

The Animals' War: Personal accounts

Horses in WWI

Exhaustion

Horses and mules often had to work long hours in terrible conditions with little food, water or rest.

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

We retreated south through village after village, mostly small grubby affairs, surrounded by coal mines and slag heaps, a feature of the region. It was hot, dry and dusty, and very quickly the horses began to look exhausted and dishevelled. Where we could, we rode along the road's soft, unmetalled edges, for the oval stones were very hard on their legs, but our horses soon began to drop their heads and wouldn't shake themselves like they normally did. Many were so tired they fell asleep standing up, their legs buckling, as they stumbled forward, taking the skin off their knees.

To ease the horses' burden, excess kit was dumped. Shirts, spare socks and other laundry were all thrown away along with our greatcoats. It helped, but the horses really needed a good rest and this was an impossibility. The best we could do for them was to halt, dismount and lead on, a short-lived order to walk that usually lasted no more than a mile or so. As a result, the horses' shoe nails wore down at a terrific rate, each lasting little more than a week or ten days, before the chink, chink sound of a loose shoe meant falling back to find the farrier.

It was sad to see our horses, so coveted and closeted at home, go unkempt. Saddles, once removed after every ride, now remained on for several days and nights with only the girth slackened. The horses became very sore, their backs raw from over-riding, although they tended to suffer less than the French horses, which were simply ridden into the ground.

The French cavalry never walked anywhere, and when they finally halted to give their horses a breather, it was not unknown for part of the horse's back to come away with the saddle. One horse went mad, banging its head against a wall, before it was finally put out of its misery.

It was appalling to see. For our part, we did the best we could, bandaging our horses' grazed knees with rags or bits of puttee, but the majority could consider themselves lucky if they got a rub down with a bit of straw, or a pat on the back to bring back the circulation.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p36/37

Lieutenant Eric Anderson, 108th Battery, Royal Field Artillery (RFA), 1914

We only lost two horses through exhaustion. They had been turned loose to look after themselves. All our old peacetime horses were looking really fit, though a little thin. The horses given us on mobilisation had not, as a rule, done so well, as we had not had time to harden them properly before going over to France and they had been plunged straight into the middle of real hard work.

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p3738

An Impression from the Western Front

On the way up to the front line one encounters a ceaseless stream of traffic, amidst which horse and mule-drawn vehicles predominate. Intermingled with them are the ridden horses, many of which are carrying shells, or returning empty from a trip to the various batteries. In summer the work of our equine friends is less arduous than during the vigorous months of winter, but both horse and mule lead a hard and strenuous existence no matter what the weather conditions may be.

In summer there are flies and heat to contend with, and in winter the awful mud tries the powers of the gamest horse. Yawning shell-holes gape to receive the unwary beast which wallows into them ... Coming down from the line, one passes horses and mules caked from ears to tail with a thick, adhesive coating [of mud], both the teams and the vehicles behind them looking as if they had wallowed in the yellow filth for weeks. Their work over for the time being, both horses and mules receive attention in their lines, but stables there are none. Cleaned and fed they spend the night standing together in dejected groups, awaiting the time for a return to duty ...

Source: An article from an RSPCA magazine of the period from *The Animals' War*, Juliet Gardiner p36