

**The Great War
The Final Memory**

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David Rubens Associates

David Rubens Associates is a specialist corporate security consultancy offering strategic security services to individuals and organisations across the world.

DRA has worked with government agencies, NGO's, international conglomerates and major global events, and brings a mixture of strategic vision, operational experience and academic research to all of its projects, however large or small.

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The Great War – The Final Memory



5th May, 2011 saw the final fading of the last embers of what is now a barely-remembered period in human history. The death of Chief Petty Officer Claude Choules (03.03.1901–05.05.2011), marked the passing of the last person who saw combat in the First World War, and with his death that chapter in history has now passed beyond the boundaries of human memory. For those of us too young to remember WW2, or even Vietnam, the image of war today is of 'war by TV', with high-tech armaments directed by technologized commanders, putting small strike forces into the combat zone with clearly defined tactical and strategic objectives. In an era when 365 UK military personnel have died in the ten years since the start of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, it is hard to conceive of a battle where there were 57,470 UK casualties, including 19,240 dead, in the first day alone of the Battle of the Somme – most of those occurring in the first hour.

The First World War (or 'Great War', as it was called at the time), marked the transition from 'classical warfare', where ranks of men carrying their killing weapons in their hands faced off across strategically important plains, using tactics little changed from the Battle of Guagamela when Alexander the Great defeated the massed armies of Darius III, King of Persia, in 331 BC, to a war based on technology, where tanks, airplanes and submarines made their first appearance.

The names of that conflict are as evocative as ancient history - Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire, Prussia and the Holy Alliance - and as modern as yesterday's headlines – the alliances of the Great War, both military and political had a direct impact on many of the territorial disputes still raging today in Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and across the Balkans.

Given that the European Powers had spent the previous hundred years establishing their own empires across the world, it was no surprise that what was originally a treaty dispute soon spread into the first truly global war, with British, French and German troops facing off in Africa; New Zealand, Australian and Japanese forces seizing German territory in the Pacific; the German navy sinking Russian and French ships at the

Chinese port of Tsingtao, and America taking its place as an ally of the western powers for the first time. There were almost a million British deaths in the war, over 2% of the total UK population, though the fatalities suffered by France (4.3%), Greece (3.7%), Romania (9.1%) and Serbia (16.1%) put even this figure into the shade.

The terrible battles in France based on trench warfare showed the futility of pitting men in boots against the cutting edge of modern technology, which was able to neutralise the basic military tactic of running towards your opponent in massed ranks, bayonet at the ready. The single most effective piece of equipment, and the one that had the greatest impact, was barbed wire, which effectively created areas of 'no-mans land' that had to be crossed in the open before you could engage with the enemy. This together with two other pieces of equipment – the machine gun and the field artillery, that could cut attacking troops to pieces without endangering their own operators, and the field telephone, which allowed forward scouts to give fire directions to commanders in the rear of the battle, meant that the tactics that had stood for a thousand years were not only obsolete, but suicidal. Despite this, military and political commanders persisted in throwing the young men – the flower of their generation - over the top, into the teeth of deadly enemy fire. There has been no comparable slaughter of European troops, especially given that it was directly caused by the incompetence and arrogance of the senior leadership. It was this sense of pointlessness and futility that caused the First World War to be rendered in poetry and embedded in the national memory in ways that the Second World War did not.

Recent years have seen both the celebration of the increasingly few Great War survivors, as well as the mourning of their passing. The Remembrance Day Memorial Service at The cenotaph in London has seen fewer of their number each year – and now the last one has gone.

The First World War inspired some of the greatest poetry written in English. Some of the most famous include 'Dulce et Decorum Est' (Wilfrid Owen); 'For the Fallen' (Laurence Binyon); 'In Flanders Fields' (John McCrae); '1914 V: The Soldier' (Rupert Brooke); 'The Attack' (Siegfried Sassoon)



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