

## Horses in WWI: Personal accounts

### Casualties

**Approximately 58,000 horses and mules died on the Western Front as a result of enemy action. Four times that number, 230,000, died as a result of exhaustion, starvation and disease.**

#### **Second Lieutenant Arnold Gyde, 2<sup>nd</sup> South Staffordshire Regiment, 1914**

*Horses have been slaughtered by the score. They looked like toy horses, nursery things of wood. Their faces were so unreal, their expressions so glassy. They lay in such odd postures, with their hoofs sticking so stiffly in the air. It seemed as if they were toys, and were lying just as children had upset them. Even their dimensions seemed absurd. Their bodies had swollen to tremendous sizes, destroying the symmetry of life, confirming the illusion of unreality.*

*The sight of these carcasses burning in the sun, with buzzing myriads of flies scintillating duskily over their unshod hides, excited a pity that was almost as deep as pity for slain human beings. After all, men came to the war with few illusions and a very complete knowledge of the price to be paid. They knew why they were there, what they were doing, and what they might expect. They could be buoyed up by victory, downcast by defeat. Above all, they had a Cause, something to fight for, and if Fate should so decree, something to die for.*

*But these horses were different: they could neither know nor understand these things. Poor, dumb animals, a few weeks ago they had been drawing their carts, eating their oats, and grazing contentedly in their fields. And then suddenly they were seized by masters they did not know, raced away to places foreign to them, made to draw loads too great for them, tended irregularly, or not at all, and when their strength failed, and they could no longer do their work, a bullet through the brain ended their misery. Their lot was almost worse than the soldiers'!*

*It seemed an added indictment of war that these wretched animals should be flung into that vortex of slaughter.*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p35/36

#### **Rifleman Aubrey Smith, 1/5<sup>th</sup> London Regiment (London Rifle Brigade), 1916**

*The only incident worthy of record was the death of my late steed, Jack, owing to some internal trouble . . . It took several men a day or so to dig a pit for him and the dragging of his corpse to the burial spot by a blindfolded horse was a ticklish job. Over his grave we erected a wooden board bearing the following epitaph:*

*Here lies a steed, a gallant steed, whose Christian name was Jack.  
How oft he lugged our limbers to the firing line and back.  
Although he's loath to leave us, he is happy on this score –  
He won't be in this — rotten Army any more.*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p180

**The winter of 1917/18 was one of the coldest in living memory – temperatures often fell to - 20C. There was inadequate shelter for the animals on the battlefield and not enough to eat.**

#### **An anonymous artillery officer writing about the battle of Arras, winter 1917**

*Horses perished like flies. You could count them nearly by the score on the road – fanciful word! – and the battery to which I was attached lost seventy fine horses from exposure alone, apart altogether from shellfire. One bitter morning, eleven were reported stone-dead in the lines.*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p190

### **Captain James Dunn, RAMC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Welsh Fusiliers, 1917**

*There were dead and dying horses by the roadside. The severity of the winter, short rations and the exertions of concentration, had told on the transport animals.*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p203

### **Private Thomas Hope, 1/5<sup>th</sup> King's Liverpool Regiment, 1917**

*We come across many wounded and dying horses. They are scattered all over in shell-holes, and at our approach attempt to get up and off, as if they mistrusted the presence of a human being. One poor beast with back broken tries to haul its useless hindquarters along, while others just lie where they have fallen, colouring the sodden earth with their lifeblood. A few are still galloping aimlessly about, foam-flecked and wild-eyed – victims of man's ruthlessness.*

*. . . Dawn at last, and we plod wearily back for our spell of uncertain off-duty.*

*Standing near the debris of guns and limbers is a solitary horse gently cropping leaves from a low-lying hedge. At our friendly words it trots towards us as if pleased to have our company, but not sure of its welcome – poor faithful beast, how ill you are repaid for your staunchness.*

*I have long since become accustomed to wounded humanity. Their plight evokes pity and the desire to help, but a wounded animal leaves me with a feeling of loathing, loathing towards myself and the civilised humanity, which I represent. Too often have I seen reproach in the eyes of a dying horse, and outraged frailty in the flutterings of a wounded carrier pigeon.*

*We may understand; they never can.*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p240