



# **A Storm in Flanders: The Ypres Salient, 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front**

*Winston Groom*

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## A Storm in Flanders: The Ypres Salient, 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front Winston Groom

*A Storm in Flanders* is novelist and prizewinning historian Winston Groom's gripping history of the four-year battle for Ypres in Belgian Flanders, the pivotal engagement of World War I that would forever change the way the world fought -- and thought about -- war. In 1914, Germany launched an invasion of France through neutral Belgium -- and brought the wrath of the world upon itself. Ypres became a place of horror, heroism, and terrifying new tactics and technologies: poison gas, tanks, mines, air strikes, and the unspeakable misery of trench warfare. Drawing on the journals of the men and women who were there, Winston Groom has penned a breathtaking drama of politics, strategy, and the human heart.

## A Storm in Flanders: The Ypres Salient, 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front Details

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# **From Reader Review *A Storm in Flanders: The Ypres Salient, 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front* for online ebook**

**Carlee says**

Winston Groom, most known for *Forrest Gump*, tells the sombre story of the battle at the Ypres Salient from an American perspective. Groom provides historical details and personal accounts of the "gigantic corpse factory" that the Belgium land became during the four year battle.

***The Ypres Salient in Belgium Flanders was the most notorious and dreaded place in all of the First World War, probably of any war in history.***

Written with flourishes and cringe-worthy imagery often found in fiction, Groom relates the terrible events that occurred over the course of four years (1914-1918). Everything from the German's first use of poisonous gas in warfare to Britain's detonation of mines in the Battle of Messines, *A Storm in Flanders* doesn't skip a beat. The land becomes littered with corpses throughout the tug-of-war for control of the land to the extent that statisticians can only estimate the total number of lives lost. Groom's detailed narrative has reader's seeing, hearing and smelling the battle on a physical level.

***It was said you could smell the battlefield miles before you ever reached it.***

Groom gives enough background story to make the cause of the war understandable without giving too much detail to lose the reader in politics. Incorporating soldiers' diaries and personal letters to home is a constant reminder of the truth in the horrific details.

***It was in this small confine of Belgium from 1914 to 1918 that more than a million soldiers were shot, bayoneted, bludgeoned, bombed, grenaded, gasses, incinerated by flamethrowers, drowned in shell craters, smothered by caved-in trenches, blown to pieces by artillery shells. It became one of the most vast graveyards on earth.***

Readers learn of what the soldiers on both sides had to endure and the grave cost of a country at war. The tactics and strategies that were born in Flanders would be used again in future wars. If history books were written in a similar fashion, even the most unenthusiastic scholar would have no difficulty recalling historical events. The result is known beforehand, but the path to the destination is haunting and a tale that needs to be told and remembered because the consequences of war are long-lasting.

***Today Belgian farmers are still plowing up tons of old shells and explosives each year.***

## My personal reflection:

I'm not one to typically read historical nonfiction only because every single time I've tried, I get bored and find myself daydreaming while reading. I'm not a history buff and don't pretend to be and that is, in part, due to the fact that I lose interest when reading history texts. Movies, there's enough explosions to keep me watching, but books the explosions are a little different.

Winston Groom, however, is a wonderful writer. He knows just when to provide terrifying images and just when to insert personal accounts of the war. The balance of those along with the details of the battle that can

be found in any history book had me turning pages (clicking my Kindle if we're being honest) until the wee hours of the morning.

I had heard of the Ypres Salient, but did not know much about what happened there or how difficult the battle had been or the large number of lives lost. I knew it was one of the moments that changed the war and all future wars because strategies, like using flamethrowers and poison gas, were first used in the Ypres Salient, but repeated later on in history.

Honestly, there were parts of this book that gave me nightmares. I cannot even begin to relate to what those soldiers must have felt when they saw walls of flames from flamethrowers coming their way or the constant barrage of artillery shells. The near escapes from being blown to bits and pieces by grenades and the fear of watching men slowly suffocate because of inhaling poison.

The images in this book are not only haunting because of their descriptions but also because they're real. These events really happened. It is a part of history and it should never be forgotten.

Groom truly did an amazing job telling the story of the Ypres Salient in a way that had me on the edge of my seat and cringing while I read.

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## **Marks54 says**

This book presents a short overview of the Flanders campaign in WWI. It is the history of one long and destructive battle -- written by the author of Forrest Gump. Groom is a good story teller and succeeds in this book. It is claimed that this is a book about a campaign in Belgium that was British rather than French but also a book written for Americans to provide an introduction to WWI, a war that has not received the attention it should in the US relative to WW2, Vietnam, and other conflicts. I don't know that I would have been persuaded by this overall motivation had I not visited the area last year. The Ypres area and especially the Menon Gate is immensely popular with British tourists (war tourists?) to a much greater extent than other WWI battlefields we visited. That may change next year, owing to the centennial of the start of the Somme campaign. So I am convinced that the fighting in this area has a British focus. The need for a book to reintroduce WWI to Americans is also plausible. I noticed this last year when we visited several large American grave sites and war memorials in the area and saw few if any other American visitors.

While the material in this book is well known - although Groom makes good use of memoirs and diaries -- the greatest value of the book is in conveying the brutality and unnatural nature of WWI in Flanders, with scenes and stories that seem like they took place on another planet. The sense of continuous fighting for years along a broad front where thousands died even on quiet days is hard to imagine today, even if one visits the battlefields and looks at the scene directly. The more accounts I read of this time, the more ghastly and complex it seems. It is difficult to imagine how regular people survived it.

Groom's book is a good introduction.

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## Megan Baxter says

This is a very awkward review to write. I've spent the better part of the last ten years turning myself into a historian, see, and so I feel like I should be speaking as an expert, analyzing this book of popular history, pointing out what's right and wrong, speaking from my so-called vast knowledge on the value of a book about Ypres written by the author of *Forrest Gump*.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the recent changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at Smorgasbook

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## 'Aussie Rick' says

Winston Groom's *A Storm in Flanders*, offers the reader an interesting and satisfying overview of the fighting around the Ypres Salient between 1914 and 1918. The book is 276 pages in length of which over 260 is text. This account cannot be considered comprehensive in its study of the Ypres Salient in the Great War, for that you will need to look elsewhere. However what Mr Groom does offer is a compelling look at the numerous battles fought around the Ypres Salient, including one of the most dreadful battles of World War One, Passchendaele, the Third Battle of Ypres.

The author has attempted to give you, the reader, an insight into the lives of the soldier huddled in his wet trench under constant artillery fire, where thousands of soldiers lost their lives in daily 'wastage', even during quiet periods. The story is told mainly from the British point of view, with numerous first-hand accounts offered throughout the book. The narrative is fast paced and you never get tired or bored with the story. I have read many books on the Great War and I never cease to wonder why these brave men endured what they did and for so long.

The author provides the reader with details about the introduction of new weapons of destruction unleashed for the first time during the Great War. Stories of how poison gas was utilized by the Germans and then the Allies, followed by accounts of the victims and witnesses to the effects of gas are truly horrendous. Then follows the introduction of massive underground mines and the flame-thrower to combat the trench systems and machine gun posts of the enemy. The author doesn't spare you the details of what happened to men during the fighting in the trenches and the terrible affects of an artillery bombardment or a underground mine exploding under a trench packed with soldiers.

The beauty of this book is that it really gives you an idea what these poor men, from both sides of the conflict, had to live through. The oft told story about Lieutenant General Kiggell viewing the battlefield after Passchendaele fell, breaking down into tears, crying out "*Good God, did we really send men to fight in that.*" still saddens me, regardless of how many times I read it.

If nothing else this, book will offer the first time reader of the fighting around Ypres a good understanding of the terrible battles fought there and will entice many to follow up with further reading. As such I can recommend many good titles to follow through on with for those who may be interested:

*In Flanders Fields* by Leon Wolff

*They Called it Passchendaele* by Lyn MacDonald

*Passchendaele: The Untold Story* by Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson

*Passchendaele: the Sacrificial Ground* by Nigel Steel & Peter Hart

*Passchendaele: The Story Behind the Tragic Victory of 1917* by Philip Warner

Of these Lyn MacDonald's account is one of the more interesting in that she utilises many accounts of the soldiers who fought during that terrible battle. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson's account also offers much new information and has received much acclaim of late.

Any person who reads this book will not fail to come away impressed with the stolid courage of the officers and men involved in this terrible carnage and if that's the least this book does then that is more than enough as far as I am concerned.

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## **Ken says**

After my earlier trysts with the subject of WW1 (Catastrophe and partially in The Iron Kingdom), I finally found a book that I hold in high regard in equal footing to the book that gave me a boost from curiosity to outright fascination: The Guns of August by Barbara Tuchman. And if I could clarify on what I said, I mean fascination as in the attention to detail in all aspects of the war in terms of its scope, brutality and yes, tragedy. What I mean by detail is the just as Ms Tuchman used the opening month of the conflict as an anchor in describing the events that led to the war as well as the first year's momentous events, Mr Groom uses the battlefield of Ypres in the same manner but continues to the whole war and the personalities within. From private letters of lowly privates of both sides to the highest levels of personages in the military command and political office. The battles both within the Flanders front as well as in some minor yet useful narratives of the battles outside that fateful front and how they affected the war in general (Dannenberg, Gallipoli, Verdun, Somme and Cambrai) so did not suffer from any forms of myopia or even the lack of a link. Obviously, the focus was on the British and German perspectives but the participation of the other allies and foes most especially the Canadians and the Americans were given their due. The collapse of the Russian front gets a good treatment as a prologue to the final German offensives as well as to the last year that saw the Ypres gains of 1917 virtually evaporate and then finally recaptured for the last time. The end is also sanguine as it tells of the fate of all the participants including Adolph Hitler. If anyone has any interest in the Great War and from the writer of Forest Gump nonetheless, this is a must read!

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## **Koen says**

I read Keegan, Strachan, Macdonald specifically about Ypres and a couple of other books about the big war. Most are, as i remember them since it's been a while, more comprehensive than Groom is here. As he states in the beginning this book is written for Americans who might not have had the same exposure to the 14-18 stories as Europeans in general and Brits specifically might have. That, i must say, makes for a good read. The author keeps the narrative going and nowhere gets boring like some of the other books sometimes are. No extensive strategies and troop movements.

I read it to refresh my knowledge as i will visit Ypres in a couple of weeks. I thought the book perfect for that but and i think the book is as good a starting point as any for someone who hasn't read about World War I. The focus is certainly on Ypres but the author gives enough background information on the start of the war and the other big battles all in a very readable narrative.

I could imagine, after reading this, you'd want to pick up another book about Verdun, the Somme or a more comprehensive book about the leadout to this war.

Of course, the topic itself is gruesome beyond comprehension. The grotesque, and seemingly senseless, loss of life never ceases to amaze me.

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## **Sweetwilliam says**

“They are not missing. They are here,” said General Herbert Plumer at the 1927 dedication of the Menin gate monument. Plumer was referring to the 90,000 troops of the British Empire that were missing in action within the Ypres Salient.

A storm in Flanders is another great read by Winston Groom. He has a knack for making history read as easy as fiction, accept this is not fiction and nobody could make this up. In a war that produced nine-million plus battlefield casualties, fighting in the Ypres Salient claimed 550,000 lives and 90,000 soldiers of the British Empire are still missing in action here. Groom said he wrote this so Americans could better appreciate the corpse factory that was the Ypres Salient. It surely helped this reader.

It was here that chemical warfare was unleashed for the first time and where the flamethrower made its debut. It was a war in which mechanization outpaced tactics and indirect-fire supplanted line-of-sight artillery and it was artillery accounted for 75% of the fatalities. The machine gun and barbed wire made mass infantry assaults obsolete and to survive, the men had to live underground in a region of Belgium known as Flanders which Groom said is Flemish for swamp.

There are several stories of men trying to dig trenches or sap only to strike bodies from the previous campaigns. This also may have been the first war that I have ever read of a first-hand account of a soldier dying by drowning in the mud of a shell crater. WWI was a living hell.

I was so moved by my recent unplanned visit to the Ypres that I decided to read this book to get a better understanding of the fighting within the Salient. I dedicate this review to the memory of Pvt. George W. Short and his classmates from Sussex who volunteered to fight for King and Country. Of the 30 that joined 26 made it overseas. Of the 26 that made it overseas, 15 made the ultimate sacrifice. George W. Short died in Flanders.

If you ever visit, make sure that you attend the last post ceremony at Menin Gate and gaze up the 55,000 names of the missing (the other 35,000 names are on another monument nearby. They couldn't fit them all.) And one more thing: Careful if you are a relic hunter. 30 people are killed a year by accidentally detonating unexploded ordnance.

Thank you Winston Groom for writing a book so that people can relate to the slaughter which happened in the Ypres Salient 100 years ago. This one is tough to put down.

(view spoiler)

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## **Brandon Carter says**

Honestly this is one of the best World War I books I've read. Winston Groom effortlessly moves back and forth between the perspective of soldiers on the ground at Ypres and the larger picture of what was happening in the Great War as a whole. His powers of description are second to none, so much so that I had to set the book aside a couple of times, especially when the author describes the "hellscape" that was Passchendaele.

A very readable and accessible account from the author of "Forrest Gump."

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## **Jeff Rowe says**

Here's what I learned from this book: WWI really sucked. The key here is that I already knew this, but the book makes you realize that, no, you didn't know this already because... How about this? At Ypres, you couldn't dig a trench more than a foot or so deep, so when the shells start coming, you're laying in a slight indentation in the earth. Or this? The shelling churned the soil to a depth of more than 10 feet, so when it rained you had 10 foot deep mud that sucked people under. If you tried to rescue them, you get sucked under, so you have to leave your perfectly healthy friend, screaming, to be consumed by the muck. It swallowed entire artillery pieces. I love the part where the British dig 20+ mines under the German trenches and blow them simultaneously. They attack right after, but the high-ground they were trying to capture is now a field because they just blasted an entire hill sky high. Even better, 2 of the mines didn't explode. Of course they forgot exactly where they were located so bummer. Turns out one of these blew in 1955 making a huge crater in some poor farmer's field. The other one is still waiting to this day. Pretty crazy stuff.

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## **Rich says**

Powerful book, well written, worthy to be read by everyone. But check your heart as you begin. It is not pretty.

Groom provides an overview of the conduct of the war regarding Flanders, such that the reader gains an appreciation of all factors weighting upon decisions that at times seem brilliant, more often idiotic, and usually puzzling. The ranking officers in the British Army had their own agendas and battled the political leaders (especially Gen. Haig vs. David Lloyd George). In addition, Groom adds the view from the trenches that shows the heroism, despair, and futility of fighting in the trenches. The contrast between what the Generals knew and what the men experienced comes through in this perspective from General Haig's chief of staff after the battle of Passchendaele (in 1917).

The day that Passchendaele fell, Haig's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Launcelot Kiggell, went forward to see the battle area for the first time. Nearing Ypres in his big Rolls-Royce staff car Kiggell was first amazed, then dismayed, and finally horrified at the breathtaking morass where the battle had taken place: an almost indescribable sea of mud littered with the bloated, rotten carcasses of artillery horses, smashed guns and wagons, and other detritus of war. He is reported to have broken into tears, crying out, "Good God, did we



really send men to fight in that?" His companion, an officer who had been in the battle, told Kiggell, "It's worse further on up." (pp. 224-5)

The brutality of war comes through as the mud intensified the drudgery of daily life. And in this case brought horrendous choices.

One sergeant related: "We heard screaming coming from another crater a bit away. I went over to investigate with a couple of the lads. It was a big hole and there was a fellow of the 8th Suffolks in it up to his shoulders. So I said, 'Get your rifles, one man in the middle to stretch them out, make a chain and let him get hold of it.' But it was no use. It was too far to stretch, we couldn't get any force on it, and the more we pulled and the more he struggled the further he seemed to go down. He went down gradually. He kept begging us to shoot him. But we couldn't shoot him. Who could shoot him? We stayed with him, watching him go down in the mud. And he died. He wasn't the only one. There must have been thousands up there who died in the mud." (pp. 214-5)

The ghastly image cuts through any civility that anyone tried to put on the war and the consequences.

This is a hard book to read, but a necessary read. We get immune to the ugly, harsh realities of life, if we only watch what we want on TV/internet, etc. This book opens our eyes at several levels to challenge the status quo of indifference.

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### **Edward Sullivan says**

A vivid, engrossing history that is particularly effective in conveying the horrific loss and inexplicable futility of World War I.

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### **Ian Hulsbosch says**

I discovered this book in my father's cabinet one day and, being a history-lover, I decided to start reading it. Groom does a great job detailing the horrors of the Ypres Salient (in Belgium) during World War I and dabbles a bit into how the war was started. Many of the chapters detail what it was like living in the trenches, some of the largest battles in the Salient, and what this did to the men who fought during the war. There are multiple meaningful quotes from well known soldiers at the time along with gallows humor poems that detail an average soldier's experiences. Much of the book is powerful, well written, and constantly mindful of the human perspective of war. A definite recommendation for people who enjoy war history that is told in a much more relatable view.

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### **Straw says**

3 1/2. I have read enough military history to know that if you are well-versed in this war the book is really not great at drilling down. I am not entrenched (sorry) in this subject matter yet, so I found it fairly enjoyable.

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## Alex Crowther says

When you think your life is bad, you need only to read a chapter of so of this book to realize how good you have it. The Ypres Salient was formed at the end of the first German advance in WWII during the "Race to the Sea" where both sides entrenched their positions. When the Germans realized that the war had changed from a war of manoeuvre to a war of static position, they chose the best terrain available for their positions. As such, they took the high ground which dominated Ypres to the north, east and south. The British occupied the town of Ypres which was in the low ground in the center of the German positions. From their positions on the high ground, the Germans could see everything. It is a truism of modern combat that "what can be seen can be hit" and the Germans took advantage of that to turn the British positions in the Ypres salient into hell on earth. For years the British attacked the high ground in hopes to push the Germans off. For years the Germans poured fire onto the British and maintained their positions on the high ground. There were five Battles of Ypres, including the well-known Passchendaele in 1917. The British were not able to push the Germans off the high ground until 1918 when the Germans were essentially in retreat everywhere. Casualties for the Ypres Salient are not even known. Estimates of casualties for Passchendaele, for instance, vary from 200,000+ to 400,000+ for each side. So Ypres cost over 1 million casualties for the five battles. At times the 'wastage' (British killed during normal operations, not in the offensive, i.e. people who died from sniper fire, slipping and drowning in mud etc) was 1,000 a day. Not for the faint of heart, this is a very good book about what human beings can do in the face of adversity.

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## Philip says

I feel kind of guilty saying I "really liked" a story this horrific, but I just learned so much from it, and it was so well written. Yes, Winston Groom is the same guy that wrote **Forrest Gump**, but he also served as an officer in Vietnam and was nominated for a Pulitzer for **Conversations With the Enemy**, about POWs in Vietnam - so he's more than the "life is like a box of chocolates" guy.

Groom tells a "war is hell" story that strips away the cliché and exposes in gruesome detail one of history's - and certainly "modern" history's - greatest slaughters. It also drives home the senselessness and political cynicism of war: just read the brief and absolutely chilling paragraph on page 219 describing how at the very height of the carnage, (i.e., the Battle of Passchendaele, a full four years into a virtually non-stop fight over the same useless strip of territory), the British Government was all but ignoring the struggle, "apparently on the reasoning that it would soon die out on its own due to the onset of winter" (which itself then killed additional thousands).

At the same time, I also happen to be reading **Monuments Men**, and taken together I'm surprised to see what consistent a-holes the Germans were in both conflicts. I say that coming from a long line of Jungs, Irmschers, Huttles and Shmutzes, but compared to the Allied forces in both wars, their behavior was just so much worse in the treatment of prisoners, abuse of locals, and introduction of new and nightmarish weapons of war, (what is it with Germans and their love of poison gases?). In fact, I'm so mad at the Germans right now that I'm going to read **All Quiet on the Western Front** next, just to give them a fair chance to present their side of the story.

I can't believe I didn't learn more about this when I actually lived in Belgium for two years. But apparently

there has just been so much fighting there over the centuries - the Low Countries have been the go-to place for the major European powers (France, Germany, England) to fight their battles since at least the Hundred Years War - that all that history is just kind of, like, *there*. (I used to drive past the Waterloo battlefield on my way to work every day, and it was basically one *really* big field with a hill and a single statue on top; compare that to Gettysburg, often referred to as "the largest sculpture garden in the world.") Anyway - certainly fascinating to learn about it now, and I'll definitely spend some time in Ypres next time I pass through the area.

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