

# The real, indestructible

The star of Spielberg's Oscar-tipped film is fictional. The true equine hero of 1914-18 was Warrior, a fearless bay ridden into battle by Brough Scott's grandfather

**W**arrior was rearing for it. It was March 1918 and he was looking up at the German positions at Moreuil Wood, 10 miles from Amiens in Picardy, at the heart of the western front.

The Germans had broken through and the Fifth Army was in ragged retreat. The enemy troops in the wood were reinforcing and digging in. Desperate times called for desperate measures. The cavalry would go in and Warrior would be at its head.

The small, sturdy bay thoroughbred was a legend among the troops, having served at the front since August 1914. He had somehow survived while hundreds of thousands of his human and equine comrades had fallen around him. One group of cavalrymen dubbed him: "The horse the Germans can't kill."

On being given the order to charge at Moreuil Wood, Warrior galloped forward, accompanied by a hail of bullets from the enemy as he and the rest of the party rode up the hill towards the Germans. About half the group were hit. "But Warrior cared for nothing," recalled his rider. "His one idea was to get at the enemy... We were greeted by 20 or 30 Germans who fired a few shots before running away, doubtless thinking there were thousands of us following."

This is not a scene from Steven Spielberg's Oscar-tipped film version of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* story, which was a theatrical hit both in the West End and on Broadway. It is a true tale involving my grandfather General Jack Seely's horse Warrior.

The battle of Moreuil Wood was one of the last great cavalry charges. It exacted a terrible cost. Although the allies triumphed they lost a quarter of their men and half of the horses involved. Warrior and Seely survived.

Long after the war Seely recounted the tale of the charger he had bred at home on the Isle of Wight in a book, *My Horse Warrior*, which was illustrated by Sir Alfred Munnings, the acclaimed artist. It is a tale of courage, run through with the sentiment of the citation that Seely is supposed to have written in recommending Warrior for the Victoria Cross, which read simply: "He went everywhere I did."

But that was in long-forgotten 1934. Since then the story of Warrior's war has been left in the memory of those who cherished it at the time — the book ran to five editions — and to the children of the Seely family who heard it, not infrequently, at our mothers' knees.

Then the *War Horse* phenomenon began. The play, with its aston-

ishingly lifelike horse puppets, was almost painfully moving but it was still principally a magnificent coup de théâtre.

It was only when Spielberg took up the challenge of turning it into a film that attention fastened on to how hundreds of thousands of horses were enlisted, like Morpurgo's fictional Joey, to fight on the western front. Of course the social background of Warrior, the thoroughbred, is the exact opposite to that of Joey, the three-guinea colt bought at auction by a drunken farmer to spite a rival and who was then saved from exploitation by the farmer's young son Albert.

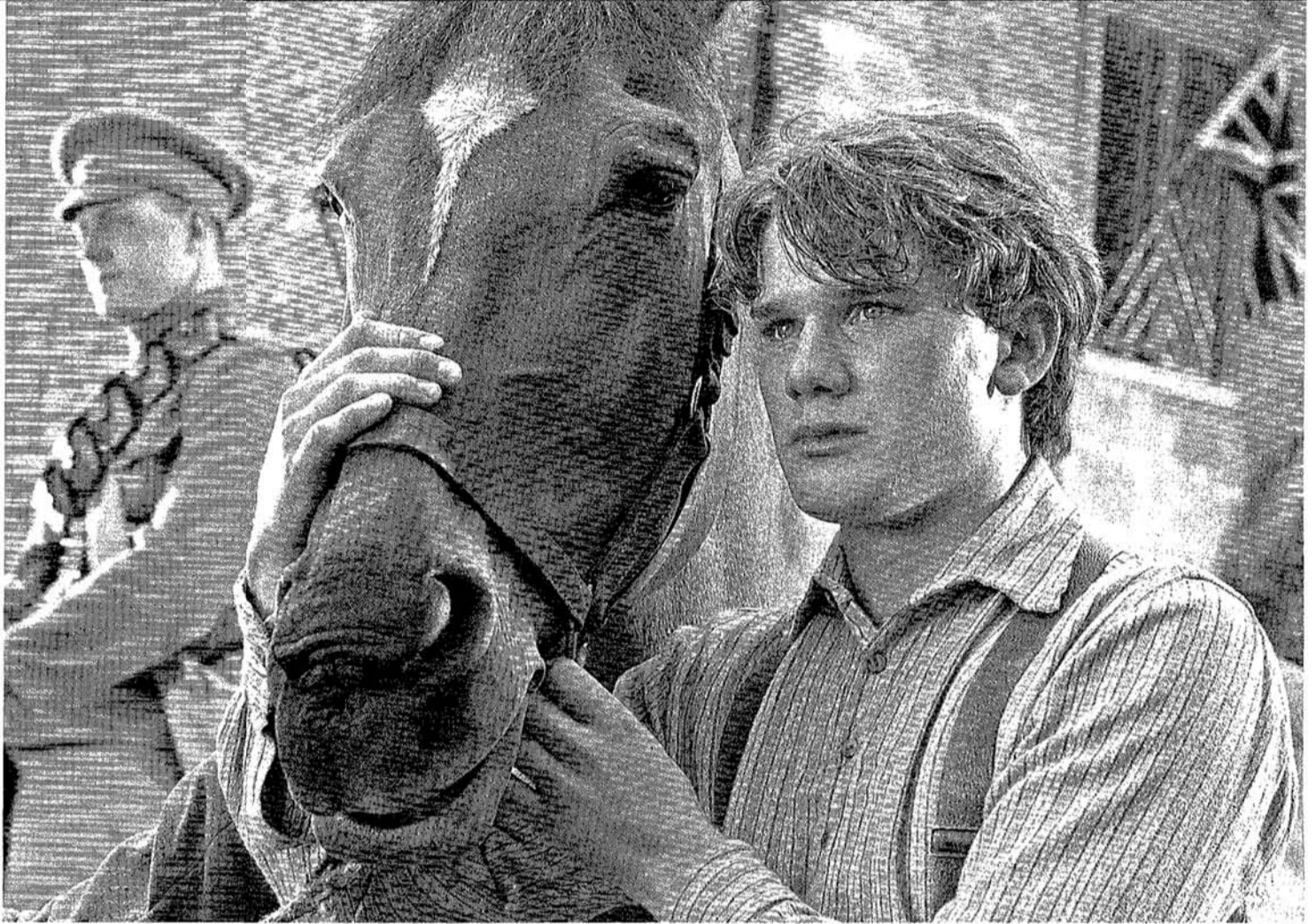
But inverted snobbery can be just as silly as the other kind and while Warrior may have had grooms and stables and extra riders as distinguished as Sir John French, the army's early commander-in-chief, he still trotted out every year of the war to where the shells crunched and the bullets flew. His life was charmed but his heart never faltered and his very existence became an inspiration. He was even granted an obituary in *The Times* in April 1941, an honour not given to many horses.

In such circumstances it seemed dumb not to front up and repack my grandfather's book. Four reprints and sales exceeding 20,000 with a consistent No 1 position in Amazon's first world war bestseller list have justified the decision commercially. Just as gratifying is the thrill of revisiting a remarkable story worthy of any fiction.

WARRIOR was a warhorse by breeding. His mother, Cinderella, was bought by Seely after he saw her galloping in the distance on Hampshire Yeomanry manoeuvres on Salisbury Plain in 1902. She was so kind that my mother and her sisters could slide safely down her tail and she was so amenable that Seely used to ride her in Rotten Row, central London, before he went to work in Westminster as a member of the Liberal government alongside his great friend Winston Churchill.

When Cinderella had a foal in 1908 by the visiting thoroughbred stallion Straybit, a name like Warrior was always on the cards, especially for an owner who by 1913 was to become secretary of state for war.

Yet while this is much more an Upstairs rather than a Downstairs story, don't ever think that horse and rider didn't forge a bond as close as man and animal have ever done. It also had its moments, starting with the first time Seely sat on Warrior as a two-year-old and got bucked off three times in a row, or when they first walked into the sea at Brook on the Isle of Wight's western shore and capsized in the surf.



They were too brave a pair to let that daunt them. Soon Seely wrote admiringly about Warrior, "he would follow the retreating water till the waves were breaking not 10 yards from his nose and then stand with feet well apart while the foamy water swept past his shoulders. It was then that I first realised what a courageous animal was mine, for I could see, though he trembled a little between my legs, that he was to overcome his fear."

Anyone who has ever ridden will know how easily startled a horse, especially a thoroughbred, can be by something as trivial as a car exhaust backfiring. They will also know the feeling of gratitude and pride when the animal beneath you stands brave in front of danger.

Seely would experience this very quickly after war was declared on August 4, 1914. Having lost his ministerial job over the Curragh crisis in March that year he became a special aide to French, the commander-in-chief. Within a week he and Warrior were on a boat to France and within a month there were more than waves crashing in front of them.

Of the retreat from Mons in September 1914, Seely wrote: "It was the

first time that I had ridden Warrior under shell fire and we went out through the little gate past the blazing stables. As we approached them, another bouquet of shells fell and burst, the nearest only a few yards away. To my amazement Warrior made no attempt to run away. I could feel him tremble a little between my legs as we trotted through the gate, but he pretended to be quite unperturbed. He was pretending to be brave and succeeding in his task.

"On many, many days thereafter during the four years that were to follow I rode Warrior in shell fire — sometimes so heavy that he was almost the only survivor — but never once did he attempt to bolt or to do any of the things which might be expected of an animal reputed to be so naturally timid as the horse. No, my stout-hearted horse not only kept his own fear under control but by his example helped beyond measure his rider and his friend to do the same."

The example was soon to spread to a wider group. In February 1915 Seely was put in command of the Canadian cavalry and went with Warrior to join them in Hampshire.



Another bouquet of shells burst nearby. Warrior made no attempt to run away

By May they were en route back to France and it is clear from the account of the voyage that the horse had already become something of a mascot to the troops.

"I well remember our arrival at Boulogne at 6am on a spring morn-

ing," Seely wrote. "I led Warrior first off the gangway and got on his back sitting there as the men filed off. As they formed up somebody shouted out 'Three cheers for Warrior!'"

It was an experience that Seely would have to get used to. "This handsome bay thoroughbred was my passport wherever I went," he recalled.

"As time went on, especially in France, the men got to love him more and more. As I rode along whether it was in rest billets, in reserve, approaching the line or in the midst of battle, men would say not 'Here comes the general', but 'Here's old Warrior!'"

At Ypres, the Canadians, to their dismay, were dismounted and stuck in the trenches. Warrior was, however, as so often, an exception and, like his mother Cinderella before him, took to walking round behind Seely like a dog. It must have been one of the few amusing sights in a scene dominated by carnage.

Warrior was often at the centre of the devastation. One morning he was tethered just behind the front line when a German shell, instead of bursting into small fragments when it hit the ground, broke in half

nearby. One half struck Seely's brigade major's horse in the chest and cut it clean in half.

"The orderly [in charge of the horses] was knocked down by the force of the blow and must have been unconscious for a little while," Seely said. "He was still sitting on the ground when we returned and there was Warrior who had just moved away a few yards and was waiting for me. He neighed loudly as I came in sight and cantered up to me saying quite clearly 'I would not leave you!'"

At times his ability to dodge the bullets and shells seemed almost supernatural. One day Warrior went lame and Seely rode another horse. A shell hit him and he was killed. Seely recalled: "I had three ribs broken myself, although I did not know it, but my first thought was, 'What luck it was not Warrior!'"

Indeed, what luck. Warrior survived the first day of the battle of the Somme — he and his team were poised behind the line on July 1, 1916 when 20,000 British troops were killed and a further 40,000 injured. Seely lay on the ground holding Warrior's bridle as the 18-pounder guns boomed overhead. And he

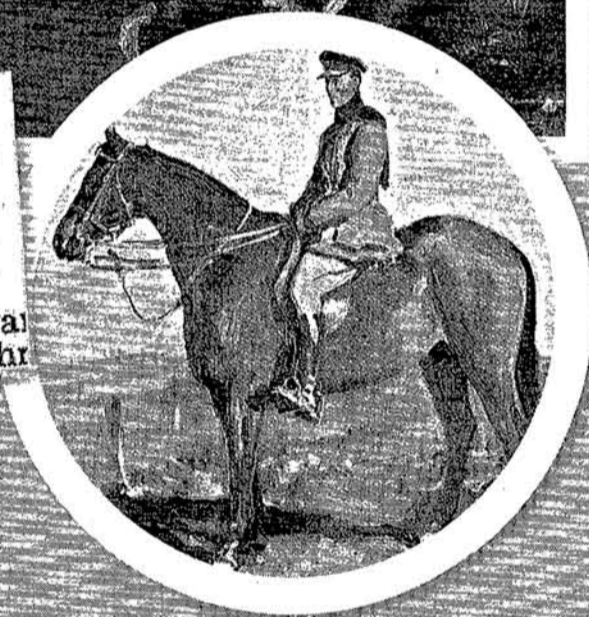


# War Horse



## Horse the Germans Could Not Kill

Lord Mottistone's famous old war horse Warrior, which he and Sir John



Jeremy Irvine, left, as Albert with Joey in the film *War Horse*. The charge at Moreuil Wood in 1918 was depicted in a painting by Sir Alfred Munnings for the book about Warrior by his owner Jack Seely, right. The horse was famed for his exploits against the Kaiser's army

came through the strafing of horse convoys by German planes.

"On one occasion Warrior was stuck fast in the mud and a German flew down and emptied his machinegun at us; the bullets were very near but not one of them hit us," Seely said.

During the march to Passchendaele in 1917, Warrior again sank into the mud. "There were many dead horses lying about which had foundered in the mud and could not be extricated," Seely wrote.

"All of a sudden Warrior went deep in up to his belly. Antoine [Prince Antoine d'Orléans et Braganza, Seely's impeccably bred aide-de-camp, the great-grandson of Louis Napoleon] was just behind me with Corporal King and another orderly. It was only with immense difficulty that the four of us managed to get him back on to sounder ground. It was a narrow escape."

For Seely and Warrior the real climax came with that fabled cavalry charge at Moreuil Wood but to survive that far they had to endure other adventures that at times seem almost comical in the telling. These included the ill-fated joint infantry, tank and cavalry

attack at Cambrai. As was to be expected, the dynamic duo were up the front behind the leading tank.

"I am sure Warrior enjoyed every minute of it," Seely said. "Down the main street of Masnières we went together, Warrior's nose nearly touching the tank. Then misfortune befell the adventure, for with a frightful bang the bridge collapsed and the tank fell through into the canal. Warrior and I nearly fell in too. There was a good deal of rifle fire around and many of the horses behind us were hit but Warrior's luck held and although he was the leading horse, he escaped without a scratch."

Further adventures saw Warrior survive when a sniper missed him and killed the horse whose nose he was touching, and when a shell landed on the ruined cottage in which he was stabled. Amazingly, he emerged from the rubble.

Most remarkable of all was when Seely and Warrior, against all convention of the time, led the signal troop to mark the route for the cavalry engagement at Moreuil Wood on March 30, 1918. Such a group would normally contain a junior officer and his horse, not a

general on his thoroughbred. But this was Warrior and for all its impetuosity and loss of life of men and horses, the attack did check the German advance.

Indeed, the battle of Moreuil Wood was crucial in checking the Germans' Ludendorff offensive, their last throw of the dice in an attempt to win the war.

TWO days later Warrior was lame and both Seely's replacement horses were killed. A year on he took part in the victory parade with the Canadian cavalry in Hyde Park, London.

Four years to the day after Moreuil Wood, and now safely in retirement, Warrior won the light-weight race at the Isle of Wight point-to-point under his original groom, Jim Jolliffe, and to the utter delight of his owner: "It was a glorious day. Everyone was pleased. I could not bear to have him led away and we rode home together over the downs rejoicing in this splendid conclusion of an anniversary which neither of us could ever forget."

By now Warrior had become very much the celebrity, lauded wherever he went whether it was to review troop parades, to war

veterans' rallies, to greet the visiting Queen Mary at tea, to give out sweets at the local Hulverstone school or just to go hunting with the Isle of Wight foxhounds. As so often happens with famous horses — and in my time Arkle and Red Rum have been the greatest examples of this — the animal thrives on the attention, pricking his ears for the cameras, dipping his head to be stroked by his idolaters.

You can swear that is what Warrior was doing when he and Seely made the papers in 1938 trotting outside Seely's home at Mottistone with their combined ages (30 and 70) making a century. With horses already quite elderly at 20, this is a rare achievement.

They must have been a very special team. Among my grandfather's papers in Nuffield College, Oxford, is a diary entry from Good Friday 1941. "I do not believe," he wrote about Warrior's death the previous week, "to quote Byron about his dog Boatswain, 'that he can be denied in heaven the soul that he held on earth'."

*Warrior: The Amazing Story of a Real War Horse* is published by Racing Post Books at £14.99