

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

This Tuesday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of February is wingman day. A wingman is someone who supports you, who you know will stand by you, who will be there in times of trouble, who will help you through thick and thin. In some contexts, the wingman can be rather more nuanced. It might refer to a friend who looks after you by introducing you to possible romantic partners or at the very least helps you socialize if you are the kind of person who tends to be rather shy or private. A wing man is therefore a common character in romantic comedy the one who tries to bring people together. The word originates from the American air force and particularly the bombing raids of the Second World War. American crews bombed in daylight – a brave but very risky strategy that resulted in high losses. The British bombing took place at night. The word stems from a time-honored tradition that says a wingman will always watch the lead pilot's back, stay with and protect him or her. The term, as I said, originated in combat aviation. When pilots are flying in formation, especially in training or in actual aerial combat, the person next to the pilot is referred to as the wingman.

There is at the time of speaking a new series on TV which features the story of these air crews based in East Anglia in 1943. This is the latest in a long line of films and series focusing on the same period in history and that is hardly surprising as the bravery and determination of these crews is such an extraordinary story.

I don't think the gendered term is sexist but it is interesting that it isn't common to hear wingwoman or wingperson. Women are as likely – or maybe even more likely – to have supportive friends. In fact, it might be the relative rarity of these male friendships that makes the word, and concept, a focus of attention. That is illustrated by the frequency with which these relationships feature in books and films – (2.30)

Think for example of some famous fictional partnerships. Dr Watson and Sherlock Holmes, Samwise Gangee and Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*, Woody and Buzz, Prince Henry and Falstaff, *Waiting for Godot*. Perhaps this subgenre of wingman relationships in literature is worthy of study and research.

As is the way military language becomes part of everyday speech. There are many examples of English expressions that derive from the armed forces. A person who is unpredictable and liable to create problems can be referred to as a loose cannon. An example of this might be a politician or a member of a government who has a tendency to do things which are not consistent with the party line. The expression dates back to sea battles in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. You can just imagine the mayhem that could be caused by one of those enormous heavy cannons if it became loose and started rolling around the deck, potentially more dangerous than the enemy. Then there's another Second World War pilot's expression which we use a lot today - flying under the radar. Any situation where someone is trying to avoid being noticed and remain inconspicuous.

It's a mystery why some words stick and others don't. Cannons aren't used anymore in warfare but that expression is firmly established in the language. Other expressions which were equally linked to a specific historical moment have not. Civvy street was a common

term to hear when I was growing up as a way of specifying that someone had left the army and was now a civilian. There is no longer a need for this word as the thousands of adults between 20 and 50 have not recently been fighting a war. And in the 1960s, men who tried to find ways to avoid being sent to Vietnam earned the disparaging term draft dodger. Again, an expression that did not survive its historical moment. Going back to our American bombing crews, the term to take a lot of flak is used today when someone receives heavy criticism. Flak was an acronym meaning the anti-aircraft guns that targeted American planes as they flew over continental Europe.

And when you do take flak for something you've done or something other people don't like that's when it's really useful to have a wingman to watch your back. We could all do with one. If you're lucky enough to have one, do thank them on Wednesday.

Thanks a lot for listening. I hope you've enjoyed this Upper Street podcast and will join me again next week