Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies, Vol 7, Nr 4, 1977. http://scientiamilitaria.journals.ac.za

MILITARY USE OF ANIMALS IN SOUTH AFRICA (1400-1881)

LT McGILL ALEXANDER*

Introduction

The extent to which military operations depended on animals prior to the gradual mechanisation of armed forces which has taken place this century, is seldom fully appreciated by the soldier in a modern army. In South Africa, with its relatively short history profusely studded with belligerent actions ranging from internecine tribal squabbles through riots, rebellions, civil wars, invasions and conquests to international conflicts, animals have played a significant role in the conduct of military affairs. The varied topography and climate of the sub-continent has enabled animals to be utilized under many conditions which have taxed their capabilities in various fields to the utmost.

It is the aim of this paper to examine the part played by animals in South African military annals, primarily in their combat and support roles, with brief reference to their ceremonial role. An effort will be made to assess their usefulness in each role at the time, and compare this to the modern application of animals in the South African Defence Force.

Combat animals

In the field of combat two species have dominated all others, viz the equine and the bovine; the former favoured by the European colonists and the latter by the southward-migrating Black races.

The horse

Horses were first introduced into South Africa by Van Riebeeck and his successors. These were ponies imported to the Cape from Java and were later supplemented by Arabs. Lord Charles Somerset brought out a number of British thoroughbred stallions, and when crossed with the original stock these produced the small, incredibly tough Cape Horse. This new breed was also known as the 'Hantam'.[1]

From the Cape Horse two indegenous breeds were developed as the horse, with the white settlers, spread further east and north. These were the 'Boerperd', which accompanied the Voortrekkers on the Great Trek, and the Basuto Pony.[2]

Responses of the non-white races to horses

The introduction of mounted soldiers into South Africa had an electrifying effect on the non-white races. Together with their use of guns, it was this factor which gave the whites almost constant military superiority over them. Yet, curiously, it was only the Basuto who, in later years, adopted the horse on a large scale, and even then not as a combat animal. Although the Hottentots often stole horses, they do not appear to have generally used them in combat against the whites. G.E. Cory makes mention of the fact that the Bushmen used to ride the horses which they stole to their lairs in the mountains,[3] but it seems unlikely that they subsequently made any further use of them other than to fill their stomachs! The farmers who had been robbed, were initially successful in tracking down the Bushmen because of their own use of horses, but the Bushmen in turn devised a counter tactic by choosing more inaccessible lairs: ' ... retreating to the safety of rocky fastnesses and caves in the mountains where the mounted farmers could not follow them.'[4] This was a classic example of the limitations of the horse in broken terrain, and the superiority of the foot-soldier in such conditions.

---

* Lt McGill Alexander is a B Mil student at the Military Academy, Saldanha.

1. *Summerhay's Encyclopaedia for Horsemen,* (London 1975), p 303—304.
2. *Standard Encyclopaedia of South Africa*, Vol 5, (Cape Town, 1972), p 592.
3. G.E. Cory: *The Rise of South Africa*, (Cape Town, 1965), Vol 2, p 223.
4. C.F.J. Muller (ed): *Five Hundred Years — A History of South Africa*, (Pretoria, 1973), p 73.

That the Bantu tribes used, and in fact coveted, the horses of the whites, is a fact borne out by the gifts of horses sometimes made to Xhosa chiefs by various British governors of the Cape, as well as prominent frontier farmers. Hintza, the great chief of the Eastern Xhosa or Galekas, is an example: 'Hintza used to ride his own horse, a splendid dark bay half-bred English horse, presented to him a year before the war by Piet Uys, a celebrated Dutch Boer, a great hunter and breeder of superior horses.'[5] The reluctance of the Bantu to steal donkeys or mules, yet their readiness to take both cattle and horses further testifies to their high opinion of horses. Yet except for isolated instances (such as when a few Zulus pursued Karel Landman and Hans de Lange and their commando on stolen horses shortly after the Battle of Blood River),[6] the Bantu never used the horse as a martial aide.

It was the Coloured people, of all the non-whites, who most took to mounted warfare. Cory describes the 'gang consisting of ... Bastards and Korannas' which were based on the islands of the Orange River, and who 'invade the Colony in bands of from 50 - 70 well-armed and mounted men.'[7] The Griquas of Adam Kok and Andries Waterboer are further examples of successful mounted soldiers amongst the Coloureds.

The horses of the Trekkers and Boers

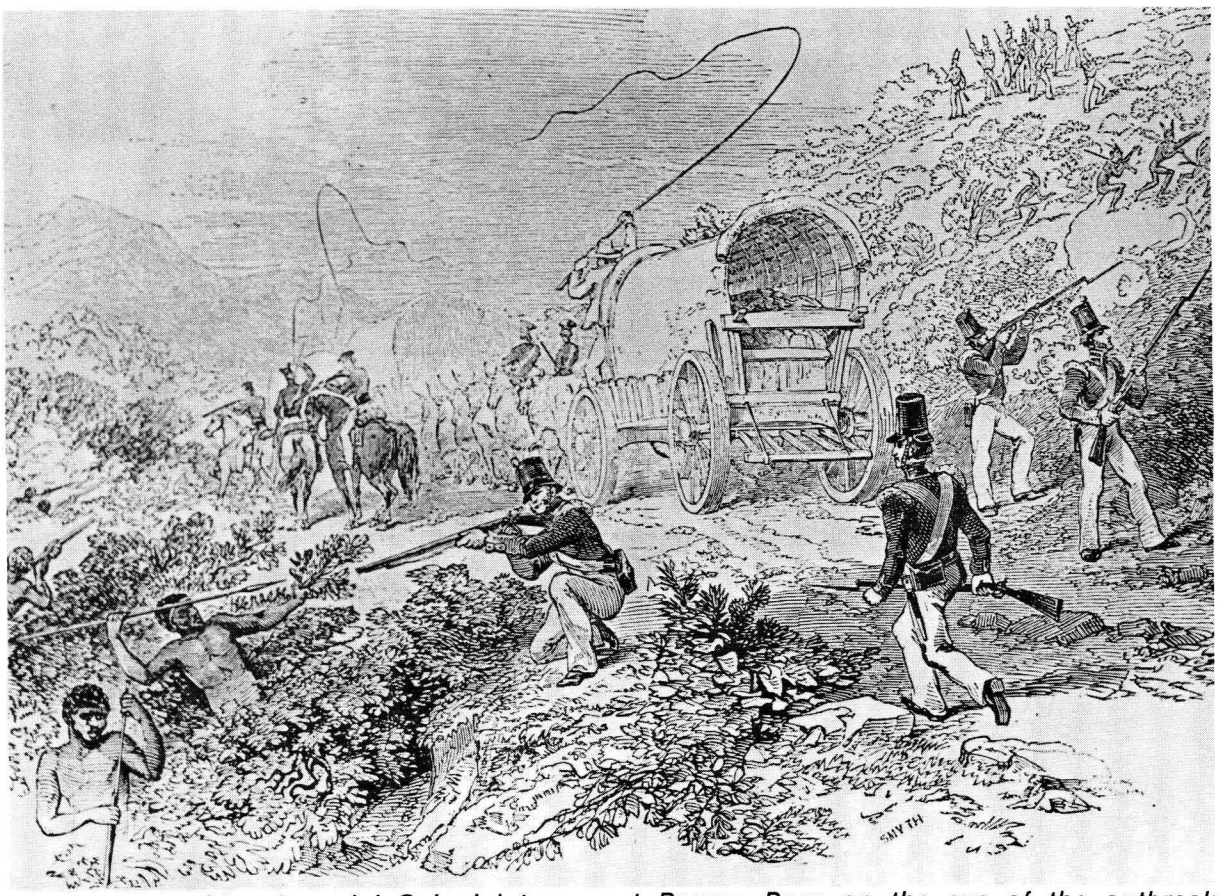
It was the white settlers, however, who made the greatest use of horses. From the beginning, Van Riebeeck saw them as a component of the little settlement's defenses. At the time of his departure, the Company owned forty-three horses at the Cape. It was his hope that their numbers would increase rapidly so that both the Fort and the outposts could be provided with a mounted defensive element. He foresaw a major role for the horse in the future of the country: 'sullende in tijt ende wijle de paerden wel soo overvloedigh worden, dat oock de vrijeluijden daer mede sullen cunnen gedient worden ende bij noot oock tot haer eijgen siffentie selfs als ruiters cunnen te pas comen, item mede by geval van Europische invallen etc.' Van Riebeedk proved to be accurate in his foresight as history has shown — especially where the Boers were concerned.

The Trek-boers took their horses to the interior during the 18th Century, and established a reputation against the foes they met. Back at the Cape, the Dutch forces had superior mounted troops to pit against the British during both the latter's forced occupations in 1795 and 1806, although these mounted troops were not used to proper advantage.

Later, at the time of the Great Trek, horses were to play a vital part in the military aspect of the emigration. These horses are well described by E.A. Walker in his work on the exodus: 'Some well-to-do men in the West and even in the more remote East had fine horses of the strains that a sporting English governor (probably Lord Charles Somerset) had introduced a few years back, but most were content with colonial-bred animals. These were thicker-set and uglier than European horses and could not draw such heavy loads, but they could go without shoeing, climb better, and do with much less fodder. They could cover sixty miles a day if they were not pushed too fast, going a good half of it at the tripple, an easy canter, and be none the worse for it after a good roll. Colonial-bred horses made fine steeds for hunting and for the Boer type of warfare which was not unlike hunting. They would follow steadily, stop at a touch, stand while their riders fired and reloaded, or, if their masters dismounted, let them rest their heavy guns across their backs or necks.'[9]

It was horses that were used whenever a punitive expedition was undertaken against the Ndebele or the Zulus by the Trekkers, and such expeditions were invariably successful largely because of this. The tribes of the interior, according to Professor Muller, a renowned authority on the Great Trek, were subjugated (albeit temporarily) 'by the guns,

5. D.C.F. Moodie: *The History of the Battles and Adventures of the British, the Boers, and the Zulus, in Southern Africa*, (Cape Town, 1888), Vol 1, p 371.
6. T.V. Bulpin: *Natal and the Zulu Country*, (Cape Town, 1972), p 115.
7. G.E. Cory: *op cit*, p 441.
8. A.J.H. van der Walt (et al): *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika*, (Kaapstad, 1951), Deel 1, p 69.
9. E.A. Walker: *The Great Trek*, (London, 1948), p 35—36.



Gaikas ambushing Imperial Colonial troops at Booma Pass on the eve of the outbreak of the Eighth Frontier War, showing the close association between man, horse, and ox in South African military annals. (Sketch from the Mansell Collection).

horses, ox-wagons, better organisation and Calvinistic determination of the Voortrekkers.'[10] We see thus that horses were one of the decisive factors in their successes.

In their subsequent clashes with the British, the Boers built up a reputation for two things, viz marksmanship and horsemanship. In a description of the 'Battle of Zwartkoppies' in 1844, by a British soldier who took part, we read of the Boers that 'they much annoyed and harassed the infantry by dismounting, laying their 'Snelders' (*sic*) across the saddles of their horses, firing, reloading and remounting, to gallop out of range of our Brown Besses.'[11] This gives us a good idea of the way in which Boer tactics, though by no means cavalry-orientated, were formed around their horses.

British mounted soldiers

The tremendous mobility of the Boer horsemen in the warfare of the time was well-recognised by the British Army (though they seem to have done little to counter it), especially during the Transvaal War of Independence in 1881.

The British were, nevertheless, greatly inclined to use horses where they could, and it is worth remembering that three of the most famous 'rides' in the annals of South African military history were made by Englishmen. In 1828 Major Somerset, the son of Lord Charles, 'performed the feat of riding from the heights of the Umtata into Grahamstown in forty-eight hours',[12] in order to muster regular troops and burghers against the 'Fetcani'. This not inconsiderable accomplishment was more than bettered when Colonel (later Sir) Harry Smith, by organising relays of horses ahead of him in 1835 'set out alone to ride to Grahamstown.

10. C.F.J. Muller: *op. cit.*, p 155.
11. D.C.F. Moodie: *op. cit.*, p 597.
12. *Ibid.*, p 222.

He left Cape Town in intense heat and galloped from dawn to dusk ... to complete his epic journey of 600 miles (966 km) in 6 days. He arrived in fine fettle and apparently untired by his herculean feat.'[13]

The third 'ride', that of Dick King when he travelled from the beleaguered Port Natal to Grahamstown in 1842, to obtain relief, was a similar distance to that of Sir Harry Smith's, but although he took longer to ride it, it was perhaps a greater feat because of both the terrain, the absence of organised remounts, and King's state of health. In spite of a two-day delay through illness, Dick King reached Grahamstown, after repeatedly crossing 122 rivers ten days after leaving the besieged camp.[14] Thus the British were by no means unacquainted with horses nor with their usefulness in South Africa.

In their initial clashes with the Xhosa on the Eastern Frontier the British soon learnt from the Boer farmers the value of mounted troops in the bush warfare of that area. Nevertheless, the British were slow to adapt to the local conditions and stature of the horses. D.C.F. Moodie complained the 'Cavalry are very useful against South African natives, especially against people like the Zulus who come out into the open, but it is hardly advisable to take the course so often adopted in sending the cavalry to South Africa, namely that of sending out stalwart dragoons, who, with all their heavy trappings, are much too heavy for the little Cape horses.'[15]

Initially, the British used infantry, together with mounted Burghers against the Xhosa, and it was in 1843 that cavalry proper were sent out to South Africa in the form of the 7th Dragoon Guards, a heavy cavalry regiment. They were 'the first European Cavalry that had ever been seen in the Cape,'[16] and were somewhat taken aback by their new steeds, the cocky little Cape Horses. 'The whole of them were very young and wild, and having the habit of "bucking", they surprised many of our best riders.'[17] No doubt the much-vaunted cavalry caused some amusement at the time!

Horses proved so invaluable in South Africa that in the ensuing years the British Army made increasing use of them, especially in the mounted infantry role. Initially used experimentally, mounted infantry became a feature of the British Army in South Africa. An authoritative source claims: 'The eighties were a time of many small wars, mostly in Africa, North and South, and for the first time mounted Infantry were used to a considerable extent. After various experiments of no long duration they had been re-started in South Africa in 1887 with personnel drawn from each of the Regular Battalions stationed there, and it was not long before they were being regularly trained at Aldershot.'[18] However, a British Army publication of 1881 describes the Imperial Troops stationed in the Transvaal in November 1880 as including two Battalions of Infantry and goes on to say that 'each of the Infantry Battalions has a detachment of Mounted Infantry, about 40 strong, formed of men selected throughout the Battalion.'[19] It seems, then, that mounted infantry were in general use about the time of the Transvaal War of Independence.

Dangers of horse diseases

The inherent danger of disease was a constant unkown factor amongst mounted armies, and could often jeopardise the success of a battle, a campaign or even a war. In South Africa during the 18th and 19th centuries this was an especial danger due to the presence of disease-spreading insects as well as a variable climate and the absence of any efficient veterinary service. The Fifth Frontier War was an example of this factor in action, when, in 1819 'the military prepared for the invasion of Kaffirland. This, (however), was temporarily hampered by an epidemic of horse-sickness.'[20]

---

13. D.E. Rivett-Carnac: *Thus Came the English in 1820*, (Cape Town, 1974), p 96—97.
14. T.V. Bulpin: *op. cit.*, p 134.
15. D.C.F. Moodie: *op. cit.*, p 598.
16. *Ibid.*, p 596.
17. *Ibid.*, p 597.
18. Maj G. Tylden: *Horses and Saddlery — An account of the animals used by the British and Commonwealth Armies from the 17th Century to the Present Day*, (London, 1965), p 24.
19. War Office: Intelligence Branch of the Quartermaster-General's Department, Horse Guards, Précis of Information concerning the Transvaal Territory, London, 1881, p 121.
20. J. Meintjes: *Sandile — The Fall of the Xhosa Nation*, (Cape Town, 1971), p 59.

A monument to man and horse commemorating Dick King's epic ride and emphasising the vital role which the horse has played in our military history.

The British Army towards the end of the last century had a healthy regard for this factor, amd regarded the Transvaal with particular caution as an area of potential death to their horses. The official view was that 'the principal causes of mortality among them are two-fold, the attacks of the Tsetse-fly and the malady known as horse-sickness ... The ravages of this singular insect (the tsetse-fly) are so deadly as to render impossible the employment or existence of horses or cattle werever it exists.'[21] It was these demanding conditions in South Africa that led to local horses, though often considered hacks, to outlast expensive imported horses.

Recurring need for combat horses

It is significant that 'after exhaustive investigations, the Danie Theron Combat School, near Kimberley, came to the conclusion that the horse could still serve a useful military purpose particularly in difficult wooded terrain.'[22] The patrolling and fighting lessons learnt on horseback on the Eastern Frontier a century and a half ago, are today again being applied on an equally densely vegetated and inhospitable border.

In the current terrorist wars in Southern Africa, the Portuguese were the first to recognise the advantages of re-introducing mounted infantry, when their first mounted platoon went into operation in Angola in 1966, and in 1971 they were introduced into Mozambique.[23] Interestingly, most of their horses came from South Africa. The South African Defence Force followed their lead, with such success that the Rhodesian Army followed suit in1974.

21. War Office Précis, p 38.
22. *Soldiers in the Saddle*, South African Digest, September 12, 1975, p 15.
23. K. Swift: *Cavalry in the Bush*, Sunday Times Colour Magazine, April 14, 1974, p 16.

Rhodesians are aiming at breeding their own specialist animal, primarily from the Boerperd and Basotho Pony, and only last year established their mounted infantry as a full-fledged unit with the name 'Grey's Scouts.'[24]

It is clear that the horse has played a vital part in South African military history. Indeed, it has been said that 'op die rug van die perd is die geskiedenis van die wêreld geskrywe.'[25] The horse's consistent speed (reckoned by the South African Defence Force as 8 km per hour for a road patrol and 3,5 km per hour for a veld patrol) and its stamina (50 km per day for a road patrol and 21 km per day for a veld patrol) have made and continue to make it a worthwhile aide in the insurgency wars which South Africa experienced until 1881 as well as that being experienced today.

Cattle as combat animals

At first glance oxen would hardly seem to be suitable for combat purposes; yet they were employed in warfare long before horses in this country. The Hottentots, whose lives revolved largely around their livestock, were recognised as excellent animal trainers, especially as regards their oxen. There have even been exaggerated claims, since discredited, that they kept lion cubs which were trained for use in warfare on reaching adulthood.[26]

Their use of oxen has, however, been confirmed by several sources. Theal says 'they had great skill in training oxen to obey certain calls, as well as to carry burdens, and bulls were taught not only to assist in guarding the herds from robbers and beasts of prey, but to aid in war by charging the enemy on the field of battle. ... (The ox) served instead of a horse for riding purposes being guided by a riem or thong of raw hide attached to a piece of wood passed through the cartilage of his nose.'[27]

The actual tactics used by the Hottentots in battle are probably best described in the work on the early Hottentots edited by I. Schapera: 'They also employ a sort of advance-guard or skirmishers who shelter themselves behind the bodies of huge oxen or savage bulls. These creatures are trained in preliminary sham-fights and sportive encounters, and taught to keep their places in the front-line. They are then led against the enemy on a halter, and the warriors sheltering behind this movable rampart which can be wheeled in any direction hurl their weapons at the foe, as confident in their defence as if protected by a breastwork or parapet.'[28]

Although this is probably a description based on over-reaction to a primitive and simple, though unusual, tactic, and therefore somewhat exaggerated, it is in essence substantiated by Theal in another work in which he records the disastrous Portuguese encounter with the Hottentots in which D'Almeida was killed.[29]

The Bantu

The Bantu, also a bovine-oriented people, were known to occasionally use their oxen in warfare too. In his 'Description of the Bantu' G.M. Theal refers to military displays where 'sometimes oxen were brought to take part in the manoeuvres and to prove the skill of their trainers.'[30] When the Ndebele under Mzilikazi were plundering the Sotho tribes in the present Transvaal, 'tradition tells, for example how the local Phuting tribe sent their army hidden behind a herd of cattle to attack Mzilikazi. If they hoped Mzilikazi would be dazzled by the dust and cattle they were sadly wrong. He was too guileful for that. He sent his youngest regiment down, yelling loudly enough to wake the dead. The cattle turned and stampeded upon their own masters, and there was a sudden end to the matter.'[31]

This seems to indicate that the Bantu perhaps had not achieved the same level of training with their cattle as had the Hottentots, although undoubtedly Mzilikazi threw

---

24. J. Tampin: *Grey's Scouts*, Assegai, Vol 16, No 3, p 23.
25. Kmdt F.C. Potgieter, SM, DFC: *Die Rol van die Perd in Suid-Afrika se Geskiedenis*, Paratus, Vol 24, No 10, p 27.
26. I. Schapera, (et al): *The Early Cape Hottentots*, (Cape Town, 1933), p 41.
27. G.M. Theal: *The Beginning of South African History*, (Cape Town, 1902), p 21.
28. I. Schapera, (et al): *op. cit.*, p 189.
29. G.M. Theal: *Records of South East Africa*, (London 1903), p 301.
30. G.M. Theal: *op. cit.*, (London, 1902), p 86.
31. Bulpin: *Lost Trials of the Transvaal*, (Johannesburg, 1965), p 32.

a vast number of warriors against the cattle, as compared to the relatively diminutive numbers in D'Almeida's punitive force against the Hottentots.

It would seem, however, that the Ndebele did not learn from their own experience in countering these 'cattle-tactics'. For when Potgieter launched his punitive expedition against them in November 1837, a reversal of their encounter with the Phuting occurred at eGabeni. 'There Mzilikazi, with a curious repetition of history, threw into the defence of his capital what he hoped would be a trump card. Through the bush towards the surprised attackers came a strange cavalry of warriors, riding special oxen trained for war and armed with sharpened horns. For a few brief minutes the oxen did some damage, ripping at the stomachs of the trekkers' horses with their horns. Then the tumult of battle, the firing and smell of blood, panicked the beasts. They ran amok. They turned tail for their familiar cattle-kraals, trampling down and goring their own masters in their panic.'[32]

That the Zulu also employed 'cattle-tactics' on occasion is apparent from Gustav Preller's account of the Blaauwkrantz massacre. Basing his description on this account Meintjes says 'the Zulus promptly used an old tactic by stampeding cattle towards them, taking cover behind the beasts, and reaching their victims thus.'[33]

The whites perhaps made the least use of oxen in a combat capacity. An interesting exception was encountered during the 1834—35 Frontier War, where many of the mounted infantrymen's horses succumbed to the rigours of the campaign. This resulted in the following officious conclusion by the British Army: 'Although an ox can be ridden ... his loose skin makes saddling difficult and constant care is needed to keep the load in place. Infantry officers who rode pack oxen in the Kaffir War of 1835 in South Africa did not find them satisfactory.'[34]

Transport and commissariat

Although horses have played a definite transport role in South Africa, they have been overshadowed in this by the ox, partly because of the latter's great strength and ability to stand up to severe conditions, and partly because of the constant demand for riding horses. The speed of an army in South Africa was usually determined by the oxen. 'On a level road twelve oxen might reckon to drag a waggon with the customary load of a short ton at three miles an hour (4,8 km per hour), as fast as a man could conveniently walk, and unless they were overdriven when they were apt to cave in suddenly, they could keep that up for eight hours or so.'[35]

In this respect, the tendency of the whites to be overburdened with supplies contrasts sharply with the practices of the Bantu armies. The Zulu, for instance, resorted to young boys for their transport needs, while oxen served purely as an 'on the hoof' commissariat item. 'A herd of cattle, proportioned to the distance to be traversed, accompanies each regiment.'[36]

In addition to drawing, oxen were also utilised for carrying loads, though, it seems, less satisfactorily. The method still used in Lesotho today was common practice in the last century, where a 'blanket and groundsheet were used as a pad ... with two (grain bags) slung over to take the load. The Basuto bring full loads down from the mountains with rawhide girths tied over the blanket pad. Pack oxen loaded in this manner were tried in 1879 in the Zulu War, but competent drivers were not available and the pack-oxen were not satisfactory.'[37]

Two further animals utilised for military transport were the donkey and the mule. South African donkeys are amongst the world's largest, and used in their capacity as pack animals they were reckoned by the British Army as being able to carry a pack of 130 lbs (58,5 kg) at a pace of 2½ miles per hour (4 km per hour) with 15 miles (24,15 km) as the limit of a day's march.[38] They were therefore unable to maintain the pace of the ox, and had to be entrusted with loads of a lower priority. Their advantage over the ox,

32. *Ibid.*, p 60.
33. J. Meintjes: *The Voortrekkers*, (London, 1975), p 143.
34. G. Tylden: *op. cit.*, p 102.
35. E.A. Walker: *op. cit.*, p 37.
36. R. Furneaux: *The Zulu War*, (London, 1963), p 36.
37. G. Tylden: *op. cit.*, p 104.
38. *Ibid.*, p 92.

however, was their ability to subsist on almost any kind of grazing. In addition, their ability to withstand arid conditions combined with a stronger resistance than most domestic animals to the tsetse fly, made the donkey a useful military asset. The first importation of donkeys into South Africa reputedly took place in 1656.

Transport in the Zulu war

In order to give some idea of the difficulties involved in animal transport for an army in the field, it would be helpful to consider the numbers involved in this aspect of the Zulu War of 1879. Chelmsford's policy of erecting a trail of forts behind his line of advance to guard communications meant that 'all these garrisons had to be supplied and fed. A vast army of 2 500 wagons and carts was engaged on this task. Some 27 000 oxen and 4 500 mules were employed on haulage and mortality among these animals was fantastic. The oxen, particularly, had a cruel time of it, with heavy loads, no roads, steep gradients and poor grazing. The oxen had a negative revenge when they appeared on the menus. Their beef was the principal food, and it was as tough as the thorn trees.'[39]

During this campaign the principal animals employed for draught were oxen, mules and horses. Most Transport Officers accorded the preference to ox transport, regarding it as the mainstay of the transport to be employed in South Africa. They were easily procurable, fed on the pasture of the country, required a smaller number of followers to tend them than other animals, and were well-suited to draw heavy loads at a uniform pace on the bad roads. The weight of body and preserving nature of the animal, made it suitable for draught in muddy roads and heavy spruits.[40]

Communications

In the field of communications, it has been primarily the horse which has served to convey messages over great distances. This is illustrated by Dick King's ride between Port Natal and Grahamstown, already referred to, as well as the numerous examples of carrying news of attacks by the Xhosa on settlers in the Eastern Frontier and of attacks by the Zulu and Ndebele on the Voortrekkers. An example of the last was the Italian woman, Theresa Biglione, member of a trading party with the Voortrekkers, who streaked on horseback from camp to camp to give warning[41] during the Blaauwkrantz Massacre.

There appears to be no record of pigeons being used in South Africa for communication purposes prior to the South African War of 1899—1902, although 'equipped with an inexplicable instinct for homing, pigeons have supplied battlefield communications from the days of Ancient Greece and China to modern times, when more sophisticated systems have failed. '... A pigeon postal service operated in Baghdad from 1174—1258 when an invading Mongol army captured and uncharitably ate the pigeon postmen.'[42] At the time of both the Zulu War and the Transvaal War of Independence pigeons were a recognized form of military communication, for 'when Paris was beleagured in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870—71, pigeons were carried to a safe altitude in balloons before being released with despatches from the capital.'[43] However, the British appear to have stuck to horses in South Africa, as did the Republicans.

Communications were consequently slow by modern standards. Today, the radio seems to have replaced other media, although, perhaps significantly, as recently as the closing stages of the Second World War pigeons were dropped into Holland with paratroopers to serve as a back-up system in case of radio trouble at Arnhem. In the event, this was just as well, as radio failure was one of the major contributing factors to the British defeat in that battle. This could indicate that there is still a place for animals as communications media in the modern military world.

Security

Since their introduction by Van Riebeeck, horses have played a primary role in security in South Africa. At the time of Van

39. T.V. Bulpin: *op. cit.*, (1972), p 278—279.
40. Lt Col G.A. Furse: *Military Transport*, (London, 1882), p 65.
41. J. Meintjes: *op. cit.*, (1975), p 145.
42. 'Pigeon Post', Soldier, Vol 22, No 8, August 1966, p 18.
43. *Ibid.*, p 18.

Riebeeck's departure from the Cape in 1662 a force of 18 mounted men were regularly patrolling the border to guard against Hottentot livestock thieves. On the Eastern Frontier and during the Voortrekker and Republican wars, the horse figures prominently in security duties. However, as their use in this role often coincided with combat duties, this aspect need not be dealt with in further detail.

Dogs, on the other hand, have played a largely unsung part in the security of the peoples of South Africa.

In South Africa, we find that 'dogs were the only domestic animals kept by the Bushmen. They were generally lean, hungry-looking mongrels, half-starved and savage-tempered, but excellent assistants in the chase, for which they were mainly employed.'[44] Theal describing a Bushman going hunting, says 'he grasped his bow and quiver of arrows and with his dog set off in pursuit.'[45] In describing the dogs of the Hottentots he writes: 'He was an ugly creature, his body being shaped like that of a jackal, and the hair on his spine being turned forward (the ancestor of today's Rhodesian Ridgeback) but he was a faithful serviceable animal of his kind.'[46]

The first occasion on which dogs were employed on security duties in a military context was during the First Hottentot War, 1659—1661. Thereafter, they became a regular feature of security in outlying areas, especially on farms, where the Boer mastiff or Boerbull was developed primarily as a guard dog.

It was almost certainly these dogs which accompanied the Voortrekkers into the interior, for in his record of the Blaauwkrantz Massacre, Daniel Bezuidenhout mentions that: 'We had three or four bold, savage dogs, that would tear a leopard to pieces without difficulty. I heard the dogs bark and fight, and thought there was a leopard.'[47] On going to investigate, Bezuidenhout discovered the horrifying truth; he suddenly realized that the dogs were fighting Zulus.

Dogs were always kept firstly as guards, thus falling into the security category. However, their readiness to attack has always placed them close to combat animals — perhaps more so because their offensive actions have actually inflicted wounds and even death on the enemy in themselves, rather than merely carrying the human warrior into battle.

In the South African Defence Force today dogs are trained for use on the borders in tracking, reconnaissance, early warning and mine detecting, but the vast majority are still used for security duties.

Ceremonial animals

Ceremonial occasions, though seldom going down as significant in history, often play a big part in morale. The use of animals in this role can boost the confidence of one's own troops, as well as inspire fear in the enemy. An excellent example of this is the colourful displays which preceeded Retief's death, in which Dingaan attempted to impress and frighten the Trekkers. 'And they were certainly impressed, Retief being enthralled by a kind of ox dance in which nearly 200 oxen, all without horns and of one colour, took part. The animals were decorated with fringes of hide pendant from their foreheads, cheeks and shoulders, and under the throat. The oxen were divided into two's and three's among the warriors who danced in companies with them.'[48]

Doubtless the annual Stellenbosch Fair held so much earlier, had its fair share of ceremonial parades and displays, and the arrival of the British with their flair for ceremony and love of tradition certainly left South Africa with a legacy in the form of military parades of a particular character. The traditional mounted police contingent at the opening of Parliament is a typical example. Another is the use of regimental mascots such as ponies used by some units for ceremonial parades.

---

44. I. Schapera, (et al): *op. cit.*, p 33.
45. G.M. Theal: *op. cit.*, (1902), p 18.
46. *Ibid*, p 21.
47. T.V. Bulpin: *op. cit.*, (1972), p 103.
48. J. Meintjes: *op cit.*, p 124.

Such regimental mascots invariably produced a fair share of amusement and lightheartedness, which is in itself a necessary component for any unit engaged in the usually grisly business of war. A classic example of this is to be found in one of T.V. Bulpin's anecdotes about the British garrison in Pretoria in 1881. 'There was also a certain amount of liquor in the camps and a good fund of humour, as when the Chief Officer of Transport in Pretoria, returning late at night from a scouting manoeuvre, tired and irritable, found the regimental mascot, an obstinate Southdown ram, comfortable in his bed. Forcible attempts at ejection eventually got the animal going — with the officer in front of it, being butted all around the camp.'[49]

Conclusion

With the advent and increasing introduction of mechanisation in the South African Defence Force since the First World War, animals have rapidly slid from prominence, and their present utilisation is generally obscure, not only to the public but also to many members of the South African Defence Force. The impressive appearance and performance of tanks, armoured cars, armoured personnel carriers, infantry combat vehicles, heavy trucks, jet aircraft and other metallic marvels tends to relegate animals to what many consider obsolescence, or at best, an eccentric enigma; no more than traditional residue with no truly significant part to play in a modern army.

Nevertheless, a leading authority on armed forces in Europe says: 'As several ... nations have come to recognise, in certain types of terrain the horse-soldier still enjoys real advantages over opponents with more conventional modern transport and over enemy infiltrators.[50] Perhaps, too, a thought should be spared for the recent awareness of the dependency of mechanised armies on the availability of fuel. What happens when the fuel runs out and the fight has to go on? Why else would the Soviet Army keep the world's largest herd of horses on the Russian steppes, trained to act as both draught and riding animals? Even Russia could be cut off from her fuel sources and lose her reserves in a nuclear attack. But she would still be mobile, albeit not as efficiently as when mechanised.

Indeed the lessons of military history in South Africa, as taught by the lowly animals, are lessons perhaps best not forgotten.

---

49. T.V. Bulpin: *op cit.*, (1965), p 202.
50. O. von Pivka: *The Armies of Europe Today,* (Reading, 1974), p 211.