

Salisbury Plain in the Great War

At 11pm on 4 August 1914 Britain declared war on Germany and the country began preparing for war, sending the British Expeditionary Force (the BEF) across the Channel to the aid of its Allies. Following the battles of Mons and the Marne, the two sides 'dug in', facing each other across a front which stretched from the English Channel to Switzerland : trench warfare had begun.

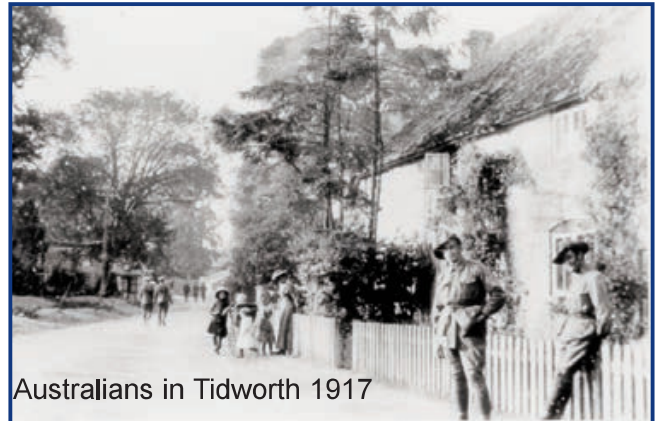
Salisbury Plain had been purchased by the War Office in 1897 for Army manoeuvres and it was to the Plain that the whole world now descended for 'Mission Specific Training', a concept with which today's soldiers are very familiar !

Broadly speaking, New Zealanders were based in Sling Camp in Bulford, Australians near Larkhill and Canadians near the Bustard, close to Rollestone Camp.

The evidence of their presence and their training can still be seen today.



Canadians at The Bustard in 1916



Australians in Tidworth 1917

For example, there are practice trenches on Telegraph Hill between Tidworth and Bulford; there are soldiers' initials, alongside those of their girlfriends back home, carved onto trees during 'down time' between exercises - and a crater near Half Moon Copse in the middle of the Plain reveals

where new assault strategy was worked out, in preparation for the Messines campaign in 1917.

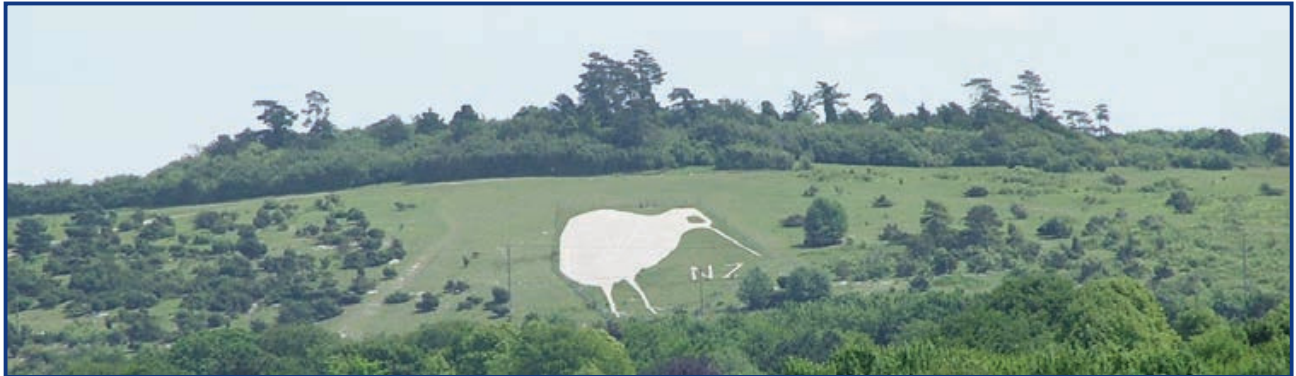
When there were fatal accidents during training, as there sometimes still are today, men were buried in the Tidworth military cemetery and in village cemeteries in Durrington and Tilshead. Lt Col John McCrae, best known as the writer of the poem, "In Flanders Fields", was a Canadian doctor who arrived on Salisbury Plain at the beginning of the War, writing his famous poem in Flanders in mid 1915.

"Winnie", (short for 'Winnipeg'), was a female black bear cub who arrived on Salisbury Plain with Harry Colebourn, a Canadian Army vet. When he deployed to France, he left Winnie at London Zoo, where she was visited by a certain AA Milne and his son, Christopher Robin ...



Harry Colebourn with Winnie on Salisbury Plain

In Bulford, you can still see the railway platform where troops got on to trains for Southampton to embark for France and, the largest monument of all, the giant Kiwi on the hillside which was carved into the chalk above Sling Camp in 1919 by New Zealanders awaiting repatriation after the war was over.



The Warhorse connection ...

WW1 marked a dramatic evolution in armed conflict. At the outbreak of the war, the traditional cavalry charge was still seen as an essential part of military offensive 'shock' tactics, but modern machine guns and artillery fire soon made it clear that the horse's days on the battlefield were numbered. Trench warfare and barbed wire on the Western Front made the use of the cavalry charge virtually impossible, although cavalry was still used in the Middle East when facing a less technologically advanced enemy.

Horses remained essential for logistical support throughout the war and were also used for reconnaissance and carrying messengers. Mechanized vehicles were still in their infancy and not always reliable; horses were better at travelling through deep mud and over rough terrain and were used for pulling heavy guns, transporting weapons and supplies and for carrying the wounded and dying to hospital.

The value of horses, procuring fodder for them and the increasing difficulty of replacing them when they were killed, contributed to the outcome of the war. Around 1,000 were sent across from the USA by ship every day, becoming a target for German naval attack. German spies also attempted to poison horses in America before they started their journey.

Losses on the Western Front were appallingly high - there were more horses killed in the terrible battles of the Somme and Passchendaele than there were men. The Royal Army Veterinary Corps, as well as the RSPCA, were active in treating injured horses.

Back on Salisbury Plain, a new archaeological project will be starting in Larkhill in the Autumn. Called, "Digging Warhorse", the aim is to discover as much information as possible about the horse hospital which is known to have been located in the area.

