



Rags' friends stand in front of a sign commemorating him for his bravery in battle. (The Hon. Raymond G.H. Seitz/National Archives at College Park)

The animals that helped win World War I

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Rags was as brave and hardworking as the American soldiers he fought alongside during World War I. But one key detail set him apart from the men serving in the First Division American Expeditionary Forces: He was a dog.

The stray dog turned soldier was just one of the estimated millions of dogs, horses, camels and other animals that served during what was known as the Great War. These animals often were referred to as "military mascots." These beasts of burden typically acted as soldiers' companions, boosting morale when times got rough for soldiers living thousands of miles away from home.

But military mascots didn't just lend a supportive paw. They did real work on the battlefield. Thanks to their speed, strength or agility (depending on the species), they'd take on important tasks. Some lugged munitions and other cargo. Some carried crucial messages between units. And some sniffed out buried mines. But many of these animals never received any recognition for their hard work and dedication. Their short lives were largely forgotten - until now.

Recently, the National Archives completed a massive scanning project. It was the digitizing of 63,000 World War I photos for its American Unofficial Collection of World War Photographs (165-WW) record series. The collection took two years to get online. It contains images obtained from the Army Signal Corps, various federal and state government agencies and the American Red Cross. A majority of the collection contains images of soldiers participating in various stages of military life. But archivists noticed something else in the photos: animals.

"I'm an animal lover," says Kristin DeAnfrasio. She is an archivist who worked on the project. "As I was going through the photos, I kept seeing unique animals, like a raccoon, an alligator and a bear, that stood out to me."

Upon further research, DeAnfrasio learned that many of the animals captured in black and white served as military mascots. (She wrote a post on the subject for the archives' Unwritten Record blog.)

Not much is known about the animals in the collection. Little is known beyond the typewritten captions that accompany each photo. But they provide rare insight into an aspect of the war that often gets left out of the history books. Animals have often served on the battlefield. The Assyrians and Babylonians were some of the first groups to recruit dogs for war purposes. Closer to home, animals were a part of the Civil War. They sniffed out wounded soldiers and responded to bugle calls. However, their role is often underappreciated or unknown.

Take "John Bull." He is an English bulldog who belonged to an English major general up until an American air unit adopted him. Aside from the picture in the archive, little else is known about him and his time at war. Adoption wasn't the

only way animals made their way onto the battlefield. Citizens also donated their own pets in a show of patriotism.

And not all of the animals whose images made it into the archives were domesticated. Take, for example, Whiskey and Soda. They are two lion cubs. They served as the mascots of the Lafayette Escadrille. It was a military unit of the Aeronautique Militaire (French Air Service). There was also Dick, a monkey belonging to the Provost Guard at Camp Devens. It was an Army training ground in Massachusetts. Their stories have been lost to time. So today historians can only wager a guess of what their lives entailed. And if they even survived the war.

Biographer Grant Hayter-Menzies wrote a book about one of them. From Stray Dog to World War I Hero: The Paris Terrier Who Joined the First Division follows the story of Rags. He is a canine who went from a street dog scrounging for scraps outside a cafe in Paris to a pivotal member of the First Division.

"I wanted to write about a dog who came out of a situation where it had reasons not to trust a human," says Hayter-Menzies. "I'm troubled by service animals in war who were (recruited) into service for something they didn't cause. No animal ever started a war."

Rags lived from 1916 to 1936. He followed soldiers home after they fed him and refused to leave the battlefield. He began his military life in 1918 as a mascot. But soon the soldiers realized he had more to offer. First Sergeant James Donovan taught him to deliver messages during a time when the U.S. military lacked a formal messenger service. And Hayter-Menzies credits Rags with

saving the lives of "hundreds" of men. This was thanks to the messages he successfully delivered.

"Practically overnight, Rags learned how to run messages," Hayter-Menzies says. "He could also tell when shells were coming minutes before the men could hear it, and he would flop over [onto his side to let them know]. When Donovan would go check the mines, Rags would go with him and he was able to identify broken lines, even under foggy conditions, by running up to them and barking. How he did it, no one knew."

Eventually, while running a message that Donovan carefully tied to his collar with telephone wire, Rags' military career came to an abrupt end. His paws and ears were injured by shrapnel. His lungs were damaged by poisonous gas from a close-range explosion after his mask slipped off. (The message was successfully delivered.) Rags and Donovan were transferred to a military hospital in Chicago for medical care. His master succumbed to his injuries, but Rags survived. He was adopted by a military family and was their four-legged companion for the remainder of his 20 years. Today, visitors can visit his grave at Aspin Hill Memorial Park in Silver Spring, Maryland. He was buried with military honors.

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