Cats in World War One

Cats do not have a natural or important place in wars in the same way as dogs, horses and some other animals since, as cat owners will know, it is very difficult to get a cat to do what you want.

There is one function that cats have fulfilled since time immemorial, though, and that is as ships’ cats where they have kept the vessels’ stores free from rodents and also acted as mascots and companions to the crew.

They were especially important in wartime, when supplies could be short, and men were far from home for extended periods and welcomed feline companionship.

It is said that the ancient Persians took cats into battle against the Egyptians because they knew it would give them an advantage.

The Egyptians, because of their reverence for cats, would do anything to avoid harming one, so would be reluctant to attack anyone with a cat.

In the 16th century German artillery officer Christopher of Hapsburg came up with a plan to use cats as gas bombs.

The cats, he proposed, would have jars of poison gas attached to their backs (with the openings facing backwards) and be driven amongst enemy troops to spread alarm and poisonous fumes.

His plan was presented to the Council of One and Twenty in Strasbourg, but was never put into use.

During the Crimean War (1854-55) it was reported that some captured Russian soldiers were found to be carrying kitten mascots beneath their coats.

In World War 1, it has been suggested that the British army employed 500,000 cats as gas detectors and ratters in the trenches, although it is not known who counted them.

Soldiers have always felt better for adopting mascots, and many cat mascots have earned their keep by relieving stress - such as one kitten, which was a tank mascot in WW1.
This photograph shows a Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) officer supervising a kitten balancing on a 12-inch gun shell near Arras in France.

The photo was taken in July 1918. Information from the back of the print said that the Germans looked after it when it was found in a devastated part of France.

However, it stalked out of a German dugout and joined the advancing British forces in the Champagne sector of the country, and became an official British mascot.

In November 1918, a canteen supervisor, Mrs Chisholm was pictured with an unnamed cat at Kambara, Egypt, in what was then the Suez Canal Zone.

Pincher was the WW1 mascot of HMS Vindex. He is seen here sitting on the propeller of one of the seaplanes the ship carried.

HMS Vindex was a Royal Navy seaplane carrier during the First World War.

The ship spent the bulk of her career operating the North Sea where she twice unsuccessfully attacked the German Zeppelin base at Tondern and conducted anti-Zeppelin patrols.

One of her Bristol Scout aircraft made the first take-off from an aircraft carrier in late 1915.

Another made the first interception of an airship by a carrier-based aircraft.
In mid-1916, she unsuccessfully attacked the Zeppelin LZ17. *Vindex* was transferred to the Mediterranean in 1918 and was sold back to her original owners in 1920.

Since 1975 the British Royal Navy has banned cats, and indeed all animals, from its ships. It's a far cry from the days of Louis XIV's French Navy in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when it is reported that all French ships were ordered to carry two cats for rodent-control duties.

Cats tend to attach themselves to a territory as much as to people, so were better mascots for a ship's company or an air-force base than they were for an army regiment which was likely to be on the move for much of the time during war. Some ships had more than one cat (and many kittens were born at sea); and ship's cats were able to 'rise through the ranks'.
They became the mascot of a particular part of a ship, such as the engine room or one of the mess-decks, before going on to ultimately becoming the 'official' mascot of the whole vessel.

British Admiralty documents from World War 1 show significant sums paid out for the annual maintenance of cats to keep down rats on board ship.

**HMS Aurora** was a light cruiser launched on 30 September 1913 at Devonport Dockyard. She saw service as part of the Grand Fleet from 1914 to 1915, as leader of the 1st Destroyer Flotilla. She carried among her armaments four of the 4-inch quick-fire guns shown in the photo from September 1914.

The kitten, name unknown, is sitting on the gun's shell tray.

In 1915, Aurora was assigned as leader of the 10th Destroyer flotilla of the Harwich Force, guarding the eastern approaches to the English Channel.

Her experienced crew and durability made her a natural choice as a Flagship during many offensive operations throughout the course of the First World War.

She was the first Royal Navy warship in action at Battle of Dogger Bank (1915).

In August 1915 she took part in the sinking of the German raider Meteor. In 1918 she was again reassigned, to the 7th Light Cruiser Squadron of the Grand Fleet and
was one of the ships present at the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet in November 1918.

**HMS Barham** was a battleship of the Royal Navy named after Admiral Charles Middleton, 1st Baron Barham.

She was built at the John Brown shipyards in Clydebank, and launched in 1914.

Like many warships, this 'Dreadnought' battleship boasted both a ship's dog and a ship's cat.

They were apparently friendly enough to have their photo taken together in about 1916.

In 1915, she collided with her sister-ship **HMS Warspite**. In 1916, she was Admiral Hugh Evan-Thomas's flagship of the 5th Battle Squadron temporarily attached to Admiral David Beatty's Battlecruiser Fleet at the Battle of Jutland, where she received five hits and fired 337 shells.

**HMS Chester** took part in the Battle of Jutland in May 1916.

On board were the ship's cat, Hoskyn, and the captain's sheep dog.

The collie was wounded during the action.

After the battle one of the crew embroidered this cushion cover picturing Hoskyn and presented it to Surgeon Lieutenant Brownfield of the ship's medical staff.
HMS Chester was a light cruiser of the Royal Navy. She was originally ordered for the Greek Navy in 1914 and was to be named Lambros Katsonis. The order was placed with Cammell Laird and production continued for the Greek account after the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. In 1915, however, the two cruisers were purchased by the British government.

John Travers Cornwell, VC, Boy, First Class, Royal Navy, was born on 8 January 1900, at Leyton, son of Eli and Alice Cornwell. He was educated at Walton Road School, Manor Park. He wished to be a sailor when he left school, but his parents could not bear the thought of losing him so soon so he bravely turned to the work that lay to his hand, and became a boy on a Brook Bond's tea van. He was also a keen Boy Scout, and held two certificates. When the European War broke out his father promptly joined the Army, and Jack Cornwell was given his chance to join the Navy. He went through preliminary training at Devonport from 27 July, 1915 and became a First Class Boy on HMS Chester for active service in Admiral Beatty’s North Sea Squadron.
A few months after Jack Cornwell joined his ship, Admiral Beatty came to grips with the German High Seas Fleet near Jutland 31st May 1916; he was mortally wounded in action, and died two days later in Grimsby hospital.

He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross [London Gazette, 15 Sept. 1916]:

John Travers Cornwell, Boy (First Class), O.N. J.42563: Mortally wounded early in the action, Boy, First Class, John Travers Cornwell remained standing alone at a most exposed post, quietly awaiting orders, until the end of the action, with the gun's crew dead and wounded around him. His age was under sixteen and half years.

The story of his brave deed was told in the following letter, written to his mother by the Captain of his ship.

I know you would wish to hear of the splendid fortitude and courage shown by your son during the action of 31 May. His devotion to duty was an example for all of us. The wounds which resulted in his death within a short time were received in the first few minutes of the action. He remained steady at his most exposed post at the gun, waiting for orders.

His gun would not bear on the enemy; all but two of the crew of ten were killed or wounded, and he was the only one who was in such an exposed position. But he felt he might be needed, and, indeed, he might have been; so he stayed there, standing and waiting, under heavy fire, with just his own brave heart and God's help to support him. I cannot express to you my admiration of the son you have lost from this world. No other comfort would I attempt to give to the mother of so brave a lad, but to assure her of what he was, and what he did, and what an example he gave, I hope to place in the boys' mess a plate with his name on and the date and the words, 'Faithful unto Death.' I hope that some day you may able to come and see it there. I have not failed to bring his name prominently before my Admiral.

Through one of the stupid blunders which are inseparable from officialdom he had been buried in what was no better than a pauper's grave.

No sooner was the truth known of the lad's last hours of life and the manner of his death than public opinion demanded a befitting re-interment.

Accordingly the body was exhumed, and there was an impressive funeral in Manor Park Cemetery.

His father, Private Eli Cornwell, Royal Defence Corps, died on 25 October 1916, age 64, and was buried in the same grave. His step brother, Private Arthur Frederick Cornwell, London Regiment, died on 29 August 1918, age 30.
His Majesty's Australian Transport (HMAT) Demosthenes was a WW1 troopship, formerly the White Star liner of that name. The photograph on the left shows members of the Australian Army 15th Battalion leaving Australia for Britain on the ship on 20 December 1916. The third soldier from the left at the front is holding a cat (enlargement above right).

The HMAT A64 Demosthenes weighed 11,223 tons with an average cruise speed of 15 knots or 27.78 kmph.

It was owned by G Thompson & Co Ltd, London, and leased by the Commonwealth until 16 March 1917.

HMAS Encounter was a protected cruiser of the Challenger class operated by the Royal Navy (RN) and Royal Australian Navy (RAN). She was built by HM Dockyard Devonport and completed at the end of 1905. She transferred into the Australian Navy in 1912. Her ship's cat, name unknown, is seen here sitting in the muzzle of one of the ship's 6-inch guns.
Encounter spent the first six years of her career operating with the RN's Australia Squadron, before being transferred to the newly formed Royal Australian Navy. During World War 1, the cruiser became the first ship of the RAN to fire in anger when she bombarded Toma Ridge.

Encounter operated in the New Guinea, Fiji-Samoa, and Malaya areas until 1916, when she returned to Australian waters.

The ship spent the rest of the war patrolling and escorting convoys around Australia and into the Indian Ocean.

HMS Irresistible was a battleship and the fourth British Royal Navy ship of the same name

This is Togo, posing in the muzzle of a 12-inch gun. Able Seaman William Thomas Clegg, served on the Irresistible between July 1905 and the end of 1906 and, apart from his assigned duties it was his responsibility to look after the ship's mascot, 'Ordinary Sea Cat Togo'.

Togo certainly qualified as a wartime cat, because he remained with the ship until she was sunk by a mine off the Turkish coast during the Dardanelles engagement in 1915. Leading Stoker William Burrows made a heroic attempt to save the cat, but sadly both he and Togo drowned.

Following the outbreak of World War 1, Irresistible, served in the Dardanelles Campaign, in support of the bombardment of the Turkish forts guarding the Dardanelles. On 18 March 1915, she struck a mine, which caused severe damage and killed around 150 of her crew. Without power, she began to drift into the range of
Turkish guns. With attempts to tow her having failed, she was abandoned with most of her crew having been successfully evacuated, and eventually sank.

The caption read, “The Last Moments Of The Irresistible - This impressive photograph, replete with the tragic glory of war, shows the ill-fated Irresistible, after having been shattered by the explosion of a floating mine in the Dardanelles during an attack on the Narrows' Forts on 18 March. After the explosion, the ship, listing heavily, drifted towards the beach, the helpless target of Turkish 6 inch shells. The crew were transferred to the Ocean and the Irresistible foundered in deep water. Subsequently the Ocean struck a mine and sank, but nearly all the crews of both ships were saved.”

King George V, a battleship, sailed at the head of Britain's Grand Fleet to the Battle of Jutland in May 1916.
On board was ship's cat, Jimmy, a large, long-haired, tortoiseshell type who had been adopted by one of the ship's cooks when his former owner, an Australian soldier, had been wounded and was no longer able to look after him. Jimmy suffered severe damage to his left ear when a shell exploded near him on deck and he was hit by a piece of shrapnel. Later he was transferred to HMS Renown, a battle cruiser, in September 1916, where he became ship's mascot and was reportedly usually to be found in the galley. He was later 'decommissioned' and died in 1924 in a Chelsea cats' home.

**HMS Shark** was a Torpedo Boat Destroyer, which was torpedoed and lost at the battle of Jutland. Lyddite was the ship's mascot.

On the afternoon of 31 May 1916, during the Battle of Jutland, Commander Jones in HMS Shark, led a division of destroyers to attack the enemy Battle Cruiser Squadron.

In the course of this attack a shell hit the Shark's bridge, putting the steering gear out of order, and very shortly afterwards another shell disabled the main engines, leaving the vessel helpless. The Commanding Officer of another destroyer, saw the Shark's plight, and came between her and the enemy.

Commander Jones warned him not to run the risk of being almost certainly sunk in trying to help. Though wounded in the leg, Commander Jones went aft to help connect and man the after wheel. Meanwhile the forecastle gun with its crew had been blown away, and the same fate soon afterwards befell the after gun and crew.

Commander Jones then went to the only remaining gun, and personally assisted in keeping it in action.

All this, time the Shark was subjected to very heavy fire from enemy light cruisers and destroyers at short range.

The gun's crew was reduced to three, of whom an Able Seaman was soon badly wounded in the leg. A few minutes later Commander Jones was hit by a shell, which took off his leg above the knee, but he continued to give orders to his gun's crew, while a Chief Stoker improvised a tourniquet round his thigh.

Noticing that the Ensign was not properly hoisted, he gave orders for another to be hoisted. Soon afterwards, seeing that the ship could not survive much longer, and as a German destroyer was closing, he gave orders for the surviving members of the crew to put on lifebelts.

Almost immediately after this order had been given, the Shark was struck by a torpedo and sank. Commander Jones was unfortunately not amongst the few
survivors from the Shark, who were picked up by a neutral vessel in the night.
Lyddite was never found.

HMS Neptune was flagship of the Home Fleet from May 1911 until May 1912 when she was transferred to the 1st Battle Squadron, where she remained until June 1916, just after the Battle of Jutland. She was accidentally struck by SS Needvaal in April 1916 but no serious damage was done. She was present at the Battle of Jutland as part of Admiral Jellicoe’s Battle Fleet. She fired only 48 12 inch (305 mm) shells but is credited with scoring several hits on the German battlecruiser Lützow. Neptune had a handsome black mascot called Side Boy. He featured on one of the ‘lucky black cat’ postcards, popular at the time, which crew members could send home to their loved ones. Perhaps he did bring luck, as the ship survived the war.
Mowler was the mascot of HMS Manica, standing here on a flat surface amongst the rope attachments of the ship’s balloon, part of which is visible behind. The notation on the back says, “Mowler, one of our mascots (of a sort). Regarded as a cat, he was very queer looking, with very big ears and voice to correspond. After a life of tribulation, borne without any patience whatever, he eventually left as for a water ship – perhaps not thinking much of our chances!”
HMS Manica was the first Kite Balloon Ship of the Royal Naval Air Service which saw active service in the Dardanelles Campaign of 1915 directing the fire of the supporting ships at Anzac Cove.

In this poster of the pantomime character Dick Whittington, he is dressed in medieval costume, but also wears an infantryman's backpack and carries a rifle over his right shoulder. He is accompanied by his black cat, shown walking on its hind legs, wearing an army helmet and backpack.

Not only cats were ship's mascots – there were dogs, bears, ferrets, monkeys, goats, etc., but one of the most interesting stories concerned Tirpitz, the pig, who started service life on board the German light cruiser Dresden which was sunk by the Royal Navy on 14 May 1915.

A sailor from HMS Glasgow noticed Tirpitz swimming in the water and after nearly being drowned by the frightened pig, succeeded in rescuing him. Tirpitz served as the mascot of HMS Glasgow for a year and was then transferred to Whale Island Gunnery School, Portsmouth.

That certainly was 'bringing home the bacon', but the story continued…
After his spell of duty at Whale Island Gunnery School, Tirpitz was detached to Cranwell, when it was decided that he had better be auctioned for the British Red Cross. Messrs Knight, Frank and Rutley put him up for sale at the Grosvenor Hotel, Chester, where Tirpitz was knocked down to the Duke of Portland on 11 December 1917 for a round £440. In February 1918, he was re-auctioned in Ayrshire for another £840, again for the Red Cross and The Agricultural Relief Fund.

Having been bought back again by the Duke of Portland, he was auctioned for a third time at the Nottingham Patriotic Fair, raising £505. The total sales realised were £1,785. Tirpitz died in 1919 and his head was stuffed by a Piccadilly firm and, at the Duke’s request, it was accepted by The Imperial War Museum.
HMS Glasgow was a light cruiser, launched on the Clyde at Govan in 1909. On the outbreak of the First World War, she was operating off the coast of South America under Captain John Luce, where she captured the German merchant ship SS Catherina on 16 August 1914. In the South Atlantic on 1 November 1914, she saw action at the Battle of Coronel when, together with the cruisers HMS Good Hope and HMS Monmouth, she engaged the German East Asia Cruiser Squadron, including the new cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau. Having inflicted little damage on the enemy, Glasgow escaped with moderate damage considering that an estimated 600 shells were fired at her, although the other British cruisers were lost with all hands. Next month, in the battle of the Falkland Islands, with the battlecruisers Invincible and Inflexible, the battle with Admiral Von Spee was resumed on more advantageous terms. The victory was convincing with HMS Glasgow helping sink Leipzig. Another German ship, Dresden, escaped this particular battle, only to be later found by the Glasgow and HMS Kent and forced to scuttle after a short battle near Mas a Tierra. Glasgow was assigned to operate in the Mediterranean in 1915, and in 1917 was reassigned to the 8th Light Cruiser Squadron in the Adriatic Sea. In early 1917, Glasgow accompanied HMS Amethyst in patrolling the Brazilian coast for German raiders, such as SMS Möwe. After the war Glasgow served briefly as a stokers’ training ship before being paid off in 1922 and sold for scrapping on 29 April 1927.

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