

SENIOR SCAPE: Forgotten Warriors

By Doug LeGallais

With November rapidly approaching we will soon be thinking of our Veterans. There is another group I believe deserves a kind thought. The animals who have served.

How many paintings do we see projecting the 'glory' of War with mounted cavalry charging into battle? The horses depicted are immaculately groomed, and in full muscle; this sadly was rarely the case. Perhaps the Lord's charger was given special care, but like the ordinary foot soldier the horses usually died from wounds, neglect or starvation.

30,000 horses were used in the Battle of Waterloo alone, in what has been referred to as a 'veritable meat grinder.'

During the Boer War, the British lost 323,000 horses.

War Horses have endured much, from the butchery of the Medieval fields of war to the Mustard Gas, mange and dysentery of WW1. From Comanche warriors to the Mongol horde the horse was a valued weapon. From draft horses pulling supplies and weaponry, to the all-important cavalry horse.

In the 16th century, Equestrian skills developed and specific moves were created such as the Pesade (horse reared to protect his rider), and the Piaffe, horse high steps in-place while his rider hacked at the Enemy. These moves are now seen only in the Dressage ring.

Although the treatment of these animals was often poor, there are countless stories of the extreme bond they had with their riders. Soldiers sharing their meagre supply of food and water with their horse and horses buried with full military honours. Blackfoot warriors cried openly when their horse died. In 1932, a group of American Cavalry men learned that 506 horses deemed 'useless' were to be slaughtered. They rounded up the horses, risking court martial, and drove them from Texas to Canada. War brings out the worst and the best in us.

Similarly, dogs have proven their worth during War.

The Ancient world used large Mastiff type dogs, armed with spike collars and mail armour to fight. Napoleon, Attila the Hun and the Spanish Conquistadors counted on dogs as part of their arsenal. The American Pit Bull was used during the American Civil War to protect and carry messages.

Dogs still serve as warriors; they carry messages, track, haul, sniff out bombs, act as sentinels, and maybe most importantly are mascots for troops.

The breeds have changed, from the Mastiffs and Wolfhounds to the German Shepherds of modern wars to the now more popular Belgian Malinois, a somewhat smaller, more agile working dog. Although faced with terrible conditions and danger, the dog historically was treated somewhat better than the horse and most of the dogs of WW1 & WW2 were adopted by soldiers. However, during the Vietnam War these service dogs were deemed 'expendable' and were ordered to be euthanized after serving. After years of protest by ex-service people, a law was signed by President Clinton in 2000 reversing that policy.

Did you know that the Navy Seal Team who 'took out' Bin Laden included a dog?

And while we remember the noble horses and dogs that have served bravely, other animal war veterans are often overlooked. When we speak of hauling cargo or mounts for warriors, ancient and new, we cannot forget the countless camels, elephants, donkeys and mules that have served throughout the world. Carrier Pigeons flew across battlefields carrying important military strategies and messages. Canaries and mice were used to detect the presence of lethal gasses. Cats were invaluable in keeping down the rat population in trenches, military encampments and ships, and as a source of comfort and amusement for soldiers in the field or the wounded in hospitals.

These animals may not elicit the same response as our beloved horses and dogs but their service was also important.

We cannot deny the important contribution animals have made to mankind's wars. When you pause to remember our brave soldiers, give a thought to them.