

Shots from the Front - The British Soldier 1914-1918 by Richard Holmes.
Harper Press 2008.

Following his brilliant book Tommy, and synchronised with the 90th anniversary of the ending of the First World War, the eminent military historian Richard Holmes has, with Shots from the Front, produced a collection of extraordinary photographs from that conflict, accompanied by a highly readable, though brief, explanatory text.

The double meaning of the book's title makes the point instantly that photographs can tell a very powerful story, and while they may not enable the viewer to smell the stench of the battlefield, feel the bitter cold and privations of the trenches, hear the explosions overhead or experience the fear of a sniper's bullet whistling past the ear they bring the horror of trench warfare, its brutality and criminal futility extraordinarily close.

Holmes' author's note highlights the preponderance of privates and NCOs in the pictures, explaining that the majority of soldiers in the First World War British army held the rank of private, but there are some splendid officer photos too, and they amply conform to the brave, devil-may-care stereotype of the 'officer class'. Holmes also explains each of the pictures, and draws the eye to the small details that might easily be missed as the viewer takes in the whole. There are too many memorable photos in this collection to single out any as the best, but the ones I shall remember are those of a body blown into the high branches of a tree like a rag doll, and the bodies of brave cavalry horses butchered by German artillery fire.

Shots from the Front is a valuable testimony to the horror of the First World War, and the privations through which my grandparents' generation put themselves for their King and country.

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