

WORD OF THE MONTH

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big stoush

- **noun**: the First World War.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

A number of different terms evolved during the years 1914–18 to refer to the war that involved so many countries of the world and caused so many casualties. In English, the terms *world war* and *Great War* were first recorded in 1914. The *Oxford English Dictionary* first records the term *First World War* in 1918, when Charles à Court Repington wrote the following ironic statement in his *Diary* (published in 1920):

To call it The German War was too much flattery for the Boche. I suggested The World War as a shade better title, and finally we mutually agreed to call it The First World War in order to prevent the millennium folk from forgetting that the history of the world was the history of war.

In Australia, the term **big stoush** was used briefly. *Stoush* is a well-attested Australian English term that probably has its origins in British dialect. It first appeared as a verb in 1885, meaning 'to punch, strike, or thrash a person', and as a noun in 1893, meaning 'fighting; violence; a brawl or a fight'. It was in common usage in the years before the war, and undoubtedly would have been part of the Australian soldier's vocabulary. During the war, *stoush* was used to refer to fighting in the context of battle; for example, Private C. Doyle, writing home from France in September 1916, said:

The Anzacs are making a great name for themselves. They take stopping when they get a go on. I think this bit of stoush will be over by Christmas — let us hope so. I have had just about enough—two years a soldier.' (*Seymour Express*, 1 September)

Unsurprisingly then we find the term **big stoush** evolving to refer to the war in its entirety. South Australian soldier Private T.J. Lynch wrote to his aunt in 1917:

We are going over to 'The **Big Stoush**' next Saturday and I hear it's rather dangerous there. But heaven help poor Fritz when the 48th Battalion gets behind him, because we are all anxious to do a bit. (Broken Hill *Barrier Miner*, 21 January)

Also in 1917, the troopship periodical *The Limber Log* noted of a non-commissioned officer on board: '... on conclusion of the **big stoush**, Ship's Sergeant-Major Odgers intends taking over the Four Courts Hotel. His vast experience in Australia, and latterly in the East, should enable him to cater for all-comers.' (p. 41)

The term did not outlive the war, perhaps because while it reflected the humour and insouciance of the Australian soldiers, it was not a fittingly serious term for a war that had resulted in so many tragic losses.

Big Stoush is included in Amanda Laugesen's new book *Furphies and Whizz-bangs: Anzac Slang from the Great War*, available from Oxford University Press.



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