

THE THIRD REICH IN PHOTOS WARHORSES OF KURSK

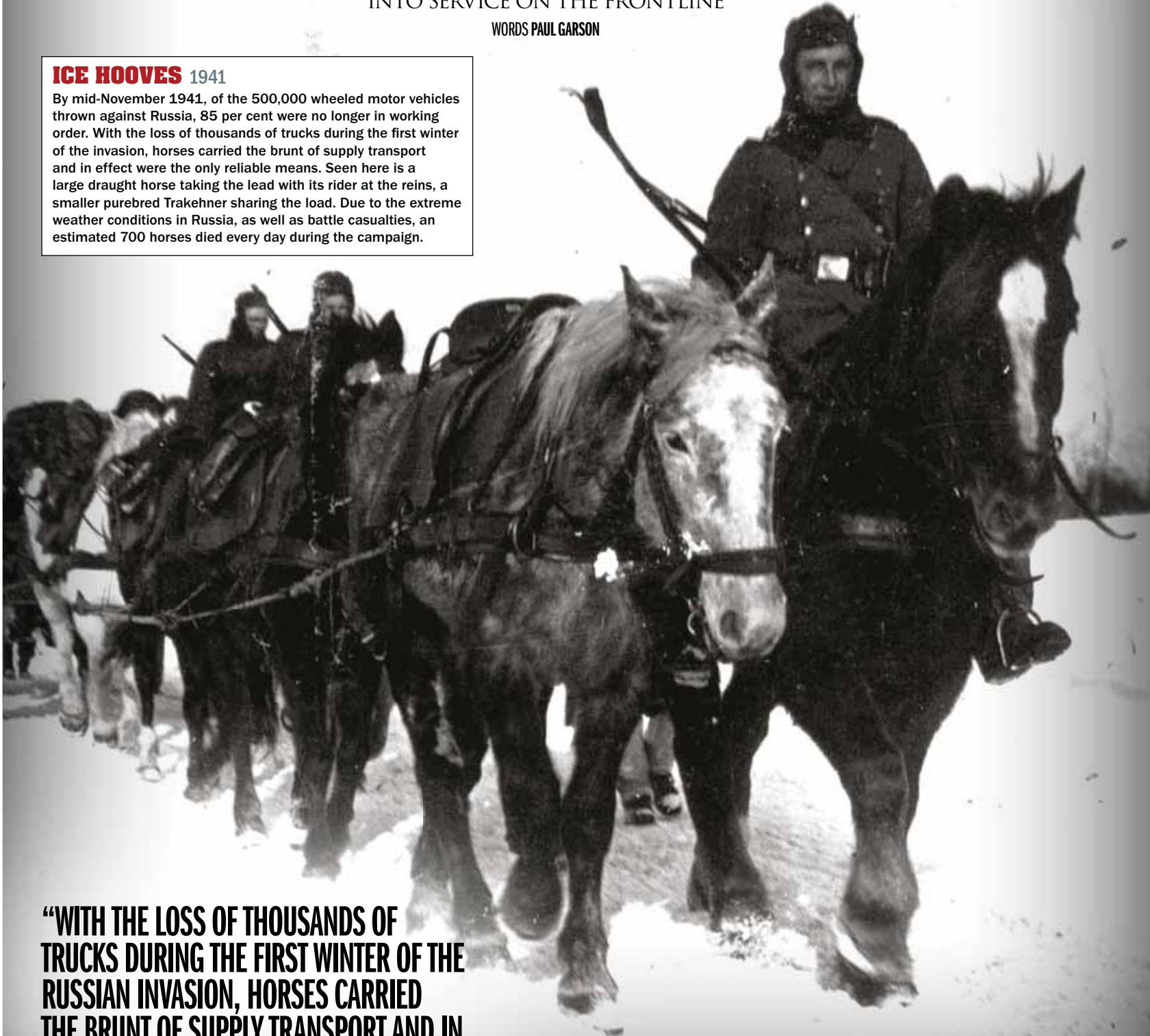


THE CAMPAIGN SAW THOUSANDS OF HORSES AND MULES PRESSED
INTO SERVICE ON THE FRONTLINE

WORDS PAUL GARSON

ICE HOOVES 1941

By mid-November 1941, of the 500,000 wheeled motor vehicles thrown against Russia, 85 per cent were no longer in working order. With the loss of thousands of trucks during the first winter of the invasion, horses carried the brunt of supply transport and in effect were the only reliable means. Seen here is a large draught horse taking the lead with its rider at the reins, a smaller purebred Trakehner sharing the load. Due to the extreme weather conditions in Russia, as well as battle casualties, an estimated 700 horses died every day during the campaign.



“WITH THE LOSS OF THOUSANDS OF TRUCKS DURING THE FIRST WINTER OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION, HORSES CARRIED THE BRUNT OF SUPPLY TRANSPORT AND IN EFFECT WERE THE ONLY RELIABLE MEANS”

Following World War I, the size and equipment of the German military was restricted by the Treaty of Versailles. While motor vehicles intended for the military came under strict control, the treaty allowed for seven infantry divisions and three cavalry divisions consisting of 18 regiments. In effect, the cavalry made up a large part of the German army, with 16,400 of the permitted 100,000 soldiers on horseback.

A great amount of time was afforded to basic rider training – some 3,000 hours. This laid an excellent groundwork for the horse-mounted troops, although as Germany moved towards war, the training time was reduced to an average of one hour per day, riders now focusing on weapons and combat tactics.

Since much of their duties were aimed at reconnaissance, scouting and even assault operations, the horse troopers often endured training regimens requiring 48-97 kilometres (30-60 miles) per day in the saddle, while each horse was tasked with carrying, often at speed, upwards of 115 kilograms (254 pounds) of man and equipment.

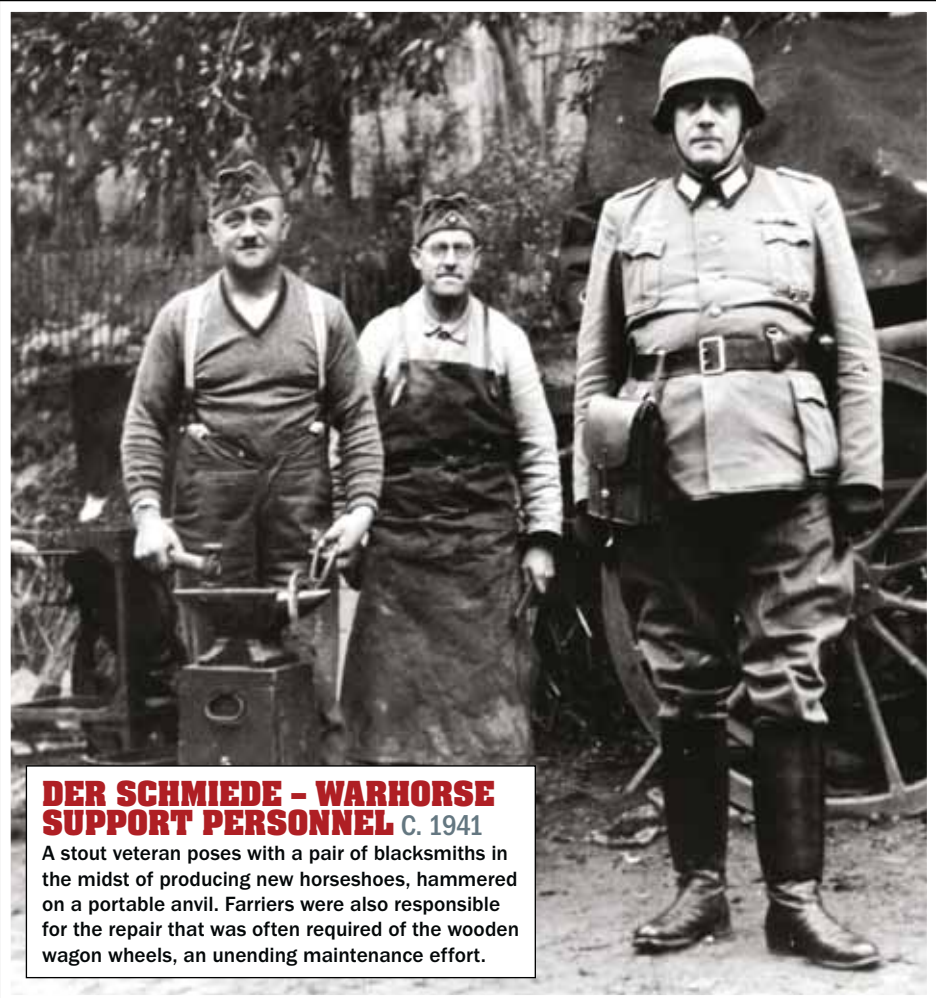
All horse riders and team drivers also took training in mastering the basic medical needs of their mounts. The extensive support system also required that a plentiful supply of both blacksmiths and veterinarians were recruited and made available for the military, facilitated by rural Germany's horse-dominated agriculture.

Examining the record of World War I and preparing for the next conflict, Germany began buying up large quantities of mounts, including many from Britain, where its military planners saw no need for horses as they were certain the next battles would be fought by modern machines, principally aircraft and the tank, thus in great part scrapping its cavalry components.

Because production of steel and iron could not keep pace with the expansion of the mechanised military, horses filled the gap. When war began with the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, Germany counted over 2 million men in uniform, but only 14 divisions were fully motorised, comprised of some 183,000 motor vehicles and 94,000 motorcycles, all backed up by 3.8 million horses, of which 885,000 were initially draught and pack animals.

Supplying food for the hundreds of thousands of horses employed by the German military was a daunting task, and eventually the quality and quantity fell dangerously below minimal standards. Huge quantities of fodder had to be shipped by rail, competing with the critical delivery needs of war resources. Foraging off the land was often the end result, the horses suffering as a result. Due to the stresses caused by combat and extreme weather conditions, especially in Russia, shortages of all types afflicted the warhorses, and sometimes tree bark was added to their fodder to bulk it up.

During the war, 70 per cent of all transport and supply was horse-drawn. Due to their size and the fact they were often tethered to heavy transport wagons and field artillery, horses were left to face the brunt of air attacks while their human counterparts sought cover. When rendered unfit by the rigours of traversing huge distances, the harsh climate, wounds, disease and food deprivation, horses were slaughtered on the spot and fed to their human taskmasters.



DER SCHMIEDE - WARHORSE SUPPORT PERSONNEL C. 1941

A stout veteran poses with a pair of blacksmiths in the midst of producing new horseshoes, hammered on a portable anvil. Farriers were also responsible for the repair that was often required of the wooden wagon wheels, an unending maintenance effort.



KICKING UP ITS HEELS C. 1939

A soldier's camera captures a colt in high spirits, prancing near the stables of a large horse farm. As the military expanded on all levels, the number of horses increased as well. Cavalry mounts were chosen by special committees that purchased horses at the age of three, with training beginning at four and continuing for two more years. It was a program unsurpassed by any other nation.

**PANJE DIVISIONS
REPLACE PANZER
DIVISIONS** 1942

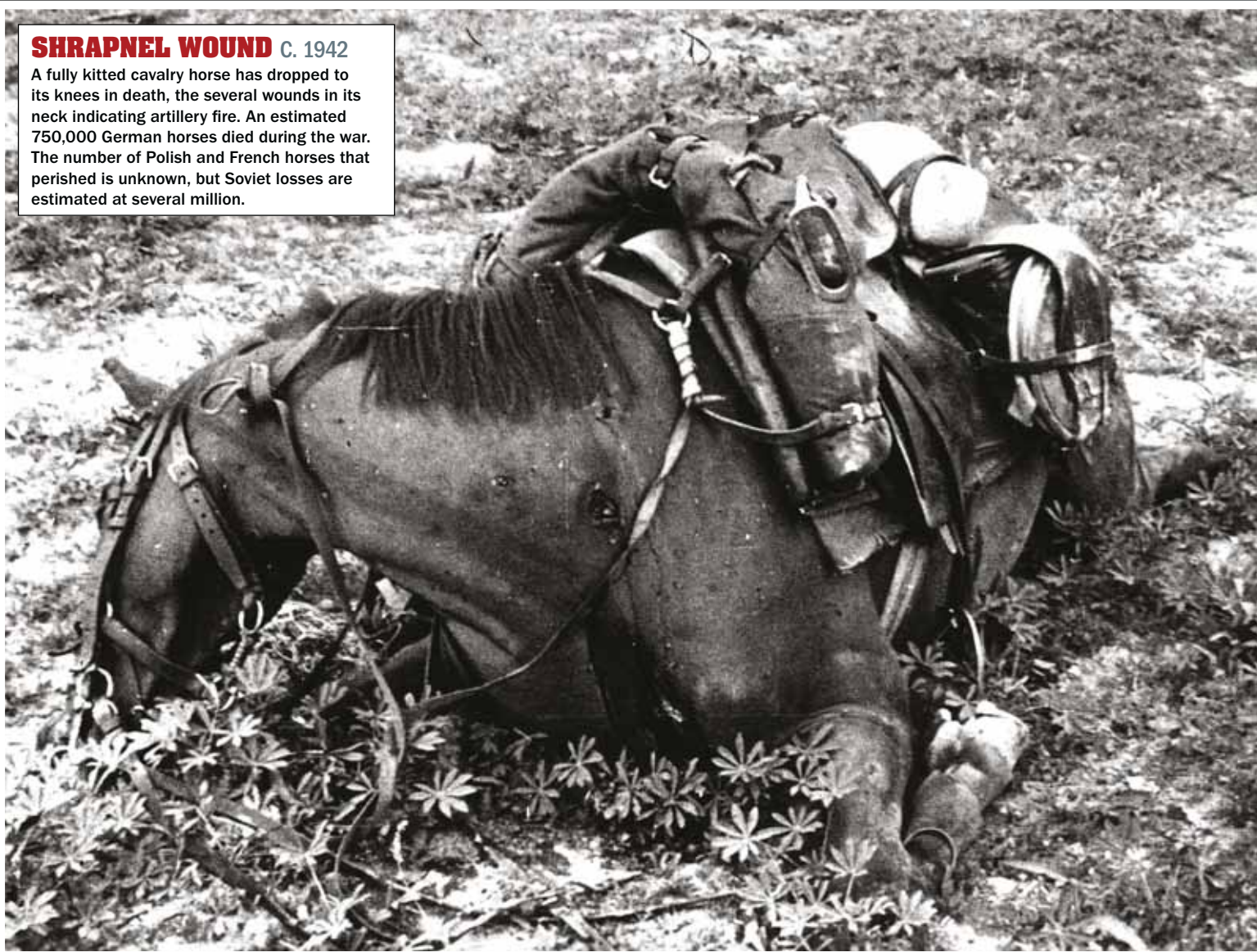
Somewhere in the Russian vastness, two German soldiers conscripted a local horse with its distinctive wooden harness. The smaller Russian panje or Bashkir breed of pony was found to be an excellent substitute for the German horses when their numbers were reduced by the harsh conditions. The high attrition rate of German motorised armour and transport during early 1942 on the Eastern Front forced increased reliance on such means.

**“THE SMALLER RUSSIAN
PANJE OR BASHKIR BREED
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SUBSTITUTE FOR THE
GERMAN HORSES”**



SHRAPNEL WOUND C. 1942

A fully kitted cavalry horse has dropped to its knees in death, the several wounds in its neck indicating artillery fire. An estimated 750,000 German horses died during the war. The number of Polish and French horses that perished is unknown, but Soviet losses are estimated at several million.

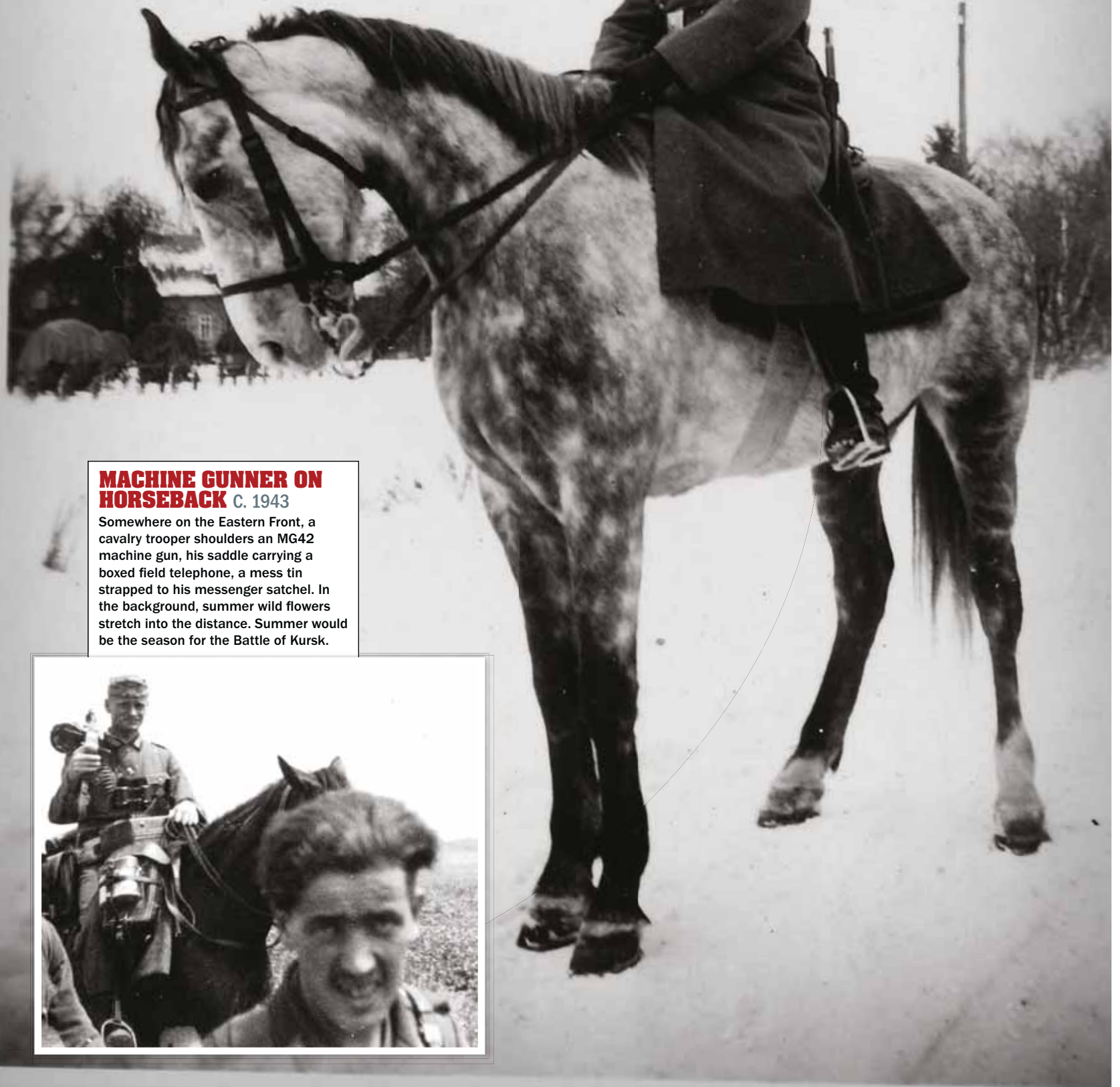


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EQUINE EXCELLENCE

C. 1941

Some of the finest breeds were recruited, including the German warmblood Hanoverian and Trakehner, seen here, as well as the Romanian Furioso. Of all Axis allies, the Romanians supplied the largest contingent of cavalry forces.



MACHINE GUNNER ON HORSEBACK C. 1943

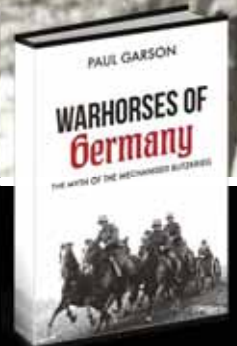
Somewhere on the Eastern Front, a cavalry trooper shoulders an MG42 machine gun, his saddle carrying a boxed field telephone, a mess tin strapped to his messenger satchel. In the background, summer wild flowers stretch into the distance. Summer would be the season for the Battle of Kursk.





FINAL FATE C. 1943

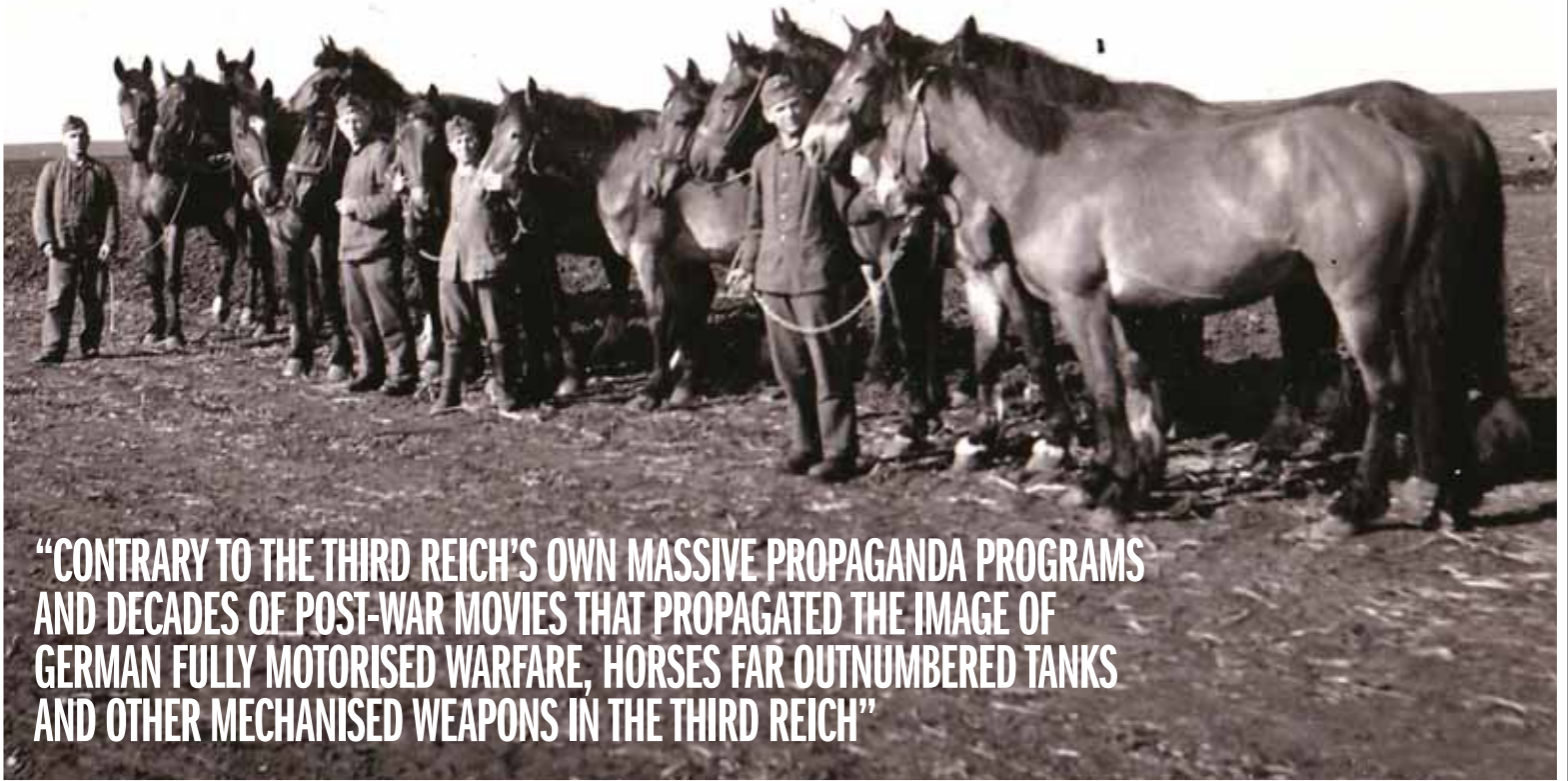
On 19 January 1943, Field marshal Friedrich von Paulus, the commander of the doomed Sixth Army surrounded by Soviet forces at Stalingrad, sent the message, "The last horses have been eaten up." While many of the army's horses had been previously evacuated before the encirclement, some 25,000 had remained with the troops, many to face the same fate as the 250,000 Germans and their Italian and Romanian allies left dead in the snow.



WARHORSES OF GERMANY: THE MYTH OF THE MECHANISED BLITZKRIEG BY PAUL GARSON, IS AVAILABLE NOW

ARRIVING AT KURSK PRIOR TO BATTLE 1943

Four soldiers pause for photos with their four-legged comrades somewhere on the empty plain at Kursk. The horses appear in good condition and well-fed.



“CONTRARY TO THE THIRD REICH’S OWN MASSIVE PROPAGANDA PROGRAMS AND DECADES OF POST-WAR MOVIES THAT PROPAGATED THE IMAGE OF GERMAN FULLY MOTORISED WARFARE, HORSES FAR OUTNUMBERED TANKS AND OTHER MECHANISED WEAPONS IN THE THIRD REICH”

HOOFED VS. TRACKED C. 1943

Two cavalry mounts are dwarfed by the formidable Tiger tank. Contrary to the Third Reich’s own massive propaganda programs and decades of post-war movies that propagated the image of German fully motorised warfare, horses far outnumbered tanks and other mechanised weapons in the Third Reich. By October 1941 the German army had some 24,000 veterinary troops deployed in the Soviet Union, an indication of the vast number of horses employed on the Eastern Front.

