

ANIMALS IN WORLD WAR ONE

by

Reg. A. Watson

Animals played a huge role during the war, none more so than horses, camels, donkeys and mules, particularly in Palestine and Mesopotamia.

Many Tasmanians served with the 3rd Light Horse, which was made up of two squadrons from South Australia with "C" squadron recruited from Tasmania. While the light horseman supplied his own horse, once you were in the army, it was the latter which owned your mount. The army would continue to provide feed and veterinary services.

It is hard to say how many horses were purchased by the Australian army, most of which were sent overseas, perhaps between 110,000 to 125,000. The cost of transporting horses, say to Egypt on a six week voyage was astronomical, more than a hundred pounds each

The purchasing of the mounts was done by local buyers with the stocky, powerful pony type aged between 8 years and 15 years sought after, but there were variations and exceptions. The height preferred was between 14.2 to 15.2 hands for the Light Horse with a slightly smaller horse to be used as pack horses. These latter horses had to endure heavy loads, up to 150lb packs on either side. Gun horses used for artillery could be greater in height, 16 and half hands.

Every man of the Light Horse was responsible for his own mount and his horse was not to be neglected in any way. Indeed it was expected that his horse would be fed and looked after before taking care of himself.

With gun-teams, a man would be responsible for two horses.

The cost to the army of horses varied greatly. The average purchase for a normal would be worth one hundred pounds, while the normal mount could be purchased for around about twenty pound.

Sadly only one horse returned to Australia that being *Sandy* belonging to General Bridges. When the war was over horses were placed in various categories. The best, A was sent to other places where Britain considered them to be needed, whereas B & C were despatched to India and Mesopotamia. Class D were destroyed.

Horses, donkeys and mules were not only used as Light Horse mounts but used as forms of transport, but also for pulling guns and wagons and carrying heavy packs of munition, water and medical help to the soldier. They also carried wounded soldiers and we are reminded of the amazing story of the "*man with a donkey*". This was when Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick who served at Gallipoli helped many soldiers who had been wounded by carrying

them to safety on his hard serving donkey. Sadly many horses, donkeys and mules were killed while doing so. These could go where lorries and cars could not because the roads were so muddy and steep. Horses were also used as Calvary horses and the Australians used them on the attack on a Beersheba, Palestine. Naturally in this desert-like and rugged terrain of the Middle East and North Africa camels were also used. A prime example of this was the extraordinary work undertaken by Colonel T.E. Lawrence, later to be called, "*Lawrence of Arabia.*"

Other animals also played a major role such as pigeons, dogs and even cats.

Dogs were used to help soldiers when they were out patrolling to give them warning of an enemy approaching, thus saving their lives. The pigeon was used to carry messages between the soldiers and their officers when it was not possible to lay telephone lines being too dangerous.

It was not only the pigeon which served our soldiers; it was also canaries. When digging underground, poisonous gasses appeared which would suffocate the men. Canaries, as they had been used in mines during peaceful times, were put to work to detect these gasses. Mice also were employed in the same way. If the canary or mice died from these gasses, the soldiers were fore warned, so that they could put on their gas masks preventing their death.

The conditions in the trenches both at Gallipoli and at the Western Front were so bad that the men were plagued by mice and extremely large rats. There was only one really effective way of dealing with these creatures and that was to bring in the resourceful cat. Many of these rats were as big as the cats themselves. Nonetheless, our feline friend did a mighty job in killing these rodents to the benefit of our soldiers.

Other animals and birds such as hawks were used as mascots and many soldiers became very friendly and fond of their animal mascots which helped them.

Our animal friends played a major part in the war and it is sad to know that like the men, many of the animals were killed. It is hard to estimate how many animals, such as horses died during world war one.

Perhaps even though World War One was the first mechanised war in history, it still relied on animals when there was a great need to do so.

Animals played a vital role during World War One, especially horses. Australia sent more than 136,000 Australian horses overseas to support and serve. The type of war horse that was favoured by the light horsemen in the campaign was originally from New South Wales, hence the sturdy, hardy breed became known as 'Walers'.

The Australian Light Horse unit was a popular choice for many Australian volunteers who enlisted. Here we have compiled a list of some of the local soldiers who either served with the Australian Light Horse or worked with animals during their time in service.

For Australia, the World War One remains the costliest conflict in terms of deaths and casualties. From a population of fewer than five million, 416,809 men enlisted, of whom more than 60,000 were killed and 156,000 were wounded, gassed, or taken prisoner. Another 6,000 veterans died by the 1930s because of war related injuries and suicide.