

HORSES IN THE ANGLO-BOER WAR

Sensitive readers are advised not to read this article because it could prove to be distressing

While I was researching the importation of Welsh ponies and cobs into South Africa in the early 1900's, I came across numerous articles and became fascinated by the role which horses, donkeys and mules played in the Anglo-Boer War (A-BW) from 1899 to 1902. The appalling toll which the war took on these equines and the reading of such horrendous neglect and callousness made my blood run cold. However, we must never forget their contribution, despite their unfortunate sacrifice which meant that the horses paid dearly for what was only the result of human squabbling¹; but it was 'Theirs not to reason why'²

This war could be considered as the last fully horse-powered war in history. This was before the development of the internal combustion engine for its use in motorised transport. By the time the First World War started in 1914, not only were fighting forces relying more and more on motorised vehicles for transport and military equipment but the development in the use of aircraft was already well advanced. Even with that in mind, WW1 used about 8 million equines in Europe alone.

When the war commenced on 11th October, 1899, the British military already had arrangements with owners of some horses where the military paid a fee to those owners on the understanding that they would be released to the military if and when required for the purposes of war; the owners obviously betting on the likelihood of this NOT happening. The owners lost. Payment had been made in respect of 6 000 horses which included Welsh cobs and these were immediately requisitioned with arrangements made to ship them to the new war front in South Africa. The first shipment of horses commenced at about the middle of November, 1899, arriving in Durban 3 weeks later.

The British War office confirmed that 669 575 horses, donkeys and mules were purchased from around the world³ including 210 239⁴ bought locally at

¹ European Armies and the Conduct of War by Strachan p84

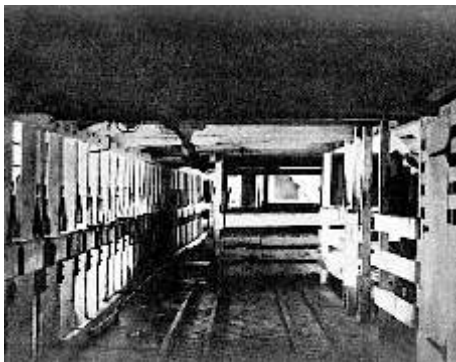
² "Theirs Not to Reason Why" – horsing the British Army 1875-1926 by Graham Winton

³ The British Commonwealth (UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India), Europe, USA and Argentina

about £15 each. From Australia came the ‘Walers’ bred, ironically, from the original shipment of Cape Horses in the 1700’s⁵. The USA was by far the greatest provider of horse-flesh. 109 878 horses and 81 524 mules were shipped from New Orleans in 65 different British steamships making 166 voyages. It was one of the largest global transports of animals in history⁶. However, the records of these voyages are less than encouraging.

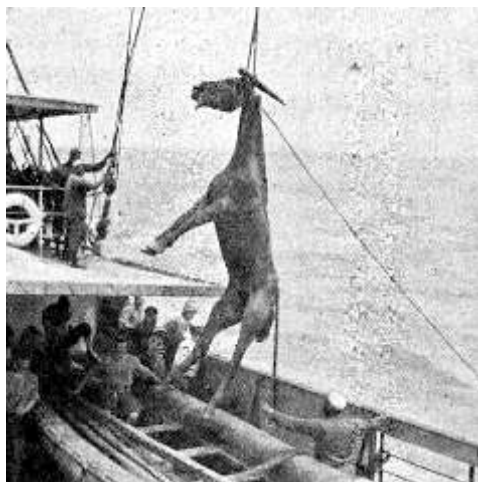


Loading ramp to Main Deck



Main Deck starboard and midship stalls

It was reported that ‘Conditions on the steamers were terrible, paralleling



Horse funeral

those on the slave ships in the transatlantic slave trade. Horses and mules were forced with chains into gangways leading from the wharf to the side of the steamship. They were packed into the steamships, stood up to their hocks in excrement and excoriating urine, got sick with the pitch and roll of the ships, starved from insufficient fodder, were unable to lie down or roll, and some 13 144 or 3,73% died and were then thrown overboard. The atmosphere below

⁴ 164 115 horses and 46 124 mules and donkeys

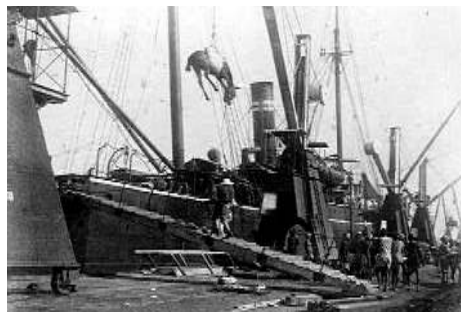
⁵ War Horses: The Role of Horses in the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The term ‘Waler’ was first used in India in 1846 in reference to the horses that came from New South Wales.

⁶ American Horses for the South African War by Philip Homan

in which these animals lived was so foul, that the men looking after them would not work more than half-an-hour before coming on deck for air. The



Unloading a horse in Port Elizabeth



Unloading a horse at Durban Harbour



*Horse unloaded from the 'Lighters'
in PE Harbour*

absolute blackness, excepting for a few electric lights, intensified the evil⁷. It must, however, be mentioned that for those journeys undertaken by regiments where the soldiers and horses travelled together, conditions were far superior, as the soldiers were required to attend their own allocated horses.

In many cases the officers were able to take their own horses and naturally ensured that they were well cared-for by the grooming staff

However, by 31 May, 1902, 326 073 horses, 22 874 donkeys and 51 399 mules had died. This had been calculated from the figures given by the British War Office where it is determined that 400 346 horses, mules and donkeys were 'expended' during the war⁸. If one considers that the war lasted 970 days, this equates to 336 horse, 53 mule and 24 donkey deaths for each and every day of the war. This only includes those horses that were purchased, not those that were confiscated or captured; and as the Boer forces provided their

⁷ Frederick Smith: A Veterinary History of the War in South Africa. 1899-1902, (Veterinary Department Officer during the A-BW)

⁸ T Pakenham: The Boer War.

own horses individually, no statistics are available of the deaths of their horses. A comment made some time later was that the A-BW 'swallowed horses as a modern army swallows petrol'.

A horse's life expectancy was around six weeks from the time of arrival in South Africa. However, ironically, the likelihood of dying in battle was far less (as it was for humans⁹) than that of succumbing to illness, deprivation and environmental hazards¹⁰.

It can therefore be realised that horses were an indispensable part of the war effort and one can only wonder why so little was done to reduce these deaths, after all, most of the horses were not being killed in combat. Many reasons are given in numerous publications but all come down to the following basic causes:-

- As mentioned above, after the 3 to 4 weeks sea voyage, the equines arrived in a parlous condition; undernourished and standing in the stalls without any exercise. It was not so much the voyage that killed them, but the aftermath: its debilitating effects and the absence of an acclimatization period. Horses would arrive incapacitated, dehydrated, malnourished and their immune system compromised, and instead of having the period necessary to revive, they would be transported to the front almost at once. It was mentioned earlier that the first batch of horses arrived mid-December, 1899, from the UK. From a mid-winter climate with their heavy winter coat to mid-summer in South Africa. They were immediately sent to the front line for active service in the African summer heat.
- The rough terrain, including boulder-strewn hills, which the imported horses were not used to
- Exhaustion and dehydration as a result of horses being ridden over hundreds of kilometres in all kinds of weather, with little or no respite. It was estimated that the military 'lost one horse for every 3,5 miles it marched during the war'¹¹.

⁹ 22 000 of the 447 435-strong British forces died; for the Boers roughly 7 000 of the 87 365 Boer combatants were killed and about 20 000 of the estimated 100 000 Black combatants and refugees on both sides. In addition 27 000 Boer civilians (mostly women and children) died in British-run concentration camps; total about 76 000 people died

¹⁰ Sandra Swart: Horses in the South African War, c. 1899-1902 p348 in Society and Animals 18 (2010)

¹¹ Peter Warwick, The South African War p98

- Many horses sustained injuries to their fetlocks and hooves – there was not always the time to treat animals with the care they were used to. The sheer wear and tear on the horses can be imagined.
- Imported horses, unlike those used by the Boers, were unused to surviving on the veld grass, which is all many were exposed to for food for much of the time. Most had been raised and fed nutritious grains, not to mention the rich grazing of the lands from which they came. The larger size British horses made them more dependent on fodder that had to be imported in great quantities from places such as Mexico. South African horses would eat both oats and mealies; New Zealand horses would eat oats but not touch mealies, and Australian horses would eat mealies but not oats¹². It was estimated that one million tons of fodder was imported for the war. One officer put it bluntly when he said that many mounted men in ignorance ‘did not know whether to feed their horses on beef or mutton’¹³
- Overloading the horses with unnecessary equipment and saddlery, sometimes weighing up to 50kg, which, together with the mount at 75kg, was 125kg, and the horses were expected then to maintain a speed of 15km per hour over all terrains and under all weather conditions; blistering heat, freezing winters, thunderous rain storms and the fording of dangerous flooded drifts.
- And if the above did not kill them, African Horse Sickness and a motley of other equine diseases did; brought in by the imported horses, such as strangles, vesicular stomatitis (from America), mange, glanders, influenza and pneumonia, for which they had not developed any immunity.

In the War office report after the A-BW it is clear that the entire exercise was an unmitigated disaster. Predicting a speedy victory in a “tea-time 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 wrong by a factor of ten¹⁴. It was not as if the British were not aware of the conditions in South Africa (because they governed the Cape Colony and Natal and knew, or ought to have known the local conditions), but the recommendations and specified requirements of the officers in the field were over-ruled by unsympathetic Whitehall staff who decided what the men and the equines needed although

¹² Sandra Swart p353

¹³ Marquess of Anglesey: A history of the British cavalry (Vol IV)

¹⁴ Sandra Swart p351

they had no experience of the conditions under which the war was being fought. This was especially so when the guerrilla phase of the war started in 1901; but then again this was the first time guerrilla warfare was used and it took the British generals by surprise.

During the A-BW, the British Army routinely chose to destroy its horses than allow them to fall into the hands of the enemy. One of these incidents occurred at Winburg in the Orange River Colony when the British Army slaughtered some 1 500 animals as shown on the accompanying photograph¹⁵.



The condition of the horses show a definite poor physical condition – clear signs of malnutrition and starvation. The attitude of the two men in this picture is disturbing, though.

When a horse died, it was left at that spot and with the large number of deaths, the stench of rotting flesh was everywhere. These rotting carcasses of horses and mules left psychological scars¹⁶.

The horses which were already in poor condition were pushed beyond the extreme. During General French's swift advance to relieve the sieges of Kimberley and Mafeking, up to 500 horses perished each day from exhaustion and general neglect.

There is a long tradition among both Britons and South Africans (of different races) of aversion to horse meat¹⁷. During the sieges of Mafeking, Ladysmith and Kimberley, however, as food began to grow scarce after a few weeks,

¹⁵ Chelsea Autumn Meddock: Remembering the forgotten Legions: The Veteranization of British War Horses 1850-1950. Thesis for DPhil at Oklahoma State University

¹⁶ Reitz R: Commando – A Boer Journal of the Boer War

¹⁷ ST Plaatje: Mafeking Diary: A black man's view of a white man's war

horses were added to the menu¹⁸. Public shock was evident¹⁹. The besieged British forces in Ladysmith also produced Chevril, a Bovril-like paste, by boiling down the horse meat into a jelly paste and serving it like beef tea²⁰.

Poor horse management and ignorance within the military turned South Africa into an 'imperial knacker's yard'²¹. The Anglo-Boer war cost the British taxpayer £240 million (about £340 billion in 2021 prices) with about 10% of this representing the cost of horses in the conflict²².

Many combatants spent so much time with their horses, that they became part of them and any parting was particularly traumatic. One learns from the parting how close has been the comradeship²³. Lonely soldiers chatted to their horses and spent more time with them than any other living entity and experienced shared dangers that forged bonds²⁴. In the accompanying picture, a British soldier bids farewell to his horse, obviously emaciated. One need only look at the veld to see that there is nothing whatsoever to eat, and no shelter.



If a British soldier 'ended his wounded horse's South African career with his revolver', instead of waiting for the farrier-sergeant to do so, he faced arrest for destroying government property.

The following poem composed by A G Visser²⁵ dedicated to the eponymous 'Voorslag', his war pony, captures this sense of affection:-

¹⁸ Nevison HW: Ladysmith: The diary of a siege

¹⁹ Battersby HF Prevost: In the web of a war

²⁰ Alexander, Murray E: Horses and Horseflesh losses in the Boer War

²¹ Nasson, Bill: The South African War p151

²² Rimington MF: The horse in Recent War p8

²³ Battersby, HF: In the web of a war

²⁴ Hopkins HC: Maar een soos hy, die lewe van commandant CA van Niekerk

²⁵ Visser, after the occupation of Pretoria in 1900, left to study medicine at Edinburgh University where he graduated in 1906. He set up a practice in Heidelberg, Transvaal.

*Ek was 'n penkop en hy was a jong perd,
Met De La Rey het ons storm geja;
Onder 'n bui van kartesse het Voorslag
My en my maat van die slagveld gedra.*

*Gee my 'n ryperd, 'n roer en 'n wildsbok,
En ek beny nie die rykste sy geld;
Vryer en blyer as Vors op die troon is
Voorslag en ek op die eind 'lose veld.*

*Aangeland in die Hiernamaake Velde
Sou 'k van die Aare net een ding begeer;
Gee my die beste, the trouste van Vrinde,
Voorslag, my ryperd, gee hom vir my weer.*

At the signing of the Peace of Vereeniging, there were more than 131 000 horses on the books of the War Office, of which about 9 500 suspected of infection were simply destroyed to forestall epidemics. The better quality horses were to form the basis of the new Government Stud farms established at Tweespruit in the ORC and Standerton in the Transvaal with the 'remnants of the empire' being sold to local farmers in the year after the war. In the newspaper, *The Friend*, published in Bloemfontein, there was no issue from June 1902 onwards which did not have at least 3 advertisements each day for the auction of horses, mules and donkeys. About 200 were offered for sale at every auction. Of course, there were still horses en-route to South Africa. In Volume V of the *Natal Agricultural Journal* of June, 1902, it is reported that 6389 horses were unloaded at Durban harbour: 4 610 from Russia, 696 from America, 463 from England, 317 from Australia and 303 elsewhere. So, the horses accustomed to the fields of England, Wales 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 first horse memorial of this conflict was unveiled in Port Elizabeth on 11 February, 1905, on the Campanile in Port Elizabeth. This was sourced entirely with voluntary public donations. Naturally there was unwarranted criticism of the spending of the £800 that it cost, some believing that there were more pressing issues and that it was an unjustifiable expense. It was manufactured by Joseph Whitehead in England, shipped to Port Elizabeth and swung onto the docks, much as the remounts themselves had been²⁶.

²⁶ Sandra Swart: *Horses in the South African War*, c 1899-1902 p362



Horse Memorial - Port Elizabeth

**THE GREATNESS OF A NATION
CONSISTS NOT SO MUCH IN THE NUMBER OF ITS PEOPLE
OR THE EXTENT OF ITS TERRITORY
AS IN THE EXTENT AND JUSTICE OF ITS COMPASSION**

**Erected by public subscription
in recognition of the services of the Gallant Animals
which perished in the Anglo Boer War 1899-1902**

I am indebted to Professor Sandra Swart of the History faculty of the University of Stellenbosch for publishing her article “Horses in the South African War, c,1899-1902” in “Society and Animals” brill.nl/soan. The reading of this article led to my researching the history of the Horses in the Anglo-Boer War. I was amazed at the variety of publications and depth of coverage of the use of horses in war and extracted only a very small portion of the history for this article.

I trust that you found it as interesting, although distressing, as I did.

GK 2021



THE O.R.C. GENERAL AGENCY'S AUCTION SALES.

Imperial Military Auctioneers.

REMOUNT DEPARTMENT.

The undersigned, duly instructed by His Majesty's Imperial Military Authorities, will sell by Public Auction as

SMALDEEL,

ON

SATURDAY, 25th OCTOBER, 1902,

AT 10 A.M.

ABOUT

200 Horses.

Any person purchasing a horse exceeding £25 will be entitled to seven days' free baggage railway.

Purchasers must pay cash or give satisfactory guarantee for payment before removal of horses.

All horses sold will be treated by Mallein process for glanders.

The Orange River Colony General Agency.

HENRY SMIT and
MATT. LOCHHEAD, Auctioneers.

THE O.R.C. GENERAL AGENCY'S AUCTION SALES.

Imperial Military Auctioneers.

REMOUNT DEPARTMENT.

The undersigned, duly instructed by His Majesty's Imperial Military Authorities, will sell by PUBLIC AUCTION as

FICKSBERG,

ON

THURSDAY, 30th OCTOBER,

AT 10 A.M.

.. ABOUT 200 HORSES..

Any person purchasing a horse exceeding £25 will be entitled to seven days' free baggage railway.

Purchasers must pay cash or give satisfactory guarantee for payment before removal of horses.

All horses sold will be treated by Mallein process for glanders.

THE ORANGE RIVER COLONY GENERAL AGENCY.

M. LOCHHEAD, } Auctioneers.
HENRY SMIT, }



REMOUNT DEPARTMENT NOTICE

SALE OF HORSES.

AT the conclusion of Hostilities, the Horses in Remount Depots were divided into two Classes, as follows:—

CLASS I.—Animals 8 years old and under, sound, and suitable for the service.

CLASS II.—Others.

Of Class II, the Remount Department have sold 60,000, at an average price of £15 10s.

Owing to the reduction of establishments, the following Horses of Class I, chiefly Russian Cobs of a very good stamp, are now for sale:—

Bowler's Park (C.C.)	...	...	...	2,000
Port Elizabeth	...	...	...	2,000
Sollersbach	...	...	...	1,000

It is impossible to give the exact numbers for sale, as the Repatriation Department have the first call upon them.

The Assistant Inspector of Remounts, Johannesburg, is prepared to receive offers for the whole or part of these animals, which, by the way, have all been treated with Mallein.

No offer at a less all round price than £30 for Class I, or for a

O.R.C. GENERAL AGENCY'S AUCTION SALES.

Imperial Military Auctioneers.

REMOUNT DEPARTMENT.

THE undersigned, duly instructed by His Majesty's Imperial Military Authorities, will sell by PUBLIC AUCTION as

LADYBRAND,

ON

TUESDAY, 28th OCTOBER,

AT 10 A.M.

ABOUT 200 HORSES.

Any person purchasing a horse exceeding £25 will be entitled to seven days' free baggage railway.

Purchasers must pay cash or give satisfactory guarantee for payment before removal of horses.

All horses sold will be treated by Mallein process for glanders.

Orange River Colony General Agency.

HENRY SMIT, } Auctioneers.
M. LOCHHEAD, }