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HEADQUARTERS  
EUROPEAN COMMAND  
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF HISTORIAN

MS # D-096

MANUSCRIPT DATA SHEET

- I. Author: 505
- II. Title of Report: The Veterinary Service during the Campaign in  
the East
- III. Assigned: 24 April 1947
- IV. Sources: None. Written from memory.
- A. Personal:
- B. Reference Sources (American, German Documents; Diaries;  
Other Material; etc.):

EUCOM: HD: CHGB: Form CA-2

Restricted Classification  
Removed Per  
Executive Order 10501

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The Veterinary Service during the Campaign in the East

Introduction

After World War I, the question whether to employ horses or motor transportation became a major issue. Rapid technical developments and forward strides in motorization eliminated horses from industry to an ever greater extent. Tractors of all sizes gained popularity, and to some extent replaced horses on large and small farms. Consequently, it was obvious that motorization would play as prominent a role in the German re-armament program after 1935 as it did in that of all other armies.

At the outset of World War II it seemed at first as though in the era of the "Blitzkrieg" the horse would play only a minor part. The dense net of paved highways and roads in the West, plus the high quality of new automotive equipment, gave the motor undisputed precedence. However, the campaign in the East demonstrated that conduct of operations without horses -- riding, draft, or pack horses -- is inconceivable in the mountainous areas of Russia or in the vast spaces with their poor roads, and the unusual climate with its effects on the condition of the soil. The extended duration of the war, the wear and tear on motorized equipment, and the failures in the movement of supply due to industrial breakdowns caused by enemy air raids, meant that horse-drawn transportation gained ever increasing prominence. Our old friend, the horse, regained its prominent status to a considerable extent. Even armored units had to employ horses for movement of artillery and supplies when tanks and prime movers failed because their tracks were too narrow.

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The troops had been spoiled by the speed of motor transportation and had lost the ability to evaluate the maximum capacity of horse-drawn transportation. Frequently the horses were overtaxed, and as a result considerable losses were incurred. With the development of motorized transportation, interest in horses had ceased: real horse experts had become scarce. It was therefore essential that mobilization plans provide for the assignment to horse-drawn units of personnel experienced in riding, driving, harnessing, and caring for horses. This applied especially to the infantry, where the number of horses was increased considerably. At the time of induction, this basic rule should be followed: Technically trained personnel should be assigned to motorized units, and men able to handle horses to horse-drawn units.

In troop units and in command echelons the responsibility for all matters pertaining to horses rested with the veterinary officer. He was the only adviser to his superiors in matters concerning horses and the veterinary service. That required thoroughly-trained active and reserve veterinary officers. Aside from their professional veterinary training, all veterinary officers must be well grounded in the theory and practice of riding, driving, and harnessing of horses. They must be versatile and active, and possess all the qualities of a true horseman.

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Their chief mission, however, must be to take the necessary precautionary measures, so as to safeguard the health of the horses from the outset; this is more important than curing sick horses. The veterinaries must feel responsible for the supervision of the horses' marching capacity, their rate of march, and especially for the maximum load of the vehicles so that troop commanders may be warned in due time, and avoidable casualties of horses may be prevented.

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The number of active veterinary officers totalled roughly 800 before the war. In Germany there were about 10,000 veterinarians. Half of these were on active duty throughout the war.

The German veterinary service proved to be completely satisfactory in all theaters of operations during World War II. It discharged its mission to the greatest degree possible. The winter of 1941 - 42 and the bitter fighting in the Caucasus at times created situations which made demands far beyond human endurance. The handling, feeding, evacuation, and replacement of horses did not break down in spite of the many unavoidable difficulties throughout the war. All participating elements, the veterinary units, the veterinary officers in command positions, and the combat troops quietly did their duty in excellent fashion under the most trying conditions. In addition, the personnel and replacements of the veterinary units were composed almost exclusively of men in the oldest age groups, who often had had no military training and were of poor health. As the war continued, up to 75 percent of these men had to be replaced by "volunteers".\* Their unfamiliarity with the German language increased the difficulties of the veterinary service. Veterinary units -- of course without any volunteers -- were repeatedly committed in combat, sometimes in platoon strength and sometimes as companies, for the defense of their own quarters, protection of railroads and highways, or even at the front. Such commitment required familiarity with weapons and the ability to command small units which called for special training.

Experiences encountered in several fields of the veterinary service are related briefly in subsequent manuscripts, inasmuch as they may be of interest

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\* Volunteer units composed of certain Eastern minorities which were integrated into the German Army.

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not only to military history but also to other agencies.

Purely veterinary matters, such as experiences in diagnosis and therapeutics, methods of treatment, as well as all other factors pertaining to disease should be included in the literature of veterinary medicine.

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