



Horses in action

Narrated by Matt Baker

Video transcript

My great-granddad, Tommy Baker, was a 'mule man' in the First World War. He joined up with his mates and was assigned to the transport regiment in the 11th battalion of the East Yorkshire regiment, and these he is.

Now great-granddad Tommy had two mules, Nellie and Nancy and his job was to care for them, to feed them, to groom and then together they took the ammunition for the rifles and the machine guns to the front line.

Now as well as all the ammunition, the job of the transport section was to carry everything the battalion needed – so food, medical supplies, tools and as well as traveling over horrific terrain, they mainly moved at nighttime, so the Germans wouldn't spot them and shell them.

Now to give you an idea of the conditions we're talking about, at the Somme, where Tommy's battalion fought, the liquid mud could be 20 inches deep, so Gulliver, what job would you have had?

Well, you would have made an ideal supply horse due to these powerful shoulders and short neck, you'd have been great, for pulling wagons or ambulances. And after battles, horses like Gulliver would have been taken to the frontline to bring back badly injured men.

While supply and pack horses made up 43% of war horses, there were other essential roles too.

One in five were ridden by officers, messengers and scouts – essential for communication and reconnaissance, they needed to have a sloping shoulder to give room for the rider and a long easy stride.

Big horses like the sturdy Shires were used in teams to pull heavy artillery guns, which weighed around 5,000lbs – that's more than a London taxi cab!

At the start of the war, generals like General Haig believed cavalry charges would be essential to break through enemy lines. But they were needed less and less as the opposing armies became deadlocked in the trenches – and the development of the tank replaced the power of horse.

Instead they were used to protect troops on the move. The cavalry was more successful in Palestine and Syria - managing to break through Turkish enemy lines in 1918.

Whatever their role in whichever theatre of war, mules and horses were fundamental to the success of the British army.

And through it all they were looked after by soldiers like my great-granddad Tommy. Not just because they were valuable, but because they saw them as comrades-in-arms.

[Images courtesy of National Army Museum, Getty Images, Mary Evans Picture Library]