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The Equine Learning Curve: Horses and mules in British Army transport services during the First World War

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ABSTRACT
This article combines research methodologies from military history and animal studies to write equines into the history of the First World War. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate how considering the animal perspective can advance our understanding of conflict at an individual and operational level. It proposes that the horses and mules used in British Army transport services were not just passive victims as they are often portrayed, but sentient beings who played an active role in operations.

Introduction

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that equines participated in the First World War, the popular narrative often over-simplifies and sentimentalises their contribution, framing them as little more than mute victims of a vicious human conflict.[1] This perspective is informed by wider mythologies of mud, blood and futility, and is reflective of the fact that as animal behavioural historian Stephen Budiansky states 'horses have been enveloped in human dreams, myths, ambitions and sentiment for so long, that the story we have come to think of as theirs, is often but a distorted reflection of our own' – thus, the true experience of the equine is often overlooked.[2] Though equines are not totally ignored in the war's historiography, they are largely absent in historical reconstructions and research has focused on their use in the

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1777
[1]Jilly Cooper, *Animals in War,* (London: Corgi, 1984); Simon Butler, *The War Horses: The Tragic Fate of a Million Horses Sacrificed in the First World War,* (Wellington: Halsgrove, 2011); Michael Morpurgo, *War Horse,* (London: Kaye & Ward, 1982).
[2]Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory,* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005); Stephen Budiansky, *The Nature of Horses: Their Evolution, Intelligence and Behaviour,* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 1.

cavalry, with little attention given to the experience of the far greater number of horses and mules working in transportation.[3] Yet as has been demonstrated by Sandra Swart and Gervase Philips, analysing this equine experience not only advances our understanding of conflict at an individual and operational level, but can provide insights into the character of warfare itself.[4] This article seeks to demonstrate how this can be achieved by combining animal and military history research techniques, to present an equine-centric narrative of the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) transport services on the Western Front.

Animal history is a historical subfield that has grown substantially over the past two decades. Its primary aim is to challenge human exceptionalism in recognition of the fact that 'there has never been any purely human moment in world history'.[5] The inclusion of the animal turn can shift our perspective, just as the widening of the lens through which events are perceived to include previously marginalised groups (such as women or enslaved peoples) has enriched our understanding of a range of military topics.[6] To achieve this the article will explore the influence of equines as independent actors to build on Swart's theory that by examining the view from *below* the saddle rather than *from* the saddle, a greater understanding of how equines influenced war can be found.[7] The British Army's approach to equine management and changes in transport methodology will also be analysed, to better understand how the developing relationship between the BEF and its equines effected the war effort. This will contribute to a body of scholarly work based around the learning process, which

[3]Spencer Jones, 'Scouting for Soldiers: Reconnaissance and the British Cavalry, 1899-1914', *War in History,* 18 (4) (2011), p. 511; David Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land: British Cavalry & Trench Warfare 1914-1918,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2019); Stephen Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880-1918,* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[4]Sandra Swart, '"The World the Horses Made": A South African Case Study of Writing Animals into Social History', *International Review of Social History,* 55 (2) (2010) pp. 241-263; Sandra Swart, 'Horses in the South African War, c.1899-1902', *Society and Animals,* 18 (2010) pp. 348-366; Gervase Phillips, 'Writing Horses into American Civil War History', *War in History,* 20 (2) (2013) pp.160-181.

[5]Susan Nance, *The Historical Animal,* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), pp. 5-6.

[6]Panikos Panayi, 'Minorities' in Jay Winter (ed), *The Cambridge History of The First World War: Volume 3 Civil Society,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014 [2016]), pp. 216-241; Susan Grayzel, *Women and the First World War,* (London: Routledge, 2002); Richard Fogarty, 'African Labour in Europe', https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/. Accessed 5 January 2021.

[7]Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa,* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), pp. 254-258.

suggests that the British Army went through a period of transformation as it adapted to modern industrialised warfare.[8] Many historians now accept this theory, but as Philpott points out, it is a highly complex model that requires more thematic study to fully understand 'the British army's way of war, as well as the false starts and trials along the way'.[9] By exploring how the army's attitude towards equines and their usage changed throughout the war, this article hopes to provide an example of how consideration of the animal experience can be a valuable tool in developing existing theory.

Notes on Methodology

In order to widen the historical lens to include animals, it is necessary to rely heavily on anecdotal primary sources, as equines have left no direct oral or written accounts attesting to their experiences. In doing so, it is important to remember the limitations of subjective evidence that was written after events, such as memoirs. Authors may misremember details and have a tendency to impart human emotions onto their equine counterparts which can distort findings.[10] Relying on personal accounts is therefore not without controversy, as ultimately the sources in use emanate from people, and so it could be argued that we are still not really looking at animals, but at the representation of animals by humans.[11] However, as Hilda Kean has noted 'human authored texts can provide insights that are not merely reducible to the human perspective' when the agency of animals is demonstrated through their actions.[12]

Equine Agency

Meeting the subsistence requirements of troops and the increasing use of artillery placed huge demands on the BEF's logistics network, with 5,253,338 tons of

[8]Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities,* (London: Review, 2002 [2001]), p. xvii.

[9]William Philpott, 'Beyond the 'Learning Curve': The British Army's Military Transformation in the First World War', *RUSI,* 7 October 2015 https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/beyond-learning-curve-british-armys-military-transformation-first-world-war. Accessed 16 January 2024.

[10]Andrew McEwen, "'He Took Care of Me": The Human-Animal Bond in Canada's Great War' in Susan Nance (eds) *The Historical Animal,* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), pp. 273-275.

[11]Erika Fudge, 'A left-handed blow: Writing the history of animals' in Nigel Rothfels (eds) *Representing Animals: Theories of Contemporary Culture*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) 2002, p. 6.

[12]Hilda Kean, 'Challenges for Historians Writing Animal-Human History: What is Really Enough' *Anthrozoös* 25 (s1) (2012), p. 61.

ammunition alone shipped to France between 1914-1918.[13] In such a materiel-intensive conflict, efficient transportation became central to maintaining operational tempo, as when, for example, demand for munitions outstripped supply, artillery could not be used and offensives stalled or failed.[14] Although the BEF's supply system increasingly utilised Motor Transport (MT) to move materiel from the railheads, horse transport remained the primary means of transporting goods from divisional supply dumps to forward units throughout the war.[15] The history of BEF logistic services can therefore be conceptualised as interspecific: that which exists or occurs between two different species.[16]

Although equines working in transportation greatly influenced BEF operations, scholarly works on logistics remain anthropocentric in approach; regarding equines as tools utilised by man rather than sentient beings, whose needs and behaviours had a direct effect on the war effort.[17] This is perhaps because as Clausewitz contended, war is an inherently human phenomenon.[18] It 'privileges human language and chronology over smells, images, physical sensations and emotions' and thus the experience of nonhumans is largely ignored.[19] One way to move beyond the anthropocentric is to credit the BEF's equines with agency when analysing personal accounts. By asserting that independence of thought is not exclusive to humans and centring the equine

[13]Clem Maginniss, *An Unappreciated Field of Endeavour: Logistics and the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front 1914-1918,* (Warwick: Helion & Company, 2018), p. 57.

[14]Hew Strachan, 'Shells Crisis of 1915', https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/shells_crisis_of_1915. Accessed 3 January 2022; Christopher Phillips, *Britain's Transport Experts and the First World War,* (London: University of London Press, 2020), p. 322.

[15]A.M. Henniker, Official History of the Great War: Transportation on the Western Front 1914-1918, (The Naval & Military Press Ltd), p. 330; Graham Winton, *Theirs Not to Reason Why: Horsing the British Army 1875-1925* (Warwick: Helion & Company Limited, 2013), p. 208

[16]Greg Bankoff & Sandra Swart, *Breeds of Empire: The 'invention' of the Horse in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa 1500-1950,* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2007), pp. 10-11; Ian Malcom Brown, 'Logistics', in Jay Winter (ed), *The Cambridge History of The First World War: Volume 2 The State,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 220-221.

[17]Nance, *The Historical Animal*, p. 5; Phillips, 'Writing Horses into American Civil War History', p. 60.

[18]Carl Von Clausewitz (translated by Miss Maguire), *On War*, (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1909), p. 57.

[19]Nance, *The Historical Animal*, p. 5; Phillips, 'Writing Horses into American Civil War History', p. 60.

decision, we can consider how they influenced the men around them and events on the battlefield.

Much like humans, the decisions equines make are determined by a complex combination of their environment, genetics and lived experiences. These factors all play a role in shaping the equine's temperament/personality and as Geoffrey Brooke observed of Jack Seely's horse Warrior: 'horses, like men, vary in character'.[20] Mules for instance, have noticeably different personalities to horses. They are described by soldiers as intelligent, independent, suspicious, cunning, or crafty – their distinct traits the cause of both amusement and frustration.[21] The mule's stubbornness is a manifestation of its talent for self-preservation. This 'ever-present sense of apprehension' can be of great benefit to the mule's driver/rider: if a mule takes care of itself then it follows that it will also take great care of its cargo.[22] Studies have shown that the mules' cognitive ability is greater than that of horses, and research demonstrates their hybrid vigour provides them with the ability to think beyond any given moment and comprehend their place and role in situations.[23] Corporal Harry Forrester of the Royal Field Artillery (RFA) recalled a driver of an ammunition limber 'thrashing' a mule that refused to move forward over a bridge. Harry, who was a blacksmith by trade, understood that the mule must have had a reason for not moving forward, so investigated to find the bridge had been blown further forward – 'this mule had sensed it and would not go'. Harry credited 'mule 141' (a number he remembered some 70 years later) with saving him and his men from disaster.[24] The independent decision of this mule to not cross the bridge saved the limbered wagons and ammunition from destruction, allowing Forrester to signal that an alternative route forward needed to be found. That equines could sense things that humans could not had other practical benefits; for example, they often alerted their riders/drivers to things beyond human sight and hearing, such as enemy cavalry riders in the distance, or approaching aircraft.[25] Captain L.E.L. Taylor had a black mare who could even tell the difference between allied and enemy aircraft, providing advanced warning to

[20]Jack Seely, *Warrior: The Amazing Story of a Real War Horse,* (Newbury: Racing Post Books, 2011),p. 104.
[21]Imperial War Museum (hereinafter IWM) 10061, Harry Forrester (Oral history); IWM 32096, unknown British bombardier; Blenkinsop & Rainey, *History of the Great War,* p. 93; Ronayne, *Amateur Gunners*, p. 120; Temple Clarke, *Transport and Sport,* p. 86.
[22]Sidney Galtrey, *The Horse and the War,* (London: Butler & Tanner, 1919), p. 46; Lorraine Travis, *The Mule,* (London: J.A. Allen, 1990), p. 4.
[23]Leanne Proops, Britta Osthaus & Faith Burden, 'Mule cognition: A case of hybrid vigour?', *Animal Cognition* 12 (1) (2009).
[24]IWM 10061, Harry Forrester.
[25]Seely, *Warrior,* p. 108.

troops of incoming attacks.[26] This behaviour is reflective of the fact that equines are adept at learning through association. They are able to detect the subtlest of signs that predict a known outcome, such as the sound of the feed room door opening ahead of mealtime. Though Taylor's mare did not actually know the engine sound belonged to an enemy aircraft, resulting events following the slightly different sounds will have shaped a behavioural change in her over time, to the benefit of the men around her.[27] The ability to exploit the natural instincts and cognitive functions of horses (either deliberately or accidentally) could therefore be of great value on the battlefield in unexpected ways.

Learning through association coupled with distinct personality traits also had downsides, however. Frederick Sanders described a mule nicknamed Boxer who had a habit of standing on its rear legs and thrusting out its forelegs to kick anyone who approached it.[28] As a result, this mule had to be picketed on its own and could not be handled by any man in the unit.[29] Boxer likely initially kicked because it was fearful, but, having learnt that this action resulted in being left alone, formed a habit of this disruptive behaviour.[30] No further details are provided as to Boxer's fate, however Alexander Thorburn recounted a similar tale of a mule named Iron Cross who would 'beat a man's brains out with his fore-feet'.[31] Iron Cross could not be handled at all and was left chained to a wheel, until he bonded with one particular driver and could finally be put to work. In these examples, the mules' unwillingness to cooperate with certain humans was expressed through violence which could cause significant disruption and even harm, but sometimes the equines' desire to avoid being put to work/handled took more subtle forms. Captain Charles Rose recalled how one horse, Shrapnel, would suddenly go lame when saddled to go up to the front line at night. After closer inspection from veterinary staff, it was determined that there was nothing medically wrong with Shrapnel and that he was in fact, faking his lameness. Rose concluded that he simply 'did not like it [going out at night]'.[32] The decisions of these animals as to who they chose to accept a bond with, their preferred outcomes and

[26]D.S. Tamblyn, *The Horse in War: Horses & Mules in the Allied Armies During the First World War, 1914-18,* (London: Leonaur, 2011) pp. 45-46.
[27]Daniel Mills & Sue McDonnell, *The Domestic Horse: The Evolution, Development and Management of its Behaviour,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 173-179.
[28]IWM 8273, Frederick Arthur Sanders (Oral history).
[29]Ibid.
[30]https://paintedqhfarm.weebly.com/mule-facts.html. Accessed 7 January 2022.
[31]Ian Ronayne, *Amateur Gunners: The Great War Adventures, Letters and Observations of Alexander Douglas Thorburn,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2014), pp. 124-125.
[32]Richard van Emden, *Tommy's Ark: Soldiers and Their Animals in the Great War,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 145.

how they chose to express these decisions, could make the difference between them having a positive impact and contributing to a unit's work, or simply absorbing soldiers' valuable time in their care.

These testimonies show that equines could positively and negatively influence the soldiers who worked closely with them and that their decisions could therefore be an important factor in whether the movement of soldiers or supplies was successful. Sociologist Bruno Latour argues that by crediting a greater number of actors with agency in any given situation, it allows for controversies about matters of concern to be mapped more easily.[33] Thus, for the military historian, historical reconstructions that consider the equine point of view, can offer a more holistic view of events.

Whilst the above demonstrates that equines had a degree of autonomy, their choices could be greatly influenced by the soldiers working with them. Writing in 1921 John Moore commented of transport equines that 'the practical command of the most useful war animals was a weapon in the hands of the Allies that went a long way towards the downfall of the enemy'.[34] On each occasion where either practical command was lacking, or usefulness of animals reduced, the BEF's advantage over the Central Powers decreased. To avoid this, horses that repeatedly exhibited unwanted behaviour were often provided with alternative roles or removed from service altogether.[35] In an attempt to control these behaviours and encourage positive equine decision making, the British Army invested in educating soldiers in horsemastership (the art of caring for horses) to enable them to communicate effectively with each animal in their care.

Learning to be Horsemasters

The growing debate between the functionality of the horse and its rights as a sentient being, were reflected in discussions regarding British Army policy in the aftermath of the Boer War, in which many equines perished unnecessarily.[36] Detailed discussion on the causes of this high wastage are out of scope of this paper, but a central reason was poor horsemastership, which Anglesey notes was 'abysmal in all branches of the army' at the time.[37] In *How Britain Goes to War: A Digest and an Analysis of Evidence taken by*

[33]Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor- network-theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[34]John Moore, *Army Veterinary Service in War,* (London: H & W Brown, 1921), p. 41
[35]Ronayne, *Amateur Gunners,* p. 126.
[36]W.T. Stead, *How Britain Goes to War: A Digest and an Analysis of Evidence taken by the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa,* (London: Review of Reviews Office, 1903), p. 175.
[37]Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry Volume 4: 1899-1914,* (London: Leo Cooper, 1986), p. 356; *Minutes of Evidence,* p. 440 & pp. 526-527.

the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa, an entire chapter is devoted to understanding the mismanagement that led to 'the hideous and revolting tragedy of the torture to death wholesale of hundreds of thousands of horses' for which its author blames directly on the British Army.[38] Coverage of the Boer War 'horse wastage scandal' in the press was reflective of the increasing public interest in and wider change in public attitudes towards the welfare of horses.[39] Organisations such as the Humanitarian League and Society of the Promotion of Kindness to Animals added pressure on the British Army to reform equine services, with some even suggesting horses be afforded the same protection as humans under the 1864 Geneva Convention.[40] In response the British Army made a number of changes to improve equine supply and care in the interwar period. With the influence of men such as Lt-Col Birkbeck, Lt-Gen MacMunn, Sir John Moore and Maj-Gen Frederick Smith, the army began to recognise that not only were changes to the Remount Department and Army Veterinary Department required, but an organisational shift in the attitude towards equines was also needed to minimise equine deaths in any forthcoming conflict.[41]

By 1914 the centralisation of and investment in equine services signalled to soldiers of all ranks that horses and mules were more than just disposable, inanimate commodities and the growing pressure on the BEF's logistic system meant that equines became an increasing priority.[42] This was not only because the War Office (WO) recognised that remount supply was finite and the cost of replacing animals significant, but also a recognition that equines were living breathing participants in the war and that a transactional relationship needed to exist to get the most from them. In order to achieve this, the Army sought to recruit personnel familiar with equines and their management.[43] In 1914 many men serving in the ASC were well acquainted with horses and underwent extensive training in horsemastership and stable management; evidence that the British Army had learnt lessons from the Boer War by recognising that the majority of diseases and debility in horses in conflict could be avoided with

[38] Stead, *How Britain Goes to War,* p.175.
[39]'Lord Roberts and the Care of Horses in War', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 24 December 1901, p. 3; 'Light on the Horse Wastage', *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 28 March 1902, p. 5; *London Evening Standard,* 4 March 1902, p. 3.
[40]'Care of Wounded War Horses', *Eastern Daily Press*, 11 January 1905.
[41]Graham Winton *Theirs Not to Reason Why,* p. 33.
[42]Steven J. Corvi, 'Men of Mercy: The evolution of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps and the Soldier-Horse Bond During the Great War', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research,* 76 (308) (1998), pp. 276-277.
[43]Blenkinsop, Major-General Sir L.J. and Rainey, Lt-Col J.W. *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents. Veterinary Services* (London: HMSO, 1925), p. 59.

good animal management.[44] Yet, whilst many pre-war members of the ASC had good levels of horsemastership, a dilution of men skilled in the art was inevitable with the creation of the New Armies, who were recruited primarily from working class urban backgrounds, with little first-hand experience of horses.[45] The army made strides to retain and bolster institutional equine knowledge, appealing for men who had worked with horses in recruitment advertisements and creating courses to instruct officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) on animal management. Training courses covered the basics of horsemastership, such as: recognising signs of disease and loss of condition, the importance of exercise, and tack and hoof care. They were delivered at veterinary hospitals on the Line of Communication (LOC) and though brief, demonstrated that equines should not be treated with indifference, and that ensuring their well-being was the responsibility of all – not just those serving in the Army Veterinary Corps (AVC).[46] This helped to instil a sense of individual pride in the well-being of a soldier's horses/mules – the popularity of recreational horse shows, photographs of which often show impeccably groomed horses, was both a result of and further encouraged this attitude.

In addition to training courses, people-to-people learning methods played a key role in educating soldiers in horse care.[47] During basic training, new recruits were taught how to muck out, groom and handle horses safely. Men who were already experienced with equines found their skills highly valued as great reliance was placed on them to impart their knowledge laterally as the BEF expanded.[48] As ASC recruit John Crumpton Clarke recalled, comrades sharing their experience was vital when training was lacking:

> Not having the slightest idea how to put them [harnesses] together I had to obtain help of Derickson (pre-war territorial). There was no one to give any real help and it was a question of the best man helping the others.[49]

The best men referred to by Clarke mostly came from farming backgrounds and proved vital in helping their fellow soldiers to understand and care for equines on the

[44]Temple Clarke, *Transport and Sport,* p. 78.
[45]John Bourne, 'The British Working Man in Arms' in Hugh Cecil & Peter H Liddle (eds) *Fighting Armageddon: The First World War Experience*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2003), p. 336.
[46]Blenkinsop & Rainey, *History of the Great War*, p. 60.
[47]Aimée Fox, "Putting Knowledge in Power': Learning and Innovation in the British army of the First World War' (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2015), p. 94.
[48]Jane Flynn, 'Sense and Sentimentality: The Soldier-Horse Relationship in the Great War' (PhD, University of Derby, 2016), p.65
[49]IWM 15137 Private Papers of J C Clarke.

job when training time was limited.[50] They essentially acted as translators, teaching men who were unfamiliar or even scared of horses how best to communicate with them and helping them to establish a bond. A more formalised method of this peer-to-peer learning was the appointment of equine experienced Transport Officers to infantry brigades of the New Armies. These were men drawn from civilian equine industries such as hunting, horse racing and logistics, who took on a role of ensuring welfare standards of equine transport in infantry formations. Similarly experienced men were also appointed as Horse Advisors to direct Corps and Divisions on horsemastership, working alongside members of the AVC.[51]

As the war progressed however and the numbers of men unfamiliar with horses dramatically increased, this lateral learning became less effective and standards of horsemastership began to deteriorate. Writing in 1919 Lt-Col Arbuthnot of the RFA noted:

> We were too dependent on the one-man expert who becomes rare in wartime, we need to have a greater interest and more widespread horse-knowledge among both officers and men.[52]

Arbuthnot's view was shared by members of the AVC during the war. In April 1917 the Commander-in-Chief echoed concerns raised by some veterinary officers that a main cause of equine sickness was a direct result of ignorance of horsemastership in Commanding Officers and promptly sent 128 Yeomanry Officers out to Artillery units for 'horsemastership duties'.[53] Efforts to root out this ignorance and place greater emphasis on trying to extend the lifespan of animals on active service by better meeting their physical and mental needs, is evidenced in war diaries from the Quartermaster General (QMG), Deputy Assistant Director Transport (DADT) and Deputy Director Supply and Transport (DDST). These diaries contain many references not just to the supply of equipment vital to providing good horse care, but evolving instructions on how to improve the day-to-day care of animals, such as the procurement of additional rugs specifically for horses arriving from Australia who had not yet acclimatised to Northern European weather.[54] The volume of these entries reveal an institutional

[50]IWM 13290 John William Wing Oral history); IWM 10264 William Thompson Oral history.
[51]Blenkinsop & Rainey, *History of the Great War,* p. 61.
[52]A.Q. Arbuthnot, "Horsemanship During The War', *Journal of the Royal Artillery,* 46 (11) (1919), pp. 337-343.
[53]The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) WO 95/34/1 Branches and Services: Quarter-Master General, April 1917.
[54]TNA WO 95/291/2, Headquarters Branches and Services: Deputy Assistant Director Transport, May-July 1915; TNA WO 95/31/5, Branches and Services: Quarter-Master

effort to ensure that animals were not only given the basics of good care, but that they were made as comfortable as possible according to their individual needs. During the transfer of the New Zealand Divisional Artillery from Fourth Army to Second Army in October 1916 for example, care was taken not to overexert animals where it could be avoided with orders issued to leave ammunition and grenade crates in the Fourth Army area to 'ease horses on the march'.[55]

This sympathetic consideration of the horses' well-being was impressed on men through strict punishment for misdemeanours and structured checks on equine welfare. During an inspection of the 3 Division train in January 1916, the DADT Second Army noted that four Baggage Section horses that had been sent in for exchange by 4 Battalion Royal Fusiliers, had been 'overworked and neglected' - their condition was empathetically described as 'lamentable' and 'deplorable'. The DADT felt it 'quite wrong' that Baggage Section horses were detached from their ASC companies to First Line Transport (infantry brigades), as this resulted in them 'being worked without consideration'.[56] Such events reveal that the BEF's attempts to ensure excellent levels of horsemastership were not universally successful. However, when animals were found to be in poor condition or abuse was discovered reports from units were required and the consequences for individuals responsible could be severe – including docked pay and even demotion.

Along with inspections, people-to-document methods were also used to help to disseminate the organisational attitude towards horses in an official capacity. *Notes on Horse Management in the Field* compiled by the Assistant Director of Veterinary Services, 1 Division, was issued as an official handbook for transport officers in the First Army. Made explicit in this was that officers and NCOs in charge of wagon lines were responsible for the condition of their horses.[57] Likewise, *Army Service Corps Orders for Drivers* placed firm emphasis on the individual responsibility of each man for the wellbeing and care of his animals.[58] The codification of not only basic horse care instructions, but the notion of individual responsibility made it clear to soldiers of all ranks that equines were incredibly valuable.[59] This can be seen not just in the ASC/AVC but across the army where animals were used in transportation roles. For example, in the Machine Gun Corps, *The Mounted Officer's Book of Horses and Mules*

General, September 1916; TNA WO 95/27, Branches and Services: Quarter-Master General, October 1914.
[55]TNA WO 95/32/3 Branches and Services: Quarter-Master General, October 1916.
[56]WO 95/291/5, Deputy Assistant Director Transport, Feb-March 1915; Flynn, *Soldiers and Their Horses,* p. 73; IWM 8135, Private Papers of J H Reynolds.
[57]Blenkinsop & Rainey, *History of the Great War*, p. 704.
[58]Temple Clarke, *Transport and Sport,* p. 201.
[59]IWM 32096 unknown British bombardier Oral history.

for Transport: The Care of the Horse and Mule and how the harness should fit by Second Lieutenant R.T. Day was issued 'to assist those whose duties are with the Machine Gun Transport.'[60]

The booklet highlights the link between good horsemastership and effective operations, stating in the introduction:

> It is considered a point of honour for the Machine Gunner to keep his Gun firing under all circumstances, so it should be a point of honour for the Driver to keep his animal always in a fit condition and ready for any emergency.[61]

It also emphasised how a soldier's actions can influence those of his equine, and draws a link between this and the ability of a soldier to meet the state of readiness mentioned above:

> Very often the animal is put down as lazy or bad-tempered when the fault really lies with the man in whose care it is … Harsh treatment should never be meted out to mules or horses, and this applies particularly to mules, who strongly resent any beating and refuse to be worked as a consequence. But by kindness, coupled with a firm hand, much good work will willingly be done by these invaluable assistants to the Machine Gun Corps.[62]

The army's approach to horsemastership training utilised both formal and informal methods of disseminating information to teach soldiers about equines and improve their care, which bears out recent scholarship on pragmatic and adaptive learning in the BEF during this period and that 'individuals turned to each other' to gather knowledge, rather than simply relying on doctrine.[63] Soldiers were taught to view animals not just as the property of the British Army, but as theirs, and encouraged to build personal bonds with them to aid in their care. It is difficult to ascertain the direct impact this had on equine mortality throughout the war, since this figure naturally fluctuated in line with external influences such as offensives and the weather.[64] However, the fact that the numbers of BEF equines suffering from accidental injuries such as sprains, galls and punctures of hoof by nails etc were kept low throughout the war and overall wastage was on average just 14% – compared to 80% in the Boer War

[60]IWM LBY 71417 *The Mounted Officer's Book of Horses and Mules for Transport: The Care of the Horse and Mule and how the hardness should fit* by R.T. Day, 1916.
[61]Ibid.
[62]Ibid.
[63]Fox, 'Putting Knowledge in Power', p. 260.
[64]Winton, *Theirs not the Reason,* p. 429.

– supports the idea that the majority of soldiers paid careful attention to the welfare of their animals.[65]

Institutional learning related to equines was not limited to their care and management, but also included a growing understanding of how different types and breeds of equines could contribute differently to military operations. In the pre-war period there was an increasing recognition of the value of selecting the right equines for different types of war work. This was reflected in the publication of *Types of Horses Suitable for Army Remounts* to guide Remount Officers and civilian breeders on not just the desired conformation (i.e. shape and physical attributes) of equines for certain roles, but also their temperament and personal characteristics.[66] This growing understanding of how best to utilise different equines, in a conflict that also saw a 2000% growth in the use of motor vehicles, helped to shape changes in transport methodology that resulted in the BEF logistics systems overcoming a number of challenges.[67]

The Changing use of Equines

Remounts suitable for work with the ASC were described in general terms as 'Parcel Vanners' i.e. medium sized draught horses capable of hauling a good load without the need for a great deal of pace.[68] Both heavy and light draught horses were employed and the BEF developed flexibility to use these different types of equines interchangeably as their supply waxed and waned throughout the war.[69] During the ploughing season when supply of heavy draughts such as Shire horses was limited, light draught horses were substituted in a ratio befitting of their difference in size and strength, and vice versa during a critical period of light draught horse shortage in late 1914.[70] These decisions were made by the QMG based on regular communication with the Director of Remounts and transport and veterinary officers. In 1914-1915 the BEF's QMG was Major-General William 'Wully' Robertson who was a highly professional and competent man, as well as a fine horseman who understood how important it was to look after horses well to create an effective fighting force.[71] Robertson's main challenge was to improve the organisation of the LOC which was suffering from severe growing pains towards the end of 1914, as the pre-war system

[65]Blenkinsop & Rainey, *History of the Great War*, p. 540.
[66]Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Types of Horses Suitable for Army Remounts,* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1909).
[67]Maginniss, *An Unappreciated Field*, p. 276.
[68] Board of Agriculture, *Types of Remounts,* p. 1.
[69]TNA WO 95/27/13, Quarter Master General's War Diary, May 1915;
[70]Ibid.; Winton, *Theirs not to Reason Why,* p.291.
[71]Hew Strachan, *The First World War: Volume 1: To Arms,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 248; William Robertson, *From Private to Field-Marshal,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), p. 5.

proved woefully inadequate for the supplies demanded by the swelling BEF.[72] A reorganisation of services went some way to resolve the conflict in push/pull supply that the BEF was experiencing, and Robertson's pragmatism played a key role in ensuring the army's administrative echelons were able to flex sufficiently to cope with increase in supply and demand.[73] An integral part of this was the continual supply of remounts to transport goods from divisional supply dumps to forward positions, and as domestic supply of equines ran low, imports became essential.

The majority of the equines imported by the BEF came from North America, which had a vast population of good quality light draught horses and mules – the latter of which had played an important role within the U.S. military for many years.[74] Robertson was initially against the purchase of mules deeming them an unsuitable substitution for horses. By the end of 1914 when domestic draught supply was dwindling, the BEF began trialling mules in pack and draught roles.[75] Historically the British Army had failed to fully embrace the mule, perhaps as a result of what Anthony Clayton refers to as 'psychological contamination' from its hybrid nature and its associations with stubbornness and obstinance.[76] However, these eccentricities of character were often the result of failing to understand the differences required in their handling compared to horses.[77] Writing in January 1917 the DADT of the Second Army discussed the pros and cons of the mule succinctly:

> Possible objections to the mule which have been put forward are:-
>
> – His tendency to neigh at inopportune moments
> – The greater difficulty in shoeing him
> – Not so reliable under fire

[72]Brown, 'Logistics', p. 232;
[73]Ian Malcom Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-1919,* (London: Praeger, 1998), p. 67.
[74]Emmett M. Essin, *Shavetails & Bell Sharps: The History of the U.S. Army Mule,* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 3.
[75]Winton, *Theirs not to Reason Why,* p. 291
[76]Anthony Clayton, *The Mule in Military Service,* (Kibworth: The Book Guild, 2017), p. 2.
[77]Rob Thompson, 'Mud, Blood, and Wood: BEF Operational and Combat Logistico-Engineering during the Battle of Third Ypres, 1917' in Peter Doyle & Matthew R. Bennett (eds) *Fields of Battle: Terrain in Military History,* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), pp. 237-256; Galtrey, *The Horses and the War,* p. 50.

> On the other hand the mule is hardier than the horse, and thrives on forage on which a horse would go to pieces.[78]

The ability for mules to do more work on less food, along with their greater resilience to sickness and injury compared to the horse, were 'admirable qualities in the work of transporting food and munitions'.[79] This made them ideal for work on the Western Front, where environmental conditions were extremely challenging for equines.[80] Evidence of the BEF's equine learning is clearly demonstrated through the increasing use of mules throughout the war, with nearly 114,346 passing through the United States's main shipping ports at Virginia and New York between 1916 and 1918.[81] As the number of good quality light draught horses available further decreased due to displacement in civilian life as a result of motor transport, the BEF integrated the mule further into transportation services.[82]

The increasing use of mules may initially appear incongruous when considered alongside the BEF's rapid expansion of motor transport, but there were many areas in which motor transport was not advantageous. Although it provided capacity benefits and allowed the BEF to expand their operating area, supply on the Western Front still ultimately relied on horse transport due to environmental challenges – the most notable of which was mud. The adoption of artillery as the operational tool of choice has been explored in depth by historians, with many citing the development of the creeping barrage as central to the learning curve theory.[83] Yet whilst these artillery-centric tactics are widely praised, the increase in heavy gun use placed unprecedented strain on the LOC to supply not only ammunition, but food and equipment for the additional personnel involved in operations. The strain was so great at first, that during the Battle of the Somme, BEF logistic services came very close to collapse.[84]

It was not just the sheer amount of materiel that required moving that caused issues, but the devastation it wrought on the landscape over which it needed to be moved.

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[78]TNA WO/95/292/2 Headquarters Branches and Services. Deputy Assistant Director Supply and Transport, January 1917.
[79]Galtrey, *The Horses and the War,* p. 50; Blenkinsop & Rainey, *History of the Great War*, p. 64.
[80]Thompson, 'Mud, Blood, and Wood', pp. 237-256; Galtrey, *The Horses and the War,* p. 50.
[81]Brian Nicholls & Philip Malins, *The Military Mule in the British Army and Indian Army: An Anthology,* (Doncaster: D P & G Military Publishers, 2006), p. 90.
[82]Blenkinsop & Rainey, *History of the Great War,* p. 63.
[83]Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004)
[84]Brown, *Logistics,* p. 112, p. 134.

The destruction of the top layer of soil, combined with the weather, resulted in forward areas being turned into a series of watery ditches with little or no hard standing, the effects of which were described by an unnamed British bombardier at Ginchy Ridge:

> We could not get to the guns with the ammunition wagons, so we had to take it up by pack horses. Four rounds on the rider and eight on the off horse – and they went through it I can tell you, up to their bellies in mud and water most of the time.[85]

It was simply impossible to use motor transport in these areas, as the vehicles of that time had limited off road capability so pack transport by mule became the only reliable way to move supplies up to the front line. Their reliability in these circumstances stems from the surefootedness and endurance inherited from their donkey sire, and the strength and vigour of their horse dam, which results in an ability to carry heavier loads than horses over more difficult terrain.[86] However, putting more animals into pack work at relatively short notice not only required additional animals suited to the work, but additional tack – which was not readily available and sometimes had to be improvised. Saddle bags were created from sandbags and bayonet fighting sacks, and special crates constructed to carry rations and water to front line troops.[87] Low-level battlefield adaptations such as these have not received as much focus from military historians as broader organisational changes, but do represent an important step in the learning process of the BEF and reflect an ethos of flexibility and individual innovation in the field.[88]

After the Battle of the Somme the reorganisation of British logistics led by Sir Eric Geddes saw the expansion of rail and mechanical transportation and growth of the ASC – bringing many improvements to battlefield supply; yet equine transport was not displaced, as the further development of artillery tactics in 1917 saw an even greater reliance on horse and pack transport.[89] As Rob Thompson has argued the shallow 'bite and hold' tactics used at Messines and during Third Battle of Ypres, for which General Plumer has been praised from an operational standpoint, caused major challenges for

[85]IWM 32096 unknown British bombardier (Oral history).
[86]Essin, *Shavetails & Bell Sharps,* p. 4.
[87]TNA WO 95/292/5 July 1917.
[88]Foley, Robert, 'Dumb donkeys or cunning foxes? Learning in the British and German armies during the Great War', *Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-* vol, 90 (2) (2014), pp.2 79-298
[89]David Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War,* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 244

logistics.[90] These tactics used even more concentrated fire than was used on the Somme, with approximately 4.3 million shells fired in the initial bombardment and one 18-pdr gun for every 12.5 yards of front.[91] Troops were then required to move forward swiftly over newly taken ground, consolidate and advance again.[92] The question of how to move supplies across the shell-blown forward areas presented significant challenges, as with no proper roads and soft ground, lorries could not move forward and even horse transport had great difficulties.[93] In order to maintain momentum when traversing the areas destroyed by shellfire, the BEF turned once again to the mules that it had deemed unsuitable for use in the opening months of the war.[94]

In the days preceding the initial attack, mule tracks were laid and transport officers traced supply routes during the day and at night to ensure they were fully prepared. Existing pack transport companies were utilised, and to increase the amount of pack transport available, additional animals and personnel were also drawn from infantry and pioneer battalions and all placed under the command of ASC officers. It was only as a result of the BEF's ability to adapt its use of equines that transport services were able to continue to supply rations and munitions to front line troops with an incredibly high state of efficiency. Supplies were delivered to areas of the front line as quickly as 20 minutes after capture, and though the organisation of pack transport varied in divisions, the advantage of this speedier delivery of supplies meant it was adopted by many units.[95]

It is often said that the BEF's success at Messines was a result of the newly developed artillery tactics, yet without the use of mules, the momentum of the attack would have been severely impeded, undoubtably affecting the outcome. It was the BEFs increased understanding of the mules' unique attributes that shaped transport methodology and represented a distinct change in attitude towards the animals from 1914, when the Deputy Inspector-General of Communications predicted there would be little use for

[90]Thompson, 'Mud, Blood and Wood', pp. 237-256

[91]J.E. Edmonds, Official History of the Great War: Military Operations, France & Belgium 1917: Volume 2 (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2021), p. 135.

[92]Thompson, 'Mud, Blood and Wood', pp. 237-256.

[93]C.A. Rose, *Three years in France with the Guns: Being Episodes in the life of a Field Battery,* https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/19814 Accessed 15 January 2024. Chapter V: On the Somme, Para 14.

[94]TNA WO 95/69/1 Headquarters Branches and Services: Director of Remounts, August – December 1914.

[95]TNA WO 95/292/5 Headquarters Branches and Services. Deputy Assistant Director Supply and Transport, July 1917.

pack transport during the campaign on the Western Front.[96] This continued reliance and development of equine transport has been largely overlooked by scholars researching the mechanisation of the British Army, who tend to present the subject in an almost adversarial tone of 'horses versus machines' rather than understanding how the two were used to complement one another. Even those who argued for the abolition of horse transport after the war, such as O.W. White, conceded that horses and mules would always be required in some capacity under certain environment conditions, a prediction that rang true as recently as 2001 in Afghanistan where mules once again played an important role.[97]

Conclusions

Centring the equine allows us to reconsider historical sources in new ways, revealing that the actions of horses and mules used by the British Army during the First World War solicited responses from the humans around them that resulted in both micro and macro changes. From a single transport wagon failing to reach its destination, to a shift in transport methodology that ensured operational tempo could be maintained in a vital offensive, utilising the concept of agency has shown that equines could affect both positive and negative change and were not mere tools in the war. Instead, they were active participants who are deserving of similar historical analysis to soldiers, rather than just comparisons with motor transport.

Viewing events through the animal lens also allows us to shed new light on how the British Army educated its soldiers and embraced knowledge of agricultural and animal psychology matters, and then amalgamated it into policy. The army's relationship with equines on the outbreak of the First World War displayed a level of concern previously unseen in its history, and a greater appreciation of individual equine attributes was gained as it came to recognise how important it was to ensure that not only were sufficient quantity of equines available, but sufficient quality. Further, it came to acknowledge that the continual care and well-being of these animals was a worthy investment and best achieved when all soldiers who interacted with them practised good horsemastership skills. Nowhere was this more important than in transport services, where steps were taken to educate soldiers through formal and informal methods. This included the dissemination of pamphlets, introduction of training courses and efforts to recruit men experienced in equine husbandry who could share their knowledge. Increasing responsibility was placed on individuals for the care of their animals, demonstrating a growing awareness that a strong bond between soldier

[96]TNA WO 95/69/1, Headquarters Branches and Services: Director of Remounts, August – December 1914.

[97]O.W. White, 'The Abolition of Horse Transport in the Administrative Services', *Royal United Services Institution Journal* 66 (461) (1921), p. 64.

and equine resulted in healthier animals and that this in turn, meant operations could be carried out more efficiently.

Philpott states that the transformative process of the British Army during the First World War was not a learning curve, but a complex and dynamic series of adjustments; in this respect, the equine learning process is similar. Although many positive developments took place and horse wastage was dramatically reduced from previous conflicts, horsemastership quality varied across units and equine use and care was greatly influenced by external factors such as the development of artillery and the weather. By considering the equine responses to war and exploring the shared experiences of soldiers and their animals, more can be learnt about these factors adding another layer to our understanding of the transformation of the British Army during this period.

Whilst uncovering this additional perspective undoubtably enriches our understanding of how events on the battlefield unfolded, there is a broader, more profound purpose to including the animal turn that the military historian should consider. Integrating animal studies forces historians to revisit the assumed baseline that military history is a human-only phenomenon. It is perhaps an uncomfortable truth to acknowledge that the deaths of circa 6 million living breathing participants (equines) in the First World War have been largely overlooked, yet as this paper has shown, these animals touched the lives of the men who served with them in a multitude of ways. To understand these interactions and consider their place within conflict can only provide a greater insight into the changing nature and character of warfare itself – this is perhaps the true value of viewing history from the hindquarters as well as the headquarters.