

The Animals' War: Personal accounts

Other animals involved in WWI

Many animals were adopted as mascots by the troops.

Jimmy and Jane

A few months later and another part of the line: an irregular and hastily convened court martial was under way; two lives were at stake. The trial had been set up with all the attributes of a military court with its appointed judge, prosecution and defence. Witnesses were on standby as the two defendants waited impatiently in the wings, as it were.

Jimmy and Jane, a gander and a goose belonging to A Battery, 52nd Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, had been purchased in early December 1915 and were being rapidly fattened up for Christmas Day lunch. However, their 'personalities' had captured the imagination of some men in the unit who suggested that instead of being eaten they might make excellent battery mascots. After due deliberation, the jury 'acquitted' Jimmy and Jane and the pair took up their new role, travelling to the mess cart, heads hanging over the side, to general amusement.

They subsequently went everywhere with the unit, enduring not only counter-battery fire but also a brief kidnapping by an acquisitive farmer. Rescued, the pair survived the war and were sent to England and a zoo. Jimmy died in 1920 while Jane lived in retirement on a Berkshire farm until 1931.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p1

Both livestock and pets were often abandoned as people fled in haste from the invading German army.

Captain Arthur Corbett-Smith, Royal Field Artillery (RFA), 1914

One man, at least, I knew (I never learned his name) who, at the tears of two tiny mites, clambered into the ruins of a burning outhouse, then being shelled, to fetch something they wanted, he could not understand what. He found a terror-stricken cat and brought it out safely. No, not pussy, something else as well. Back he went again, and after a little search discovered on the floor in a corner a wicker cage, in it a blackbird. Yes, that was it. And, oh, the joy of the girl mite at finding is still alive!

'Well, you see, sir,' he said afterwards, 'I've got two kiddies the image of them. And it was no trouble, anyway.'

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p34/5

Staff Nurse Clara Holland, Territorial Force Nursing Service, 1914

My heart bled at the pathetic sight of the many dogs and cats that refused to leave the piles of what had once been their homes. Many of them were mad with starvation and snarled when we approached them. It seemed so terrible that these faithful dumb pets of scattered families should also have to suffer in such an awful way.

The next day I returned, borrowed a rifle from a soldier, and another soldier and myself went around shooting these miserable, howling and starving things. We had very nearly finished our gruesome job, when we had to stop suddenly as the Germans began to answer our rifle shots from a wood beyond.

I saw a small kitten, frightened by our firing, rush out of the remains of a house, and I was just about to shoot it when it ran towards me and sat down at my feet. I hate cats, but this little poor wee thing looked so pathetic as it stared up at me with its little mouth open, that I stooped and picked it up, and it was then I saw that it had but three feet, one of its back ones having been shot off, and the stump was bleeding. I carried it to the hospital and dressed its

wound, and that night it went back to Antwerp with me as the smallest and youngest 'blessé' and the mascot of our hospital.

Would you have believed that a cat would have eaten chocolate? No, no one would and yet this little starving thing eagerly ate chocolate, all that I had in the food line with me and swore over it as if it had been the most delicious of 'catty' meals.

All the beautiful animals in the zoological gardens were shot. Lions, tigers, elephants, monkeys, in fact every animal in the building was killed in case they got out and added to the terrors.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p 52/3

Captain John Marshall, 468th Field Coy, Royal Engineers (RE), 1918

Doctor Foster and myself spent the best part of two days going round the town letting out dogs from premises – the owners of which had locked them up, leaving the dogs in charge, with the idea that they themselves would return in a day or two. We had several stiff climbs, up walls and trees, to get at some of these animals – and then they generally received us as burglars in a most ungrateful manner. Doctor Foster rescued a parrot that called itself Coco. The bird bit him twice on the nose, so that he had to wear a bandage. It could swear beautifully.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p266

Lieutenant J.R.T. Aldous, 210th Field Coy, Royal Engineers (RE), 1918

All the way up the road, and in fact all over the countryside, houses and whole villages were on fire, lighting up the whole district. One most pathetic side of the war which was very much in evidence was the dreadful fate which the livestock on the farms had to suffer: when the owners of these farms of these farms cleared out, they were in such a hurry that they left all their livestock tied up in the barns with the result that many were killed by shellfire, many were burnt in the farms, and those which escaped starved to death in their sheds. On our way up, the air was full of the cries of those miserable animals.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p267