

HISTORICAL COLUMN

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ELEPHANTS IN WAR

From very early times elephants have taken part in war. They were not only used to stampede Cavalry and to trample down Infantry, but they were fighting machines, protected by armour, with steel blades fastened to their tusks, and saddled with towers of howdahs containing several men from which missiles of various kinds could be thrown. On occasion the elephants of rival forces would have a *duel à la mort*, the rest of the forces halting to contemplate the contest.

Perhaps the first appearance of elephants in historical battle was at the Battle of Arbela in 331 B.C., when Darius Codomannus marshalled fifteen elephants in his fighting line against Alexander the Great. No mention is made of the part they played on this occasion, but from that time onward their importance was considerable.

In 326 B.C., when Alexander the Great reached the River Jhelum (Hydaspes) he was opposed by King Porus. In the battle which ensued in the immediate neighborhood of Chillianwalla, King Porus, trusting to the terror inspired by his elephants, disposed them to the number of 200 in the front line, a hundred paces apart, his infantry being behind and his cavalry and chariots being on the flanks. Seeing the elephants Alexander decided not to make a frontal attack, but relying on his superiority in cavalry, he made his main attack against the left flank of Porus, one Brigade working to the rear. The result of this was that the Indian Cavalry were driven to shelter behind the elephants. The Macedonian phalanx then advanced and as elephants crashed through it the situation was for a while serious. The Indian troops were, however, gradually hemmed in, the elephants as the battle progressed became unmanageable from their wounds and attacked friend and foe indiscriminately. At last they refused to charge any longer. The Indian troops were defeated with heavy losses, and King Porus, who fought most bravely from a huge elephant until the very end, sought refuge in flight — to be captured shortly after. I have alluded to this battle specially, as it is perhaps the most glorious encounter in which elephants participated. They were certainly not relished by Alexander's troops, for in the complaints by the latter of war weariness, and that they had gone far enough they stated that towards the East there were still more powerful monarchs than Porus whose war elephants were stronger and more numerous than his.

At the battle of Ipsus in Asia Minor in 301 B.C., Seleucus, a greater soldier and one of Alexander's Generals, was said to have used his elephants (480 in number) with great effect against Demetrius. He obtained the elephants and large sums of money from Chandragupta of Indian fame in exchange for territory and the matrimonial alliance of his daughter.

The elephants of Antiochus Soter, a successor to Seleucus, in 280 B.C., caused a mad stampede amongst the Cavalry of the Gauls (said to have numbered 40,000) who had overrun Northern Asia Minor and settled in Phrygia. Antiochus celebrated the victory by a trophy bearing the figure of an elephant. In all probability they were Chandragupta's elephants. I mention this as of interest to India, elephants being long lived animals. They are remounts at 40 and 50 years and perform useful work up to 80 and 100 years.

Later on at the battle of Raphia in Palestine, in 217 B.C., there was an encounter between Indian elephants and Antiochus the Great and African elephants of Ptolemy of Egypt in which the Indian elephants prevailed, although the battle was lost to Antiochus.

The Macedonians at the siege of Megapolis attacked with elephants, but the defenders strewed the ground with long spikes concealed under loose earth, and the huge animals maddened with pain, broke back, killing their own troops.

In the First Punic War, the Carthaginian Army used elephants before Palermo. The Romans struck terror into them by means of flaming arrows and fireworks. They were put to flight, trampled down their own infantry, and the Romans taking the offensive gained a victory.

The Cathaginians were fond of elephants for War purposes. The great Hannibal took 200 to Spain and afterwards 37 of them crossed the Alps with him into Italy (219 B.C.). They were ferried across the River Rhone on rafts specially constructed. What with exposure and attack from the Roman Legions in the Battle of Trebia, only one remained. Hannibal obtained 40 remounts, but only seven remained to take part in his final overthrow on Italian soil.

At the Battle of Zama in Africa four years later, his elephants (80) were defeated by the Romans. Romans, as a rule, disliked encounter with elephants, but on this occasion a fine example of personal combat was set by the

*Extract from "Army Veterinary Service in War, p. 157."
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Roman Commander Scipio, which ended in the destruction of nearly all the elephants.

The Parthians being essentially an Army of light Cavalry had no use for elephants; while under the Sasanian Dynasty of Persia, the Corps of Elephants was the most important of the main Arms of Service.

In 1339 when Timur invaded India, he engaged the Army of Mahmud Nassir-ud-din at Ferozabad near Delhi. The Army of the latter included elephants armed to the teeth. Timur gained a victory by driving a herd of buffaloes with burning faggots attached to their horns amongst the elephants, causing them to stampede, with a resulting discomfiture and defeat of the Indian troops.

At the seige of Arcot in 1752, Chanda Sahib had war elephants with iron plates on their heads, which were trained to butt against the gates and break them down. When fired on they turned tail, and created disaster amongst their own troops.

The foregoing will show that elephants have little merit as fighting machines, and that they even constitute a danger to the side to which they belong.

The last appearance of elephants in battle was in the Afghan War of 1878-80, and they finally disappeared as Field Transport after the Chin-Lushai Operations in 1890. In Afghanistan they were employed in Heavy Batteries, each gun being drawn by two elephants, the total number on the establishment of a Heavy Battery being six. They

performed great service at the Battle of Peiwar Kotal (2nd December 1878) packing four Horse Artillery guns up the steep ascent of the Kotal during the night, leading to the surprise of the enemy. Their immense strength, their silent movements, and aptitude for climbing over rough ground were of especial value for this purpose.

The drawback to elephants in Heavy Artillery is that they are very gun shy, and it was for this reason, and the difficulty of providing them with their enormous rations, that they lost their place as War animals. A big animal of this kind is also a fine mark for the enemy, and when one is knocked out or rendered ineffective, it is relatively a serious loss of animal power to its unit.

Elephants in heavy batteries continued for some fifteen years after the Afghan War, and I recall those of a Battery, and their stable (still in existence) at Jansi, of which I had charge nearly thirty years ago. I remember, too, the old joke against the Veterinary Officer — that when his elephant patient required an enema, application had to be made for the local fire engines.

As transport in the Chin-Lushai Expedition, the 70 animals employed proved most valuable, and performed very excellent work.

The only association the Army of India now has with the elephant is the scale of diet still permitted to be retained in Army Transport Tables. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

Dr. R.G. Thomson is responsible for the "Historical Column" currently being featured in the Canadian Veterinary Journal. Readers are invited to send items, papers, suggestions, pictures, comments, etc., to Dr. Thomson, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island C1A 4P3.