

# The Horse Goes to War

by Robert Butler



One of the most widely-reproduced illustrations to have come out of the First World War shows a man kneeling in the middle of a road, cradling the head of a wounded horse. Behind him, smoke billows from a shelled house, and a compatriot (further up the road) urges him to move on quickly. The soldier's cheek is pressed against the horse's. The caption reads: 'Goodbye Old Man' [see next page]. It's melodramatic, of course; but the harsh fact is that more than eight million horses died during the First World War.

Most people had expected the war to be a short-term affair (over by Christmas, in fact). The classic theory of war, outlined by Clausewitz, was to seize the initiative. What followed would be short and decisive. The qualities needed in these kinds of engagements – surprise, speed, precision and ruthlessness – were best exemplified by the cavalry. The Cavalry Manual was unequivocal on the matter. Nothing could replace 'the speed of the horse, the magnetism of the charge, and the terror of cold steel.'

The cavalry placed great value on training and experience because horses don't like blood, or noise, or gunshots (they don't like anything unexpected really) and in a cavalry charge, a horse that panics can be more dangerous than the enemy. In the 19th century, the level of training reached impressive heights. Officers in the Prussian cavalry could charge 2000 yards without breaking line. Off-duty, a Prussian officer's idea of fun was to ride his horse between the turning sails of a windmill.

As for experience, English cavalry officers were renowned for riding fast over uncertain ground. This was largely thanks to the amount of time they had spent hunting foxes. 'In the business of war', wrote Captain Nolan, who died in the Charge of the Light Brigade, 'Our cavalry ought to be able to do whatever is done in the sport of hunting.'

In his book *Cavalry – Its History and Tactics* (1853), Captain Nolan writes that the first principle of horsemanship is to think of the horse first. A bad rider tries to guide and manage his horse so that he can 'keep his seat'. A good rider 'keeps his seat' in order to guide and manage his horse. This advice echoes the words of the Greek soldier and writer, Xenophon, two thousand years earlier. In his own treatise, *On Horsemanship*, Xenophon urged the cavalry to treat their horses gently. 'Those who force horses forward with blows,' he wrote, 'inspire them with still more terror.'

On the Western Front, the cavalry was stopped in its tracks by two 'terrors' that had been around for decades. The first was patented by an American farmer, Joseph Glidden, in 1874. He had discovered that if you placed barbs at intervals along a wire and used a second wire to hold these barbs in place, you could prevent cattle from roaming around the countryside. The discovery of 'bobbed' wire, or barbed wire, made Glidden one of the richest men in America, and transformed the American West.

The second 'terror' came from another American, who

Tophorn and Joey  
PHOTO: SIMON ANNAND, November 2011

# The Horse Goes to War

had previously distinguished himself by inventing the mousetrap. Sir Hiram Maxim later became British and was knighted. His breakthrough was based on Newton's Third Law of Physics, the law of reciprocal actions. It states that 'whenever a particle A exerts a force on another particle B, B simultaneously exerts a force on A with the same magnitude in the opposite direction.' Maxim used the backward momentum, or recoil, that comes from firing a shot, to load the next bullet. This transformed the weapon's rate of fire. In 1881 Sir Hiram invented the automatic machine gun.

Hundreds of thousands of cattle in America may have known about barbed wire, but at the beginning of the First World War, the British army was still using single strands of wire. Machine guns had been used in the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5), causing one future British general to report that the only thing the cavalry could do in the face of machine guns was cook rice for the infantry. (His superiors thought he had lost his

mind.) Between 1904 and 1914, when war broke out, the number of machine guns the British army ordered each year from the arms manufacturer Vickers remained the same: ten. As one historian observed, the British army in the 19th century was 'a social institution prepared for any emergency except that of war.'

Barbed wire and machine guns overturned the traditional concepts of warfare (quick and decisive actions) and introduced (on an unheard-of scale) the war of attrition. The area under hostile fire, or 'swept zone', became known as No Man's Land. The trenches were rapidly constructed out of duckboards, sandbags and corrugated iron and this trench system became so fixed that you could buy maps of the Western Front from London stationers.

The most famous battle of the war, the Battle of the Somme, was remarkable (not least) for its total lack of surprise. One survivor from the Somme remembered as his strongest recollection 'all those grand-looking cavalymen, ready mounted to follow the breakthrough. What a hope!'

Two and a half months after the Somme, a new weapon emerged. It was mobile, it could deflect machine gun bullets and it could crush barbed wire. The horse had been replaced by the tank.

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This article appeared in the original programme for *War Horse*. Robert Butler's publications include *The Alchemist Exposed*, *The Art of Darkness* and *Humble Beginnings* in the series 'The National Theatre at Work', copies of which are on sale at the NT Bookshop



Goodbye Old Man,  
a poster produced by the Blue Cross  
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# Horse and the history of war

by Gene Tempest



There is a lot of history in the *War Horse* story. We discover pre-war rural England – a small, complicated community, one family’s hardship, farm chores, livestock auctions, and horse-power. We witness the impact of the First World War on the countries and peoples that waged it – destruction of land and animals: trenches dug deep into the rich farmland of the French north, bombed-out houses and exhausted, starving equines; destruction of peoples: occupied populations, men on both sides of the front struggling to survive, dead husbands and sons, and the families and friends left to mourn them.

The original novel by Michael Morpurgo and the adaptation by the National Theatre were meticulously researched – as both final products and several of the articles in this education pack make clear – so it comes as no surprise that the cavalry bugle rings loud, sharp and historically correct. But in my opinion, the most interesting and, perhaps unexpectedly, the most historically representative part of *War Horse* is the central story: the friendship between men and horses in war.

Over the course of the war, the French and British armies deployed some 4 million horses and mules, the vast majority on the Western Front. Recognising the scale of this animal presence leads to drastically recasting our understanding of the Great War. Through horses – and particularly via the relationships between soldiers and horses – we may come to see entire societies, events, and individuals’ experiences anew.

When we dig into British, Australian, French, German and American archives, memoirs, letters, photographs and sketches, we begin to see how important horses really were – not only to military authorities (who often echo the sentiment that “[Horses] were not only

valuable; they were indispensable. [...] had the Allies been deprived of them, the victory would not have been ours”), but also vitally to the soldiers themselves.

Some men enlisted to follow their horses to war, as Albert does in *War Horse*. This was the case for a young soldier, Paddy, in the British Expeditionary Force. Paddy was thus able to remain with the horse he loved; the pair became groom and mount to an artillery officer on the Western Front.

Others men simply expressed a general desire for equine companionship during the trials of war. Frenchman Ephraïm Grenadou, born in a small hamlet in the rural region of Eure-et-Loire, enlisted with the simple request, “I want to be a soldier with the horses” (“Je veux être soldat dans les chevaux”).

Nor was Morpurgo’s story the first time a writer described a young man following his horse (and heart) to war. Fairfax Downey’s *War Horse* (1942) tells of the Texan, Jim Thomas, who joins the army to be with a mare named Barbara. Something about the idea of a loving partnership between soldier and horse captured the imagination of societies during the First World War – and still does today.

Unlikely as it may seem given the number of horses and men at war, reunions did sometimes occur. Richard St Barbe Baker remembers being reunited with a horse he had worked with in Canada prior to the war: “Recognition was mutual and it would be hard to say which of us was more excited. In a few minutes he was showing off with all the paces I had taught him during our long rides across the prairies of Saskatchewan.”

Another witness remembers Colonel W. MacDermott returning to his unit after an injury had forced his temporary evacuation: “The Colonel was anxious to see [his horse] Billy again, and started to walk down the line, shouting ‘Billy.’ The result was surprising; the horse recognized the voice, and immediately began to neigh, and shortly after exhibited great joy at seeing his old master again.”

Thus many of the most romantic parts of the *War Horse* story find ample archival confirmation, but for me the significance is not just about historical fact-checking. Instead, I think that the great beauty of the play is that it conveys a deep – and accurate – truth about the nature of war: horses helped soldiers remain human, and human/equine relationships help us understand how humane sentiments survived the trenches.

Sir John Moore, Director of the British veterinary services in France during the war, believed that soldiers’ relationships to horses provided “evidence of a pleasanter side of the picture and one which acts as a corrective and is an antithesis to baser impulses of men and nations.”

Scholars who study how war transforms soldiers often

Hayes Wills and his Field Artillery horse in Arizona, 1917. Inscription on the back of the image: “my horse/I ride him all/the time/drill on horses/all the time.”  
IMAGE COURTESY OF BOB SWANSON

# Horse and the history of war



write about brutalisation – how participating in and witnessing violence makes men increasingly callous and unemotional. But soldiers' relationships to horses, as we see in the play, suggest that in fact there is a more delicate balance between brutalization and sensitivity.

"Among the few bright things of the soldier's life none touched him more deeply than the mutual attachment of man and horse. No one who has ever had to do with soldiers and with horses can fail to acknowledge how much the horse helped to keep up the morale of the man. The very work of tending a horse was a distraction which relieved the trooper or the gunner from the otherwise unrelenting tension of warfare. The few minutes of pleasant companionship made him the more ready for the battle of a new day." – AW Curie, "Foreword" in DS Tablyn, *The Horse in War and Famous Canadian War Horses* (1932)

Writing about horses also provided soldiers with a way of protesting against war. First World War veteran Erich Maria Remarque, in the German classic *All Quiet on the Western Front*, wrote that "it is the vilest baseness to use horses in the war." Briton Robert Graves, in his war memoir *Good-Bye to All That*, echoes this sentiment: "The number of dead horses and mules shocked me; human corpses were all very well, but it seemed wrong for animals to be dragged into the war like this."

## Mobilisation

The requisition of horses in the French and British countryside and cities was often a painful moment,

one which accompanied the traumatic enlistment and departure of the menfolk. A French postcard shows a woman screaming at the military officer sent to buy her horse; the caption reads: "Keep my man at war for as long as you'd like, but at least let me keep my mare!!!"

French and British citizens wrote to their local and national governments with professional and personal appeals to keep their animals. Two children wrote to Lord Kitchener in August 1914:

"We are writing for our pony, which we are very afraid may be taken for your army. Please spare her. [...] It would break our hearts to let her go. We have given 2 others and 3 of our family are now fighting for you in the Navy. Mother and all will do anything for you but please let us keep old Betty, and send official word quickly before anyone comes." (For more on this particular example, see Jilly Cooper, *Animals in War*)

Over the course of the war, the United Kingdom impressed 468,088 privately owned horses into the army – 17% of Britain's equine population. In France in the month of August 1914 alone, 730,000 horses were requisitioned – in other words, 23% of the French horse population disappeared from the home front in fewer than 30 days.

The military archives are full of telegrams regarding the dangerous depletion of the French horse population. In early October 1914, the Prefect of the Aube telegraphed the Minister of War to beg him to stop the requisitions in the region – otherwise the Prefect feared that agricultural work would become completely impossible.

In Britain, a general shortage of the required light-draught horses was worsened by the fact that politics dictated requisitions: though Ireland had provided 80% of England's army horses before the war, military authorities decided that it was too controversial to widely requisition Irish equines upon mobilization. Called in to testify before the Committee of the Supply of Horses for the Army, WH Birkbeck, the Director of Remounts, stated only that requisitioning horses in Ireland was not desirable "for reasons of State."

## Imports

To meet demands for equine reinforcements after catastrophic casualty rates early in the war, hundreds of thousands of animals were purchased in the United States and Canada, as well as tens of thousands in Argentina. The fact that Germany did not have access to these markets, nor to the fodder exports of the Americas, gave the Allied campaign a material – and potentially decisive – advantage.

The photographer Erwin Biesenbach and his horse on the Eastern Front. IMAGE COURTESY OF JENS-OLAF WALTER

# Horse and the history of war

American newspapers widely reported the arrival of French and British purchasing officers. On November 2, 1914, *The Los Angeles Times* ran the sensationalist headline, “Beware! California Invaded By War Horse Agents.” Meanwhile, American horse dealers made handsome profits: “Alabama farmers profit by demand for war horses,” reported *The Washington Post* (horses were purchased at an average price between \$200 and \$300 a head). Meanwhile, other Americans protested against the involvement of the nation’s horses in a European war. As one 1915 *Washington Post* editorial put it, “The American horse has about as much business in the conflict as the American citizen.”

Charles Monpert was a French remount officer in the United States in 1914-1915. He drove a Ford across the country, eating fried chicken and corn for the first time, inspecting horses for 12 to 17 hours a day. In the duplicitous game of livestock purchase, Monpert was up against the likes of Joe Christie, a rough-rider from Grand Island, Nebraska, who bragged that he could sell any horse – no matter how wild:

“A lot of unbroken broncos were being shipped into the company to sell. [...] We could ride anything we could climb on to [...] It was not only a matter of personal pride with us to be able to control a horse well enough for it to pass inspection, but we also welcomed the nice fat tips the owners gave us when we rode one of their poor horses so well that it passed inspection.” – Joe Christie, *Seventy-Five Years in the Saddle* (1976)

## After the War

Though in 1917 Britain had more than 1 million horses in all its theatres, only some 60,000 returned to the United Kingdom after the war. Most were sold to local populations as working horses, while the animals in the worst condition were auctioned off to slaughterhouses

Many years after the war, soldiers still deeply regretted the horses they had left behind:

“Poor dear old Dandy, many were the rides we had together. [...] I wish I could pull down your soft face towards mine once again, and talk of the times you took me down Hill 63 and along Hyde Park Corner at Ploegsteert. Had I not been wounded and sent back to England at the end of the war, I would have brought you home with me to show my family, a friend that not merely uncomplainingly but cheerfully, with prancing feet and arching neck and well-groomed skin, bore me safely through dangers and darkness, on crowded roads and untracked fields. [...] I used to tell the men that Dandy and I always came home together. Sometimes I was on his back and sometimes he was on mine, but we always came home together.” – FG Scott, “Epitaph”

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