

THE WAR HORSES

THE TRAGIC FATE OF A MILLION HORSES
SACRIFICED IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Simon Butler

REPRINT

It is estimated that ten million fighting men, almost 800 000 of them British, died in the First World War. Only a fraction of those who were killed have a known grave – thousands were simply blown into fragments or lie buried, their graves unknown, in foreign soil. In the decades following the war's end hundreds of books appeared written by soldiers, politicians, poets and preachers, each trying to make sense of the conflict, the appalling conditions and the seemingly pointless slaughter. Simply put, the 1914–18 war has become a metaphor for hell on earth.

Alongside this tide of human cannon fodder was formed an equally large army of horses and mules – transport animals and cavalry mounts essential to the bloody business ahead. While men cheerfully volunteered in their tens of thousands, similar numbers of horses were being stripped from farms, liveries, hunt stables and from private ownership, packed on to ships and sent overseas. Over 8 million animals were thus engaged in the war worldwide. On the Western Front alone a total of a million horses died. Of those used by the British Army, themselves numbering almost a million, only around 60 000 are said to have been returned to the Britain at the war's end.

The War Horses concentrates upon those groups of animals who were requisitioned rather than those 'professionally' employed by the cavalry, in other words the horses, mules and donkeys who took on the drudgery of heaving rations, guns and munitions up to the front line, returning with wounded and maimed men. The author draws upon over 200 photographs and eye-witness accounts to illustrate the actuality of war and the vital role played by the horse on the Western Front. Poignant memoirs reveal the bond formed between the fighting men and the animals in their care; remarkable stories of compassion and kindness set against the harrowing background of 'The War to End All Wars'.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

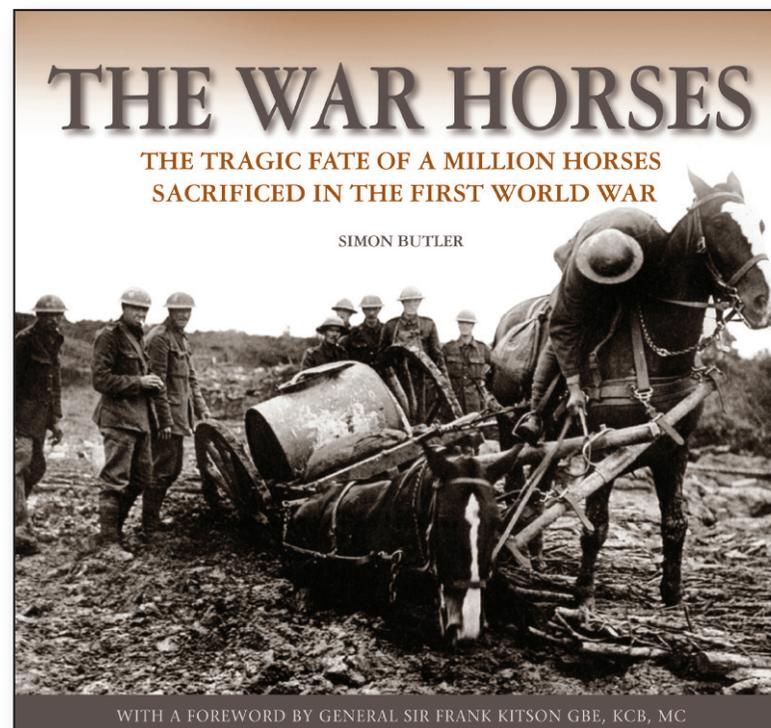
Simon Butler lives and works in the Westcountry. This book grew out of his interest in the Great War and his friendship with those who keep alive the bond between humans and the horse.

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A horse show behind the lines c.1915. The photograph captures a lancer sergeant successfully 'tent pegging'.



The importance of providing horses with protection from poison gas was quickly realised and experiments were made with several types of gas mask using a variety of materials.



A fanciful depiction by a German artist of German troops repulsing the attack of British cavalry in the form of the 18th Hussars and 4th Dragoon Guards at Thulin, 1914. Much exaggerated – the actual event was relatively minor – the artist gave the German public what they wanted – heroism of the infantry in the face of massed cavalry attack.



Right: A line of horses, fully equipped, waits at the back of a heavily sandbagged dugout at the entrance to which stand some troopers in a relaxed pose.

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A heavy shell falls in the city of Amiens. The German bombardment did not spare the railways, and an engine and its train were destroyed.

Shells in towns and cities could have an even more demoralising effect than in open country. Caused by the noise of shells, the sight of the men fighting and people and horses were often killed, and the loss of life was often more than that of the animals in a given area.

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With long range artillery it was possible to throw shells far behind the enemy's lines and at favoured targets including railways and ports, along with many of the large towns where troop concentrations were known to be quartered.

The incessant shelling brought about other problems for the troops, a phenomenon hitherto unimagined in warfare, shell shock. As early as 1914 men on the front line began to regress in their conduct the symptoms associated with the stress of fighting in the trenches, particularly when under an artillery bombardment. But while fighting men saw the effects on their comrades, the authorities were slow to recognise the problem. The symptoms of many soldiers were put down as cowardice and a number were shot following courts martial trials, others committed suicide. By the end of the war 50,000 cases were being treated.

While no veterinary report on such trauma appears to exist in respect of horses, there is no reason not to suppose that such sensitive animals, when subjected to similar conditions, should not also have exhibited behaviour akin to their human ones.

"The first, merry war to which we have all looked forward for years has taken an unforeseen turn. Troops are mangled with machines, horses have almost become superfluous... The most important people are the engineers... the theories of tactics are shown to be worthless."

A German officer writing in 1914.

A German soldier examines dead horses and men, Western of 1918.

Example of a double-page spread.



Wading through deep mud a soldier leads a horse laden with trench boots up to the front line.