

The Animals' War: Personal accounts

Horses in WWI

The account of Driver Luther RFA

Rowland Luther was a 19-year-old Welsh coal miner when the First World War broke out. After seeing a recruitment poster urging 'Here is a place for you. Fill IT', he decided to join up. On 9th September 1914 he was signed up as 28933 Driver RM Luther of the Royal Field Artillery (RFA) Regiment. First he was sent for training:

We were taught that after every job was done, the horses must be attended to first; they must be fed and groomed. That was all right on Salisbury Plain where there were plenty of water troughs but was impossible at the Front. In the Battle of the Somme ... we men suffered terribly, but the horses suffered even more.

In 1915 Driver Luther embarked for France:

We led our horses up the gangway and down into the hold of the ship. Some would not budge, and we had to tug at their heads and shove at their flanks, while their hooves were flitting in all direction. The impossible we slung up in a hammock, and dropped in the ship. After disembarking, the men and their horses marched for five days until they neared the firing line, or what was know as the front. We could hear distant gunfire.

As they drew nearer 'an artillery gun would fire ... we now realised that we were actually in the firing line. Horses were rearing up, terrified, and the drivers were having to use every possible effort to control them.'

On 25 September 1915 Luther and his brigade were ordered to prepare to advance:

The German gunfire had quietened down, but machine guns were active while rifles were whistling all around. We somehow managed to leap from our front line trenches, and got tangled up in the barbed wire. The horses became almost unmanageable, but the orders were to advance. We must have gone forward about two miles to the outskirts of Loos, when we were suddenly halted. The Germans were striking back and men and horses were falling right and left. The centre and wheel drivers were ordered to dismount, and the lead drivers were to take the team of six horses to the rear, which was virtually impossible with the terrified animals, some of which had received bullet wounds. Indeed I had never known before that horses can scream, but they can, in such conditions ... it was carnage, British and Germans and animals dead or dying lying all around.

During the battle of the Somme in 1916, artillery had to be brought forward to new positions over ground littered with debris, shell holes and a sea of mud. Knowing this, the Germans had littered the ground with caltrops (sharp spikes designed to pierce the animals' hooves).

But the guns could not ceasefire. It was necessary at any cost, to place them in the forward position, so as not to give respite to the enemy. When one team of horses fell exhausted in the mire, another took its place'.

If they had received shell fragments, we cut their traces, and many received a bullet to end their suffering and agony. Here we were stuck until after Christmas 1916. Our poor animals ... were now sinking in mud. True we had been given a coat covering for the animals, but the cold and rain were getting worse. The horses, however thirsty, would not touch shell water. Their rations of oats and hay were very poor, and the poor devils with mud on their legs and bellies now developed balls of mud which froze on their limbs and it was impossible to release them ... In this cold and hunger, the horses now developed a new habit – they started chewing – ropes, leather or even our tunics.

The horses then turned to chewing at one another, and soon became hairless, and a pitiful sight.