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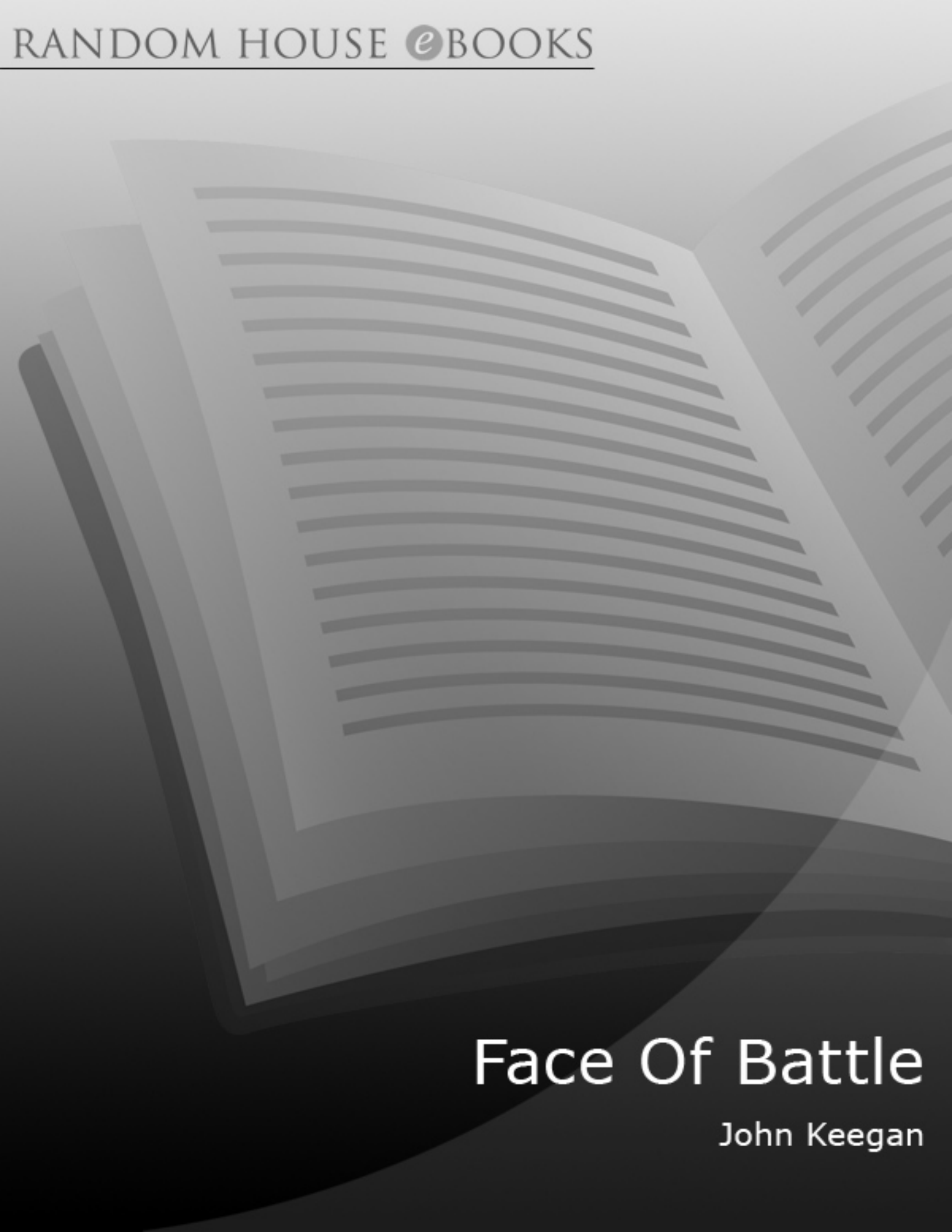

Face Of Battle

John Keegan

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About the Author

John Keegan is the Defence Editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and Britain's foremost military historian. The Reith Lecturer in 1998, he is the author of many bestselling books including *A History of Warfare* (awarded the Duff Cooper Prize), *The Mask of Command, Six Armies in Normandy, The Second World War, Warpaths, Battle at Sea, The Battle for History, The First World War, Intelligence in War* and, most recently, *The Iraq War*.

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In memory of my father and my father-in-law

THE FACE OF BATTLE

A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme

JOHN KEEGAN

PIMLICO

Chapter 1

Old, Unhappy, Far-off Things[1]

A Little Learning

I HAVE NOT been in a battle; not near one, nor heard one from afar, nor seen the aftermath. I have questioned people who have been in battle – my father and father-in-law among them; have walked over battlefields, here in England, in Belgium, in France and in America; have often turned up small relics of the fighting – a slab of German 5·9 howitzer shell on the roadside by Polygon Wood at Ypres, a rusted anti-tank projectile in the orchard hedge at Gavrus in Normandy, left there in June 1944 by some highlander of the 2nd Argyll and Sutherlands; and have sometimes brought my more portable finds home with me (a Minié bullet from Shiloh and a shrapnel ball from Hill 60 lie among the cotton-reels in a painted papier-maché box on my drawing-room mantelpiece). I have read about battles, of course, have talked about battles, have been lectured about battles and, in the last four or five years, have watched battles in progress, or apparently in progress, on the television screen. I have seen a good deal of other, earlier battles of this century on newsreel, some of it convincingly authentic, as well as much dramatized feature film and countless static images of battle: photographs and paintings and sculpture of a varying degree of realism. But

I have never been in a battle. And I grow increasingly convinced that I have very little idea of what a battle can be like.

Neither of these statements and none of this experience is in the least remarkable. For very, very few Europeans of my generation – I was born in 1934 – have learned at first hand that knowledge of battle which marked the lives of millions of their fathers and grandfathers. Indeed, apart from the four or five thousand Frenchmen who, with their German, Spanish and Slav comrades of the Foreign Legion, survived Dien Bien Phu, and the slightly larger contingents of Britons who took part in the campaign in central Korea in 1950–51, I cannot identify any group of people, under forty, in the Old World, who have been through a battle as combatants. My use of the words 'battle' and 'combatants' will indicate that I am making some fairly careful exceptions to this generalization, most obviously in the case of all those continental Europeans who were children during the Second World War and over whose homes the tide of battle flowed, often more than once, between 1939 and 1945; but also in the case of the thousands of British and French soldiers who carried arms in Africa and south-east Asia during the era of decolonization, to whose number I ought to add the Portuguese conscripts still campaigning in Mozambique and Angola, and the British regulars policing the cities and countryside of Ulster.

The first group exclude themselves from my generalization because none of them was old enough to have had *combatant* experience of the Second World War; the second because their experience of soldiering, though often dangerous and sometimes violent – perhaps very violent if they were French and served in Algeria – was not an experience *in* and *of* battle. For there is a fundamental difference between the sort of sporadic, small-scale fighting which is the small change of soldiering and the sort we characterize as a battle. A battle must obey the dramatic

unities of time, place and action. And although battles in modern wars have tended to obey the first two of those unities less and less exactly, becoming increasingly protracted and geographically extensive as the numbers and means available to commanders have grown, the action of battle – which is directed towards securing a decision by and through those means, on the battlefield and within a fairly strict time-limit – has remained a constant. In Europe's wars of decolonization, the object of 'the other side' has, of course, been to avoid facing a decision at any given time or place, rightly presuming the likelihood of its defeat in such circumstances; and 'the other side', whether consciously fighting a war of evasion and delay, as were the communist guerrillas in Malaya or the nationalist partisans in Algeria, or merely conducting a campaign of raiding and subversion because they implicitly recognized their inability to risk anything else, as did the Mau Mau in Kenya, has accordingly shunned battle. I do not think therefore that my Oxford contemporaries of the 1950s, who had spent their late teens combing the jungles of Johore or searching the forests on the slopes of Mount Kenya, will hold it against me if I suggest that, though they have been soldiers and I have not and though they have seen active service besides, yet they remain as innocent as I do of the facts of battle.

But what, it might be fairly asked at this stage, is the point of my re-emphasizing how little, if at all, unusual is my ignorance of battle? Ignorance has been bliss in Europe for nearly thirty years now, and in the United States there has been little thanks given for the lessons its young men have been forced to learn at Pleiku and Khe San. The point is, I had better admit, a personal one – not so personal that it cannot be revealed but one which, over the years, has grown to something of the dimensions of a Guilty Secret. For I have spent many of those years, fourteen of them – which is almost the whole of my working life – describing

and analysing battles to officer cadets under training at Sandhurst; class after class of young men, all of whom stand a much better chance than I do of finding out whether what I have to say on the subject is or is not true. The inherent falsity of my position should be obvious. It has always been clear to me, but at Sandhurst, which carries almost to extremes the English cult of good manners, the cadets I have taught have always connived at the pretence that I and they are on a master-and-pupil footing and not, as I know and they must guess, all down together in the infant class. I for my part, anxious not to overtax their politeness, have generally avoided making any close tactical analysis of battle, entailing as that would my passing judgment on the behaviour of men under circumstances I have not had to meet, and have concentrated the weight of my teaching on such subjects as strategic theory, national defence policy, economic mobilization, military sociology and the like – subjects which, vital though they are to an understanding of modern war, nevertheless skate what, for a young man training to be a professional soldier, is the central question: what is it like to be in a battle?

That this – or its subjective supplementary, 'How would *I* behave in a battle?' – is indeed the central question reveals itself when it is raised in a roomful of cadets – and probably at any gathering of young men anywhere – in a number of unmistakeable ways: by a marked rise in the emotional temperature, in the pitch of voices, and in what a sociologist might call 'the rate and volume of inter-cadet exchanges'; by signs of obvious physical tenseness in the ways cadets sit or gesticulate – unless they assume, as some do, a deliberately nonchalant attitude; and by the content of what they have to say – a noisy mixture of slightly unconvincing bombast, frank admissions of uncertainty and anxiety, bold declarations of false cowardice, friendly and not-so-friendly jibes, frequent

appeal to fathers' and uncles' experience of 'what a battle is really like' and heated argument over the how and why of killing human beings, ranging over the whole ethical spectrum from the view that 'the only good one is a dead one' to very civilized expressions of reluctance at the prospect of shedding human blood at all. The discussion, in short, takes on many of the characteristics of a group therapy session, an analogy which will not, I know, commend itself to many professional soldiers but which I think none the less apt. For the sensations and emotions with which the participants are grappling, though they relate to a situation which lies in a distant and perhaps never-to-be-realized future rather than in a disturbed and immediate present, are real enough, a very powerful, if dormant, part of every human being's make-up and likely therefore, even when artificially stimulated, to affect the novice officer's composure to an abnormal and exaggerated extent. These feelings, after all, are the product of some of man's deepest fears: fear of wounds, fear of death, fear of putting into danger the lives of those for whose well-being one is responsible. They touch too upon some of man's most violent passions; hatred, rage and the urge to kill. Little wonder that the officer cadet, who, if he is one day to quell those fears and direct those passions, must come to terms with their presence in his make-up, should display classic signs of agitation when the subject of battle and its realities is raised. Little wonder either that my soldier colleagues regard their 'leadership' lectures, in which the psychological problems of controlling oneself and one's men in battle are explicitly reviewed, as the most taxing of their assignments in the military training programme. Few of them, I know, would think that they handle the subject satisfactorily. Most, I suspect, would agree that it is only an exceptional man who can.

Of course, the atmosphere and surroundings of Sandhurst are not conducive to a realistic treatment of war.

Perhaps they never are in any military academy. But Sandhurst is a studiedly unmilitary place. Its grounds are serenely park-like, ornamentally watered and planted and landscaped, its buildings those of an English ducal mansion, fronted by nearly a square mile of impeccably mown playing-field, on which it is difficult to imagine anything more warlike being won than a hard-fought game of hockey. And the bearing and appearance of the students helps to foster the country-house illusion; as often to be seen in plain clothes as in uniform, for they are encouraged from the outset to adopt the British officer's custom of resuming his civilian identity as soon as he goes off duty, they unfailingly remind me, with their tidy hair and tweed jackets, of the undergraduate throng I joined when I went up to Oxford in 1953. It is a reminder which strikes all the more vividly those who teach in universities today. 'They look', exclaimed an Oxford professor whom I had brought down to lecture, 'like the people I was in college with before the war.'

'Before the war'; the pun is a little too adventitious to stand very much elaboration. But 'before the war' is, after all, the spiritual state in which the pupils of a military academy exist. For however strong their motivation towards the military life, however high their combative spirit, however large the proportion who are themselves the sons, sometimes the grandsons and great-grandsons of soldiers – and the proportion at Sandhurst, as at St-Cyr, remains suprisingly large – their knowledge of war is theoretical, anticipatory and second-hand. What is more, one detects in one's own attitudes, and in those of one's colleagues, in those who know and in those who don't, in the tough-minded almost as much as in the tender-hearted, an implicit agreement to preserve their ignorance, to shield the cadets from the worst that war can bring. In part, this agreement stems from an aesthetic reflex, a civilized distaste for the discussion of what might shock or disgust;

in part too, it reflects a moral inhibition, an unwillingness to give scandal to the innocent. And it may also be a manifestation of a peculiarly English reticence. French officers, certainly, show a readiness, in reminiscing over the wars in Indo-China or Algeria, to dwell on the numbers of deaths their units have suffered or inflicted – usually inflicted – which I have seen bring physical revulsion to the faces of British veterans, and which I do not think can be wholly explained in terms of the much greater ferocity of the French than the British army's most recent campaigns.

But Sandhurst and St-Cyr would agree over a quite different justification for the de-sensitized treatment of war which in practice characterizes instruction at both academies, and at all others of which I have any knowledge. And that is that the deliberate injection of emotion into an already highly emotive subject will seriously hinder, if not indeed altogether defeat, the aim of officer-training. That aim, which Western armies have achieved with remarkably consistent success during the two hundred years in which formal military education has been carried on, is to reduce the conduct of war to a set of rules and a system of procedures – and thereby to make orderly and rational what is essentially chaotic and instinctive. It is an aim analogous to that – though I would not wish to push the analogy too far – pursued by medical schools in their fostering among students of a detached attitude to pain and distress in their patients, particularly victims of accidents.

The most obvious manifestation of the procedural approach to war is in the rote-learning and repeated practice of standard drills, by which one does not only mean the manual of arms practised by warriors since time immemorial to perfect their individual skills, but a very much more extended range of procedures which have as their object the assimilation of almost all of an officer's professional activities to a corporate standard, and a

common form. Hence he learns ‘military writing’ and ‘voice procedure’ which teach him to describe events and situations in terms of an instantly recognizable and universally comprehensible vocabulary, and to arrange what he has to say about them in a highly formalized sequence of ‘observations’, ‘conclusions’ and ‘intentions’. He learns to interpret a map in exactly the same way as every other officer will interpret it (the celebrated story of Schlieffen’s reply to his adjutant, who had drawn to his attention a vista of the River Pregel – ‘an inconsiderable obstacle, Captain’ – was only an exaggeration of a reflex response to the accidents of geography which military academies devote much effort to producing in their pupils). Personal, or personnel, relationships are book-taught too: he learns ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ in the treatment of prisoners, whether of his own petty defaulters or of enemy captives, by reference to simplified manuals of military and international law – and to ensure that he will get his decisions straight he watches and eventually takes part in a series of ‘playlets’ in which the more common military offences and submissions are simulated. Simulated for him also, of course (both in the classroom and on the ground), are the most frequently encountered combat problems, which he is asked to analyse and, on the basis of his analysis, to solve, usually only on paper, but sometimes by taking command of a group of fellow cadets or occasionally even of ‘real’ soldiers borrowed for the exercise. His analysis, solution and mistakes are then criticized by reference to the ‘school solution’ (called in the British army ‘the pink’, from the colour of the paper on which it is always mimeographed), which he is only then allowed to see (and not allowed to argue about).

Officer-training indeed makes use of simulation techniques to a far greater extent than that for any other profession; and the justification, which is a sound justification, for the time and effort and thought put into

these not very exciting routines is that it is only thus that an army can be sure – hopeful would be more accurate – of its machinery operating smoothly under extreme stress. But besides the achievement of this functional and corporate aim, the rote-learning and repetitive form and the categorical, reductive quality of officer-training has an important and intended – if subordinate – psychological effect. Anti-militarists would call it de-personalizing and even de-humanizing. But given – even if they would not give – that battles are going to happen, it is powerfully beneficial. For by teaching the young officer to organize his intake of sensations, to reduce the events of combat to as few and as easily recognizable a set of elements as possible, to categorize under manageable headings the noise, blast, passage of missiles and confusion of human movement which will assail him on the battlefield, so that they can be described – to his men, to his superiors, to himself – as 'incoming fire', 'outgoing fire', 'airstrike', 'company-strength attack', one is helping him to avert the onset of fear or, worse, of panic and to perceive a face of battle which, if not familiar, and certainly not friendly, need not, in the event, prove wholly petrifying.

The Usefulness of Military History

History, too, can be pressed into the service of familiarizing the young officer with the unknown. One does not mean here the history of myth, of the Legion at Camerone or the Fusiliers at Albuera, though Moltke, the great nineteenth-century Chief of the German General Staff and himself an academic historian of distinction, 'held it "a duty of piety and patriotism" not to destroy certain traditional accounts' if they could be used for an inspirational end, as indeed they can; one is thinking rather of a sort of history, to the

launching of which Moltke gave a weighty shove, usually known as ‘Official’ or ‘General Staff’ history. Official history can be bad and good. At its best, modern British, and even more so American official history is a model of what conscientious and at times inspired scholarship can be. But the General Staff variety of official history often took in the past, and still can take, a peculiarly desiccated and didactic form, dedicated to demonstrating, at the cost if necessary of dreadful injury to the facts, that all battles fall into one of perhaps seven or eight types: battles of encounter, battles of attrition, battles of envelopment, battles of breakthrough and so on. Now there is no doubt a certain brutal reality in this approach, just as there is a certain rough-and-ready applicability about the seven or eight or nine ‘immutable and fundamental’ Principles of War (Concentration, Offensive Action, Maintenance of the Aim, etc.) which derive from it by another route and which military academies used to, as some in the ex-colonial countries working off out-of-date training-manuals still do, teach to their students.

But it is not a reality that the university-trained historian can grant more than the shakiest foundation. He, after all, has been trained to detect what is different and particular about events, about individuals and institutions and the character of their relationships. He cannot easily accept therefore, as the typical survey-course text of *Military History from Hannibal to Hitler* might ask him to, that the battle of Cannae, 216 B.C., and the Battle of Ramillies, A.D. 1706, still less the Battle of the Falaise Gap, 1944, are all the same sort of battle because each culminated in an encirclement of one army by the other. He may admire the painstakingly reconstructed and often beautifully drawn maps which accompany these texts, usually embellished with neat, conventional NATO symbols (infantry division symbol *equals* a Roman legion; armoured brigade symbol *equals* cavalry of the Maison du Roi) but he ought not to be

persuaded that, because the course of battles fought two thousand years apart in time can be represented in the same cartographic shorthand, the victor in each case was obeying, even if unwittingly, the rules of some universal Higher Logic of War. He will, or should, want to know a great deal more about many things – arms, equipment, logistics, morale, organization, current strategic assumptions – than the General Staff text will tell him, before he will feel able to generalize about anything with the confidence that its author displays about everything.

No doubt, however, he will – as I have done frequently – adopt the General Staff approach and make use of its material. But he will do so with the mental reservation that once off the nursery slopes, he will introduce his pupils to the real thing, the hard stuff. 'Let them get hold of the distinction between strategy and tactics' (a distinction as elusive as it is artificial) he may say to himself, 'and then we'll get down to some really serious discussion of the Schlieffen Plan, look at the documents, scrutinize the railway time-tables, mobilization schedules, read some Nietzsche, talk about Social Darwinism'… but in the meantime, 'Gentlemen, I want you to think about these two maps of the German invasions of France in 1914 and 1940 which I'm going to project on the screen. Notice the similarities between …' He may reconcile this rough-and-readiness to himself, as do a thousand American professors who silently – or audibly – curse World Civilization XP49 but teach it all the same, with the thought that no economic historian would consider discussing the pre-market economy with a class which did not understand the law of supply and demand; no social anthropologist bother embarking on an analysis of the master-man relationship for the benefit of students who did not grasp that there had once been a world without class-structures. And he would be right to do so. We all have to begin somewhere.

There are, however, two obstacles, one minor, one major, to a military historian making with his pupils the intellectual transition from the nursery slopes to the slalom *piste* which the economic historian or social anthropologist can always look forward to achieving with his (even if he does not get them that far). The first, and lesser, is that the student-officer, and it is he we are discussing, for almost no one else systematically studies military history, is simultaneously undergoing two processes of education, each with a dissimilar object. The one, highly vocational as we have seen and best described by the French word *formation*, aims if not to close his mind to unorthodox or difficult ideas, at least to stop it down to a fairly short focal length, to exclude from his field of vision everything that is irrelevant to his professional function, and to define all that he ought to see in a highly formal manner. Hence, as he is to begin his career as leader of a small unit of professional soldiers, it is at leadership and small-unit morale that he is asked to look; and, as he may later become a general, then let him also study generalship, strategy, logistics; no matter in either case whether the raw material of his study is culled from the Crusades or the Crimea. The difference between warfare then and now is in a sense unimportant, for it will be his task to bring his enemies to battle on his own terms and force them to fight by his rules, not theirs.

But the other process of education the student-officer undergoes is the normal, 'academic' one, which aims to offer the student not a single but a variety of angles of vision; which asks him to adopt in his study of war the standpoint not only of an officer, but also of a private soldier, a non-combatant, a neutral observer, a casualty; or of a statesman, a civil servant, an industrialist, a diplomat, a relief worker, a professional pacifist – all valid, all documented points of view. It will be obvious that any of these viewpoints, adoptable readily enough by the schoolboy or undergraduate, are reconciled much less

easily by the student-officer with the stern, professional, monocular outlook he is learning to bring to bear on the phenomena of war.

However it is by no means the case that all, or even many regular officers find it difficult to talk or think about war from an unprofessional point of view. We are most of us capable of compartmenting our minds, would find the living of our lives impossible if we could not, and flee the company of those who can't or won't: zealots, monomaniacs, hypochondriacs, insurance salesmen, the love-sick, the compulsively argumentative. One of the pleasures of mixing in military society is the certainty that one will meet there no representatives of most of these categories and few of the rest. The military zealot is, in particular, a rare bird, at least among British officers, who deliberately cultivate a relaxed and undogmatic attitude to the life of *Grandeur* and *Servitude*. Indeed the frankness and lack of hypocrisy with which they, having as it were declared by their choice of career where they stand over the ethics of violence and the role of force, are able to discuss these questions makes much mess conversation a great deal more incisive, direct and ultimately illuminating than that of club bars or university common-rooms.

'Of course, killing people never bothered me,' I remember a grey-haired infantry officer saying to me, by way of explaining how he had three times won the Military Cross in the Second World War. In black and white it looks a horrifying remark; but to the ear his tone implied, as it was meant to imply, not merely that the act of killing people might legitimately be expected to upset others but that it ought also to have upset him; that, through his failure to suffer immediate shock or lasting trauma, he was forced to recognize some deficiency in his own character or, if not that, then, regrettably, in human nature itself. Both were topics he was prepared to pursue, as we did then and many times afterwards. He was, perhaps, an unusual figure, but

not an uncommon one. Fiction knows him well, of course, a great deal of Romantic literature having as its theme the man-of-violence who is also the man of self-knowledge, self-control, compassion, *Weltanschauung*. He certainly exists in real life also, and as often in the army as elsewhere, as the memoirs of many professional soldiers – though few successful generals – will testify. Perhaps – it is only an impression – he is more typically a French or British than a German or American figure, the horizons of the Sahara or the North-West Frontier encouraging a breadth of outlook denied to the Hauptmann or the First Lieutenant on dreary garrison duty in Arizona or Lorraine. And although there is a German 'literary' literature of military life, it is very much more a literature of leadership, as in Bloem's *Vormarsch*, or of the exaltation of violence, as in Jünger's *Kampf als innere Erlebnis*, than of adventure, exploration, ethnography, social – sometimes even spiritual – fulfilment, the themes which characterize the novels of Ernest Psiachari or F. Yeats-Brown, or the memoirs of Lyautey, Ian Hamilton, Lord Belhaven, Meinertzhagen and a host of other major and minor servants of British and French imperialism in this century and the last who, by design or good luck, chose soldiering as a way of life and found their minds enlarged by it.

If literature of this latter sort reinforces, as I think it does, my personal view that there exists in the military mind neither a psychological barrier nor an institutional taboo against free discussion of the profession of arms, its ethics, dimensions, rewards, shortcomings, if military society is, as I have found it to be, a great deal more open than its enemies will admit or recognize, what then is this other and more important obstacle which I have suggested stands in the way of an intellectual transition from the superficial and easy to the difficult and profound in the study of war – or more particularly of battle-which lies at its heart? If the student-officer can pigeon-hole at will the

highly polarized view of combat which his military training gives him, in which people are either ‘enemy’ (to be fought), ‘friend’ (to be led, obeyed or supported as rank and orders prescribe), ‘casualties’ (to be evacuated), ‘prisoners’ (to be interrogated and escorted to the rear), ‘non-combatants’ (to be protected where possible and ignored where not) or ‘dead’ (to be buried when time permits); if he can set aside this stark, two-dimensional picture of battle and prepare to look at it in the same light as a liberal-arts student might, or a professional historian, or a strategic scientist, or a member of that enormous general readership of military history which has come into being in the last twenty years, what difficulty will prevent his – and their – seeing what they want to see and being shown what they ought?

The Deficiencies of Military History

The difficulty, in a sentence, is with ‘military history’ itself. Military history is many things. It is, and for many writers past and present is not very much more than, the study of generals and generalship, an approach to the subject which can sometimes yield remarkable results – the American historian Jac Weller’s three modern studies of Wellington in India, the Peninsula and at Waterloo, for example, convey a powerful sense of character and are informed by a deep and humane understanding of the nature of early nineteenth-century warfare at every level from the general’s to the private soldier’s – but which, by its choice of focus, automatically distorts perspective and too often dissolves into sycophancy or hero-worship, culminating in the odd case in a bizarre sort of identification by the author with his subject – an outcome common and understandable enough in literary or artistic biography but tasteless and

even mildly alarming when the Ego is a man of blood and iron, his Alter someone of scholarly meekness and suburban physique.

Military history is also the study of weapons and weapon systems, of cavalry, of artillery, of castles and fortifications, of the musket, the longbow, the armoured knight, of the ironclad battleship, of the strategic bomber. The strategic bombing campaign against Germany, its costs and benefits, its rights and wrongs, engages the energies of some of the most powerful minds at work in the field of military history today and has fomented one of the subject's few real intellectual antagonisms, comparable in the intensity and the scholarly rigour with which it is carried on to that sustained by seventeenth-century historians over the Rise or Decline of the Gentry; like those exercised by that long-running feud, its initiates seek constantly to widen the arena of their private conflict and to add to the list of combatants, so that all manner of passers-by – mild strategic-theorists, visiting demographers and uncommitted economic historians en route between a pre- and post-war Index of Gross National Product – find themselves challenged to stand and declare their colours over the ethics of area bombing or the practicability of bottleneck targeting. Tiresome though this faction-fighting can be, it justifies itself, quite apart from the importance of the moral issues at stake, by the high level of scholarship at which it is conducted and by the network of connections its participants, unlike so many other kinds of military historian, maintain with the wider world of historical (principally economic historical) inquiry.

Strongly economic in flavour too is a great deal of naval history, built as it must be around the study of weapon systems, of the big-gun battleship of the First World War and the aircraft carrier of the Second. And very precise, from the professional point of view very satisfying, history it can be. For modern naval warfare is, as correspondents

with the Eighth Army were fond of reporting of the Desert campaign, very nearly ‘pure’ warfare, a war without civilians (on the whole) and one in which the common sailor cannot, as the common soldier can, by running away or sitting tight, easily confound his commander’s wishes. All being in the same boat, a ship’s company generally does as its captain directs, until all are sunk together; fleets, by extension, until beaten, move as their admirals order. And since naval orders must be transmitted mechanically and are logged as sent and received, navies accumulate archives whose contents are pure historical gold-dust: precisely noted changes of course, the weather reports of trained meteorologists, damage-control reports by professional engineers, accurately timed sightings of friendly and enemy units, hard nuggets of fact about visibility, casualties, sinkings, fall of shot, sea conditions, facts of a density and volume to crush the spirit and blind the imagination of all but the most inspired and dedicated scholar. For inexplicable reasons, it is American rather than British historians who have triumphed in the long-distance event that the writing of naval history is, and this although, by the majority vote of historical events, it is the doings of Royal rather than U.S. Navy which has compelled their attention. (One of them at least, Professor Arthur Marder, has achieved in his study of the British navy in the First World War standards of archival research and organization of material which defy betterment.)

Military history furthermore is the study of institutions, of regiments, general staffs, staff colleges, of armies and navies in the round, of the strategic doctrines by which they fight and of the ethos by which they are informed. At the most elevated level, this branch of the subject shades off, through the history of strategic doctrine, into the broader field of the history of ideas, and in another direction, through the study of ‘civil-military’ relations, into political science. ‘Elevated’ should of course be understood

here in a very relative sense, for though academic interest in civil–military relations, particularly in those between the German army and the German state, has produced a large, satisfying and in parts distinctly exciting literature, it is elsewhere prone to clothe itself in the drab garments of sociology at its most introspective; while the history of strategic doctrine, with some notable exceptions, of which Jay Luvaas's *Military Legacy of the Civil War* is a glittering example, suffers markedly from that weakness endemic to the study of ideas, the failure to demonstrate connection between thought and action.

That weakness is not, however, peculiar to this sub-branch of military history. Action is essentially destructive of all institutional studies; just as it compromises the purity of doctrines, it damages the integrity of structures, upsets the balance of relationships, interrupts the network of communication which the institutional historian struggles to identify and, having identified, to crystallize. War, the good quartermaster's opportunity, the bad quartermaster's bane, is the institutional military historian's irritant. It forces him, whose urge is to generalize and dissect, to qualify and particularize and above all to combine analysis with narrative – the most difficult of all the historian's arts. Hence his preference, paradoxically, for the study of armed forces in *peacetime*. And excellent many works of that sort turn out to be. But, as Mr Michael Howard concluded at the end of a long, very painstaking and generally warm review, 'the trouble with this sort of book is that it loses sight of what armies are *for*.' Armies, he implied, are for fighting. Military history, we may infer, must in the last resort be about battle.

That certainly reflects Clausewitz's view. In an economic analogy, which delighted Engels and has helped to ensure this Prussian (admittedly vaguely Hegelian) general an unobtrusive niche in the Marxist *Temple du Génie*, he suggested that 'fighting is to war', (the paraphrase is

Engel's) 'what cash payment is to trade, for however rarely it may be necessary for it actually to occur, everything is directed towards it, and eventually it must take place all the same and must be decisive.' Battle history, or campaign history, deserves a similar primacy over all other branches of military historiography. It is in fact the oldest historical form, its subject matter is of commanding importance, and its treatment demands the most scrupulous historical care. For it is not through what armies *are* but by what they *do* that the lives of nations and of individuals are changed. In either case, the engine of change is the same; the infliction of human suffering through violence. And the right to inflict suffering must always be purchased by, or at the risk of, combat – ultimately of combat *corps à corps*.

Combat *corps à corps* is not of course a subject which historians, any more than other sorts of writer, can be accused of ignoring. The 'battle piece', as a historical construction, is as old as Herodotus; as a subject of myth and saga it is even more antique. It is an everyday theme of modern journalistic reportage and it presents a literary challenge which some of the world's masters have taken up. Stendhal, Thackeray and Hugo each offer us a version of the battle of Waterloo – as seen through the eyes of a shell-shocked survivor, of a distracted bystander, of a stern and unrelenting Republican deity; while Tolstoy, in his reconstruction of the battle of Borodino, which had for nineteenth-century Russians the same historical centrality as Waterloo for contemporary western Europeans, not only brought off one of the most spectacular set pieces in the development of the novel-form, but also opened the modern case for the prosecution against the Great Man theory of historical explanation.

Imagination and sentiment, which quite properly delimit the dimensions of the novelist's realm, are a dangerous medium, however, through which to approach the subject of battle. Indeed, in that sub-world of imaginative writing

which Gillian Freeman has called the undergrowth of literature, calculated indulgence in imagination and sentiment have produced, and regrettably continue to produce, some very nasty stuff indeed, which at its Zap-Blatt-Banzai-Gott in Himmel-Bayonet in the Guts worst may justifiably be condemned by that overworked phrase, 'pornography of violence'.

Historians, traditionally and rightly, are expected to ride their feelings on a tighter rein than the man of letters can allow himself. One school of historians at least, the compilers of the *British Official History of the First World War*, have achieved the remarkable feat of writing an exhaustive account of one of the world's greatest tragedies without the display of any emotion at all. A brief, and wholly typical, extract will convey the flavour; it describes a minor trench-to-trench attack by infantry, supported by artillery, on August 8th, 1916 at Guillemont, in the second month of the Battle of the Somme:

> Some confusion arose on the left brigade front, where the 166th Brigade (Brigadier-General L. F. Green Wilkinson) was replacing the 164th – a very difficult relief – and although the 1/10th King's (Liverpool Scottish), keeping close behind the barrage, approached the German wire, it lost very heavily in two desperate but unavailing attempts to close with the enemy. Nearly all the officers were hit, including Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Davidson who was wounded. Next on the left, the 1/5th Loyal North Lancashire (also 155th Brigade) was late through no fault of its own; starting after the barrage had lifted, it stood no chance of success. Subsequently the 1/7th King's attacked from the position won by its own brigade (the 165th) on the previous day, but could make no headway.

Agreed that this is technical history; that it is intended as a chronological record of military incident to provide, among other things, material for Staff College lectures and authoritative source references for other historians to work from. But is this featureless prose appropriate to the description of what we may divine was something very nasty indeed that happened that morning at Guillemont fifty-eight years ago to those 3,000 Englishmen, in particular to those of the 1/10th Battalion of the King's Regiment?[2] That it was something very nasty is revealed by a footnote: 'The Victoria Cross was awarded to the medical officer of the 1/10th King's, Captain N. C. Chavasse, for his exceptionally gallant work in rescuing wounded under heavy fire.' For most of us know, even if nothing else about the British army, that the Victoria Cross can be won, and then very rarely, only at the risk, often at the cost, of death. If we also know that Chavasse is but one of three men ever to have won the Cross twice, his second being a posthumous award, and that his battalion was a Kitchener unit, composed of enthusiastic but half-trained volunteers; if we guess that 'could make no headway' and 'stood no chance of success' mean that its neighbouring battalions returned precipitately to their trenches or did not leave them, then we can glimpse, in this episode in no-man's-land at Guillemont on August 8th, 1916, a picture in miniature of the First World War at, for those compelled to fight it, almost its very worst.

But if we may conclude that the official historians' decision to deal with the emotive difficulty in military historiography by denying themselves any explicit emotional outlet whatsoever was unsatisfactory, and that some exploration of the combatants' emotions, if not the indulgence of our own, is essential to the truthful writing of military history, we are still left with the problem of how it is to be done. 'Allowing the combatants to speak for themselves' is not merely a permissible but, when and