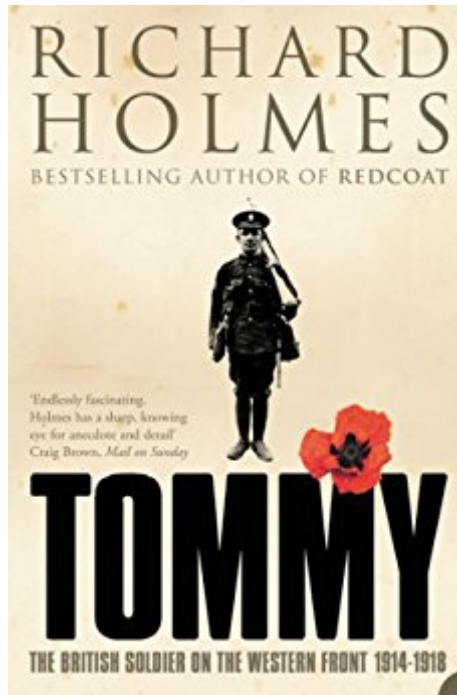


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Tommy: The British Soldier On The Western Front



Synopsis

Groundbreaking and critically-acclaimed, Tommy is the first history of World War I to place the British soldier who fought in the trenches centre-stage. Tommy tells the story of an epic and terrible war through the letters, diaries and memories of those who fought it. Epitomised by the character of Sgt Tommy Atkins, Richard Holmes portrays the strength and fallibility of the human spirit, the individuals behind the epic conflict, and their legacy.

Book Information

File Size: 4730 KB

Print Length: 752 pages

Publisher: HarperPress; Revised ed. edition (December 21, 2011)

Publication Date: December 21, 2011

Sold by:Â HarperCollins Publishers

Language: English

ASIN: B006K114NU

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #487,975 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #87

inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Military & Wars > World War I #257 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Military > World War I #449 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Military > World War I

Customer Reviews

What kind of man was the British soldier who unflinchingly trudged through the Menin Gate into the mud of the salient in 1917? How did he live day to day? What did he fight with and how did he do it? Where did he come from and why did he face the horrific attrition of World War I seige warfare with a 'stiff upper lip"? The answers and much more are here. This is the most detailed and yet most readable book on the British (and Empire) troops and their lives that I've seen and I've been a student of World War I for many years. From the world that created the Brit soldiers of the Great War to a realistic look at their commanders, how food reached them in the trenches, what happened when a high explosive shell fell in the middle of a platoon, how the army was organized, it's all here,

but written in a page-turning, nearly can-put-it-down style that makes 700+ pages seem like not enough. There is information here that I've read before, certainly, but there is a wealth of info new to me - enriched by quotes from interviews, diaries and published works of the men themselves, woven seamlessly into the sharp narrative. It reminds me a bit of the work of Lyn MacDonald in that respect, but doesn't focus on the battles, but everything else. At least some knowledge and understanding of WWI will be helpful while reading this, but not necessary for enjoyment and revelation. If you're interested at all in the Great War this volume is indispensable.

Richard Holmes, the author, provides a fascinating, masterful portrait of British soldiers' everyday lives during WWI. This book is about the British army itself; it is NOT a campaign history, a strategy essay, or a biography. Despite the plethora of books produced about Britain's WWI effort, Holmes manages to include a great volume of hitherto neglected information. Some of these topics include: commissioning, pay, ranking differences (permanent, temporary, brevet), compulsory requisitioning of horses, medical treatment, replacements, promotions, religion, liberty, leave, discipline/punishment, mustache regulations, combat training, demobilisation, and return to civilian life. Thankfully, he also explains the highly complex war-time formation, structure, varying roles, and evolution of battalions, regiments, brigades, divisions, corps, and armies. Holmes also defines the differences between formation types (regular, Special Reserve, territorial, and New Army). In addition, he also relates the jobs of various staff and admin unit members (e.g. Chief of Staff, Adjutant, Regimental Sergeant Major, etc.). Besides all the above, the book includes the more commonly discussed trench life routine, weapons, personal accounts, a typical attack, morale, and the army's various branches (infantry, artillery, sappers, cavalry, tanks, machine guns, supply, general staff, etc.). The author unusually presents a few striking, small-scale examples of successful cavalry charges and a costly episode of firing guns by direct sight. This is an excellent, well-researched book that is a pleasure to read. Bravo!

Richard Holmes does a TV series in the UK called War Walks. In the series he basically walks through a battlefield pointing out where a particular action took place, where a dug out or ridge was and then turns to camera and deliver a short, precise monologue. He dresses smartly, invariably wearing a tie or cravat; with a neat trimmed grey moustache and fixes the camera from behind silver framed glasses. When he speaks to the camera his voice carries a gravitas and intensity that conveys respect and concern with cold hard truths. He has the same persona on the page and this is what drives Tommy forward. Holmes is like a kindly uncle who knows every minute detail on his

subject and will tell you everything you need to know, in a slow studied manner. Despite his slow, at times ponderous style, or perhaps precisely because of it, he ignites your interest and takes you through the story, even when it gets a little complicated and dull, regimental names and badges for instance. And like a good story, told by a kindly uncle, it stays in your head, the characters vibrant and their lives and deaths meaningful and justice done to them.

This is a must-read for anyone interested in the Great War, the Western Front, or the history of the British soldier. In his wonderful narrative style, Holmes weaves numerous first-hand accounts into a smoothly flowing story that never becomes ponderous despite the enormous size of the book. Highly recommended.

Approaching the centenary of the First World War, the 'War to end all Wars', this is one of the must reads in my top ten. Recommended by many others, not least Professor Peter Simkin of the Imperial War Museum and Western Front Association. This is an excellent tonic to narratives, memoirs and panegyrics.

Richard Holmes continues a fine series of books about the British soldier, allowing the individual soldier full voice throughout this excellent book.....and covers both the campaigns and mundane army life during one of the few times that a British Army has been forced to directly engage with the main army of the enemy in an European War. Rather than follow a strictly chronological approach, Holmes intersperses the individual recollections with perceptive and balanced background information on the topics that most impacted "Tommy" in his day to day service. Of course, he gives full attention to the "day of battle" as well as training, life in the trenches, views on spiritual matters and their opinions on their officers and generals. All in all a very informative read.

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