

# MESSENGERS AND PROTECTORS

## ANIMALS IN WORLD WAR ONE - PART TWO



German messenger dog leaping a trench (IWM)  
Top: Injured pigeon (IWM)



**As well as horses, many other types of animals were used in the First World War. They carried messages, acted as lookouts, helped carry troops and equipment and warned soldiers of danger.**

### Dogs

At the British War Dog School of Instruction, 20,000 dogs were trained under harsh battle conditions to perform duties such as carrying messages, scouting and acting as sentries.

In order to provide enough dogs for training, the police were ordered to hand over any strays they found. Many were taken from Dog's Homes. The government appealed to the public to give up their pets and more than 7,000 were handed over for war service.

Those who passed training were sent to the front. Sadly, many of those who failed to make the grade were put down.

Wireless sets were bulky and unreliable, and telephone cables were easily broken by shellfire, so dogs were used to carry messages on the battlefield.



A message placed into a canister attached to a British dog's collar (IWM)



British messenger dogs with feet bandaged as a result of injuries caused by mustard gas (IWM)

Trained to return to their keeper's station, messenger dogs could cover 10 -15 miles in one to two hours, running under fire from trench to trench through barbed wire and over shell holes.

The companionship of dogs was so highly valued in the trenches that men would sometimes offer to deliver messages in their place.

Dogs were also used as sentries to guard trenches, and as casualty or ambulance dogs to carry food and medical supplies to injured soldiers trapped in no man's land during the battle. The Belgian army used dogs to pull heavy machine guns across the battlefield and the German army used them to carry hand grenades (or bombs).

The dogs faced many dangers on the battlefield. Enemy snipers would try to shoot them because they carried vital information. No one knows how many dogs died, but the figure probably runs into tens of thousands.

The fate of the thousands of dogs who survived the war was not a happy one. Rather than being re-homed or returned to their original owners, many were simply put down.

Most soldiers couldn't afford to pay the cost of quarantining animals. This meant that most of the animals adopted as mascots, or pets, were simply abandoned when the war ended.



German messenger dog carrying grenades to a bombing patrol (IWM)



Some dogs were taught to lay telephone lines between the trenches, darting through mud with a roll of cable attached to their back (IWM)

## Mascots and companions - *Pincher* and *Sammy*



Soldiers often adopted animals as companions. 'Pincher' (above), the mascot of HMS Vindex is sitting on the propeller of a Sopwith Camel fighter plane. Sammy (right) was the mascot of the Northumberland Fusiliers. He went to France with the regiment in April 1915, and was wounded and gassed during the Second Battle of Ypres, the following month. He was buried by shellfire on several occasions. Sammy died in action along with many of his companions on the Somme in 1916. (Both images from IWM)





Pigeon being released from an Allied trench with a message (IWM)



## Pigeons

Due to their homing ability and great stamina, pigeons were used by the military to carry messages over long distances.

On the battlefield, a message would be written on a piece of special paper then put into a capsule on the bird's leg. The bird would be tossed into the air to fly back to his home coop behind the lines where a Signals Service officer would remove the message and pass it on by telegraph, field phone or personal messenger.

Messenger birds were considered to be so important that posters put up in the trenches reminded soldiers that 'killing, wounding or molesting homing pigeons' was an offence, punishable by six months' imprisonment or a £100 fine.

As with messenger dogs, the enemy would target carrier pigeons because they carried vital information. However, even skilled marksmen found birds flying at 60mph difficult to shoot. Despite this, many were injured or killed by shellfire.

By the end of the war, there were 22,000 pigeons in service with British forces. They were looked after by 400 pigeoneers.

Of the 100,000 pigeons used by all sides in the war, it is thought that about 20,000 were killed in action.



German soldiers wear respirators as they place carrier pigeons into a gas-proof chamber, during an anti-gas drill (IWM)



Pigeons were also carried onboard ships, aeroplanes and tanks. This one is being released from the side of a British tank (IWM)



## Camels

Around 120,000 camels were used by the British military during the First World War. They served in the deserts of the Middle East and North Africa because they were considered to be better suited to the hot sandy conditions than horses.

The Camel Corps rode them into battle much as the cavalry would ride horses. However, most camels were used to carry supplies such as ammunition, food and water.

The death rate among camels was very high because of their poor treatment and the harsh environment. 24,000 camels were killed in action, but more than four times this number, 97,200, died from disease, exhaustion and neglect.



Camel 'cavalry' in the Jordanian desert (IWM)

## Canaries and mice

Both sides on the Western Front dug tunnels so that they could explode mines under the enemy's trenches and break through their defences.

The men who dug the tunnels underground used canaries and mice to warn them of the presence of dangerous gases such as methane or carbon monoxide. If the mice stopped moving, or the birds stopped chirping or fell unconscious off their perch from a lack of oxygen, the miners were alerted to the danger and would evacuate. Although the animals often recovered consciousness, many died underground.



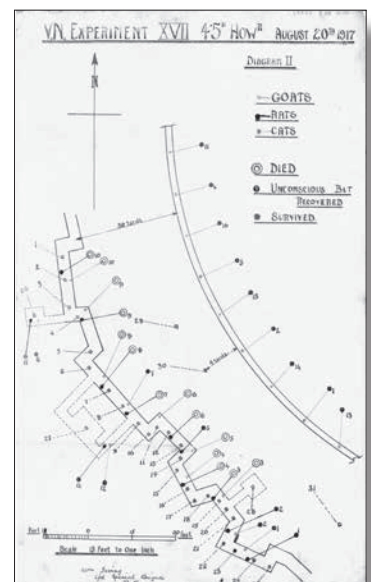
A member of an Australian Tunnelling Company with canaries and mice in cages (AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL)



Australian handler with camels in Palestine 1917 (IWM)

## Experiments on animals

In 1916, the British army set up the Royal Engineers Experimental Station in Wiltshire to carry out research into chemical weapons. The experiment shown opposite involved putting goats, rats and cats in a specially dug trench and exposing them to poisonous gas to see how they were affected. (You can see this plan in detail on our website.)



Warfare experiments are still carried out on animals at this research establishment, which is now called Porton Down. Animals are poisoned by chemical warfare agents, subjected to blast injuries, force-fed sensory irritants and deliberately wounded and killed by bacterial toxins.

## Heroes or victims?

Some people say that the animals who saw action in the First World War were heroes because they were brave. Other people argue that the animals who died in combat were victims because they did not agree to take part in the war. *What do you think?*

**Visit our website to find out more about how animals were used in World War One.**