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From desert armies to a daring heroine

Historians, members of the Armed Forces and other experts choose the best books on military subjects published this year

Deborah Haynes, The Times Defence Editor

Death of a Soldier: A Mother's Story, by Margaret Evison (BiteBack Publishing), offers a rare and private glimpse into the dark world of mourning, questioning and, at times, anger that more than 430 families of British servicemen and women who have died in Afghanistan will have experienced.

Written with honesty and a sense of raw vulnerability, the book grapples with the reality of a mother's worst nightmare coming true — the premature death of a child, suffering, in pain and fighting to stay alive on foreign soil, the latest casualty of a distant war. Lieutenant Evison, 26, was on his first tour to Afghanistan as commander of a platoon of Welsh Guards stationed at a remote patrol base in the Nad-e Ali district of Helmand province. He was shot in the right shoulder during a gun battle on May 9, 2009.

Patrick Hennessey, former officer in the Grenadier Guards and author of *Kandak: Fighting with Afghans*

I would say Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (Canongate Books) is in ambition, scope and achievement by some considerable distance the best novel yet written about the Iraq War. Ostensibly the story of a "hero" squad sent on home to boost domestic support for war it ends up an indictment of America's response to the war itself. By turns wick-edly funny and startlingly authentic it could well be the *Catch-22* of our generation. Its honesty and brilliant constructed set-pieces blew me away. To my mind an instant classic.

Air Vice-Marshal Peter Dye, Director General, Royal Air Force Museum

I would recommend Jonathan Boff's *Winning and Losing on the Western*

Front (Cambridge University Press). You might wonder why the Director General of the Royal Air Force Museum would recommend a book that focuses on the BEF's success in defeating the German Army in 1918, rather than a treatise on the role of air power in more recent conflicts. However, this is a well-written and well-researched book that deserves a wider readership. It represents the more rigorous school of military history that has emerged in recent years, providing new insights and new perspectives. It describes how victory was secured — without pretending that this was either elegant or efficient.

Britain was ultimately successful on the Western Front through a willingness to learn, the ability to exploit technology, the total mobilisation of national resources and a mixture of pragmatism and perseverance. We honour no one by clinging to old stereotypes or subscribing to the view that war should always be simple, easy and painless.

Erica Wagner, The Times Literary Editor

There is a hands-down winner this year, a rarity: also rare is that it is a novel. Kevin Powers's debut *The Yellow Birds* (Sceptre).

Powers is from Richmond, Virginia; in 2004-2005 he was a machine gunner in Mosul and Tal Afar, in Iraq. His fiction draws on those experiences to more vividly convey what America's Arab wars are like for those who fight them than any nonfiction I've read — Tom Wolfe compared this book to *All Quiet on the Western Front* — and he's not wrong. Extraordinary.

Diane Lees, Director-General of the Imperial War Museum

"Why did the First World War start?" Visitors to the museum ask this question every day. In *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Allen Lane), Christopher Clark re-orientates tired perceptions of why a war of unprecedented destruction began. Archduke Franz Ferdinand's murder in June 1914 is so often the linchpin of any explanation. But in this rich study Clark roves across Europe. He puts us in the moment, showing how old tensions mutated with immediate

misunderstandings. Given the war's bloody cost, no explanation may seem satisfactory. But Clark goes a long way to making sense of one of history's most complex questions.

Brigadier Allan Mallinson, writer and author of *The Making of the British Army*

Patrick Bishop's *Target Tirpitz* (Harper-Press), the story of the sinking of Hitler's last battleship, is meticulous and gripping. Bishop cannot write a dull sentence, his material is heroic, and the rivalry between the Royal Navy and the RAF has resonances today, as does the vulnerability of British merchant shipping. *Fifteen Rounds a Minute*, Michael Craster's account of the Grenadier Guards in 1914 compiled from diaries and letters, originally published in 1976 and just re-issued by those indefatigable military publishers Pen and Sword, is humbling. The losses were horrific — far greater than at the Somme and later battles — but the pride and discipline is unsurpassed.

Major-General Michael Tillotson, editor of *SOE and the Resistance: As Told in The Times Obituaries*

So complex was the undercurrent of wartime mistrust between the Allied



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governments and that of the Poles in exile, I believe the definitive book on the struggle that embroiled Countess Krystyna Skarbek, alias Christine Granville, has still to be written, but in *The Spy Who Loved* (Macmillan) Clare Mulley has produced a telling advance on Madeleine Masson's *Christine* of 1975.

She has woven the romantic account of the heroine's courage, enterprise and occasional despair when denied an active role against the enemy, into the intricate and confusing fabric of the war in Eastern Europe and the Levant with rare perception. The depth of her research authenticates a text of suspense and daring, in particular Christine's gamble against the Gestapo to secure the release of her SOE leader on the eve of his execution. What a woman!

Guy Walters, historian and journalist

Although I thought I knew a thing or two about the Commandos, thanks to reading James Owen's *Commando: Winning World War II Behind Enemy Lines* (Little, Brown), I now realise my knowledge was limited to little more than the comic book version of the legendary unit. Owen successfully treads a fine line between serving up dollops of derring-do and presenting a warts-and-all appraisal. Told episodically, this is a great read not just for military history buffs, but also for those who like a glimpse into the types of long-gone personalities that were equally at home in the clubland of St James's or the African desert.

General Sir Peter Wall, Chief of the General Staff

Kandak: Fighting with Afghans by Patrick Hennessey (Allen Lane) gives a rare and privileged perspective on an organisation with a decisive role to play in the future of the Afghan people. By focusing on the Afghan soldier rather than his British counterpart, Hennessey allows us to see that while the Afghan National Army culture is very different from ours, the Afghan warrior is fighting for the long-term survival of his homeland, and with all the bravery and determination we expect of our soldiers. After five years in the Grenadier Guards, including service in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan, Hennessey is now qualified as a barrister.

Melissa van der Klugt, editor, Military Matters

Theatre of War, a collection of Cecil Beaton's wartime photographs woven

together with notes from his diaries, is at once beautiful and disturbing. It's a remarkable record of the Second World War from Libya to India, capturing countries on the cusp of change, but with all of Beaton's theatrical eye for detail and drama. There are the eerie remains of wrecked vehicles and abandoned equipment scattered in the North African desert; soldiers hidden in the dense jungles of Burma; and, in London, the sometimes still smoking ruins of the city's great museums and churches. It's an unusual view of Beaton's career too (often remembered more for portraits of actresses than armies) and celebrates what was an extraordinarily productive time for him — on his travels he took just one Rolleiflex but produced 7,000 prints.

Gary Sheffield, Professor of War Studies and author

Correlli Barnett's *The Lords of War: Supreme Leadership from Lincoln to Churchill* (Praetorian Press) has just appeared, and it elbowed its way onto my "must read" list by force of personality. For more than 50 years Barnett has delighted and infuriated with his robust views. This book, complete with penetrating insights into leader-

ship, is as controversial as ever. Barnett's villains include Napoleon: in Russia his Grand Army marched "on an empty stomach in true Bonapartian style"; his heroes include Haig, who Barnett describes as "The Victor of 1918". Whether you agree with him or not, this is indispensable stuff.

Janice Murray, Director General, National Army Museum

Marlborough Soldier and Diplomat edited by John B. Hattendorf, Augustus. J. Veenendaal Jr and Rolof Van Hövell tot Westerfliet (Karwansaray BV) is the kind of tour de force of international publishing that seems to come round less and less. An enormous, glossy, richly illustrated book which includes one of the Museum's finest oil paintings by Sir Joshua Reynolds. It benefits from a raft of international authors all looking at different aspects of Marlborough's life and career. So sumptuous, it even has twin silk page markers, so you can turn from comparative chapters and illustrations.

Alan Borg, Director General of the Imperial War Museum, 1982-95

You might think there was nothing

more to say about the First Crusade but Peter Frankopan in *The First Crusade: The Call from the East* (Bodley Head) argues that it was not just an enterprise dreamt up in the West; rather it was the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I who launched the idea of Crusades to the world. Byzantium was under attack from the Turks and Alexios despatched ambassadors to Pope Urban II asking him to send help. This persuaded the Pope to call the Council of Clermont which issued a call to arms that, four years later, resulted in the fall of Jerusalem to the Crusaders. Riveting stuff.

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Clockwise, from left: Debris from German tanks in the desert of Libya taken in 1942 by Cecil Beaton while working as an official photographer for the Ministry of Information; the celebrated SOE heroine Countess Krystyna Skarbek or, as she became known, Christine Granville; Royal Marine Commandos moving inland from Sword Beach in Normandy in June 1944



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