Horses in Gray

Famous Confederate Warhorses

J. D. R. Hawkins

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PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
Gretna 2017

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hawkins, J. D. R., author.
Title: Horses in gray : famous Confederate warhorses / J. D. R. Hawkins.
Description: Gretna : Pelican Publishing Company, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016055027| ISBN 9781455623273 (paperback : alkaline paper) | ISBN 9781455623280 (e-book)
Subjects: LCSH: War horses—Confederate States of America—History. | Confederate States of America. Army. Cavalry—History. | Confederate States of America. Army—History. | United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Cavalry operations. | United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Transportation.
Classification: LCC E546.5 .H39 2017 | DDC 973.7/42—dc23 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016055027

Printed in the United States of America

Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

For Dave

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Acknowledgments

Much appreciation goes to the following for their assistance in the production of this book:

Katherine Wilkins, assistant librarian, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia

Margaret Samdohl, Lee Chapel Museum Shop, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia

M. R. Dye Public Library, Horn Lake, Mississippi

David Bates, Janie Riley McDonald, David Ringo, and Eve Davenport Holder

Dan Nance, for the honor and privilege of using his artwork *Defenders of the Confederacy* on the cover

My family for their ongoing support.

Horses in Gray

Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? The glory of his nostrils is terrible.

He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at fear and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield.

He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet. He saith among the trumpets, Ha ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.

—Job 39:19-25 (KJV)

Chapter 1

Life as a Confederate Horse

The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but safety is from the Lord.

—Proverbs 21:3

Horses and mules were vital military tools used for carrying officers, providing mounts for the cavalry, and pulling caissons, wagons, artillery limbers, and ambulances. During the first two years of the war, though there were never more than 60,000 cavalrymen in the field at one time, 284,000 horses were used.[1] Not only were these animals devoted and loyal, but they were heavily relied upon and necessary for the existence of the armies they served. Because they demonstrated unflinching bravery in the face of fire, they were loved and adored. Lifelong relationships evolved between horse and master, and on many occasions, the gallant steed carried his rider to hero's status and immortality.

Before the war, horses in the South were essential, since the region was primarily rural. Railways were sparse and roads were rough. Southern horses were descendants of equine nobility, and through their veins ran the blood of English Thoroughbred royalty: Sir Archy, Boston, Diomed, Eclipse, Exchequer, Messenger, Red Eye, Timoleon, and other splendid champion sires.

Mules usually did the plowing and heavy hauling, while horses broken to harness did lighter tasks and pulled carriages. Some horses were used for fox hunting or jousting, but most were used to transport family members cross-country.

For the most part, Southern men and boys were excellent horsemen. When the war started, some were already

members of military companies and had been for years. The horse was so revered by the South that one is depicted on the Confederate States of America's national seal. Seated on the animal is George Washington. The South greatly honored Washington and considered the war to be its Second War of Independence.

★★★

Most horses used in the war were geldings or mares. Not many stallions were utilized because they were unruly and hard to handle. For ambulances, horses were used rather than mules because horses were less skittish.[2] At the start of the war, Southern gentry considered Thoroughbreds to be superior. They were certain that the quality and breeding of their fine racehorses would ensure the Confederacy's victory.

The national seal of the Confederate States of America

One newspaper article printed in 1863 read: "Let the baser baseness of breeding scrubs and cold bloods be left to the Yankees: and let Virginia planters resume [breeding] the thoroughbred Virginia race horse."[3]

It didn't take long for Confederate soldiers to figure out that Thoroughbreds were too flighty for use on the battlefield. Instead, various other breeds were used. Percherons were preferred by the Confederate artillery for pulling heavy caissons and wagons. Saddlebreds from Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri, as well as Tennessee Pacers (Southern Plantation Horses), the forerunners of today's Tennessee Walking Horses, were ridden by the cavalry.

Gen. Basil Duke, second in command to Gen. John Hunt Morgan, was the first to describe the Saddlebred breed: "If I be correct in my estimate of the Thoroughbred, then it must be conceded that the nearer he approximates him, the better another horse [the Saddlebred] will be. But the Kentucky Saddlebred horse has not only inherited, in a large measure, the excellence of the Thoroughbred in respects to which I have called attention, but has also retained certain desirable characteristics which have more peculiarly distinguished the humbler [non-Thoroughbred] strain from which he is descended."[4]

The desirable characteristics to which Duke alluded were "the peculiar gaits which make their descendants so valuable for the saddle."[5] However, Morgans were the most popular riding horses used by officers and horse soldiers alike.

Morgans were one of the earliest breeds to be developed in the United States. They can be traced back to their foundation sire, Figure, born in 1789 in Springfield, Massachusetts, and later renamed Justin Morgan after his owner. The breed is smaller than the Thoroughbred and possesses a stocky body, sturdy legs, and a long, thick mane and tail. Morgans are alert, easy keepers, sustaining on little food compared to other breeds. Used primarily for riding and harness racing, they also served as coach horses. Because they were accustomed to pulling vehicles and were able to keep calm under fire, both armies used the breed extensively.

During the war, bays were the most common in terms of color. Bay horses are distinguishable by their brown coats and black points (i.e. black manes, tails, and lower legs). Browns were the second-most common, followed by chestnuts and blacks. Next in line were horses whose colors ranged from gray to white, followed by roans, which have white and any other hair color intermixed throughout their coats. Most armed forces did not use pintos, spotted, or white horses, since they believed the animals would be easy targets, but some soldiers took a chance and rode them anyway. Grays were used by trumpeters so that officers could easily locate them when they wanted to have a call blown. Musicians also rode grays.

Horses came to recognize the different bugle calls used during the war. The call to trot or gallop was synchronized with the rhythm of the horses' hoof beats in those gaits. The animals also recognized certain songs, a favorite of theirs being "Stable Call" because when they heard the music, they knew it was time to eat:

> Oh, go to the stable,
> All you who are able,
> And give your poor horses some hay and some corn.
> For if you don't do it,
> The colonel will know it,
> And then you will rue it as sure as you're born.[6]

Gen. James Ewell Brown Stuart (known as Jeb) had an immense love of music and assembled a band of talented musicians to entertain his division as they marched long miles. Some horses in his cavalry grew so accustomed to the melodies that they responded by prancing in rhythm to the tunes.

Early in the conflict, more horses were killed than soldiers. It is believed that the very first casualty was a Confederate horse, which died when Southern troops fired on Fort Sumter

in Charleston Harbor. The rigors of war were much harder on horses than on soldiers. The average life expectancy of a military horse was only six months. Most horses were not killed on the battlefield but died from disease, including glanders and grease-heel, or succumbed to starvation. Since they were constantly ridden, horses frequently developed saddle sores, as well as foot and leg ailments. And because food was scarce at times, horses developed colic and often had to be put down.

In both armies, horses suffered tremendously, but more so in the South because Union troops made raids and burned crops to destroy the Confederate armies' resources. As the war dragged on, hungry horses that could not find a blade of grass to eat pulled bark from trees and consumed bits of paper around camp. When they were close to starvation, they gnawed the hair from each other's manes and tails.[7]

While on the march, obstacles such as inclement weather, broken-down vehicles, and injuries constantly occurred, which made travel difficult at best. Wagons and stubborn mules regularly clogged the roads, and mud bogged down the travelers, so progress was gruelingly slow. Roads frequently became so muddy during a campaign that wagons and horses got stuck. One soldier observed: "If a single wagon stalls, the whole rear train has to stop until the vehicle is dragged out of the mud, for in many places, the road is so narrow that not even a horse, and sometimes not a footman, can pass a single wagon."[8]

The more it rained, the muddier it became, until animals were literally trapped. In one instance, Cpl. John Worsham of the Army of Northern Virginia wrote, "I saw dead mules lying in the road, with nothing but their ears showing above the mud."[9]

During a march in January 1862, weather and weariness played havoc on Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's troops. They stiffly shuffled into Romney, Virginia, sadly in need of a rest. The condition of their animals wrung the hearts of Jackson's men, who were almost as wretched. A soldier in the Rockbridge Artillery said that many of the horses "had been bruised by their falls—all were covered with dried sweat, and from one horse's knees there were icicles of blood which reached nearly to the ground."[10]

Trostler's barn, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1863, photograph by T. H. O'Sullivan (Library of Congress)

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Draft horses and mules were put under the tremendous strain of pulling heavy, cumbersome artillery pieces. Because of this, a massive supply of animals was needed to keep the troops mobile. Although many of these animals were literally worked to death, they were, for the most part, tireless and dependable to the end.

One example of their suffering took place four days before Christmas in 1863. The Army of Northern Virginia struggled to march through inclement weather while attempting to reach their winter quarters near Fredericksburg, Virginia. The ordeal was relayed by Pvt. George Michael Neese:

> Some of our artillery horses are weak, worn out, worthless or false. They stalled several times during the day, and we had to push, pull, and start the pieces by man motor.
>
> The following day wasn't much better, as the men managed to only march six miles. At one place, one of the drivers became so vexed and aggravated at his balking horses that he dismounted and drew out his pocket knife with determination to cut their throats.[11]

The driver was persuaded otherwise after realizing that his actions might draw the attention of his superiors.[12]

In the artillery, pairs of horses worked side by side and grew so reliant on each other that they became inseparable. A Confederate gunner who observed this deep affection wrote, "I have heard and seen a horse whose mate was killed at his side utter an agonized and terrified neigh, meanwhile shuddering violently, and I have known a horse so bereaved persistently refuse to eat and pine away and die."[13]

Not only were horses used to pull wagons and artillery caissons, but they were recruited to move trains, too. When Jackson captured a bevy of locomotives near Harpers Ferry, he discovered that they would have to be pulled overland to reach a railroad line. For the trek to the Manassas Gap Railroad, Jackson hitched a team of forty horses to each captive locomotive.

Crucial to the infantry, cavalry soldiers served a special purpose, as they were the eyes of the army. Cavalry units could easily cover thirty to seventy miles a day, and scouting units could travel as much as one hundred miles a day.

Throughout the course of the war, the Confederacy raised an estimated 137 mounted regiments; the North, nearly twice that many. The US Army supplied mounts to their cavalry, while Confederate soldiers provided their own.

Dead horses left on the field of Cedar Mountain, August 1862 (Library of Congress)

The Confederate cavalry consisted of regiments containing eight hundred to one thousand men. Regiments were made up of ten brigades of one hundred men each and were commanded by a colonel, a lieutenant colonel, three majors, and a lieutenant. Regiments also included a surgeon and his assistant, a quartermaster sergeant, a commissary sergeant, a saddler sergeant, a blacksmith, a wagoner, hospital stewards, and musicians.

Equipment used by officers was usually nonregulation. Saddles were flat or English style, and Confederates of all ranks often used imported types, as well as McClellan and Jennifer saddles. A cavalryman's gear also included iron stirrups, breast and crupper straps, a running martingale, a bridoon or snaffle bit, and a curb bit. Saddlebags had straps attached for tying on bedrolls, cooking utensils, ponchos, and other necessities.

When a horse threw a shoe, blacksmiths, or farriers, as they later came to be known, were called upon to remedy the situation. But sometimes the farriers were inaccessible.

Confederate horses at the Battle of Antietam, September 1862 (Library of Congress)

In these instances, the trooper had to shoe his own horse by nailing on one of the two spares he carried in his saddlebags. The South had much less iron than the North, so when shoes became scarce, cavalrymen were compelled to wrench shoes from dead horses.[14]

For the first two years of the war, the Confederate cavalry was far superior to its Northern counterpart. This was because Southern soldiers came from rural upbringings, and their horses were generally more agile compared to the draft horses used up north. Many Confederate officers were experienced foxhunters, so they were well versed in jumping ditches and fences and galloping through woods.

Some soldiers who were not as learned around horses were taught tricks by their seasoned comrades. Lt. Col. William Willis Blackford, Stuart's aide-de-camp, wrote in his memoirs: "I recollected a thing Von Borcke[15] had once told me. He was taught in the Prussian Cavalry schools for this very emergency, and I made a courier twist the horse's ear severely and keep it twisted while he led the horse off the field with Von Borcke on him, the horse becoming perfectly quiet immediately."[16]

Tactics during the war changed. Instead of staging direct attacks, cavalry officers learned to use their horses for swift mobility to bring soldiers closer to the enemy. Once the soldiers reached a close proximity, the horsemen dismounted and fought on the ground, with one man in each group of four holding the reins of his comrades' horses.

Horses were valuable, sacred commodities. Blackford explained it this way: "To a cavalry officer in active service, his horse is his second self, his companion and friend, upon whom his very life may depend."[17] Because of this, cavalrymen put the needs of their horses before their own.

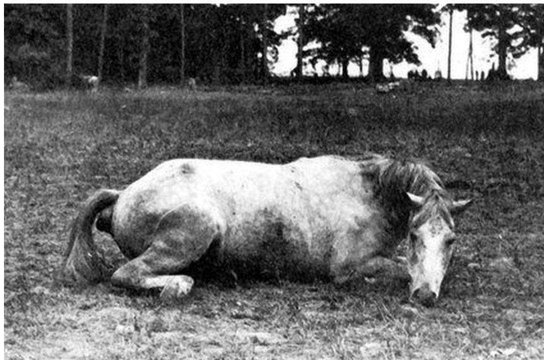
As the war progressed, Southern cavalrymen found it more challenging to replace their mounts. In the summer of 1862, the Union army captured and cut off the great horse-breeding states of Kentucky, Missouri, parts of Tennessee, and western Virginia. This forced Gen. Robert E. Lee's men to scour the South, where remounts became more and more scarce. There were plenty of mustangs in Texas, but most of them were too small for military service.[18]

Whereas Confederate infantrymen were paid eleven dollars

per month, cavalrymen were paid forty cents per day, or thirteen dollars a month; the two extra dollars could be used to provide for their horses. The men were also given horseshoes when they were available. If a horse was killed in the line of duty, the government compensated the trooper for his loss. But if the horse was captured, disabled, or lost, the trooper was not paid anything. In either case, the cavalryman was required to replace the mount himself. This could be a difficult task, as by the end of 1863, horses in the South were selling for $2,000 to $3,000 each.[19]

While on furlough to find a horse, a trooper was considered to be on "horse detail."[20] Horseless soldiers were said to belong to Company Q, a nonexistent company composed "not only of good soldiers, but no-goods, malingerers, and inefficients as well."[21] Blackford wrote about a flaw in this arrangement: "We now felt the bad effects of our system of requiring the men to furnish their own horses. The most dashing trooper was the one whose horse was the most apt to be shot, and when this man was unable to remount himself, he had to go to the infantry service and was lost to the cavalry. Such a penalty for gallantry was terribly demoralizing."[22]

When soldiers were riding shanks' mare, it meant that they were on foot. This was the most common means of transportation used for getting home after the war. "You place your feet on the ground and move," one Tennessean



Horse killed with its owner, Col. Henry B. Strong, 6th Louisiana, at the Battle of Antietam, September 1862 (Library of Congress)

described. “Walk in the direction you are going. You are now riding Shanks’ Mare.”[23]

Horse thievery was treated as a serious offense, even during times of war. Instead of stealing horses, the cavalry purchased fresh horses from unwilling farmers whenever possible—not only from the enemy, but from their own side as well—and paid for the animals with Confederate scrip. On one occasion, a small boy was playing in his front yard while several horsemen were passing.

“Hello sonny, where’s your daddy?” one of them asked.

The youngster replied, “Oh, he’s in the cellar with his horses.”[24]

The little boy didn’t know that the horsemen were Confederate foragers, who immediately confiscated the animals.

The Confederates were not always pleased with the horses they confiscated, or “liberated,”[25] from civilians. In the words of one anonymous soldier, “The horses brought back from Maryland and Pennsylvania proved utterly unserviceable and seemingly have as little taste or talent for war as their fat Dutch proprietors. Mennonites and Dunkards had followed the ways of peace for generations. Could anyone expect more than quiescent dispositions in their horses?”[26]

Another interesting commentary came from Gen. Robert E. Rodes, who was a division commander in the Army of Northern Virginia’s Second Corps. During the Pennsylvania Campaign, he complained that all of the horses seized by his men were “rarely accounted for.”[27] This observation gives further credence to the idea that many of the foragers were in business for themselves.[28]

Aside from stealing local horses, invading Federals, who brought their own horses with them, desecrated churches by converting them into stables. This happened on many occasions and in several locations, including the First Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.

On the afternoon of July 1, 1863, Confederate general George Doles encountered a problem. As Doles' Brigade charged the line and battery, an intensely serious incident (but a rather amusing one, as it turned out) occurred for a few seconds. An eyewitness to the event recalled:

> General Doles was riding a very powerful sorrel horse and, before he could realize it, the horse had seized the bit between his teeth and made straight for the Federal line as a bullet and going at full speed. We thought the General was gone, but when in about fifty yards of the line, he fell off in the wheat. The Federals, being in a wavering condition, did not seem to pay any attention to him. The horse ran up apparently to within ten or fifteen feet of the Federal line, wheeled, and came back around our brigade; and, strange to state, he had no sign of a wound on him.[29]

During Pickett's Charge, five Confederate officers rode horses: Gens. Richard B. Garnett and James L. Kemper, Cols. Eppa Hunton and Lewis B. Williams, and Garnett's aide, Capt. Simkins Jones. Garnett and Williams were killed, as were the horses of all five officers.

Westwood A. Todd of the 12th Virginia observed some of the wounded horses that remained on the battlefield on July 4, the day after the battle ended: "It was piteous to see the poor animals walking about with terrible wounds and to hear their groans. An artilleryman told me that there was a veteran horse in his battery, which was so sagacious that, as soon as the shells commenced, he would lie down, and keep close to the ground."[30] Another soldier, a Confederate artilleryman, related: "Some of these sensitive creatures were mortally afraid of artillery fire. I have seen the poor brutes, when the shells were flying low and close above their backs, squat until their bellies almost touched the ground."[31]

Approximately 1,500 artillery horses died during the battle, with the Union losing 881 horses and mules and the Confederacy losing 619.[32] The total death toll was much

higher, however. The number of dead horses left on the field was estimated to be between 3,000 and 5,000. Following the Battle of Gettysburg, the area around the Sherfy House was strewn with dead Union and Confederate horses. Capt. Francis E. Moran of the 73rd New York remembered: "The poor horses had fared badly, and as we passed, scores of these ungazetted heroes stood upon their maimed limbs regarding us with a silent look of reproach that was almost human in expression."[33]

After the soldiers were buried, the dead animals were dragged into piles and burned, an extremely slow and odorous process. One soldier recounted:

> We saw the remains of not less than two hundred of these noble brutes, many of them on fire, the smoke of which, with the effluvium of decomposition everywhere, filled the whole region of Gettysburg with unpleasant odors . . . the fields on our right over which Pickett swept with his division to the attack of Hancock, thickly strewn with the graves of men and horses, the former marked by small headboards, and the latter distinguished with large mounds.[34]

The aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1863 (Library of Congress)

Many statues of these noble horses carrying their famous heroes exist as monuments across America, paying tribute to the horses that were as brave as their owners. Tradition holds that if the horse has all four feet planted on the ground, his rider escaped the battle unscathed. If one foot is off the base, the rider was wounded, and if two feet are raised, the rider was killed.

In 1997, the Virginia Historical Society unveiled a bronze statue depicting a horse to honor all equines that served in the War Between the States. Titled *The War Horse*, this statue stands before the Society's Battle Abbey in Richmond as a reminder of the sacrifices horses made. It was designed by Tessa Pullan of Rutland, England, and given to the Historical Society by philanthropist Paul Mellon of Upperville, Virginia. An inscription on the base of the statue reads:

> IN MEMORY OF THE OVER ONE AND A HALF MILLION HORSES AND MULES OF THE CONFEDERATE AND UNION ARMIES WHO WERE KILLED, WHO WERE WOUNDED, OR DIED FROM DISEASE IN THE CIVIL WAR.[35]

A reproduction of this memorial was erected on the grounds of Ft. Riley, Kansas, where Mellon served during World War II. And another reproduction is at the National Sporting Library in Middleburg, Virginia.[36]

This book pays tribute to the noble horses that obediently carried their masters fearlessly into battle, sacrificed their lives, and, largely have been lost to history. They are the forgotten heroes. "The horses that were alive at the close of the war were, for the most part, tenderly cared for, and have long ago joined their comrades on the other side. I hope they are all grazing together in the green fields of Eden."[37]

The Artillery Horse's Prayer[38]

> To thee, my Master, I offer my prayer—
>
> Treat me as a living being, not a machine.
>
> Feed me, water and care for me, and when the day's work is done, groom me carefully so that my circulation may act well, for remember, a good grooming is equivalent to half a feed.

The War Horse *at the Virginia Historical Society* (Author's photo)

Clean my legs and feet and keep them in good condition, for they are the most important parts of my body.

Pet me sometimes, be always gentle with me so that I may serve you the more gladly and learn to love you.

Do not jerk on the reins; do not whip me when I am going uphill.

Do not force me out of the regular gait or you will not have my strength when you want it.

Never strike, beat, or kick me when I do not understand what you mean, but give me a chance to understand you. Watch me, and if I fail to do your bidding, see if there is something wrong with my harness or feet.

Do not draw the straps too tight; give me freedom to move my head.

Don't make my load too heavy, and Oh! I pray thee, have me well shod every month.

Examine my teeth when I do not eat; I may have an ulcerated tooth, and that, you know, is very painful.

Do not tie my head in an unnatural position or take away my best defense against flies and mosquitoes by cutting off my tail.

I cannot, alas, tell you when I am thirsty, so give me pure, cold water frequently.

Do all you can to protect me from the sun; and throw a cover over me, not when I am working, but when I am standing in the cold.

I always try to do cheerfully the work you require of me; and day and night I stand for hours patiently waiting for you.

In this war, like any other soldier, I will do my best without hope of any war cross, content to serve my country and you; if need be, I will die calm and dignified on the battlefield.

Therefore, Oh! My Master, treat me in the kindest way, and your God will reward you here and hereafter.

I am not irreverent if I ask this, my prayer, in the name of Him Who was born in a stable.

—Captain De Coudenhove