

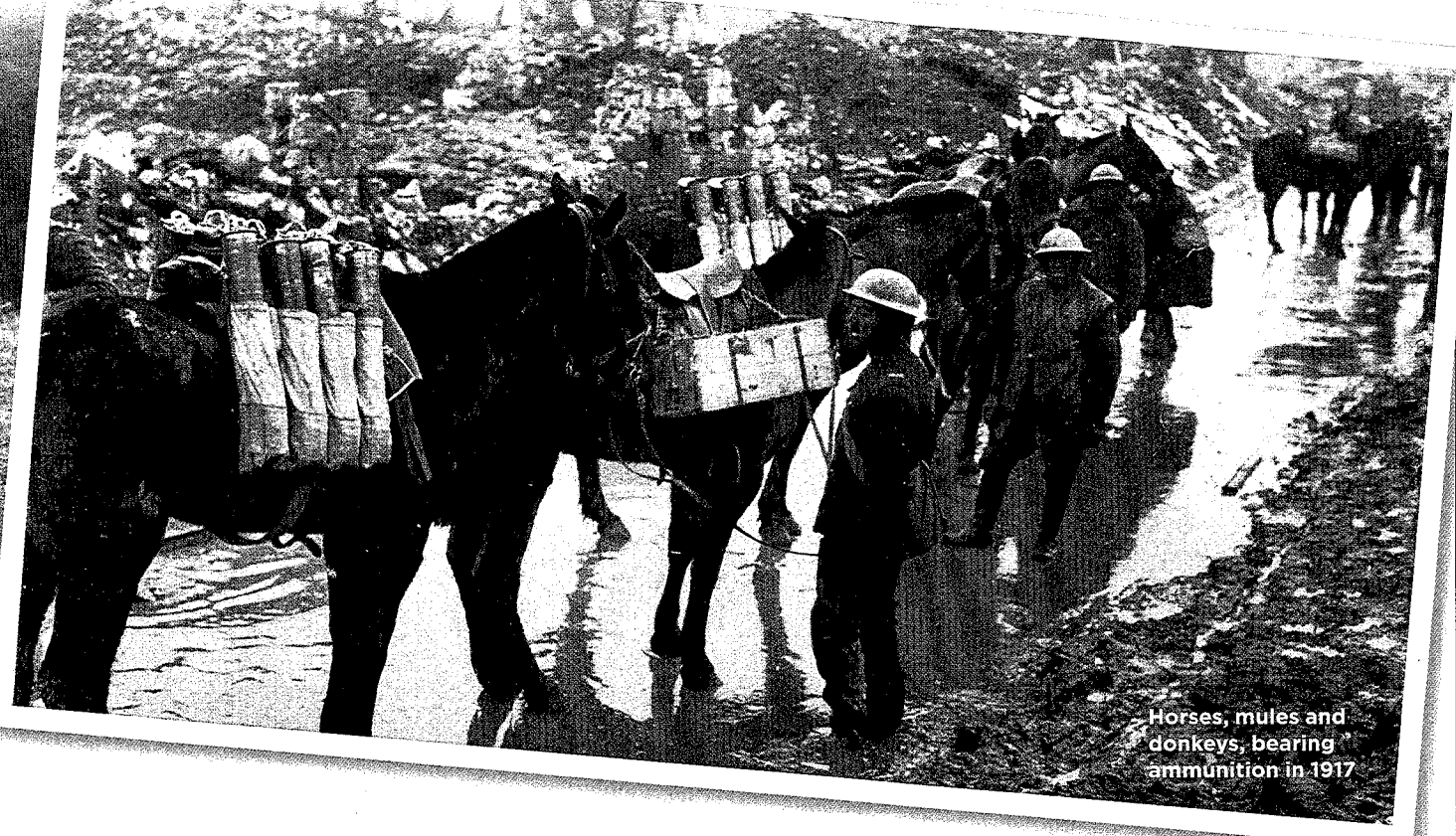


Benedict Cumberbatch as Major Stewart

Steven Spielberg, Joey and Jeremy Irvine at the War Horse premiere



Joey (left) and his mother run free in Devon



Horses, mules and donkeys, bearing ammunition in 1917

always wanted to be on a horse, with Spielberg directing. And lo and behold, here I am! I feel incredibly lucky to be living a kind of dream.'

The 'on a horse' part of Hiddleston's childhood ambition certainly comes into fruition in the film – 14 horses were used to play the part of Joey, and all the actors spend the majority of their screen time with their animal co-stars. 'I've come away from this project with an undying love for horses,' says Hiddleston. 'I'd ridden a little bit before this film, but the sensitivity and nobility of those animals are something I never expected.'

All of the film's cast forged a real bond with the animals, but none more so than the young Irvine. 'Jeremy is an amazing horseman,' says Hiddleston. 'I would turn up to the farm where we had our riding lessons at eight in the morning to find Jeremy had already mucked out three stables, having been there for hours. He was the definitive John Wayne among us.'

It is surprising to learn that the young actor had never had any experience with

with Tom and Benedict Cumberbatch (another British star of the film), it was awful to realise that it was men just like them who were sent off to die in their millions. The futility of it all really hit home.' Hiddleston's old school, for instance, sent 3,000 of its former pupils into the army during the Great War, more than a third of whom died in action.

Hiddleston and Cumberbatch, an old Harrovian, both play officers who face brutal combat. Hiddleston in particular is well qualified to play a military figure, having had one grandfather who served in the Royal Artillery and another in the Navy. 'I felt an enormous responsibility to represent the kind of spirit with which that war was fought,' he says. 'It helped that the resources available to Steven and his production team were exceptional, so much so that the only thing that wasn't recreated was actual bullets being in the guns.'

His trademark bright-blue eyes glaze over as he recalls the filming. 'The experience of being in a battle charge was both thrilling and terrifying. The sound of

480 hooves thundering, the wails of 120 stuntmen screaming at the top of their lungs and

the look of hundreds of extras running in terror – it felt as real as it could possibly get without it being so. I was overwhelmed with admiration and appreciation for the men who fought in the two world wars.'

Spielberg's finished film is typically epic in scale yet intimate in focus. The beautiful scenes encompass many heart-wrenching close-ups of both human and animal faces, lending the tender character emphasis for which he is known. There is one shot that homes in on Captain Nicholls's face moments before he is caught in the merciless fire of a machine gun. He goes from the triumphant expression of a noble officer to that of a terrified child, all in a matter of seconds. The next shot shows Joey frantically galloping on into battle without his officer. 'The horse's capacity for courage reminds people of their humanity,' says Tom Hiddleston. It is a very British story. ♦

♦ *The film War Horse is now on general release.*

*As Spielberg's new blockbuster ignites a debate about the way we treat animals, Dominic Prince tells the truly inspiring, and tragic, tales of the REAL war horses*

**F**orget the dog being man's best friend, the true recipient of that mantle is the horse. Strong, diligent and loyal, the bond between horse and man goes back hundreds of years. Over time they have become comrades in arms, forming an indelible partnership in which the horse has helped fight battles, given its pulling power to industry and agriculture, as well as pleasure to many on the hunting field and racecourse.

My maternal grandfather, Percy Hazzard, a Somerset farmer of some means, was a professional soldier. He saw action in the first Iraq war (Mesopotamia) and, unable to leave his charger behind, he brought it back to the West Country. The horse, which he named Ahmed, spent his later years at Slades Farm in the Somerset village of Templecombe; here he must have lived to a ripe old age as my mother (born in 1928) remembers him, and the great affection my grandfather had for him. Percy and Ahmed

## My kingdom for a horse...

spent many a chilly winter's day hunting with the Blackmore & Sparkford Vale Hunt – a true example of comrades in arms.

Getting Ahmed back from Iraq must have been a remarkable feat in itself. During the earlier Boer War, of the 669,775 horses that were sent to the front line, 400,000 were killed. And during the First World War, more than 8 million horses in total were killed and 2.5 million were injured.

Quite apart from the human and equine tragedy, the financial burden of the First World War was horrendous. At its outbreak the British Army had only 25,000 horses – a chronic shortfall. Although families with private means and officers supplied their own horses, the British Army spent £36m buying horses both privately and at auction. Today's financial equivalent is well in excess of £1.55bn.

The battle tasks for animals were relentless. Horses were needed to haul essential supplies like heavy guns and food; to heave the sick and wounded to hospital in ambulances; to struggle through the filthy mire of the trenches and witness the carnage first hand as chargers.

Indeed, the great war poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote during the First World War about his horse: 'Had I been near enough to study his facial expression, I

should have seen what I already know, that Cockbird definitely disliked being a trooper's charger: It was a brutal and nasty existence but is it not appealing to marvel at Sassoon's thoughts for his horse, not for himself? No cumbersome pity, merely reflections on the state of

*More than 8 million horses were killed and 2.5 million were injured'*

mind of his horse.

Finally, there is the tale of General Jack Seely and his horse Warrior, which had been bred by him on the Isle of Wight. In 1914 he took it to France where the pair of them survived four years of bombs, bullets and gas. In 1918, Warrior led a cavalry charge before returning to England where he not only hunted from his home, but also won the Isle of Wight point-to-point race on 30 March 1922.

As Seely wrote in his book Warrior, 'It was the anniversary of that great day when he had galloped through the British and German front lines to save Amiens and the Allied Cause. We rode home together over the downs rejoicing in this splendid conclusion of an anniversary, which neither of us could ever forget.'

After the First World War,

there were more than 500,000 horses standing and of those, 60,000 were sold to Belgium for meat and 100,000 were sent home where they returned to the land. Hunting, perhaps pulling the odd cart but, soon after, superseded by the internal combustion engine and the motor car. Progress and,

in many ways, at a good price.

No longer the needless slaughter of both man and beast but neither the implacable bond between horse and man. In a way

though, it does still live on. In 2009, it was mentioned by Professor David Nutt, the previous government's drug policy adviser who identified a condition he called 'equasy' (equine addiction syndrome), which he described as being more dangerous than ecstasy. For that remark he was sacked by the Brown government.

Winston Churchill put it a better way when he said, 'No hour of life is wasted that is spent in the saddle'. Percy Hazzard and Jack Seely would surely have approved.

♦ *The exhibition War Horse: Fact & Fiction is at the National Army Museum till August 2012: 020-7881 6606, www.nam.ac.uk*



General Jack Seely and Warrior, by Sir Alfred Munnings (1918)