



Unknown Soldiers: The Story of the Missing of the First World War

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The First World War was a conflict of unprecedented ferocity. After the last shot was fired and the troops marched home, approximately three million soldiers remained unaccounted for. An unassuming English chaplain first proposed a symbolic burial in memory of all the missing dead; subsequently the idea was picked up by almost every combatant country.

Acclaimed author Neil Hanson focuses on the lives of three soldiers — an Englishman, a German, and an American — using their diaries and letters to offer an unflinching yet compassionate account of the front lines. He describes how each man endured nearly unbearable conditions, skillfully showing how the Western world arrived at the now time-honored way of mourning and paying tribute to all those who die in war.

Unknown Soldiers: The Story of the Missing of the First World War Details

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Margaret says

The second half of this book won it a fourth star. I've read so many books (maybe too many) about WW1 that much of the first half was not new to me. However, the second half regarding the building of the Cenotaph in London and the creation of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster was fascinating. Many times I was moved to tears, not just by a nation in mourning, but by the individual losses. The woman who lost a husband and all her sons. A child placing flowers at the Cenotaph and believing it was a beautiful garden just for his father.

Of the 3 individual missing warriors Hanson chose to focus on, the life and death of Alex Reader was most touching to me. My Grandfather's brother was also killed on the Somme and like Alex Reader was one of the missing, his body never recovered. It was touching to discover that Alex Reader's name is on the same monument at Thiepval in France as my Great Uncle.

A very fine book.

Mark Wardlaw says

This book is an engaging, personalised and intensely moving encounter from World War One. I do not think I have read a better description of the horror experienced by soldiers in the squalid death ridden, rat infested trenches of the First World War.

Through Neil Hanson's excellent prose you can sense the tension from this turbulent time; for example, the risk of death or mutilation going through a soldier's mind before he goes over the top. He is someone's son, brother, husband, father, friend.....

Then there is the anxiety of worried relatives at home. Will the next letter be his last? You feel the pain and sorrow for grieving relatives. In particular for those where a body was not identified; something now taken for granted with DNA analysis. Relatives need closure in grief.

You also experience the catharsis in being freed to mourn for those who could identify their loss with the Unknown Soldier buried in Westminster Abbey. A truly beautiful solution to unite a grieving traumatised nation that sacrificed so many young men. An excellent book.

Debbie Brown says

I read this to learn more about WWI. What a tragic and pointless war! I cried several times.

Linda Rollins says

Still reading this one but so far it is amazing. It gives insight into what it was really like for the men going to the front in the first World War. Quotes from letters home and snippets of news from the time gives a very touching portrayal of what it felt like from both German and English soldiers. Some of the images are grotesque but then the book is simply telling it like it was. I think it is important that we know about these things - and that we never forget. For me, it really puts modern living and contemporary issues into context and makes me realise how truly blessed we are, because of the sacrifices that those men made.

Miranda says

This was one of the best books I've ever read for trench warfare and the firsthand accounts of the infantry soldiers.

Even though I knew all three of the main soldiers were going to be killed by the end of the book, I couldn't help but get attached to them and feel the loss their families felt when they passed on.

I think Mr. Hanson did a terrific job of picking the three different soldiers (German, English & American) to tell the story.

I learned a lot and would recommend this to any WWI enthusiast.

John says

A remarkable account of three men who gave their lives for causes that they believed in. They each represented 100's of thousands of men. Their horrific fates were described with clarity and provided a very different account of the WWI. The emotional outpourings following the war and the placatory role of the crown and government were fascinating.

Virginia says

Very detailed story of WWI. Author takes 3 soldiers (British, German, American) following them through the war. The historical descriptions of the Trenches and actual Battle methods is very graphic, and hard to read very much at a time. But the understanding it provides for the horror of that war makes it all worth it. The end portion tells the story of the Dr. who came up with the idea for the "unknown soldier" graves, and gives special details about the ceremonies in England as well as France and the US. This book taught me so much.

LeAnn says

My time to sit down with a book is limited due to a full-time job, a husband, and two small children. The time I have to spend with a book, then, is usually for pleasure and escapism; that being said, I am not a huge fan of nonfiction. Add the very small print and lack of chapter breaks in this book, and I quit reading after page 24.

Another reason I quit reading the book was the lack of historical background regarding this war. I met the first soldier, Paul (the German) and had to do some research on WHO fought WHOM in this war. WWI was over 100 years ago, and sadly, it was usually glossed over in all my history classes - for the next big war,

WWII. For a book this hefty, perhaps a short preface of events would help. Of course, maybe that was in the other 500 pages I didn't get to.

Christine says

Trench warfare details: Not for the faint-hearted or weak-of-stomach. I read it to learn about the Tommy and the Gerry (not so interested in the Yank). I was a bit disappointed that the end of Herr Hub's life was the end of the German side of the unknown soldier story, when there was a large amount of information included about subsequent commemoration efforts on the parts of the British and the Americans. But the book was still very informative.

Asha Stark says

One of the most informative, and heartbreaking books I've ever read.

Unlike many non-fiction accounts of war/conflict, Neil Hanson manages to write in a very engaging and, for lack of a better word, 'interesting' manner. I certainly learned a lot from this book, and especially regarding the men and women who lost someone- or someones- during the first world war.

It was particularly sad to read of how little was thought of soldiers by the English king at the time, how they were effectively spat on by their public school officers, and how in the end, millions of lives are nothing when it comes to saving face politically.

Graceann says

When it comes to writing narrative non-fiction, very few authors are as talented as Neil Hanson. In Unknown Soldiers, he takes the stories of three fighting men of WWI, and tells their stories. He doesn't "choose sides" or seem to have an agenda, other than support for men who were stuck in a thankless situation.

The German, British and American soldier all died within sight of one another, albeit at different times, and their burial sites are unknown to this day. Even now, French and Belgian farmers find bones (among other remnants of War) dating back to the conflict, and nobody will ever know to whom these remains belong. In this tightly-written 357 pages, Neil Hanson attempts to pay tribute to the sacrifice of the Unknowns, and he is wholly successful.

If you want to know how idiotic and short-sighted the leaders were (on all sides), you'll find it here. If you want to know how gruesome it was in the trenches and in No Man's Land, it's here. The quotes are scrupulously noted in the back of the book and the research is seamlessly woven into a compulsively readable story. These are not faceless cannon-fodder, but men with families, lives and futures ripped away from them. For these three, there are many thousands more unnamed - this book is a fitting eulogy for all of them.

Anita says

Before reading this book I had a very limited understanding of the First World War and what it entailed. This was a fascinating read, and I loved the way the war was explained through the stories of soldiers from different countries, including Germany. "The Unknown Soldier" was rivetting, personal, touching, and informative. I recommend it to anyone who wants to find out what it was like for those poor men in the trenches, and where and when and why it all happened.

John says

excellent research! a valuable contribution to scholarship about "the Great War"

Juliette says

'An English officer came across with a white flag and asked for a truce from eleven o'clock to three to bury the dead. The truce was granted, it is good not to see the corpses lying out in front of us any more. The truce was moreover extended. The English came out of their trenches into No-Man's-Land and exchanged cigarettes, tinned meat and photographs with our men, and said they didn't want to shoot any more Suppose the whole English army strikes and forces the gentlemen in London to chuck the whole business!'

I am emotionally exhausted after reading this book. I thought I knew about the First World War -- the war to end all wars. I know the date that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated and the day the first shots were fired. I know who fought whom. In theory, I know about trench warfare and gas attacks. I know about the Somme. I visited the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey and said a prayer for him.

I didn't know nearly enough to say I knew *anything* about the war.

Hanson used letters from the men who fought in First World War to write *The Unknown Soldier*. Indeed, the book is more of a quilt: large patches of narratives from the warriors (to use the contemporaneous term) that Hanson stitched together. It's one thing to know about the tactics and the history, and it's completely different to read what the men endured and what they hoped after the war. At times, I had to stop reading because the tears in my eyes made it impossible to continue.

To be sure, the book is heavily anti-war and indicts the governments (both Allied and Central) for whom the soldiers fought. However, since most of the book is told by the men in the trenches and the airplanes, I can't fairly consider this a fault of the book.

The coffin was placed on the bars laid across the open grave, sited in front of the West Door, squarely 'in the pathway of kings, for not a monarch can ever again go up to the altar to be crowned, but he must step over the grave of the man who died that his kingdom might endure.'

Shaun Major says

As other reviewers have noted it was the second half of this book that lifted it to the height of the extraordinary. The construction of remembrance in the west after the Great War is extraordinary and the lengths those countries went to to commemorate the fallen and how heavy the burden sat on the world in the decade that followed. A similar depth to the postwar German perspective would have been extremely interesting and would have earned the book a fifth star.
