

# 1.8

## Photographer on the Western Front, 1917

*Caitlin Patrick*

Lieutenant Ernest Brooks stands posed in a trench on the Western Front, holding his favored Goerz Anschutz plate camera, which was considered compact and reliable at the time. Although this photo is dated 1917, Brooks was the first professional photographer to cover British forces at this key battle site. After a military ban on unofficial troop photography in 1915, Brooks was expected to provide a record of battles that, to a large extent, were happening unseen by the citizens of countries sending their troops by the hundreds of thousands into the “Great War” begun in 1914. Photographic representation of this unprecedented conflict has been deeply affected by various forms of censorship. Beyond regulated controls, official photographers appear overwhelmingly to have believed in the necessity and righteousness of the fighting. This outlook undoubtedly shaped their approach to their subject matter. Outside of the official photographic collections, the estimated thousands of “unofficial” photographs produced mainly by soldiers, mostly on small, affordable Kodak and Brownie cameras, remain dispersed throughout private and public archives. Yet Brooks, among other official World War I photographers, has provided a large and rich collection of photographs, which remain difficult to access.

In their imaginings of the Great War, popular literature, poetry, and film have given particular attention to the horrors of trench warfare, and there is certainly photographic documentation to support these accounts. Much of the photography tells a different story, however; one that testifies to the pride and camaraderie of the war’s participants, as well as the daily practicalities of managing and supporting millions of fighting troops.<sup>1</sup> Though the concept of the “war photographer” was still very much in its infancy, publications of the time already attributed many now-recognizable traits of those in this profession to Brooks. He apparently had “no nerves” and showed remarkable dedication to capturing photographs under heavy fire and in extremely difficult conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Such intrepid behavior was not only in the face of battle but also in dialog with strict governmental regulation. From August 1914, the War Propaganda Office organized for photographs first to be censored in the field and then sent to the London-based Press Bureau for final approval and distribution. Approximately a dozen official photographers were eventually commissioned to shoot on the Western Front, covering the major allied nations. Assigned vast swathes of territory and large numbers of troops to cover, the photographers were responsible not only for battle shots but also for pictures of troop leisure time, visiting dignitaries and equipment shots.<sup>3</sup> Although he was supported by photographers in



**Figure 1.8** Photographer unknown, Ernest Brooks, first British official photographer to be appointed, seen in a trench on Western Front, 1917. Imperial War Museum. © Crown Copyright. IWM.

the Royal Engineers, Ernest Brooks, the first official British photographer of WWI, was eventually responsible for covering nearly two million troops on the Western Front.<sup>4</sup>

Getting close to the action during battles involving large morasses of destroyed “no-man’s land,” and heavy artillery use was difficult, but Brooks managed to photograph some dramatic explosions during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Newspapers eagerly used such photographs when they arrived in London a week after 1 July 1916. Occasionally the stagnation of fighting allowed for the capture of powerful images of daily conditions for front-line troops, such as William Rider-Rider’s photo of Canadian troops “holding the line” in a flooded mud field of shell-holes in 1917. Due to censorship and patriotic attitudes, as mentioned above, few photographs of “our” dead or extremely wounded were taken by the official photographers, though some exist in archives. Allied official photographers’ and German military

photographers' photos of "enemy dead", often in destroyed trenches or in "no-man's land," constitute a more common iconography.

In assessment of official photography, some commentators have argued that it remained limited to "archaic images of individual suffering and heroism," failing to challenge the promoted government propaganda narrative.<sup>5</sup> Historians such as Holmes, on the other hand, defend the many photographs showing camaraderie and moments of happiness amongst the troops, insisting on the legitimacy and importance of these experiences as well as those of death, injury, and horror. Although by the era of the Great War, the war photographer was already becoming a recognizably intrepid "type," the imagery he produced, that audiences were able to view in the press, were visually less exciting than the action at the front. Regardless of how publicly-available press photographs of the time are read, there can be little question that they were constrained and limited. At present, archives can offer up many photographs which did not clear censorship of the day and provide the possibility of richer interpretation of how photographers, if not the public at large, saw the Great War.

## Notes

- 1 See Richard Holmes, *Shots from the Front*, London: HarperPress, 2010.
- 2 Basil Clarke (Special Correspondent at the Front), "Camera Correspondents," in *The War Illustrated*, 7 July 1917.
- 3 Jane Carmichael, *First World War Photographers*, London: Routledge, 1989: 16.
- 4 Howard Chapnick, *Truth Needs No Ally: Inside Photojournalism*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994.
- 5 Matthew Farish, "Modern witnesses: foreign correspondents, geopolitical vision and the First World War," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26.3, 2001: 279.