

Jilly Cooper is a well-known journalist, writer and media superstar. Author of many bestselling books, including *Riders*, *Rivals*, *Polo*, *The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous*, *Appassionata*, *Score!* and *Pandora*. She and her husband live in Gloucestershire with several dogs and cats. Jilly Cooper was awarded the OBE in the 2004 Queen's Birthday Honours List.

By Jilly Cooper

FICTION

PANDORA

The Rutshire Chronicles:

RIDERS

RIVALS

POLO

THE MAN WHO MADE HUSBANDS JEALOUS

APPASSIONATA

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NON-FICTION

ANIMALS IN WAR

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HOW TO SURVIVE CHRISTMAS

HOTFOOT TO ZABRISKIE POINT (*with Patrick Lichfield*)

INTELLIGENT AND LOYAL

JOLLY MARSUPIAL

JOLLY SUPER

JOLLY SUPERLATIVE

JOLLY SUPER TOO

SUPER COOPER

SUPER JILLY

SUPER MEN AND SUPER WOMEN

THE COMMON YEARS

TURN RIGHT AT THE SPOTTED DOG

WORK AND WEDLOCK

ANGELS RUSH IN

ARAMINTA'S WEDDING

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

LITTLE MABEL

LITTLE MABEL'S GREAT ESCAPE

LITTLE MABEL SAVES THE DAY

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ANTHOLOGIES

THE BRITISH IN LOVE

VIOLETS AND VINEGAR

ANIMALS IN WAR
Jilly Cooper



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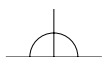
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To Leo



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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I also owe a particular debt of gratitude to J.M. Brereton, whose touching and beautifully written book, *The Horse in War*, was a constant inspiration to me when I wrote the two chapters about the horse; and to Henry Harris, who drew my attention to that wonderfully funny volume, *Mascots and Pets of the Regiments* by Major T.J. Edwards. I am also grateful to Lt.-Col. C.H.T.

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It only remains for me to thank my husband, Leo Cooper, for his photographic contributions to the book. By his vision, kindness, wide knowledge of military matters, and sense of humour, he is really the only begetter.

INTRODUCTION

One of the proudest moments of my life was when Dr Christopher Dowling of the Imperial War Museum asked me to write a book about the role animals have played in war to coincide with an exhibition on the same subject, which the Museum were planning to stage in the summer of 1983. For a dizzy moment, like the clown asked to play Hamlet, I felt I was being taken seriously as a writer.

It was only when I started work that I realized how singularly ill-equipped I was to write this book. For a start, I knew very little about *military* history. Being married to a military history publisher, Leo Cooper, for twenty-one years, has been rather like working in a sweet shop. I soon developed a complete block about the subject, and out of the 400 military books he has published, I had shamefully to confess I had read less than half a dozen. As a woman, I suspect I am not alone in having this block. In the same way that some men spurn novels, particularly romantic fiction, women tend to avoid war books, as being an exclusively guts-and-glory male province.

Having given up geography at twelve and history at seventeen (and being at a school where history stopped abruptly with Queen Victoria), I began writing from a position of total ignorance. I kept getting the First and Second World Wars dreadfully mixed up. How very inconsiderate, for example, of the Italians to

have been our allies in the First World War, and not the Second. Geography posed even more of a problem, and the house rang with wails of ‘Where the hell’s Mesopotamia?’ and ‘Whatever happened to Salonika?’

Apart from getting my Salonika’s in a twist, nothing had prepared me for the horror of the subject matter. I had no idea that eight million horses died in the Great War – imagine a capacity crowd at Wembley on Cup Final day, then multiply it by 80, and that’s about the figure. I had no idea that camels, elephants, mules, oxen, pigeons, dogs and cats perished in their thousands, often from starvation, cold and exhaustion, or because the soldiers had absolutely no idea how to look after them.

This is not a pretty story – it has been written with tears, not ink. Locked away in my study day after day, the material was so harrowing, I was in despair that I would ever be able to finish the book. But gradually I succumbed to the fascination of the subject. For with military history you put your finger on the pulse of all history, and so open the jewel box of the past. Gradually I realized too that it was not just a dry-as-dust subject dealing with tactics and strategies, but a story as full as any great novel of hatreds, petty jealousies, bumbling incompetence, burning ambition, and above all love. For where animals are concerned there is always love. One thinks of the Indian muleteers paid £1.20 a month, who refused ever to go on leave because they couldn’t bear to be parted from their beloved mules, or the German horse who stopped in the middle of a cavalry charge, and trotted back to comfort his dying master until a shell killed them both, or of the bedraggled mongrel in the trenches running desperately from soldier to soldier, gradually coming to the end of his little strength as he frantically searched for his missing master.

Fortunately too where animals are concerned, comedy is never far away either. As each chapter was started, and I became acquainted with each new animal, I would wander downstairs announcing: ‘I must have a mule, they’re so wonderful,’ or ‘Do you think we could find room in the paddock for a baby camel, or even an ox, they’re so terribly brave?’

As I type this introduction, my two dogs sleep sleekly beneath the table, and a large black cat purrs in my In tray. Across the valley, cows and sheep graze safely in the fields, and among them two beautiful slightly muddy grey horses suddenly kick up their heels and, full of the joy of life, break into a gallop, manes and tails streaming. This is how animals should live, not dragged, terrified and suffering, into our human conflicts.

I am well aware that many many aspects of animals in war have been covered sketchily, some not at all, but if this book should make a few people aware of the immeasurable debt we owe to the animal kingdom for our freedom today, I shall be very happy.

Gloucestershire, 1983

FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

Animals in War was first published in 1983, sold very well, was serialized in the *Mail on Sunday* and attracted a great deal of attention. Now I would like to thank my publishers Transworld for reissuing it in this lovely new edition, to spearhead a campaign to erect a long overdue memorial to Animals in War.

The memorial will be dedicated to all the animals who lived and died (in most cases) in the service of their country. At the time of writing, no firm decision has been made on the location of such a memorial, but it will certainly be in a prominent place in central London. A sculptor who came up with a wonderfully moving concept has been chosen. Funds, with a splendid kick-start from our sponsors Petplan, are already being raised. The royalties from this book will add to them.

It would be marvellous to write that the sufferings of animals in war are now a thing of the past. Alas, it is not so. We all remember Sefton and the slaughter of the Household Cavalry horses in Hyde Park. Horses today gladden our hearts with their jangling beauty on ceremonial occasions, but with mules they are also employed on dangerous missions abroad, resupplying troops far more stealthily and quietly than any helicopter.

Remember too that dogs are very much front line troops in various activities throughout the armed forces, tracking down the enemy and sniffing out explosives. They also guard our troops

and their depots, and have the heartbreak of having to re-bestow their love and loyalty to a new handler every few months, when the old one is posted on. Nor can these dogs serving so gallantly abroad expect a peaceful and happy retirement back home. Instead they are invariably put down to avoid the expense of six months in quarantine, which will soon, God willing, be a thing of the past.

Animals have a happier time raising morale as mascots. The noble wolfhound of the Irish Guards and the jaunty goat of the Royal Welch Fusiliers are splendid examples. But countless others are used to test explosives, chemical weapons and a wide number of vaccines and have died agonizing, hideous deaths.

One can only hope that our memorial will serve as a constant reminder of the literally millions of animals who perished in our service and for their countries and how appallingly we treated them. When people pass this memorial perhaps they will remember not just the horses and the dogs, but the mules, camels, oxen, elephants, pigeons, cats, canaries and many more. Even the tiny glow-worm guided soldiers in the First World War.

Remember them all. They had no choice.

JILLY COOPER
Gloucestershire, 2000

ANIMALS IN WAR

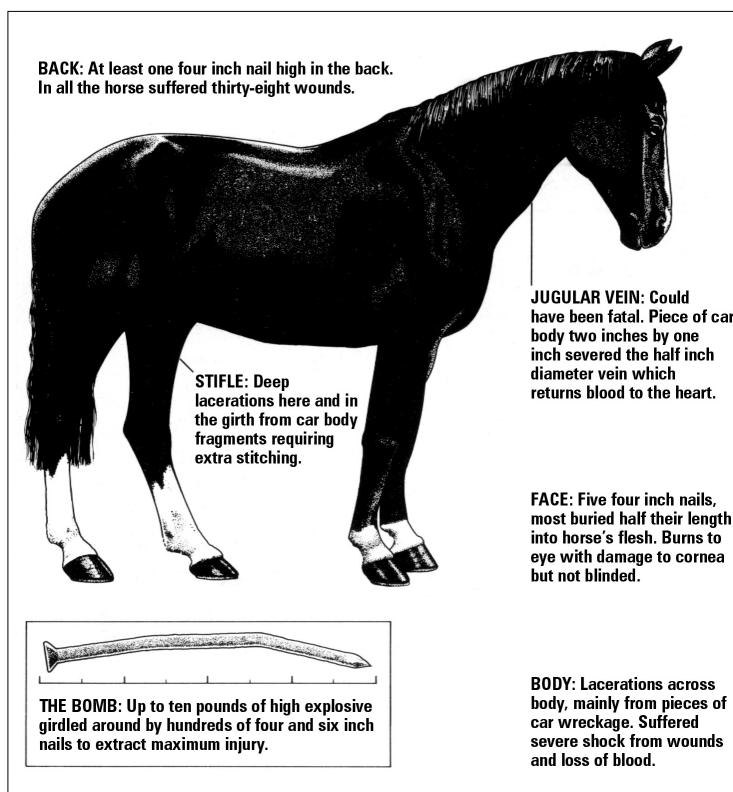
MY KINGDOM FOR A HORSE

'Do you know what they fought about?' I asked.

'No,' he said, 'that is more than a horse can understand; but the enemy must have been awfully wicked if it was right to go all that way over the sea on purpose to kill them.'

Anna Sewell: BLACK BEAUTY

On the morning of Tuesday 20 July 1982, a new guard formed by the Blues and Royals Mounted Squadron rode out from Hyde Park Barracks to take over as the Guards at Whitehall. Well aware that they were the loveliest sight in London, they rode with pride, and the usual crowd gathered along the pavement to marvel and applaud. Just as they were approaching Hyde Park Corner, a nail bomb hidden in a nearby car was detonated, killing four members of the guard. What sent shock waves of horror and outrage through the world, however, was that seven of the beautiful, glossy black horses which carried the soldiers were also killed and three severely wounded. Sefton, at nineteen the oldest, was the most badly injured. His jugular vein was completely severed and a six inch nail had pierced straight through his bridle into his



After 28 pieces of shrapnel were removed from his body, Sefton made a slow but complete recovery. The diagram gives details of his most serious injuries.

(BY COURTESY OF THE MAIL ON SUNDAY)

head. After twenty-eight pieces of shrapnel were removed from his body, he made a slow but complete recovery, and returned triumphantly to work in November, having become a national symbol of courage and stoicism.

While in no way belittling the horror and vicious cruelty of this tragedy, it was shortly afterwards that I started my research on the part horses have played in war, and gradually realized to my dismay that the Hyde Park bombings were the merest drop in the

ocean compared with the sufferings and terrors horses have endured in battle over the years. At least the dreadfully maimed horses in Hyde Park were immediately put out of their misery, or nursed back to health by devoted and highly skilled veterinary staff. They were not left to die slowly and in agony on the battlefield.

Of all the animals, the horse is probably the shyest, most highly strung and least aggressive. Yet for four thousand years he had been our most faithful ally in war. He has thundered unquestioningly into the mouth of the cannon. He has carried the military leaders and their vast armies to the far corners of the earth, allowing them to carve out their great empires. Yet despite the millions of words written to glorify the soldier's courage in war, little praise has been given to the horse that bore him. To single out a horse for praise seems to be as alien to most military commanders and historians as to suggest a tank or a helicopter fought with particular gallantry or stoicism.

Horses were first conscripted into armies sometime between 2000 and 1000 BC when a nomad tribe called the Hyksos invented a primitive form of chariot which could be drawn by a horse. With this weapon, they managed to overthrow the might of Egypt. A vast hurtling army of horses and chariots, raining down a torrent of sharp arrows, must have aroused the same kind of terror and panic we would feel today if a lot of Martians landed in spaceships. However, Egypt being a powerful nation soon drove out the Hyksos by inventing bigger and better chariots, this time drawn by two horses and carrying three men – one to drive and two to fire. By 1550 BC the chariot corps had become the elite of the Egyptian army.

It was Pharaoh's chariots who also drove the Israelites out of Egypt around the thirteenth century BC and instilled in them a marked antipathy to horses. Any Israelite capturing an enemy horse was ordered to hamstring him, which involved hacking through both tendons, leaving the wretched animal completely immobilized, crouching in dreadful pain under a burning sun until the vultures got him. This barbaric and criminal practice

continued for centuries. Rather as a soldier today would pull out the wiring from a vehicle, the Saracens used to hamstring their own horses during the Crusades rather than let them fall into the hands of the enemy.

The Greeks didn't use cavalry with any great efficiency until the fourth century BC, when Philip of Macedonia built up a well-drilled army which his son Alexander was later to exploit with such genius. Out of 40,000 men, 5,000 were cavalry. With this comparatively small force, Alexander was able to overthrow the might of Darius, King of Kings, who is estimated to have taken the field with a million foot soldiers, and 40,000 horsemen.

Alexander's revolutionary technique was to advance his infantry not in a straight line, but in the shape of a V pointing towards the enemy. This caused a dent in the opposing line, allowing his cavalry to sweep in on both flanks.

Alexander was exceptional among Greeks and among most early soldiers in that he was absolutely devoted to his horse Bucephalus. The name means 'Ox Head', the horse was so called because he had a particularly wide and handsome forehead. The legend goes that Philip, Alexander's father, had bought Bucephalus for a large sum, then found him vicious and unmanageable. The horse was about to be destroyed when Alexander, then aged twelve, asked if he might try to ride him. Despite the scoffing of his father, and no doubt the sniggering of the stable lads, he walked quietly up to Bucephalus, stroked him, swung his head towards the sun, and mounted him without difficulty. He was the only person to realize the horse was terrified by his own prancing shadow. The delighted Philip gave the horse to Alexander, who was also the only person Bucephalus ever allowed on his back.

Alexander rode Bucephalus through all his triumphant campaigns, but as the horse grew older, he used other horses for routine camp duties like inspecting and addressing the troops, and saved Bucephalus for the thick of the battle.

At the battle of Hydaspes in 326, when Alexander defeated the King of India, the gallant old warhorse who must have been at



Mosaic, discovered at Pompeii, showing Alexander the Great charging towards the enemy on Bucephalus.

ALINARI

least thirty was wounded in the neck and side. Gushing blood, he carried the unscathed Alexander out of the fray, and only collapsed and died peacefully knowing his master was safe. Alexander was prostrate with grief. Bucephalus was buried with full military honours and a city was built over his grave.

The Romans were not wild about horses, preferring their splendidly drilled infantry; but they soon realized if they were going to carve out and hold an empire, they would need an efficient cavalry to stamp out border skirmishes and deal swift hammer blows at the crux of an infantry fight. During the fifth century AD, Roman supremacy was toppled by the Huns, terrifying hordes who thundered in on their small stocky ponies, burning, looting and terrorizing all before them and darkening the sky with their arrows. The secret of the Huns' success was that, beside being inspired horsemen, they also introduced a brilliant new invention – the saddle. Made of wood and covered with hide, it kept the

weight firmly off the horse's backbone by resting on his sides. Even more important, the saddle had two stirrups which enabled the rider to use all kinds of weapons, and to swing round in the saddle and fire arrows accurately at high speed. With the aid of stirrups, he could also deliver a blow using the combined weight of himself and his charging horse.

Had Attila triumphed at Châlons, Europe would have been totally under Asian rule for the first time in its history. After such a nasty fright, Europe learned fast, and soon all the armies were riding with saddles and stirrups. From the Bayeux Tapestry, we can see that William the Conqueror's cavalry rode with saddles, stirrups and spurs. The horses are still small, the riders' feet nearly touch the ground; and one winces at the thought of Harold's battleaxes hacking away at those delicate spindly legs and elegant heads.

From the tapestry it can also be seen that the knights are wearing both helmets and body stockings of chain mail. With the arrival of the Normans, we see the introduction of the fully armed knight into Britain.



The Bayeux Tapestry, showing the cavalry of William the Conqueror. Note the use of stirrups, spurs and body armour.

GIRAUDON

The history of war has always been one of deterrent and counterdeterrent. The Norman knights on their nippy ponies and light armour could easily whisk out of range of Harold's battle-axes and bows and arrows. It therefore became necessary to produce a missile with a longer range, so the deadly crossbow was invented, and shortly afterwards the even more deadly longbow, which could shoot 250 yards (that's more than eleven cricket pitches) and bring down a horseman even before he started his charge.

The counterdeterrent was to resort to heavier armour for the rider, but then if his horse was hit, the rider was so hampered by his steel trappings that he couldn't run away, so the only answer was to arm the horse too. This meant that bigger and bigger horses were needed to carry all this weight, so we see the arrival of the heavy horse, or *destrier*, who was to dominate the battlefields of Europe until the invention of gunpowder ousted his supremacy.

The *destrier* was principally imported from the Low Countries and had hairy legs and huge quarters like our Shire horses today.



By the twelfth century, he was carrying an armoured knight and armour on his own neck, head, forehead and hindquarters weighing up to thirty stone. It was no wonder that he could go no faster than a lumbering trot, and like armoured cars today, frequently got bogged down.

At the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, for example, when Robert the Bruce defeated Edward II, the English *destriers* became completely bogged down in the marshy land and the potholes dug by the Scots.

Edward III also imported a large number of horses from the Low Countries not only for stud purposes, but to continue the war against Scotland.

The cost of this influx of great horses so horrified the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1310 that he included the excessive expense of their upkeep among the worst abuses of the country. Each great horse cost 2s 7d a week to keep – a sum which would have fed at least four or five people.

It was impossible for the man in the street to afford, let alone keep or arm, one of these huge horses, so the animal became a status symbol of the very rich and grand, just like cars at the beginning of the twentieth century.

J.M. Brereton in his brilliant book, *The Horse in War*, writes, 'Drawn exclusively from the nobility and "county" families, the entire ranks of the mounted knights were everywhere regarded as the flower of military might . . . on the battlefield the knight and his horse reigned supreme, they had become the *raison d'être* of the armies, and the humble serfs and peasants of the infantry were regarded as little more than a necessary nuisance.'

Occasionally the infantry were allowed to start the battle, but if their skirmishing went on too long, the mounted knights got fed up with waiting, and charged into and over their wretched followers.

It was this superiority of the mediaeval knight that somehow instilled into the cavalry the idea that they would always be smarter than any other section of the army. This attitude was summed up several hundred years later by the young officer who

when asked in a *Punch* joke to define the role of the cavalry in war, replied: 'I suppose to give tone to what would otherwise be a mere vulgar brawl.'

With the arrival of gunpowder, the heavy horse's reign was ended. At the Battle of Crécy in 1346, 8,500 English infantry routed a French army of 50,000. Armed with longbows and three very primitive cannon, the English also had the advantage of having their backs to a low slanting evening sun. Standing their ground, as the French *destriers* and their riders clanked forward like Metal Mickies, the English let loose a volley of arrows and gunpowder, bringing the horses crashing to the ground. Even if they weren't hurt, it was difficult for them to get up in all that armour, and many were trampled underfoot as the French cavalry put in fifteen gallant but equally ineffectual charges. The French lost 11,500 men, the English a mere 200.

'It is best', as J.M. Brereton points out, 'not to contemplate the image of the stricken *destrier*, pierced with a dozen barbed shafts, each convulsive struggle forcing them deeper and deeper and twisting them in his entrails.'

Nevertheless, at the Battle of Manicura during the Crusades, one horse, obviously an early Sefton, staggered out of the fray like a maddened porcupine with fifteen arrows sticking out of him, and survived.

Now that gunpowder had arrived, it was not long before the cavalry, determined not to be upstaged, picked up their muskets too. Gustavus of Sweden ordered his mounted men to ride at the enemy, fire a single shot, and then set to with the sword. At Edgehill, in 1642, Prince Rupert banned muskets altogether, insisting that his men galloped home with the sword alone.

Rupert is probably one of the most glamorous figures in English history, a handsome foreign prince and a brilliant commander who fought for the Royalist cause out of true altruism. It is fitting that his concept of the charge, tearing across country like a hunt in full cry, and brandishing a sword instead of a whip, should become the romantic dream of every cavalryman, whenever he entered the fray.

Marlborough like Prince Rupert preferred his cavalry to use the sword not the pistol, and to advance at a steady trot. He was also a stickler for neatness, deploring long messy tails, and insisting the horses had their tails docked ludicrously short like a boxer dog's stump, leaving them with no protection against flies. Even more barbaric was the practice of having their ears cut short, on the premise that the wretched animals might go beserk if the offending protuberances were suddenly lopped off by some complicated sword flourish in war.

In the eighteenth century Frederick the Great probably created one of the most efficient armies of modern times. He found his cavalry in a chaotic state, with the men riding sloppily and the horses fat as elephants. With extensive drilling he soon had horses and riders welded together like centaurs. Frederick also had the vision to realize that as gunpowder grew more efficient, the cavalry would become more vulnerable without any artillery backup. He therefore introduced batteries of light six-pounder guns, balanced on gun carriages, and drawn by six galloping horses, which were able to keep up with the cavalry wherever they went. Once again Europe was not slow to follow suit; soon every cavalry had its team of galloping gunners. The British model, founded in 1793, became the Royal Horse Artillery.

Napoleon was another great military leader who found his cavalry in a chaotic state and took immediate steps to remedy the situation. Although he was determined to improve the quality of the horses, he had absolutely no feelings about the animals themselves, and made it very clear that he didn't wish horses to be spared if they could catch men.

And they were not spared. In the retreat from Moscow in 1812, Murat lost a horrifying 30,000 horses, who either starved or froze to death. Little better was the fate of the British horses in the Peninsular War. On the retreat to Corunna, horses, with riders in the saddle, were discovered frozen stiff like equestrian statues.

Then came the 'most unkindest cut of all'. Having survived all the horrors, any of the horses which staggered into Corunna had to be shot by the soldiers, as there was no room on the boats, and



The Scots Greys charge forward at the Battle of Waterloo, Belgium, during the Napoleonic Wars.

HULTON GETTY

they mustn't fall into enemy hands.

According to J.M. Brereton, 'a horrifying carnage ensued, there was no time for humane consideration, only a mass slaughter with troopers unused to pistols, firing into the demented herds. Maimed and mangled horses struggled or lay still, on the quay-side . . . or panic-stricken, galloped over the edge of the quay and were left to drown . . . when ammunition ran short, the troops were ordered to use the sword and even worse butchery ensued.'

One poignant aspect of the tragedy, and one that crops up frequently in the next hundred and fifty years of war, was that only the soldiers' horses were slaughtered. Room was found on the boats for nearly all the officers' chargers – as usual there was one law for the rich and privileged and another for the poor and non-commissioned.

Not that the soldiers appeared to be particularly attached to their horses. Captain A.C. Mercer of G. Troop RHA commented acidly in his journal of the Waterloo campaign, that the only way

to make the men pay some attention to their horses was to make them walk and carry their kit should their horses fall sick or die.

Waterloo had its own share of terrible casualties. In twelve successive charges, the French light cavalry under Marshal Ney crashed against the immovable squares of Wellington's redcoats. Each charge was hampered by dead and dying horses underfoot, and grass made slippery by spilt blood. Marshal Ney had three horses shot from under him.

Two extracts from Captain Mercer's diary, however, illustrate the full horror of the battle. At the height of the fighting, he noticed some soldiers hastily unharnessing a battery horse, and shoeing it away. A few minutes later he was amazed to see the



A cavalryman of the 11th Hussars.

HULTON GETTY

horse desperately trying to join another team; looking down he was sickened to see that the lower half of the animal's head had been shot away. 'Still he lived, and seemed conscious of all around whilst his full clear eyes seemed to implore us not to chase him away from his companions.'

Fortunately, Mercer ordered a farrier to destroy the horse. Later, his own brave troop of horses were badly shot to pieces and those left alive suffered a dreadful night on the battlefield. 'Some lay on the ground with entrails hanging out, one poor animal excited painful interest, he had lost, I believe, both his hind legs, and there he sat the night long on his tail, looking about as if in expectation of coming aid, sending forth from time to time long and protracted melancholy neighing.'

Anyone who has watched the Grand National will appreciate the herd instinct of the horse. In battle it was the same; a horse would be so terrified that he would keep going however badly he was injured, racing along, being careful not to tread on dead or wounded bodies, until he came to three or four other riderless horses, and would fall in with them, keeping together for mutual protection. This herd instinct was also tragically illustrated at the Charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimean War when horribly mutilated horses instinctively followed the nearest rider and had to be beaten off with the sword. Theirs was not even the ability to reason why.

And if the carnage effected on the Light Brigade wasn't enough, the Crimean winter did the rest. It didn't appear to occur to the authorities that horses tied up in the freezing cold would never survive without food or clothing. There was no hay and no rugs, and the demented horses started eating each others' manes and tails.

A report from the *Illustrated London News* of 3 February 1855 says it all:

Once upon a day he had been a handsome charger, but now he was the veriest caricature of a horse that Edwin Landseer – foisted on the most atrocious nightmare that ever weighed

upon Cruikshank – could conceive or delineate. That horse was grand in its decay for it beggared description. A skeleton covered with an old hide, no mane, no tail; a pair of deep-set glaring, ghastly, and almost ferocious eyes, and lips shrunk away from the long, bare, and hungry teeth. You could not tell the colour of the animal; his coat of hair was covered with a thick coat of mud, which was baked on him, and fitted him tight, like a slush-coloured leather jerkin, and there he stood, shivering in the sun, and up to his knees in mire, tied to what had once been a shrub, but was now a bundle of dry, withered, leafless, branchless sticks, rooted to the ground; and these sticks the animal eyed with a hungry glare, and every now and then took a bite of them.

Fortunately rumblings of disapproval were beginning to be heard. The late nineteenth century saw the growth of that splendidly vigilant organization the RSPCA. At the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War, they wrote to both combatants pleading that a corps of official slaughterers might be employed to put wounded horses out of their misery. With massive contempt the Germans appointed one man. He was not much use. The RSPCA in their magazine *Animal World* gave an infinitely pathetic account of the aftermath of the Battle of Vionville, when hundreds of horses lay wounded on the battlefield. Evidently, when the bugler for the first regiment of German Dragoon Guards sounded the evening call, 602 wounded horses answered the summons. Shuffling, terribly lame, some scarcely able to crawl, the noble creatures staggered back to the lines.

‘One can guess’, wrote *Animal World*, ‘the feelings of the German Dragoons when they beheld this touching scene, and many a hand brushed away a tear.’

Compassion also shone through the carnage after the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, when troopers of the 21st Lancers gave their heavily wounded horses, those that could hobble down the river, a long, last drink before shooting them.

In fact as Lord Anglesey points out in Volume III of his *History*

of the British Cavalry, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, people were starting to be more professional about the horse. Remounts are spare army horses. In 1887 an Army Remount Centre was founded which consisted of a pool of horses on which each regiment could draw, if it fell below its allotted equine quota. Thus 'no longer would the buying of horses be subjected to the whims of individual commanding officers, and the wiles of dealers'. Remounts, it was further ruled in 1898, must be at least fifteen hands high, and five years old.

In 1888 under the National Defence Act a system of organization was started, giving the Government powers to requisition horses in times of national danger. Livery stable keepers, bus and railway companies were all asked to register a percentage of their livestock and by 1897 some 14,500 horses were on the books.

Meanwhile across the Atlantic, the American Civil War of 1861–5 had come and gone, which was not only the greatest clash since the Napoleonic Wars, but also introduced a revolution in cavalry tactics. Charging against the newer, more powerful and accurate guns, generals on both sides found they were losing too many horses.

The new technique was therefore to gallop within gunfire range of the enemy, leap off your horse, leaving him in charge of a soldier, then pound away at the enemy until your ammunition ran out, then if you were still alive, you jumped on to your rested horse, and galloped away to safety.

Unfortunately, the British, wrapped in their usual isolation, took absolutely no notice of these new tactics and continued to dream of the knee-to-knee cavalry charge.

It was hardly surprising that when they arrived in South Africa in 1899, supremely confident of crushing the Boers in a few weeks, they were dismayed to find themselves outshot and outridden by gangs of 'Bible thumping farmers mounted on scruffy little ponies'. These tough Boer ponies in fact could live off the land and keep going for days, while their masters as well as being first class shots, knew the country backwards, and kept well out of the way so the British cavalry had no one to charge.

Most important of all, having learnt the lesson of the American Civil War, the Boers dismounted when they reached the enemy, and used their guns. Nor did they need any extra hands to hold their ponies, which were trained to stand still the moment their reins were thrown over their heads. By comparison, the British horses, after a dreadful sea trip round the Cape, were given no time to rest and get used to the climate. Nor had the British learnt from the Crimean War that the hunter, the mainstay of their cavalry, though brilliant at keeping going at speed across country, cannot thrive on short rations and violent shifts of temperature. The only British horses which turned out to be tough enough to stand up to the conditions were those sent out by the London Bus Company.

The other equine success story of the Boer War was the Australian Waler. The product of thoroughbred stallions bought cheap from England and mated with local mares, the Walers were



Watering the horses: a Boer War situation which was not always as simple as it is depicted. IWM

light but extremely tough, and used to carrying their masters all day on the sheep farm. They had no difficulty coping with the long treks, nor the shortage of hay and oats, or the shifting climate.

The Australian bushmen who accompanied them brought their usual cheerful iconoclasm to the battle. A troop under Herbert Plumer, who was later to become a distinguished general, was encamped with some Dragoon Guards. Soon the Dragoons' fine chargers began to vanish from the horse lines, with the scruffy Walers taking their place. The incensed Dragoons found it hard to identify their horses (give an Australian half an hour with a horse, and tails are changed, manes hogged, and brands and marks disappear like magic) and complained bitterly to Plumer. He was totally unsympathetic, telling them they could learn a few lessons in tactics and toughness from the bushmen. He was less amused however when someone stole his fine grey charger and



Boot, saddle, to horse . . . British yeomanry in the Boer War. IWM



dyed it with Condy's fluid. The General with his eyeglass picked out the horse from the Australian lines, and the guilty bushman was made to walk for a day beside his mounted comrades.

In fact the Dragoons' fine horses were soon breaking down like the other British horses from exhaustion, mange, strangles, influenza, and sore backs. Even worse, at Ladysmith and Mafeking, the cavalry were forced to shoot their horses to feed the starving garrisons, and fight as infantry. Every bit of the horse was used. Tails and manes stuffed mattresses, bones were boiled to make soup, flesh was minced and stuffed into intestines to make sausages.

Britain won the war in the end by sheer weight of numbers, but the horse casualties were a disgrace. Out of the 520,000 remounts supplied, an utterly appalling 326,073 horses died – most of them from disease and exhaustion rather than enemy fire. Never before in the history of any war had there been such a dreadful sacrifice of animal life and public money. And because there was



Parley between surrendering Boers and 1st East Lancs, 1900. IWM

no veterinary corps to destroy the sick and wounded horses or supervise their return, they brought home diseases, which weren't stamped out for years.

At the beginning of the Boer War, the RSPCA had been on the warpath again. After much fuss they were assured by the British authorities that although they didn't feel an official corps to put horses down was necessary, directions had been given to all the troopers to end mercifully the lives of all severely wounded animals. This was plainly rubbish. A trooper can't shoot a horse, if he's running for his life, or severely wounded. According to an RSPCA pamphlet issued after the war, one of the most painful recollections of the soldiers in the Boer War was the heavy moaning of the injured horses, and their sorrow at having to abandon these doomed creatures in their hour of misery.

Public feeling was outraged. In 1902 a parliamentary committee was set up. As a result, the Army Veterinary Corps was founded in 1903, with Major-General Frank Smith, a man of

great vision and compassion, appointed Director-General. He vowed that in future the corps would keep animal suffering and wastage to a minimum. How triumphantly it was to achieve this aim despite appalling obstacles and setbacks will be seen in the next chapter.