

The New Zealand Veterinary Corps

The New Zealand Veterinary Corps was formed in 1907, but, apart from a nucleus of officers—all qualified veterinary surgeons—it possessed no "establishment." On the outbreak of war immediate calls were made upon the resources of the Corps, for the purchase of military horses, the provision of veterinary officers for duty on transports, and in the training of essential personnel which had to be enrolled for the carrying out of routine duties. To do this it was necessary to utilise the services of all available qualified veterinary surgeons in New Zealand. The majority of those so enrolled subsequently received commissions in the New Zealand Veterinary Corps. The various veterinary operations were under the administration of Dr. C. J. Reakes (latter the Director-General of the Department of Agriculture) who held the appointment of Director of Veterinary Services and Remounts.

The New Zealand Veterinary Corps had a good reputation during WWI. Surprising high ranking officers of the Imperial Army by the low percentage of losses sustained in the transportation of NZ horses successful treatment during on active service. During transportation the total number of horses transported from New Zealand was 9,988, of which the loss on voyage was only 3 per cent. Lieut.-Col. Young was in charge of the horses—a total of 3,817—which went with the Main Body, and of these, only 78, or 2 per cent. died at sea. The general average of loss with all horses shipped during the war was remarkably low for such long voyages, and it would have been some points lower if the fifth reinforcement horses, which went to India, had not suffered the comparatively high mortality rate of 7 per cent. The largest number of horses carried on one ship was 728 on the *Orari*, a main body transport. This low percentage of losses speaks volumes for the care and devotion of the men, whose stable duties in the tropics can easily be imagined. It is also a tribute to New Zealand's veterinary organization. Precautions were taken at the outset to assure as much comfort as possible for the horses. At sea keen eyes were always alert for troubles such as strangles, "ship's pneumonia," colic, or other ailments. On ships where there was space enough, the horses were exercised on decks covered with coconut matting.

In New Zealand

The mobilizing of horses entailed much heavy work. The buying was done principally by stock inspectors on the staff of the Department of Agriculture stationed throughout the Dominion, a method which proved both economical and efficient. The inspectors accomplished excellent results, exhibiting good judgment, combined with the highest standard of integrity. Horses offered for sale were carefully tested, and those showing the slightest signs of unsoundness were rejected. Afterwards came the severe "try-out" at the remount depot as the final safeguard against the shipping of animals unfit in the slightest degree for the hard usages of war. Proof that the buying was well done is supplied by the records which show that the total number purchased was 9,347, at an average price of £17 1s. 10d. for remounts (5,097), and £24 10s. for artillery horses (4,250). Of the total number purchased only 90 died in New Zealand during the war, and only 154 were cast and sold before the Armistice. When hostilities ceased there were 449 horses left on hand in New

Zealand, most of which were sold at good prices. A few were retained to complete the establishment of the permanent artillery.

In addition to the horses purchased, many were given to the Government by settlers and others. The total number of these gift horses was 1,437.

The veterinary war work began with the establishment of the camp at Palmerston North, in August, 1914. Captain Dudley Hewitt, then on furlough in Palmerston North, from India, was placed in charge of the horse section of the camp, and he had the assistance of Captain W. Smith, and Mr. R. C. Tilley, a Manawatu farmer well known for his expert knowledge of horses. Mr. Tilley was invited by a Palmerston North committee to help in this work, and he went into camp on 7th August. From all quarters large numbers of horses came—by rail and road. Day and night the trains brought them.

Captain Hewitt being ordered back to his regiment in India, Captain Smith succeeded him in command. Drafts of horses were sent to Awapuni (where the 1st Reinforcement was encamped), to Trentham and to other localities where they were needed for A.S.C. work. This distribution reduced the number of horses at Palmerston to about 400. Of these 200 were turned out to pasture near Palmerston, and the remainder were sent to Upper Hutt where the remount depot was now established on ground leased by the Defence Department. From this time the concentration of all horses was there. Captain Smith went away as remount officer with the 3rd Reinforcements, and Mr. Tilley, now appointed captain, took charge of the remount depot, with Lieutenants Elworthy and McLean as assistants. Captain Burton, N.Z.V.C. was for some time in charge of the veterinary training operations at the Featherston Camp.

In the days and nights when the depot had its busiest times, the township of Upper Hutt did not lack liveliness. At one time a thousand horses, with about a hundred attendants, were at the depot, and the lines extended over fifteen acres.

As soon as possible after arrival at the depot, the horses were classified for artillery (light and heavy draught), pack, and troop work. There was also a sixth class—the charger! After classification, came marking. The sign of the State—N broad arrow Z—was set with a hot iron on one fore-hoof, and the horse's number was branded on the other. Identification notes on every horse handled at the depot—the number, colour, sex, height, marks, and other details—were entered in a ledger, and this record also showed subsequently any change of camp or user that the animal might have. The regulations provided that the depot must always be kept in touch with every horse issued for home use. As far as possible the horses of each class retained a uniform appearance by having the same cut of mane and tail.

The remount depot had a field hospital organized by Lieut.-Colonel Reid, with a veterinary surgeon in charge, for the treatment of horses suffering from kicks, colds, or other troubles which were not serious; but the main hospital was at Wallaceville, in the Upper Hutt district, connected with the State Laboratory there, which did all the veterinary dispensing for the depot, and, incidentally, for the camps also.

An early trouble was an outbreak of strangles. The horses affected were promptly removed to Wallaceville, and the epidemic was checked.

When the shipment of horses eased off, owing to mounted troops being required in diminishing numbers, the depot at Upper Hutt was closed, and the concluding remount work was done at Wallaceville.

In Egypt, Sinai and Palestine

Early in the war the War Office requested the New Zealand Government to send two veterinary mobile sections and two veterinary hospital sections to Egypt. Arrangements were promptly made for this purpose. Suitable men were selected for the various duties which were to be done under veterinary officers, and were trained at a remount depot, which was established at Upper Hutt, New Zealand, where experts gave a series of lectures and demonstrations. These men eventually left with the third reinforcements. The reinforcements for subsequent veterinary units were similarly trained at Upper Hutt. At first in Alexandria, the New Zealand veterinary officers had to make the best of what they could. Lieut.-Col. Young and his staff managed to win through all difficulties, which included the successful overcoming of the tricks of some Egyptian dealers in forage.

By the end of three weeks the animals were ready for work, and the training was then begun by men of the mounted units. A farrier quarter-master sergeant and three farrier-sergeants were detailed to each mounted squadron, and a farrier went with each troop. These men acted as dressers for injuries from kicks and other minor ailments, under the supervision of a veterinary officer. Sick parades were held every morning for horses as well as for men.

In January, 1915, the veterinary personnel, composed of two mobile sections, and two veterinary hospital sections from New Zealand. Each hospital could take in about 250 horses. One was for the mounted brigade, and the other for the infantry and artillery. While the New Zealand Brigade was at Zeitoun camp, an epidemic of influenza raged among the animals for six weeks. Almost all of the 5,000 of them in the lines were affected, and about 75 died. Next came ringworm, which affected about 80 per cent.

Major Neale, who went with the A.S.C., was the first New Zealand veterinary officer with the Gallipoli expedition. He was relieved by Major Stafford, D.S.O., who remained on the Peninsula till the evacuation. Events soon proved, however, that horses *were* of little use on Gallipoli, except for some work at night. The conditions were much more suitable for mules and Egyptian donkeys. Happily the animals were not much troubled by disease, but wounds from shells were plentiful and frequent, and many were killed.

For a time, until Easter, 1916, New Zealand horses were scattered over Egypt, and then came the concentration for the Sinai campaign. The New Zealand Mounted Brigade became part of the Anzac Mounted Division, and the New Zealand Veterinary Corps was re-organized with fresh equipment. Major Stafford, who was now in charge of the veterinary work (Lieut.-Col. Young having proceeded to France), was attached to the New Zealand Brigade headquarters staff. As there was no veterinary hospital on the east side of the Canal, No. 2 Mobile Veterinary Section was converted into a hospital under Captain Mc Hattie at Bir-el-Mala, where very good work was done. Every possible care was taken by New Zealand Veterinary officers to avoid the dispatch of sick or wounded horses to the British base hospital in Egypt, for when they had been merged in the mass of horses there it was usually a case of good-bye. As New Zealand's horses were mostly of exceptional quality the veterinary organization exerted itself to retain as many as it could for the Brigade.

In the desert of Sinai, shortage of water caused a considerable loss of horses. Flies were also a serious trouble. Their bites brought sores at the corners of horses' eyes and mouths, and the same pest made any cut or wound difficult to heal. Fringes had to be attached to the head to protect the eyes. Sand colic was also a common complaint.

In the first battle of Gaza the horse casualties were light, but in the second battle the New Zealand mounts suffered severely. Acres of horses, standing while the men were in action, made an easy target for the bombs of hostile airmen, and also for guns, and they were bombed and shelled from early morning till late at night. Out of a total of about 2,000 horses attached to the Brigade, over 100 were killed outright and about 300 were wounded.

When the big Palestine push came in February, 1917, the New Zealand horses' endurance was severely tested. The pace left the camel transport far behind. At one stage the horses had to go 72 hours without water, and their sole allowance of food was 12 lbs. of barley each per day, and each had to carry a three-days' ration. This restriction to barley, with a shortage of water, brought on diarrhea, and horses began to die. At this time the Brigade was at Jaffa. Fortunately some stacks of barley straw were found, the Quarter-Master General supplied petrol for a chaff cutter, and soon the horses had barley chaff, which helped to check the trouble.

Anthrax appeared in the Jordan Valley early in 1918, but the disease was quickly arrested, and only three horses died. New Zealanders and their horses were destined to have varied memories of this sultry valley, where they camped at intervals several times. They felt the change from a garden to a desert—from the cool green of the spring to the hot whiteness of mid-summer, when the temperature went as high as 122° F. in the shade. In this oven there was ever a dark streak in the limey dust left by the horses—the drip of the sweat that did not cease in those sweltering days and nights.

In the advance from the Jordan Valley in 1918, between Es Salt and Amman, in one day twenty-eight of the New Zealand Brigade's horses died from apparently acute poisoning. Altogether about 150 were lost in this manner. It was believed that the poisoning was due to tablets of strychnine, arsenic, and other medical materials mixed accidentally or designedly with barley abandoned by the Turks on the roadside when a convoy had been caught and cut up by aero planes. This barley, which lay in little heaps on the roadside, had been picked up by the New Zealand mounted men and given to their horses.

The Brigade returned to the Jordan line, and was encamped at Reichen le Zion at the time the Armistice was signed. From this date till the embarkation from Egypt, the New Zealanders had abundance of horse-racing, in which the Dominion's representatives had many memorable wins. For example, at one big meeting in Egypt, open to the whole of the Expeditionary Force, the New Zealanders' horses won five races out of seven. The New Zealanders also gained distinction in various horse shows, some of which were held during the campaign. It is proof of the stamina of New Zealand horses that a number of the main body mounts went right through the war, and won races in good company after the Armistice. Before the home-coming embarkation from Egypt, there was many a sad parting between man and horse—mates in the hard years of war. The ill-usage of some horses that had been sold to callous Egyptians had convinced the New Zealanders that a merciful death was a better fate for a faithful horse than bondage to a pitiless taskmaster, and numbers, for which kind owners were not available, were given a painless death.

In a brief review of the Sinai and Palestine campaigns, Major Stafford says that the New Zealand horses of the proper type and build went through the difficulties extraordinarily well. They stood the hardships better than any other horses, except some of those from Australia. There was a tendency at first to send mounts that were too tall. Experience proved that a horse over 15.2 hands was not suitable. Short-backed, thick-set horses 14.2 to 14.3 hands, or small thoroughbreds up to 15 hands, with good bone, symmetry and substance, proved the best. Larger horses, showing much of cross-breeding, were all right for ordinary journeys, when food and water were plentiful, but they fared worse when on short rations, and proved less able to withstand severe hardships. A tall horse also was a disadvantage for the rifleman whose work required much mounting and dismounting. The experience was the same with draughts as with other horses. Sturdy, compact, well-built draughts of medium size, had good endurance, but tall, heavy, loosely-built, long-legged animals were not efficient.

On the Western Front

With the organization of the New Zealand infantry into a division in February, 1916, the veterinary personnel took a different formation from the one originally planned. The veterinary provision for a division comprises a mobile section with veterinary sergeants to each battery of artillery, and each infantry brigade, and certain other horsed units. These sergeants, together with the mobile section and veterinary officers to the number of six, were under the command of Lieut-Col. A. R. Young for as long as he could be spared from New Zealand, and then the command passed to Lieut-Col. H. A. Reid, A.D.V.S. This officer remained in control until the troops were finally repatriated. The mobile section acted as a collecting station for all sick and wounded horses that could not be treated satisfactorily in the unit lines. These horses were then taken to a veterinary casualty clearing station on a line of communication where they were classified. Serious cases of sickness or injury, especially those with a prospect of protracted recovery, were removed to a base hospital. There were special veterinary hospitals for certain cases, more particularly for cases of skin disease.

The veterinary personnel attached to the unit in the field had the care and treatment of all sick and injured horses. As this personnel was not large enough to meet all needs, suitable assistants were drawn from the ranks, wherever possible, to help in first aid and in the routine veterinary treatment of sick or injured horses and mules. The veterinary officer also concerned himself with the inspection of forage, the sanitation of stables, and horse lines—particularly the sick lines—and it was his duty to report any irregularities to the officer commanding the unit.

Early in the war the evacuation of horses from the mobile veterinary section in the northern districts of France was largely done by barges along canals and rivers. This method was comfortable for the horses, and generally proved very successful. When barges were not available, trains had to be used. Lieut.-Col. Reid mentions as a noteworthy fact that, despite the enormous demands on the railway systems, there was very little undue delay in the carriage of sick horses to the base. Animals which were able to march went by road if the collecting station was not too far away.

A New Zealand veterinary sub-section hospital, with Major P. M. Edgar in command, was established at Calais, attached to No. 4 General Veterinary Hospital. Major Edgar's hospital achieved a solid reputation for efficiency and up-to-date practice.

The most trying time on the Western front for horses was during winter. In northern France the winter of 1916 was said by inhabitants to be the worst for forty years. The cold was

intense, but it did not affect the horses nearly as much as the perpetual wetness and mud. This trouble, with an occasional shortage of food and material for shelter, due to the great difficulties of railway transport at the front, made the horses lose condition and exposed them to infection by disease.

Mange was extremely difficult to treat. In most of the divisional areas sulphur baths, supplied with hot water, were built for the regular dipping of horses. This dipping was done, however, more as a preventative of mange than as a cure, for it was found that, as a matter of routine, it was better to send all actual cases of mange to a special skin hospital at the base.

Horse lines and mule stables had heavy losses occasionally by shell-fire, and by the night bombing of enemy airmen. All wounds which could be treated received immediate attention. The animals were inoculated with anti-tetanic serum, the routine precaution, also, for the human subject. Usually these horse patients did exceedingly well under efficient surgical treatment, but for further service the horse—unlike the human subject—must be perfectly sound, and therefore numbers of the more seriously wounded animals had to be destroyed.

Very frequent and serious injuries were received from nails penetrating the hoofs. In the war zone where building activity was always intense, large quantities of nails became unavoidably scattered on the roads. Nails were especially plentiful near dumps, and among the ruins of shattered houses. Special steel protective plates were tried, but were not altogether successful, particularly on unevenly paved streets. The plates slipped on the stones, buckled, and bruised the sole of the foot. Generally speaking, however, the horses maintained a remarkable fitness.

To encourage the right handling of horses, shows were held regularly by divisions in which the units competed. The men took immense pains to prepare their horses for the parade. Corps shows were also arranged. These shows proved a great attraction to all lovers of horses. Troops assembled in thousands to see them. New Zealanders always won distinction, especially with their artillery horses, and also because they had some of the best cross-country horses.

Throughout the Western campaign the New Zealand Veterinary Service worked under the direction of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps of which it formed part, and the New Zealand officers and men received the commendation of the Director-General of Veterinary Services in France, for their efficient co-operation.

| Name | Unit attached to | Campaigns | Further information |
|------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1st New Zealand Veterinary Section | New Zealand Infantry Brigade (Dec 1914 - Jan 1916) | Gallipoli, 1915 | |
| 2nd New Zealand Veterinary Section | New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade (Dec 1914 - Jan 1916) | Gallipoli, 1915 | |
| New Zealand Mobile Veterinary | New Zealand Division (Jan 1916) | Western Front: Somme 1916 | Unit diaries at Archives New |

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|---|--|--|---|
| Section No. 1 | - Feb 1919) | Messines 1917; Passchendaele 1917; Spring Offensive and Advance to Victory 1918. | Zealand |
| New Zealand Mobile Veterinary Section No. 2 | New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade (Jan 1916 - Jun 1919) | Sinai, 1916 Palestine, 1917-18 | Unit diaries at Archives New Zealand; Unit diaries at Archives New Zealand |

Badge and shoulder title



Cap and collar badges: The monogram 'NZVC' enclosed within an oak leaf wreath, surmounted by a crown.



New Zealand Veterinary Corps shoulder title.