

Nothing **NEW**
under the sun

Dogs for war

BY RIA HÖRTER IMAGES COURTESY RIA HÖRTER

The expression “our loyal friends” is often used in reference to dogs. However, there’s a special category of dogs that always deserves this qualification: Dogs for war are brave, intelligent, well-trained, loyal animals under all circumstances. Frequently, they pay for their loyalty with their lives.

During wartime, dogs have been used as messenger dogs, patrol dogs, guard dogs, mine dogs, Red Cross dogs or as draught dogs for the transportation of weapons, ammunition, food and medical supplies.

No role at all

Numerous dog books state that Greek and Roman armies fought their many wars assisted by large, dangerous war dogs. Even in encyclopaedias, well-known dog writers state that war dogs “fought man to man beside their masters.” It was the Dutch dog writer and specialist in classic antiquity, Dr. Robert van der Molen, who, in his book *Honden bij de Grieken en de Romeinen (Dogs in the Greek and Roman World)*, rectified this mistake. For many years, he studied the classic literature (Homer, Ovid, Strabo, Vergil, Columella, Arrian, Xenophon, Oppian and many others) and translated their writings in which one or more dogs occurred. He came to the conclusion that dogs were present in legions, but they played no role at all in the acts of war. Dogs in Greek and Roman armies served as guard dogs, gundogs and messenger dogs. Sometimes soldiers brought their own (hunting) dogs along as companions.

Van der Moles writes, “Despite all exciting stories in numer-

ous dog books, army dogs, Indian dogs or mastiffs, fighting with soldiers in the front lines and attacking the enemy, never existed in the Greek or Roman armies.”

Celts

A Greek amphora, dated about 500 BC, shows hoplites (heavily armed foot soldiers) equipped with lance, sword, shield, armour plating and greaves – very effective for fighting in close ranks. The amphora also shows a dog that looks rather fierce. With the conclusions of Van der Molen in mind, it could be a guard dog.

In the first half of the 4th century, Aeneas Tacitus published his *Polioretica* where he wrote about messenger dogs whose communications were fastened to their collars. The author’s advice was that at nighttime, soldiers could benefit from having dogs at their observation posts, and patrol dogs.

The story about fighting dogs in Greek and Roman armies is refuted now, but we may assume that the Celts and Gauls used their dogs as weapons from the 6th century to about 200 BC. Wearing suits of armour and collars with iron pins, the dogs were provoked against the enemy’s horses, wounding the animals or horsemen. Attila the Hun (died 453) used large



Clockwise, from top left:

A Celtic warrior and his Mastiff

Grenadiers of the Italian army used dogs for the first time in 1905. The army choose Italy's large mountain dogs.

British infantrymen in a First World War trench. In the front is Col. Richardson and his guard dog.



Molossian dogs during his campaigns, and in the 12th century, Irishmen brought their wolfhounds into action in their battles against Norman knights on horseback.

Well, this is what historians want us to believe.

Eight hundred fighting dogs

During the English War of the Roses (1455-85) – between the rival Plantagenet Houses of Lancaster and York – the contending parties used mastiffs.

English and European monarchs in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries brought their dogs to the battlefields. In 1525, under the reign of King Henry VIII, 400 mastiffs were shipped out to Spain, the king's gift to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to support him in his wars against France. In the last quarter of the 16th century, Queen Elizabeth I unleashed 800 fighting dogs on the Irish Desmond rebels.

In the Seven Years' War, a military conflict between 1756 and 1763 involving the armies of Prussia, England, Russia, Austria, Sweden, Saxony, Spain, Portugal and France, Prussian King Friedrich II introduced a method of mail delivery

by dogs between his troops. Thanks to this web of messenger dogs, the army leadership could transmit their strategies. It is said that he introduced this method based on an example dating from antiquity.

Finally, in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), King Philip V of Spain used dogs as scouts in his army.

Guards

With the arrival of firearms, the importance of war dogs decreased; gunpowder and a rifle were more effective than a dog. But there was still work left for dogs to bring messages, transport ammunition and medicine, track and patrol.

Little is known about dogs in Napoleon's campaigns, but we do know that he had dogs posted as sentries at the gates of Alexandria, Egypt, to warn his troops of any attacks.

However, it wasn't until the end of the 19th century that dogs were fully brought into action in military operations again. In particular, the dogs' senses of hearing and smell were important.

According to various sources, the Russians used dogs in the



Clockwise, from top left:

Soviet training camp for war dogs, Moscow 1931.

German soldiers with an Airedale Terrier carrying food. (Collection Imperial War Museum, London.)

Telegraph dogs carried a reel of telephone wire that unwound along the route.

Crimean War (1853-56). The Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) claimed so many lives that human guards had to be replaced by trained guard dogs.

Around 1860, there was a real mania in German military circles for breeding and training dogs for wartime activities. In 1884, the German army established the first military school for training war dogs in Lechenich, and in 1885 wrote the first training manual for military war dogs.

Imperial Russia used ambulance dogs and guard dogs during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). The dogs were trained by British dog fancier Col. Edwin Richardson, who later established the first army dog school in England. In this war, the Trans-Siberian railroad was never attacked, thanks to well-trained guard dogs.

By the outbreak of the First World War (1914-18), all parties involved were prepared to bring their dogs into action.

Breeds

It's not easy to find reliable data and the available sources seem to have conflicting statements, but it is a fact that Germany had "*die grösste einsatzbereite Hundearmee der Welt*" – the largest army of war dogs in the world – mostly Alsatians. The Germans are said to have used 28,000 dogs, including 4,000 Red Cross dogs (*Sanitätshunde* – sanitary dogs) and 4,000 messenger dogs and patrol dogs.

France founded a training centre in 1910, and in 1915 the dogs were sent to the front for the first time.

Alsatians (German Shepherd Dogs), Belgian Shepherds,



Polish Army Trains Dogs To String Phone Lines

Modern warfare may be becoming more and more mechanized, with tanks replacing cavalry and trucks doing the work of mules, but Polish Army authorities are now busily training corps of dogs for military duty. The war dogs are taught not only to carry messages and emergency supplies of food and ammunition, but also to haul reels of wire for stringing field-telephone lines.



Airedale Terriers, Schnauzers, Doberman Pinschers, Boxers and Labrador Retrievers were the most suitable war dogs. The Labradors were used for tracking and in Belgium, dogs of the French *matin* type pulled carts with machine guns.

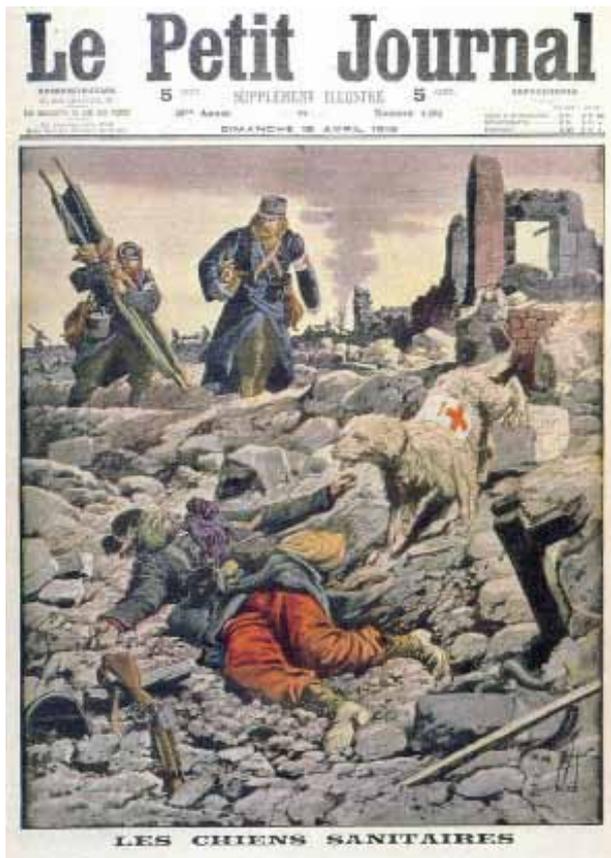
Mascots – another category of war dog – came in all sorts and sizes, but they are outside the scope of this article.

Messenger dogs and telegraph dogs

Dogs serving in the signals unit were divided into messenger dogs and telegraph dogs. Some of the messenger dogs carried homing pigeons that were released at the front line. Telegraph dogs carried a reel with a telephone wire; the wire unwound en route. Most of these dogs were able to avoid the danger in the trenches and firing lines, and thanks to their bravery, communication could be maintained. The patrol dogs could point out hostile troops, soldiers and snipers.

France started using Red Cross dogs in their army in 1908. The German *Sanitätshunde* were brought into action by the thousands and many soldiers in this horrible war owed their lives to a dog.

In addition, dogs were trained as parachute dogs. At first,



Clockwise, from top left:

Cover of the French magazine *Le Petit Journal*, April 1915. In France these dogs were called *chiens sanitaires*, in Germany *Sanitätshunde*.

Riflemen of the Belgian army in the First World War. The Belgians were pioneers in using dogs and small, lightweight vehicles to transport guns and ammunition. (Collection Royal Army Museum, Brussels)

Airdale Terriers wearing gas masks in the First World War. This breed was very popular with the British Army.

the dog jumped on its own, using a lighter parachute. Dog and handler jumping together came later.

Gas masks

Special gas masks were made for dogs. In the trenches, a messenger dog was often the last hope for keeping contact with other army units. A messenger dog was accustomed to only two people and covered a distance of two to four kilometres.

Bryan D. Cummins' book *Colonel Richardson's Airedales. The Making of the British War Dog School 1900-1918* describes how the countries prepared themselves and the dogs for war

Small, lightweight vehicles

For a long time, the European armies sought a suitable solution for transporting machine guns, which were effective only when they could be moved quickly, could be placed in position easily, and could be provided with sufficient ammunition.



When mobilization was proclaimed just before the First World War, the Dutch army experimented with carts, automobiles and even bicycles for the transport of machine guns, but the Belgians and French constructed small, light vehicles to be pulled by dogs.

There are many images of dogs pulling machine guns. It seems that almost every infantry regiment wanted to be photographed with their cart and dogs.

The dogs worked in pairs and if the guns had to be fired immediately, the dogs were not even unharnessed. Precision and no barking were requirements for machine gun dogs.

In addition, all war dogs needed to have a sharp sense of hearing, an excellent nose, stamina, no coat markings and a strong physique.

World War II participation

Experts on the Second World War (1939-45) state that the participation of dogs in this war can be multiplied by 10 compared to the First World War. A new phenomenon was dogs serving in the armoured divisions.

Peacekeeping force

Today, advanced arsenal has made most jobs for war dogs redundant. Satellites now provide wireless communication and computers have taken over parts of the fieldwork. Except for the wars between the former countries of Yugoslavia, Europe

has had no wars during the last 65 years. Peacekeeping forces are now brought into action to separate contending parties or to train the police force. The war dog's field is now, for example, Afghanistan or Iraq, where there is sufficient work for an intelligent, well-trained dog.

Modern war dogs are needed for the same reasons as their forerunners were useful in bygone days. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun.

A breeder/exhibitor/judge and retired bookseller and publisher, Ria Hörter also contributes to *Onze hond* (Netherlands) and *Canine Chronicle*.



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The war dog's work is now in Afghanistan or Iraq.