



[Ben W. Heineman Jr.](#) - Ben Heineman Jr. has held top positions in government, law and business. He is the author of *High Performance with High Integrity* (Harvard Business Press, 2008).

The Real Story of War Horses on the Western Front

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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The upcoming Spielberg feature War Horse tells a powerful personal tale, but the play it's based on misses the larger narrative about cavalry's role in World War I



After a smashing success on the London stage and a Tony-award winning production in New York, *War Horse* is now about to have another blast of publicity with the release on Christmas Day of Stephen Spielberg's film version.

Drawn from a children's novel by Michael Morpurgo and set before and during World War I, *War Horse* is the story of a young boy who trains and comes to love a horse named Joey. But Joey is sold by the boy's father to the cavalry as it leaves for the front, and, when the boy becomes old enough to enlist, he searches for the horse on the battle-scarred fields of France.

Despite stunning stagecraft that evokes the horror of war in general, *War Horse* keeps its focus narrowly on the boy-stallion relationship, saying little about the First World War itself. It sounds like the film is the same way. "I didn't pay a lot of attention to the first World War," Spielberg [said in an interview earlier this month](#). "I didn't know very much about it. And I also don't consider *War Horse* to be a war movie. This is not one of my war movies. This is much more of a real story between the connections that sometimes animals achieve; the way animals can actually connect people together."

This is ironic. The war horses of the Western Front in fact offer a powerful metaphor for the war's mass human slaughter, as the old tactics of frontal cavalry and infantry assaults were crushed by the new technology of huge artillery, machine guns, tear gas, and barbed wire. *War Horse*, at least as a play, thus fails to provide much context about the monumental dimensions of the Great War itself. This fuller setting of the scene (beyond generalized horrors of battle) could, if handled with grace in a dramatic vehicle, have given the very personal story more poignancy--from the destruction of a generation of young men to the end of 19th-century Europe. Regardless of issues with the play or film, though, the saga of the war horses as a symbol of the war's larger themes is itself a striking tale. (See [Simon Butler, *The War Horses*](#) (Halsgrove 2011)).

For centuries, cavalry had been an important element of military strategy, giving commanders the ability to strike quickly and shock the enemy, either with direct attacks or hit-and-run raids on the opponents' periphery. But, early in WWI, the casualties from such frontal cavalry assaults on the Western Front were so appalling, and attacks behind lines impossible because of the miles of trenches and wire, that the cavalry largely disappeared as an offensive weapon. (In the more open warfare on the Eastern Front and in the Middle East, war on horseback remained strategically important.)

Because trucks were underpowered and incapable of moving through seas of mud, horses continued, as they had historically, to have great value in the traditional role of hauling men, supplies, kitchens, the wounded, ammunition, and artillery. But the customary battleground risks to horses of disease or exhaustion or inadequate food were compounded by the new conditions of the Great War: tear gas, shell shock, drowning in craters or direct hits from mammoth artillery shells, machine gun fire or, increasingly, air attack. Knowing how valuable horses were, the armies often targeted them.

And the death toll was fearsome. During the war, the British had approximately one million horses and mules on the Western Front. Approximately half a million died and tens of thousands were injured. (Some estimates are higher.) Those horses that survived were sold on the continent after the war (often for [food](#)). Only a fraction of the

horses under arms returned to Britain (the program notes at the Lincoln Center production of the play put the number at 62,000).

Because of the terrible disjunction between the old tactics and the modern technology of battle, the human casualties of the Great War are almost beyond comprehension: e.g. the British Empire (900,000 dead, 2.1 million wounded); France (1.4 million dead, 4.3 million wounded); Germany (1.8 million dead, 4.2 million wounded), with tens of thousands missing on all sides. (The United States had 116,000 dead, and 204,000 wounded.) Horses shared with soldiers a sad similarity: a high percentage of those in the field were killed or wounded.

WWI marked the end of the Great Powers' use of horses in war, almost exactly a century after horses had played a critical role in the last great European-wide conflict. According to the historian Dominic Lieven ([Russia Against Napoleon](#), Viking 2010), the Russians' ability to maintain a healthy supply of horses and their offensive use of light cavalry was far superior to the French and was a critical factor in defeating Napoleon first in the retreat from Moscow in 1812 and then in the European Wars of 1813-1814, which led to Napoleon's abdication.

After 1918, most cavalry and other horse-centered units of the armed forces evolved into mechanized ones, as the uses of the first tanks in WWI gained momentum. Horses then served as just symbols of the British martial tradition. A team of black stallions that were in the artillery had the honor of transporting the coffin of the Unknown Soldier to Westminster Abbey on Armistice Day (November 11), 1920. And the Royal Horse Guards are, of course, on parade in London to this day.

War Horse is a moving (if melodramatic) story of a single relationship taking place against the backdrop of a gargantuan, transformative conflict. But the broader, more complex story of the war horses of the Western Front as comrades in arms to the soldiers who suffered casualties in the millions is no less compelling. Says one London memorial to the war horses: "Most obediently and often most painfully they died—faithful unto death."

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