



The Royal Army Veterinary Corps History

200 years of history

The Army Veterinary Service was founded in 1796 by public demand, outraged that more Army horses were being lost by ignorance and poor farriery than at the hands of the enemy. Parliamentary debate and media attention obliged the Committee of General Officers to take positive action and the Army Veterinary Service was born 'to improve the practice of Farriery in the Corps of Cavalry'.

A Principal, Professor Edward Coleman, was appointed and graduates of the London Veterinary School, of which Coleman was the Head, began to be recruited to the regiments of cavalry. John Shipp was the first veterinary surgeon commissioned into the Army. He joined the 11th Light Dragoons on 25 June 1796, a date now recognised as the Foundation Day of the RAVC - John Shipp Day.

Army Veterinary Service personnel have probably been present at every campaign undertaken by the British Army since. Primarily concerned with horses for the first 150 years the Army Veterinary and Remount Service (amalgamated in 1942) became responsible in 1946 for managing the Army's dog resources.

In the first Gulf War it was an RAVC Veterinary Officer who commanded all water purification plants - yes the veterinary profession covers a wider field than animal care alone - and, in the Falklands, it fell to the RAVC to assist the local government in restoring its animal health regime. For many years in the 1970's, veterinary officers assisted an Arabian State to improve its animal husbandry and establish an ongoing veterinary management system. In Malaya, RAVC dog specialists played a significant role in the training of US military personnel for deployment with dogs in Vietnam.

The Army Veterinary Service was founded at a time when the veterinary profession itself was in its infancy. The London Veterinary School was but two years old and its graduates were, in many ways, on a voyage of discovery, particularly if they took a commission. The conditions encountered by veterinary officers were varied and often previously unknown. Much pioneering work was done by Army veterinary surgeons in the field, where necessity demanded bold action in 'nothing to lose and everything to gain' situations.

Many equine treatments and procedures, the principles of which remain valid today, are attributed to officers of the AVS. The prime purpose of the foundation of the Service was eventually achieved with a vast improvement in farriery but there was an even greater benefit, perhaps not originally perceived by the Committee of General Officers, in the overall veterinary management and care of Army equine resources.

These improvements did not, however, come easily. It took 84 years to establish the fact that the AVS had to be more than an advisory Service. The Principle Veterinary Surgeon, there were only four in all those 84 years, lacked the ability to instruct the colonels of regiments in their duty to care for

their animals and, more importantly, had no authority over the veterinary officers. Until 1871 the colonelcy of a regiment had to be purchased for a considerably large sum of money - £6,000 plus depending on its perceived status - little wonder such commanding officers were autocratic and resented any intrusion by the PVS.

The formation of the Army Veterinary Department in 1880 placed most veterinary officers under the Department's professional direction and the Army Veterinary Service now had some teeth - although not a full set since the veterinary officer remained firmly under the control of the regiment. However, a major step forward was the creation of the Army Veterinary School at Aldershot in 1880. An Artillery School that had been formed two years earlier merged with it and the Army Veterinary School became a major influence, not only in improving the skills and military application of probationary veterinary officers but also in training regimental officers and men in good horse management.

The establishment of this School, the original buildings of which remain in use by the RAVC today, had an immeasurable impact on the care and management of military horses. The whole military perception was progressively changed enabling the Army Veterinary Service to develop positive strategies to ensure that military animals were maintained fit for duty and that the veterinary response to sickness and injury was as effective as possible.

In 1890 a Director-General, Colonel James Lambert, was appointed to head up the Department and, after 94 years of its existence, a serving officer became the professional head of the Army Veterinary Service. The development of the Army Veterinary Service was considerably more rapid post 1890 than in the first 104 years since John Shipp. In 1903 the Army Veterinary Corps was formed to unite all Veterinary Officers, except some with Cavalry, under one badge and also to provide a soldier resource trained to assist and support them in their duties. Until then, lay assistance was provided at the discretion of the regiment.

The AVC was well tested in WWI. There were 2.5 million admissions mainly on the Western Front and 80% of injured animals were treated and returned to duty. An outstanding achievement far exceeding anything previously attained which earned the Corps its Royal prefix on 27th November 1918. The Quartermaster General stated

"The Corps by its initiative and scientific methods has placed military veterinary organisation on a higher plane. The high standard which it has maintained at home and throughout all theatres has resulted in a reduction of animal wastage, an increased mobility of mounted units and a mitigation of animal suffering unapproached in any previous military operation."

The mechanisation of the Land Forces plus the political belief that the 'war to end all wars' would result in lasting peace, led to a serious decline in the post-war size of the RAVC. In 1921 the establishment of the Corps was, nonetheless, confirmed as 772 all ranks, so there was clearly a job to be done, particularly in the Turco-Greek war in 1922 and the Shanghai Defence Force in 1927. The years between 1919 and 1939 were, however, mainly a time of restructuring and consolidation of experience gained in the Great War in management and forward planning.

A large number of veterinary officers served in India, which had an extensive animal establishment. Many of these animals were kept as part of the military food chain but there was extensive use, particularly of mules, in support of mountain artillery and other units operating along the North-west Frontier. Numerous contagious diseases prevailed.

Anthrax, Foot-and-Mouth, Glanders and Rinderpest were but a few of the diseases encountered and it required constant veterinary vigilance, good husbandry practice and the development of vaccines to combat them. Rinderpest was one disease brought under complete control by the Army

Veterinary Service in India. Mallein, the testing agent for Glanders, was developed by the RAVC and produced at the RAVC Laboratory Aldershot until the early 1970s.

The Corps came under War office scrutiny in 1937 and its continuing need in the modern mechanised Army was validated. The report on the Corp's future, which was accepted by the War Office, concluded that

"the RAVC should be preserved in order to conserve the experience of the past against possible future needs and to modify and enlarge this knowledge by study and practice under changing conditions".

The conclusions of the 1937 report were well founded then and continue to be just as sound an argument today.

In 1939 on the outbreak of WWII, the 1st Cavalry Division, with 20,000 animals, was despatched to Palestine and it was 1941 before the Division was mechanised. Having been deployed to Palestine, many animals of the Cavalry Division were used, post 1941, for transport duties. In the UK large numbers of animals that had been acquired in anticipation of major operations in Norway were also used for this purpose. In Italy, India and Burma mules played a major role in support of the ground forces. There was indeed a continuing need for the RAVC and it expanded rapidly to meet it on the outbreak of World War Two. The Corps grew from 190 to nearly 4,500 personnel before hostilities were to end in 1945.

Whilst most personnel were to serve with equines in Italy, the Middle East, India and Burma, it was during WW2 that the Corps developed its interest in the use of dogs for military purposes - this was to ensure its post-war viability. In 1942 the RAVC became responsible for the procurement of dogs for all service agencies, to avoid the duplication that had arisen between the Services in the acquisition of dogs.

A further 49 years were to pass before the duplication of effort in the training of services dogs was to be addressed. RAVC personnel ran the Army Dog Training School which was first located at the Greyhound Racing Association kennels at Potters Bar and, in 1945 as an RAVC unit, moved to Belgium and then to Sennelager in Germany. This unit had a major influence in the provision of Army dogs for many years, procuring and training dogs for deployment in BAOR and also shipping many to RAVC dog units around the world. The Military Working Dog Support Unit RAVC, at Sennelager, continues to provide technical support for all animals on the continent and still occupies those same premises today.

In 1942 the Army Veterinary Department and the Army Remount Department amalgamated and the Army Veterinary and Remount Services became a reality. Similarity in the work of the Veterinary Department and the role fulfilled by the Remount Department had grown over a number of years and this sensible decision was long overdue. When war ended in 1945, the AV&RS was charged with the overall management of Army animal resources.

The RAVC Depot, re-located from Woolwich to Doncaster Racecourse as a wartime measure, needed a new home, Melton Mowbray had the last Army Remount Depot. Extensively used throughout the war as an equine assembly area (at one stage some 8,000 animals were held at Melton Mowbray) it comprised about 300 acres of pasture with much stable accommodation and some veterinary support facilities. Also, on part of the estate, a militia camp (Hoare-Belisha style) had been built in 1939 to provide accommodation for battalions preparing for battle.

In 1946 the RAVC moved out of Doncaster to the Remount Depot. Melton Mowbray became the Corps base, embracing all facets of its responsibility - the Army Dog Training School, Army School of

Equitation, Army School of Farriery, Remount Depot and Army Veterinary Hospital were fitted into existing accommodation with little need for additional construction. The mule isolation lines, built for the influx of imports during the war, were easily converted into kennelling and a large MT shed lent itself as a Forge. The ideal suitability of the Melton estate for such military activities could not have been better achieved by design; the validity of which has been demonstrated by a number of studies throughout the past 20 years.

It was fortunate that the RAVC had developed war-time skills in the training and deployment of dogs, since the post war involvement in equines was to decline rapidly once the assets acquired for war service had themselves been "demobilised". By the early 1950's, except for some continuing requirement for patrol duties, horse transport, pack and recreational purposes, the use of horses was primarily for ceremonial purposes with the Household Cavalry and The King's Troop RHA being the main users. In a number of UK military bases horse drawn transport played an important role in the immediate post-war years.

The years since 1946 have been active for the RAVC with Corps representation in some form in nearly every theatre of operation. Dogs are an invaluable aid to ground troops in jungle warfare as was demonstrated in the Malayan campaign against the Communist terrorists and again in Borneo against the Indonesian invasion. Over open country or in urban areas, in pursuit of intruders or detecting their munition dumps, dogs have been successfully used in Kenya, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Bosnia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Dogs have been more widely used around the world protecting military installations and vital points. Their superior ability to indicate the presence of an intruder, coupled with their agility and speed in chase and apprehension, make dogs a formidable deterrent which is rarely challenged by the ill intentioned. One handler and dog are capable of covering an area that might otherwise require five separate foot patrols and they can also do it more effectively. The well trained dog and handler are a very effective and efficient force multiplier. Little wonder that, with the escalation of international terrorism there has been little abatement in the Corps involvement with Service dogs.

Although the commitment of Corps resources to horses is now limited to support for the ceremonial units, the basic skills of pack transport have been kept alive at Melton Mowbray since 1976 when the last remaining Pack Transport Troop, located in Hong Kong, disbanded. In pursuit of the principles so clearly defined in 1937, the RAVC has a duty to retain the ability to respond quickly to the changing military need in animal deployment.

Although there is unlikely ever be a significantly large requirement for equines in future military operations, there are scenarios where ground conditions, (in situations where stealth is required or helicopters are not available for example), could make pack transport a vital solution to the need. In the liberated Falkland Islands there was, for over a year, an operational need that was best met by pack ponies locally hired and managed by an RAVC SNCO trained in these duties.

For over two hundred years since John Shipp first joined, the Army Veterinary Service has been a positive influence in the development of good practice in the care and use of animals for military purposes. The prime aim in founding the Service in 1796 was to ensure that Service animals were properly cared for in order that their fitness for duty was maximised. That fundamental principle is as good today as it was then and sits well with the present military philosophy of cost effective efficiency, something that the RAVC is well acquainted with.