



## *Voices from the Front: An Oral History of the Great War* by Peter Hart.

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The centennial of the First World War has inspired a plethora of new works on various aspects of that cataclysmic conflict. While those who fought the war are now gone, students and scholars interested in British soldiers' experiences are fortunate to have access to the remarkable set of oral history interviews compiled by Imperial War Museum (IWM) historians from the late 1970s into the 1990s. Noted historian Peter Hart began his career working on that project and remains with the museum to this day; he has written important studies<sup>1</sup> that make extensive use of the interviews he and his colleagues recorded. *Voices from the Front* is, he writes,

an oral history of the British military involvement in the Great War based on the 183 interviews with veterans that I carried out for the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive in the 1980s and early 1990s. The length varied from some thirty minutes to a stupendous twenty-two hours; they were always fascinating, but since the passing of the last few veterans they are now a unique source of authentic voices from the front line. They have never been “forgotten”; the recordings were deliberately created by the IWM staff as part of their ongoing mission to expand our historical record. Previous authors have done little more than skim lightly over the surface of these treasures. (ix)

The book is an engaging tribute to those veterans; it will bring its audience about as close to British soldiers in the Great War as words alone can make possible.

Unlike Hart's more conventional works on the war, this one is largely free of the trappings of an academic history. Footnotes cite only quoted sources, nearly all of them interviews. The author neither discusses the scholarly literature on the topics he covers, nor provides a bibliography. This is quite appropriate in a work aimed at a general readership. Hart does, however, offer his academic colleagues a “robust defence of oral history” (xii), which he sees as a needed corrective to material in official records and soldiers' heavily censored (and self-censored) letters home. Interviews have the advantage of providing material both more spontaneous and more reflective than more traditional sources. Hart acknowledges that all sources have their flaws and biases, but his book persuasively demonstrates the distinct value of oral testimonies in the hands of a scholar intimately familiar with their context.

Hart proceeds chronologically, moving from the mobilization of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in 1914 for immediate service in France, to its opening campaigns, and the deployment of the much larger army needed to fight a modern industrialized war. As might be expected, the book concentrates on the Western Front, where most British military personnel served. But it deals, too, with the Mediterranean theater, especially the Gallipoli campaign, and the largely forgotten British efforts in Iraq, as well as the naval, air, and medical services, and the soldiers' return home. Hart builds his narrative throughout on extensive quotations from interviews, adding context and commentary as needed, and at times discussing the interview process itself and what

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1. E.g., *The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front* (NY: Pegasus, 2008), *Gallipoli* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2011), and *Fire and Movement: The British Expeditionary Force and the Campaign of 1914* (id., 2014).

the veterans did later in their lives. This allows the reader to get to know the veterans as human beings and see the war from a different perspective from the one typically adopted in conventional works.

A notable feature of the book is its emphasis on the British army's woeful lack of preparation for war. Unlike the French and Germans, the British had no reserve system to speak of and no mass mobilization plan. The small regular army that made up the core of the original BEF was, Hart grants, well enough trained, especially its riflemen, but the masses of new recruits faced a steep learning curve. These circumstances left the lion's share of the fighting during the costly offensives of 1914–15 to the French. Hart stresses that the inability of British political and military leaders to grasp the realities of modern war led to the dismal failures at Gallipoli (1915) and at Kut-al-Amara in Iraq (1916). The British commander of the besieged garrison at Kut, he points out, based his plans on his experience in Kashmir in 1895, where he held out while besieged until eventually being rescued. Hart quotes Henry Rich, a British lieutenant serving with an Indian unit:

[Maj. Gen. Charles] Townshend always thought he was going to be relieved within six weeks, and we just used up the rations in that six weeks. After the relieving force had failed to get through, he suddenly found out that by commandeering all the Arab food, the piles of grain and using the mules, he could hold out for another eighty-four days. We had seven weeks of plenty, followed by ten weeks of adequacy, gradually getting less and less, and finally four weeks of starvation which was complete hell. You hadn't got enough in your stomach. You were hungry—you can't get away from that. (122–23)

Lieutenant Rice goes on to discuss the finer points of starvation cuisine, noting that mule is better eating than horse, and that the ginger tea brewed from the stocks of ginger root included in Indian soldiers' rations "wasn't very nice, but it was hot!" (123). Hart quotes other survivors on the horrific conditions in the besieged camp and the harsh treatment the defenders received after their surrender. Outside of the worst combat in the trenches, conditions at Kut were as bad as anything the British endured in the war. Hart's perceptive use of interview material to reveal both the ugliness of war and the humanity and even sense of humor of men like Rich makes this whole section of the book less painful to read than one might expect.

The statistics Hart provides regarding the war are staggering, whether they concern numbers of killed and wounded or the tremendous diversion of manpower and other resources to places like Kut and Gallipoli, which had little effect on the course of the war. But, although the human suffering presented in firsthand accounts is appalling, the author always finds positive elements, however small, to balance the disasters. After all, oral history conveys the stories of *survivors*, and, in war, survival is a form of triumph.

The book's later chapters move beyond individual triumphs to identify the reasons for the ultimate success of British and Allied forces in the war. Hart credits the French and the Russians for doing a good deal of damage to the Germans early on, and shows how the British gradually learned to put their superior resources to good use, while the Germans' losses of manpower and materiel canceled the advantages in training and organization they had enjoyed early on. Despite the enormity of their losses, and their own personal sufferings, most of the British survivors interviewed by the IWM felt their efforts had been justified and viewed their service experiences more positively than outsiders might expect.

The weaknesses in the book are minor: they include a lack of maps and photographs. And certain aspects of the conflict are less well covered than others, a product in part of which veterans were interviewed or had lived to be interviewed in the first place. Thus, for instance, the Salonika

and Egyptian fronts get little attention and the other African campaigns none at all. Even so, the author covers a broad range of experiences, while giving enough context to help general readers follow the veterans' stories. Even specialists will find things they did not expect to and learn things they did not know. Peter Hart seems to have written *Voices from the Front* out of a sense of obligation to the veterans who shared their stories with him. If so, he has paid off that debt with interest.