



The ultimate war machine

Narrated by Matt Baker

Video transcript

When we think of horses and World War One, we think of War Horse – the hugely popular play and film about Albert and his horse Joey.

War Horse tells just one part of what is a much bigger story about the vital role that horses played in the First World War.

The real story takes place behind the front lines. Without horses, ammunition would have run dry, soldiers would have gone without rations, and casualties would not have got to the field hospitals.

Given that this would be the century of the car and that vehicles were already a common sight, why was the British Army so dependent on animals in battle?

Well, early motor vehicles had temperamental engines and were designed for hard surfaces. Their wheels would lose traction and sink in the mud. Horses, on the other hand, could be unloaded and could then try to free themselves.

During World War One, the British Army put to work over a million horses and mules – from the trenches of the Western Front to the deserts of Mesopotamia.

They provided the backbone for an army fighting on a global scale never seen before – historians generally agree that without horses, the British Army would have disintegrated.

[Images courtesy of National Army Museum, Getty Images, Mary Evans Picture Library, Topfoto]