

The Diary of a War-Horse

BY

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I was JUST a horse. I was raised in Oregon and pastured as a colt on the luxuriant grasses of that State. My master was kind to all his stock and I, with others, was well taken care of in winter as well as in summer. Here I stayed until my country declared war against the greatest tyrant the world has ever known, and until a call went out to all farmers to help Uncle Sam in every way they possibly could, as horses were needed to pull our guns. I was taken to a near-by city stockyard, where I was offered to a Government purchaser of horses, who after looking me over and having judged me with the critical eye of the veterinary officer, accepted me. The letters "U.S." were branded on my left shoulder, and from that moment I became the property of the United States, and here is where my real war history begins.

How well I remember that day! I was put in a large pen with a number of other horses, all branded the same as I. We ran around the edge of the pen with our heads in the air and our tails up, as if to say, "We are going to war and die, if necessary," in order that the guns may be taken into the thick of the fight or that food may be taken to the advanced trenches at night, regardless of the stream of lead or the crash of shells.

You know a horse will go wherever his master bids him. So naturally we had some right to be proud that we had been chosen out of thousands to fight for our country. That night we were fed the first food that I had eaten furnished by the Government, and many times since then I have longed for such a feed while standing in harness up to my knees in mud, the rain slashing my face and the shells bursting on all sides of me. But I am getting ahead of my story.

The next morning I was put on a stock car and shipped to Newport News, but before being put on the car I was given a hypodermic injection under my skin to prevent me contracting influenza, a disease which has been the cause of so many deaths in horses destined for service "overseas." Fortunately for me, I did not contract the disease and I was unloaded safe and sound at Newport News, where I was taken to a large Remount Depot to await the first available transport for France.

After ten days or so the long-looked-for time came. I was taken down to the veterinarian, who tested me to see that I was free from glanders, and two days later I was on the Atlantic bound for a port in France. I had been given a nice stall on deck, where the air was fresh and also where I could reach over and steal an occasional extra bite of oats and hay from supplies piled up outside my stall. Submarines were my only fear, as I could imagine the hopeless chance a horse would have on a torpedoed ship, unable to do anything to save one's life. I was thankful the sea was calm, as I was told that on one voyage the stalls and their holdings on the

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upper deck had come unfastened from the rough seas, and that the horses were pitched or thrown in huge numbers, like a great avalanche, from one side to the other and were dashed to pieces against the relentless steel sides of the boat; and this fate, needless to say, I did not wish to experience; hence my comfort at the calmness of the sea.

After a voyage of sixteen days, during which we had done much zigzagging to escape the submarine, we sighted the coast of France, and, having passed Belle Isle, we slowly approached the locks of St. Nazaire. Here we passed into the inner basin and docked alongside the huge sheds erected by the Government for the storage and shelter of the many articles of war disembarked at this important seaport. The docks were lined with the people of St. Nazaire, who, when they heard that American boats were coming in, came down to the landing to witness the sight of help from the great American people coming from over the seas. Our attendants on the trip over were composed of a veterinary hospital unit trained at home for service in France, consisting of seven veterinary officers and 300 men. You can infer that we had the best attention from the fact that none of us were on "sick report," and that there were no losses on the voyage.

Here I was on French soil! Oh! the thrill it gave me, opening up new vistas to my equine eyes. How long was I to be kept at the base before being sent to the front? How long would I be there before a shell blew me to atoms? Who was going to be my soldier master? How would he treat me? Was there a hospital to send me to in case I got wounded? These thoughts and many more, I remember, went through my mind as I was being led through the streets of St. Nazaire on my way to the Remount Depot, a mile the other side of town, facing the sea.

Upon my arrival at this depot I was again tested for glanders, and then turned loose in a large, sandy lot, where I could take the first roll in the soft sand that I had seen since leaving the States. How I enjoyed that night, lying down full stretch and sleeping, free from the rolling and pitching sensation of the transport. Here they kept me for two weeks, when one morning I was caught up and formed into line with many others and led toward the station.

The thought of at last going to the front made me prance and buck in sheer joy; but little did I know how often I would long to be back. To all of my friends in America I send this message: Never travel in a French horse-car if you can avoid it! Eight of us were placed in the smallest box-car arrangement you ever saw in your life, four on a side, with heads toward the middle. In the space left in the center was piled our hay and oats for the journey. Besides, our soldier attendant lived, ate, and slept in the same car with us for the four long, dreary days of our trip.

He watered and fed us well, but the slowness of the train, the many stops, the rough track, the long waits on sidings, were things I will never forget. My legs swelled up and my whole body was cramped and stiff from the close confinement.

At last we came to our journey's end and we were unloaded at G----, a little French village in the Meuse, 25 miles from the front, and assigned to the Artillery Brigade of the Division, which had its headquarters there. My soldier led me through

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the narrow, winding streets of the quaint old village, where I passed many horses in the French carts; this was the first time I had really seen a French horse. They looked so strange in their huge collars, covered with a mass of black, curly hair, which looked very warm and uncomfortable to me.

Here I was assigned to Battery "B," Field Artillery. My driver was called "Red" by all the men of the Battery. His real name was a long one and hard to spell and pronounce, so it was found much easier to give him the sobriquet "Red"; this was on account of him having bright red hair. I immediately began to love him. He was kind to me from the first, always handing me my nose-bag filled with grass that he had gathered by hand, which he had found growing in some shaded spot where the dust had not been able to penetrate. He never went to the village without bringing me back an apple, and his pocket always had a lump of sugar in it, which, after nosing him, I managed to get after a little persuasion.

About this time he christened me "Dixie." I suppose he picked this name from his love for that part of his dear home country. Every morning he would hitch me up and with the others of the team I worked with; he would go out to the firing range for gun practice. I soon got accustomed to the roar of the guns and began to long to go nearer the front, where we could fire our shots into the enemy lines. For this I did not have to wait very long, as we received orders that night to take up a certain sector on the front. We started off in the dark, the whole regiment strung out a mile in length along the road, and when the day was breaking our guns were in position and with my team-mates we were hidden behind the crest of a hill.

I will never forget the appearance of the country which we passed over. The fields, as far as the eye could see, were pockmarked with shell-holes, and every few yards was a hole so large and deep it was necessary to go around it with our wheels. The ground was strung with telephone wires, which constantly wrapped around our legs. Machine-gun belts, broken rifles, and machine-guns were lying all around. All trees had their tops blown off; nothing but the stumps left. German helmets and discarded clothing were scattered here and there. At times we would pass large ammunition dumps, acres of shells, gas, shrapnel, and high explosive varieties.

Once we crossed a deep-cut road, and here I saw a sight that made me realize my probable fate. A German gun and its carriage had received a direct hit; they were both upside down; the wheels were smashed to atoms; the harness had been piled in a heap at one side, and two large shell-holes, recently filled in with fresh dirt, told a gruesome tale. A board was stuck up in the dirt of one of the holes, with a sign, printed, "Dead horses buried here," and the contents of the other hole, judging from the tremendous force of the explosion of the shell and the strips of clothing seen around, can be imagined. Where villages had been standing, with their church and town hall towering above the little French houses, all now was flat to the ground and overgrown with weeds. Such villages, well known in the history of this World War, were invisible at fifty yards' distance, being practically wiped out.

I was taken back to the picket lines every night, near a small stream, some 2,000 yards from the front-line trenches. In France it rains nearly all the year. "Red" gave

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me a blanket, but after a night's rain it was soaked through. The mud was so deep that we sank up to our knees, and it was necessary to move our lines frequently. Nights were spent standing in the pouring rain, long-distance shells bursting too close for comfort at all times and aerial raids every few hours. I was about as miserable as a horse could be. One of those nights, after a hard day's work dragging the guns through the mud, lives vividly in my memory. An aerial squadron was above our lines dropping bombs. One of them struck at the other end of the line to which I was hitched. It killed seven of my companions and wounded fifteen. Yet there we had to stand, with no dugout to hide in, trusting to Providence that we would be spared.

The veterinarian with my regiment was at once on the lines. Those of us who were hopelessly mangled were put painlessly out of misery and the rest were carefully dressed and started to the Division Mobile Section, to be sent by them to the railhead for shipment to the nearest veterinary hospital at the rear. Those too lame to walk were put in a horse-drawn ambulance and taken to the railhead. This Veterinary Service is certainly a Godsend to the war-horse, who is willing at all times to give up his life for man. How we appreciate its timely aid when a large artery is pouring forth our life's blood on the field of battle. One of those veterinary officers is there, ready to take up the vessel and to dress our wounds and give us a hypodermic that stops the pain and suffering.

Surely the money that has been spent to organize and equip such a service is well spent, and I ask all lovers of the horse who read this to uphold the Army Veterinary Service, and to insist, whenever they have a chance, that it be one of the best organizations of an army as long as it is necessary to use "man's noblest friend" in war.

To "carry on," as "Red" is always saying, with my story: Several nights after this slaughter of my team-mates, I had the satisfaction of seeing one of those German bombers brought down. It was about midnight when one fokker was plainly heard up in the moonlit but cloudy sky. I and all the rest of us were restless and nervous, pulling on our halters and longing to be able to break away. Five searchlights were searching the sky, when all of a sudden a large light on our right picked him up, and immediately the other four on the left got on to him and crisscrossed their bright rays, lighting him up so that we could see him plainly. In less than a second one of our planes was right behind him, and then ensued an exciting chase. Machine-guns were rattling in the air, and finally our plane got a shot into the Hun's tank and he went up into a burst of flame, his colored signal lights catching fire and making it look like the burst of a large rocket at a pyrotechnic display. "Red," who had been lying flat on his back watching the fight, got up with a look of intense satisfaction, thinking, I am sure, that that Hun aviator was the man who had tried to clean up our picket line a few nights ago. Incidentally he was looking for "Red" and his pals just as much or more than for the horses of the battery.

My luck thus far had been of the best, but, alas! it did not last long, for the Huns made a big attack some nights after and "B" Battery was ordered to change its

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position to reinforce another battery that was coming in for more than its share. We were quickly harnessed and hitched and were soon in a full gallop across the field toward our new position, shrapnel bursting all around us and many of our drivers and horses going down. I felt a burning pain over my quarters, but our blood was up and we dashed on through the rain of steel, unlimbered our guns, and opened up with all that we had to give the onrushing human tide of fighters. They wavered and fell back; we had stopped the gap and saved the line. By this time I became faint and I realized that I was losing a quantity of blood, which was pouring in a stream down my hind legs. "Red" saw my plight at once, whipped out his first-aid packet, put iodine into my wound and then plugged the hole with gauze, thereby clotting the blood and stopping the hemorrhage. They found that a piece of shrapnel had struck me and had torn a large wound into the muscles of my quarters, where it had become imbedded.

I was anxious to stay with my battery and dreaded to think that I might be evacuated, but at first sight of me the veterinary officer said, "Hospital for you, Dixie." I was tagged with a metal disk stamped "Surgical," and in the morning I started on my trip back. "Red" gave me a lump of sugar and a kiss on my nose and threw his arms around my neck and whispered in my ear, "Come back to me, even if you have to break a dozen halters in doing it." Poor "Red" was all broken up at my departure.

After passing a day at the Mobile Station where they dressed my wound again and removed the piece of shell splinter, I was taken to the railhead with about fifty other wounded and arrived at an advanced veterinary hospital that evening. What a surprise it all was to me; 300 men and 7 veterinary officers were working day and night with the wounded. The hospital, holding 2,000 sick, was divided into sections or wards, each for its own class of disease—catarrh, pneumonia, lameness, surgical, etc. I was placed in the latter section, where I had a fine straw bed and was once again under a roof and out of the wind and rain.

By this time my leg was badly swollen from the wound, and hot packs were applied by the attendant. I also received a hot feed, which in time began to make me feel like a new horse, and all pain left me. Stretching myself full length on the bright, warm straw, I again blessed the Veterinary Corps and slept the rest of the night in absolute comfort. The next morning I was taken into the operating room and my wound was thoroughly examined and dressed. I stayed at the hospital three weeks, when I was evacuated to the near-by Remount Depot, wound healed, fit and sleek, and feeling my old self once more.

As luck would have it, I was sent back to my old battery, and so joined "Red," who was the happiest man at the front when he got me back. But, alas! my stay at the front was again of short duration. A skin disease called "mange" was very prevalent in that sector, so that I soon became covered with the vile parasite. The itching was so intense that sleep was impossible, the hair dropped off me in large patches and I was isolated with a number of others and started once more for a mange hospital, specially equipped for this class of disease. I was tested for glanders,

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and then what remaining hair I had on me was clipped off. By this time I was an awful-looking sight and feeling equally miserable. I was then taken to a long concrete swim bath composed of hot lime and sulphur. I was led along a narrow passageway which ended in an abrupt drop. I went completely under and had to swim 15 feet before striking bottom, near the exit up which I walked. I was given this bath three times a week for a month, at the end of which I was cured. My hair was growing again. I was exercised and was soon ready to face the hardships of the front once more. So back again to the Remount Depot I went, and after some days I rejoined my battery and "Red." I have always thought he must have used some special plea to the Battery Commander for him to request that I be sent back to them instead of to a new organization, for all of which I was truly grateful.

I am writing this last part of my diary in a hurry, as "Red" has volunteered to carry food to a small patrol of men that have been cut off last night from returning to our lines; they are practically surrounded in "No Man's Land." I am praying that "Red" will ride me, as the rations are too heavy for him to carry—at least I can take them as far as it is safe to advance above ground; so good-bye, my dear diary, for the present. I hope I will live to finish the account of this escapade.

P.S.—By first sergeant, in charge of cut-off patrol:

"2.00 A.M.—A riderless horse, badly wounded, being shot by machine-gun fire and shrapnel, ran toward the shell-hole in which we were hiding. Slung on his back was enough water and food to last us two days, which was undoubtedly the cause of saving our lives, enabling us to gain strength and to hold out till the following night, when we fought our way back to our own lines. The horse, in spite of all the attention we could give him, soon succumbed to his injuries, being actually riddled with bullets; and how he ever managed to reach us is a mystery. In the saddle pocket was a note. I copy it as it was written.

"NO MAN'S LAND, 1.30 A.M.

"I have done my bit. I have got mine. We are near the patrol and I hope 'Dixie' can reach them. A shell burst so close to us that we were both well plastered. We die for our country. Tell the captain good-bye and all my pals and give the horse I loved a hero's grave.

"(Signed)

RED, 'Private, Battery 'B,' "

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