

Shots from the Front

The British Soldier 1914-1918

Richard Holmes

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Extract

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Prologue

Over my career as a military historian I have spent longer on the Western Front than any wartime combatant. When I first stood under the Menin Gate, listening to the buglers of the Ypres fire brigade sound the Last Post, the veterans around me were not much older than I am now, and I was then closer to Passchendaele than I now am to D-Day. I was just older than the youngest soldiers to be killed in the war – Private John Condon of the Royal Irish, who died at the age of fourteen, and Private Valentine Joe Strudwick of the Rifle Brigade, who was fifteen. My father died when I was eighteen, long before I had any career in view, and amongst his possessions I found snapshots he had taken in northern France and Belgium in 1929. Among them is one of John Condon's grave, in Fig. 1. The print is old and its framing far from perfect, but I include it here because it sends a sharp jolt of connectivity across the years.

I am still younger than the oldest military victim of the war, Lieutenant Henry Webber of the South Lancashire, killed on the Somme at sixty-eight. Webber, a well-to-do widower from Horley in Surrey, had been a member of the London Stock Exchange for over forty years, and had sufficient influence to secure himself a commission, though he was well over-age. The commanding officer of 7/South Lancashire sensibly made him the transport officer, so that he would be back in the transport lines with his horses and wagons when the battalion was in the trenches. No photograph of him seems to have survived, but for an image of tired transport men on the Somme we

Fig. 1
(opposite)



Fig. 2 cannot do better than Fig. 2, which shows a driver of the transport section of a Devon battalion using one of his horses as a pillow. Not long before Henry Webber was killed he wrote:

Fifty-one years ago I got my colours in the eleven, and last week fifty-one years ago I was bowling against the Old Boys, and looking on some of them as 'sitters' and in 'the sere and yellow leaf,' and here I am a Lieutenant in His Majesty's Army, having to salute three sons if I meet them out here, a Colonel and two Majors . . . I am so far extraordinarily fit and well, and though when I tell you that for four consecutive days I was either on my feet or in the saddle for twenty-one hours out of the twenty-four you will see that there is a bit of work to it.

Our boys were simply splendid and now, after a rest, they are as keen as - well, as a schoolboy to be put on to bowl.

The battalion was part of 19th (Western) Division, in reserve at the start of the Somme but it was soon committed and helped take La Boisselle on 2-5 July.

Shortly afterwards German artillery fire caught its transport lines, and Webber was mortally wounded, dying on 21 July. His eldest son, Norman William 'Squib' Webber, finished the war as Brigadier General, General Staff to the Canadian Corps.

When that Last Post echoed away into the domed roof of the Menin Gate, the First World War seemed close enough to touch. There were veterans aplenty, although they were not always easy men to talk to. For some the war was, as the French survivor Jacques Meyer put it, 'our buried, secret youth', comprehensible, by definition, only to those who had shared the experience. Even if they did talk, Meyer argued that some troops built a linguistic wall of slang between themselves and outsiders. Others had become professional raconteurs, their fund of anecdotes worn smooth by frequent use. I learned to be cautious with both categories, though in different ways. The former might confide in you if they thought there was some point to it, so a little knowledge was essential, though it had to be very lightly worn. The latter might reveal something of merit, though only if they could be dissuaded from reminiscing about rats as big as footballs and the doubtful paternity of sergeant majors. The best were men who had never said much about the war but mused, as the years crept onwards, about their own demise, and wanted to say some things that they thought needed to be said. Nevertheless, one must always be cautious about the evidence of veterans: how might any of us remember and then describe a fatal car crash that happened forty years before?

As we approach the ninetieth anniversary of the war's end, I am conscious that the last Tommies, survivors of the biggest army this nation has ever put into the field, cannot live much longer. The last *poilu* went beyond recall by the thin trumpets of France while this book was in press. The war is about to pass beyond living memory and into history. In *Tommy* I began my story with words, letting the men who fought in the war speak for themselves, and using diaries, letters and other personal accounts when I could. Here I have started with pictures, and built my words around them. Despite my strictures against grabbing the usual suspects, there are some photographs which are simply too important not to use. Some are the pin-sharp work of official photographers. Others are the blurred product of amateurs' cameras. But it

Fig. 3



would be foolish not to include Fig. 3, taken by a member of the London Rifle Brigade, which shows his battalion's first waves attacking into the smoke and gas on the first day of the battle of Loos, 25 September 1915, or Fig. 4, Lieutenant C.A.F. Drummond's snapshot of soldiers of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment fraternising with Saxons of the 134th Infantry Regiment on Christmas Day 1914. However, I have tried to broaden my search, using photographs from regimental museums and private collections to supplement official images. For instance, the Liddle Collection's catalogue lists 782 sets of First World War photographs, yet few of them ever find their way into books. I have organised my chapters thematically rather than chronologically, and the images within them illustrate relevant aspects across all theatres in which British soldiers were engaged, though the majority are unsurprisingly of the Western Front.



Fig. 4