



Horses in the South African War, c. 1899-1902

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Abstract

This essay discusses the role of horses in war through the lens of their mortality in the South African War (1899-1902). This conflict was the biggest and most modern of the numerous precolonial and colonial wars that raged across the southern African subcontinent in the late nineteenth century. Aside from the human cost, the theater of war carried a heavy environmental toll, with the scorched-earth policy shattering the rural economy. The environmental charge extended to animals. Both sides relied on mounted troops, and the casualties suffered by these animals were on a massive scale. This is widely regarded as proportionally the most devastating waste of horseflesh in military history up until that time. This paper looks at the material context of—and reasons for—equine casualties and discusses the cultural dimension of equine mortality and how combatants on both sides were affected by this intimate loss.

Keywords

Anglo-Boer War, animals in history, horses, South African War, war

In this essay the role of horses in the South African War (1899-1902) is explored through the lens of their mortality. This war was waged by the British to establish their hegemony in South Africa and by the Boers/Afrikaners to defend theirs, in the South African Republic and the Orange Free State.¹ Fewer than 90,000 fought against a British army that eventually approached 500,000. The Boer forces, taking advantage of an initial lead in numbers, won several military triumphs. In 1900, however, British forces began to overwhelm the Boers. Resistance continued in the form of a guerilla war in the countryside until 1902, when the British prevailed by adopting a scorched-earth policy. The signing of peace on May 31, 1902, brought an end to three years of devastating conflict. No British war since 1815 had been so costly, both in terms of mortality and finances.² The War Office calculated that 22,000 of the 447,435-strong British force died.³ For the Boers, the losses were proportionally even higher, with roughly 7,000 of the 87,365

Boer combatants killed, together with the 27,000 Boer civilians who died in British-run concentration camps. Africans' participation was on a substantial scale, with at least 100,000 in military employment on both sides, and the death toll for black combatants and refugees was between 16,000 and 20,000 (Nasson, 1999b; Smith, 1996).

The South African War was the biggest and most modern of the numerous precolonial and colonial wars that raged across the southern African subcontinent. Aside from the human cost, the theater of war carried a heavy environmental toll, with the scorched-earth policy shattering the rural economy of the Boer Republics. Both sides relied heavily on mounted troops, and the casualties suffered by these animals were on a massive scale. On the British side, 326,073 horses and 51,399 mules died between October 1899 and May 1902, at the rates of 66.88% and 35.37% of the total head count, respectively.⁴ This is widely regarded as proportionally the most devastating waste of horseflesh in military history up until that time.⁵ The slaughter was actually described as a "holocaust" by an eye-witness, Frederick Smith (1919).⁶

This essay could thus simply, and certainly justifiably, take the form of an equine Grand Guignol, but this would mask other, hidden stories. Instead, the material context of—and reasons for—equine casualties will be examined, followed by a discussion of human ideas surrounding the death of horses and how combatants on both sides were affected by this intimate loss.

Horses in War

The horses in this war were among the last to engage in war the way it had been fought for more than 2,000 years. The role of the military horse was changing and growing increasingly controversial. As an instrument of combat, the horse had already begun its slow and inexorable slide into obsolescence. Horses did not immediately become a military anachronism; the development of field artillery in fact rendered horses vital for logistical purposes. Cavalry, too, remained tactically relevant by shedding their heavy armor plate, adding pistols and carbines to their weaponry, and working in concert with artillery and musketeers. But this change of tactics removed the mounted warrior from his preeminent position on the battlefield. Traditionally, the British cavalry had been trained to ride "knee to knee" at a gallop and in so doing cut a swath through the enemy (Marquess of Anglesey, 1973-1994). Even before the South African war, however, there was growing debate over whether to preserve the use of blade weaponry, the *arme blanche* (steel-bladed weapon), or move to firearms in mounted warfare. Military

traditionalists supported the continued use of the *arme blanche*, incorporated with the mass cavalry charge, believing in the traditional cavalry principle that the best weapon is a man on a horse.⁷ This traditional approach was to prove ineffective, however, against Boer commandos made up of adaptable, experienced horsemen fighting in familiar environs. By using their greater mobility, Boer commandos could simply circumvent old-fashioned, large-scale mounted cavalry assaults.

In the initial stages of the war, the Boer commandos held the advantage, as the British Imperial force suffered from inadequate combat preparation. Within months, the British were besieged at Ladysmith, Mafeking, and Kimberley and had suffered defeats at Magersfontein, Stormberg, and Colenso. In January 1900, however, Field-Marshal Lord Roberts assumed command. Roberts believed that the “knee to knee” cavalry charge was outdated and that all further mounted attacks should be carried out with the rifle. With the Boers secure in the east and west, the Imperial forces pressed north of the Cape Colony, capturing the two Boer capitals. From 1901, the war entered a new phase, with the Boers resorting to guerrilla tactics. The British response was to remove sources of food and shelter, implementing a devastating scorched-earth policy. Farms were destroyed, and large numbers of both the Boer and African civilian population were relocated into concentration camps.

This war reflected the shift to a new kind of warfare; modern technology was fused with the traditional body of the horse. Horses and mules (and even oxen) remained vital to mobility in the war and were utilized side by side with steam traction engines, telegraph, telephones, searchlights, breechloaders, and Lee-Netfords. As the war progressed, the British often abandoned the *arme blanche* and used a rifle in place of the carbine. As mounted infantry became favored over traditional cavalry, the function of the horse concomitantly changed. But it continued to be the key solution to mobility, providing units of infantry with fast, efficient transport.

The (Re)Mounting Crisis

In terms of horseflesh, on the eve of war in October 1899, the British were utterly unprepared. While the Boers and their *agterryers* (mounted African retainers for Boer fighters) simply had to provide their own horses on command, the British army had to muster a mounted force, larger than any it had ever mobilized before, and then transport it 10,000 kilometers to South Africa—farther than it had ever previously had to. It soon became clear that prewar remount estimations had been dangerously optimistic. (“Remounts”

are supplies of fresh horses for those worn out or killed.) Predicting a speedy victory in a “teatime war,” the Imperial army entered the conflict with the idea that a mere 125 cavalry horses and 250 mules per month were enough and that the troops and their steeds would be home by Christmas. This prediction was to be wrong by a factor of ten. As one colonial combatant observed: “I never knew there was a remount service before this war. It has its hands full now” (Paterson, 1934).

The Remount Department had been established over a decade earlier, in 1887, to set up a register of horses that could be deployed in times of crisis. This floating pool of owners enjoyed a small but steady financial supplement by gambling against the outbreak of such a crisis. With war imminent, 6,000 horses were immediately enlisted in this way. On board ship, horses were compelled to stand in stalls during their weeks at sea, unable to roll or lie down (Hayes, 1902). Occasionally insufficient fodder was packed, and horses simply starved to death. Aeration was inadequate, and the stalls were poorly designed, which made it difficult to muck out the decaying dung and excoriating urine (Smith, 1919). As a contemporary noted with dry understatement, “Horses and mules do not make good sailors.”⁸ Yet, of the 352,353 horses who embarked for South Africa from all ports, only 13,144 failed to survive the voyage—a loss rate of only 3.73% (Royal Commissions of Inquiry, Military Preparation for South African War, 1903). It was not so much the voyage that killed them but its aftermath: its debilitating effects coupled with the absence of an acclimatization period. In the absence of acclimatization depots, horses would arrive incapacitated—dehydrated, malnourished, and their immune systems severely compromised—and instead of having the weeks or months needed to revive, they would be transported to the front almost at once. There were insufficient supplies, which entrenched constant low-level malnutrition. The Remount Commission was increasingly condemned, but its remit was extremely difficult from the very outset (Sessions, 1903). The Remount depot itself was seen as a kind of exile—a “Siberia” for incompetent officers (Paterson, 1934). Indeed, the Director of Remounts at Stellenbosch sank into a depression and eventually shot himself.⁹

The remit was almost impossible. Remount officers were required to find healthy young stock at the low prices mandated by the government. Horses were acquired on a global level with much variation in suitability for the veld. In the first fifteen months of war, England and Ireland supplied 87,000 horses. Many of these horses were large, unwieldy animals, however, requiring better forage than the sparse veld could provide. As a Boer general noted acerbically, “The British cavalryman might have used elephants with almost as much advantage as their colossal horses” (Viljoen, 1902). Slightly smaller,

hardier stock came from the United States, which provided about as many horses as England, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand combined, with a total of 109,878 horses. By the end of 1901, 6,000 horses (including many mustangs) were being imported from the United States per month (Sessions, 1903). From the South American contingent, only the Argentinian stock had any reasonable reputation.¹⁰ Russian-bred horses were small and able to work hard and survive on little food. In contrast, the Austro-Hungarian stock, of which there were 64,157, were collectively damned as “bad do’ers.”¹¹ A total of 8,000 horses from New Zealand, 23,028 from Australia and 5,611 from India were imported, both the latter gene pools containing a strong South African ancestry from earlier exportations, and thus able to adapt and survive slightly better than the other stock brought into South Africa from around the world.¹²

With globalized stock, basic but significant adaptations were needed. Some horses had come from another hemisphere and needed weeks to grow or shed their winter coats, depending on when they arrived in South Africa. For example, horses who arrived in South Africa from England in the southern summer of December 1899 with their heavy winter coats were immediately pressed onto the front line, and they suffered in the African heat. There were other unanticipated difficulties. As remarked at the time, regional variation

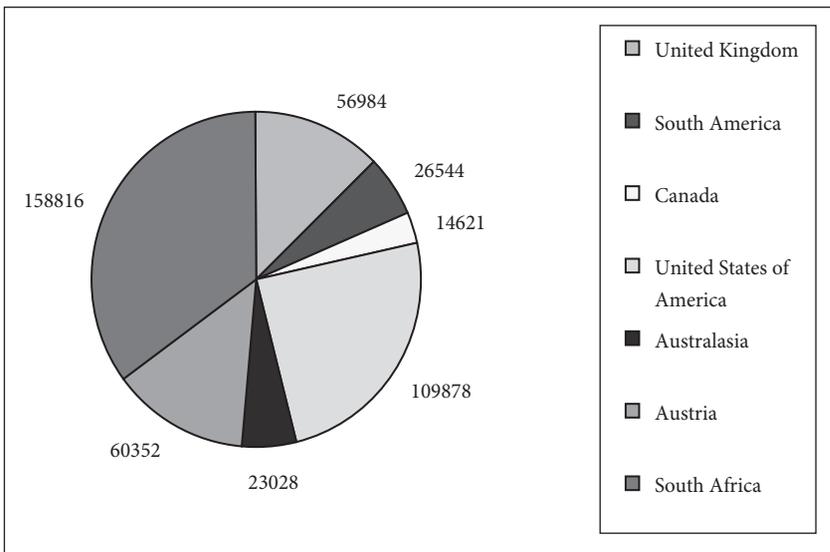


Figure 1. Sources of horses for the British Army¹³

in the horses' own lived experiences had tremendous secondary effects. Multinational horses under British command each demanded different types of forage. There were: South African horses who would eat both oats and mealies; New Zealand horses who would eat oats but would not touch mealies; and Australian horses who would eat mealies but not oats (Pilcher, 1903). All horses had to become accustomed to the British manner of bridling horses, a practice that the foreign horses often found strange and upsetting. The Remount Department initially had little notion of the sheer complexity and diversity involved. In Argentina, for example, mares were seldom broken in. Instead the horses would live in free-roaming little herds of riding horses. Each man-made herd had one matriarch whom the others trusted (Sessions, 1903). When separated for remount work, the scattered horses would miss the guidance of the senior mare and could grow emaciated, pining for their erstwhile companions—a phenomenon unforeseen by the bureaucrats in Whitehall.

Cause of Death

Disease, physical privation, and combat itself, coupled with the military's sheer inability to care for their horses, all contributed to the massive casualty figures. Even when equine casualties suggested an epidemiological factor as primary cause, the vectors operated synergistically: those enfeebled by malnutrition were more prone to disease, which in turn hampered calorie absorption and further weakened them.

Disease was rife—particularly contagious ailments—as the debility camps and remount depots were often merged in the same facility. In the second and third years of the war, horse sickness resulted in 5,700 fatalities (Smith, 1919).¹⁴ Strange ailments, like a mysterious “tongue illness” (probably vesicular stomatitis) spread from the American imports to local stock, who had little resistance to it. Mange, a highly communicable disease, affected more equines than any other disease. During the war there were around 27,300 cases of mange. In 1901 alone, 12,000 head infected with glanders had to be put down (Smith, 1919). Strangles (an infectious disease of the respiratory system) and equine influenza were triggered by the stress induced by transportation and became more widespread as large numbers of animals were suddenly brought together, their vulnerability compounded by the conditions of poor hygiene in which they were kept. Pneumonia was yet another disease that levied a high cost and was especially dangerous for horses after grueling sea voyages and extended overland transportation. Weakened

immune systems rendered horses more vulnerable to endemic diseases. For example, in the second and third year of the war, horse sickness resulted in 5,700 fatal cases (Smith, 1919).¹⁵ Horses also suffered from trypanosomiasis or “sleeping sickness.” One could purchase “salted” horses, who had recovered from the sickness and were believed to have a measure of immunity, but such horses were “sorry, wretched steeds” (Bethell, 1887/1976). Moreover, they were largely unaffordable, from £50 upward (Churchill, 1893/1969). Biliary or tick-bite fever (caused by a parasite in the red blood cells and carried by the red tick, which was picked up during grazing), to which South African horses were partially immune, affected most of the imported horses. Local horses had more immunity to local diseases and were usually more robust because they had not suffered the rigors of maritime transportation, which weakened these imported horses’ immune systems. Vernacular knowledge of local disease and local lore were more useful than the international equine dogma, and this gave Boer horses another advantage.

Fodder was scarce due to the lack of transport and the generally ad hoc nature of commando bureaucracy. By 1901, the Boer republics were run by a mobile “government on horseback.” Boer horses thus had to rely in large part on the veld for food. On the southern and western fronts, there was visible evidence of overgrazing by commando livestock. By early 1900, the horse fodder scarcity reached critical proportions. Provisions ran low, and the veld often proved insufficient. The eastern Orange Free State had managed to supply fodder to the commandos in the guerilla phase, but by the end of 1900, the scorched-earth policy impeded the flow of food. Some commandos contrived to grow their fodder in liminal areas or pillaged from African communities (Pretorius, 1999).

Of course, there was, in addition to deaths caused by disease, environmental hazards, and deprivation, the effect of combat itself. Ironically, the likelihood of dying in battle was far less (as it was for humans), than that of succumbing to an illness. As the horse’s primary role was in providing mobility—no longer in cavalry charges—there was some distance between the horse and the firing line, keeping horses relatively safe. Yet combat casualties for the horses were still commonplace.

On the British side, the Army Veterinary Department (AVD) was widely damned as inadequate in dealing with equine casualties. “The waste in horse-flesh . . . has been little short of appalling, and for that waste the inadequacy of the AVD has been largely to blame” (Battersby, 1900). The AVD was just a loose bundle of units, with no veterinarians or farriers of its own (as they were regimental), and it was stretched beyond capacity, with no executive control. Untrained personnel, indeed men “entirely new to the intimate

needs of a horse,"¹⁶ were deployed to the AVD. By the end of the war there were 322 veterinary surgeons working in South Africa (up from 123) which—although a small number in the context of the war—represented more than 10% of the entire British profession.¹⁷ Moreover, requests for additional personnel, equipment, and facilities for the veterinary service fell on deaf ears, since soldiers received priority over animals. The lack of qualified equine-care personnel led to elementary errors of judgment, which had dire consequences for the animal populations. Contagious, diseased horses were penned, for example, with exhausted and malnourished horses as a result of the inability to distinguish between the symptoms of these ailments—a situation that triggered unnecessary epidemics.

A less documented cause of equine mortality was simply bad horsemanship on the part of the soldiers. Inexperience on both the human and equine side played a role. On the Boer side, Viljoen noted that "quite one-third of the horses we had taken with us were untrained for the serious business of fighting, and also that many of the new burghers of foreign nationality had not the slightest idea how to ride. Our first parade, or 'Wapenschouwing,' gave food for much hilarity. Here one saw horses waltzing and jumping, while over there a rider was biting the sand, and towards evening the doctors had several patients" (Viljoen, 1902). On the British side, an officer put it bluntly when he said that many mounted men "did not know whether to feed [their horses] on beef or mutton" (Marquess of Anglesey, 1986).

Both British and Boers believed themselves quintessential horsemen. Ironically, styles and equipment perceived to be particularly characteristic of either side were commonly used by both sides: for example, the Boer *rysambokkie* was akin to a British crop. In fact, the two sets of equipment and styles were very similar, with only small differences (Swanepoel, 1985).¹⁸ Both sides disparaged the other's equestrian skills. The British horse trainer Horace Hayes, referred to earlier as serving on remount voyages, held a series of horse-breaking demonstrations throughout South Africa prior to the war. He noted that he had to fight hard to win the "the good opinion of the Boers, whose hatred of the English is equalled only by their contempt for us as horsemen" (Hayes, 1894). Boers, in turn, frequently cited their own organic, archetypal horsemanship. As Reitz observed, "We learned to ride, shoot and swim as soon as we could walk" (Reitz, 1929/1990).

Horsemanship was one of the marks of manhood and thus a frequent target by the other side. Both sides felt the other groups did not love horses, merely used them. A war correspondent noted that the African "is not fond of horses... A horse is to him merely something to get about upon, and he cannot understand our fondness for our equine friends. I have noticed the

same trait in the Boer character” (Hales, 1901). Further, a British observer noted witheringly, “A horse broken in by Boers was a horse spoilt. They must be the very worst horsemen in the world... this applies especially to the Transvaal Boers; some of the younger Natal Boers, who had mixed more with English, had much better seats” (Lacy, 1899). The idea that good horsemanship was contagious—the Boers could catch it from prolonged proximity to English-speakers—endured because British equestrianism had become integral to the national identity. As one English commentator averred, “The English may undoubtedly claim to be the most equestrian nation on the face of the earth” (Dorré, 2006). Superior horsemanship and the preeminence of English horses seemed to substantiate the glory of empire.

Horse-Human Relationships

The war helped both accelerate and highlight a time of changing association between human and horse. Of course, there was a strongly economic interest in this change of relations. There was an obvious pecuniary incentive to treat horses well: the average Imperial mounted soldier in South Africa went through seven remounts during the course of the war. The general rate of wastage for the war was 25% per month, which meant that, on average, each horse had to be replaced once every four months and was to be treasured as much as possible by its rider. Equally, on the Boer side, “The burgher knows perfectly well how valuable to him is his horse, and he is thus constrained to use his knowledge in carefully tending it; moreover, considerable affection exists... between the master and his beast” (Viljoen, 1902). The rare moments of a soldier’s happiness in this devastating war were often connected with his horse. In the all-too-brief periods between battles, horses were used in leisure pursuits, strengthening still further their bond with their riders.

It was certainly not solely economic self-interest. Visceral experience of the combat slaughter evoked powerful personal and public emotions and changed minds about what was acceptable casualty of war. After the capture of Bloemfontein in early 1900, a British officer described the horrific state of the horses with empathy: “From side to side this living skeleton swayed and crossed its hind legs if compelled to move. When tied up in batches they leant against each other, and the centres collapsed under the pressure... These wrecks of war, this flotsam and jetsam of human passions and strife, these helpless victims of a policy of the grossest cruelty and gravest injustice, were dying by hundreds...” (Marquess of Anglesey, 1986). The rotting carcasses of horses and mules left psychological scars.¹⁹



Figure 2. Bodies of horses after the Battle of Magersfontein²⁰

The war and contemporary writings helped propagate the idea of seeing and talking about the horse as an individual, with a personality and agency of its own.²¹ It was arguably only with the advent of the racing industry from the beginning of the nineteenth century that horses began to acquire individual public personae in southern Africa. Race favorites became known and adored by the crowds. This was further fostered by military campaigns (for example in 1881 and 1899-1902), which facilitated the popularization of heroes, both human and equine. Leaders had iconic horses who became war-time celebrities in their own right: General De Wet's famous gray, Fleur, and General De la Rey's Starlight.²² Lord Roberts's Arabian, Vonolel, who had carried him in campaigns in India, Afghanistan, and Burma, actually won service medals from Queen Victoria. The period also saw a florescence of writing on how to care for horses, with greater focus on the horse's own agency and personality (Fleming, 1889).

Of Horses and Men

One of the seminal war narratives from the Boer side was originally entitled "Of Horses and Men," which reflects that the position of the horse was not only pivotal but *understood* at the time to be pivotal. Horses mattered as individuals in a way that other animals did not. Indeed, so vital were horses that initially Milner had wished to concentrate on removing all the horses rather than to impose the scorched-earth policy (Pakenham, 1979). The primary sources offer suggestive descriptions of the horse-human bond and new ways of articulating it, with analogies observed between combatant and horse. The English horses were likened to "the townbred soldier," and both were "newly arrived" foreigners, "ignorant of the country."²³ On the Boer side, staff officers, who did not suffer with the ordinary combatants and their horses, were dubbed *Kripvreters* (stall-fed horses who did not have to forage their food from the veld like common horses). Equally, there are subtextual suggestions of contemporary understandings of animal agency. There is evidence of a clear belief in equine agency. Reitz, for example, describes his uncontrollable horse, who was baptized "Malpert" (crazy horse). Reitz maintained that Malpert came to respect only his brother and himself. Reitz had once clung to him during one of his rodeo-style displays, winning Malpert's respect, and his brother had once doctored him, after which he "showed his gratitude by obeying him" (Reitz, 1929/1990).

Significantly, this was one of the first wars in which ordinary soldiers were commemorated. Perhaps a related point was that it was also one of the first wars in which animals were celebrated, both as individuals and as a group. Boer poet A. G. Visser composed a postwar poem dedicated to the eponymous Voorslag, his war pony:

I was a youngster and he a young horse,
Ek was 'n penkop en hy was 'n jong perd,
 When with De la Rey the two of us charged;
Met De la Rey het ons storm geja;
 Under a rain of bullets Voorslag
Onder 'n bui van kartetse het Voorslag
 Carried me and my comrade from the battlefield.
My en my maat van die slagveld gedra.

Give me my mount, a musket, a buck,
Gee my 'n ryperd, 'n roer en 'n wildsbok,
 And I won't envy the richest his gold;
En ek beny nie die rykste sy geld;
 A King on his throne is neither as happy nor free
Vryer en blyer as Vors op die troon is

As Voorslag and me in the endless veld.
Voorslag en ek op die eind'lose veld.

Arriving in the land of the Great Beyond
Aangeland in die Hiernamaalse Velde

I have but one earthly desire:

Sou 'k van die Aare net een ding begeer:

Give me the best, most loyal of friends,

Gee my die beste, die trouste van Vrinde,

Voorslag, my mount, give him back to me.

Voorslag, my ryperd, gee hom vir my weer.

The poem captures the sense of affection—indeed, comradeship—felt at least from the combatant's side toward his horse. There is a great deal of evidence for such sentiment being widespread among the men. Indeed, a Boer general noted of his men: "No doubt the burghers were very kind to their animals." They "sometimes carried it too far," he continued, "and the superior officers had often to interfere" (Viljoen, 1902). Some Boers even granted horses greater prescience than humans, believing that their horses could alert them to enemy proximity (Standertonner, 1936). Reitz noted of yet another of his horses, a "sturdy little Boer pony, Blesman," that he "remained my faithful friend long after he had got me out of [trouble]; he was shot, poor little chap, the day when they made me prisoner. Poor Blesman, to you I owe my life! Blesman was plainly in league against all that was British; from the first he displayed Anglophobia of a most acute character. He has served me in good stead, and now lies buried, faithful little heart, in a Lydenburg ditch." Where possible, horse carcasses were dealt with as bodies rather than meat. When Reitz's Malpert died, the commando "climbed down to pay a last visit to his poor emaciated carcass" (Reitz, 1929/1990).

On the other side, a British combatant described how his horse, Peter, had "learnt most of the philosophy that soldiering teaches. . . . Only by such companionship does one come to know a horse. Not his paces and his vices and his powers, but his interests, his understandings, his capacity for self-effacement." He continued that a soldier's horse "is an unaccounted confidant; his spirit and courage have lifted the flight of reflections, and in the rhythm of his paces our vague thoughts have trod. One learns from the parting how close has been the comradeship" (Battersby, 1900). Lonely soldiers chatted to their horses and spent more time with them than with any other living entity and experienced shared dangers that forged bonds (Hopkins, 1963). Combatants had strong ties to their horses. In the case of the Boers, this took a literal form: near the enemy, the men slept with their "unsaddled horses by their sides, and the bridles in their hands" (Viljoen, 1902) or even tethered

to their feet. This was true of *agterryers*, too. *Agterryers* had been pivotal on commando, caring for the horses, maintaining tack, ensuring they were fed, and guarding the horses at night (Pretorius, 1999; Reitz 1929/1990).

There was an uneasy friction between the growing view of horses as comrades and their official designation as military property. This was played out acutely in the arena of death. Both sides, for example, used euthanasia on terminal cases. When a British combatant “ended his [wounded horse’s] South African career with [his] revolver,” instead of waiting for the farrier-sergeant to do so, however, he faced arrest for destroying government property.²⁴ This was an issue only for the British, as the Boers rode their own horses on commando.

Since every Boer was his own ordnance, supply, and remount department, as the war progressed, by necessity there was increased flexibility as to who rode which horse. Horse ownership on commando was, however, sacrosanct, and if a good case could be made out for ownership, the horse had to be returned to its original owner. Nevertheless, since horses were indispensable, horse and tack theft were rife. Saddlebags, as well as horse shoes and nails were in short supply. Horses’ appearance could be altered with the strategic docking of a tail, cutting of a mane. Sometimes a ward number was branded on a horse’s haunch to thwart theft. Certainly, there were prosecutions for horse-theft in the guerrilla phase, where a horse could mean life or death.²⁵

There was thus tension between mounted burghers and those on foot (Viljoen, 1902). A commando member observed that without a horse a man could not really “belong in the Boer army” (Ver Loren van Themaat, 1903). To be a horseless man meant almost certain capture—or worse. A combatant noted that “the burghers without horses were suffering terribly from the killing heat, and many were attacked by typhoid and malarial fever through having to drink a lot of bad water” (Viljoen, 1902). In a telling example, which reflects the desperation for horses of any kind: 300 horseless men drew lots for remounts, mainly unbroken mares, and “those of us... unsuccessful in the drawings had at least the fun of seeing the winners break in their mounts, a diverting spectacle.” Rapidly broken-in quasi-feral horses provided occasional Boer remounts—until the British became wise to this strategy and peppered them with machine gun fire, rendering them uncatchable (Reitz, 1929/1990).

The value of horses was such that their loss brought combatants to utter despair. Reitz, for example, shared his worst experience of the war: a hard rain falling on the commando, with 50 or 60 ponies dying from exposure, rendering a quarter of the commando horseless, on foot in the freezing downpour, carrying their saddles and stumbling over the carcasses. The night was

so psychologically damaging that the little group that survived it felt a shared traumatized identity, calling themselves the “Groot Reent Kerels” (the “Big Rain Men”). On the British side, an equally poignant vignette captures the close bond forged between man and horse: a trooper had been shot and fallen from his horse who, “as if realizing the wounded man’s condition . . . knelt down beside him, the trooper making several ineffectual attempts to scramble into the saddle. The enemy, with a marksmanship on a par with his humanity [fired ineffectually at the horse]” (Battersby, 1900). This anecdote, with its emphasis on the lack of humanity on the part of the enemy toward the horse, also reflects how growing public humaneness could be mobilized as effective propaganda.

As propaganda it was successful because the treatment of horses was increasingly mobilized as a hallmark of civility. One Boer general, for example, was at pains to record in a memoir written during the war that, while Boers made boots out of the hides of horses that had died of disease, “no horse was specially slaughtered for this purpose or for the purpose of food.” He then went on to emphasize that it was “only [the British] who slaughtered their horses to make sausages” (Viljoen, 1902). There was a long tradition among both Britons and South Africans (of different races) of aversion to horse meat (Plaatje, 1990). During the sieges of Mafeking, Ladysmith, and Kimberley, however, as food began to grow scarce after a few weeks, horses were added to the menu (Nevinson, 1900). Public shock was evident (Battersby, 1900). Arguably, the eating of horses broke a taboo produced by an intimacy that had been increasingly reinforced by sentimentalizing the horse-human bond. In a social environment where horses and men relied on each other, it was a shocking act, tantamount to a kind of cannibalism, stamped in popular memory.

Death and Memory

Once hostilities ceased, the monuments commemorating the war were part of the first mass raising of war memorials in Britain.²⁶ Before this war, military memorials almost exclusively honored men of commissioned rank. (Most early regimental memorials named only the officers and not the noncommissioned officers and men.) The South African War, however, was one of the first wars to show recognition not only for the generals and upper echelons but also for common soldiers and, perhaps because of the growing emphasis on the role of the subordinate strata, it was also one of the first to show recognition for the ordinary horses. Nostalgia played a large part in any social

understanding of war, and much reminiscence included reference to horses. Reitz's memoir, for example, written in self-imposed exile after the war, talked of the "long road we had travelled... and of the good men and splendid horses that were dead" (Reitz, 1929/1990).

After the war, among the other cenotaphs was a statue erected by public subscription (largely English-speakers) to honor the dead horses in Port Elizabeth. A pro-British women's committee had initiated the subscription during the war.²⁷ There was some public opposition to the memorial by those who were felt it might be antireligious to raise an idol to a beast, and by some who simply felt it self-indulgent while the country was still at war, and that afterward, during the difficult Reconstruction period, it was an unjustified expense, at £800. The statue was not politically neutral: three years after the war, it was made in England by Joseph Whitehead, shipped to Port Elizabeth, and swung onto the docks, much as the remounts themselves had been. The three-ton bronze gelding did not stand alone; he was accompanied by a one-ton British Tommy. They were both draped in a Union Jack and then unveiled by the mayor to a rousing chorus of "God Save the King" (Van Tonder, 1971).

International interest was aroused in the horse memorial in South Africa, and postcards of it sold in great numbers.²⁸ Simultaneously, in Britain, similar memorials were raised. For example, in 1903 in Surrey, a memorial was raised in memory of the "mute fidelity of the 400,000 horses killed and wounded at the call of their masters during the South African War 1899-1902 in a cause of which they knew nothing. This fountain is erected by a reverent fellow creature." A few years later, a granite memorial at Winchester was erected simply "in memory of the horses killed in the South African War 1899-1902." The war museum in Bloemfontein contains statues of Boers and their horses, erected nearly two generations after the war.²⁹ Revealingly, however, there was no monument erected to *agterryers*.

After the War

The public consciousness of the equine fatalities was to save lives in the far greater conflict that followed a decade later in World War I. Questions over the remounts lost to the "wastage of war" engaged the attention of a military Court of Inquiry and two committees. Reforms were instituted after public outrage, particularly after the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the South African War forced an overhaul of the Remount Department. There was widespread contemporary understanding that the slaughter had occurred at least in part through military error and administrative incompetence.³⁰ The

postwar Commission of Inquiry concluded that the “great loss of horses during the campaign is no doubt chiefly due to the rawness of condition when brought into the field, but must also be attributed in part to the inexperience of great numbers among the men who used them (Royal Commissions of Inquiry, *Military Preparation for South African War*, 1903). Following the Commission, there was pressure from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, from politicians, and from the public to reform the Army Veterinary Service. In the immediate aftermath of the war in 1903, the Army Veterinary Corps was created, and four years later the most outraged commentator of all—Major General Sir Frederick Smith, who had dubbed the equine wastage a “holocaust”—became Director General.

By the end of the war, there were still over 131,000 horses on the books of the War Office, with a fifth recovering in remount camps. The Repatriation Department faced the Herculean task of restoring the devastated country and dealing with remaining combat animals—a logistical cleaning of the Augean Stables. About 9,500 horses suspected of infection were simply destroyed to forestall epidemics. But that still left 120,500 horses from all over the world. These remnants of empire were sold to local farmers in the year after the war. So the horses accustomed to the fields of England and Ireland, the steppes of central Europe, the pampas and plains of the Americas, found a new home and new herds on the *platteland* and Highveld of South Africa.

The horses’ experiences of war have offered a foundation for exploring the human experience—particularly, the personal experience of combatants on both sides of the war. Both the strengths and vulnerabilities of horses were significant in the war, underlining the point that including horses in human history does more than simply add to the story—it opens up a fresh dimension.

Notes

1. There is a rich seam of primary sources on the war, and this article of necessity touches on a limited number. There is a vast secondary literature: for a discussion of historiographical themes see Cuthbertson, Grundlingh, and Suttie (2002). For a comprehensive analysis, see Nasson (1999a).

2. The war cost the British taxpayer more than £200,000,000, of which £15,329,306 was spent on horses, mules, and donkeys. Royal Commissions of Inquiry, *Military Preparation for South African War 1903*: Cd. 1792, p. 258.

3. The total was made up of 364,693 Imperial and 82,742 colonial troops.

4. Casualties may have been higher, as these statistics refer just to those animals paid for by the public purse, omitting those seized by troops locally. Royal Commissions of Inquiry, *Military Preparation for South African War 1903*: Cd. 1792, p. 97.

5. “Horseflesh” refers to horses considered as a group.

6. After qualifying as a vet, Frederick Smith (1857-1929) joined the British Army in 1876. From 1886 he was attached to the Army Veterinary School, Aldershot, transferring five years later to the remount department. He came to South Africa as a regular AVD officer in November 1899 and remained until 1905, serving as Principal Veterinary Officer after the war. After his return to England, he was appointed Director General of the Army Veterinary Service in 1907, retiring in 1910.

7. There were still highly successful cavalry charges in the South African War: French's charge on Kimberley, for example. Royal Commissions of Inquiry, Military Preparation for South African War 1903: Cd. 1789-1792, pp. 49-50.

8. See Amery (1900-1909), pp. 650 and 655-658; see also NAB: Cd. 963, Report on the working of the Army Remount Department, pp. 10-14 and 31-32.

9. National Army Museum, UK, Laurence L. Maxwell Papers, 7402/30-8, 25 Feb 1900, MS. Stellenbosch.

10. NAB, CSO, 1652, 1900/5324, Arrival of SS 'Norfolk' from Buenos Ayres with horses under offer to military authorities, 1900.

11. VAB (Free State Archives), Cd.882, Report On Horse Purchase In Austro-Hungary, 1902.

12. TAB (National Archives Repository, formerly Transvaal Archives Repository), MGP, 62, 577/01, Re - Prices for Australian Horses, 1901.

13. Statistics from Royal Commissions of Inquiry, Military Preparation for South African War 1903: Cd. 1792, p. 258.

14. See also National Archives, United Kingdom, PRO 30/57/22, Kitchener Papers, pt. 1-2, 22, November 1901, p. 207.

15. See also National Archives, United Kingdom, PRO 30/57/22, Kitchener Papers, pt. 1-2, 22, November 1901, p. 207.

16. Report on the Army Veterinary Department in South Africa, Ian Matthews, Principal Veterinary Officer, SA, to Colonel Duff, 15 July 1900, Royal Commissions of Inquiry, Military Preparation for South African War 1903: Cd. 1792. Appendix No. 6, p 100.

17. Report on the Army Veterinary Department in South Africa, Ian Matthews, Principal Veterinary Officer, SA, to Colonel Duff, 15 July 1900, Royal Commissions of Inquiry, Military Preparation for South African War 1903: Cd. 1792. Appendix No. 6, p. 100. There was also a shortage of farriers.

18. Boers tended to ride with only the left hand on the reins, and they often favored the control offered by a curb or Pelham bit.

19. Reitz (1929/1990), p. 165; McLean (1931), p. 28; VAB, CO, 9, 685/01, Burial of dead horses by military near farm: discomfort etc. Caused by: authorities to select some other site further away, 1901.

20. KAB, AG Collection, AG6074. In the Battle of Magersfontein, December 1899, Boer forces crushed British troops who had been sent to relieve the Siege of Kimberley.

21. For the possibility of a hippocentric history, see Swart (in press).

22. Reitz, (1929/1990), p. 137. Boer General De Wet prayed to God to spare his Fleur, struck down by a foreign "English disease" and then, when prayer failed, buried him on his farm.

23. Smith, F. (1919). *A veterinary history of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902*. London (as cited in S. J. E. Vandenberg, (2009), p. 142).

24. TAB, MGP, 12, 1282/00, "Asking that an order may be issued that horses who are in low condition may be taken to the site of burial and shot there." July 26, 1900; TAB MGP 13, 1522/00, "Re: killing of horses," August 2, 1900; Reitz (1929/1990), p. 207; see also Lee (1985).

25. TAB, Preller Collection, 10, L. Botha to B. J. Viljoen, November 21, 1901, p. 45.

26. This was because of the ideology of empire, increasing wealth, and faster communications. See Jones (1999).

27. Contributions came variously from the London Metropolitan Drinking Trough Association, schools, businessmen, various military units, and from individuals in England, Australia, and North America.

28. See "South African Memorial to Horses" (1909).

29. See, for example, "Die Bittereinder," Danie de Jager, War Museum, Bloemfontein.

30. NAB: Government House, vol. 838, W. Hely-Hutchinson—A.G. Vansittart, December 10, 1900. 21 NAB: Cd. 1792, Royal Commission on the War in South Africa. Minutes and Evidence, pp. 97-98.

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