



Glossary

A

AIRBORNE: Troops trained in deployment by air, either by parachute, glider, or similar assault aircraft. Can also refer to any equipment or operations related to or involving air-dropped troops.

ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER: Often abbreviated APC, a vehicle designed to transport troops to the battlefield in a protected environment, often alongside tanks and other armored vehicles.

ARMY: From the Latin *armata*, or “act of arming,” a term that describes any land-based military force and sometimes including other branches of service as well. In modern military usage, an army is defined as a group of two or more corps. During the World Wars, the massive scale of the conflicts often saw armies being organized in turn to form Army Groups.

B

BARRAGE: A coordinated mass of artillery fire, often fired indirectly.

BATTALION: In modern military usage, a grouping of multiple companies totaling around one thousand soldiers. The smallest unit considered capable of independent, unsupported action.

BAYONET: A dagger-length blade fitted to the end of a rifle or musket. Originally developed to arm slow-firing guns with a secondary use in close combat, turning the firearm into a spear, the use of bayonet tactics was taught in European-style armies from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century.

BEACHHEAD: A small footing gained by an army landing on enemy shores or crossing a river. Often the target of determined counterattacks.

BRIGADE: First developed by Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus during the Thirty Years War, the brigade was originally an early version of a combined arms task force consisting of several regiments of infantry, cavalry, and artillery. Modern usage places the brigade roughly on par with the regiment in terms of size.

C

CALIBER: The diameter of the bore, or inside, of a gun’s barrel. Can be expressed in millimeters (i.e. 9 mm) or fractions of an inch (i.e. .50 caliber, meaning half an inch bore).

CAMPAIGN: A series of military operations, often designed towards a single objective.

CAVALRY: Soldiers who move and fight primarily from horseback. Does not generally extend to troops who use mounts to move into battle but dismount to fight, who are instead referred to as “mounted infantry.”

CIVILIANS: Also called noncombatants, any non-enlisted person. As war became increasingly driven by industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, civilians became targets of armies and the weapons of war.

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF: A general or other leader vested with control of a nation’s military forces. The United States Constitution reserves this role for the President, although only two—George Washington

and James Madison—have actually led troops in the field while in office.

COMPANY: A military unit consisting of platoons, usually three or four in number, totaling anywhere from 100–200 enlisted men and officers.

CORPS: An organization of two or more divisions, grouped in turn to form armies.

D

D-DAY: A general code term for an unspecified day upon which a planned event is to take place in any given operation; the specific time is referred to as “H-hour.” Since June 6, 1944, the term has become synonymous in the popular imagination with the Normandy Invasion.

DEFILADE: A position that protects a unit from direct enemy fire.

DIVISION: A concept that first emerged during the Seven Years War of the mid-eighteenth century, the division organizes ten to twenty thousand soldiers into a single unit, forming the building block of larger armies and corps. Napoleon Bonaparte was the first general to fully adopt the divisional system; by the end of the Napoleonic Wars, all of Europe’s armies would be organized by divisions, as are all modern armies.

E

ENFILADE: Also known as “flanking fire,” the condition whereby a unit’s flank becomes exposed to enemy fire, exposing troops beyond the front rank.

ENLISTED MAN: A term used in modern military organization to refer to the lowest ranking soldiers, often including non-commissioned officers.

F

FILE: A line of troops standing one in front of another.

FLANK: As a noun, flank is a term used to describe the side of a military unit. As a verb, the action of moving against an enemy’s side or rear.

FRIENDLY FIRE: Used to describe casualties arising during battle caused by friendly forces either through mistake or accident.

FRAG: A term that became well known during the Vietnam War to describe the murder of a superior officer, usually while out in the field. “Frag” is short for “fragmentation grenade,” the supposed weapon of

choice in such situations, since it would leave behind no fingerprints or other ballistic evidence and could easily be chalked up to friendly fire.

FRONT: Also called a battlefront, this is the point along which two opposing forces meet. The term can be applied to anything from local engagements up to entire theaters of war.

G

GRENADE: An explosive device originally designed to be hurled by hand, which also sends shards of metal flying through the air.

H

HALFTRACK: A vehicle utilizing caterpillar tracks for rear propulsion and standard road wheels for front propulsion. Designed to offer the cross-country capabilities of a tank and the maneuverability of a road vehicle, military halftracks were used extensively in the Second World War as some of the first armored personnel carriers.

I

INFANTRY: The backbone of most armies throughout history, the infantry is characterized by soldiers who fight and move primarily or exclusively on foot and who are armed with relatively light weapons such as spears or rifles.

IRREGULAR: A soldier trained in non-standard military techniques, often making use of loose, open deployments.

M

MEGADEATH: A term coined in 1953 meaning one million deaths. Used to describe potential death yields from various nuclear war scenarios.

N

NO MAN’S LAND: The ground between opposing forces along a front. Can be anywhere from a few yards to a mile or more in width.

NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICER: Commonly abbreviated NCO, an enlisted man given battlefield authority by a commissioned officer. The most well-known “non-com” rank is sergeant.

O

OFFICER: Also called a commissioned officer, these are individuals vested (or “commissioned”) with the ability to issue commands on the battlefield. Up until relatively recently, commissions were commonly bought and sold and did not necessarily reflect actual military skill.

P

PLATOON: Originally used to describe a small detachment of men, the platoon evolved into a modern military unit usually consisting of two to four squads totaling thirty to fifty soldiers. Usually led by a low-ranking commissioned officer such as a lieutenant.

R

RANK: A line of soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder. Most regular military units up until the First World War were trained to fight in ranks.

REGIMENT: The first post-feudal military unit, developed as armies became increasingly professional and organized during the sixteenth century. Early regiments often acted as independent military entities, conducting their own recruiting and commis-

sioning their own officers. The modern British Army still has traces of this “regimental system” in its training and deployment of its units. Modern regiments vary widely in size depending on the army and their perceived tactical usefulness and range, anywhere from a few hundred up to three thousand soldiers.

REGULAR: Term used to distinguish trained soldiers who follow commonly accepted forms of military organization and tactical deployment.

S

SQUAD: In modern military organization, the smallest recognized unit on a battlefield, most often consisting of between eight and fourteen soldiers. Called a “section” in British and Commonwealth armies.

STRATEGY: The deployment and movement of large units, from divisions up through entire army groups, to achieve a military goal.

T

TACTICS: Military methods for defeating an enemy in individual battles.