

The Animals' War: Personal accounts

Horses in WWI

Shellfire

Enemy artillery would often target horses and mules because they knew that they were important to the war effort.

The retreat from Mons 1914

Captain Douglas Reynolds of the 37th Battery Royal Field Artillery (RFA), seeing that all the horses attached to a number of guns had been killed, brought up two new teams in the hope of rescuing the guns. Driven by volunteers, and within a hundred yards of the enemy, the teams attempted to hitch up two guns to drag them away. Under a hail of fire, one whole team was shot down.

Source: *The War Horses*, Simon Butler p69

Albert George, Artillery Sergeant

We could see ammunition wagons trying to replenish, getting about half-way to the gun, then a couple of shells would burst blowing the drivers and horses to smithereens, it was a terrible sight.

Source: *The War Horses*, Simon Butler p88

Private Joseph Murray, Royal Naval Division, the Somme, 1916

The journey to the rear was a nightmare. There was no shelter at all over the newly captured ground. The road to Beaucourt was a graveyard of many of the ration parties that had attempted to get through to us. When we reached the village, it was a dreadful sight: mutilated bodies of men, horses and mules everywhere among which we had to shelter while waiting a chance to run the gauntlet known to us as 'suicide corner'. The road, the only one, and the only way in or out of the area of our attack, had been in enemy hands for years and now they were free to concentrate all their fire on this narrow strip of activity.

Source: *From A Call to Arms*, Joseph Murray

Private David Polley, 189th Machine Gun Coy, MGC, 1916

To me, one of the beastliest things of the whole war was the way animals had to suffer. It matters not to them if the Kaiser ruled the whole world; and yet the poor beasts were dragged into hell to haul rations and gear over shell-swept roads and field paths full of holes to satisfy the needs of their lords and masters. Bah! Many a gallant horse or mule who had his entrails torn out by a lump of shell was finer in every way than some of the human creatures he was serving. I believe I might normally be described as a peaceful, easy-going sort of chap, but the sight of a team of horses, hitched to a limber, on a road in the forward areas, screaming with fright at a shell burst in the ditch beside them, turned my mind in such a direction, and instilled a desire to wipe out those responsible for the poor brutes' presence.

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

Gunner, H. Doggett, Artillery 1917

Our ammunition wagon had only been there a second or two when a shell killed the horse under the driver. We went over to him and tried to unharness the horse and cut the traces away. He just kneeled and watched this horse.

A brigadier then came along, a brass hat, and tapped this boy on the shoulder and said, 'Never mind, sonny!' The driver looked up at him for a second and all of a sudden he said, 'Bloody Germans!' Then he pointed his finger and he stood like stone as though he was transfixed.

The Brass Hat said to his captain, 'All right, take the boy down the line and see that he has two or three days rest.' Then he turned to our captain and said, 'If everyone was like that who loved animals we would be all right.'

Source: *The War Horses*, Simon Butler p125