

War Stories

Season One

Prologue: High Wood

Adin:

There's this thing with wars. They give us a lot of stories.

Angry Staff Officer:

And we mean a lot.

Adin:

All it takes is thinking back to your last family reunion...

Angry Staff Officer:

"—So, there I was..."

Adin:

Happy stories, sad stories, funny stories, and absolutely crushing ones.

Angry Staff Officer:

It's how we connect to something so seemingly inhuman, but also uniquely human.

Adin:

Even with these anecdotes, however small, we gain insight into something larger.

Angry Staff Officer:

We can trace trends, histories, technological developments; all through the medium of storytelling.

Adin:

And from these stories, we can learn about the nature of war, and with that, maybe something about humanity itself.

Angry Staff Officer:

Along the way, we'll meet fascinating people, see incredible places, and examine some turning points in the history of conflict.

Adin:

I'm Adin Dobkin

Angry Staff Officer:

And I'm Angry Staff Officer.

...

"Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story."

- Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried

Adin:

And this, is War Stories.

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Adin:

Firstly, a quick aside. Thanks all for joining us on our show launch. In this season, we're talking about armor and armor tactics in warfare.

Angry Staff Officer:

And for all you body armor aficionados out there, we're talking tanks, not suits of armor.



The Aubriot-Gabet Fortress

Adin:

But isn't body armor sort of like a tank, just smaller and for people?

Angry Staff Officer:

See, that's exactly the kind of thing we're going to be talking about in these episodes: where did armor come from, how did it develop, and so on.

Adin:

And to do that, we're going to be talking about a lot more than tanks.

Angry Staff Officer:

We're spanning a century of warfare — while making quick leaps back in time. As with the other, future seasons of the show, we'll be doing it in a way that focuses on the stories of those who were there at key points in its development.

Adin:

You can basically think of us as your war time machine. Hey, but does this make me Bill or Ted?

Angry Staff Officer:

I'm just going to ignore that. In any case, we hope you stay tuned and enjoy the series.

Adin:

So I got to thinking the other day, when did we decide on...tanks? I mean, it's an imposing machine to just drop on the battlefield at some point in a war. Pretty much going to blow anything that comes up against it out of the water in those early days, right?

...



Little Willie Early Tank Prototype
[\(video tour\)](#)

Angry Staff Officer:

Like what wooden stakes were to dracula, tanks were to some unfortunate European army in the early 20th century?

Adin:

Something like that.

Angry Staff Officer:

Well sure, but dracula also managed to do pretty well for himself before he was on the wrong side of a gardening utensil.

Adin:

So that must mean tanks were a reaction to something pretty potent.

Angry Staff Officer:

Let's put it this way: the firearm hits Europe at a time when the Americas are still this sort of this vague, unmapped territory, everyone is dying from weird diseases, and Spain is the dominant world power. It's nothing short of a revolution in warfare

Adin:

And probably something even more. Now you don't have to be inches away from an opponent, staring him in the face, while you're trying to kill him

Angry Staff Officer:

Totally. As time goes on, they get more lethal.

Adin:

But still, for two centuries, we're really only talking about firing three rounds per minute, tops, right?

Angry Staff Officer:

Yep.

Adin:

Doesn't sound like a fun Call of Duty experience.

Angry Staff Officer:

And a lot can happen when you're reloading. Like, what if something comes at you fast?

Adin:

Like...running fast?

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An account of hand-to-hand, combat from a German World War I veteran:

"For a moment I felt the fear of death and in a fraction of a second I realised that he was after my life exactly as I was after his. I was quicker than he was. I tossed his rifle away and I ran my bayonet through his chest He fell, put his hand on the place were I had hit him and then I thrust again. Blood came out of his mouth and he died.

I felt physically ill. I nearly vomited. My knees were shaking and I was quite frankly ashamed of myself. My comrades, I was a corporal there then, were absolutely undisturbed by what had happened. One of them boasted that he had killed a poilu with the butt of his rifle, another one had strangled a captain, a French captain.

A third one had hit somebody over the head with his spade and they were ordinary men like me. One of them was a tram conductor, another one a commercial traveller, two were students, the rest were farm workers, ordinary people who never would have thought to do any harm to anyone.

- Stefan Westmann

Angry Staff Officer:

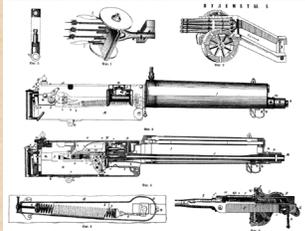
Like horse fast. But make that lots of horses, with angry dudes, with sabers. Makes for a bad day. But something happens in the second half of the 19th century that changes everything.

Adin:

We unlock that next CoD rifle class.

Angry Staff Officer:

In a big way. Repeating rifles give grunts the capability to fire 10-15 rounds per minute. And then some enterprising souls realize they can take it a step further: fully automatic fire. Three centuries of how wars are fought suddenly come to a screeching halt.



Early illustration of the Maxim Gun

Adin:

Yeah, the bayonet charge, massed volley firing in formation...those just become giant targets, don't they?

Angry Staff Officer:

Yep.

Adin:

You'd think everyone would stop for a second and go, "whoa, maybe this whole war thing isn't the best move anymore."

Angry Staff Officer:

Remember how the atomic bomb was supposed to end all war because it was so destructive? They said the same thing about the machine gun. They called it the "peace-preserver" in ads.

Adin:

Hang on, I've got this British jingle stuck in my head...

Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not.

But what happens when everyone has them?

Angry Staff Officer:

You get a World War. More casualties than most can fathom. A front that troops only refer to as "the meat grinder."

Hilaire Belloc, the author of the jingle, was one of the more prolific writers in Western Europe during the early 20th century. He frequently turned to satire in everything from his poems for children to his travel writing.

Despite the title being The Modern Traveller, the book this jingle is pulled from is not a travel book at all, but rather Belloc's satire on colonialism.

The full text of the work can be found online [here](#).

Adin:

But if that meat is bottled up and can shoot back

Angry Staff Officer:

That makes it a lot harder for you to grind it, yeah.

Adin:

Sounds something like a pressure cooker.

Angry Staff Officer:

Without a release.

Adin:

When does it hit capacity?

Angry Staff Officer:

Well, it's hard to pin down a specific point, but our closest approximate is High Wood.

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Adin:

Longueval is a small town in Northern France. I suppose it's not even technically a town, it's a commune, but that's besides the point.

High Wood, or in French Bois des Fourcaux, is only 75 acres of land, but was of great strategic importance to the surrounding area during the fighting of World War I. Unlike some other, more populated parts of the region, the land was not rehabilitated in any way after the end of hostilities. Though plants have eventually regrown on the land, unexploded shells, weapons, and the approximately 8,000 bodies of those who fell in the wood have laid there ever since.

In any case, if you found yourself in Longueval and wanted to explore some of the surrounding area, you could head north on one of the few roads out of town, D 107. The drive isn't a particularly exciting one as you leave, just farmland on both sides of the highway, but about three or four minutes down the road, you'd come upon a strange little wooded area off on your right hand side.

The wood is the peak of the surrounding area, it's how it got its name, but it's shallow enough that you would never realize it unless you were looking really hard.

It hasn't changed much in the past century. Sure, there's a pond in the southeast corner that wasn't created until fall of 1916, but besides that, what did change since then has been since reclaimed by nature.

Of course, there's also what was lost in the woods. And that we can never really even begin to measure.

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The commune of Longueval, a type of French civil township, has a population of only a few hundred people.

By the end of the war, the town was nearly entirely destroyed from the fighting that took place in and around it.

Although it's since been rebuilt, cemeteries and memorials to those who fought in the valley dot the area around the town. Additionally, the soldier of the New Zealand tomb of the unknown was taken from the town.



The High Wood Pond, which is actually a crater created by 6,000 pounds of exploded ammonal mines

Angry Staff Officer:

You see, during the Battle of the Somme, High Wood was the site of some of the most intense fighting of the war. Both sides clashed over its control for months in the latter half of 1916.

One of the battles over its control was the Battle of Bazentin Ridge.

The battle started about two weeks after the eruption of Somme which left 1.3 million casualties in its wake.

Take a minute to think about that number, 1.3 million casualties. In 1916, the population of New York City was about 5 million people. That's akin to wounding or killing over one fifth of everyone in New York over the course of a few weeks. It's the type of thing the mind has trouble even fathoming.

For two weeks, the British pounded the German lines, just trying to get some sort of a breakthrough.

But the Germans held successive lines of defense, a tactic called defense in depth and one the Entente — the nations opposing Germany and its allies — hadn't been anticipating, or if they had, one which they weren't prepared for.

Rather than field one heavily-defended line which could be outflanked or exploited in some other way, Germans deployed their resources across multiple, successive lines. They filled these lines with supporting artillery and machine gun positions — well out of the reach of British artillery. This created space and time where the Germans could counterattack or bring in reserves. Forcing the British to lose momentum and with it leave themselves open.

Adin:

We usually think of trenches like the ones at High Wood as muddy caverns full of lice and rats — which, to be fair, were what they often were. But the Germans had brought something new to the game — concrete. Something so simple it seems unnecessary to even mention, right?

Angry Staff Officer:

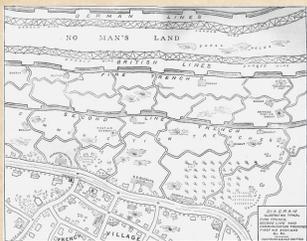
Wrong.

Adin:

Soldiers from Britain, France, and the U.S. remarked over and over at how, well, nice the German trenches were.

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The Battle of the Somme, or the Somme Offensive, would start July 1st, 1916 and end on approximately November 18th of the same year. Most consider it to be the largest and bloodiest battle of the war, though the width of the front was only about 15 miles.



Defense in Depth, showing the multiple lines of trenches and artillery sites



A concrete German dugout position in Flanders

In addition to concrete positions, the Germans strung miles and miles of barbed wire obstacles across the front of their positions. These would be designed to slow attacking troops and make them vulnerable to artillery and machine gun fire.

In this hellscape, why would anyone even think of introducing...horses?

Angry Staff Officer:

And you'd have a legitimate question. But with that said, horses played a long-standing, important role in battles pretty much as far back as we can remember.

Firstly, transportation. Getting there "first-est with the most-est" as Confederate cavalryman Nathan Bedford Forrest reputedly said, is one of the key tenets of warfare.

Next is reconnaissance. Historically, cavalry have always been the eyes and ears of an army. They scout the enemy's lines, routes of march, and prevent the enemy scouts from viewing friendly troop movements.

Last but not least is breakthrough and exploitation. The cavalry charge was both a physical and a psychological weapon. Thousands of horses at full canter or gallop was often enough to break an enemy soldier's spirit. And because of the increased mobility of mounted soldiers, the cavalry could be used to follow up a breakthrough and harry retreating troops, keep them from reforming, and possibly threaten enemy command posts and lines of supply.

Adin:

Now, when we talk about horses in warfare, were these the sort of horses that were pulling plows on the farm one day and then shipped off to battle alongside whoever owned them?

Angry Staff Officer:

Well, the shortest answer is that it depends, but if you're not a military like the Confederacy during the Civil War — who asked their soldiers to bring along their horses — getting mounts for your troops is something you took pretty seriously.

Another thing — horses weren't used by just the cavalry. They were used to haul the artillery's guns, to carry supplies, and as a plan b for messengers when the telephone lines were cut. In a modern war, where aircraft and trucks were used, it seems odd to think about horses being a commonplace sight. But they were. How important were they? Between 1914-1918, the British government purchased over 1 million horses and mules, from the UK, North and South America, Spain, and Portugal.

Remount services, the ones responsible for horses in militaries, aren't typically large enough anymore to be considered separate units under Departments/Ministries of Defense. The U.S. Remount Service is now organized under the Department of Agriculture while the United Kingdom's has since been reorganized to include all veterinary services.



A relief of an Assyrian Cavalryman (~7th Century BCE)

And, unsurprisingly, the breeds of horses used for these various tasks roughly fell under the old adage of “form mirrors function.” While cavalry might’ve used horses that were prized for their agility and coolness under fire, horses used for logistical tasks might be slower but more well-suited for carrying heavy loads.

Some, like the Cleveland Bay, were very nearly wiped out entirely by the war. In addition to your variety of combat-related deaths from gas, machine guns, and artillery fire, exhaustion, falling into artillery shell holes, and regional dangers like the Tsetse Fly in Africa all contributed to serious strains on the stocks of the warring countries.

And it took a toll on more than just the industry. The bond between men and horses was profound. Men often put gas masks on their horses before donning their own. And men grieved for their mounts when they fell as they grieved for their own comrades. This bond was almost ancient. In a truly modern war, cavalry hearkened back to a time when war was almost a gentleman’s occupation.



Two of the British Crown's Cleveland Bay Horses



A WWI Cavalryman and his horse, both in gas masks

Adin:

Of course, this was no such war. Killing was indiscriminate. The wealthy, educated, and privileged fell alongside the poor and destitute. Death democratized the imperial powers.

How, you might ask, did British “tommies” fight and die alongside Indian Sikhs and Muslims? How were French “poilu” accompanied in death by Senegalese fighters?

Angry Staff Officer:

Well, the same way that a unit of Indian lancers from Hyderabad ended up spurring their horses over the congested and shelled-out roads in France on the morning of July 14th.

To even understand the background of High Wood, we’ve got to go back a little bit. Okay, we have to go back a long way. 1790, in fact.

Adin:

Why are we going back all that way?

Angry Staff Officer:

Well, you remember the East India Company.

Adin:

Like that British East India Company, slave trade, rule over India, that East India Company?

Angry Staff Officer:

Indeed.

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Adin:

Okay, I'm still not sure I follow

Angry Staff Officer:

Believe it or not, the actions of the East India Company all the way back in the 18th century played a direct role in World War I.



A British Indian Army cavalryman from its time under the control of the East India Company

Adin:

Why am I only mildly surprised?

Angry Staff Officer:

So way back in the day, the British exercised control of India through, of all things, a mercantile corporation. It was called the East India Company, and in the 18th century it had an army larger than many world powers. Over time, the facade of the East India Company simply went away and the British took direct colonial rule of large swathes of India. As part of this, they created the British Indian Army. In most units, the enlisted men were Indian while the officers were British. Despite a mutiny or two or five, it seemed to work pretty well.

This was nothing new — most nations with colonies had native troops fighting under their flags. France, for example, had many African colonies. Most of these colonial troops aided in keeping regional stability for the home countries, preventing massive drafts of men from being posted in foreign climes. Native troops stayed in their native lands.

Until 1914-1915, that is, when home country armies began to bleed...and bleed and bleed and bleed. All of a sudden, this mass of trained troops from India and Africa started to look really tempting.

"Do not think that this is war. This is not war. It is the ending of the world. This is just such a war as was related in the Mahabharata [the Indian epic] about our forefathers"

- An anonymous Indian soldier writing to his parents

Adin:

Of course, you couldn't just pull thousands of troops from another continent and shove them into the front lines of the most deadly war in human history without repercussions.

How would you keep a Sikh lancer or a Senegalese warrior content with colonialism when they saw the haphazard way commanders treated human life? Maybe, just maybe these weren't the wisest rulers after all...And yet, the Indian troops fought as if it was their war too. The British did a remarkable job accommodating wounded Indian soldiers who were sent back to England for treatment. Segregated wards for men and women, different hospitals for different religions, dietary restrictions, the list went on. The King would even visit to put a human face on empire. Reading the letters of many Indian soldiers, it's clear that these accommodations were appreciated.

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On the front lines, however, things were a little different. It was war, after all. There's not much that could be done to ensure that food was served ritually, or that holy days were observed. Many Indians dealt with this stoically and made exceptions to their dogmas — another casualty of war. It still rankled, though.

Angry Staff Officer:

Also, France was hardly the warm country that these soldiers had left, particularly in the winter. The several Indian infantry divisions on the Western Front suffered from the cold. And poor equipment. And new replacement officers that didn't speak the language. And lots of casualties: over 9,000 killed in action. Morale dropped in the Indian infantry divisions. In fact, morale became so bad that in 1915, they were removed to serve in Africa. But not so the cavalry. The two Indian cavalry divisions remained on the Western Front until 1918.



The terrain men and horses would've traversed in no man's land

Like the British cavalry divisions, the Indian cavalry waited behind the main lines - harboring their strength for a break-out...like a mass of water behind a dam, waiting for the sluice to open, so they could pour through, bugles sounding, sabres shining, lances poised, to cut down the hated Boche.

Adin:

But what chance did cavalry have of doing any of this in the moonscape that was the Somme? Massive shellholes dotted the fields, trenches ran zig-zag across the landscape, wire entanglements could trip horse and rider...and then — of course — there were machine guns. Thousands of rounds chattering away at a mass of seething men and horses.

Seemingly, a recipe for suicide.

Angry Staff Officer:

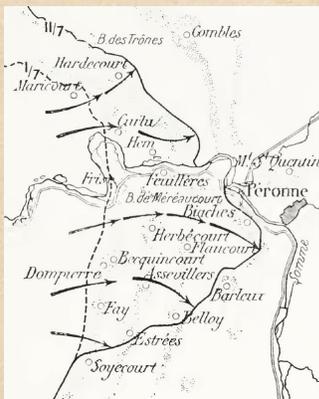
But that's not what happened, is it?

Adin:

Well, that's where we travel back to Longueval. Though this time, in the midst of the Somme offensive.

So come July 14th, the offensive had been raging for exactly two weeks. The first portion of it, the Battle of Albert, had been closed in the days prior with the Entente forces succeeding in gaining control of the first German trench position.

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The first Entente push at Somme from July 1 - 11

At around 3:00am in the morning — early enough so that German machine gun positions couldn't see quite so far outside the wire — the attack on the German's second position began with arguably the first thing you think of when you talk about World War I — artillery.

Five minutes before the first lieutenant blew his trench whistle, the barrage began.

Angry Staff Officer:

What followed was an experience not only unique to those who served in the wars prior to World War I, but by most measures, unique to those conflicts that followed.

With the artillery barrage came an overburdening of the entire sensory experience. In addition to the near continuous crack of high explosive shells which ranged in size from small to hundreds of pounds sometimes coming down with many more than one per second was the concussive force of the blast — itself powerful enough to kill those who strayed too close.



Artillery explosion at Ypres

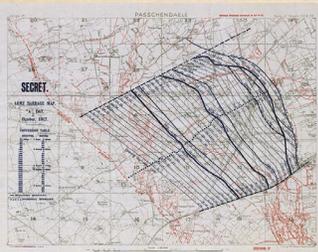
Major Neil Fraser-Tytler, a British officer there on the 14th described the initial hurricane barrage as *“the whole world breaking into gunfire...the darkness lit up by thousands of gun flashes...bursting shells along the northern skyline, followed by a succession of frantic SOS rockets and the glare of burning Hun ammunition dumps.”*

Adin:

Following the initial barrage, entente soldiers came trailing in behind another, this one precisely timed to advance 50 yards in front of the soldiers as they crept along toward the position. They cautiously advanced through no man's land — a move that would've been deemed suicidal at most times of the day until they hit the largely abandoned German trench.

In the following few hours, entente forces gradually captured points of Bazentin Ridge, including Longueval itself. From the captured trenches of Longueval, they would've been able to look northwest towards the relative peak of High Wood, or at least what was left of it.

Even in the relatively short two weeks since the outbreak of the fighting, what was once a densely-wooded 75 acres of land had turned into little more than a plain of varying sized toothpicks thanks to the tons of artillery dropped on it.



Entente creeping artillery barrage planning map

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Initially, General Henry Rawlinson, the commanding general of the forces, sought to quickly advance upon High Wood while it was still abandoned by the Germans in the aftermath of the morning hours. However, in the words of Helmuth von Moltke, “no plan survives contact with the enemy.”

General Henry Rawlinson, the son of a British East India Company Army Officer, politician, and prominent scholar on the Assyrian civilization by the same name, first saw combat in an uprising in Burma.

In the following years, Rawlinson led troops in the Mahdist War and Second Boer War before being named the commanding officer of the 4th Division in France just before the outbreak of WWI in 1914.

Later in his life, Rawlinson would head to India again to lead the British forces there, where he stayed until his death in 1925 in Delhi.

The remaining infantry troops who otherwise would have been available for the capturing of High Wood at its most vulnerable were under orders to stand guard for a potential German counterattack on the positions they'd already captured. This meant that troops away from the front needed to be called forward for the assault — diminishing the opportunity for exploiting the relative calm.

Angry Staff Officer:

It's here where we turn to an unnamed officer of Deccan Horse — one of the British Indian cavalry units held back to exploit key points in the battle — who received news of their order to ride at 6:30pm that day.

“Every now and then [we] came under heavy shell fire shrapnel and high explosive...there is not room for a table cloth on any part of the ground without some part of it touching a shell hole, so you can imagine the regiment galloping over it...barbed-wire — well cut by shell fire — old trenches, dead bodies, and every sort of debris lying in every direction. Words fail me to describe it.”

“That was for about three miles; then full tilt down a steep bank ...into a very famous valley, where the shrapnel got worse, as we were spotted by one of their sausage balloons”

Angry Staff Officer:

So the 20th Deccan Horse and the 7th Dragoons Guards Regiment — themselves almost polar opposites in the British Army, you might say — the one being the colonial troops of Empire and the other the literal household cavalry to the crown — found themselves riding together into the front lines. And there's this really vivid — almost tragic — moment as the cavalry make their way into the front lines, where, as the horsemen are cantering by in neat lines, the artillerymen and infantry stop everything and “madly cheer” for the horsemen, as the Deccan Horse officer describes.

You might be thinking to yourself, “what on earth are sausage balloons”? We know we did.

Sausage balloons, or more accurately the Parseval-Siegsfeld balloon, was so named due to its shape. One of the most important functions of such balloons was to act as an observation platform for artillery which were now advanced enough to shoot beyond line of sight.

Though balloons were not, in and of themselves, difficult targets for pilots to shoot, they were rabidly defended by anti-aircraft guns and other supports. Shooting them down required skilled (and lucky) pilots.

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Adin:

Of course, after the morning hours with their decisive win, it's safe to presume that the soldiers had much to cheer for, at least as much as one can in the midst of a war. But one can't help but wonder if the troops were cheering for something more than the men and their success in battle. Perhaps cheering for something that had been long-lost in the horrors of the Great War. Cheering for what had once been noble.

The cavalymen then leave the relative protection of the British lines, until...

"We were under cover here for half a mile, but suddenly, coming out of the valley, we had to turn sharp to the right up another little valley, and here we came under terrific, but rather inaccurate, machine-gun fire from two directions. I cannot tell you anything about casualties, but it was here my chestnut mare was killed."

Angry Staff Officer:

What's with all these turns?

Adin:

Remember how we talked about the difficulty of mobility in terrain full of shell-holes and trenches? Throughout all of warfare, terrain has dictated where troops can move.

And this is especially true with horses.

The Germans clearly realized this and placed their machine guns where they could get overlapping fields of fire on what we would now refer to as avenues of approach.

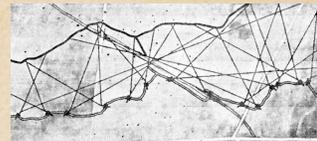
Angry Staff Officer:

Seems like this whole affair would be destined for massacre — horses charging into machine guns.

Adin:

It does seem like that. In fact, to those watching, that's what they thought was well. Take Captain Graham Hutchinson, commanding a British machine gun company, who watched this whole thing unfold.

"As my eyes searched the valley for reinforcements...I decried a squadron of Indian Cavalry, dark faces under glistening helmets, galloping across the valley towards the slope. No troops could have presented a more inspiring sight than these natives of India with lance and sword, tearing in mad cavalcade on the skyline...turning their horses' heads, with shrill cries these masters of horsemanship galloped through a hell of fire, lifting their mounts lightly over yawning shell-holes; turning and twisting through the barrage of great shells; the ranks thinned, not a man escaped."



Overlapping fields of fire across two trenches

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Angry Staff Officer:

And it wasn't just Hutchinson. A British artillery lieutenant recalled the charge 60 years later:

"It was an incredible sight, and unbelievable sight...they simply galloped through all that and horses and men dropping on the ground, with no hope against the machine guns...it was an absolute rout. A magnificent sight. Tragic."

Adin:

So...were they wiped out? The quotes, while assuredly romantic, made it seem like they were pretty much doomed against the machine guns and artillery fire.

Angry Staff Officer:

You do get that sense, right? But...it's one of those weird things about combat. Looks can be deceiving. Men can walk through an artillery barrage unscathed. The beaches at Normandy or the hills of Iwo Jima can get pummeled by naval gunfire and aerial bombing for hours, and yet when ground forces advance, the enemy is still there.

In this case, to the infantry, the cavalry disappearing into a cloud of smoke and explosions seemed to be a lost cause.

Let's go back to that unnamed officer from the Deccan horse. He mentioned they took inaccurate machine gun fire and kept going for another mile up into the valley. Now that's quite a ways, at least to a foot soldier. For a horseman, however, that's not that far. They were moving so quickly that they simply rushed right through the Germans "kill zone." He then goes on to say:

"It was now about 7:30 in the evening, and there were twenty-four aeroplanes hovering over us, and one monoplane came down to about 200 feet and fired his machine guns on the Huns just over us - going round and round- the finest sight I have ever seen."

Adin: Wait, what? Airplanes? Supporting horse cavalry?

Angry Staff Officer:

Yeah, this, to me, is one of the finest anachronisms in this whole affair. According to the logbook of Lieutenant T.L.W. Stallibras, 3 Squadron, RFC, he and his gunner were flying an artillery observation when they spotted Germans hiding in a sunken road and in a cornfield, who were getting ready to give the cavalry a really bad day. He flew circles around the Germans as his gunner unleashed on them. Not only that, but they did an aerial sketch of the German positions and dropped it off to both the cavalry and British artillery.

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It's likely that the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) plane flying overhead was one of the Royal Aircraft Factory R.E.8s that had replaced the older B.E.2 variety.

In addition to a pilot, the R.E.8s had a rear-facing gunner who commanded two .303 Lewis machine guns. The planes could reach 103 mph when going full speed. Though in this story the observer in the craft used paper to inform the troops of German positions, they'd more frequently use Morse code and a camera to detail movements of the enemy.



Royal Aircraft Factory R.E.8

Adin:

So...what we're seeing here is a combined arms operation? Close air support of cavalry operations with intelligence provided to artillery?

Angry Staff Officer:

That's exactly what it was, although it certainly wasn't planned that way. Luck really does have a say in the outcome of a battle.

These horsemen have now carved their way about a mile and half across no-man's land and into the German line, and with some CAS, are sitting right in the middle of the enemy.

That Deccan horse officer said "We stuck with sword and lance about forty of them — a glorious sight!"

Adin:

It reminds me of the account of another British cavalryman when he was interviewed in 1985 about a cavalry charge against the Turks in 1917:

"Sword: slash - slash - slash, see? Then someone appears, sword over the horse's head, dig in, out again - then that one appears over there, you simply reverse it, twist your wrist and slice at him! - and then that side! And of course, everybody's doing the same thing, you see, so you have to be careful you're not wounding your next door neighbor!"

Angry Staff Officer:

That's pretty horrific.

Adin:

Exactly. As if all the new stuff World War I brought wasn't enough — gas, high explosives, machine guns — it still managed to encapsulate all the old horrors of war, too.

Now that the cavalry had broken through and have a foothold — and taken some prisoners, to boot — they have to hold what they've won. The Germans, of course, try to rush in reinforcements, but they're cut to bits by British machine guns who spot their movement.

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While the 7th Guards consolidate their positions, Deccan Horse is still out in front as advance guards and, as you can imagine, are catching hell from every German in the area. A German machine gun from the direction of Longueval starts firing on them. But it gets a nasty surprise when the cavalry unload their own machine gun detachment and put the Germans out of action.

Angry Staff Officer:

But this isn't what cavalry is really used for, and so the Deccan Horse is pulled back alongside the 7th as night falls. Nick of time, too, as German artillery starts pummeling High Wood, searching for these audacious horsemen who dared break their lines.

So now there are two cavalry regiments, hunkered down around what's left of High Wood, in the middle of the night. And remarkably, they are never found by German artillery fire. Remarkable, because how the hell do you hide thousands of horses and men?

Adin:

Carefully, I guess. That luck of war — it held again. It was a really misty morning on July 15th. During the night, a German three-man patrol stumbled on a listening post of the Deccan horse. One German was killed, two captured, and the cavalry remained hidden.

But if we go back, to the original intent of this whole thing: it was to seize the ground around High Wood and keep the initiative. The cavalry is given the order to withdraw that morning around 3:30 AM, which they do, into the mist, not losing a horse or man, at least apart from those who'd been lost in the charge, which is nonetheless remarkable.

But what about the overall object of the battle?

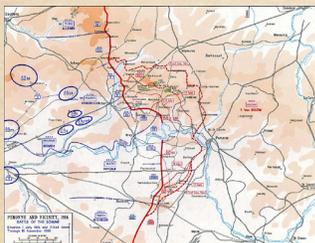
The thing is, this story makes up only a tiny portion of the Battle of Bazentin Ridge, which makes up only a small portion of the Battle of the Somme. As to the overall object of the battle — the cavalry did what it was supposed to do — and did it well. The battle itself raged on for days — but eventually halted in the rain and mud and disappointment of the Somme. In the end, hundreds of thousands of casualties later, nothing had really changed.

Angry Staff Officer:

The entente forces eventually quote unquote won the Somme Offensive if all you're looking for is a binary measure of success, but that belies the true nature of the battles.



The main road of Longueval on July 14th



Progress of the Entente forces over the course of the Somme Offensive

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More accurately, entente forces gained about six miles of ground over the course of the four-and-one-half month long offensive. A distance probably not so dissimilar from the ride made by Deccan Horse on the evening of July 14th. These few miles came at a cost of millions of casualties — 102 coming from Deccan Horse itself on that fateful day.

It does make the question a bit more difficult to answer, doesn't it?

Adin:

And this is all in spite of the fact that as a measure of technological achievement, the Battle of the Somme was a revolutionary moment in warfare. Infantry, airplanes, and artillery all coming together for little to nothing.

Of course, the advances made in the Great War hardly stopped there. If they did, we wouldn't be here launching our series on armor.

Angry Staff Officer:

You see, while Deccan Horse might've been successful in their charge on High Wood that day, it was at the cost of 130 mounts and 102 men.

For those who lost their mounts — sometimes almost immediately after beginning the charge — they were little more than the least effective of infantrymen. This is combined with the fact that you obviously didn't choose when your mount got shot — even if you were in the middle of no man's land.

Adin:

Cavalry units who found themselves in other parts of the war faced the same circumstances. There was always going to be artillery. There was always going to be trench warfare. And there was always going to be the machine gunner waiting to shoot their horse out from under them.

If you're a commanding officer considering your options for an offensive, the advantages of cavalry in this environment are pretty slim.

Angry Staff Officer:

But that's not to say a useful alternative to horses was immediately apparent. Something, anything had to fill in the gap they left.

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The powers that be found something that just might be able to fill it in armor. Of course, there was much work to be done to get it battlefield ready. Doing so would require combining multiple existing technologies to create a platform that could traverse the cratered landscape, take on machine gun nests, and live to fight another day at the end of it. And, of course, officers who could effectively lead units of such frankenstein creations.

Fortunately, one was found in a young captain by the name of George Patton.

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Adin:

War Stories is written by Angry Staff Officer and me, Adin Dobkin. I also produce the show. You can find us on Twitter at [@WarStoriesCast](#). Staffer and I can be found at [@pptsapper](#) and [@AdinDobkin](#) respectively. We're also on Facebook and Instagram all of which can be found on our website at www.warstoriescast.com.

If you enjoyed this episode and the more that'll come in season one, I have a couple requests for you. Firstly, please send it to a friend, work colleague, or family member whom you think would enjoy it. As we're just launching, a big part of what goes into our day-to-day efforts is making sure that it's hitting the right ears. Second, if you're looking to do even more, there's a couple ways you can do so. One is rating us [on iTunes](#). It's how we get outside our current networks and find more people like yourself who might love war stories, but haven't yet heard about us.

We're also running a Patreon campaign for War Stories. Patrons of the show get some cool perks like episode transcripts with more primary sources and research than what we can hope to fit into 45 minutes, extended cut episodes where we talk about what went into making the show, surprises we learned about while writing it, and more. You can find us there at www.patreon.com/warstories.

Until next time, thanks for listening.

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