

Horses in WWI: Personal accounts

Cavalry

Early in the war, during the battle of Mons, the newly arrived cavalry were ordered to attack the advancing German army in order to give the retreating British troops a chance to withdraw.

Second Lieutenant Roger Chance, 1914

The regiment waits, dismounted, in a field behind the village. I have slipped the reins over my charger's head and he crops the lucerne. A remount, drafted from a hunting stable, he has not worked off a summer's ease and sweat darkens his bay coat. Cleg flies, out for blood, pester him. A lark sings out to me in a pause in the boom of the guns . . . 'Get girthed up,' says [Captain] Oldrey, 'stand by your horses, prepare to mount, mount.' The commands are rapped from troop to troop and 'walk-march' follows. There is a whee-thump of shells and a crash of house tiles from the village ahead. I see Colonel Mullens halted on the bank above, grimly watching us go. The order given to our Major Hunter will become a hasty squadron order yelled to me from those in front but all I can hear is the wholesale crack of shrapnel.

We span the unmetalled road, which runs straight, unfenced, through a stubble field dotted with corn stooks. I endeavour one-handed to control my almost runaway steed. Talbot has gone down in a crashing somersault. Then I'm among the ranks of those who, halted by wire, veer right in disorder like a flock of sheep. A trooper crouched on his saddle is blasted to glory by a direct hit whose fragments patter to earth. We follow the 9th Lancers to a heap of slag which affords cover. Sergeant Talbot appears mounted again, with Captain Sewell whose chestnut horse coughs foam and blood at me.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p31

Trooper Benjamin Clouting, 4th (Royal Irish) Dragoon Guards, 1914

It was a proper melee, with shell, machine-gun and rifle fire forming a terrific barrage of noise. Each troop was closely packed together and dense volumes of dust were kicked up, choking us and making it impossible to see beyond the man in front. We were galloping into carnage, for nobody knew what we were supposed to be doing and there was utter confusion from the start. All around me, horses and men were brought hurtling to the ground amidst fountains of earth, or plummeting forwards as a machine gunner caught them with a burst of fire.

Ahead, the leading troops were brought up by agricultural barbed wire strung across the line of advance, so that horses were beginning to be pulled up when I heard for the one and only time in the war a bugle sounding 'troops right wheel'. I pulled my horse round, then with a crash down she went.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p31/32

Cpl William Hardy, 4th (Royal Irish) Dragoon Guards, 1914

We galloped right across the enemy's firing line, absolutely galloping to death. The noise of the firing was deafening, being mingled with the death shouts and screams of men. Corporal Murphy, riding by my side, was shot through the chest and I had to take him out of the saddle and undress and tie him down to dress his wound. Men were shaking hands with each other, thankful they were still alive. Tracking all night. It was sickening to see the wounded horses that were trying to follow us, but the majority were shot.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p32

During the battle of Arras in 1917 cavalry horses were pitted against entrenched artillery and machine guns.

A/Capt. Douglas Cuddeford, 12th Highland Light Infantry, 1917

An excited shout was raised that our cavalry were coming up! Sure enough, away behind us, moving quickly in extended order down the slope of Orange Hill, were line upon line of mounted men covering the whole extent of the hillside as far as we could see.

It was a thrilling moment for us infantrymen, who had never dreamt that we should live to see a real cavalry charge, which was evidently what was intended. In their advance, the lines of horsemen passed over us rapidly, although from our holes in the ground it was rather a 'worm's eye' view we got of the splendid spectacle of so many mounted men in action.

It may have been a fine sight, but it was a wicked waste of men and horses, for the enemy immediately opened on them a hurricane of every kind of missile he had. If the cavalry advanced over us at the trot or canter, they came back at a gallop, including numbers of dismounted men and riderless horses, and – most fatal mistake of all – they bunched behind Monchy in a big mass, into which the Boche continued to put high-explosive shrapnel, whizzbangs and a hail of bullets, until the horsemen dispersed and finally melted away back over the hillside from where they came.

They left a number of dead and wounded men among us, but the horses seemed to have suffered most, and for a while we put bullets into poor brutes that were aimlessly limping about on three legs, or else careering about madly in their agony, like one I saw that had the whole of its muzzle blown away. With the dead and wounded horses lying about in the snow, the scene resembled an old-fashioned battle picture.

Why it had been thought fit to send in cavalry at that juncture, against a strongly reinforced enemy who even then were holding up our infantry advance, we never knew. Cavalry may still have their uses in some kinds of warfare, but for a large force of mounted men to attempt an attack on the enemy positions that day was sheer madness.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p200

One of the last cavalry charges was made during the battle of Soissons.

Captain Reginald Thomas, Royal Artillery, 18 July 1918

It was a magnificent sight as the French cavalry came out of the forest at Soissons. Their uniforms were all new, bright blue, every bit and spur-chain was burnished and polished; their lances were gleaming in the sun; and as the bugler blew the charge the horses went into the gallop in a fan attack - two regiments of French cavalry. They went along beautifully, magnificently, through the wheat field in the afternoon sun, until they met the German machine guns, which had just come up and unlimbered. The machine guns, they opened up on them at close range and aimed high enough to knock the riders off the horses. At the end of the time there was practically nothing left of those cavalry regiments.

Source: *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*, Max Arthur p293