

ANIMALS IN WWI

HORSES AND MULES

At the start of the War in 1914 the British Army had a mere 25,000 horses. With little mechanisation available, it needed 250,000 to pull field guns, transport other weapons and supplies, carry the wounded and dying and to mount cavalry charges. Even **elephants** from zoos and circuses were pressed into service as draught animals. The cavalry was useless in trench warfare, although it took Field Marshal Douglas Haig and the generals a long time and the loss of many lives to recognise this, but they were used to good effect in Palestine, where **camel corps** were also used

The horses and mules were very vulnerable to artillery and machine gun fire and suffered an appallingly high death rate – at Verdun alone, some 7,000 were killed in one day by long range shelling. The **Royal Army Veterinary Corps** did their best to treat the injured and prevent unnecessary suffering. The RAVC hospitals treated 725,216. They successfully healed 529,064 but many died of exhaustion, drowned in shell holes or suffered in gas attacks. Many injured were shot to stop their suffering.

Others starved to death for lack of fodder – a feed of sawdust cannot sustain life. Many horses also suffered shell shock. Britain lost over 484,000, one horse for every two men. More than 8 million horses, mules and donkeys died on both sides

Replacements came mainly from the USA and Argentina, but also from Canada and Australia. Between 1914 and 1917, an average of 1,000 per day were sent across the Atlantic in horse convoys under constant German naval attack. They were also poisoned by German saboteurs before they even embarked. The presence of the horses improved morale, but their dead carcasses and manure contributed to the general poor levels of sanitation and disease in the mud of the trenches.

Between 1914 and 1920 the **Remount Department** spent over £67million on the purchase, training and delivery to the Front of horses and mules. Under the Army Act it was possible to impress horses on payment of a fair price, subject to the owner's right of appeal. The remount Officer for the Kelso area was the local vet **A.B. Tulley** of the Lothian and Border Horse, which did not make him very popular in this largely farming area. In the first year of the War, the countryside was emptied of its shire horses, but also riding and carriage horses, although Lord Kitchener ordered that no horse under 15 hands be taken, at the request of British children who feared for their ponies. Local farmers were forced into buying tractors in great numbers. The British Army Remount Service provided the services of quality stallions to farmers for breeding – their names and availability dates were announced in the Kelso Chronicle.

After the war the Australian and New Zealand horses could not return home because of quarantine regulations. Only one horse, Sandy, came home to Australia. 2,000 were slaughtered and sold to local butchers or shot for fear of mistreatment and the rest became remounts for the British Army and Egyptian armies.

DOGS

The Continental armies had long made use of trained dogs – in 1914, the German army had 6,000 where the British army had just one Airedale. Col. Edwin Richardson knew the value of trained dogs on the battlefield, but the War Office ignored all his pressure. He made a private arrangement with a Col. Winter to send out two Airedales, Wolf and Prince, on the last day of 1916. The War Office finally ordered him to set up the War Dogs School at Shoeburyness (there was also one set up later in Perth) and sent him a rag bag of collies, lurchers, Bedlington terriers, and Airedales from the Battersea Dogs Home. Earlier in the war, stray dogs had been shot and many were put down when rationing began to bite. Training took five weeks and the ones which came though it were sent out to Keepers. Each had three dogs and each dog's duty period was two weeks. After the war, many were re-trained as guide dogs, especially being given to ex-soldiers who had been blinded.

- Dogs were trained as sentry dogs lying alongside their handler's gun, giving a quiet warning signal while on patrol, usually by pricking ears or soft growling, sometimes by tugging the clothing of their keeper.
- As scout dogs they could scent an enemy up to 1000 yards away and 'point' out his position silently to their keeper.
- As first aiders and carrying a pack of medical supplies strapped to their back, their sense of smell could enable them to detect wounded soldiers and bring first aid. If the soldier was unconscious, they were trained to remove his cap/hat (which had his regimental details and his name) and bring it back to their handler.
- Dogs were used as lightweight hauliers (two dogs to a machine gun).
- Conditions in the trenches were dreadful and they were overrun with rats, so a good 'ratter' was a godsend. The men hated the rats. Not only did they contaminate food, clothing and bedding, but they feasted on the dead bodies – of men as well as of horses.
- Their real contribution was as messengers carrying a small canister containing the vital message attached to their collars and returning to their handler with the reply. They were particularly needed when visual signals or pigeons could not be used – at night or in fog and, as happened frequently, telephone lines were broken by shelling. They could often get through when all other attempts at communication failed. They could usually get through much more quickly than a man. All their work was logged and one dog at Ypres ran five miles, belly deep in mud, in 27 minutes. A human runner, in the unlikely event that he survived, would have taken two hours.
- The only means of communication in the trenches was by telephone. The wires regularly got broken by shelling. The Germans pioneered the training of dogs, using a special reel strapped on their backs, to lay thousands of metres of telephone wires.

More than a million dogs were killed on both sides during the war.

BIRDS

Wireless had not yet been invented and communications at the Front were by semaphore, telegraph and by telephone. Despite the appalling terrain, miles of wire were laid by both sides, but wire was easily broken by shelling and visual signals were not always possible.

Pigeons played a crucial part before modern means of radio communications. At the start of the War Britain had just 60 pigeons and 15 handlers in the war zone. By 1918, there were more than 20,000 pigeons and 370 handlers.

They were used in the air and at sea. They flew high and fast (50mph), had a range of 100 miles and unerringly found their lofts. Some lofts were stationary back at HQ; some were in caravans or on the backs of trucks and it is reported that on one occasion, the caravan 'loft' was so well camouflaged, the birds themselves couldn't find it! Many pigeon 'lofts', with their pigeons, were carried on the backs of soldiers as they moved through enemy country. Pigeons were able to find their lofts even when they were mobile. Messenger pigeons were so important that killing one brought a sentence of six months in prison and a fine of £100 under the Defence of the Realm Act.

To begin with, the French were much more aware of their usefulness. At the First Battle of the Marne, the French had 72 lofts advancing with the army as it forced back the Germans.

"Cher Ami" was awarded the French Croix de Guerre with Palm for delivering 12 messages during the Battle of Verdun. On her final mission in October 1918 she arrived, shot through her breast and one wing and delivered her precious message in its capsule hanging from a ligament in her shattered leg.

Canaries Following their long-time use in coalmines, canaries were used as warning for mustard gas. Gas was first used in Poland on 31st January 1915 when 18,000 gas shells containing xylyl bromide was rained down on the Russian lines. By April at the 2nd battle of Ypres, German scientists had perfected pressure cylinders to deliver chlorine. Characteristically green in colour, it reacts with the water in the airways to produce hydrochloric acid, swelling and blocking lung tissue. The British used it four months later at the second Battle of Loos. Later, mustard gas was used which produces terrible blisters.

SLUGS

Dr Paul Bortsch of the US National Museum of Natural History discovered that slugs could detect mustard gas long before humans could and showed their distress by closing their breathing pores and compressing their bodies. The 'slug brigade' early warning system saved many lives.

MASCOTS

Official and unofficial, helped many men by their mere presence. Jackie the Baboon belonging to South African soldiers had excellent eyesight and hearing and would warn of enemy movement by pulling on their clothing and making certain noises. The Royal Engineers had a baboon called 'Dinks'. Winnipeg, known as Winnie, an American black bear was mascot to Canadian soldiers who gave Winnie to London Zoo in 1914. A.A. Milne used to take his son to see Winnie at the Zoo and the rest is history!