Preparing for battle

As we mark 100 years since the start of World War One, **Graham Cox** examines the important role of dogs in warfare and the parallels with their work in other spheres.

It was not until Armistice Day, November 11, 1920, that the long journey of an unknown soldier would reach its final end in Westminster Abbey. Over the next five days over a million visitors filed past his grave in what became an overwhelming and cathartic tribute.

The nation's motto at the outset of the Great War on July 28, 1914, had been 'business as usual'. County cricket matches continued until the end of August and it was widely supposed that it would all be over by Christmas. But by that festive period the Western Front stretched from Switzerland to the English Channel and trench warfare was already unremitting. In 1916 the unspeakable carnage of the Somme saw the British Army sustain the worst losses in its history, with 60,000 casualties on the opening day alone. By the time a cessation of hostilities was declared in November 1918, the War Office listed the number of dead or missing, including colonial forces, as 908,371.

Almost everyone born in the 20th century grew up in the shadow of the First World War, and for many of us its legacy remained raw and present. Certainly, it would be hard to overemphasise the way in which the war dominated the European imagination: for the colossal bloodbath and its complex aftermath shaped the character of the century long after the guns fell silent in Flanders. A telling statistic, for instance, is that in 1921 the *Estates Gazette*, looking back on four hectic years of land sales, concluded that one quarter of England must have changed hands.

Dogs in the trenches

Needless to say, dogs played several parts in the conflict: sentry dogs, scouting, messengers, casualty dogs, explosives dogs, ratters or mascot dogs who could be relied on to lift morale in the most desperate of situations. By 1918 it was estimated the Germans had employed 30,000 whilst Britain, France and Belgium had together used over 20,000 and Italy 3,000. The most decorated dog in the war was Sergeant Stubby, a Boston bull terrier, who took part in 17 battles on the Western Front, saving his regiment, the 102nd Infantry, 26th (Yankee) Division, from surprise mustard gas attacks as well as finding and comforting the wounded.

More recently, in 1943, the animal charity PDSA introduced the Dickin medal, which soon came to be characterised as the animals' Victoria Cross. Since then, 65 medals have been awarded to animals in war. A recent posthumous award was made to four-year-old yellow labrador Sasha, a bomb finder who was killed in an RPG attack, along with her handler Corporal Kenneth Rowe, in a Taliban ambush in July 2008 while on patrol from a remote base in the Helmand province of Afghanistan. During her time in Afghanistan, Sasha made 15 confirmed operational finds.

Meeting the exacting demands of shoot day

It's hardly surprising the sport of shooting and the gundog work that is vital to its proper execution should be characterised, from time to time, in images and analogies drawn from the theatre of war. Marshalling beaters to produce a really effective drive can easily seem like a military manoeuvre, and the older generation in particular was understandably more inclined to make such comparisons. I well remember Wilson Stephens, my co-commentator at the CLA Game Fair in the 1980s, often describing the ever-optimistic springer spaniels as being like the SAS or the Paras – the shock troops of the gundog world.

For my part, I routinely use the expression 'battle conditions' to describe the extra demands made by work in the field: work that will on occasion stretch almost to breaking point the link between dog and handler. Basics have to be rock solid if they are to withstand the challenges of a shooting day. Temperament is the bedrock of measured and effective work, and when a dog copes with whatever may come its way, the heaviest of drives for instance, we are inclined to call it 'bomb proof'.

Dogs and traumatic stress disorder

But what of the dogs that serve in actual theatres of war? Are there any lessons from their experiences? Something akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is, it seems, often apparent in dogs who have served in the front line. Military vets have come to use the expression to characterise patterns of troubling behaviour amongst dogs exposed to explosions, gunfire and other combat-related violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. As with humans, different dogs show different symptoms: but the net result is often that the dogs stop doing the task they were trained for.

In one tragic instance in Afghanistan in 2011, this was seemingly taken one stage further. Corporal Liam Tasker, 26, was shot dead by the Taliban and his 22-month-old springer spaniel Theo suffered a fatal seizure shortly afterwards. Theo was later awarded the Dickin medal for his work in bomb and weapon detection.

How to make a young dog 'bomb proof'

The number of working dogs on active duty in the American army has risen from 1,800 in 2001 to nearly 3,000. Most numerous are German Shepherds, followed by Belgian Malinois and labrador retrievers. Dogs reckoned to be affected with PTSD are considered, by Dr Walter Burghardt, who heads the Military Working Dog Hospital at Lackland Air Force Base, invariably to be using some object, vehicle or person as a cue for recalling some violence they have witnessed. It's not always easy, of course, to be sure about the traumatising experience

Corporal Kenneth Rowe and four-year-old bomb sniffer Sasha. They were both shot dead in a Taliban ambush in July 2008 whilst on patrol from a remote base in the Helmand province of Afghanistan and Sasha was subsequently awarded the Dickin Medal for bravery in combat..

Photograph: Julian Simmonds/The Sunday Telegraph

and sometimes simply taking the dog off patrol and giving it lots of exercise, downtime and gentle obedience training can be sufficient to treat them.

More serious cases receive what Burghardt calls 'desensitisation counter-conditioning'. That is a process of exposing the dog at a safe distance to what might have initiated the adverse response and rewarding it if it shows no reaction. Where dogs do not recover quickly they are returned to their home bases for longer-term treatment; and, if they continue to show symptoms after three months, they are usually retired or transferred to other duties.

Gradual progression is the watchword of the strategies at Lackland Air Force Base. And that should be no surprise because, if anything is a precondition for enabling a young gundog to become 'bomb proof', it is a careful and studied process of preparation, which readies the animal for the successive new experiences that make up its education.

When dogs face stress in the field

What if gundogs are over-faced? Do we see PSTD type effects? I believe that on occasion we do: there are instances when dogs appear to be coping with a situation but are, in fact, completely fazed by it to the point of being incapable of doing the task they were trained for. I started thinking about this many years ago after experiencing a long duck drive with much shooting at Ampton, where the dogs, in the latter stages of a Novice Stake, were sat in line along the edge of a creek. There was neither whining nor unsteadiness, but at the conclusion of the drive the dogs seemed incapable of retrieving birds that had fallen with a big splash directly in front of them. Many of the dogs seemed to have been afflicted with a collective incompetence, such that they could hardly do anything, however straightforward.

It's certainly a possibility to be aware of and, if it occurs, its effect will be very similar to confusion: something to be avoided at all costs. Avoidance through preparation should be the aim. And if the experience of war dogs tells us anything, it is that. But it no less surely tells us there are some things for which no amount of preparation can be adequate. And when that happens we must recognise the situation for what it is.