

Creature Comrades: Animals in World War I

Over 16 million animals were pressed into service during WW1. Horses, donkeys, camels, mules and even elephants were used to transport soldiers, weapons, ammunition and food. Pigeons were used to send messages, and dogs to track the enemy and locate injured soldiers.

This resource uses primary and secondary historical sources to explore the roles animals carried out in WW1 and encourages pupils to think about the ethical considerations of their large-scale use in conflict.

The resource is designed to develop communication, literacy and critical thinking skills through creative play (younger pupils) or through written and oral discussion and debate (older pupils).

Set the Scene

- What types of animals were used in World War I?
- What kinds of roles did they perform?

Dogs

When the war started in 1914, the British Army had very little in the way of military dogs although other countries, including France and Germany, had been using dogs in a variety of roles. It was the work of Lt Col Edwin Hautenville Richardson that convinced the British Army that dogs could provide immeasurable value on the front lines.

Richardson and his wife Blanche had been training dogs for military purposes from their home in Carnoustie since 1900. Officers at the nearby Barry Buddon army camp took an interest in their work and let Richardson bring his dogs to train with the soldiers. He and Blanche were eventually asked to set up the British War Dogs training school at Shoeburyness, Essex in 1917.

Dogs for the school came from rescue centres and many people donated their pets. The dogs were trained to perform many roles. Casualty dogs carried first aid to wounded soldiers; sentry and guard dogs secured military camps; messenger dogs carried out the dangerous task of running messages; and scout dogs, who could detect enemy scent up to 1000 yards, worked with soldiers on foot, patrolling the terrain ahead of them.

Horses, mules and donkeys

These animals were essential to the British Army and over the course of the conflict, more than a million were deployed. They performed a number of roles. Supply horses, mules and donkeys were used to move ammunition, general supplies and ambulances. Teams of gun horses pulled artillery pieces that weighed as much as taxis and cavalry horses were still used in battle. It was dangerous work and, on average, the British Army lost 15% of its horses every year. Only a quarter of horse deaths were caused by enemy action. The biggest killer was 'debility' – a condition caused by exposure to the elements, hunger and illness.

Pigeons

Over 1,000,000 pigeons were used to send messages during the conflict and, with a success ratio of 95 per cent, their value proved immeasurable. On the Western Front, the birds were kept in mobile lofts – either horse-drawn or mounted on lorries or London buses – behind the front line, before being taken to the trenches in wicker baskets when required. Once launched, they could use their homing ability to return to their distinctively patterned lofts, even if these had been moved.

Mascots and trench pets

Not all animals in the trenches were expected to carry out military tasks. Dogs and cats, along with more unusual animals such as monkeys, bears and lions, were often kept as pets and mascots by the soldiers. Many of the animals provided psychological comfort for men trapped in the horrors of trench warfare or reminded them of cherished pets at home. Having a cat or dog mascot also often had the added benefit of keeping the legions of rats at bay.

After the war

The war had been expensive and after the Armistice, there was not enough money for the Government to transport so many animals back home. Thousands of animals were abandoned in the country where they were stationed.

Most soldiers could not afford to bring their dogs home. The cost of quarantine care had been set at £14 - way above the paypacket of most ordinary soldiers. Some were forced to abandon their dogs, some smuggled their dogs back and others relied on charitable organisations. The RSPCA set up the Soldiers Dog Fund to meet the cost of bringing the dogs back and keeping them in quarantine until the men were able to take them home.

Some fortunate horses were also rescued by The Blue Cross Fund and lived out their lives on sanctuaries.

First and Second Level

Tasks

1. Show the pupils historical photographs of mascots that soldier had in the trenches (IMG1 to IMG3). Ask them to think of what animal they would like as a mascot if they were in the trenches.
2. Ask the pupils to draw their mascot or use the colour-in sheet (activity sheets 1-4) and answer some questions about it. What is your mascot's name? How did it become your mascot? What job does it do? How do you think your mascot felt being at war?
3. Pupils can present their mascot to the rest of the class.

Curriculum Experiences & Outcomes

Inspired by a range of stimuli, I can express and communicate my ideas, thoughts and feelings through activities within art and design. EXA 0-05a / EXA 1-05a/ EXA 2-05a

First Level

When I engage with others, I know when and how to listen, when to talk, how much to say, when to ask questions and how to respond with respect.

LIT 1-02a

Core Skills

- Thinking
- Communication
- Literacy
- Working with others

Second Level

When I engage with others, I can respond in ways appropriate to my role, show that I value others' contributions and use these to build on thinking. LIT

2-02a

Approaches & Methods

- Creative learning
- Play-based learning

Third and Fourth Level

Tasks

1. Pupils can read some of the personal accounts of the soldiers and the old magazine articles (documents 1 to 3 and testimonies of soldiers serving in WW1 document_4). It might also be useful to look at more recent newspaper and internet articles about animals in WW1. Ask the students to think about how are the animals are represented in these accounts.
2. Ask the students to write an short opinion piece for a local newspaper giving their views on animals at war. They can use any information from testimonies, magazine articles or photographs and should to communicate their opinion effectively to their audience.
3. After writing their opinion piece, ask those in who believe it is fair or ethical to use animals in war to stand on one side of the room and those who don't to stand on the other. As a team, they can review the points made in their pieces and debate with the opposing team's view.

Some discussion points

- The animal does not choose to fight or give its life; rather, its life is taken.
- Animals helped save millions of human lives and were integral to the war effort.
- Animals may not have had a choice, but neither did conscripted men.
- Millions of animals are slaughtered every year for food, medical purposes and cosmetics. Is this different from the military use of animals, and if so how is it different?

Some opinions

- 'Wars are human endeavours. While a person, a political party or a nation may decide that war is necessary, the animals never do.' - Stephanie Boyles, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.
- 'To them, what they are doing may appear as a game' - so you are in effect exploiting and deceiving them, which would be 'objectionable.... There is an element of responsibility; humans have to treat the animals well, and treat them in ways that don't put them at risk.' -- Lori Gruen, Professor of Philosophy, Wesleyan University.
- Animals provided important morale boosts to soldiers posted overseas in both world wars, but little thought was given to how they fared in dangerous and frightening circumstances. Animal Aid in The Hidden Victims of War.
- To all the animals that served and died alongside British and Allied forces in wars and campaigns throughout time. They had no choice.' Inscription on the Animals in War Memorial, London
- "We believe if you treat the animals with proper care and respect that it is not immoral to use them for purposes like this," "You basically take advantage of their sensory capabilities; you ask the animal to find something for you. And when it does that, you say, 'You are now free to go. We'll deal with the danger.'" Tom LaPuzza, public-affairs officer for the Navy's Marine Mammal Program in San Diego.

Curriculum Experiences & Outcomes

Third

I can use my knowledge of a historical period to interpret the evidence and present an informed view. **SOC 3-01a**

When I engage with others, I can make a relevant contribution, encourage others to contribute and acknowledge that they have the right to hold a different opinion. I can respond in ways appropriate to my role and use contributions to reflect on, clarify or adapt thinking. **LIT 3-02a**

Fourth

I can evaluate conflicting sources of evidence to sustain a line of argument. **SOC 4-01a**

When I engage with others I can make a relevant contribution, ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute and encourage them to take account of others' points of view or alternative solutions. I can respond in ways appropriate to my role, exploring and expanding on contributions to reflect on, clarify or adapt



Using what I know about the features of different types of texts, I can find, select and sort information from a variety of sources and use this for different purposes. **LIT 3-14a**

Throughout the writing process, I can review and edit my writing to ensure that it meets its purpose and communicates meaning at first reading. **LIT 3-23a**

I can persuade, argue, evaluate, explore issues or express an opinion using a clear line of thought, relevant supporting detail and/or evidence. **LIT 3-29a**

Core Skills

- Thinking
- Communication
- Literacy
- Working with others

thinking. **LIT 4-02a**

Using what I know about the features of different types of texts, I can find, select, sort, summarise, link and use information from different sources. **LIT 3-14a / LIT 4-14a**

Throughout the writing process, I can review and edit my writing independently to ensure that it meets its purpose and communicates meaning clearly at first reading. **LIT 4-23a**

I can persuade, argue, evaluate, explore issues or express and justify opinions within a convincing line of thought, using relevant supporting detail and/or evidence. **LIT 4-29a**

Approaches & Methods

- Creative learning

Materials & Resources

Creature Comrades IMG 1 Winnipeg the bear with Harry Coleburn (©Manitoba Provincial Archives)

In 1914, Harry Colebourn, a vet on his way to tend horses on the Western Front, bought a baby bear from a man at a train stop and named her Winnipeg (Winnie for short). He brought Winnie across the Atlantic to the army camps on the Salisbury Plain, where she lived with him and his fellow soldiers while they trained to go to the front lines in France. Realising that the trenches were no place for a bear, he drove to London Zoo and asked if they would look after Winnie until the war was over. He did not expect the war to last so long. When he went back to the zoo after four long years, it was clear to Harry that Winnie had found a new home. Winnie lived for 20 years and became immortalised in the stories of Winnie the Pooh written by A.A. Milne, who was a regular visitor to the zoo along with his son, Christopher Robin.

Creature Comrades IMG 2 Ali Pasha the tortoise with Henry Friston and Henry's son (©Michael Foreman)

Henry Friston was a 21-year-old sailor in World War I who found himself off the coast of Gallipoli. There he had the job of scouring the battlefield, searching for any signs of life and carrying wounded soldiers back to the ships. One day Henry found a tortoise on its back on the shelled battlefield and vowed that he would protect it. He hid the tortoise in his pack and made him a secret berth in the gun turret of HMS Implacable, where he became the ship's mascot. Both survived the war and spent the rest of their days in England. Henry lived into his 80s and Ali Pasha lived on for another 10 years, cared for by Henry's son.

Creature Comrades IMG 3 Sergeant Stubby

While training for combat on the fields of Yale University in 1917, Private J. Robert Conroy found a stray puppy roaming the grounds. Because of the puppy's very short tail, Robert named him 'Stubby' and soon the dog became the mascot of the 102nd Infantry, 26th Yankee Division. When the division shipped out for France, Robert smuggled Stubby aboard.

Stubby was involved in many battles. He suffered injury from a gas attack and a grenade attack, receiving a large amount of shrapnel in his chest and leg. He saved many human lives. After his experience of a gas attack, Stubby got to know the smell very well. On one occasion, the whole of his camp was sleeping when a gas attack started. Stubby smelt the gas straight away and ran through the trench, barking and biting the soldiers' shirts to let them know what was happening. He would also go into No Man's Land to find wounded soldiers, barking until paramedics arrived or leading lost soldiers back to the safety of the trenches.

Both Robert and Stubby survived the war. The American press had picked up on stories about Stubby and he became very popular with the reading public. His popularity ensured his return home, but many dogs were abandoned at the front. Stubby died in 1926 when he was about 10 years old.

Creature Comrades Activity Sheets Mascot activity sheets

Creature Comrades Document 1 The Literary Digest, March 24th 1917 'Red Cross Dogs'

Creature Comrades Document 2 New York Times 1921

Creature Comrades Document 3 A Plaque honouring Sergeant Stubby

Creature Comrades Document 4 Testimonies from soldiers serving in WW1