

Unlikely Heroes

Millions of animals have served in wars. Horses, donkeys and camels transported food, weapons and medication. Pigeons carried vital messages. Dogs worked as guards, trackers and even medics, locating and assisting the wounded. But there were also many unusual animals which played a vital role in World War One and Two. Read on to learn about some of the most unexpected heroes of war, from gas detecting gastropods to bioluminescent beetles...

Lanterns of the trenches

In World War One, many soldiers lived and fought in trenches: long, narrow ditches dug into the ground which were damp, dangerous and rife with disease. Conditions in the trenches were horrific. Night time was especially terrifying. Soldiers couldn't risk using lanterns or lighting matches as the bright light could alert the enemy to their location. Instead, the soldiers found comfort in another source of light, thanks to the lowly glow-worm! But what exactly is a glow-worm and how did these tiny creatures light up the trenches?

The term glow-worm refers to various types of insect larvae and adult insects that are *bioluminescent*. This means they make their own light through an internal chemical process. The glow-worms found in the trenches were European glow-worms. Closely related to fireflies, the European glow-worm is not a worm, but a beetle. The adult female creates a glow to attract a mate. But her glow also attracted the attention of the soldiers in the trenches. They discovered if they placed the glow-worms in jars, they provided a natural and safe light. Not only did these magic lanterns bring comfort, but they enabled soldiers to read maps and letters at night.

The Slug Brigade

Loathed by gardeners everywhere, the common slug does not have a glorious reputation. But this garden pest is credited with saving the lives of thousands of soldiers during World War One. So how did the slimy slug become a soldier's saviour?

Dr Paul Bartsch, a curator at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, accidentally discovered that slugs had an amazing ability. Dr Bartsch had been studying garden slugs at his home when they escaped and found their way into his furnace room. He observed that the slugs were sensitive to the gas emitted by the furnace. It was this ability to detect gas which led to the slugs' life-saving role on the battlefield.

Poisonous mustard gas was a significant threat to soldiers during World War One. Around 90,000 died, and over a million were injured from gas warfare. The US army had tried using a variety of animals to detect poisonous gas, but with little success. Dr Bartsch's research had shown that slugs visibly reacted to low-levels of gas by compressing bodies. Even better, the gas didn't kill the slugs as they could protect their lung membrane. The army had found their gas detectors!

From June 1918 until the end of the war, slugs were taken into the trenches. By observing the slugs' behaviour, soldiers could put on masks to protect themselves before the gas reached a dangerous level.

Dashing through the Snow

Horses, donkeys and camels were often used to transport wartime weapons and supplies, but did you know that in World War Two reindeer also played their part?

Between 1940 and 1944, around 6000 reindeer and their indigenous herders served with the Soviet army. This 'Reindeer Battalion' transported essential supplies and equipment from the Northern ports to the battlefield. They also helped carry thousands of wounded soldiers, and even towed grounded planes. The reindeers' strength and their ability to deal with the treacherous Arctic conditions made them a vital resource for the Soviet army.

In 2012, a statue was erected in the Russian town of Naryan-Mar to acknowledge the role reindeer and their herders played in World War Two.

The Elephant Company

In ancient times, elephants were often used in battle. Their strength and size made them a fearsome force. Swords and spears could do little damage to the enormous elephant (who sometimes even had its own armour). For thousands of years, elephants played a role in warfare, but this changed with the invention of gunpowder weapons.

Even when they were no longer used in battle, elephants continued to be of service in war, carrying weapons and supplies in areas otherwise inaccessible. One particular troop of elephants played a very special part in World War Two. James Williams, who was employed by a teak company in Burma (now Myanmar), developed a remarkable relationship with the elephants he worked alongside. When Japanese forces entered Burma in 1942, Williams commanded a troop of 1600 elephants transporting timber to build bridges and roads needed by the allies. Cornered by the Japanese, Williams and his elephants also helped refugees escape Burma, crossing several mountain ranges, to the safety of India.

Companions through the darkest times

Animal mascots have also played an important role in war. As well as providing companionship and hope, mascots served as a reminder of home. Dogs and cats were a popular choice as mascots, but there were also many unusual animals who provided comfort in the dark times of war.

Wojtek, 'the soldier bear,' was the mascot of a group of Polish soldiers in World War Two. Wojtek was adopted as a cub, but he grew to over 180 centimetres tall and 220 kilograms in weight. A gentle giant, Wojtek loved the company of soldiers (as well as play fighting, taking showers and drinking beer). When the soldiers moved to Italy, Wojtek was officially enlisted so he could accompany his unit. They gave him the title of private and a service number. Wojtek fulfilled his duties, carrying ammunition to the troops and was later promoted to corporal.

A Canadian Infantry unit was so attached to their mascot goat 'Sergeant Bill' that they smuggled him into France. Sergeant Bill proved much more than just a mascot when he saved the lives of three soldiers, pushing them into a trench to escape an exploding shell. Sergeant Bill was wounded on several occasions and suffered from trench foot (a rotting of his hooves, but he survived the war and spent his retirement in Edinburgh zoo). Sometimes animals intended for food became mascots, and this was what happened to Tirpitz, the pig. Carried aboard German warship as a fresh supply of meat, Tirpitz was spared when her ship sunk in a battle with HMS *Glasgow*. Tirpitz swam to safety, and a sailor from HMS *Glasgow* rescued her from the sea. The British crew then adopted Tirpitz as their mascot, and she spent a year aboard the ship.

For some, mascots were symbols of good luck. For others they were life-saving companions. Whether it was a scorpion in a jar or a devoted dog, the menagerie of animal mascots played a vital role in war.

We remember them

The Animals in War Memorial in Canberra is one of the many monuments commemorating the animals that served, suffered and died in war. Australia now marks February 24 as a National Day for War Animals, and people are encouraged to wear purple poppies as a mark of respect. As we pay tribute to these many animals, let us remember the more unlikely heroes among them. From the humble glow-worm to the majestic elephant—they also served.