How did animals (even slugs) serve in World War I?

By Armed Forces History Intern Leah Tams, November 14, 2014

Veterans Day is a time to commemorate the brave men and women who are serving or have served in the armed forces. However, the service of animals during times of military conflict often goes unmentioned. Whether providing comfort, inspiration, or indispensable service, animals have played a crucial role in militaries and armed conflicts for centuries. World War I, which ended 96 years ago on November 11, was no exception. To honor our animal veterans, this post highlights five animals that made significant contributions to the Great War.

Pigeons

Pigeons played a crucial role in communication during World War I because of their speed and ability to fly at great heights. Their homing instincts also made pigeons extremely reliable and capable messengers—they could easily find their way back to their loft. Some of the lofts remained at army/division headquarters, while others were mobile, with soldiers carrying the lofts and pigeons on their backs as they moved throughout Europe.

Both the Allied and the Central Powers used tens of thousands of homing pigeons to send messages between military detachments. In fact, they were so important to communication during the war that the British Defence of the Realm Act made it a crime to kill, wound, otherwise molest, or not take adequate care of pigeons.

Cher Ami, one of two WWI pigeons in our collection, served in the U.S. Army Signal Corps in France with the American sector in Verdun. He delivered 12 messages, and in delivering the last one on October 4, 1918, he was shot through the breast and leg. Despite being gravely injured by enemy fire, he was able to carry on and save the lives of almost 200 men. The message that he delivered was from the "Lost Battalion" of the U.S. Army's 77th Infantry Division, who were trapped behind enemy lines and accidentally being shelled by American troops. The message from the 77th Infantry Division read: "WE ARE ALONG THE ROAD PARALELL [sic] 276.4. OUR ARTILLERY IS
DROPPING A BARRAGE DIRECTLY ON US. FOR HEAVENS SAKE STOP IT." After receiving the message, the U.S. Army redirected its artillery fire and found and relieved the soldiers, bringing them back behind American lines.

Cher Ami, the savior of the "Lost Battalion"

For his bravery and outstanding service, the French government awarded Cher Ami with the Croix de Guerre with palm. The palm signifies the great importance of Cher Ami's role in the battle. Unfortunately, Cher Ami died on June 13, 1919, from the wounds he sustained in the heroic delivery of his last message.

Dogs

Like homing pigeons, Allied and Central Powers used dogs as messengers during World War I. Dogs could easily and much more subtly navigate trenches and battlefields than soldiers could, thus making them ideal ground messengers.

Dogs also served in several other capacities—for example, their keen sense of smell made them perfectly suited to finding wounded soldiers on the battlefield and in the trenches. This sense of smell, combined with dogs' excellent hearing, allowed them to serve as effective guards and scouts,
particularly when it came to detecting nearby enemies. Man's best friend also filled the simple but essential need for comfort and companionship during times of great distress. In the United States, dogs were not officially incorporated into the military until World War II, but many still served with the armed forces. These dogs were most likely adopted by units on an individual basis as mascots, as in the case of Stubby.

![Stubby](image)

*Stubby with his numerous military decorations*

Stubby was a Staffordshire terrier mix puppy adopted by Private J. Robert Conroy while he was training for combat. Stubby became the mascot of the 102nd Infantry, 26th Yankee Division, and he learned the calls, drills, and salutes. Private Conroy smuggled Stubby onto the SS *Minnesota* when the division shipped out to France, and Stubby won over the commanding officer when he gave the officer his dog salute.

When the division reached France, Stubby was allowed to accompany it to front lines and serve as their mascot—but he did much more.
Private J. Robert Conroy and Stubby in France

His sense of smell allowed him to detect enemy gas before the men, and he would run through the camp barking, sounding the alarm, and saving the lives of the troops. He also saved the lives of many soldiers because he could locate the wounded on the battlefield and would lead the soldiers to safety or bark until medics arrived.

One day, Stubby caught a German spy attempting to make a map of Allied trenches, and he attacked the man until American soldiers arrived. For this act, Stubby was unofficially promoted to sergeant.

By the end of the war, Stubby had served in 17 battles. At the Battle of Seicheprey on April 20, 1918, shrapnel from a shell seriously injured Stubby, and he was rushed to a field hospital for treatment and then to a Red Cross hospital for recovery. During his recovery, Stubby went around the hospital and visited wounded soldiers, boosting their morale. Stubby received many awards and medals for his outstanding service, including one awarded by General John Pershing.

Horses and Mules
Dogs and pigeons played a crucial role in World War I, but horses and mules are perhaps the animals most commonly associated with the Great War. Sketches from the American Expeditionary Forces show both animals constantly in the background, and even the foreground, of American military activity.

*Barn with Mules, Boucq. J. Andre Smith. Official Art from the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I.*

They were used as beasts of burden to pull pieces of artillery, supply trains, and other materials. Horses also served as transportation for soldiers and as integral members of cavalry units. In fact, horses and their transportation capabilities were so important on the battlefields of the Great War that they were seen as the key to saving soldiers’ lives.
The American Red Star Animal Relief created posters that urged people to "Help the Horse to Save the Soldier," depicting a soldier holding his wounded horse. This relief organization was founded on June 27, 1916, with the purpose of functioning essentially as a Red Cross for U.S. Army animals.

American Red Star Animal Relief, organized by the American Humane Association, started a veterinary corps and recruited experienced veterinarians, blacksmiths, and stable hands to serve in its ranks. The organization created and distributed over 80,000 booklets to American soldiers that detailed first aid for horses, and it supplied veterinary ambulances and medical supplies to Army camps.

The new technology of machine guns and tanks made these efforts by the American Red Star Animal Relief all the more important because horses sustained much graver injuries. Today, the American Red Star Animal Relief is the American Humane Association's Red Star Animal Emergency Services. The Red Star now works on its own, responding to disasters such as Hurricane Sandy and animal cruelty cases.

The essential role that horses and mules played in World War I did not go unrecognized: the U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum erected a plaque dedicated to the horses and mules that served in the American Expeditionary Forces during the Great War. It states, "A fitting tribute to their important services has been given by... General John J. Pershing who has written 'The army horses and mules proved of inestimable value in prosecuting the war to a successful conclusion. They were found in all the theaters of preparation and operation doing their silent but faithful work without the faculty of hoping for any reward or compensation.'" The plaque also says that "what they suffered is beyond words to describe."
Slugs

By the time soldiers noticed the presence of mustard gas on the battlefield, it was often too late. Dr. Paul Bartsch of the Division of Mollusks in the U.S. National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History) discovered that slugs could detect mustard gas well before humans could. The slugs would visibly indicate their discomfort by closing their breathing pores and compressing their bodies, and soldiers in the trenches would quickly put on their gas masks to protect themselves from harmful levels of gas. The “slug brigade” ended up saving many lives.
Gas mask from World War I

What all of our soldiers sacrifice and suffer is beyond words to describe. This Veterans Day, as we remember and give thanks for the brave men and women who have given so much in the service of our country, let us also remember the animals who provided them aid, comfort, and companionship.

Leah Tams is the James Lollar Hagan intern in Armed Forces History. She recommends learning more about military cats, other animals in war, and the history of the Red Star. She also recommends Animals in the Military: From Hannibal’s Elephants to the Dolphins of the U.S. Navy by John M. Kistler.

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