

Animals in the Great War

The Dogs of War were initially trained as Ambulance Dogs for the Belgian Army by Lt. Col. E.H. Richardson, who had been training police dogs since 1898. However, conditions on the western Front meant it was soon impossible to use Ambulance Dogs and the French Army banned their use within a few weeks of the beginning of the war. In 1914 Lt. Col. Richardson escaped Belgium from the advance of the German Army and, once in the U.K. he soon received requests from some officers for dogs to be used for sentry and patrol work. He found that Airedales were well suited to this



task and in the winter of 1916 he trained two at the request of the Royal Artillery for use as messenger carriers. They proved to be very effective at Wytschaete Ridge, carrying messages 4,000 yards to Brigade HQ when all other forms of communication had failed. This success prompted British Generals to give the go-ahead to set up the War Dog Training School at Shoeburyness, Essex. Eventually a central kennel was established at

Etaples by the Signals Section, Royal Engineers under the command of Major Waley M.C. Dogs were sent from there (usually three) with their handler, to sectional kennels, usually run by a sergeant with sixteen men and forty-eight dogs. From here they were collected by battalion handlers, who took them up the line. Many of the dogs used came from Battersea Dogs Home and other stray centres around the country and some people did give their dogs for use by the army. Eventually Shoeburyness proved too small for training all the dogs provided and the school was moved to Mateley Ridge, in 1917, where it remained until May 1919 when it moved to Salisbury Plain.



The dogs had tin cylinders and coloured tallies on their collars to distinguish which unit they were with and it was a court-martial offence for any soldier to stop or interfere with a dog on a run.

Breeds of dogs used included;

Border collies

Airedales

Lurchers

English sheepdogs

Retrievers and

Summer dogs (summer this and summer that).

Dogs, and of course horses and mules, were not the only animals to be used in the



Great War. Carrier pigeons were widely used by both sides. They had a 95% success rate for delivering messages, often when all other forms of communication had broken down. One of the most famous pigeons was called *Cher Ami* who saved a “lost American Battalion” in France. The 600 man battalion had advanced too far into enemy territory and were being shelled by “friendly fire”, there only means of communication was *Cher Ami*. When the Germans saw him being released they fired on him but were unable to bring him down. He flew 25 miles back to the Command Post and arrived with one eye shot out, a bullet in its breast and most of the leg missing that still had the capsule and message attached to it. The shelling was stopped and the battalion was later

saved. *Cher Ami* recovered from his injuries and received an honorary service cross and was returned to America. He died in 1919 and was mounted and displayed in the Smithsonian Institute.

In January, 1916 the Imperial Camel Corps, a camel mounted infantry brigade, was raised by the British Army. The brigade eventually comprised of four battalions, one each from Great Britain and New Zealand and two from Australia. They became part of the Egyptian



Expeditionary Force and fought in actions such as the battle of Magdhaba in 1916, the battles of Rafa, Beersheba and Gaza during 1917 and the raid on Amman in 1918. In over two years of service, including much combat, 246 members of the Corps died, 106 of them British, 84 Australians, 41 New Zealanders and 9 from India. A memorial to the Imperial Camel Corps stands in London as does a memorial to the animals that served.

