

WAR HORSES

November 2018 saw the 100th anniversary of the Armistice of the First World War. It was a most terrible war with so many killed and such a great deal of suffering. Not only was it men, women and children who suffered but also animals, particularly horses.

Until the 1880s, Cavalry Regiments were responsible for buying their own horses. In 1887, the Remount Department was created to take over this role. Animals were bought from breeders, auctions and private families. Officers at this time still used their own horses.

During the First World War the Army could not have functioned without horses. They were vital for Cavalry roles, but also needed for moving supplies, equipment, guns and ammunition and for transporting the wounded to hospital. The requisition, transportation and care of these animals was of huge importance.

Obtaining horses.

When the war broke out in 1914, the Army had only 25,000 horses at its disposal. By the end of the conflict, it had purchased over 460,000 horses and mules from across Britain and Ireland. Horses were heavily used in World War One. Horses were involved in the war's first military conflict involving Great Britain – a cavalry attack near Mons in August 1914. Horses were primarily to be used as a form of transport during the war.

Horses were commandeered by the War Office from all over the country, some 120,000 in the first two weeks of war and some of the local hardships caused for example, were the 80 horses shipped from the Isle of Arran, ferried to the mainland saw trams stopped running as no horses were available to pull them and across the country farmers were particularly hit hard as working horses and thoroughbreds alike had to go, not forgetting also, the parting of much loved 'family' horses.

The wharf at Wat Tyler Country Park was used as a loading dock as well as the Rail station at Pitsea for arrivals and transfer of horses whilst other local areas including Canvey Island and Fobbing were used as training and feeding grounds.

Miss Dorothy Gardner who was born at Marsh Farm at Vange in 1904, related her memories of the lead up to the war to the Basildon Heritage Group in 1985. She spoke of nearby Brickfields and mentioned her father had lots of horses and carts and used to carry the bricks for building local houses, including the farmhouse they lived in.

She said Barges used to come up the nearby creeks to be loaded with bricks which were then taken to London. As a child, she used to swim in the creeks. On the day war was declared, she had returned home from the annual Horticultural Show held at All Saints Church at Vange, to find her mother in tears. The War Office had taken several horses and her mother's mare that she used to drive her trap, was one of these, for the war effort.

During the war, Dorothy, her sister and her younger brother used to do a milk round before going to school. Dorothy and her sister used to go to Pitsea Station and put the milk churns on the 8.15am train for either Southend or Grays. This was then followed with the milk round in the Bowers Gifford area. Near the Bowers Gifford Rectory was a gun site and her brother and another sister delivered milk to the troops there. They had been given a one-hour morning session extension requiring them to be at school at 10am.

Horses pulling artillery.

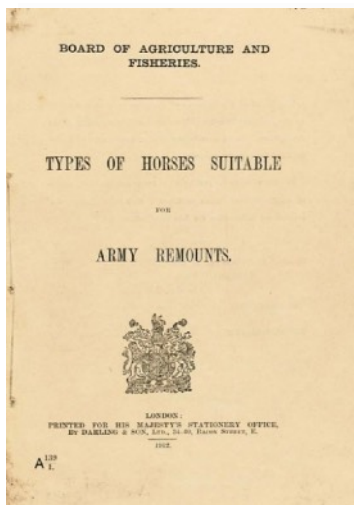
When the war broke out in Western Europe in August 1914, both Britain and Germany had a cavalry force that each numbered about 100,000 men. Such a number of men would have needed a significant number of horses but probably all senior military personnel at this time believed in the supremacy of the cavalry attack. In August 1914, no-one could have contemplated the horrors of trench warfare – hence why the cavalry regiments reigned supreme. In fact, in Great Britain the cavalry regiments would have been seen as the senior regiments in the British Army, along with the Guards regiments, and very many senior army positions were held by cavalry officers.

However, the cavalry charge seen near Mons was practically the last seen in the war. Trench warfare made such charges not only impractical but impossible. A cavalry charge was essentially from a bygone military era and machine guns, trench complexes and barbed wire made such charges all but impossible. However,

some cavalry charges did occur despite the obvious reasons as to why they should not. In March 1918, the British launched a cavalry charge at the Germans. By the Spring of 1918, the war had become more fluid but despite this, out of 150 horses used in the charge only 4 survived. The rest were cut down by German machine guns.

Though a cavalry charge was no longer a viable military tactic, horses were still invaluable as a way of transporting materials to the front. Military vehicles, as with any mechanised vehicles of the time, were relatively new inventions and prone to problems. Horses, along with mules, were reliable forms of transport and compared to a lorry needed little upkeep.

Such was the use of horses on the Western Front, that over 8 million died on all sides fighting in the war. Two and a half million horses were treated in veterinary hospitals with about two million being sufficiently cured that they could return to duty.



Types of Horses Suitable for Army Remounts, 1912.

This booklet was issued by the War Office in 1912 and gives details of the types of horses suitable for use in different units of the British Army. It outlines conditions that had to be followed as regards to age, colour and soundness, for all horses accepted for remount purposes.

Prior to the war, a census of British horses had been taken, identifying how many were available, how much they ate and what type of work they were suitable for. Their nearest train station was also listed. In the first few weeks of the conflict, the Army requisitioned around 120,000 horses from the civilian population. Owners who could not prove that their horses were needed for essential transport and agricultural needs had to surrender them.

Requisition.

Dr Reginald Duke Hill (1866 – 1922) worked for the Army Remount Department. He used this stationery box on his travels around the country.

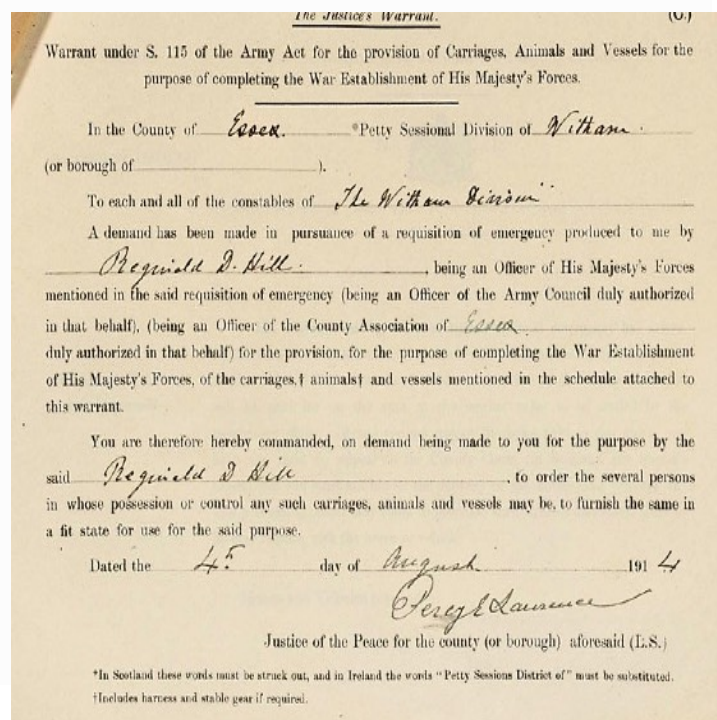
It contains everything he needed to buy horses for the Army, including a chequebook, numerous official forms and labels, as well as a branding iron. During the first year of the war the British countryside was virtually emptied of horses, from the heavy draft horses such as the Shire through to the lighter riding ponies.

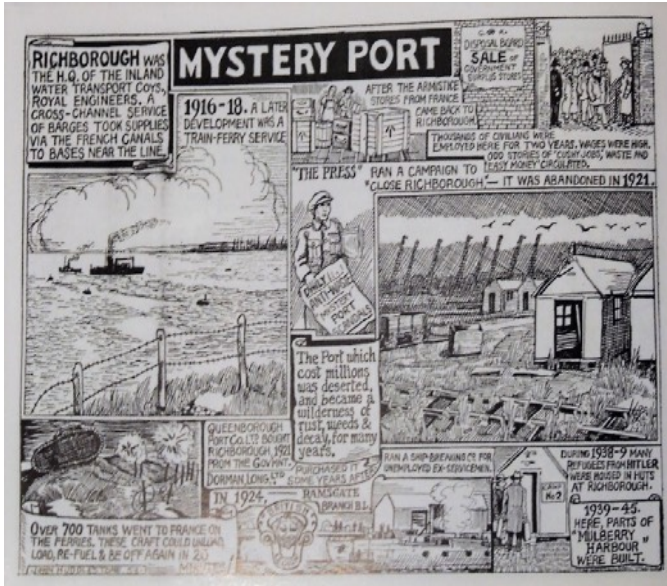
Crucial to agriculture at the time, the impact of having their finest and beloved horses requisitioned by the Government was immense on farming families.

Transport

In some areas, especially around London, short connecting lines were built to allow the railway system to function more efficiently. Railways were crucial for conveying troops and their equipment, and many camps were provided with new branch lines and sidings as were new munitions factories. Canal transport remained important to local economies, but similarly suffered from a lack of investment.

Hostilities brought an end to civilian cross-channel shipping and many ferries were requisitioned as troop transports and hospital ships, and some were painted in dazzle camouflage to confuse U-boat crews. Dover and Folkestone were two of the most important embarkation ports.





At Dover, the new and nearly completed Dover Marine station was pressed into service for troop embarkation and receiving the wounded. In recognition of its role in the Southeastern and Chatham's Railway's war memorial was placed at Dover, it and the station are listed Grade II. At Richborough, Kent a new port was built and included the world's first roll-on roll-off rail ferry; the connecting rail bridge survives at Harwich, and is listed Grade II.

On the roads the requisitioning of draft horses for the army reduced the amount of freight that could be carried. Mechanised road transport was in its infancy, although steam wagons, and petrol and diesel lorries were increasingly used for shorter journeys. Post-war the sale of surplus military vehicles greatly accelerated this trend.

The horses were transported to the ports where they were hoisted onto ships to cross the Channel. On arrival in France they would soon be confronted by the horrors of the front line either as cavalry horses or as beasts of burden. Many of the men, grooms, infantrymen, cavalrymen and others formed close bonds with the horses in their charge, but they could do little to prevent the appallingly high death rate due to shelling, front-line charges and exhaustion.

In 1914 the British Army owned only 80 motor vehicles so the dependence on horses for transporting goods and supplies was significant. The conditions on the Western Front were so appalling they were totally unsuitable for motor vehicles.

O v e r s e a s .
The Remount Department also looked for help overseas, eventually spending over £36 million buying animals around the world, especially from America and Canada. In today's money that would be about £1.5 billion.

Over 600,000 horses and mules were shipped from North America. Travelling by sea was as dangerous for horses as it was for humans. Thousands of animals were lost, mainly from disease, shipwreck and injury caused by rolling vessels. In 1917, more than 94,000 horses were sent from North America to Europe and 3,300 were lost at sea. Around 2,700 of these horses died when submarines and other warships sank their vessels.

On 28 June 1915, the horse transport SS 'Armenian' was torpedoed by U-24 off the Cornish coast. Although the surviving crew were allowed to abandon ship, the vessel's cargo of 1,400 horses and mules were not so lucky and all perished. The demand for horses was so great due to the heavy losses, between 1914 and 1917 in the United States a 1,000 horses a day were loaded on to ships bound for Europe.

With the horses being so vital to the war effort there were constant threats of naval attacks and even attempts at poisoning of horses before even embarking on the journey. A lot of the horses were taken from the North American plains, and many were half wild.

Horses were also shipped from New Zealand, South Africa, India, Spain and Portugal. In addition, a large number of mules were also purchased from the USA. Prized for their amazing stamina, they endured the terrible conditions on the front-line far better than the horse.

With so many horses crowded into tight spaces on the ships the rampant spread of disease became a major problem. These horses were particularly susceptible to a type of pneumonia. Even those that weren't ill weren't necessarily in good shape when they finally landed.

Horses aged three to twelve years old were trained as rapidly as possible by soldiers called 'roughriders.' When they were ready the horses were formed into squadrons and sent to the Western Front.

F e v e r .

Once on the ships, the animals were placed in their stalls and given regular checks during the voyage. Despite the best efforts of the men who looked after them, many horses suffered from 'shipping fever', a form of pneumonia, and from various pulmonary complaints. Having been confined in a small space, horses usually required several weeks to recuperate on landing. It was the job of the Remount Department and the Army Veterinary Corps to get them into shape and ready for active service.

S e l e c t i o n .

Horses purchased for the Army had to meet certain criteria. Initially, a horse had to be over three years old, healthy and the right size for the work they were purchased to do. This was either for riding, for pulling guns or for transport. The requisition of horses from civilians at the start of the war prompted some families to write to the War Office to spare their beloved family ponies. In response, the War Office decided that no horse under 15 hands high would be recruited. A horse's height was measured from its withers (the top of its shoulders) with special sticks.

The Remount Depot at Romsey, Hampshire, was kept busy day and night with shipments of horses from across Britain and those arriving at nearby Southampton from overseas. All the animals were checked to ensure they were not carrying any diseases that could infect other horses. Once passed for service, they were sent to the front.

Care

For hundreds of years, the Army had lost huge numbers of horses through neglect. In 1796, it appointed veterinary officers to cavalry regiments to reduce the number of sick and injured horses lost in conflict. The Blue Cross Fund, established in 1912, also offered medical help and supplies to animals. This was especially important during the First World War where many new recruits would never have worked with horses before and needed to learn quickly. In 1915, the Blue Cross produced 'The Drivers' and Gunners' Handbook to Management and Care of Horses and Harness' to provide vital information for soldiers working with artillery, ambulance and supply horses.

Grooming.



In muddy conditions, it could take up to 12 hours to clean horses and their harnesses. But keeping horses well-groomed, even on the dirty conditions of the battlefield, served several purposes. Practising good grooming standards meant that the horse was always prepared for battle at a moment's notice.

Grooming also helped to prevent chafing from harnesses and saddles, keeping horses in better condition for longer.

And at the same time, it gave the carers the opportunity to inspect their horses for pain, wounds or sickness on a daily basis. During the war, veterinary officers were told to clip horses to help control skin infections like mange, which were prevalent in the boggy conditions of the Western Front. Unfortunately, this led to an increase in the number of animals dying from exposure to the cold and the mud. So in 1918, the order was relaxed so that only the legs and stomachs were clipped.

Watering and feeding.

A horse required ten times as much food as the average soldier. During the First World War, there was a distinct lack of grass for them eat on the Western Front or in the deserts of the Middle East. This meant that horse fodder was the largest commodity shipped to the front by many of the participating nations. The food ration for a horse was 20 lbs of grain a day. This was nearly 25% less than what a horse would usually be fed. Finding enough food for the horses and mules was a constant problem. The horses were always hungry and were often seen trying to eat wagon wheels. When grain was in short supply, the horses and mules had to be fed on sawdust cake.

The demands on transport meant that feed had to be rationed. British horses ate the best of all the warring nations. The naval blockade forced the Germans to supplement their horses' feed with sawdust, causing many to starve. The horses were fed from a nose bag rather than directly from the ground. This reduced

waste and cut the risk of horses eating something that would make them ill. It also stopped a horse stealing food from another!

In 1918 the British army alone had almost 500,000 horses distributing 34,000 tons of meat and 45,000 tons of bread each month. Since the animals themselves also needed feeding and watering they would also distributed some 16,000 tons of forage.

Farriery.

Horses were expected to march long distances during wartime, sometimes up to 40 miles (64km) per day. Iron horseshoes wore out quickly, and usually had to be replaced once a month. Farriers and shoeing smiths were needed to keep horses moving. The farriers' job was primarily hoof trimming and fitting horseshoes to army horses. This combined traditional blacksmith's skills with some veterinarian knowledge about the physiology and care of horses' feet.

Tools.

The 'smiths usually carried the heavy materials they needed with them as they marched. An army farrier would have used a variety of tools and nails to clean horses' feet and change their shoes. Most farriers were non-commissioned officers; the majority serving with artillery and cavalry regiments. One of their less welcome tasks was the humane despatch of wounded and sick horses.

Medical care.

During the war, horses suffered greatly from cold temperatures, long marches and poor food. Equine diseases, respiratory problems and mud-borne infections were also prevalent, as well as fatigue, exhaustion and lameness caused by work.

Combat injuries were not as common. But thousands of horses were still treated for bullet wounds, gas and even shell-shock. Of the horses who died during the First World War, some 75 per cent perished as a result of disease or exhaustion. Even so, between 1914 and 1918, the Army treated its animals with greater care than ever before. Around 80 per cent of those treated by the Army Veterinary Corps were successfully returned to frontline service.

The British Army Veterinary Corps.

Army Veterinary Corps was responsible for the medical care of animals used by the army; predominantly horses, mules and pigeons.

Before the war, the Corps was comprised of the following:

- AVC Depot (Woolwich)
- No 1 Veterinary Hospital at Aldershot (made up of Nos 1 and 2 Sections AVC)
- No 2 Veterinary Hospital at Woolwich (made up of Nos 3 and 4 Sections AVC)
- No 3 Veterinary Hospital at Bulford (made up of Nos 5 and 6 Sections AVC)
- No 4 Veterinary Hospital at the Curragh (made up of Nos 7 and 8 Sections AVC)
- No 9 Section AVC at Pretoria (South Africa)
- No 10 Section AVC at Potchefstroom (South Africa)
- No 11 Section AVC at Colchester
- Nos 12 and 13 Section AVC at Woolwich
- A detachment at Shorncliffe
- A detachment at Cairo (Egypt)
- Territorial troops of the AVC serving with Divisional Veterinary Sections



During the Great War.

The Corps reorganised to provide a Mobile Veterinary Section as part of each Division that went overseas. They are shown in the table below. There were approximately 70 of these who went overseas with the rest of its division.

A number of Base Veterinary Hospitals were established in the theatres of war including:

- No 1 at La Chapelle-aux-Pots until November 1917 when it moved to Italy
- No 2 at Le Havre
- No 6 at Rouen
- No 9 at Abbeville
- No 22 at Abbeville
- Indian Veterinary Hospital at Rouen (formerly 7, 19 and 20 Sections AVC)

In one year alone, 120,000 horses were treated for wounds or disease by British veterinary hospitals alone. Ambulances and field veterinary hospitals were required to care for the horses, and horse trailers were first developed for use on the Western Front as equine ambulances. Disease was also a major issue for horses at the front, with equine influenza, ringworm, sand colic, sores from fly bites, and anthrax among the illnesses that affected them. British Army Veterinary Corps hospitals treated 725,216 horses over the course of the war, successfully healing 529,064. Horses were moved from the front to veterinary hospitals by several methods of transportation, including on foot, by rail and by barge. During the last months of the war, barges were considered ideal transportation for horses suffering wounds from shells and bombs.

Inspections.

The primary aim of the Army's veterinarians was to prevent disease and injury, both of which had caused huge losses in earlier conflicts. Horses were inspected daily by veterinary officers. Equine medical care during the First World War was superior to that of any previous conflict. That said, between 1914 and 1918 the Army lost around 15 per cent of its horses annually. In comparison, 80 per cent were lost each year during the Crimea War of 1854 to 1856.

Many wounded animals were destroyed on the spot. But others were taken to casualty clearing stations for emergency treatment. Hospitals were established to treat the sick horses sent from the front, with equine ambulances and trailers developed to transport them there.

Disposal.

During the war, thousands of horses, mules, camels, donkeys and oxen were killed or wounded. Others succumbed to fatigue and disease. While the Army Veterinary Corps tried to save as many as possible, thousands had to be destroyed. Many were shot. But sometimes tools, like this humane killer, were used. It is a single-shot device and unscrews to take a .310 cartridge. This was fired into the skull of the animal in order to kill it as humanely as possible.

On the lines.

Providing accommodation for the huge number of horses on the front was a difficult task. There were not enough stables to provide shelter for every horse. When the Army requisitioned new horses, they tried to prepare them for life outdoors by not stabling them before they were sent to the front.

Picket spikes were used to tether horses out in the open. Usually, a number of spikes would be hammered into the ground and a rope strung through them, and then several horses tied to the rope. But picketed horses were still at risk of sinking in the sticky mud of the Western Front.

Picket Spike and Case.

However the majority of the horses were not used on the battlefield. In 1918 just over 75,000 were allocated to the cavalry, while nearly 450,000 horses and mules were used to lug supplies around. Another 90,000 were charged with carrying guns and heavy artillery, and over 100,000 were horses that were ridden around the front lines, carrying food and ammunition to soldiers and bearing the wounded across the trenches to hospitals.

By the end of the war there were twenty horse hospitals behind the lines. The military were aware that the war could not be won without them. However, following their initial engagements, they realised cavalry charges were not the most effective use of horse power. The cavalry soldier for the next eighteen months joined his fellow infantry soldiers in the trenches.

The War Horse

Over six million horses played a role in World War I, more than any other conflict in history. The British Army alone used 1,183,228 horses.

At the end of the war some 85,000 were sold for horsemeat and about a half a million to farmers in the war zones to help them rebuild the countryside. Only about 60,000 came back to Britain including the six black horses who pulled the body of the Unknown Warrior to its resting place in Westminster Abbey.

After the war, horses which had survived the horrors of fighting were brought home to be cared for by the charity now called "Blue Cross." This charity has been in existence since 1897. In 1912 a 'Blue Cross Fund' was established during the Balkan War and reopened in 1914 to assist the horses of the First World War. It still functions today as "Blue Cross"

A document is held in the National Archives at Kew regarding the slaughter of horses and the sale and consumption of horseflesh as human food. Whilst it is recognised that Belgium and France were the main purchasers of horseflesh but also, as well as our butchers who undertook this work, both Great Britain and America also consumed post war horseflesh.

San Toy (1890-1922)

One of those was San Toy. It was said that San Toy never missed a single day's duty through both the Boer campaign and the Great War. Working so well, and to the grand age of 28, his officers were keen to see him live out his retirement years in comfort.

San Toy was one of the first 'War Horses' taken in by The Home of Rest.

Roger (1907-1934)

Roger's story was truly remarkable. 15.2hh chestnut gelding Roger, thought to have been a German Officer's Charger, was found wandering rider-less on the battlefield during the infamous Battle of the Somme.

A British Army Officer 'captured' Roger and got him to safety. Roger then served as that Officer's mount for the last 2 years of the war, getting him out of any number of 'tight spots' on the battlefield.

After the war, the grateful Officer bought Roger back to England and paid for him to enjoy a quiet and dignified retirement at The Home of Rest for Horses.

Old Sam (1907- late 1930s)

Working Horse Old Sam was a survivor of World War I but being just 11 years old in 1918 still had a lot of work left in him. He toiled for another 19 years, pulling firewood which his owner sold on the streets. Though his owner depended on and cared for him, life was hard and there wasn't always enough money to look after Old Sam properly. When he could work no more, Mr. John Harris – the Magistrate of the Thames Police Court – asked the Society to help. At last Old Sam could enjoy some well-deserved rest and retirement.

There is a Remount Depot at Cologne holding the reserve for the Army of the Rhine.

Animals have been disposed of for work and for meat as follows :—

	Number sold for work.	Number sold for meat.
United Kingdom, 11th November, 1918, to 31st March, 1920 ...	132,649	6,247
France and Flanders " " " " ...	197,181	40,688
All other theatres " " " " ...	169,331	14,347

The following is a comparison of the wastage of horses in the French and English Armies, 1st October, 1917 :—

	Died, destroyed, killed, missing.	Cost.	Total loss.
French Army in France ...	376,201	165,513	541,714
British Army in France and in England ...	225,836	30,348	256,204

The proportion of castings to deaths in the French Army is 1 cast to 1·7 dead; in the English Army it is 1 cast to 7 dead.

Wastage during the South African war worked out at 7·8 per cent. a month.

The estimated expenditure up to 31st March, 1920, was 67,505,000*l*.

The number of *riding* horses purchased in United Kingdom from the date of mobilization to 31st December, 1918, is as follows :—

1st, Mobilization period (5th August, 1914, to 16th August, 1914, inclusive) ...	49,131
2nd, Completion of mobilization period to 31st March, 1915 ...	57,271
3rd, 1st April, 1915, to 31st March, 1916 ...	21,337
4th, 1st April, 1916, to 31st March, 1917 ...	20,583
5th, 1st April, 1917, to 31st March, 1918 ...	10,646
6th, 1st April, 1918, to 31st December, 1918 ...	15,697
Total ...	174,665

Warrior

Warrior was foaled on the Isle of Wight in 1908. He went to war with his owner General Jack Seely (Lord Mottistone) in 1914. He was involved in many of the famous battles of the war including the charge at Moreuil Wood on 30 March 1918. The men of the Canadian Calvary that they had a special fearless horse in their midst and made him their mascot.

He survived the war, returning to the Isle of Wight and died at the grand old age of 32. His obituary in the Evening Standard in 1941 read:

‘The Horse the Germans could not kill’

Lord Mottistone’s famous old warhorse Warrior, which he and Sir John French (Lord Ypres) rode during the last war, has died at Mottistone Manor, Isle of Wight at the age of 32.

Warrior had so many narrow escapes from death in the last war that the Canadian Calvary, who Lord Mottistone commanded in France, used to call him “the horse the Germans could not kill”

This is our real war horse meeting star of stage and screen Joey of the National Theatre's internationally acclaimed production of War Horse.