The Importance of the Horse and Mule During the American Civil War

By: Childs F. Burden

I was asked in 2010 to give a talk for the National Sporting Library on the importance of the horse and the mule in the American Civil War. It was an especially appropriate subject as the Sporting Library has a vast collection of literature and sporting art that focuses on fox hunting, polo, and horse racing of all types. Perhaps, most of all, it was an especially appropriate subject because in front of the museum stands a wonderfully powerful sculpture called “The War Horse.”

Photo by Childs F. Burden. Close up of horse in front of the National Sporting Library, Middleburg, Va.

Tessa Pullan’s sculpture of that exhausted cavalry horse has become the iconic symbol of the National Sporting Library and for good reason. It makes the visitor pause and reflect upon how much we owe to our equine friends. The horse and mule have provided vital transportation over the years, and they have been put to work hauling, clearing and plowing the land that ultimately produced the agricultural goods and wealth that allowed our country to expand and prosper. Without question, the noble horse and

mule stand quietly in the shadows of our national history, and we rarely stop to reflect that without them we would have been at a decided disadvantage.

That pitiful cavalry horse at the National Sporting Library stands emaciated, totally exhausted and seemingly unable to move further. It is shown with all of a cavalryman's equipment including an empty scabbard symbolizing the loss of his trooper. Mr. Paul Mellon commissioned Tessa Pullan to create this work of art after having read Mr. Robert O'Neill's authoritative work, *The Cavalry Battles of Aldie, Middleburg and Upperville*, which was published in 1992. These three bloody actions occurred along the Ashby's Gap Turnpike, modern day Route 50, in June of 1863 just two weeks before the Battle of Gettysburg. Mr. Mellon asked Ms. Pullan to create a war horse in that pitiful pose because he felt that the cavalry horse should be properly honored for the service it rendered during the Civil War. He had research done to come up with an estimate of the equine losses resulting from those four years of dreadful conflict. That estimate is detailed on the base of the sculpture which reads, "In Memory of the 1.5 Million Horses and Mules that Were Killed, Wounded or Died of Disease in the Confederate and Union Armies in the Civil War."

More recent research has estimated a far higher number – perhaps as many as two million horses and mules. In reality, the actual number will never really be known simply because the high casualty rate for these equines occurred as such a rapid pace that accurate numbers were impossible to track. Either number is an astounding figure.

The American Civil War was fought over four years from 1861 until 1865. During that period our country lost over 620,000 lives at a time when our total population numbered just thirty million people. Put another way, three horses or mules went down for every one of those soldiers who died in that war.

Let us stop and reflect upon that startling thought. The 1860 census reports that the northern states held about 3.4 million horses as opposed to the 1.7 million held in the southern states. This makes sense since the north had a population of about twenty million while the south had a population of about ten million. The border states of Kentucky and Missouri held another 800,000 horses which would have likely found service on both sides of the conflict.

The situation was reversed when it comes to the stock of mules. The northern states held about 100,000 mules while the south held 800,000. Kentucky and Missouri held an additional 200,000 which again makes sense since the south was primarily an agrarian based society. So altogether there were approximately six million horses and one million mules available for potential war service. Some additional animals likely came in from the territories, but it is reasonable to assume that about 60% of the total would have been put into service for the war effort. Certainly, more than 60% would have been recruited in the south. This would mean that the available stock for war service was over four million horses and mules.

Whether we use the 1.5 million or the 2.0 million number for the horses and mules that failed to survive those four years, the total is truly horrendous. Nearly half of the equine stock put into service during the war did not survive!

Now take a moment to reflect upon how extremely important these animals were to the war effort. An army is nothing more than a large force of men who have been trained to fight and to kill and who expect to be adequately fed and clothed. The Civil War was fought on two fronts – the eastern and western theaters. Within each theater of war there were several armies on each side maneuvering and confronting their counterparts. One of the largest of these numerous armies was the Army of the Potomac which fought in the eastern theater for the United States.

To use just one example to highlight the importance of the horse and mule in the war, let's consider the Army of the Potomac as it marched through our area after Antietam in the late fall of 1862. It marched toward Fredericksburg and set up camps at Falmouth which is directly across the Rappahannock River from that city. The army took stock of its strength there and reported 130,000 men present for duty including the support personnel that were required to keep an army properly equipped and fed. The reports do not detail the number of horses or mules present with the army, but we can make a pretty good, educated guess.

After studying the numbers my estimate is that the Army of the Potomac needed about 55,000 horses and mules to keep the army on the move and properly supplied with food, clothing, and ammunition.

An army is a multi- faceted organization which is composed of three main parts. First there is the infantry which is composed of hundreds of Regiments. When a Regiment was first formed it would have been composed of ten companies of about 100 men within each company commanded by two lieutenants and one or two captains. Above company level, the Regiment was commanded by a major, a lieutenant colonel and colonel. These latter three officers had a number of staff officers present, and all would have required a horse - some of them certainly had more than one. Attrition would have worn down the company numbers considerably by late 1862 but a reasonable estimate would be about three hundred and fifty men and officers in each Regiment. These Regiments were each placed into Brigades and each of the Brigades was placed into a Division and each Division was placed into a Corps. In December of 1862, the Army of the Potomac consisted of six Corps with each Corps having three Divisions and each Division having three Brigades consisting of from four to six Regiments. Each command component, Brigade, Division and Corps, had separate officer and staff complements and all would have been mounted. Altogether there were 259 Regimental units camped upon the plains of Falmouth in December of 1862 with nearly 90,000 men under arms and I estimate nearly 4,000 horses were present within these infantry camps.

In order to supply these Regimental units, the army needed wagons – lots of wagons. The army reported over 5,000 wagons and ambulances on hand in December of 1862. Each wagon could haul about one ton of supplies and each wagon would be pulled by teams of either four or six horses or mules.

An interesting fact here is that, in work, each horse and mule required 14 pounds of hay and 12 pounds of grain per day to be kept fit. They would otherwise need 80 pounds of pasturage if the dry goods were not available. Clearly, it would not take long for the demand of pasturage to strip the countryside. So, let's do some math. If I am close on

my estimate of equines present, 55,000 horses and mules needing 26 pounds of daily dry feed comes to over 700 tons of grain and forage – each day!

Seven hundred tons would require about 700 wagons. For a short time after the army arrived at Falmouth, supplies needed to be hauled 25 miles over bad roads from the Potomac River landing called Aquia Creek where there was a huge supply depot. The rail line, the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac, leading from Aquia, had been recently broken up and many of the bridges had been wrecked. Therefore, the army set to work repairing things but before this could be done it was necessary to haul supplies by wagon. So, 700 wagons making a fifty-mile round trip, required over 4,000 animals just to keep the army's equine stock properly fed! This is before the required supplies for the 120,000 men camped at Falmouth could even be considered. In total, the army needed approximately 1,500 tons of supplies per day which means that nearly one-half of the army's daily supplies consisted of feed for its equines! Altogether, I estimate that 30,000 horses and mules would be needed to haul the army's wagons and ambulances. Certainly, more would have been on hand to replace broken down animals as needed.

The second part of the army is the artillery arm, and they required a lot of horses and mules. The Army of the Potomac reported 63 batteries present for duty. A battery is made up from four to six guns, most often six, with each one weighing at least 1200 pounds and each battery requiring a full complement of officers and men, ammunition, and equipment to service the guns. On average, each battery required at least 100 horses to pull the unit and to keep it in action. The cavalry horse artillery batteries required many more horses because most of the artillerymen were also mounted. These cavalry batteries could easily number 160 horses. Each cannon required six horses or mules to move the gun and each gun had one or even two support caissons also requiring six horses or mules and each battery would also have a blacksmith wagon complete with forge and other equipment to manage repairs for the cannons. I estimate that altogether, a total of at least 8,000 horses or mules were needed for this part of the army. Again, a reserve stock would have prudently been available to replace those that fell in this extremely dangerous service.

Extremely dangerous because when artillery units went into action, the teams would swing around and unlimber their guns, often under fire. They would be made to stand in close support so that the guns could be reattached and taken away quickly in case of emergency. In other words, the horses would be where counter battery fire would land. In fact, the opposing force would actually target the animals because if the horses could be shot down, the guns would be immobilized – anchored and ripe for capture. Battle report after battle report gives the grim details of the heavy losses of the poor artillery horses shot down in their traces.

In the Fifth Massachusetts Battery, Captain Charles Phillips wrote:

> "We had hard work changing harnesses as fast as the horses were killed. The way we did this is I would send to the rear and have spare horses brought up and then as soon as a horse is killed, the driver sets to work

> and takes off the harness and puts it on a new horse. This takes some time as the harness is heavy and they usually have to take it to pieces to get it off a dead horse. And when the enemy's infantry gets within rifle range, they can kill the horses as fast as we can change them."

When not in battle, just pulling those heavy guns along soft and often deeply muddied roads brought the faithful animals to their knees. It has been noted that at Gettysburg, the two armies engaged over 75,000 horses over that three-day battle. After the battle over 4,000 lay dead on the field. Most of them were artillery horses. Countless more were likely led away never to recover.

The third section of an army is the cavalry arm. An important difference between the cavalry arm between the two armies was that the Confederate trooper brought his mount (and many brought more than one) from home. The Confederate Army would appraise the value of the trooper's horse and, should that horse fall in battle, the cavalryman would receive reimbursement. It would then be the trooper's responsibility to find another mount, or he would be transferred to the infantry. On the Union side, the men were issued their mounts and were supplied with replacements as was necessary. I follow with some grim examples of how quickly the horses in the cavalry arm were used up in service.

At the Battle of Brandy Station, fought on June 9th, 1863, 18,000 troopers met head-to-head on the plains of Culpeper County. On that bloody field, an estimated 1,400 horses went down in that single day. A week later, when the cavalry again clashed along our Loudoun Valley, another 1,400 horses were estimated as permanent casualties – a number that matched the men who fell there.

During the Overland Campaign, in May of 1864, Philip Sheridan and his cavalry corps were cut loose from the army to move south in an attempt to neutralize JEB Stuart's cavalry force. Sheridan assembled his ten thousand troopers near Spotsylvania and headed out with his whole cavalry corps traveling south toward Richmond on a single road. The men rode in column and that blue column stretched for 13 miles. The cavalry corps came back to the army two weeks later – Stuart was dead, but they came back with 1,000 fewer mounts. Most of the horses had been killed by sheer exhaustion. A trooper from the 8th New York Cavalry described his regiments camp near Warrenton in November of 1862.

> "It is an awful place and the horses are dying. We ride them sometimes 24 hours a day without a mouthful to eat. It seems hard to ride a horse with nothing to feed him but we have to do it."

Charles Francis Adams Jr., the grandson, and the great-grandson of two presidents, was an officer in the 1st Massachusetts Cavalry. His battalion of 70 troopers had been nearly totally destroyed at the Battle of Aldie on June 17th, 1863. Just before that battle he wrote home to Massachusetts in May about the care of his mount.

> "On the march, my horse stays saddled 16 hours a day. His feed is normally 10 pounds of grain per day but on a march it is much less. He gets no hay and only such other food as he can pick up during a halt. The usual water he gets is brook water and it is so muddied by the passage of the column as to be the color of chocolate. Sore backs are our greatest trouble. They get feverish under the saddle and the first day's march swells them. After that first day, the trouble grows and no care can stop it. Imagine a horse with his withers swollen to three times the natural size, and with a volcanic sore running matter down its side and you have a case which every cavalry officer is daily called upon to deal with. Understand that the poor horse still needs to be ridden until he finally lies down in sheer suffering. Then we seize the first horse we come upon and put the dismounted trooper upon his back. The air in Virginia is literally burdened with the stench of dead horses – both Federal and Confederate. How it would astonish you at home with your sleek, well fed animals, to see the weak, gaunt, rough animals, with each rib visible and hip bones starting through the flesh. It would knock the romance right out of you!"

Sidney Davis of the 6th U. S. Cavalry wrote:

> "I can't help but recall those terrible trials our poor horses went through during those historic days of Wilson's 1865 Expedition through Alabama. For two months our (13,000) horses had been under saddle almost constantly both day and night, marching and counter marching and at times going without food until, in their ferocious hunger, they bit at our clothing and ate off each other's manes and tails. "

The Cavalry would be organized into a Corps in early 1863 but in December 1862 it was organized in either Divisions or Brigades and assigned to certain tasks rather as one fighting unit under one commander. It would become a much larger force in 1863 but at Falmouth it probably numbered about 5,000 troopers; however, the fail rate of the horses was so high they likely kept more stock on hand to replace those that were dying. A rough estimate is 8,000 cavalry horses on hand that December. By mid-1863, the United States Army required 500 new horses per day to replenish the losses due to overwork, injury, and death. The average Union Army cavalry horse lasted but four months before being rendered useless for further service.

I conclude with this marvelous quote from Confederate trooper, Luther W. Hopkins. He rode in Company A in the Sixth Virginia Cavalry. He left us his thoughts about a cavalryman's relationship with his mount as he reflected back on how much the valiant horse did in the war – those unspoken heroes that were so steadfast and so honorable and so noble.

> "Ah the horses! – the blacks and the bays, the roans and the grays, the sorrels and the chestnuts that pulled Lee's Army from the Rappahannock to Gettysburg and back, and all the other horses that pulled and tugged at

> the wagons, and at the batteries of artillery; the horses that carried the men, the un-stabled horses and the half-fed horses.
> Let my right hand forget its cunning if I forget to pay proper tribute to those noble animals that suffered so much for their masters.
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> "How often my mind goes back to that horse I saw coming across the field from the front at Bull Run with his sides all dripping with blood. He was a hero, because he had been out "where the fields were shot, sown and bladed thick with steel" and was coming back home to die. The cavalryman and his horse got very close to each other, not only physically, but also heart to heart. They ate together, they slept together, they marched, fought and often died together. While the rider slept, the horse cropped the ground around him and got as close to his rider's body as he could get. The loyal steed would push the trooper's head gently aside with his nose in order to get at the grass beneath it.
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> "By the thousands, men reposed in the fields fast asleep from arduous campaigns with their horses quietly grazing beside them, and nary a cavalier was trod upon or injured by his steed. They were so faithful and unfaltering. When the bugle sounded, they were always ready to respond, for they knew all the bugle calls. If it was saddle up, or the feed call or the water call, they were ready to answer one as to the other. And they were so noble and brave in battle. They seemed to love the sound of the guns. The cavalryman might lie low on the neck of his horse as the missiles of death hissed about him – but the horse never flinched, except when struck. We build monuments for our dead soldiers, for those we know and for the unknown dead. So, with the ultimate sacrifice of our lamented, fallen and honored soldiers upon their noble deaths, is it not also just that we recall our valiant steeds? What would you think of a monument someday, somewhere in Virginia, in honor of Lee's noble horses? What could General Lee have done had all his horses balked in unison? Nothing! Then honor to Lee's horses, which pulled and hauled and died that this might be a very great nation!"

Thank you, Trooper Hopkins, for that outstanding tribute! Also, let us remember an outstanding philanthropist and benefactor of our Loudoun and Fauquier area, Mr. Paul Mellon. He has brought that dream of a monument to honor the horses of the American Civil War into reality. We owe him a great debt of gratitude!

Appendix:

Photo by Childs F. Burden. Long distance shot of horse in front of the National Sporting Library, Middleburg, Va.

In the American Civil War there were sixteen armies on the Federal side that were formed for a brief period of time or for the duration on the conflict. There were twenty - three armies on the Confederate side that were formed for a brief period or for the duration of the conflict. Each one was formed for independence of action but often moved in concert with other armies. Each army varied in manpower, but each army consisted of all three sections that comprise an army – infantry, artillery, and cavalry. The following list is not meant to be a complete roster of the above, but a representative sample of the largest fighting armies employed during the long four years of conflict. Hopefully, having read the need for horses and mules in late 1862 by the Army of the Potomac, one can appreciate how desperately these noble animals were needed by both sides. They were all heroes!

Federal Armies in the Eastern Theater

1. **The Army of the Potomac**: The principal army in the Eastern Theater under the commands George McClellan, Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, and George Meade.
2. **The Army of the Shenandoah**: The army operating in the vicinity of the Shenandoah Valley under the commands of David Hunter, Philip Sheridan, and Horatio Wright.
3. **The Army of Virginia**: the army briefly operating in Virginia to protect Washington during the Peninsula Campaign of 1862 under the command of John Pope.
4. **The Army of the James**: The army operating primarily on the Virginia Peninsula during 1864 and 1865 commanded by Benjamin Butler and Edward Ord.

Federal Armies in the Western Theater

1. **The Army of the Ohio**: The army operating primarily in Kentucky and later in Georgia under the commands of Don Carlos Buell, Ambrose Burnside, John Foster, and John Schofield.
2. **The Army of the Mississippi**: The army briefly operating along the Mississippi River and Mississippi Valley commanded by John Pope, William Rosecrans, and John McClennan.
3. **The Army of the Tennessee**: The most famous army in the Western Theater operating in Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, and the Carolinas commanded by Ulysses Grant, William Sherman, and James McPherson.
4. **The Army of the Cumberland**: the army operating in Tennessee and Georgia under the commands of William Rosecrans and George Thomas.
5. **The Army of Georgia**: the army operating in Georgia during the 1864 “march to the sea” commanded by William Sherman and Henry Slocum.
6. **The Army of the Gulf**: the army operating primarily along the Gulf Coast commanded by Benjamin Butler, Nathanial Banks, and Edward Canby.

Confederate Armies in the Eastern Theater

1. **The Army of Virginia or later Northern Virginia**: The principal army operating in the Eastern Theater commanded by Joseph E. Johnston and Robert E. Lee.
2. **The Army of the Shenandoah**: the army briefly operating in the Valley under the command of Joseph E. Johnston.
3. **The Army of the Potomac**: the army briefly operating outside Washington, D.C. under the command of P.G.T. Beauregard.
4. **The Army of the Valley**: the army operating in the Valley during 1864 under the command of Jubal Early.
5. **The Army of the Peninsula**: the army briefly operating on the Peninsula in 1862 under the command of John Magruder.

Confederate Armies in the Western Theater

1. **The Army of Tennessee**: the principal army operating in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Georgia under the commands of Joseph E. Johnston, Braxton Bragg, John Bell Hood and Alexander Stewart.
2. **The Army of Central Kentucky**: the army fighting in Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Mississippi Valley under the commands of Albert Sydney Johnston, P.G.T. Beauregard, Simon Buckner, and William Hardee.
3. **The Army of Mississippi**: the principal army fighting in the Mississippi Valley under the commands Albert Sydney Johnston, P.G.T. Beauregard, Braxton Bragg, William Hardee, and Leonidas Polk.
4. **The Army of the Trans-Mississippi**: the principal army fighting west of Mississippi under the command of Kirby Smith.
5. **The Army of Missouri**: The army operating in both Missouri and Arkansas under the command of Sterling Price.