HANDOUT

"ANIMALS THAT SERVED IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR"

As presented to the Ventura County Genealogical Society.

Over 16 million animals served in the First World War. They were used for transport, communication and companionship. In 1914, both sides had large cavalry forces. Horse and camel-mounted troops were used in the desert campaigns throughout the war, on the Western Front, new weapons like the machine-gun made cavalry charges difficult and deadly.

Horses, donkeys, mules and camels carried food, water, ammunition and medical supplies to men at the front, and dogs and pigeons carried messages. Canaries were used to detect poisonous gas, and cats and dogs were trained to hunt rats in the trenches. Dogs, cats, and more unusual animals including monkeys, bears and lions, were kept as pets and mascots to raise morale and provide comfort. Some regimental mascots represent their home country and counties history.

When the custom of having regimental mascots first started is not clear; the earliest record is that of a goat belonging to the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in the 1775 American War of Independence. Some mascots in the British Army are indicative of the recruiting area of a regiment, such as the Derbyshire Ram, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Irish Wolfhounds and Welsh Goats.

Official British Army mascots are entitled to the services of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps, as well as quartering and food at public expense. There are also mascots whose upkeep are borne by the regiment or unit itself. In 1914, the British army possessed 25,000 horses. The War Office needed to source a half million more to go into battle. They were essential to transport weapons and supplies, to carry the wounded and dying to hospital and to mount cavalry charges. In the first year, the countryside was emptied of shire horses and riding ponies, heartbreaking for families who saw their horses requisitioned by the government.

It was traumatic. Transported to the ports, they were hoisted onto ships crossing the Channel before being initiated into the horrors war. Men formed close relationships with the horses, but they couldn't prevent the appallingly high death rate.

Ambulance horses carried wounded soldiers and artillery horses carried weapons, ammunition and other heavy loads. Here in the first picture - allied cavalry troops' horses are lowered down in a sling onto the quayside as they arrive in Salonika, Greece.

PICTURE 1

The British government arranged for half a million horses to be transported across the Atlantic in convoys. Between 1914 and 1917 around 1,000 horses were sent from the United States by ship every day. A constant target for German naval attack and over two thousand seven hundred were drowned although this is not greatly advertised. Horses were so vital to the continuation of the war effort that German saboteurs also attempted to poison them before they embarked on the journey.

The British public petitioned the government to improve animal welfare during the war. The RSPCA and the Royal Army Veterinary Corps were active in treating injured horses and trying to prevent unnecessary suffering. Indeed, the loss of horses greatly exceeds the loss of human life in the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele. At the end of the war some of the surviving horses were sold as meat to Belgian butchers, being regarded as unfit for any other purpose. It would be the last time the horse would be used on a mass scale in modern warfare.

Before 1914, wars had mainly been fought by cavalries – **As here in Picture 2** – The Famous Royal Scots Greys - soldiers who fought on horseback using swords and guns. But both sides soon realised men on horses could not win the war in the trenches, so they were used for transportation instead.

However the majority of the horses were not used on the battlefield. In 1918 just over 75,000 were allocated to the cavalry, while 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 carried food and ammunition to soldiers and bearing the wounded across the trenches to hospitals.

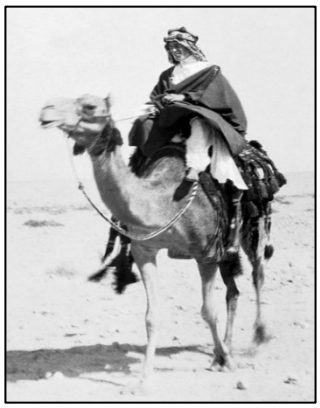
In 1918 the British army alone had almost 500,000 horses distributing 34,000 tons of meat and 45,000 tons of bread each month. Since the animals themselves also needed feeding and watering they would also distributed some 16,000 tons of forage. The food ration for a horse was 20 lbs of grain a day. 25% less than what a horse would usually be fed. Finding enough food for horses and mules was a constant problem and when grain was in short supply, the horses and mules had to be fed on sawdust cake.

CAMELS

At the beginning of the war, the Maharaja of Bikaner in India, sent his camel corps to support the British in Egypt. British soldiers soon came to appreciate the advantages that camels had over horses in a desert. Not only could a camel carry a soldier and six week's worth of supplies for days at a time without water, but camels proved to be much calmer than horses under fire. In cavalry units, one man out of four had to hold the team's horses while his companions fought; but with camels, just one man was needed to look after 12 to 16 animals. So the "cameliers" had much greater firepower than their horse-riding counterparts.

The Imperial Camel Corps (ICC) was created in 1916 and included troops from Britain, New Zealand, Australia and India. It fought in Egypt, Sudan, the Sinai Peninsula and Palestine – As shown here in **Picture 3 at Beersheba**.

While the soldiers were all male, almost all the camels they rode were female – they were quieter than males and had more endurance. **(SOUNDS FAMILIAR!)** and Old or injured camels would serve as a source of meat.



When we think of camels during the First World War, the first thing that comes to mind might be the Arab Revolt and its special liaison, T E Lawrence – or Lawrence of Arabia as he is better known. Lawrence said that one of his reasons for adopting Arab clothing was that it was easier to ride a camel in robes than in an Army uniform – As shown in **Picture 4.**

Fortunately for the animals – if not for humans – by the time the Second World War came around, both horses and camels had largely been replaced by motorised transport.

ELEPHANTS

There was a massive shortage of horses during WWI. Farmers and traders were at a loss, left looking for an alternative. The Indian elephant shown here in **Picture 5** - fits the bill and got a job carting munitions, scrap metal and machines around Sheffield in Yorkshire.

Now, an elephant wasn't conventional. This elephant was fitted with a harness and she was given a special pair of leather boots to protect her feet from the metal waste that covered the ground at the scrap metal yard.

In Horley, Surrey, Elephants from a circus also filled in for the missing horses and even helped to plough fields – As here in **Picture 6** - and transport hay and agricultural loads around farms. Apparently, these elephants were from 'Lord Sanger's Circus', which based itself in the area.

DOGS

Dogs had a vital part to play in World War One, as the complexes of trenches spread throughout the Western Front. It is estimated that by 1918, Germany had employed 30,000 dogs, Britain, France and Belgian over 20,000 and Italy 3000. America, at first, did not use dogs except to utilise a few hundred from the Allies for specific missions. However, the USA produced the most decorated and highly-ranked service dog in military history, Sergeant Stubby.

Lots of dog breeds were used during World War One and two in particular were used because of their superior strength, agility, territorial nature and trainability; Doberman Pinscher's and German Shepherds, both native to Germany. Doberman's because they are both highly intelligent and easily trainable and possess excellent guarding abilities. Needless to say, they were employed most frequently by Germany. German Shepherds were used also because of their strength, intelligence and trainability. Other breeds associated with WWI were smaller breeds such as terriers, who were most often employed as 'ratters'; dogs trained to hunt and kill rats in the trenches.

The next picture **(Picture 7)** shows a French Casualty dog - trained to find wounded or dying soldiers. They carried medical equipment so an injured soldier could treat himself and they would stay beside a dying soldier to keep him company.

In Picture 8 - Sentry dogs stayed with one soldier or guard and were taught to give a warning sound such as growling or barking when they sensed a stranger in the area or close to camp.

Soldiers living in trenches encountered millions of pests during the war including rats. They fed on rotting food because there was no proper way of getting rid of rubbish in the trenches. **Here in Picture 9** - A little terrier dog shows off its catch after a 15 minute rat hunt in French trenches in September 1916.

Scout dogs were highly trained and had to be quiet and disciplined. Their role was to work with soldiers on foot patrolling the terrain ahead of them.

PICTURE 10

These dogs were useful because they could detect enemy scent up to 1000 yards away.

Instead of barking and thus drawing attention to the squad, the dogs would stiffen raise its hackles and point its tail, which indicated that the enemy was encroaching. Scout dogs were widely used because they were highly efficient in avoiding detection.

PIGEONS

Before radio, carrier pigeons were frequently used on the battlefield to communicate with a stationary headquarters. In the 6th century BC, Cyrus, King of Persia, used carrier pigeons to communicate with his empire. In Ancient Rome pigeons were used to send messages by Julius Caesar.

In the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) , besieged Parisians used carrier pigeons to transmit messages outside the city; in response, the besieging German Army employed hawks to hunt the pigeons.

The French used balloons to transport homing pigeons past enemy lines. Microfilm images containing hundreds of messages allowed letters to be carried into Paris by pigeon from as far away as London.

Homing pigeons were used extensively during World War I. In 1914 during the First Battle of the Marne, the French army advanced 72 pigeon lofts with the troops. The US Army Signal Corps used 600 pigeons in France alone.

PICTURE 11

One of their homing pigeons, a Blue-Check hen named Cher Ami, was awarded the French "Croix de Guerre with Palm" for heroic service delivering twelve important messages during the Battle of Verdun.

On her final mission in October 1918, she delivered a message despite having been shot through the breast or wing. The crucial message, found in the capsule hanging from her shattered leg, saved 194 US soldiers of the 77th Infantry Division's "Lost Battalion".

United States Navy aviators maintained twelve pigeon stations in France with a total inventory of 1,508 pigeons when the war ended. Pigeons were carried in airplanes to rapidly return messages to these stations; and 829 birds flew in 10,995 wartime aircraft patrols. Airmen threw the message-carrying pigeon either up or down, depending on the type of aircraft, to keep the pigeon out of the propeller and away from airflow toward the aircraft wings and struts. Eleven of the thrown pigeons went missing in action!. Some pigeons also fell to earth frozen!

COWS

World War One killed twice as many cows as people in Germany. But why? Because the skin of calves' intestines (known as goldbeater's skin) was used as an airtight material for carrying hydrogen on board German Zeppelins.

This required the innards of up to 35 million cows, resulting in a **sausage ban** in all countries under German control! The Cows were also camouflaged as shown in the picture!

PICTURE 12

Cow intestines were used to make sausage skins were such a vital component in the construction of Zeppelin airships that the Kaiser's military chiefs sacrificed bratwurst and other types of sausage in the pursuit of victory.

These created the special bags to hold the hydrogen gas used to keep Zeppelins aloft. It took more than 250,000 cows to make one airship. The technique by which the intestines, called goldbeater's skins, were turned into gas bags. By making sausage skins wet, stretching them and allowing them to dry again, could be bonded together, ideal vessels for gas.

PIGS

A mass pig slaughter, or Schweinemord, had been recommended right at the beginning of the First World War by the German physiologist Nathan Zuntz. Bad weather and the lack of fertiliser led to a shortage of grain and potatoes, two staple foods. Zuntz's suggestion was to slaughter the pigs which, he pointed out, "competed" with humans for food; it was more efficient for people to consume the vegetable and cereal crops. In late summer 1914 the Germany set up an inquiry into the consequences of wartime blockades and import bans. It's report in December 1914 reported on "the German people and the English plan to starve them".

Zuntz was one of the advisory board, and the report recommended the slaughter of nine to ten million German pigs to free up grain and potatoes for human consumption; around nine million animals were slaughtered in the spring of 1915. The slaughter did not solve the German food problems and because of this failure, during Hitler's rise to power, anti-semitic political commentators suggested that the whole Schweinemord plan had actually been a Jewish plot to cripple German agriculture and starve the population.

Tirpitz was a pig carried on the German warship SMS *Dresden* in 1914 as a food source. The *Dresden* was sunk in battle with the Royal Navy cruiser HMS *Glasgow* off the coast of South America during the Battle of Más a Tierra. Tirpitz managed to escape the sinking ship and swam towards the *Glasgow*. The crew brought him aboard and adopted him as a mascot, named him after German admiral Alfred von Tirpitz. He was transferred to the Whale Island Gunnery School in Portsmouth.

PICTURE 13 'Tirpitz' the pig on HMS Glasgow in WW1

Tirpitz was eventually auctioned off, but in his final act he raised £1785 for the British Red Cross. His head was mounted and can be seen at the Imperial War Museum in London.

GOATS

The tradition of goat mascots in the military dates to the American War of Independence when a wild goat wandered onto a battlefield in Boston, and ended up leading the Welsh regimental Colours off the battlefield at the end of the Battle of Bunker Hill.

In 1884, Queen Victoria presented the regiment, then called the Royal Welch Fusiliers, with a Kashmir goat from her royal herd, and a tradition was started. The Royal goat herd was originally obtained from the Shah of Persia, when he presented them to Queen Victoria as a gift in 1837 upon her accession.

SHEEP

In 1915, *The Queenslander* published an article calling for donations of sheep skins for the troops. Sheep skins vests had proved a great success with Australian soldiers in Europe, particularly through the cold months of the previous winter.

The vests were described as 'a sleeveless coat made high at the back and cut long enough to cover the vital organs of the body. The wool side is turned in, the leather side out, and the whole is fastened down the front with leather straps and buckles'

PICTURE 14

PICTURE 15

The sight of sheep grazing on the south lawn of the White House may seem unusual, it was a highly visible symbol of home front support of the troops overseas.

The flock, saved manpower by cutting the grass naturally and earned over $50,000 for the Red Cross through an auction of their wool. The Wilson's wanted to be a 'model American family' helping the war effort.

SLUGS

Every creature that had been tested by the Army for gas-detection purposes had developed pneumonia except for the slug. When exposed to mustard gas, the garden slug closed its breathing aperture, thus protecting its lung membrane.

Mustard gas in contact with moisture produces hydrochloric acid, which attacks the delicate lung membrane. The remarkable slug could endure many successive gassings and not be injured or have its ability to detect the presence of gas compromised.

PICTURE 16

The slug was then made available to the U.S. Army for duty in the trenches starting in June 1918. Thus, slugs served with Army forces for five months and saved countless American lives. Imagine the convenience of a slug in a trench. Animals are high-maintenance creatures requiring special handling, special food, and veterinary care. What could be easier than a slug? Just put him in a shoebox with a wet sponge, and you're all set!

GLOW WORMS

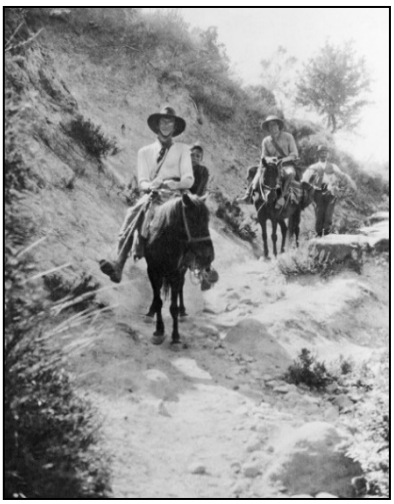
One of the most unlikely non-human contributions to the War was made by Lampyris noctiluca, more commonly known as the European glow worm, which emits light through bioluminescence. Huddled in dank, dark trenches, men turned to the incandescent insects for help, collecting them in jars by the thousands.

PICTURE 17

These instant but ephemeral lanterns allowed soldiers to examine intelligence reports, study battle maps or simply read comforting letters. According to a 2010 study, just 10 glow worms can provide the same amount of illumination as a modern-day roadway light.

DONKEYS AND MULES

After promising beginnings with the Sydney Morning Herald, Charles Bean won the Australian Journalists' Association nomination ballot in 1914 and was crowned Australia's first official war correspondent and the picture shows him at Gallipoli.



PICTURE 18

He boarded a ship for Egypt with the Australian Imperial Force, and was embedded with the Australian troops for over four years. He endured the same squalid conditions as the soldiers, and was subject to the same enemy fire. Donkeys were routinely loaded with at least three times their own body weight. Pictures and stories show donkeys carried food supplies, clothing, pots and pans, and of course water.

Summer was hot. Water, always rationed, came from Malta red with rust, tasted terrible, and was often laced with chemicals designed to kill the enemy. Water Wells on Gallipoli were often polluted or dry, so any interruption of the donkeys was considered a crisis. The Gallipoli winter climate was especially hard on donkeys. After donkeys and mules were classified as unfit, or over twelve years old, they were destroyed and their manes and tails shaved and sold. Many were even skinned to produce more leather for supplies. Of the 34,000 donkeys used, only 1,000 survived.

The Army Mule required less food than horses. They were more tolerant of extreme heat and cold, and they could go for longer periods without water, critical in battle where clean water was so scarce. Mules were proven to be more resistant, very low maintenance and seldom needed shoes. Less than half the mules died from infected bullet holes compared to the percentage of horses killed. The first animals departed in November 1914, and in the four half years of war 287,500 mules were purchased. Mule trains were hitched in threes, 15 to 20 long, always travelling at a trot and under fire.

When a mule was hit he was unhitched, the ammunition boxes rolled off him, and the mule train just carried on, often 14 to 16 hours a day (As in Picture 19 above). There was no way of digging a hole for dead mules so many were thrown into the sea washing up like submarine periscopes and reportedly panicking the Navy. 56,000 surplus mules were sold after the war.

ANIMALS AS MASCOTS

Jimmy 'The Sergeant' was a donkey born at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Jimmy was wounded three times during World War One. He learnt to raise his hoof in salute by soldiers who brought him up as in the next picture. After the war, Jimmy raised thousands of pounds for the RSPCA charity.

PICTURE 20

PICTURE 21

Togo, the cat mascot of the battleship HMS *Dreadnought*.

The fox cub mascot of No.32 Squadron at Humieres Aerodrome, St Pol, France, 5 May 1918.

A gunner of the York and Lancaster Regiment with the regimental cat in a trench near Cambria, 6 February 1918.

Venus the Bulldog

BABOONS

Jackie the baboon was taken to France by South African soldiers. Jackie had excellent eyesight and hearing and used to warn soldiers of enemy movement or possible attacks by making noises and tugging on their clothing.

PICTURE 22

FINALLY

Upon the outbreak of World War I , Lt. Harry Colebourn of The Fort Garry Horse, a Canadian cavalry regiment, volunteered his service. While en-route to Valcartier to report to the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps (CAVC), he purchased a young bear cub for $20 at a train stop in White River, Ontario.

PICTURE 23

Colebourn named the bear "Winnipeg", "Winnie" for short, after his home city. Winnie accompanied him to Valcartier and all the way to England, becoming the mascot of the CAVC and a pet to the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade Headquarters. Before leaving for France, Colebourn left Winnie at London Zoo, where she was much loved.

Among her fans was A.A. Milne's son Christopher Robin, who consequently changed the name of his own teddy bear from "Edward Bear" to "Winnie the Pooh", providing the inspiration for his father's stories about Winnie-the-Pooh.

PICTURE 24

Thank you for reading!

Norman Bambridge
Basildon Borough Heritage Society - Essex England
June 2021.