

Another valiant First World War steed is destined to capture the public's imagination, says DAVID ROBSON

MORE than a million people have seen War Horse on the London stage. Next month, with the release of Steven Spielberg's film, hundreds of millions more will be in its thrall. The story of Joey, the Devon farm horse that was commandeered to go to war, will have captivated us three times over and in three different modes: in Michael Morpurgo's children's novel it was a moving story well told, in the theatre it was absolutely mesmerising and who can doubt that Spielberg, the great genius of popular film-making, master of war and emotional manipulation, will have us all in the palm of his hand?

A horse is taken from the village boy, who loves him, to the killing fields of the First World War. A million horses were sent to the Western Front by Britain and more than 900,000 never returned. Many did show extraordinary courage and a horse can inspire love even a stranger can understand and a village boy can express movingly in monosyllables.

Jack Seely, later Lord Mottistone, schooled at Harrow and Cambridge, minister of war and a general, was a man of distinction and courage. Born in 1868 he lived on the Isle of Wight and loved horses.

He had a heroic war on the Western Front but, as he tells it, not a quarter as heroic as his horse Warrior - The Horse The Germans Could Not Kill was the headline when Warrior's death was reported in 1941, aged 32.



SO BRAVE: A scene from Steven Spielberg's film and, inset, Queen Mary visits Warrior and Jack Seely

IF JACK Seely was a man of stiff upper lip it certainly softened when he wrote about his beloved steed. My Horse Warrior was first published in 1934 and republished now with an introduction by his grandson, racing writer Brough Scott and a foreword by Sir Peter O'Sullivan (now 93) who read it when it first came out.

Warrior's upbringing was as different from Joey the War Horse's as Seely's was from Albert, the Devon village boy. Warrior was a thoroughbred with grooms and batmen to look after him.

The bay gelding with a white star on his forehead had famous admirers - he was ridden by Field Marshall French and by FE Smith (Lord Birkenhead), Churchill's great friend who became Lord Chancellor. He was loved by the Canadian cavalrymen whom Seely led into battle: "As I rode along, whether it were in rest billets, in reserve, approaching the line or in the midst of battle, men would say not, 'Here comes the general' but, 'Here comes Warrior.'" Even as a

young horse Warrior was brave. He wasn't fazed by the first big waves he saw coming towards him when Seely rode him on the beach in the Isle of Wight, nor when German shells dropped perilously close. On one occasion the barn where he was housed was destroyed by a shell and he had to be dug out of the rubble. Once he was buried except for one forefoot. On several occasions the horses right next to him were blown up but, according to Seely, he never lost his nerve.

Warrior was at Ypres, the Somme and Paschendale - places where it was a miracle for man or beast to survive. Often with Seely in the saddle he was leading from the front into enemy fire and so a prime target. The horse put his life on the line like any other animal yet his existence even at the front was different from other ranks. Not every animal was drawn and painted repeatedly by Alfred Munnings.

One of the finest of horse painters Munnings was war artist to the

Canadian cavalry. "As I rode back from the front line one cold morning, covered with mud, I met this strange apparition in civilian clothes," writes Seely. "Munnings said, 'Come along I want to paint you.' So Warrior and I stood stock still." Seely could only spare him an hour. "However," he adds, "Munnings reminds me that when we adjourned for lunch I took pity on him and ordered one of the remaining bottles of my best claret."

SEELY, like all horse people, had great respect for their intelligence. "If you happen to be a general," he writes, "you will notice with what immense interest your horse will eye the new aide-de-camp. He knows very well that much of his comfort and wellbeing depends on this mysterious man." Wellbeing on the Western Front also depended on good fortune. On

more than one occasion Seely had horses shot from under him but each time for one reason or another it wasn't Warrior.

In one attack in 1918 his black horse was killed. "And," writes Seely, "I swallowed a good deal of gas myself, one escape for Warrior." He got on another horse and that was killed too. Warrior had trodden on a stone the previous evening and was injured, otherwise he would have been killed that day.

At the end of March 1918 came Warrior's finest hour. The Germans were advancing to a ridge above Amiens. Despite the French officers telling him it was impossible, Seely, astride Warrior, decided to lead a charge to recapture the ridge.

"There was a hail of bullets from the enemy and perhaps half of us were hit but Warrior cared for nothing. His one idea was to get to the enemy... we were greeted by 20 or 30 Germans who fired a few shots before running, doubtless thinking there were thousands of

us following. But what I must record, and it is indeed the truth, that so far as I am concerned the credit for this wild adventure, which succeeded in so miraculous a fashion, was due not to me but my horse Warrior. He it was who did not hesitate and did not flinch though well he knew the danger from those swift bullets."

Warrior returned to Britain to victory parades, to hunting, point-to-points and a star appearance at the Olympia horse show. Joey, in War Horse, also survived. He was the equivalent of the ordinary soldiers and animals who endured so much and died in their millions. He is now immortalised in a prize-winning play and blockbuster movie.

When Warrior died there was a long newspaper article headed Death Of A Well-Known Charger.

● *Warrior: The Amazing Story Of A Real War Horse*, by General Jack Seely, is published by Racing Post, £14.99