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David Backhouse designed the “Animals in War” memorial honoring all those lost on behalf of the United Kingdom (including approximately 8 million WWI horses) during 20th-century wars. The memorial is located in Hyde Park where the Princess Royal (Queen Elizabeth’s daughter Anne) unveiled it on November 24, 2004. This image, by DonJay, depicts the northern section. Among the memorial’s inscriptions are these words: “They had no choice.” Click on the image for a better view.

Going home, at the end of the "great war," British soldiers - like the fictional Albert Narracott - wondered what would happen to their horses who were also veterans of the carnage. In some areas (like France and Belgium), they were sold at auction ("but only after assurances had been attained that French and Belgian butchers would not take the horses for their meat").

Although numbers vary, historians estimate that about 1 million horses served at the Western Front. Of those animals, approximately 67,000 returned home. That means at least 933,000 died under various conditions.

Horses also served in other locations during World War I. Historians estimate 8 million were lost, considering all locations and all battles.

Some of the horses were killed in combat, along with their riders. Others died from disease, or in the mud, where they were overcome by the constant, heavy burdens placed on them. Too exhausted to keep moving, some slipped in the dirt and grime - never to get up again.

Bill Cotgrove - a World War I veteran who lived until he was 105 - tells us what it was like to be with a real war horse. His confidant was called "Alfie," and together they helped to pull heavy guns into position near the front line. As he sat on Alfie's back, with shells exploding all around them, Bill and his horse did their job.

Before he died, Cotgrove was interviewed for a documentary about real war horses. He recalled:

You had to take every day as it came, because you didn't know if you were going to get killed or not, so I never used to worry about it. We'd just get on with our job - looking after our horses and the guns. (From a January 8, 2010 *Daily Mail* article, entitled "The Horses that Won Us the War: How a Harrowing Reality Inspired Michael Morpurgo's Classic Novel.")

Alfred Henn, another veteran, kept a picture of his one-eyed horse (called "Nelson") with him for most of his own long life. Before he died, at the age of 103, Henn described what it was like to be caught in the middle of an artillery barrage:

One night, the horses stopped mid-track. They wouldn't walk a straight line, they kept swerving about, and I thought, "What has happened?" We couldn't see anything in the dark, but we'd just walked into an area where a shell had dropped.

There was smoke coming up and the wall was covered in pieces of flesh. It was a terrible sight, I tell you, and the poor horses were more frightened than we were. (*Daily Mail*, 8 January 2010.)

Horses were the best confidant for young soldiers far from home. Many of the fighting troops, still in their teens, needed someone safe to whom they could unburden their thoughts. Before writing his book, Michael Morpurgo - author of *War Horse* - heard such a story from one of those young men, since grown old:

We were all 17 or 18. We were all terrified, but we didn't want to look as if we were terrified because we knew everyone else was, so we never talked about that. Which meant that we never really talked about what we were feeling deep down. We talked about things to keep ourselves jolly.

The only "person" I could talk to about things that I really cared about - my family, my mum and my fear of dying - was my horse. And I'd go to my horse at night and I'd feed him and I'd stand there, and I'd stroke his neck and talk into his ear and I'd tell him ... and that horse listened.

(Passage from the *Daily Mail's* interview with Michael Morpurgo, 8 January 2010.)

The horses aren't listening anymore because they, like all of their minders and riders, are dead now. In America and Canada, the "Great War" is so little-known it is called the "Forgotten War."

But in Britain - where stories have passed down, from generation to generation - real families (resembling the fictional Narracotts) remember. As Emily Watson, who plays Rose Narracott in the film version of the story, explains (in an interview with Mike Edwards, for *Movie Vortex*):

The Michael Morpurgo book is "Black Beauty goes to war." So if you're English, two of the most emotive subjects you could touch on are "Black Beauty" and the First World War. The crew were constantly in tears, as there were war memorials and everybody had a story in their family ... for English people, everyone is touched by that war.

Because of Morpurgo's novel - and the film, documentaries and stage productions following in its wake - people throughout the world, whose families have no personal connection to the conflict, will also be "touched by that war."

POSTSCRIPT

People who were part of the war - whose voices are now mostly forgotten - were usually young. Many were not much older than twenty; some were in their late teens.

Of all those involved, some perished; some became prisoners of war; some became heroes. Others survived to live fairly normal lives; some ended-up as physical or mental wrecks.

Deciding to leave the trail of facts and figures - to tell the story of real people fighting a real war which some welcomed and others hated - Peter England (a Swedish historian) has unearthed what twenty individuals have left behind.

His book - *The Beauty and the Sorrow* - is "a work of anti-history, an attempt to deconstruct this utterly epoch-making event [the war] into its smallest, most basic component - the individual, and his or her experiences." (*Beauty and Sorrow*, page xiii.)

Such a book helps those who do not care - because they do not know - to exchange ignorance for knowledge, to welcome reflection in place of disregard.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/JOEY-and-ALBERT-at-WAR-S-END-War-Horse)

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Questions 2 Ponder

What Happens When Boys Fight a Man's War?

In the book and movie "War Horse," like the real events of WWI, many of the actual fighters were either teenagers or young men just out of their teens.

Everyone was terrified but didn't want to express fear, so people didn't talk about their actual feelings. Instead, the young fighters talked about their families, their mothers, their fears about battles to come and their fears about dying by relating those feelings to their horses.

As a result of a soldier's need to have a good listener, when those listeners were not fellow soldiers, do you think that WWI horses played a role which is not obvious to 21st-century students of the Great War? Explain your answer.

If the young soldiers did not have horses, with whom to share their innermost thoughts, how might the war have been worse for them?

What Makes Stories about WWI Difficult for Some Countries?

For many individuals in Britain, Michael Morpurgo's book is equivalent to "Black Beauty Goes to War." Emily Watson, who plays Rose Narracott in the film version of *War Horse*, tells us why the combination of "Black

Beauty" and "The Great War" is so painful for Brits, even in the 21st century:

... So if you're English, two of the most emotive subjects you could touch on are "Black Beauty" and the First World War. The crew [working on the film] were constantly in tears, as there were war memorials and everybody had a story in their family ... for English people, everyone is touched by that war.

If you had a family story, about a war like WWI, would that make the war more personal to you? Explain your answer.

If you did not have a family story, about a war like WWI, would that make you less-interested in learning about what happened and what the soldiers had to endure? Explain your answer.

Assuming that a personal connection to an actual event makes stories about that event more real, or more interesting, what does that tell us about human nature?

Media Stream



JOEY and ALBERT at WAR'S END

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War Horse - A Real Vet Tells His Story

Clip from a documentary - "The Real War Horse" - shown on the UK History Channel and online via YouTube. Copyright 2009, History Channel, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

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