spear can be considered the first unambiguous missile weapon used for jabbing and throwing. Originally, it was a simple wooden stick sharpened to a crude point at one end, later the head was made of more resistant materials, such as flint, bone or metal.

Alongside the spear, the sling, the axe and the bow, the sword and similar edged weapons appeared in ancient times, as well as the first siege weapon, the battering ram, used for breaching fortifications. When the recently domesticated horse was involved in battle, it was used to draw chariots – but it also brought the dawn of cavalry. Ever larger warships started to be employed in maritime battles. Gradually the materials and the crafting techniques for making weapons improved, and warfare became more complex due to the development of military technology.

In the middle ages, the mounted and armoured knights brought new tactics into battles. They used the bow from a distance, the lance in a charge, and the sword at close quarters. The supporting infantry fought with spears, billhooks and later with pikes, and the staff sling or trebuchet, a type of catapult, became the siege weapon of choice.

The knights' period of glory was ended with the introduction of gunpowder in warfare during the Renaissance. This was used in rockets, cannons and the first muzzle-loading firearms – and it changed the face of armed conflict for ever.

The effectiveness of firearms constantly increased up to the nineteenth century, by which time the machine gun had already made its appearance in the American Civil War.

World War I brought the technological escalation to fully industrialised warfare. Aircrafts and tanks were introduced to the battlefield, and the first weapons of mass destruction were invented.

Weapon development reached unprecedented speed before and during World War II, culminating in the atomic bomb; and the subsequent nuclear arms race of the Cold

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)

War period took the world to the point where the entire planet could have been destroyed in a nuclear war, had it ever come to that.

Weapons & Arms

Weapons have always been a symbol of power, typical attributes of heroes and war-like gods. However, their symbolical reference is inherently equivocal, considering that they can be used for attack and aggression as well as for defence and protection.

An impressive range of weapons figure in English idioms. When you are overly well equipped with whatever you intend to use as weapons, you are ***armed*** *to the teeth.* Today's figurative use is derived from the original meaning, which was 'fully armed with a variety of deadly weapons or other military equipment and prepared for any attack', like knights used to be in their head-to-foot armour. This suit of armour, however, did occasionally prove less than infallible: an opening or gap in it could allow a weapon to penetrate and wound the wearer. This is why *a chink in somebody's* ***armour*** came to mean a small defect, weakness or imperfection in somebody's otherwise invulnerable protection or defence, that might provide a means for either attacking or impressing him or her.

Conflict situations can imply an argument or dispute with somebody: *to cross* ***swords*** used to be the literary term for a duel between adversaries. A reference to sword-fight is also in the phrase *cut and thrust,* meaning a vigorous and spirited exchange of opinions or ideas.

A more or less friendly competition or argument would mean *to break a* ***lance*** *with somebody*, which takes us back again to knights on horseback. In combat they usually tried to throw each other from the saddle using lances, and the more formalised variant of these tilts or jousts were performed in tournaments for the entertainment of the audience – and, of course, for a prize.

A *free****lance*** today is a journalist, musician, writer, designer, performer, etc., who does not have a long-term contract with one employer but receives pay for the different items of work undertaken for various persons or organisations. The term originally referred to a medieval mercenary who was willing to hire out his skills in combat with a lance to any cause. Most of these were from the 'free companies', groups of disbanded soldiery who roamed France in the mid-14th century, plundering and pillaging. Their lance was free, not in the sense that they made no charge for their services but that they were free of any long-term loyalty to one particular master, so they were available to sell themselves to any cause or master and take up arms for whoever paid the most.

The cudgel is a short, thick stick or club. *To take up the* ***cudgels*** means that you defend or support a person or cause with great energy and determination. More serious conflict, bitter argument, open hostility and readiness to attack is suggested when two people are *at* ***daggers*** *drawn* or *at* ***loggerheads*** *(over something).* The original loggerheads were long-handled implements that had iron bulbs or balls on the end and were used to

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)

melt tar. During medieval times, they were used in maritime battles: tar and pitch or some liquid was heated up in the loggerheads and thrown at the enemy ships.

If you manage to settle an argument and become friendly again, you *bury the* ***hatchet***. The expression refers to the old custom of the American Indians who took the tomahawks and other weapons of the leaders of the warring groups and literally buried them in the ground so that they might not be reminded of past quarrels when they smoked the pipe of peace with their old enemies.

The hatchet or tomahawk is in fact an axe. Battle-axes with long handles were frequently used as a weapon up to the middle ages. However, the phrase *battle* ***axe,*** meaning an overbearing and belligerent (usually middle-aged or old) woman, originated in America in the early years of the women's rights movement. 'The Battle Axe' was a journal published by the movement and the expression is thought to come from it. The term was obviously not originally meant as an insult but as a war cry. The fact that it soon came to refer to a domineering, aggressive woman of a certain age could well be a reflection of what many people thought of the movement's members.

'Old-style' weapons feature in several other expressions as well. You are said to *shoot your last* ***arrow*** when you are left without resources in a contest, and you *draw the* ***long bow*** when you exaggerate. A good archer was supposed to be able to hit between the fingers of a man's hand from a considerable distance, and could shoot his arrow as far as a mile. The tales told about longbow exploits, especially in the Robin Hood stories, fully justify the application of the phrase to somebody who magnifies his feats beyond the limits of the truth.

In the middle ages, the petard was an explosive device that was exploded to make a breach in the gate or a wall of an enemy's castle. To lay such a device was a risky operation, and since the charges were not always well put together, the slow-burning fuse sometimes exploded prematurely and the military engineer firing the petard was blown up with it. Based on this, it is easy to understand why *to be hoist with your own* ***petard*** means to become victim of your own plans to harm others when these plans backfire on you. Similarly, if someone uses an argument that could harm as well as benefit him or her, or makes a compliment or statement with a double meaning, it is a ***double-edged*** *weapon/* ***sword***: it cuts both ways.

Another, heavier type of sword is the sabre, with a one-edged and slightly curved blade, used mainly by cavalry. Whoever *rattles the* ***sabre***, expresses anger and fierceness or makes threatening statements in an attempt to impress or frighten an opponent or enemy, but without actually taking action to support these feelings. If you do not even get as far as expressing you feelings, just give fierce or angry looks to a person, glaring or scowling with obvious hostility but without speaking, you *look* ***daggers*** *at* them.

Moving on to later weapons and accessories, the warning given in case of imminent attack or upcoming danger is to remain calm and prepared for immediate

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)

action: *keep your* ***powder*** *dry*. As gunpowder will not ignite when wet, this you have to do in order not to remain defenceless.

However, if you still have to accept the prospect of pain or some other unpleasant experience, do it with courage or stoically: *bite the* ***bullet***. The most frequently cited explanation of this phrase is that before the introduction of anaesthetics, the wounded soldiers who had to undergo painful operations without drugs were encouraged by army doctors to bite on a lead bullet during treatment, which was supposed to help them withstand the pain. Another variant holds that the method was used by soldiers being disciplined with the cat-o'-nine-tails, the infamous whip with nine knotted cords used for corporal punishment, to prevent them from crying out loudly in pain.

Powder and bullets are used in a firearm but, to be able to fire it, you need the complete weapon, with nothing omitted or changed in any way: *lock, stock and barrel*, which means completely, wholly, in its entirety – in reference to anything that has constituent parts, no matter how small or insignificant. These are in fact the three basic parts of a gun: the lock is the mechanism that ignites the charge, the stock is the handle and framework holding the other parts in place, and the barrel is the metal tube through which the bullet is fired.

Further idioms that make reference to firearms include *to hang* ***fire***: to wait or be delayed, to be slow in taking decisive action – like a gun that is not working properly and is slow in firing. When things (like a plan or ceremony) happen or start too early before everything is ready so that something goes wrong during the process, they *go off at* ***half cock***, like a gun that fires too soon. If someone is at the end of his or her resources, they have *no more* ***shots*** *in the locker*, which was originally the compartment on board a warship in which the ammunition was stored.

Guns can have different shapes and sizes, and whatever they say, size does matter in their case. A special effort made to defeat one's opponent by using something powerful that has been held back is *to bring out the* ***big guns***; the same effort and energy applied in order to do very well and be successful means *to go* ***great guns***.

On the other hand, when you have to defend your position against strong opposition, you *stick to your colours* / ***guns***, and if you suffer defeat fighting manfully to the very end, you *go down (with) all* ***guns blazing***/ *firing*, like the noblest (or most desperate) western-movie heroes.

To avoid such extreme situations, you might want to prevent your enemy's plans from being fulfilled by *spiking their* ***guns***. This expression is derived from the method of literally 'spiking' muzzle-loading cannons, which could be put out of action by driving a spike, a pointed piece of metal, into the small hole through which the powder was ignited.

Police officers in free countries around the world share a common problem. They may catch a person whom they suspect is guilty of a crime, but they cannot put the person in prison unless they can prove his guilt to a judge or jury. An expression that

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)

became popular in the second half of the 20th century and has since been used referring to such indisputable evidence is *a/the smoking* ***gun***. It is based on the fact that a cloud of smoke rises from the end of a gun after it is fired. The person holding the gun may try to deny it, but anyone seeing the smoke knows the gun has just been fired.

The present-day descendant of the petard, the bomb, figures in more recently coined idioms. *To put a* ***bomb*** *under someone* means to urge them to do things faster, especially by sending him or her a reminder. A person or thing will *go down a* ***bomb*** if they prove to be very successful, much liked or admired, but *to go down like a* ***bomb*** means to be a great shock, surprise or disappointment. Similarly, *to drop a* ***bombshell*** would be to suddenly disclose or deliver some surprising, disturbing or even shattering news or information.

Shell*-shocked* was a term used for a medical condition suffered by those traumatised by being under fire in war. (Today in psychiatry this kind of stress disorder is called battle fatigue or combat neurosis.) By metaphorical extension, the phrase can now be applied to any state of stunned confusion, dazed distress or shock: after a divorce, being made redundant, the death of a loved one, etc.

Battle

The idiom for a hard-fought struggle or a fierce encounter where the antagonists are intensely engaged (usually in large numbers) is *a pitched* ***battle***. This was originally a battle where time and location were deliberately chosen and the arrangement of armed forces had also been planned.

On the other hand, *to fight a losing* ***battle*** means to struggle against something with little or no chance of success. A disagreement, argument, etc., that goes on for a long time can be called *a running* ***battle***, like a naval engagement between two hostile fleets while they are on the move, one advancing and the other retreating.

Another phrase originating in nautical usage is applied when you have to make a quick get-away, quit or flee: *to* ***cut and run***. The saying conjures the image of a sailing ship that is cut loose from the anchor line (the cable used to be made of hemp) in order to make sail instantly without waiting to wind in the anchor. 'Run' here means to sail downwind, i.e. before the wind. This procedure was sometimes necessary in an emergency, to save the ship either from a storm or from enemy attack.

If you are *in the* ***line of fire***, you are unfortunate enough to be caught between two opposing persons or groups and thus in danger of being harmed by their attacks on each other.

When you refuse to retreat or give up, you might find at the end that you have won *a Pyrrhic* ***victory***: an apparent victory which in fact is no victory at all, because it has been won at too heavy a price. Such was the one won by Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, at

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)

Asculum in 279 BC, which cost him all his best officers and many men. After the battle he remarked: "One more such victory and we are finished."

More classic figures are evoked in the following pair of sayings: *to hold the* ***pass***, that is, to support or defend an opinion, purpose, etc., and *to sell the* ***pass***, to be disloyal to one's friends or one's beliefs, to yield to one's opponents. The reference is to Thermopylae, the famous pass from Thessaly to Locris, only 25 ft. wide at its narrowest part, which is celebrated for its heroic defence in 480 BC by Leonidas, with some 300 Spartans and 700 Thespians, against Xerxes and the Persian host. Eventually, treachery allowed the Persians to get to the rear of the Greeks and the Spartan king and his band were all slain.

When you take care of things, look after a business, while the person in charge is absent, you *hold the* ***fort***. To 'hold' in a military context has meant 'to keep and defend against an adversary' since the middle ages. However, 'Hold the fort, for I am coming,' is popularly believed to have been the military order that general William Tecumseh Sherman wired to fellow Union General John Murray Corse as he faced a Confederate attack at Allatoopa Pass on October 5th, 1864, during the American Civil War. Records show that the signal from the top of Kenesaw Mountain really read 'Hold out, relief is coming', but the misquote caught popular imagination and the expression was further popularised when it became the refrain of a gospel song.

Tactics

Originally, when soldiers *closed* ***ranks***, they moved closer in a military formation. Today the expression refers mostly to a group or organisation: the members come together and unite forces, especially by overlooking petty differences, either to publicly show support for each other when they have to face some danger or threat from the outside, or when they want to keep something secret.

The original military meaning of the phrase *to take by* ***storm*** was to seize a castle, military position, etc. by a sudden and violent attack. In today's usage it means to become suddenly and extremely successful, to make a great impression upon a group of people, to quickly win popular acclaim.

When you choose the easiest possible method of doing something, of dealing with a person, etc., you *take the line of the* ***least resistance***; when you shift your attack to a new target, approach a problem from a new angle, you *open a new* ***front***. An army can get ahead of the opposing one by marching on while the enemy is resting, so if you gain an advantage over somebody by doing something earlier than expected, you *steal a* ***march*** *on* your opponent.

Acting in a way that makes it impossible to return to where you came from would be to *burn your* ***boats/ bridges***. The expression originated with the Romans. Their generals, e.g. Caesar, did at times burn all the Roman boats after invading foreign

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)

territory in order to strengthen the determination of his troops not to retreat. In time, bridges were burned for the same reason and the phrase came to have the figurative sense of committing oneself irrevocably to a particular course of action.

A final remark, act, gesture made at the moment of parting, especially one that is humorous or makes the listener think deeply, or is hostile but allows the recipient no opportunity to give an answer to it is called *a parthian/ parting* ***shot***. 'Parthian' shot or shaft refers to an ancient people of south-western Asia who became famous for shooting their arrows rearward at an enemy army from whom they were fleeing – or pretending to do so.

Another related pair of expressions takes us to sea again: *to sail under* ***false colours***, and only *show one's* ***true colours*** at the decisive moment, usually of some impending altercation or battle. These idioms connected to sailing and trade by sea are probably as old as the 'profession' of piracy itself. It was a trick used by these villains to approach 'under false colours', i.e. flag, (pretending to have a certain character or beliefs, principles, etc., which, in reality, they don't have) an unsuspecting trading ship they had spotted. They would raise their real flag (with the skull and crossbones), the one to which they were really loyal only when they were close enough to attack and the trader could no longer escape being robbed and possibly even destroyed. The phrase is used today to describe a person who eventually shows his or her true character, who has stopped acting falsely or pretending to be that he/she is not.

Military Practice

Drums were formerly very much a part of the war machine, as soldiers marched to the drum and took their orders from its beat. Retreat was one such order and would sound every evening. It was a signal for the soldiers to get behind their lines as darkness fell, and for the guards to present themselves for duty. Of course, if fighting was taking place but things were not going well, the retreat would sound to signal to the army to withdraw. Thus, *to beat a (hasty)* ***retreat*** means to leave in a hurry, to abandon an undertaking.

When you go through an ordeal, especially an unpleasant experience in which you are criticised by many people, you *run the* ***gauntlet***. This was originally a form of military punishment of Swedish invention that became prominent, so it seems, in the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), although similar practices had already been present in Roman times. The gauntlet – gantlope/ gantlet comes from the Swedish 'gatlopp' or 'passageway' (gata = lane, street; lopp = a running, chase). The offender, stripped to the waist, was forced to run between two lines of soldiers who faced each other and who would attack him with clubs, whips, switches or other weapons. The well-disciplined army of King Gustavus Adolphus clearly impressed the British military commanders. The navy implemented the punishment in 1661, for example, to deter theft from on board ship,

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)

but here they used rope yarns to flog the offender. It was abolished from the military in 1813.

Another punishment is recalled when instead of 'I won't mention anyone by name' you say *no names, no* ***pack drill*** when somebody is trying to discover the guilty parties. This punishment, formerly used in the British army, meant that the soldier in question was made to march up and down carrying on his back a heavy pack of full equipment.

The calling together of soldiers or sailors for inspection, e.g. to make sure that their dress, weapons, etc. are in satisfactory condition, is called muster and it happens with daily regularity. If something or somebody is considered satisfactory, good enough, it will *pass* ***muster***.

When you enjoy yourself very much by doing something that you get great pleasure from, something different from the daily routine, you *have a* ***field day***. In its original sense in the military this meant a day for military exercises, manoeuvres as practice for battle or as display, especially before an audience of high-ranking officers. Later the meaning was extended to similar days devoted to outdoor sports and athletic competitions at schools, then to any special outdoor activity, like nature study or a trip. Since the early 19th century, it has been used more loosely, and it can also refer to an outdoor social gathering such as a picnic or a festivity; or indeed to any special occasion, a day or time of exciting and successful activity, great opportunity, unusual pleasure or unrestricted amusement.

Any learner of the English language can have a field day with idioms when they discover how interesting their background stories can be and how much their study can help if we want to understand them better and use them correctly.

Bibliography:

Flavell, Linda and Roger 2002, *Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins*, London: Kyle Cathie Ltd.

Manser, Martin 1990, *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, London: Sphere Books Ltd.

Seidl, Jennifer and W. McMordie 1988, *English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms 1995, London: Harper Collins Publishers

The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms 1979, Longman Group UK Limited

The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms 1999, New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase &Fable 1993, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

dictionary.reference.com

http://en.wikipedia.org

www.thefreedictionary.com

BDD-A3101 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:55:28 UTC)