

All K-9s on the Western Front

By Mara Bovsun

1918. The 11th hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month.

It was the moment millions of people had been praying for, for more than four horrifying years.

All along the front, the pounding, shelling, and shooting stopped. First came an odd silence, then, one man recalled “a curious rippling sound, which observers far behind the front likened to the noise of a light wind. It was the sound of men cheering from the Vosges to the sea.”

The Great War was over.

There was also a lot of tail wagging. When the guns quit barking, at least 10,000 dogs were at the front. They were soldiers, too.

“They ranged from Alaskan malamute to Saint Bernard and from Scotch collie to fox terrier,” a newspaper reported. “Many of them were placed on the regimental rosters, like humans.”

As long as there have been humans, there have been wars and there have been dogs. And, as far back as anyone can remember, humans have enlisted dogs to help fight our battles.

But, as with many other aspects of life, the war that was supposed to end all wars forever changed the role of canine soldiers.

“You have to remember that the First World War was

the first total war of the 20th century. It’s a war in which there was total mobilization of each of the major belligerents,” says Imperial War Museum historian Terry Charman. “Everybody was brought in to conduct it, and dogs were part of that.”

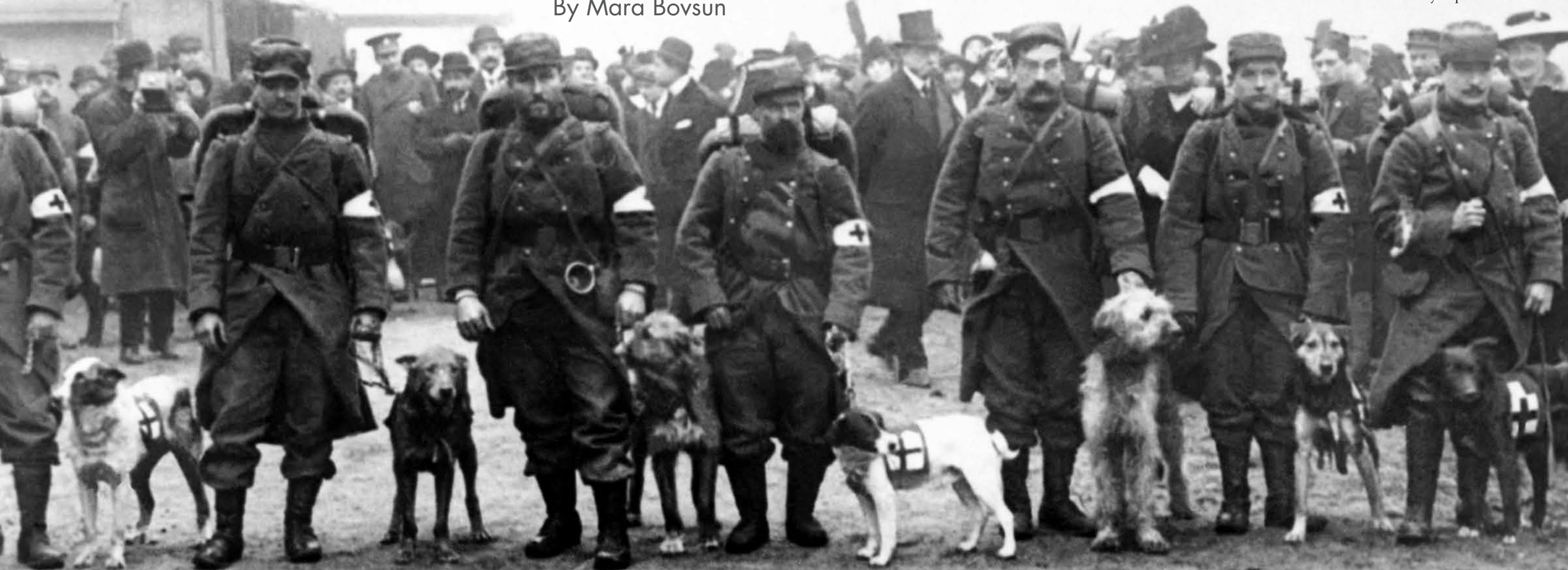
Through January 6, the Imperial War Museum North is featuring an exhibition, “The Animal’s War,” recognizing the contributions of military beasts—from message-carrying pigeons to elephants who hauled heavy equipment.

Dogs, Charman says, were used extensively during World War I. They were on the front lines, dashing across No Man’s Land, carrying messages or searching for the wounded. They hauled machine guns, light artillery, and carts loaded with ammunition, food, medicine, and sometimes wounded soldiers. Small dogs trotted among the trenches, delivering cigarettes and comfort.

“We have lots of photographs in our collection of soldiers and sailors with their pets,” says Charman. “They obviously did a lot to keep up morale in pretty ghastly conditions.”

In the Alps, dogs were the only way to get supplies to the troops. “Where the motor lorry was helpless, where the horse stood powerless to aid, where man himself found conditions which even the iron muscle and the indomitable will that is born of the fine frenzy of patrio-

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Sled teams, such as these pictured in Russia shortly after Armistice, were the only way to move in frozen regions. **Below:** Cart dogs hauling machine guns and supplies as the Belgian army heads for the front.

tism could not conquer, here came the sled dog to the rescue,” a correspondent marveled.

After one heavy snowfall, 150 dogs carried more than 50 tons of food from the valley below to the snow bunkers and trenches hacked into the frozen peaks of northern France. At least 1,000 sled dogs worked in the mountains throughout the war.

Precise statistics are impossible to come by, but Charman says that the Allied armies may have had as many as 50,000 trained war dogs, and there was an equivalent number on the other side.

About 7,000 died in active service.

Most of their names have been forgotten, and they are generally overlooked in scholarly accounts of the war. But the military dogs of World War I would have a far-ranging impact, in both war and peace. Dogs in this first modern war paved the way for more sophisticated uses of K-9 corps later on—from WWII’s Marine Devil Dogs (see *GAZETTE*, June 2006) to the bomb-sniffing sentries in Iraq.

The first formal school to train guide dogs was opened in Potsdam, Germany, in 1923, to help blinded veterans, sparking a movement that would ultimately lead to the multitalented service dogs of today.

Bomb-Proofing

Germany was the first to recognize the need for formal training, establishing the world’s first war-dog school in 1884, wrote Bryan D. Cummins in *Colonel Richardson’s Airedales* (Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 2003).

The school is credited with having introduced the idea of “mercy” or “Red Cross” dogs—what the Germans called *sanitätshunde* or sanitary dogs—as well as refining the methods for training sentries, scouts, and messengers.

At the start of the war, Charman says, Germany had about 6,000 war dogs.

The Allies had dogs too, but their efforts were not as well organized. Belgium had a tradition of using dogs as draft animals, and the French and Russians also had some dogs trained, although not as many as the Germans.

But despite their legendary obsession with all things canine, in 1914 the British had not considered involving dogs in the fray. They had one war dog, an Airedale Terrier trained for sentry duty.

That would change, largely through the

efforts of a dog trainer, Colonel Edwin Hautenville Richardson. Since the late 1800s, Richardson had been developing a training program for dogs to be used by the military and police. His research included visits to the German war-dog school.

Early in the century, Britain had no interest in Richardson’s work, so he provided trained dogs for other countries. Richardson Collies served as ambulance dogs for Russian troops during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). In 1907, another team—a Collie and a Bloodhound—were sent to guard a sultan’s palace, and Richardson speculated, his harem, in Istanbul.

The war had raged for two years before anyone in the British armed forces asked for Richardson’s help.

“In the winter of 1916 I received a letter from an officer in the Royal Artillery, in which he expressed a great desire for trained dogs to keep up communication between his outpost and the battery, during heavy bombardment, when telephones are rendered useless and the risk to runners enormous,” Richardson wrote in *British War Dogs*. “He asked if I would train some dogs to carry messages and I promised to do so.”

Wolf and Prince, two Airedales (Richardson’s preferred



breed, along with Collies, for military work), learned how to make two-mile message runs. They would prove their worth at the Battle of Vimy Ridge on April 9, 1917. “All the telephones were broken and visual signaling was impossible,” noted a military report. “The dogs were the first to bring through the news.”

The success of these Airedales on the western front, Charman says, led to the establishment of Britain’s war-dog program, which ultimately



A Sergeant of the Royal Engineers puts a message into the tin cylinder attached to the collar of a messenger dog, Etaples, 1918.

would involve about 12,000 dogs during the war.

A key component of training was getting the recruits accustomed to the relentless roar of battle. “The first training each day is the firing drill,” Richardson wrote. “Dogs would be led into a large shed, where keepers would fire round after round of blanks.”

Food was also used. “A war dog’s dinner bell is a bomb,” noted a *Boston Globe* reporter, who was visiting a French war-dog school in 1916. “When all is ready for the meal, men standing near dugout craters close to the kennels throw in fused hand grenades. ... there are terrific explosions with clouds of smoke and dust. The dogs are not frightened, for they have been taught that explosions are merely the prelude to a meal. As the grenades go off, the ‘dog men’ run down the line, pushing each dog’s plate of food within reach, so that all are served at the same time.”

Winged Dog of Verdun

Messengers like Wolf and Prince were behind some of the war’s most thrilling stories of canine heroism, and newspapers breathlessly covered their exploits.

“Dogs have carried messages between posts three miles apart, arriving infallibly at their destinations,

and returning to the point of departure, fearless of the shells and deaf to any appeals made to them en route,” an Associated Press correspondent marveled in 1916. “Not even the frequent upheaval of the ground over which they have once passed and the confusion of trails can put them off their course.”

By delivering his message through one of the war’s most horrifying battles, one dog—Satan of Verdun—became the “most famous of hundreds of highly trained messenger dogs on the Western front,” in the eyes of no less an authority than author Albert Payson Terhune.

Satan was a French *liaison* dog. These dogs were trained to carry messages, rolled up in canisters on their collars, back and forth between points, allowing soldiers to carry on a conversation of sorts.

During the siege of Verdun, a French garrison was trapped in a village, with enemy guns all around.

The soldiers were about to lose hope, when they spotted what they thought was a battlefield apparition, like the Angel of Mons. It seemed to be a dog, with wings and a massive head with bug eyes, galloping toward them.

As the form moved closer, the men realized the image was not only very real, but someone they knew very well.

It was Satan.

The four-legged messenger had almost reached his destination when he lurched sideways and fell. “A German bullet had found him,” Terhune wrote. “He stag-

gered to his feet, reeling and dizzy. For an instant he seemed to have lost his way. Then he settled into that steady run again.”

Another bullet tore into his leg, but Satan would not be stopped. He made it to his destination, and collapsed. What had appeared to be bug eyes was a gas mask, and the wings were two cages containing carrier pigeons.



Widespread use of poison gases made masks essential battlefield attire—for dogs as well as humans.



Scenes of mutual support, such as this dog and doughboy (left), were not uncommon. In 1914, a newsman told of a machine-gun dog wounded in the leg at the same time the gunner caught a bullet in his jaw. "After the battle they were seen returning. The soldier had the dog in his arms and the dog was affectionately licking the wound in his master's face." **Below:** Although not trained for battle, Stubby was decorated by General John J. Pershing himself.

of a full moon, a French guard noticed an odd movement. "Not 20 feet away, creeping slowly toward the trenches, but halting abruptly every minute, was a large, dark object." His rifle raised and ready, the Frenchman

crept up on the odd form, then cried out, "Michael!"

The dog had come back, with a battlefield souvenir no one could ignore. "Behind him, parts of his uniform literally torn away by the dog's teeth, lay Henri, dragged from the battlefield, inch by inch, by the devoted animal. Miracle of miracles, the boy was breathing." Henri was whisked to a hospital, and eventually recovered.

Many other dogs earned their keep, and the admiration of their two-footed comrades, by taking on jobs no one else wanted.

Chief among these was rat catcher. Huge, disgusting rodents figure prominently in all accounts of trench warfare. "The rats here are particularly repulsive, they are so fat—the kind we call corpse rats," wrote Erich Maria Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western*

Front. "They have shocking, evil, naked faces, and it is nauseating to see their long, nude tails."

Soldiers tried everything to get rid of them, but the trenches were prime breeding ground for such vermin. One widely repeated story tells of some soldiers who brought in a cat to solve the problem. By morning, all that was left was the unfortunate feline's tail.

Hell for humans. Heaven for a terrier. CHAMPION RAT DOG OF WESTERN FRONT, was the headline on a story about Norah, an Irish Terrier who accompanied her owner, Private



With the pigeons, the French managed to get a cry for help to their comrades, and they were saved.

Angels of Mercy

As important as the messengers, were the Red Cross dogs, who were equipped with first aid in saddlebags and wore vests bearing a red cross. They saved thousands, on both sides. One dog named Prusco was said to have located more than 100 wounded men after a single battle.

Their training gave them specific skills, but also encouraged them to think for themselves. The dogs were trained to bring the wounded man's cap or helmet back to the trench, and then lead medics to their fallen comrade. But often the soldier had lost his cap, or his helmet was fastened too tightly under his chin for the dog to remove it. Then, the dog would have to use his initiative and pick a different item, anything that could be used to make the point: "Wounded man! Send help!"

Michael, a French Red Cross dog, made headlines with one decision he made. After a sweep of a battlefield, Michael returned, carrying the glove of a wounded soldier, identified by the newspapers only as Henri. "He could scarcely wait for the attendants to bring a litter before he started off again, his great intelligent eyes imploring them to hurry."

Michael led them to a remote part of the field, where they found Henri, "lying still and cold." After a hasty exam, they decided Henri was dead and hurried back to their trench without him.

The dog refused to accept the doctor's decision, and returned again and again for assistance. When he was ignored, Michael disappeared. Late that night, by the light



Thomas Radford of the Canadian Veterinary Corps, to the front when she was a tiny pup. Norah was born at Richardson's kennels and trained by Radford to wage war on rats. Radford boasted that Norah dispatched nearly 100,000 of her rodent foes in less than three years. "The day at St. Omer when she accounted for 628 of them, she was working from 12 o'clock to 7 P.M. and for five days afterwards she could barely open her mouth," he boasted to a reporter. Although these figures were likely overstated, the importance of ratters in the trenches could never be. Many dogs would be lauded for their rat-killing prowess.

The Volunteers

Along with the thousands trained for service, even more dogs made the trenches their homes because their own homes had been destroyed, or because they could not bear to be separated from their owners. The American hero Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Stubby, was one of these, but there were countless stories of others like him.

There was, for example, a small white terrier named Fuchsl, a German mascot. He was the pet of a young corporal, who became very attached to him. When the dog vanished in August 1917, the corporal assumed he had been stolen, and was inconsolable. Years later, that soldier—Adolph Hilter—would still speak with loathing about the "swine who stole my dog."

The *New York World* carried a story in January 1916 about a setter named Feu-de-l'air (Fire of the Air) who leaped off a dock in Algiers, pursuing a transport ship carrying his owner, Sergeant Jacquimin. Jacquimin was permitted to bring Feu aboard, and the dog accompanied him to the front. It was a decision that would save the Frenchman's life. Just weeks later, a German shell collapsed Jacquimin's trench. Seriously injured and buried beneath debris, Jacquimin was resigned to his fate. Then he heard a peculiar scratching noise. It was Feu, tearing at the earth with his claws. The dog stopped only to run to other men, grab their clothes in his teeth, and try to drag them to where Jacquimin lay buried. Then he'd resume his feverish digging. Feu got his point across, and Jacquimin was saved.

Over Here

Countless stories tell of stray dogs and soldiers becoming inseparable in the trenches. Despite regulations barring

pets from the transports, there were plenty of foreign dogs marching alongside the doughboys as they stepped back onto U.S. soil. Among these was a German Shepherd Dog puppy rescued from a bombed kennel by an American soldier, Corporal Lee Duncan. Named after a French puppet, Rin Tin Tin would become one of the most famous dogs in history.

Rin Tin Tin was not, by a long shot, alone. Some canine celebrities had come over while the fighting was still going on. "Where is the war dog?" was the first question asked at the gates at Westminster in 1917. The GSD Filax of Lewanno, who rescued 54 wounded soldiers in the trenches, drew hundreds of visitors "who cared more for the glamour surrounding a war hero than they did for the aristocrats of dogdom," noted the *New York Times*.

Many had less than glamorous homecomings, as

suggested by this March 1919 account in the *New York Times* of the return of 14,000 members of New York's 27th Division, under General John F. O'Ryan, also known as "O'Ryan's Roughnecks."

"The soldiers on the *Leviathan* brought with them a large number of dogs of all descriptions. It is against the regulations for soldiers to take animals on the transports with them, and they adopted unusual ways of smuggling the dogs aboard. One of the stories told by the soldiers was that the dogs had been rolled in the packs with the blankets when the men walked on the ship."

Apparently no one paid much attention to the anti-dog rule, as it was reported in the same story that General O'Ryan himself had brought along a Belgian police dog.

Efforts to enforce the rule to leave mascots behind often met with violent resistance. Such was the case of Mut, a "trench runner" who had been

wounded twice and spent much of the war boosting morale of the 11th Engineers. When the unit sailed from France, the *New York Times* reported, "[A]n order was issued forbidding mascots to be brought home. Farewells were said to goats, cats, and dogs and the ship pulled away from their dumb friends."

Three days later at sea, Mut appeared on deck. The Colonel demanded that the little dog be thrown overboard, and was about to do so, when a Private Albert Jensen, who had been shot in the head and was suffering shell shock, started bellowing that if the dog were thrown overboard, he'd jump in after him.

"Jensen was thought to have been affected because of the wound he had received," the *Times* explained, "and the Colonel allowed the dog to debark with his friend in New York." 🐕



The country's first memorial for war dogs, erected at the Hartsdale (New York) Canine Cemetery in 1923. **Inset:** Duncan, seen here working with Rin Tin Tin, later trained dogs to serve with American forces in WWII.

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