



STORY BY BRON WILLIS PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNETTE RUZICKA

# WAR HORSE

WALERS, THE AUSTRALIAN STOCKHORSES RENOWNED FOR COURAGE AND ENDURANCE DURING THE GREAT WAR, ARE BRINGING COMFORT TO A NEW GENERATION OF WARTIME SURVIVORS.

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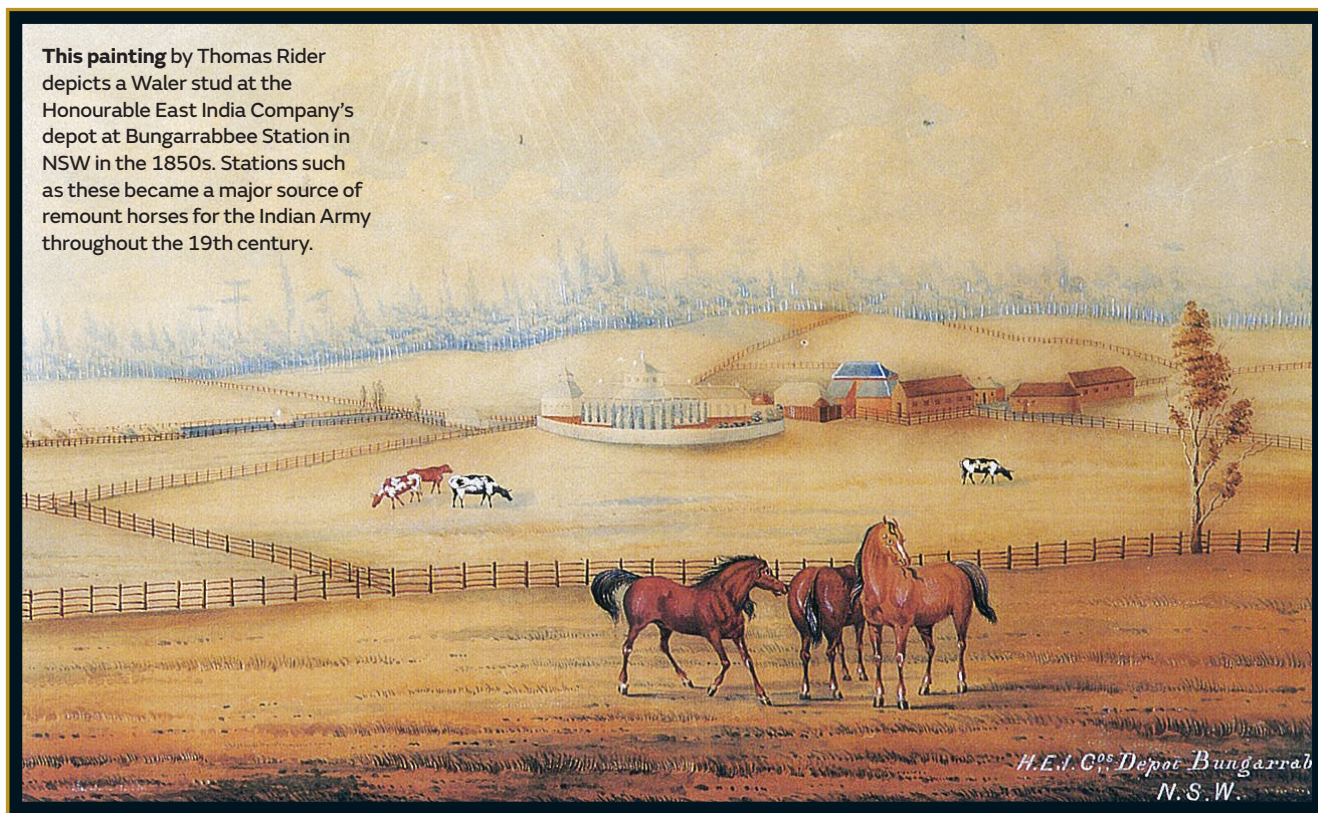
**The story of Digby**, pictured here, and the Australian Waler warhorses, with which he shares a bloodline, inspires equine therapy clients with themes of resilience and hope in the face of adversity.







This painting by Thomas Rider depicts a Waler stud at the Honourable East India Company's depot at Bungarrabee Station in NSW in the 1850s. Stations such as these became a major source of remount horses for the Indian Army throughout the 19th century.



**I**N APRIL 2019 JESS LISTON sat in the shade of a gidgee tree on the edge of the Simpson Desert in the Northern Territory and watched as horse hooves kicked up brick-red dust not far from where she rested. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and cast her mind back a month to the telephone call that had brought her to this remote place.

"I can tell you where there's a wild herd of the horses you're looking for," the stranger on the phone had said.

Jess, an equine therapist who's spent her life around horses, opened her eyes and saw startling blue skies, sparse vegetation and dusty red horizons. Her arrival in the desert had marked the end of a whirlwind month in which an already busy life with a 13-month-old baby had gone into overdrive. She'd hoped that someone else might take on the project, such was the enormity of the task. But sitting under that gidgee tree, she knew she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

Jess watched her mother, Pauline, a woman with horses in her blood, walk slowly between the animals. There were bays, greys, chestnuts and roans. They weren't particularly large but they were well proportioned. Nearby roamed about 300 more – Walers, wild descendants of horses from a bygone age – war-time mounts, commercially bred in their thousands for military service at home and abroad.

When station owners walked off their properties after the warhorse export industry collapsed in the 1940s, a few Walers were simply left behind. Some of them – ancestors of the horses that Jess was now watching – survived, roaming wild in the desert and breeding.

These desert Walers share the same bloodlines as some of the mounts ridden by the Australian Light Horse who famously



▲ Pauline Liston checks out a wild herd of horses near Alice Springs. They are descendants of the Walers bred for battle but abandoned in the 1940s when demand for warhorses ran dry.

charged the Turkish foe to capture vital water wells during the Battle of Beersheba on 31 October 1917. The battle is celebrated as one of the last great cavalry charges of World War I. More than 100,000 Walers were sent to the war where they became etched into the national psyche as symbols of bravery, strength and national pride.

Jess had come here with the goal to bring 20 of these horses safely across 2000km of the Australian outback and find them "forever homes" on the east coast.

**I**T'S NOW JANUARY 2021 and, in the paddock of her mother's Central Victorian thoroughbred stud flanked by the Loddon River, Jess stands with her fingers spread out across a horse's neck, her eyes closed. She lets the breath come in and out of her chest and feels the horse do the same. ▶



**Jess and Digby** enjoy each other's company at the Central Victorian property where they now live and work together as part of Jess's equine therapy business, Inner Rhythm.







Jess and Digby work with Africause client Mootesm Abdulrahman, whose father was a refugee from Eritrea. Africause works with young African-Australians to improve their lives in Australia.

## JESS AND DIGBY'S EPIC JOURNEY WAS AS MUCH ABOUT HONOUR AND HEALING AS IT WAS ABOUT BLOODLINES.

Jess's professional work with horses has taken her to dozens of countries during the last decade, and in Germany she gained an international master's degree in horse-assisted therapies. But some of her most powerful work has been here on the family farm in Victoria, where she offers equine therapy, workshops and retreats with her horses.

A group of young men and women waits in the paddock watching Jess with the horse. Soon it will be their turn. The horse is black, gentle and pretty. His name is Digby. And, like the people gazing at him, he is a survivor. Each member of the group carries their own story from a war-ravaged country: stories of violence, poverty and endurance. They have come today in search of healing.

It's less than two years since Digby was roaming free among hundreds in the herd of Walers Jess first met that day in the Simpson Desert. Out there he found his own food and water, surviving droughts and cold desert nights. Jess and Pauline found good homes for all the others that travelled with him, but Digby is the Waler Jess chose to keep. She sometimes wonders if she did the right thing bringing him here, but when she sees the effect he has on people in search of peace, it puts her mind at rest. "He works so beautifully with them," Jess says. "It's like he understands what they've been through."

She wasn't surprised that Digby's temperament has proved to be perfect for her work, having first heard 12 years ago, when she was working at a school, about Walers and their nature. A

poem read at the school assembly (see page 69) captivated both her and her students, and Jess's love affair with Walers began. Her research revealed that "Waler" was initially a term for horses bred from thoroughbreds and Australian stockhorses, the result of which was a temperament highly suitable for warfare.

Walers were first bred in the early New South Wales colony, hence the name. Today the term refers to a registered horse breed. While a number of organisations claim some progress in promoting and preserving the breed, Jess says Walers are largely unknown in modern horse circles. "My understanding is that they weren't spoken about for years," she says. "It was really painful for a lot of those men who came back from the war to see a Waler. So they didn't push for their grandkids to have one."

JESS CROSSED PATHS with Walers a few years later, when she moved with her partner, Steve, to a property in the Macedon Ranges of Victoria. Five Walers lived there and Jess began to use them in her therapy business. They proved ideally suited to working with people.

"If you were going to war, you'd want to know your horse could be calm even if you were scared," Jess explains. "That's why Digby is so great for working with kids and with people who are struggling with trauma or the effects of war."

When Jess's clients arrive at her family property, they have no idea of Digby's own journey. They just see a handsome black





**Africause participant Mazin Musa** closes his eyes to better connect with Digby and his heartbeat.

horse, ears pointed forward with curiosity and an attractive white blaze stretching down his face. But by the time they leave they understand that Digby is part of a story not too different from their own – a history of battle, bravery and often tragedy.

Digby's 2000km journey to the security of his new home is one that 100,000 Waler warhorses didn't get to make. They had provided their riders with strength, agility and speed throughout the Great War, as well as comfort and friendship. But they were never to return home. After surviving the atrocities of war, they were classified as "equipment", and depending on their condition, were sent to other battles, sold to locals or even killed.

Jess and Digby's epic journey was as much about honour and healing as it was about bloodlines. When Jess first came to know about the herd of wild desert horses in March 2019, she wondered about the potential of using them to help people in need. "At first, I'd imagined taking clients to see the herd, to give them a sense of what these horses endured to survive in such an incredible environment," she says. "But my drive quickly shifted, from a desire to help people to a desire to help the Walers."

After that phone call from the stranger, Jess was consumed on the one hand by the horses' plight, but on the other by family life at home. She wanted, at times, to "unknown" what she had learnt: that the herd had survived thanks to one man, an 84-year-old recluse, who lived on the edge of the desert and had made countless six-hour return trips into town to buy fuel for the pump that watered the horses during times of drought.

"If anything happened to that man, these horses would die as soon as a drought came along," Jess says. She was also aware the horses could be culled at any moment by land management authorities tasked with preserving the native species of the region from feral invasive animals such as brumbies.



▲ **Jess and Pauline** selected 20 horses from among the wild herd roaming in the desert near Alice Springs for rehoming on the east coast.

**T**HIS HERD HAD survived, bred and roamed, endured soaring temperatures and found food and water in a tough environment. But survival was now hanging by a thread. If they truly were Walers, emblematic of such tragedy, who was going to help them? For two weeks Jess mulled over the answer to that question, and eventually, hoping to find someone to take on the project, arranged a breakfast date with some radio journalist friends. "That's not the way it turned out!" Jess says, amused. "They told me very clearly, 'No-one is going to be interested in this story unless there's a person who is willing to act. That person is you.'" Within the hour, Jess's friends had set up an online crowdfunding campaign, she was whisked away for a radio interview and soon her voice was being broadcast, calling for help to bring some of the horses home.

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# THE WALER

Waler was originally a generic term used to describe horses produced by breeding Australian stockhorses with thoroughbreds, dating back to the 1830s. These horses came mostly from the new colony of New South Wales, thus the term Waler. Horse breeders have since developed the Waler into a registered breed.

● The most useful horse at the time of WWI was a reasonably stocky 14- to 16-hand crossbred horse that could cope with arduous conditions, poor rations, scarcity of water, and had a reasonable load-carrying capacity. Walers fitted the bill.

● The prized temperament of Walers was the result of a natural filtering process. Those that arrived on the battlefields of WWI had been vetted by the army, loaded onto troop ships, endured weeks at sea, and undergone military training. Those that did not have the temperament were winnowed out well before arriving at the front.

● Warhorses needed to be able to cope well with water shortages. This became particularly critical in the Middle East, where Walers sometimes went 36 hours without a drink, while carrying soldiers into battle in soaring temperatures.

“THE AUSTRALIAN Light Horsemen and their legendary mounts are one of the greatest symbols of the Australian Imperial Force,” says Brad Manera, Sydney Anzac Memorial’s senior historian. But when WWI was finally over, this powerful symbolism was not enough to save the horses from the fate that had awaited warhorses since the beginning of Australian war history.

“With the surrender of the Ottoman Empire in October 1918 the priority was to get the soldiers home,” Brad explains. “The British and French armies had to make economic decisions about how to dispose of war stores that were now suddenly redundant.

Among those war stores were tens of thousands of horses.” What happened next has captured the hearts of many Australians, including Oliver Hogue in his poem “The Horses Stay Behind” and Eric Bogle in his tear-jerking song “As If He Knows”.

“A team of veterinarians were given instructions for a process by which every horse is graded A, B or C,” Brad says. “A-grade horses were sent to fight elsewhere. C-grade horses had reached the end of their service life and so were culled as a matter of course and then harvested for hooves, hide and hair.”

It’s the B-grade horses that raise the most controversy. “B-grade

horses were fit for work but not for war and so were made commercially available to the local population in the Eastern Mediterranean,” Brad says. “Some British and Australian cavalrymen didn’t want their horses sold to locals because they had seen the locals treat their animals badly.”

Popular opinion (including that in Bogle’s ballad) is that the soldiers shot their horses instead of seeing them go to locals. But Brad says this was a rare exception.

“A small handful may have had access to their horses after hearing they were going to be sold to the locals, and so they took the opportunity to shoot them,” he says.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL PAYNE



# THE HORSES STAY BEHIND

BY OLIVER HOGUE

*In days to come we'll wander west  
And cross the range again.  
We'll hear the bush birds singing  
In the green gums after rain.  
We'll canter through the Mitchell grass  
And breast the bracing wind.  
But we'll have other horses,  
Our chargers stay behind.*

*Around the fire at night we'll yarn  
About the old Sinai.  
We'll fight our battles o'er again  
And as the days go by.  
There'll be old mates to greet us.  
The bush girls will be kind.  
Still our thoughts will often wander  
To the horses left behind.*

*I don't think I could stand the thought  
Of my old fancy hack  
Just crawling round old Cairo  
With a Gyppo on his back.  
Perhaps some English tourist  
Out in Palestine may find  
My broken-hearted Waler  
With a wooden plough behind.*

*No I think I'd better shoot him  
And tell a little lie.  
He floundered in a wombat hole  
And then lay down to die.  
Maybe I'll get court-martialled  
But I'm damned if I'm inclined  
To go back to Australia  
And leave my horse behind.*

*Maybe I'll get court-martialled  
But I'm damned if I'm inclined  
To go back to Australia  
And leave my horse behind.*



With calm temperaments, agility and sturdiness, Walers were prized by the Australian Light Horse.



▼ Australian Light Horsemen water their horses at Ain es Sultan. Tradition stated this was the water that Old Testament prophet Elisha healed with salt and was known as Elisha's Spring.

▲ Bringing imported Australian Walers ashore by small boats in Madras (now Chennai), India, was a perilous business as depicted in this painting from c.1834.





A person wearing a red long-sleeved shirt and a brown hat is wading through a river, leading a dark-colored horse. The person is seen from behind, and the horse is also seen from behind, moving away from the viewer. The water is calm with some ripples. The background is filled with lush green trees and foliage, with a large, light-colored tree branch leaning over the water from the right side. The sky is blue with some white clouds.

**Jess and Digby** cool off in the Loddon River, which runs through Three Bridges Thoroughbreds, their Central Victorian property.



## "IT WOULD BE A MIRACLE IF WE GOT THE HORSES OUT OF THERE."

She had no idea how she would even begin to do that, but by the end of the night, the first \$500 appeared in the fund. The reality of what Jess had committed to do began to set in. "I didn't know how to load wild horses onto a truck!" she says, laughing. "I didn't know how we would drive them 2000km home, or even how to catch them in the first place! It would be a miracle if we got the horses out of there."

Jess's close-knit family, including Steve, her partner, all share her love of horses and came to her aid. "Steve has strong connections to the war because his grandfather was a prisoner of war," she says. "He felt that this was a chance to honour his grandfather, his ancestors and equally our baby son. The project was never mine alone. It was about family."

Jess had been raised around horses, and Pauline, who is her equal partner in the Waler project, recalls that her daughter's passion for all things equine began very early in life. "When Jess was a two-year-old she would ride in the front of my saddle," Pauline remembers. "I'd take her off, but she'd cry and cry until I put her back on."

Jess's father, Peter, and Pauline agreed to home the new animals until owners could be found. With 200 horses already living on the property, it took some planning. Jess's three siblings, who also lived on the farm, agreed to help in any way they could.

Within the month, Jess had surpassed her \$20,000 fundraising goal and was on a plane with Pauline to Alice Springs on the first of two trips. They met landowners, stockmen and women, and farmers. They needed to gain the trust and permission of 14 different traditional owner groups, a seemingly impossible task due to poor mobile phone coverage and the vast countryside from which they came.

"We went to feedlots and cattle stations and had cups of tea, sitting out in the desert. They'd put a match to cow dung to light it to keep the flies away," Jess says. "We asked so many questions, being really honest. We just said, 'We don't know how to do this. How would you do it?'"

**T**HE MOST PRECIOUS PIECE in the puzzle was not hard to find. The shy and reclusive 84-year-old man who had kept the horses alive was sitting in his ute on the edge of the desert, just where their crudely drawn mud-map said he would be.

"We'd spoken to him on the phone, but we needed to meet him in the flesh," Jess says. "He didn't know if he could trust us, and equally, we didn't know if we could trust him."

What the two women found was a kind and rugged man who didn't like people much but who had a deep love of the land and the horses. He became an ally in Jess's mission.



▲ Jess and Pauline pose in front of the cattle truck they hired to pull the 20-horse float to the nearest driveable road.

"He had a salt-of-the-earth quality about him," she says. "He's known these horses since he was a child and he shared so much of his insight with us."

After a week of meetings, Jess and Pauline flew home, watching the red dust disappear through the plane window, longing for the laughs of Jess's little boy, hoping that when they next returned to the desert, they would be bringing 20 wild horses home with them.

When the two women returned and approached the Simpson Desert for the second time, in June 2019, with permits approved and a plan in place, they were met by 300 wild horses, some of them galloping beside the ute, sending dust into the air.

"It was amazing to see them, galloping and playing and free," Jess says.

With her was a team of stockmen from across the NT, who brought their knowledge of the land and the horses. The truck driver, too, stood watching. Jess found him after dozens of phone calls that were often met with incredulous laughter. "You want to float how many wild horses?"

Pauline and Jess observed the Walers at close quarters in the yards. It was a moment of connection for mother and daughter. "It was spiritual," Jess says. "We were so grateful to be there. It felt like the horses had called us."

"They looked really healthy," Pauline recalls. "They had great muscle definition and good feet. They were well proportioned, with sturdy legs. And their eyes were calm."

The work was about to begin. Over the next six days, the team herded the horses, 20 at a time into makeshift yards, assessing each one for its ability to survive the trip, adapt to a new life and, ultimately, keep the bloodline going.

"We wanted quality horses that had a kind eye," Pauline says. "We wanted ones to face up and look at you and be curious, and young ones that could breed."

Digby shakes his mane and puts his head down to graze. The clients have gone and Reuben, Jess and Steve's three-year-old son, is patting the dog, Bessy. Steve has brought dinner out for a picnic by the river.

Digby has helped hundreds of Jess's clients to begin their healing journey. Three Waler foals have been born from the rescued herd at farms around the country. Jess is nurturing her own little herd too: her belly is rounded and growing, supporting a little life budding inside, Reuben's future sibling. **AG**