

## Animals in war



War Memorials Trust

Many different species of animals have played important parts in conflicts throughout history. The Animals in War memorial commemorates those that were involved in the World War I and World War II. This helpsheet gives information about how and why animals were used during the wars and which types of animal performed different jobs. This helpsheet may be used alongside War Memorials Trust's 'Animals in war memorial' information sheet and 'Animals in war' primary lesson plan.

### Fighting

Throughout World War I approximately 6 million horses were involved on both sides of the conflict. The experience of horses during the war was recently depicted in Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*, which teachers may use within their literacy curriculum to explore this topic further. Cavalry regiments were participants in fighting, especially at the start of the war in 1914 when the army was relatively small. Even when the use of cavalry units declined with the rise of mechanised warfare they retained respect, seen as the traditional side of the army, and remained valuable in tasks such as reconnaissance. They were also still involved in the fighting right up until the end albeit on a smaller scale than in previous wars.

Other animals also played a part in fighting and supporting troops during and after battles. Canaries were used to detect poison gas and trained dogs were used to locate the wounded.

### Transport

A crucial role of many animals during the First World War was transport. Because the terrain of many areas of battle was impossible for larger vehicles to access, soldiers, equipment, food, munitions, weapons and supplies were all carried by horses, donkeys, mules and, in desert regions, camels. Dogs also helped to carry supplies and field ambulances were pulled by larger animals. Many animals were chosen for their stamina and ability to carry heavy loads.

Without animals available to transport vital supplies it is widely thought that the effectiveness and welfare of the army would have been diminished.

### Communications

Effective communication was vital to the war effort and in this area animals proved their value. Dogs and pigeons were highly effective message carriers and could take important information between the lines and to headquarters faster and more securely than radio or other means. There are many examples of acts of bravery and loyalty from these animals and stories of how their actions helped the course of various battles.

### Morale

As well as their practical value, animals had an important psychological impact on those fighting. Many were adopted as regimental mascots and there is much evidence of close bonds between soldiers and the animals who provided them with support and companionship. This is

**War Memorials Trust 42a Buckingham Palace Road London SW1W 0RE**

**Telephone: 020 7233 7356/ 0300 123 0764**

**Email: [learning@warmemorials.org](mailto:learning@warmemorials.org) Website: [www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org](http://www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org)**

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depicted in works such as the painting 'Goodbye Old Man' which features a soldier saying goodbye to an injured horse.

### **Recognition of the contribution of animals**

The PDSA Dickin Medal was introduced in 1943 to officially recognise and honour the role of animals in war. The medal is known as the 'animals' Victoria Cross.' It consists of a circular bronze medal inscribed with the words 'For gallantry,' and 'We also serve' within a laurel wreath.

The medal is awarded for 'conspicuous gallantry or devotion to duty while serving or associated with any branch of the Armed Forces or Civil Defence Units.' To date the medal has been awarded 66 times to animals that served in World War II and subsequent conflicts. In 2014 the medal was given posthumously to a horse, Warrior, who served during World War I. This honorary award commemorates all the animals who served in World War I before the award was introduced.

Further recognition came in 2004 when the Animals in War memorial was unveiled in London, and further information about this is available from War Memorials Trust's 'Animals in War memorial' information sheet.

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