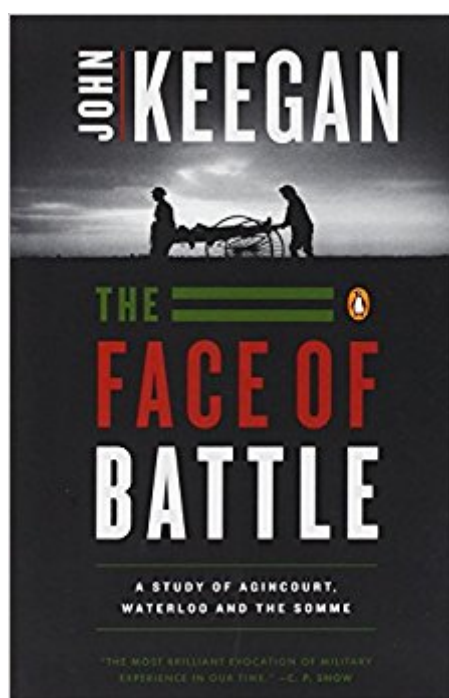


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# The Face Of Battle: A Study Of Agincourt, Waterloo, And The Somme



## Synopsis

Master military historian John Keegan's groundbreaking analysis of combat and warfare *The Face of Battle* is military history from the battlefield: a look at the direct experience of individuals at the "point of maximum danger." Without the myth-making elements of rhetoric and xenophobia, and breaking away from the stylized format of battle descriptions, John Keegan has written what is probably the definitive model for military historians. And in his scrupulous reassessment of three battles representative of three different time periods, he manages to convey what the experience of combat meant for the participants, whether they were facing the arrow cloud at the battle of Agincourt, the musket balls at Waterloo, or the steel rain of the Somme. "The best military historian of our generation." —Tom Clancy

## Book Information

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; New Edition edition (1983)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140048979

ISBN-13: 978-0140048971

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.6 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 166 customer reviews

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"The most brilliant evocation of military experience in our time" —C.P. Snow "In this book, which is so creative, so original, one learns as much about the nature of man as of battle." —J.H. Plumb, *The New York Times Book Review* "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, *The Sunday Times* "A totally original and brilliant book" —*The New York Review of Books*

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I purchased this book because I read in an interview that Bernard Cornwell found it useful in his research. And I can see why: John Keegan's analysis of the battlefield is unlike anything I ever read before. He essentially brings us down to the eye-witness level of fighting, and his explanations give us an understanding of battlefields that cannot be grasped when looking at broad strokes. This book covers much territory—too much for most general enthusiasts to grasp. The first part is theory, exploring the concept of Military History. The second part covers the Battle of Agincourt, the third part gives us an extensive view of Waterloo, the fourth part illustrates The Somme, and the last part discusses the Future of Battle. I admit that I got bogged down during WWI, for my interest is in earlier centuries; so I only read about 3/4 of the book. My primary interest was in Agincourt and Waterloo. First he gives us the outline of each battle, then he breaks it into a sequence of events and shows how the various divisions interacted with the other side (Archers vs. Infantry, Cavalry vs. Infantry and so on). I found the Agincourt chapter most instructive, though it was predominately, and necessarily, built from conjecture. I have always had my doubts that the French army was wiped out by the arrows in the initial charge, as the quick-and-dirty renditions often imply. Keegan reinforces my suspicions, for he states that in the opening volley, "Four clouds of arrows would have streaked out of the English line to reach a height of 100 feet before turning in flight to plunge at a steeper angle on and among the French men-at-arms opposite. These arrows cannot, however, given their terminal velocity and angle of impact, have done a great deal of harm... For armour, by the early fifteenth century, was composed almost completely of steel sheet, in place of the iron mail..." He theorized the archers hammered stakes in the ground, not as is often thought, in a straight line like a fence, but rather "disposed checkerboard fashion" so that "we may then visualize the French bearing down on the archers in ignorance of the hedgehog their ranks concealed." With this in mind, it's easier to imagine the chaos on the front line once the horses found themselves on top of the stakes too late to refuse the obstacle. Repelled, the cavalry returned into the face of the approaching men-at-arms, where it broke up the rhythm of the advance and knocked some men to the ground. The crunch kept coming from behind, and the unrelenting pressure from the rear on the backs of those in the line of battle combined with a lack of organized command gave the English archers the opportunity to charge with swords, axes and hand-weapons. Keegan gives us a convincing description of the slaughter demonstrating the effectiveness of hand-to-hand fighting against an enemy who were plainly in no state to offer concerted resistance and scarcely able to defend themselves individually. This is a more balanced depiction of a battle where archery, though still important, was not the only means of success. Then we abruptly jump ahead 400 years to a battle of a scale unimagined in the middle

ages. Waterloo was so huge that one battalion had no clue of what another battalion was doing across the field. The five phases of the battle were not perceived at the time by any of the combatants, not even, despite their points of vantage and powers of direct intervention in events, by Wellington or Napoleon. Again, we get the general overview, then shift to a comparison of Cavalry vs. Artillery, Artillery vs. Infantry, Infantry vs. Infantry and whatever combinations you could think of. To me, it both helped and hindered a total understanding of this complicated battle. To make it more personal, we get a dizzying compilation of first-hand reports that pinpoints individual experiences. In the process, I felt completely lost, which I guess is much to the point. I was intrigued by the concept of the crowd-like behavior of soldiers who could only react to what they were hearing in the front lines, especially in the French columns. The men at the rear did nothing, or did nothing useful. Indeed, it seems safe to go further. It was at the back of the columns, not the front, that the collapse began, and the men in the rear who ran before those in the front. It was this behavior, according to the author, rather than direct British action, that rendered useless the most critical French attacks of the day, and led to Napoleon's defeat. Apparently the British squares were more successful and felt safer, for the wounded could be dragged into the center; it was also more difficult for the weaker soldiers to flee. The Somme, the discussion of which seemed more familiar to the author, relied on trench warfare, a horrific way to fight a battle. The poor infantry were obliged to follow the line of destruction laid down by the artillery, unaware that much of the noisy, explosive shells were ineffectual due to the fact that the Germans were sheltered in holes dug well below the range of the bombardments. Also, the detonations did little to remove the barbed wire which slowed many Allies down enough to get mowed down in their efforts to cut their way through. This, added to lack of communication, contributed to a casualty rate almost inconceivable to the armchair historian. Overall, though the writing was difficult to plow through, I absorbed a lot of helpful information. My own interest in military history was not up to the task, and I could not do this book justice. But it is a great reference, though it would be much better appreciated when familiar with the subject matter ahead of time.

John Keegan could give Barbara Tuchman a run for her money. In this excellently written speculation on three major battles (A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme.) The first part of the book was a mixed message. I can understand that as a writer John Keegan had to explain that he has not been in a battle to quell detractors. However he may have overdone it a bit. Mixed with his apology is an excellent overview of what a battle is. I made it to the Tet Offensive 1968. He

could have been next to me from his descriptions of battle. I did see some differences in attitude between West Point and Sandhurst. I would have been satisfied if the first chapter was the book. Then he goes on to dissect three great battles. I only knew of the battles through Shakespeare and other tellers of tales; so it was nice to get the skinny on what it was really most likely to be. You do not have to be in a battle to feel you were there but it helps. This is one of those books that need to be re-read as there are too many details and you will have to pause and think about what you just read. This book was very well worth the time to read it.

In *THE FACE OF BATTLE*, author John Keegan, in his role as historian and not soldier, attempts to dissect the experience of battle as the common soldier knows it. The trouble with most accounts, he explains at length in his opening chapters, is that historians tend to focus on the win/lose aspects of the battle, or else how its outcome has affected the course of human events, or else been enamored with its pageantry and its place in the popular imagination. As an educator of young cadets who would someday be British officers, he found these methods inadequate; and, it would seem, motivated by his own lack of experience IN battle while teaching ABOUT battle, he sought to reach a different level of discourse about the process. Along with his lengthy opening concerning how battles are traditionally recorded, he also seeks to define what he means specifically by the word 'battle'. Rather than the generic descriptor, he is referring to particular events, possible within a larger framework of warfare, in which the set conditions are fairly narrowly confined. Instead of re-defining Professor Keegan's description, I think the 'battles' that he chooses to focus on are indicative themselves of the term as he uses it: Agincourt, Waterloo, and The Somme. Once these preliminary discussions are out of the way, Professor Keegan begins his dissection of the three battles mentioned, and I doubt I have ever read a more fascinating account of warfare. While the general course of the contest is first described, what follows is an examination of what an individual may have experienced, reasonable suppositions as to why they men may have behaved as they did, and a breakdown of the different weaponry systems as they were deployed against one another. In many ways, I'm reminded of the old rhyme, 'for want of a nail, the battle was lost', since essentially what Professor Keegan is examining is the 'nails'. It may make great theater to hear Henry inspire his men with the St. Crispin's Day speech, but how exactly did an outnumbered and bedraggled English army slaughter the French in 1415 to the point there were 'heaps of dead'? How exactly were Napoleon's cavalry attacks repulsed by the infantry? And, a question I've always wondered myself, exactly what could have propelled a man up and out of the trench to walk into the machine-guns of No-Man's-Land? These and many other questions are examined, and one has to

agree (finally!) with a blurb that decorates the cover of the paperback edition - 'one learns as much about the nature of man as of battle.' Over the years, as I have read more traditional accounts of battles, there often seem to be downright unexplainable factors that influence the outcome - bravery in one individual, cowardice in another, weapons that had once been effective, but no longer were, and on and on. Professor Keegan is intensely interested in these factors - in fact, that is the whole theme of his historiography: To seek explanation for what has before seemed nearly impenetrable. There are two sections of THE FACE OF BATTLE which bookend the description of the three battles; one, an introductory section which seeks to explain the author's motivation and ideas behind the book, and then a concluding chapter - 'The Future of Battle'. The first is necessary, I think, though overlong. I found the second to be disinteresting - written in 1976, it suffers the same problems most attempts to look at the future do. Regardless of these two issues, the meat of the book is a transformative look at warfare and the actions of those involved in it. It is by far the most truthful look at the process that I have read, tallying neatly with my own experiences. I do not think it necessary to agree with Professor Keegan's analysis or all his comments to appreciate this effort. It is his revolutionary way of looking at the events which rightly place this book on the top lists of non-fiction of the twentieth century. Highly recommended (Professor Keegan passed away in August of this year)

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