

More Bear Necessities

By retired local vet Richard Huddart MRCVS



In the last issue I wrote about the bronze statue of Wojtek the Soldier Bear in Edinburgh. He was a much-loved hero of the Polish nation from the Second World War. But he wasn't the only bear who became famous

during wartime, or to be commemorated in sculpture form...

This story begins in Britain with the birth of a certain Harry Colebourn, in 1887. He emigrated to Canada as a young man, where he trained and qualified as a Veterinary Surgeon.

When World War One broke out, he enlisted with the Canadian Veterinary Corps in his home city of Winnipeg, the capital of Manitoba. While on his journey through Ontario to join his unit, he came across a hunter on the White River who sold him an orphaned female black bear cub for 20 Canadian dollars, a considerable sum at that time.

When he was sent to England to train on Salisbury Plain, (the now Lieutenant) Colebourn took the cub with him. Now named 'Winniepeg' after his home town, she soon became the mascot of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade.

Harry Colebourn went on to serve in France with distinction, but he had to leave Winnie in the care of London



Zoo. He visited his old friend whenever he came back on leave, but eventually had to bequeath her to the zoo in 1919.

Winnie proved incredibly popular at the zoo, particularly with children. One notable visitor was Mr Alan Alexander Milne. He often took his son, Christopher Robin, along with him. The son was so enchanted that he renamed one of his soft toys (formerly 'Edward') after the friendly, playful bear at the zoo... and the rest is history!

Sadly, wartime stories about bears do not end there.

In 1953, during the Korean War, American paratroopers adopted a small Asian bear cub weighing 1.8kg as their mascot. When they tried to force it into parachuting from an aircraft, however, the poor animal became extremely distressed! Unsurprisingly, he inflicted more serious injuries on his handlers than on the enemy!.

Despite this, he was awarded the Purple Heart for his bravery, though I doubt he appreciated the gesture...

Animals have always been exploited by man for use in warfare – from the tragedy of the millions of horses which have been killed in conflict to the heroic actions of messenger pigeons, detection dogs and even rats - the list goes on.

We can only hope that we give them the care and respect they deserve, just as we did with Winnie and Wojtek.

