

SABRE *P*RATTLING

Andrew Rigsby is a former Royal Marine and a keen shooting sportsman. He has an active interest in reporting, investigating and writing about gun crime and his first book, *Gunfire-Graffiti: Overlooked Gun Crime in the UK* was published by Waterside Press in 2012.

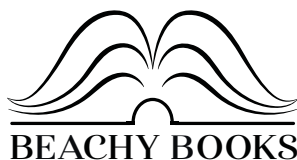
He regularly contributes to the media and has recently consulted on gun crime documentaries.

The author has written on a variety of subjects, but his motivation for writing *Sabre Prattling* came from a desire to continue learning through over 40 years as a shooting sportsman, studying military history, collecting antique firearms and the fascination of language. He also brings his personal insight to this guide having had a career in the military and experience on operations and in conflict zones, which enabled him to see the destructive force of weaponry.

SABRE *P*RRATTLING

*T*HE
LANGUAGE
OF THE
*B*ATTLEFIELD

ANDREW RIGSBY



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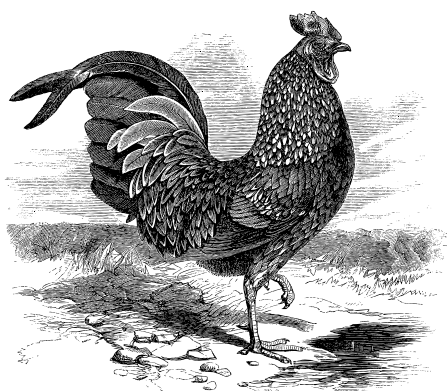
*Dedicated to my friends, family and colleagues.
Thank you for your support, suggestions and sometimes
surprised looks. To members of the armed services past
and present wherever they have served.*

This is all your fault, lock, stock and barrel.

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WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?



We have a tendency to overindulge with our language. We pluck out expressions and phrases that in a literal sense grossly exaggerate what we really mean or what is linked to our demands, endeavours or actions.

We are *starving* when we are *hungry* and parched when we are thirsty. We are *freezing* when we are *cold* and *boiling* when we are *hot*. We *run like the wind*, *get stuck up the creek without a paddle* and *go off like a rocket*. What is particularly interesting is how we describe our day-to-day

adventures, routines and events as if we were carrying or about to use a gun or a bomb.

Angered and frustrated by events, we go *ballistic*, *drop bombshells*, *character assassinate*, *blast*, *blow away*, *blow out of the water*, and *shoot down in flames* when all we actually do in these particular instances is chastise, criticise and ridicule.

We use militaristic and warlike terms in the workplace, *developing strategies*, *tactics* and *plans of attack* rather than just plain methods to outperform opposition or competitors in the corporate world. Leaders can be up in arms and *on the warpath*. We form *task groups* to sell simple products and build *fallback positions* and plan *last lines of defence* to counter business threat and loss. We *attack* and *defend* ourselves; we *fight* and seek to *wage war*.

On the sporting field, especially with ball sports, there's a lot of shots and *shooting* going on. We might hear a *call to arms*, receive orders to *dig in*, *do battle* and plan *rear-guard actions*. Professional footballers get *called up* to represent their country. During the 2020 Six Nations Championship rugby tournament one of the commentator's favourites kept creeping in when describing the strategic positioning and space creation for a sprint to the touchline that left tactically selected players poised to *pull the trigger*. NBC coverage of the 2022 Beijing Olympics were unhappy with some of the points decisions during a men's snowboarding event and declared the judges to have *grenaded* their credibility.

Unconnected, another sports commentator referred to the young and exciting Swiss snowboarder Jan Scherrer as the *Jan-grenade*.

The English language is liberally populated with idioms, similes and metaphors associated with firearms and conflict going back to the 14th century. Today we use descriptive conversational terminology that can be directly attributed to weapons and the mechanics of war and their application, perhaps not always realising what we are referring to.

At times, we literally don't know what we're talking about. Some of us have our well-worn favourites; others regularly *go off at half cock* and sprinkle all manner of expressions on their narrative like salt and pepper on their food. Pick up any newspaper, listen to any news broadcast, trawl through social media, sit through a presentation on any subject and you will always see or hear an example.

Very few people in the UK (around 5%) have an association with firearms. Some who don't might even abhor the thought of using these expressions but naively indulge anyway. Firearms are restricted to the military, elements of the police force and licenced members of the public who pursue shooting sports. In the United States around 40% of the population legally own firearms, with the majority for personal protection.

The legal use of firearms is restricted within the UK by the lawful protective measures that control the need and any responsible interest. The eventual manufacture and

development of firearms came as a result of inventors and technicians stretching their imagination and developing skills. For thousands of years the entire world had made do with simple edged weapons, stabbing devices and had launched projectiles in flight from the string of a long bow or crossbow.

Firearms changed all that dramatically and contributed to the wider issues of more general, technical and engineering developments over hundreds of years. The expertise learned from mechanical applications, tolerances, durability, and strengths has been applied to other fields. Whilst firearms are engineered tools designed to kill, they have been equally effective in helping to maintain the peace.

This book was prompted by my interest in history, particularly military history and firearms. I became fascinated with our liberal use of expressions, a weather forecaster warning us about *staring down the barrel* of an approaching storm, a wily politician unable to give a straight answer because he is *keeping his powder dry*, an entrepreneur about to *shoot a rival down in flames*, an employer advising staff members to *raise their sights*.

I have had, perhaps, the misfortune but certainly the shocking visual clarity of experiencing the sight of aircraft being *blown out of the sky* and *shot down in flames*. I have seen warships *in the line of fire*, *all guns blazing* and troops experiencing a *baptism of fire*. Those images were transmitted to me and remain as an indelible image in my

subconscious. I suppose, rather ironically, that those literal experiences mean I rarely use these terms in my own day-to-day language.

I have included a selection of expressions associated with weaponry and conflict before the introduction of firearms, namely edged and strung weapons, along with examples including metaphors (a word or phrase used in an imaginative way to represent or stand for something else) such as a *loose cannon* or a *flash in the pan*; idioms (a word or phrase which means something quite different from what it actually says) such as *bite the bullet*; and similes (a word or phrase that compares one thing to another of a different kind) such as *built like a tank* or *went like a bomb*.

The chronology is presented in alphabetical order. The narrative in *italics* is how we have now determined the meaning and use of words or phrases, and how they are used figuratively. For many of the terms and phrases referenced, many have different meanings and dictionary definitions but those not in the context of the battlefield have not been described here. And after I present a short meaning or origination of the word or phrase which may also include mention of the many shared expressions of the mechanics of firearms of which I refer to where appropriate, such as: *lock, load, battery, cock, hammer, barrel, cylinder, sling, pattern, percussion, port, eject, spent, recoil, lever, bolt, chamber, slide, swivel, magazine, cartridge, piece, pellet, cap, lug, scope* and *action*.

You will learn that much of the terminology we use within our language harkens back to the early days of firearm technology and conflict. For example, most native English speakers know that to *take a lot of flak*, means to be criticised or ridiculed, and they will use the idiom in the correct sense. Some will know that *flak* refers to anti-aircraft gunfire, but few will know it derived from German ground fire ordnance known as *Fliegerabwehrkanone*.

Sabre Prattling is not masquerading as an official catalogue; the historical study of language is far reaching and open for debate. Nevertheless, many examples are clear in my sights, but importantly I compiled it for fun and light-hearted education. Even now, I'm sure you are noting down terms and phrases I have missed out, which I'm sure will make it into a revised edition in the future. But, if my book prompts argument amongst the academics that's fine with me; *I'm keeping my powder dry* and intend to *stay out of the line of fire*.

For those interested, next I present a very short history of the gun to help get your bearings on some of the terms used in the descriptions, but for those too eager to get to my language of the battlefield, I start with a well-used classic...

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GUN



The early history of the gun cannot be easily separated from its original propellant, the mixture commonly referred to as gunpowder. Latterly it was described as black powder because of its colour. It is a mixture of charcoal, saltpetre

and sulphur. While the use of the simplest guns is well documented in Europe, the earliest gun records come from the Middle East. It is considered that the Arabs learned about guns and gunpowder from their eastern neighbours and most historians believe that the Chinese invented gunpowder and the earliest firearms. There is little doubt that cannons were the first guns utilised, cumbersome and crude affairs that were every bit as dangerous to the users as well as the targeted recipients.

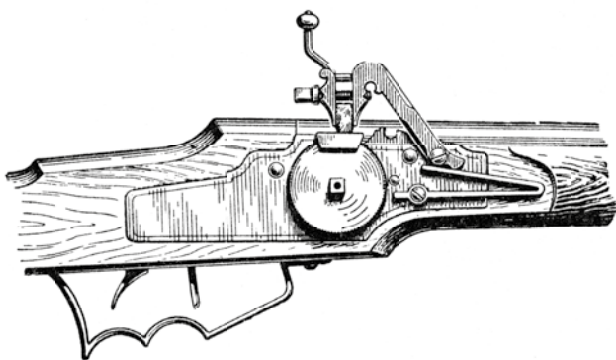
The Swiss firearms designer and writer, Colonel Rudolf Schmidt traced the earliest use of guns and gunpowder in Europe. Belgium apparently came on the scene in 1313, with England in 1327. Sweden was late to adopt in 1400 by which time all of Europe were involved and experimenting.

The basic cannon design was developed into a handheld version. These were also simple affairs, namely a heavy barrel made from either brass or cast from iron. Closed at one end with a small touch hole access vent, the weapon was charged with a measure of gunpowder through the muzzle followed by a separating wad and a roughly cast round ball of lead or iron, failing that, anything that was available. The charge was fired by applying a lit match cord to the touch hole.

As time progressed these firearms became a little more sophisticated and user-friendly and the matchlock was developed. The match cord was now held in the jaws of a simple sprung lock called the serpentine, which was released

A Brief History of the Gun

by a trigger. The serpentine arm fell upon a small charge of gunpowder held in the pan next to the touch hole which in turn fired the main charge. This now enabled the firer to hold, carry and aim the weapon more effectively and a wooden frame became an integral part of the design, namely the butt or stock and fore-end that now accommodated the barrel.



By the 16th century the wheel lock had been developed, a rather complex, intricate mechanism employing a coil sprung wheel which had to be wound up by a key and locked against a sear. When the trigger was pulled the locked, sprung wheel was released and it quickly rotated. This in turn was struck by some iron pyrites held in the jaws of a firing lock that descended towards and struck it. This created a shower of sparks that ignited the main charge.

A simple application of that ignition system still exists today employed in the Zippo cigarette lighter, the wheel being operated by the user's thumb and the resulting spark created by the struck flint, igniting lighter fuel rather than gunpowder.

The complex wheel lock was superseded by the snaphaunce in the mid 1500s and by the 1600s we had the early versions of the flintlock, an even simpler and more efficient ignition system but still based on the friction principles of the wheel lock to produce an ignition spark.

The term *flintlock* has become a generic expression and synonymous with antique firearms and any muzzle-loaded weapon is generally referred to by the layman as a flintlock.

By the early 1800s a Scottish Minister, The Reverend Alexander John Forsythe had invented the percussion lock, which was a huge step forward in ignition systems, being simple self-contained and completely weatherproof. Doing away with flints and priming pans. He patented his detonation fulminate ignition system on April 11th 1807, but he didn't live to see the invention develop into the modern percussion system. From the mid 1800s more breech-loaded weapons became apparent along with self-contained cartridges.

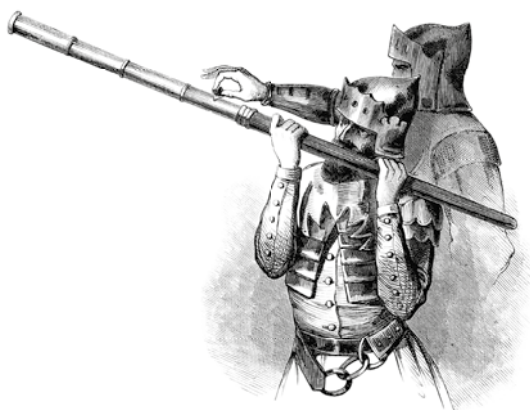
Towards the end of the 1800s we had breech-loaded repeating and automatic weapons using a wide variety of actions. Today the technology focuses on improving the firearm designs that arguably peaked at the beginning of

A Brief History of the Gun

the 20th century. For 600 years a whole new technical language had developed, and it has kept pace with rapid changes in design and application.

LANGUAGE OF THE BATTLEFIELD

AIM HIGH / RAISING YOUR SIGHTS



To extend a concerted effort to succeed in a manner that even short of total success might bring an acceptable outcome.

A bullet flies over a trajectory, that being a curved path

that results from a decrease in velocity as it is forced to descend due to gravity. In order to strike a target at maximum range a weapon has its sights appropriately adjusted so that the barrel is elevated sufficiently and the shot aimed high so that the target may be struck towards the end of the curved trajectory path.

ALL GUNS BLAZING

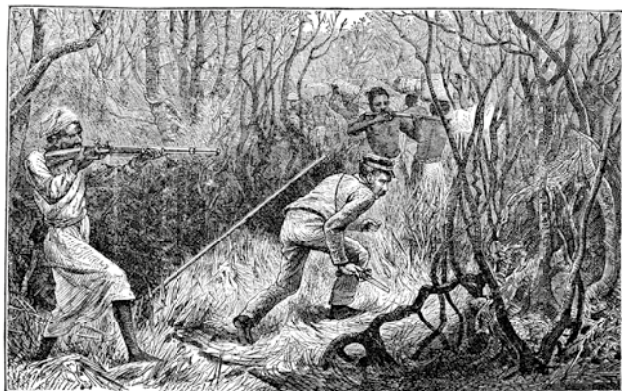


Being resolute and with perhaps furious intent.

An exaggerated term harkening back to a tactical withdrawal or attack on land or sea where all available firepower is directed. Until the later part of the 19th century when

smokeless propellants came into use firearms and artillery used black gunpowder as a propellant. This compound produced a lot of flame and smoke, and it created a very visible and violent portrayal of conflict. Artillery barrages and naval cannon salvos would have produced awesome and frightening scenes. Guns blazing would not have been an exaggeration. Modern weapon systems still produce flame and smoke but to a much lesser extent. This is a distinct advantage when you are trying to remain concealed. Modern military small arms will often have what is referred to as a flash hider at the muzzle end, incorporated into the design.

AMBUSH

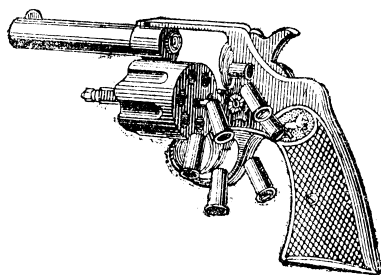


To embarrass, publicly ridicule or verbally confront.

This is an old military tactic dating back thousands of years. Soldiers or combatants would lie concealed and in wait for an approaching enemy on ground of their choosing. The purpose of an ambush was to exert maximum damage to an enemy in the minimum amount of time and in a location that gave the ambushed parties little chance to escape, defend themselves or counter-attack.

Tactical ambushing became a very technical skill, and it is a method that is still used to this day. Contrary to what might be assumed as a result of Hollywood-type interpretations, a well contrived ambush is initiated by the ambush commander simply opening fire with his personal weapon to start the proceedings rather than shouting ‘fire!’ and thus giving an unwanted warning to the enemy.

AMMUNITION



A verbal stockpile of argument, evidence, examples, or opinions.