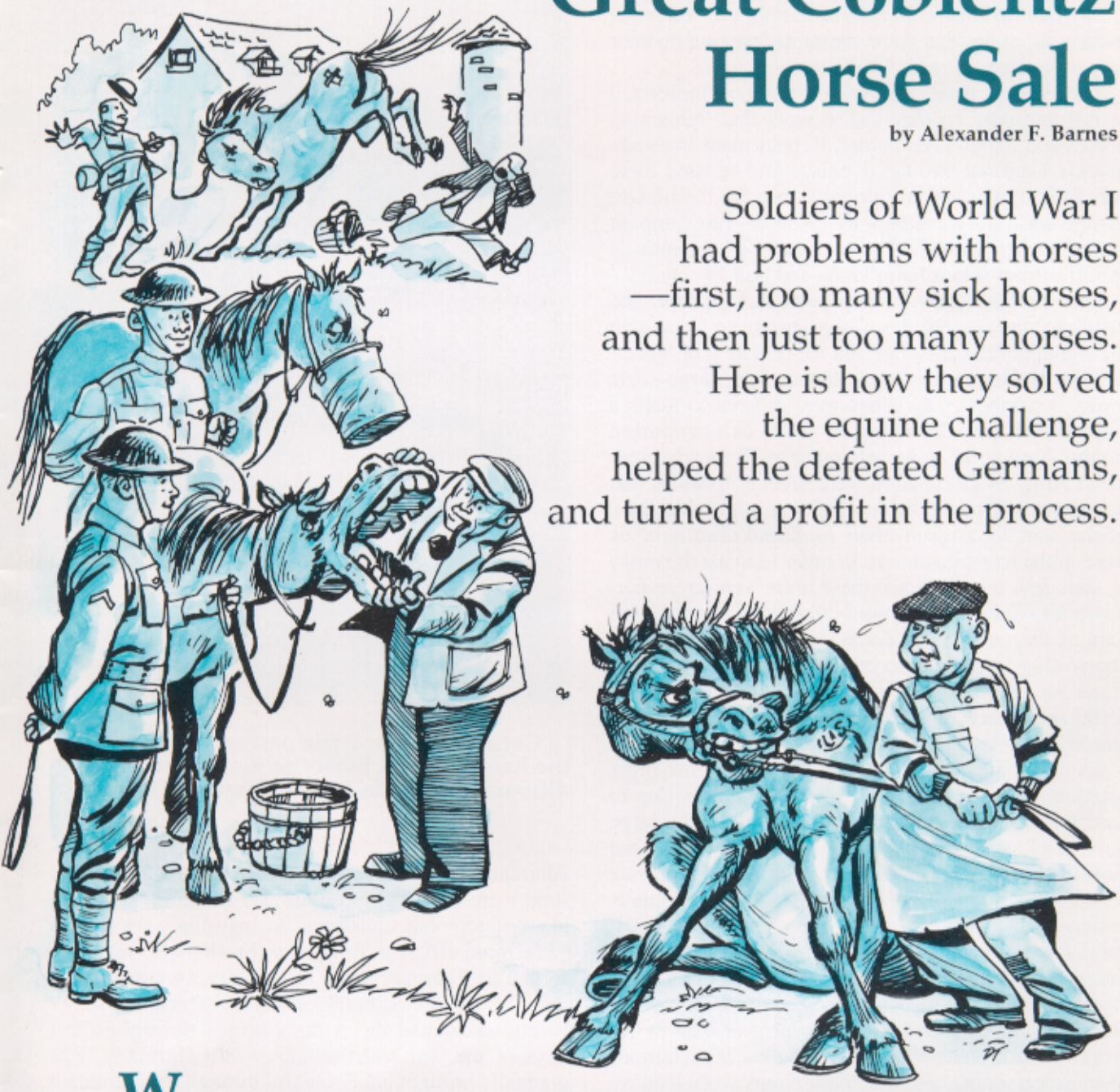
Great Coblentz Horse Sale

by Alexander F. Barnes

Soldiers of World War I had problems with horses —first, too many sick horses, and then just too many horses. Here is how they solved the equine challenge, helped the defeated Germans, and turned a profit in the process.



Whenever horses and the Army are linked in thought, story, or song, the first image that comes to mind is usually one of drawn sabers and galloping cavalry. There was a time in the not-so-distant past, however, when the Army-horse relationship was less glamorous. As recently as World War I (1917-1918)—a period within living memory—the Army called upon horses and mules to haul its guns, food, and wounded. Although the Army was beginning to use motor vehicles, pack and draft animals were still the heart, soul, and feet of logistics support during that war. This is a story of that time, when a soldier's best friend was still his horse, and his ability to manage, employ, and care for that friend was a combination of logistics planning, skill, and good old "American ingenuity."

During the closing months of World War I, the casualty rate for the American Expeditionary Forces' draft animals was nearly as high as that of soldiers in the combat units. The combination of working in all kinds of weather and overwork had reduced many horses from their initial "poor condition" to unusable. The Chief Quartermaster of Third Army reported that

"evacuations of sick and wornout animals were so numerous that the Remount Service and the Veterinary Corps had all they could do to handle the stream of horses and mules that were constantly passing on their way to the rear."

The Army's divisions lacked sufficient motorized or rail transport, so they had to work their remaining horses and mules even harder. Replacement livestock quickly wore out through overuse. And because there was little opportunity to properly care for the horses, mange—a highly contagious disease—ran rampant among the divisions and caused many of the animals to suffer from skin inflammation and boil-like ulcers.

This vicious cycle—of overwork, lack of care, and resulting disease and disability—began to slow with the signing of the armistice and the cessation of hostilities on 11 November 1918. In one last, large-scale move, a number of divisions were ordered to make a road march into Germany to serve as occupation troops. Among the units belonging to the newly organized Army of Occupation were several divisions that had seen some of the hardest fighting in the final days of the war. As a result, their pack and draft animals were in the worst condition. In order to make the move to their new duty stations, these units were given permission to draw animals from other units that were not part of the occupation force. Using this method of "borrowing from Peter to pay Paul," most of the divisions were able to reach their assigned strength of 6,100 animals each, although the condition of the borrowed horses probably left a lot to be desired.

As the occupation of Germany became better organized, a number of remount squadrons were set up to care for the healthy livestock and to nurse the large number of sick animals back to health. The 303d and 314th Remount Squadrons were stationed in Coblentz and the 311th and 322d in Trier. Of the 163 soldiers assigned to each squadron, 4 were quartermaster officers, 1 was a veterinarian, and 1 was a medical officer. What made these units so special was that the officers and enlisted men were selected for the squadrons because they had extensive prewar experience working with horses. Under the skilled ministrations of these personnel, and the less arduous work load required in garrison, many of the ailing horses began to regain their health. Things improved to the point that other horses, impounded from local farmers to support transportation operations, were returned to their owners. However, the Army hedged its bets by requiring that the local burgermeisters be personally responsible for returning the horses in good condition when demanded.

Early in 1919, the 155-millimeter artillery regiments attached to each of the divisions in the occupation force were motorized. This freed from duty an additional 1,000 horses per division, and these horses soon were added to those already in the division stables and remount squadrons. As the supply system became more efficient, forage for the animals improved, so that by February many of the horses were recovering quickly. The outbreak of mange, which had so severely threatened the Army's horses during the last days of the war and the march into Germany, was gradually brought under control through the combined efforts of the Veterinary Corps and the remount squadrons. Several thousand clipping machines also were provided through the supply chain, and the horses were soon clipped and groomed.

German prisoners file past wagons pulled by the hard-working horses of the American Expeditionary Forces, in France, August 1918.

All of these circumstances combined to create a new logistics headache. Having gone through a long period without enough "horsepower" to perform efficiently, the Army now found itself with too many horses. This sudden surplus continued to grow in size, and appetite, as the quartermasters and veterinarians of the remount squadrons brought more animals back to health. Ironi-

cally, horses had become very scarce in Germany during the war; they were so scarce, in fact, that in many cases cows were being used to pull plows and perform draft work around the farms. So the Army found itself in the strange position of owning a very large herd of horses in a country with a desperate need for the animals, both as a source of farm labor and as food.

The obvious solution was to sell the excess animals to German farmers living in the American zone of occupation. Standing in the way, however, was an agreement that called for the sale of any condemned horses to the French Government for 450 francs apiece. But the Army decided that this French option was unacceptable because any attempt to move large numbers of sick animals back into France would be a logistics nightmare and would still not address the problem of what to do with the healthier horses. Turning aside complaints that selling horses to the local German populace was, in effect, aiding the enemy, the Army decided to sell the animals at a series of public auctions in the occupied zone. Each division in the Army of Occupation would be responsible for collecting the animals at central points, where a team of experts from the Inspector General's Office, the Judge Advocate's Office, and the Remount Service would inspect and grade them. The animals could then be placed on the auction block.

It was decided that the first auction would be held in Coblentz on 13 February 1919. The Americans underestimated the interest of the local population, for as soon as the local newspapers carried the auction notice, the remount squadrons in Coblentz were swamped with German civilians. One German presented a credit guarantee from his bank and insisted that he be allowed to buy 600 horses. The Army held firm and refused all offers, but eventually the inquiries became so numerous and so strident that the Chief Remount Officer found it necessary to post a sign outside his door specifying the date, time, and place of the sale.

When the day of the big sale arrived, the U.S. authorities were amazed at the size of the turnout. Over 2,000 Germans pushed through the gates and crowded the auction site. To get the throng of rowdy horse-buyers under control, the troops in the remount squadrons had to be hurriedly called out. When peace was restored, the auction began. Those animals that were unsalvageable and destined only for butcher shops were sold first. Auctioned off in lots of five, these animals went for an average of $280 per lot. Animals in better condition were sold for approximately $360 dollars apiece. The highest price paid for any one horse was $540. When the auction was concluded, over 600 horses had been sold and, most remarkably, the Army had received more money than it had originally paid for the horses. The auction was deemed a great success by all involved.

Thus ended the first great Army of Occupation horse sale. Though there would be other horse and mule auctions, none would reach the frenzied pitch of that first sale in Coblentz, when American soldiers had to be called out in full gear to calm their former enemies so that the Army could conduct a livestock sale. What lessons can we take away from this piece of history? Anyone with military experience has witnessed the same cycle, having too few resources to meet mission requirements at certain times and then too many at other times. How we react to such conditions is perhaps the critical test of our logistics skills and ingenuity. So even after all this time, it would not be out of place to pay a little tribute to the officers and men of the remount squadrons of World War I, who performed their duties so well that the Army was forced to sell off the fruits of their labor—and in so doing, actually made a profit. **ALOG**

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