

WAR HORSES

ANIMALS IN WORLD WAR ONE - PART ONE



A mule team stuck in the mud during the battle of Passchendaele (IWM)

In the First World War, horses, mules and donkeys were considered vital to the war effort. They carried troops, pulled artillery and hauled supplies to and from the front. The animals experienced terrible hardships and many died from wounds, exposure, exhaustion and disease.

The call up

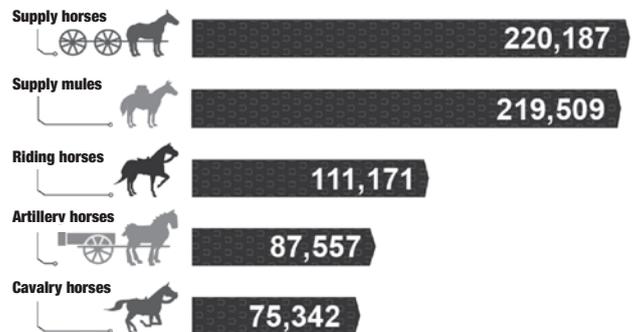
When war broke out, the British military, like all armies at the time, relied on horsepower. Motorised transport had only recently been invented, and the army, which had few lorries, relied on horses and mules to move troops and equipment.

In 1914, the army purchasing officers were sent to towns and villages to obtain more horses for the rapidly expanding military forces. Some horses were taken from farmers, hunt stables and businesses, but many were voluntarily sold to the government for use in the war effort. In just two weeks, 140,000 horses were drafted into the army, to add to the 25,000 horses they already had.

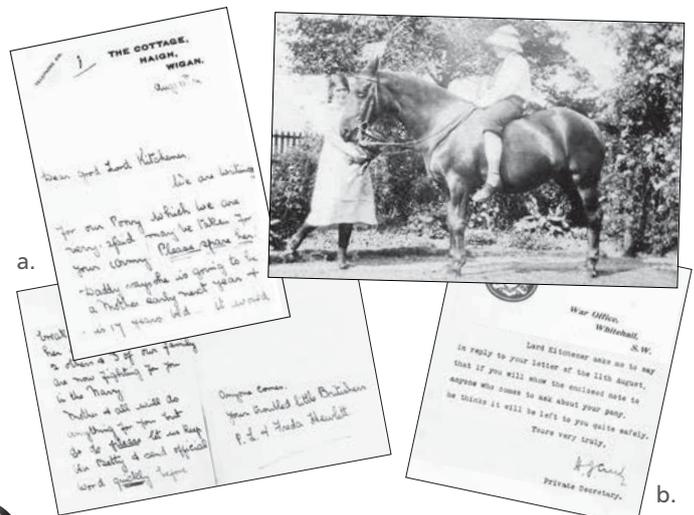
Pictured right: a) Letter written by Poppy, Lionel and Freda Hewlett to Field Marshal Lord Kitchener (Secretary of State for War) asking for their pony, Betty (pictured inset) to be spared: as 'it would break our hearts to let her go'. b) Reply from Lord Kitchener to the children. Read the full letters on our website.

The role of horses

Horses and mules in the British army in 1918



Source: BBC website - What was the Real Story of War horse?





The Royal Scots Greys practising a charge
(National library of scotland)

Cavalry

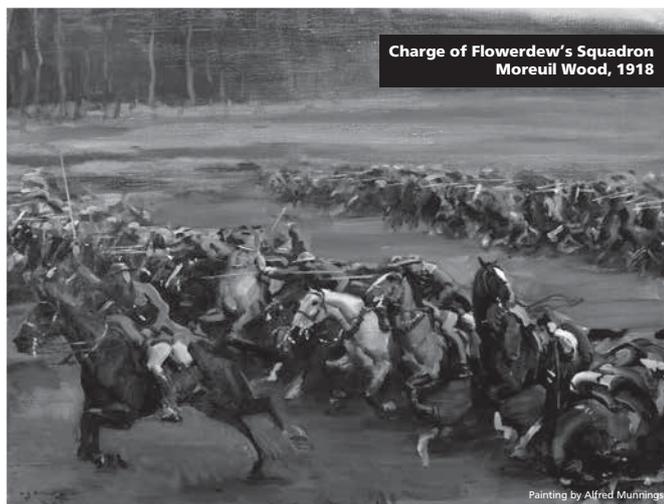
On 13 August 1914, one division of cavalry and their complement of 25,000 horses set sail for France with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). It was thought by many that they would be a decisive factor in the coming conflict.

It was not to be. Towards the end of the opening year of the war, the way the armies fought changed. On the Western Front in Europe, the two sides dug trenches and the short distance between them, called 'No Man's Land', became a killing ground strewn with barbed wire, shell holes and dead bodies. Cavalry horses stood no chance against weapons such as machine guns, high-explosive shells and barbed wire.

On the few occasions that cavalry were sent charging into battle, they suffered terrible losses.

On 30th March 1918 during one of the last ever cavalry charges, the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was ordered to retake the German hilltop position on Moreuil Wood. Three Troops of the Royal Canadian Dragoons charged up the hill towards the German position into murderous machine gun fire.

The position was taken, but at great cost. Of the 150 horses who went into the fray, only four survived the charge. At the end of the day the Brigade had lost 300 men and more than 800 horses.



Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron
Moreuil Wood, 1918

Painting by Alfred Munnings

Artillery

Horses were yoked in teams of three pairs to pull light field artillery, and as many as 10 pairs to haul heavy howitzer guns.

Early in the war, Royal Field Artillery (RFA) and Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) units fought forward with the infantry, close to the enemy where they sustained heavy losses. In these early battles, horses did not retire to relative safety, but stayed with the batteries (guns) during the engagements.



Artillery horse train pulling an
18-pounder field gun (IWM)

During the retreat from Mons in 1914, Captain Douglas Reynolds of the 37th Battery RFA wrote:

'seeing that all the horses attached to a number of guns had been killed, we brought up two new teams in the hope of rescuing the guns. Driven by volunteers, and within a hundred yards of the enemy, the teams attempted to hitch up two guns to drag them away. Under a hail of fire, one whole team was shot down.'

Albert George, Artillery Sergeant, recalled:

'We could see ammunition wagons trying to replenish, getting about half-way to the gun, then a couple of shells would burst blowing the drivers and horses to smithereens, it was a terrible sight...'

Hauling supplies

The majority of horses and mules were used by the Army Service Corps (ASC). They had the job of supplying water, food and ammunition to the troops at the front.

The ASC teams faced many hazards. The journey to and from the frontline could be fraught with danger. The enemy would frequently shell known key supply routes and junctions. Supplies had to get through, so men and horses had to risk their lives – often at night – running the gauntlet to supply the troops.

In the book *A Call to Arms*, Joseph Murray describes one such road:

'There was no shelter at all over the newly captured ground. The road to Beaucourt was a graveyard of many of the ration parties that had attempted to get through to us. When we reached the village, it was a dreadful sight: mutilated bodies of men, horses and mules everywhere among which we had to shelter while waiting a chance to run the gauntlet known to us as 'suicide corner'. The road, the only one, and the only way in or out of the area of our attack, had been in enemy hands for years and now they were free to concentrate all their fire on this narrow strip of activity.'

After heavy rainfall, the constant shelling turned the battlefield into a treacherous muddy swamp, which took the lives of many animals. Sidney Smith, a private, recalled his experience in 1916 on the Somme:

There was 'nothing the eye could see except waves rippling the mud as the wind blew, I had the terrible experience to witness three horses and six men disappear completely under the mud. It was a sight that will live forever in my memory. The last horse went to a muddy grave, keeping his nostrils above the slush until the last second. A spurt of mud told me it was all over'.

A shell explodes near a team of artillery horses (IWM)



Galloping horses run the gauntlet at 'hellfire corner' (Source: Simon Butler)



Six-horse teams pulling general service (GS) wagons (Source: Simon Butler)



Bandaged horse at a British Army veterinary hospital (IWM)

What happened to the horses when war ended?

There was no 'heroes' return' for the majority of horses at the end of the war. Only those owned by officers were guaranteed to return to Britain. The fate of the others depended upon their age and fitness.

25,000 horses remained in the British army while between 60,000 and 100,000 were returned to Britain to be auctioned. The remainder were sold in the country where they were stationed at the end of the war – to farmers as work animals or to butchers to be killed for meat.

A fortunate few were rescued by the RSPCA and Blue Cross Fund and retired to live out their lives on sanctuaries.



The Brooke Hospital for animals was founded by Dorothy Brooke (second from the left) to care for horses abandoned in Egypt after WWI.

Casualties

Casualty rates were high. By the end of the war there were 1,300 veterinary surgeons in the British Army Veterinary Corps working in 20 veterinary hospitals. 725,000 horses were treated and three-quarters survived. Many were not so fortunate.

It is estimated that a total of 8 million horses, mules and donkeys lost their lives in the war.

Many animals were killed by shellfire, but most died from the terrible weather and appalling conditions. On the Western Front, the loss of British horses due to cold, hunger, exhaustion and disease was about 200,000 - four times more than the 58,000 killed by enemy action.



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?*



War Memorial in Hyde Park, London, dedicated to animals who have died in war. The inscription says 'They had no choice'.



German horse-drawn ambulance hit by shellfire (Source: Simon Butler)

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