The special genius of Keegan is his ability to evoke the human side of war. This comes from his understanding of the martial factors involved, an empathy for the participants, and a fine prose style that allows him to really reach the reader.

In The Face of Battle, Keegan employs these formidable talents to describe the battles of Agincourt (October 25, 1415), Waterloo (June 18, 1815), and the Somme (July 1, 1916) in three chapters. Before these is a chapter on battle in military history, and after them a conclusion regarding the future of battle.

The first chapter is devoted to the history of battle in history. Keegan describes and cites examples of what he calls the battle piece, a form which he traces back to Julius Caesar, an example of whose writing he cites as containing the key flaws of its type:

Here it all is-

1. DISJUNCTIVE MOVEMENT: the Legion is hard pressed, some of the soldiers are slinking away;
2. Caesar arrives and has the standards advanced;
3. the enemy's attack loses its impetus;

UNIFORMITY OF BEHAVIOUR: the enemy are all attacking, the legionaries are either resisting feebly or drifting off until Caesar's arrival makes them all fight with fervor;

SIMPLIFIED CHARACTERIZATION: only two people are mentioned by name, of whom only one is accorded an important role - the author;

SIMPLIFIED MOTIVATION: the led have lost the will to fight until the leader restores it to them by some simple orders and words of encouragement.

The above paragraph is the key to appreciating what Keegan is doing in his battle descriptions in The Face of Battle. The flaws are the result of points of view, the choice of either a ten-thousand foot view of masses of men maneuvering around the ground, or a leaders view in which all events are the result of the leaders actions. Keegan therefore attempts to correct the flaws by writing history that is a composite of multiple points of view. For each battle Keegan begins with descriptions of the historical background, the battlefield, and the general course of the battle. These,
however, are only the set-up; the core is the battle from the perspectives of the participants. To this end, Keegan identifies categories of combat - generally based on the combinations between different arms - infantry vs. cavalry, infantry vs. artillery, etc. and then seeks to understand the ranges of the experience of each. Finally, Keegan considers the prisoners and the wounded (perspectives tending to vanish as statistics in the battle piece), and always the general question of motivation. 

Keegans first battle is Agincourt. In it, English knights and archers defeated an army of French knights. Any historian is at a disadvantage in dealing with older subjects like Agincourt - primary source material (eyewitness and participant description) is scarce, and what there is is of uncertain reliability. These are formidable handicaps, but Keegan does an outstanding job of assembling what we know of the participants material circumstances and social backgrounds to create a credible picture of what it must have been like. The point of view presented are those of the archers, the English and French knights on foot, the French mounted knights, as well as the prisoners, their captors, and the wounded. 

Keegans next battle is Waterloo. The historians task here is different than at Agincourt. For Agincourt, there is a poverty of primary source material, but for Waterloo, there is an abundance. Here, Keegan is generally able to let the participants speak for themselves, and is able to focus more on attempting to explain why they had the experiences they had, and less on trying to imagine those experiences. The points of view are the combinations of the three arms - infantry, cavalry, and artillery, as well as the wounded and prisoners. 

Keegans final battle is the Somme. The categories of experience had been multiplied by technological change between Agincourt and Waterloo, but the effect of technology by the Somme had been reduction: the two primary experiences were both infantry-as-target, either as a target of artillery or as a target of machine guns. The horror of First World War combat has often been evoked, so Keegans role as historian is less to introduce it to the reader than it is to integrate it with an understanding of why it was so, and how this experience made up the battle as a whole. All of Keegans battle narratives attempt to understand motivation - to answer the question Why did anyone fight and risk death? To do this, he draws on social, political, and economic considerations, as well as the more immediate circumstances of the battlefield itself. Although answering this is one of the key goals that Keegan sets for himself, I didnt feel that in this he was fully successful. It is a difficult problem, but I think he tends to underestimate the role of duty. I think he is perhaps too influenced by a desire to attempt to justify all actions in one form or another of self-interest, and in this he underestimates a key part of human nature - the desire of a man to do what he thinks is right. 

The last chapter of Keegans book concerns the future of battle. In it, Keegan is far too influenced by his understandable hopes that something as awful as battle will go away and indulges in bad analysis to support those wishes. The flawed last chapter aside, The Face of Battle is one of the finest military histories ever written. It is one of the very few military history books
I have read (and I have read many) that really changed my sense of not only what battle is, but what history is and can be. I have re-read it often, and when I was in school, used it as a model for the history papers that I wrote. If you read only one book of military history, read this one.

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