

'Writing Horses Into ACW History'

By Gervase Phillips

Review by Rob Morgan

An interesting title for a short article in *War in History* journal, Volume 20 (2), 2013, pp. 160-181. The author, Gervase Phillips, follows on from some earlier ground-breaking work on the role of animals in the South African War 1899-1902. The American Civil War and the horses involved in it were the subject of some well-known *American Historical Review* articles as long ago as 1930, and since this was after all, one of the last great conflicts conducted extensively on horseback, in American if not European history, it's due for reconsideration.

Horses and mules, as Phillips reminds us, don't write letters, diaries or memoirs, but the horse-rider bonds of the ACW spurred (literally!) scores of reminiscences and considerations by cavalrymen and officers. The process of using horses also became refined and competent, and provided decent records for the future historian to use. One work on the Veterinary Services role during the war estimated that 1,200,000 horses and mules died on active service from 1861-65. Incredibly, some Federal units "used-up" six or more horses per trooper in a year! One recorded official comment I found, that of General Stoneman, the Chief of Cavalry in the US Army, referring to Custer's Brigade, and to Custer personally as "great horse-killers," told a stupefying tale.

The article provides some fascinating insights into cavalry and artillery horses. The elite mounted formations of the South often began the war with superb mounts, but mounts which could not survive the rigours of a campaign. The writer deals with the problems of injury, exhaustion and starvation; one great cavalry raid in 1864 was said to have "wore down" the horses which took part and "foundered" many.

He deals with disease, the scourge of the horse lines, and with the packed unhealthy remount sites, where, at least in the Federal army, competent military officers replaced civilian crooks by mid-1863. After that the Cavalry Bureau was able to report that about half the "broken down" horses sent back from the field revived sufficiently enough to return to active duty, and that less than a quarter were destroyed or died.

This is a magnificent article, one worth any ACW wargamer reading, and indeed anyone with a creditable interest in military and equine history. I thoroughly enjoyed it and found that it did indeed "knock the romance" out of cavalry in warfare, as Phillips put it.