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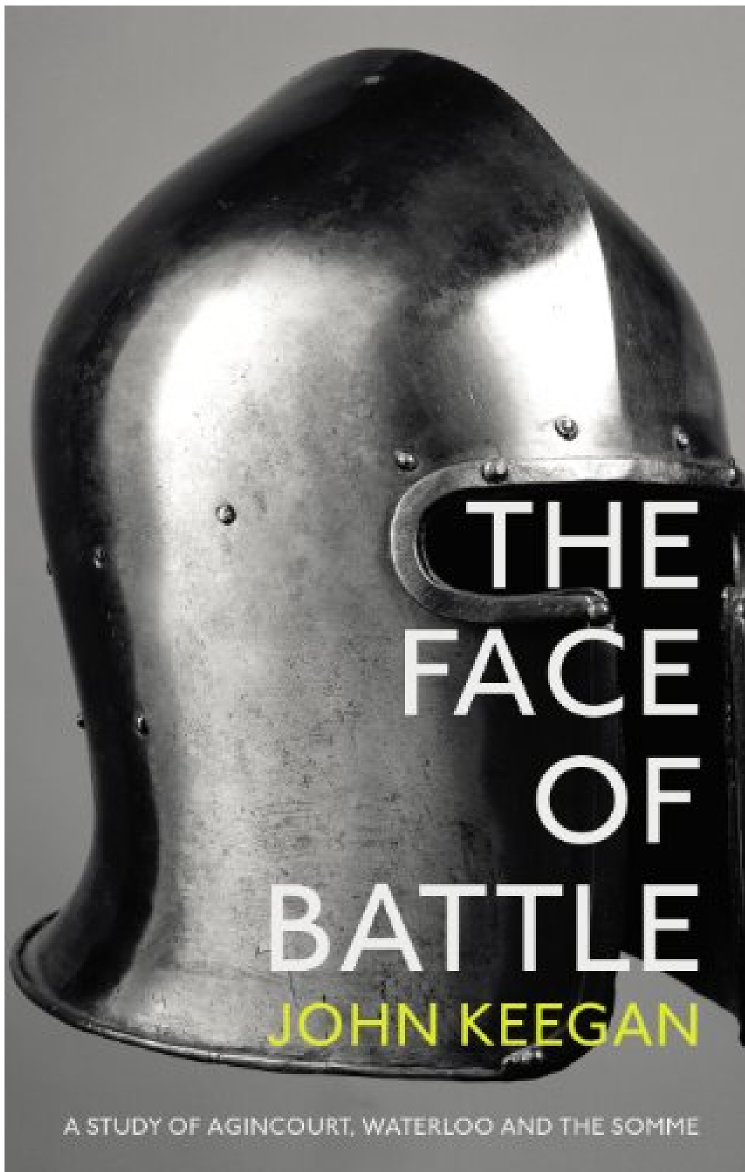
The Face Of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme



Par John Keegan
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(Ebook pdf) The Face Of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme

Par John Keegan : The Face Of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Face Of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme:

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Description : Description du produitWhat is it like to be in battle? John Keegan, a senior instructor at Sandhurst, the British Military Academy, speaks for soldiers who were present in the fray. For examples, Keegan selects Agincourt in 1415, Waterloo in 1815, and the Somme in 1916. What is common about them, what is different? Agincourt was hand-to-hand combat, thrust and cut--a fearful and personal encounter. At Waterloo, 400 years later, the battle was still largely personal. As it swayed back and forth, men on opposite sides came to recognize the same individuals they had fought off in previous charges. Keegan closes his book with the Somme. For him it stands as the distillation of wars in the industrial age: long-distance killing of faceless men by others who merely activate the instruments of destruction.

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Face of Battle is military history from the battlefield: an imperishable account of the direct experience of individuals at 'the point of maximum danger'. It examines the physical conditions of fighting, the particular emotions and behaviour generated by battle, as well as the motives that impel soldiers to stand and fight rather than run away. In this stunningly vivid reassessment of three battles, John Keegan conveys their reality for the participants, whether facing the arrow cloud of Agincourt, the levelled muskets of Waterloo or the steel rain of the Somme.ExtraitPENGUIN BOOKSTHE FACE OF BATTLEJohn Keegan was for many years Senior Lecturer at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. He is the author of many books on military history, including The Book of War, The Mask of Command, The Price of Admiralty, The First World War, The Second World War, and A History of Warfare. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.John KeeganThe Face of BattlePenguin BooksList of Illustrationsbetween pages 192 and 1931 Skull of a Swedish soldier killed in 13612 The effect of archery on cavalry at short range, 13563 A wall of bodies of the dead and wounded, fifteenth century4 Men-at-arms at the mercy of archers, fifteenth century5 A square of Highlanders receiving cavalry at Waterloo6 Scotland for Ever: Waterloo7 A German attack on a British line of scrapes, autumn 19148 Russians charging a German or Austrian trench, autumn 19149 A French counter-attack at Dien Bien Phu, spring 1954List of Maps1 Agincourt, 25 October 14152 Waterloo, 18 June 18153 The Somme, 1 July 19164 Relative positions of the battlesAcknowledgementsThis book has been written chiefly from printed sources, some of which are listed in the bibliography. But I have also derived much information and many ideas from colleagues, pupils and friends (it is one of the pleasures of teaching at Sandhurst that these categories overlap), in particular from the following serving or retired soldiers: Brigadier Peter Young, D.S.O., M.C., Brigadier D. W. V. P. OFlaherty, D.S.O., Major-General A. H. Farrar-Hockley, D.S.O., M.B.E., M.C., Colonel E. M. P. Hardy, Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Barclay, Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, Lieutenant-Colonel Jeremy Reilly, D.S.O., Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, Major Charles Messenger, Royal Tank Regiment, Major Michael Dewar, Royal Green Jackets, Captain Terence Johnston, Coldstream Guards, Lieutenant Timothy Weeks, Light Infantry, and Lieutenant Hugh Willing, Royal Green Jackets; from the following members of the Sandhurst academic staff: Dr Christopher Duffy, Dr Richard Holmes, Dr Gwynne Dyer, Dr John Sweetman, Mr David Chandler, Mr Peter Vigor and Mr William McElwee; from our homologues at the cole spciale militaire de St-Cyr, Lieutenant-Colonel Michel Camus, Lgion trangre, and Commandant Marc Neuville, Chasseurs pied; from Major-General Alastair Maclennan, O.B.E., of the Royal Army Medical College, Mr A. S. Till, F.R.C.S., of the United Oxford Hospitals, Dr John Cule, Dr H. Bleckwenn of Osnabruck and Dr. T. F. Everett, my father-in-law, who died before this book was finished; from Dr M. Haisman and Dr M. Allnut of the Army Personnel Research Establishment; from Mr Michael Howard, Professor Richard Cobb, Professor Geoffrey Best, Mr Harmut Pogge von Strandmann and Brigadier Shelford Bidwell. I also corresponded fruitfully with Professor Bernard Bergonzi and Dr C. T.Allmand. Brigadier Young, Mr Howard and Mr Chandler were kind enough to give permission for extracts from their books to be used for purposes which do not do justice to their quality. I owe special debts of gratitude to Mr Barrie Pitt and Mr Derek Anyan. Mr Anthony Sheil, Mr Alan Williams and Mr David Machin have been unfailingly encouraging; I hope I have not disappointed them. It is a pleasure to thank Lieutenant-Colonel Alan Shepperd, M.B.E., the Librarian (and creator) of the Central Library, R.M.A. Sandhurst, and his friendly, helpful and efficient staff for all their help; Mr R. W. Meadows is particularly to be thanked for procuring books through the inter-library loan service. I am also grateful to Mr Kenneth White, of the Staff College Library, and to the staff of the London Library. Mrs Valerie Horsfield typed much of the manuscript and has my thanks. My wife Susanne would have typed it all, had I not insisted that her hands were already overfull with her own writing and the care of four children; and were the title and subject of this book not so inappropriate, I would have dedicated it to her, for all she has done.JOHN KEEGANRoyal Military Academy, Sandhurst10 December 19741 Old, Unhappy, Far-off Things*A Little LearningI 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 battlemy 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 fightinga 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 Mini bullet from Shiloh and a shrapnel ball from Hill 60 lie among the cotton-reels in a painted papier-mch 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 them 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 generationI was born in 1934have 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 195051, 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 violentperhaps very violent if they were French and served in Algeriawas 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 battlewhich is directed towards securing a decision by and through those means, on the battlefield and within a fairly strict time-limithas remained a constant. In Europes 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 onenot 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 themwhich is almost the whole of my working lifedescribing 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 judgement 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 likesubjects which, vital though they are to an understanding of modern war, nevertheless state 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 thisor 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 cadetsand probably at any gathering of young men anywherein a number of

unmistakable 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 gesticulateunless they assume, as some do, a deliberately nonchalant attitude; and by the content of what they have to saya 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 beings make-up and likely therefore, even when artificially stimulated, to affect the novice officers composure to an abnormal and exaggerated extent. These feelings, after all, are the product of some of mans deepest fears: fear of wounds, fear of death, fear of putting into danger the lives of those for whose wellbeing one is responsible. They touch too upon some of mans 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 ones 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 parklike, 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 officers 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 soldiersand the proportion at Sandhurst, as at St-Cyr, remains surprisingly largetheir knowledge of war is theoretical, anticipatory and second-hand. What is more, one detects in ones own attitudes, and in those of ones colleagues, in those who know and in those who dont, 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 inflictedusually inflictedwhich 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 armys 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 200 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 proceduresand thereby to make orderly and rational what is essentially chaotic and instinctive. It is an aim analogous to thatthough I would not wish to push the analogy too farpursued 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 officers 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 Schlieffens reply to his adjutant, who had drawn to his attention a vista of the River Pregelan inconsiderable obstacle, Captainwas 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 lawand 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 thus only that an army can be surehopeful would be more accurateof 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 intendedif subordinatepsychological effect. Anti-militarists would call it de-personalizing and even dehumanizing. But giveneven if they would not givethat 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 describedto his men, to his superiors, to himselfas 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 HistoryHistory, 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 break-through 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 thingsarms, equipment, logistics, morale, organization, current strategic assumptionsthan 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 willas I have done frequentlyadopt 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 well 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 Darwinismbut in the meantime, Gentlemen, I want you to think about these two maps of the German invasions of France in 1914 and 1940 which Im 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 silentlyor audiblycurse 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 masterman 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 a 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.For 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 pacifistall 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 compartmentalizing our minds, would find the living of our lives impossible if we could not, and flee the company of those who cant or wont: 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 soldiersthough few successful generalswill testify. Perhapsit is only an impressionhe 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 Bloems Vormarsch, or of the exaltation of violence, as in Jngers Kampf als innere Erlebnis, than of adventure, exploration, ethnography, socialsometimes even spiritualfulfilment, 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 waror more particularly of battlewhich 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 hisand theirseeing what they want to see and being shown what they ought?The Deficiencies of Military HistoryThe 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 resultsthe American historian Jac Wellers 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 generals to the private soldiersbut 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 subjectan 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 subjects 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-

bymild strategic-theorists, visiting demographers and uncommitted economic historians en route between a pre- and post-war Index of Gross National Productfind 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 commanders wishes. All being in the same boat, a ships 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 Luvaass 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 quartermasters opportunity, the bad quartermasters bane, is the institutional military historians irritant. It forces him, whose urge is to generalize and dissect, to qualify and particularize and above all to combine analysis with narrativethe most difficult of all the historians 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 Clausewitzs 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 Gnie, he suggested that fighting is to war (the paraphrase is Engelss) 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, combatultimately of combat corps corps.Combat corps 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 worlds masters have taken up. Stendhal, Thackeray and Hugo each offer us a version of the battle of Waterlooas 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 novelists 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-Blatl-Banzai-Gott im 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 worlds greatest tragedies without the display of any emotion at all. A brief, and wholly typical, extract will convey the flavour; it descrites a minor trench-to-trench attack by infantry, supported by artillery, on 8 August 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 164tha very difficult reliefand although the 1/10th Kings (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 Kings 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 Kings Regiment?* That it was something very nasty is revealed by a footnote: The Victoria Cross was awarded to the medical officer of the 1/10th Kings, 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 means that its neighbouring battalions returned precipitately to their trenches or did not leave them, then we can glimpse, in this episode in no-mans-land at Guillemont on 8 August 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 where possible, an essential ingredient of battle narrative and battle analysis. The almost universal illiteracy, however, of the common soldier of any century before the nineteenth makes it a technique difficult to employ. Dr Christopher Duffy, by heroic labour among little-known Prussian and Austrian archives, has pushed use of the technique backwards into the eighteenth century; but it is not until the coming of the wars of the French Revolution that we find any extensive deposit even of officers memoirs and not until the First World War that we hear the voice of the common man (though infant murmurs can be detected during the American Civil War). Robert Rhodes James, who is one of a handful of historians to

have discussed the technical difficulties of writing military history, holds strongly to the view that battles ought to be and are best described through the words of participants; and in Gallipoli he gave a masters demonstration of how it may be done.There are, however, objections to general dependence on the technique and not wholly those concerned with the paucity or absence of material from which to work. One, well known to all scholars, is the danger of reconstructing events solely or largely on the evidence of those whose reputations may gain or lose by the account they give: even if it is only a warriors self-esteem which he feels to be at stake, he is liable to inflate his achievementswhat we might call the Bullfrog Effectand old warriors, particularly if surrounded by Old Comrades who will endorse his yarn while waiting the chance to spin their own on a reciprocal basis, are notoriously prone to do so. Contemporary letters and even more so, genuinely private diaries (if such exist) are a much more reliable source; but they must be used in the right way. Too often they are not. At worst, they are mined for interest, to produce anthologies of eye-witness accounts in series with titles like Everyman at War (The Historian as Copy-typist would be altogether more frank); at best, they serve as the raw material for what is not much more than anecdotal history, yielding a narrative with a great deal of pungency and a high surface shimmer but without any of that intense particularity or energetic and confident generalization which are the trademarks of the historical matre-ouvrier.Anecdote should certainly not be despised, let alone rejected by the historian. But it is only one of the stones to his hand. Othersreports, accounts, statistics, map-tracings, pictures and photographs and a mass of other impersonal materialwill have to be coaxed to speak, and he ought also to get away from papers and walk about his subject wherever he can find traces of it on the ground. A great pioneer military historian, Hans Delbrck in Germany in the last century, demonstrated that it was possible to prove many traditional accounts of military operations pure nonsense by mere intelligent inspection of the terrain, and an English follower of his, Lt-Colonel A. H. Burne, proposed the applicability of a principle he had tested on every major English battlefield (Inherent Military Probability) and which, used with circumspection, is a rewarding as well as intriguing concept.* I would also argue that military historians should spend as much time as they can with soldiers, not on the grounds that armies always remain the same at heart, a notion which any historian with a sense of professional self-preservation would dismiss out of hand, but because the quite chance observation of trivial incidents may illuminate his private understanding of all sorts of problems from the past which will otherwise almost certainly remain obscured.Christopher Duffy, who was lucky enough to spend some weeks teaching Yugoslav militia the elements of Napoleonic drill for a film enactment of War and Peace, described to me the thrill of comprehension he experienced in failing to manoeuvre his troops successfully across country in line and of the comparative ease with which he managed it in column, thus proving to his own satisfaction that Napoleon preferred the latter formation to the former not because it more effectively harnessed the revolutionary fervour of his troops (the traditional glamorous explanation) but because anything more complicated was simply impracticable. I myself recall a similar archaeological pang in catching a glimpse of a Guards sergeant marching backwards before his squad who were learning the slow-march on the Sandhurst drill-square; the angle of his outstretched arms and upraised stick, his perfectly practised disregard for any obstacle in his backward path, the exhortatory rictus of his expression exactly mirrored the image, sketched from life by Rowlandson, of a Guards sergeant drilling his recruits on Horse Guards parade 170 years before; and through that reflection I suddenly understood the functionchoreographic, ritualistic, perhaps even aesthetic, certainly much more than tacticalwhich drill plays in the life of long-service armies. The insight which intimacy with soldiers at this level can bring to the military historian enormously enhances his surety of touch in feeling his way through the inanimate landscape of documents and objects with which he must work. It will, I think, rob him of patience for much that passes as military history; it will diminish his interest in much of the higher study of warof strategic theory, of generalship, of grand strategic debate, of the machine-warfare waged by air forces and navies. And that, perhaps, is a pity. But if it leads him to questionas I have found it does methe traditional approach to writing about combat corps corps, to decide that, after he has read the survivors letters and diaries, the generals memoirs, the staff officers dispatches, there is yet another element which he must add to anything he writesan element compounded of affection for the soldiers he knows, a perception of the hostilities as well as the loyalties which animate a society founded on comradeship, some appreciation of the limits of leadership and obedience, a glimpse of the far shores of courage, a recognition of the principle of self-preservation ever present in even the best soldiers nature, incredulity that flesh and blood can stand the fears with which battle will confront it and which his own deeply felt timidity will highlightif, in short, he can learn to make up his mind about the facts of battle in the light of what all, and not merely some, of the

participants felt about their predicament, then he will have taken the first and most important step in understanding battle as it actually was.For if to propagate understanding of, not merely knowledge about, the past is the historians highest duty, making up his own mind is the essential precondition to that end. Making up ones mind about anything, let alone a large and complicated body of material, is always a difficult and often painful task but it is one which many military historians would seem to shun altogether. The anecdotal historian avoids it, since he has already decided that his only responsibility is to entertain the reader and he can therefore discard whatever material he judges will not. The anthologist historian avoids it absolutely, usually justifying this abdication of his function by the plea that he prefers to let the reader make up his mind for himselfas if someone he impropriates of only a fraction of the record is thereby put in any position to do so. The General Staff historian also avoids the responsibility, for his mind is made up for him by prevailing staff doctrine about the proper conduct of war and he will accordingly select whatever facts endorse that view, while manhandling those which offer resistance. The technological, the economic, the strategic, the biographic historians will all in their turn approach the subject of battle with their attitudes somewhat pre-cast, though they are usually well trained enough to advise the reader of their bias from the outset. But even the all-round military historian tends, in my experience, however perceptive, innovative, forthright, even downright disrespectful he is in his discussion of staffwork, leadership, strategic decision and the like, to shy away from the challenge of planting the impress of his own mind on his battle descriptions. One would certainly not suggest that he does so consciously, nor that the battle pieces he writes are not the fruit of careful research and skilful organization. But the trouble precisely is that what most military historians write about battle are indeed battle pieces, that is to say essays in a highly traditional form, which no amount of labour to fill out with new information will materially alter so long as the historian accepts the conventions within which he is working. To suggest that most military historians do accept those conventions is not to accuse them of that beginners error, the transmission of traditional accounts (For want of a nail the kingdom was lost); nor is it to impugn them of unreflectingly adopting the modes of thought of this or that great historian of the past. It is rather to argue that what has been called the rhetoric of historythat inventory of assumptions, and usages through which the historian makes his professional approach to the pastis not only, as it pertains to the writing of battle history, much more strong and inflexible than the rhetoric of almost all other sorts of history, but is so strong, so inflexible and above all so time-hallowed that it exerts virtual powers of dictatorship over the military historians mind.The Battle PieceWhat do I mean by the rhetoric of battle history? And what are its usages and assumptions? They are demonstrated in an extreme form in a passage which, though I have already dismissed it as myth history, is so famous and so striking an example of the battle piece that I cannot resist reproducing it. It is General Sir William Napiers account of the advance of the Fusilier Brigade (7th Royal and 23rd Royal Welch Fusiliers) at the battle of Albuera, 16 May 1811, generally regarded as the crucial moment of the battle (of which Napier was not an eye-witness, having been wounded at Fuentes dOnoro a fortnight before):Such a gallant line, issuing from the midst of the smoke and rapidly separating itself from the confused and broken multitude, startled the enemys masses, then augmenting and pressing forward as to an assured victory; they wavered, hesitated and, vomiting forth a storm of fire, hastily endeavoured to enlarge their front, while a fearful discharge of grape from all their artillery whistled through the British ranks. Myers was killed, Cole, the three colonels, Ellis, Blakeney and Hawkshawe, fell wounded, and the fusilier battalions, struck by the iron tempest, reeled and staggered like sinking ships: but suddenly and sternly recovering, they closed on their terrible enemies, and then was seen with what strength and majesty the British soldier fights. In vain did Soult with voice and gesture animate the Frenchmen; in vain did the hardiest veterans, breaking from the crowded columns, sacrifice their lives to gain time for the mass to open out on such a far field; in vain did the mass itself bear up, and fiercely striving fire indiscriminately upon friends and foes, while the horsemen hovering on the flank threatened to charge the advancing line. Nothing could stop that astonishing infantry. No sudden burst of undisciplined valour, no nervous enthusiasm weakened the stability of their order, their flashing eyes were bent on the dark columns in their front, their measured tread shook the ground, their dreadful volleys swept away the head of every formation, their deafening shouts overpowered the dissonant cries that broke from all parts of the tumultuous crowd, as slowly and with a horrid carnage it was pushed by the incessant vigour of the attack to the farthest edge of the height. There the French reserve, mixing with the struggling multitude, endeavoured to restore the fight but only augmented the irremediable disorder, and the mighty mass, giving way like a loosened cliff, went headlong down the steep: the rain flowed after in streams discoloured with blood, and eighteen hundred unwounded men, the remnant of six thousand unconquerable British soldiers, stood triumphant on

the fatal hill.Now, as Romantic prose passages go, this is clearly a very remarkable achievement, rich in imagery, thunderous in rhythm and immensely powerful in emotional effect; it almost vibrates on the page, towards its climax threatens indeed to loosen the readers hold on the book. Quite understandably it has become one of the most frequently quoted of all descriptive accounts of the British armys battles in the Peninsula and a firm favourite with compilers of military anthologies. But descriptive begs, of course, an important, not to say vital, question. Just what does it tell us about the Fusiliers advance; and is what it tell us credible?Well, we would probably all accept that their measured tread shook the ground is merely metaphor and that the difference between the British soldiers deafening shouts and the French soldiers dissonant cries is a literary sound-effectas streams discoloured with blood is probably a visual one; reeled and staggered like sinking ships is a variation on a traditional simile, no more to be taken au pied de la lettre than is vomited forth a storm of fire. But when we have made allowances for permissible over-writing, when we have stripped away the verbal superstructure of the passage, we are still left with a picture of events to which it is difficult wholly to lend credence. Am I alone in wondering whether a body of men, admittedly trained soldiers, but of whom two out of three were to suffer wounds or death as a consequence of their acts, really advanced uphill under heavy fire without once showing nervous enthusiasm or indeed anything but disciplined valour and stability and order? And how exactly, to ask another sort of question, was the loosened cliff of the French mass thrust down the steep; by weight of superior numbers, by hand-to-hand brawling, by push of bayonet, by the sudden onset of panic in their own ranks? These are only some of a large number of uncertainties which one would like to have ones mind set straight upon but which Napier, having successfully aroused, leaves frustratingly unresolved. It may be that the episode was as extraordinary as he makes outby comparison at once with everyday human behaviour and by the norms of military performance. But if so, and he as a veteran was in a position to say, he owed it to the reader, one may think, to make that clear. As it is, he seems to suggest that it is by no means abnormal (Then was seen with what strength and majesty the British soldier fights) that a leaderless brigade of infantry (the brigadier and his three colonels had been disabled) should overcome, at the cost of over half its number, a very much stronger combined force of infantry, cavalry and artillery led by one of the foremost soldiers of the age (Soult was already a marshal).It may be thought that the evidence in the case against the battle piece is being stacked by adduction of so over-written an example of the form. There are, however, besides the extravagance of his language, other elements in Napiers account of the Fusiliers advance which deserve attention because we will find them recurring in the work of other much more sober, much more scientific, historians. The first is the extreme uniformity of human behaviour which he portrays: the British are all attacking and all with equal intensity (no sudden burst of undisciplined valour); the French likewise are all resisting (though some admittedly super-energeticallythe hardiest veterans, breaking from the crowded columns, sacrifice their lives); no individual turns tail and runs, drops down to sham dead or stands thunder-struck at the indescribable horror of it all. Second, there is the very abrupt, indeed quite discontinuous, movement of the piece; the British advance, they and the French exchange volleys, carnage ensues, and then suddenly the French are over the steep. Third, there is a ruthlessly stratified characterization; the British soldiers are either fusiliers or one of five named people, all senior officers; the French, except for Soult and the hardiest veterans (a surprisingly short-lived bunch for old soldiers) are members either of crowded columns, a tumultuous crowd, a struggling multitude, a mighty mass, or, a most unsoldierly formation, that loosened cliff. This traffic in collective images, approbatory as applied to the British (gallant line), pejorative in the case of the French (dark columns), reveals a fourth, and the most important element, in Napiers approach; a highly oversimplified depiction of human behaviour on the battlefield. Implicit rather than explicit in his prose, it is clearly discernible none the less, and amounts to an absolute division of all present into leaders and led, who conduct themselves accordingly: for the whole point of the passage is that the French, despite the exhortations of Soult and the exemplary self-sacrifice of the hardiest veterans, do not prevail against the British fusiliers who, even though they have been deprived of their senior commanders, nevertheless fight heroically and bring the advance to a successful conclusion. Finally, though this does not exhaust the list of noteworthy elements in the passage, there is no explanation of what happened to the dead and wounded; nor surely is it facetious to seek one. Men advancing in close order across a constricted space against an enemy with whom they exchange effective fire will have to step over the bodies first of their own dead and wounded comrades, then over those of the enemy; would not that have interruptedit is only a quibblethe Fusiliers measured tread? And what did the woundedcombatant beings no longer but none the less, indeed, perhaps all the more, sentient for thatdo with themselves while the struggle raged round them? In Napiers

account, the dead and wounded apparently dematerialize as soon as struck down, exactly the contrary to what was supposed to happen in the Norse paradisewhere warriors killed in combat instantly sprang up to resume the fightbut equally as puzzling.The length and tone of this critique may be thought unfair to Napier, who was merely trying, in a limited space and for an audience unaccustomed to thinking of private soldiers as individuals worthy of mention by name, to describe what by any reckoning was one of the high points of the British effort in the wars against Napoleonwhich had, for Englishmen of his own time and class, the same quality of national epic as did the struggle to overthrow Hitler for their descendants five generations later. Churlishly, it fails to pay tribute to the pioneering quality of his work. No Englishman before him had written such energetic, many-sided, informative and explicative military history; even a century after its publication, its standard could prompt a doyen of English academic historians to describe British Battles and Sieges as the finest military history in English and perhaps in any language. Moreover, none of this taking-to-task is original. Napier, by his own admission, was psychologically a hero-worshipper and artistically a big-production man (It is the business of the historianto bring the exploits of the hero into broad daylightthe multitude must be told where to stop and wonder and to make them do so, the historian must have recourse to all the power of words); while it was a perceptive contemporary critic who charged that he sacrificed to the general grand effect all minor and apparently trifling things.In short, I am being unfair; and, since historians of the modern school have long been taught that the sacrifice of the general grand effect is a necessary preliminary to the achievement of anything professionally worth-while, I also appear to be labouring a point. But am I? Modern military historians have certainly shown themselves to be as keen as the next man in pursuit of the minor and apparently trifling, at least as far as the noncombatant aspects of their subject are concerned; one has only to think of a book like Quimbys Background to Napoleonic Warfare, which dissects the pre-Revolutionary French drill regulations with Thomist rigour, or S. P. G. Wards Wellingtons Headquarters, which might almost be used as a text in an enlightened school of management studies, to be satisfied on that scoreand to be filled with a sense of humility at ones own scholarly shortcomings. But when one turns from drill and logistics to the battle descriptions of even the best trained modern historians, it is to find Napierism as alive as ever; less sonorous to the ear, perhaps, certainly less xenophobic, but still trading in his limited stock of assumptions and assertions about the behaviour of human beings in extreme-stress situations. Here are three passages, all the work of distinguished English historians trained in the Oxford school of Modern History.The first, from The British Army 16421970 by Brigadier Peter Young, D.S.O., M.C., describes the charge of the British Heavy Brigade of cavalry against the Russians at Balaclava, 25 October 1854. This successful action just preceded the disastrous charge of the Light Brigade:As the Royals passed the vineyard they saw the Greys ahead of them, hacking their way through the main body of the Russians, while other squadrons threatened to envelop them. An ancient friendship existed between the Greys and the Royals, and a voice from the latter was heard to cry, By God, the Greys are cut off. Gallop. Gallop. The regiment gave a cheer, the trumpets sounded, and with ranks imperfectly formed, fell upon the flank and rear of the wheeling Russian squadrons, catching the outer troops as they tried to face outwards and routing them utterly. The Royals pressed on into the enemy mass, but Colonel Yorke hd a grip of his men and, before more than a few had galloped off in pursuit of the enemy, halted and reformed themThe 4th Dragoon Guards had also made themselves felt, and by this time the Russians were galloping rearwards, broken and disordered, followed by a few of the Heavies and sped on their way by the Horse Artillery. In this splendid charge ten squadrons routed some 3,000 men for the loss of some eighty casualties.The second passage by David Chandler is from his exhaustive study of The Campaigns of Napoleon and describes the charge of the French Reserve Cavalry against the Russians at Eylau, 8 February 1807:In marvellous fettle, eighty squadrons of splendidly accoutred horsemen swept forward over the intervening 2,500 yards. It was one of the greatest cavalry charges in history. Leading the attack rode Dahlmann at the head of six squadrons of chasseurs, followed by Murat and the cavalry reserve, supported in due course by Bessires with the Cavalry of the Guard. The troopers of Grouchy, dHautpol, Klein and Milhaud swept forward in turn. First, Murats men swept through the remnants of the Russian force retiring from Eylau, before dividing into two wings, one ploughing into the flank of the Russian cavalry force attacking St Hilaires embattled division, the other sabering its way through the troops surrounding the square of dead men at the 14th Regiments last stand. Even then the impetus of this fantastic charge did not slacken. Driving forward, the two cavalry wings crashed through the serried ranks of Sackens centre, pierced them, re-formed into a single column once more in the Russian rear and then plunged back the way they had come through the disordered Russian units to cut down the gunners who had done so much

harm to Augereaus men. As the stunned Russians attempted to reform their line, a relieved Napoleon ordered forward the Cavalry of the Guard to cause more disorder and thus cover the safe retirement of Murats weary but elated squadronsFor the loss of 1,500 men, Murat had won Napoleon a vital respiteThe third, from Michael Howards Franco-Prussian War, describes the attack of the infantry of the Prussian Guard against the French positions at St-Privat, 18 August 1870:So the skirmishing lines of the Guard, with thick columns behind them, extended themselves over the bare fields below St-Privat and began to make their way up the slopes in the face of the French fireThe result was a massacre. The field officers on their horses were the first casualties. The men on foot struggled forward against the chassepot fire, as if into a hailstorm, shoulders hunched, heads bowed, directed only by the shouts of their leaders and the discordant noise of their regimental bugles and drums. All formations disintegrated; the men broke up their columns into a single thick and ragged skirmishing line and inched their way forward up the bare glacis of the fields until they were within some six hundred yards of St-Privat. There they stopped. No more urging could get the survivors forward. They could only crouch in firing positions and wait for the attack of the Saxons, which they had so disastrously anticipated, to develop on their left flank. The casualty returns were to reveal over 8,000 officers and men killed and wounded, mostly in twenty minutes; more than a quarter of the entire corps strength. If anything was needed to vindicate the French faith in the chassepot, it was the aristocratic corpses which so thickly strewed the fields between St-Privat and St-Marie-les-Chnes.Stylistically, of course, these three pieces differ considerably from each other. Brigadier Youngs is a jolly genre scene, the violence he portrays no more hurtful than the knocks exchanged in a Dutch Low Life painting of a beerhouse brawl; David Chandlers is Second Empire Salon School, a large canvas, highly coloured and animated by a great deal of apparent movement but conveying no real sense of action; Michael Howards is Neo-Classical, severe in mood, sombre in tone, his subjects frozen in the attitudes of tragedy to which fate, deaf to appeals of compassion, has consigned them.They differ too in the demands they make on the readers credulity. Brigadier Young is content to be very vague about what actually passed between the Heavy Brigade and their Russian adversaries, perhaps because he has been in too many battles himself to think that this or any other can be explained in simple terms. Nevertheless, the factors he isolates as significantthe ancient friendship, the voice from the ranks and the chance which caught the Russian squadrons wheeling as they were struck by the chargedo not of themselves supply a sufficient explanation of how so small a force came to rout so large a one at such little cost.David Chandler tells us a good deal more; the exact number of squadrons committed to the charge, the distance they covered, how many lines of resistance they broke and more besides. He is also quite specific how the French manoeuvred during this episode: after an initial sweep forward they divided into two wings, each of which fought a separate running battle before jointly breaking through a densely packed Russian formation, after which they re-formed into a single column, turned about, passed once more through the Russians, attacked with their swords a fourth enemy body and only then withdrew from action. It sounds unbelievably complicated; indeed, it reads like something from a military Kama Sutra, exciting, intriguing, but likely to have proved a good deal more difficult in practice than it reads on the printed page. And to fortify ones doubts about whether all went as smoothly as the narrative depicts it to have done are the questions which the presence of the Russians raises. What, in the path of a manoeuvre which would have been regarded as a tour de force if executed on a peacetime parade-ground, were all those thousands of Russians doing with themselves? The narrative implies that they stood their ground, neither falling beneath nor running clear of the French onslaught. But fallen or run the Russians must have, for otherwise the French could not have passed from in front of their formations to the other side. In falling, however, must they not have brought down numbers of French horses and riders, either by acting as stumbling-blocks or by causing collisions as horses swerved to avoid them? Both things certainly happen on the far side of a big jump in a steeplechase (for horses, even when frightened or excited, never like to tread on a living object or bump into one). And would running really have done much to clear the course? A man cannot out-distance a horseunless, of course, he is given a considerable head start. But if one supposes a head start long enough to clear the French path of obstacles, then sentences like two cavalry wings crashed through the serried ranks of Sackens centre lose much of their meaning. It is all very baffling. And to say that is not to imply disbelief that the episode happened, nor that it happened much as described. It is only to say that one does not see how.Revue de presse"The book which changed how military history is written. Keegan set out to discover what it must have been like to be present at Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme - and he succeeded brilliantly" (Bernard Cornwell (Chosen as number one of his six best books) Daily Express)"This without any doubt is one of the half-dozen best books on warfare to appear in the

English language since the end of the Second World War." (Michael Howard Sunday Times)"In this book, which is so creative, so original, one learns as much about the nature of man as of battle." (J. H. Plumb New York Times Book)