

As *War Horse* prepares to hit the big screen in Britain, **Steve Snelling** talks to the man who grew up with a passion for horses in Norfolk and went on to land a dream role as Steve Spielberg's cavalry consultant.

It was one of those rare goose-bump moments. In a corner of an English field that is forever Hollywood, history, or a version of it, was rushing back in a spellbindingly Spielberg sort of way to give David Kenyon a spooky close encounter with the past.

The former Norwich schoolboy, battlefield archaeologist, military historian and surprise recruit to the film crew behind the multi-million dollar reworking of Michael Morpurgo's acclaimed children's novel *War Horse* had just completed writing an epic study of British cavalry operations in the first world war.

In it, he explored one of the conflict's most famous engagements, a desperate charge that turned a Norfolk cavalryman into a national hero and was immortalised on canvas by the greatest equine artist of all, Alfred Munnings.

And now, by some miracle of movie-making, it was as though he had been transported back to the scene of Gordon Flowerdew's fateful final action.

"It was uncanny," he says, rewinding to the summer of 2010 and the broad acres of the Duke of Wellington's grand estate in north Hampshire. "We were shooting a scene where about 80 or 90 cavalrymen charge out from a cornfield. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon and the light was gorgeous and as they surged towards me it was as though Munnings' painting had come to life in front of me.

"The colour palette was precisely the same and all the guys were stretched over the horses' necks with their swords out. It sent a shiver down my spine."

Even now, some 16 months on and with the film's London premiere only days away, he finds himself marvelling at the extraordinary synchronicity and the outrageous stroke of good fortune that saw him earn his movie spurs as cavalry consultant on a big screen epic directed by Steven Spielberg, arguably the greatest filmmaker on the planet.

"There are moments," he says almost wistfully, "when it all seems like a dream, a fantastic, unbelievable dream."

And as if to underline the point, he recalls a conversation he had while filming some of the set-piece cavalry scenes at Stratfield Saye. "I was travelling with a bunch of extras dressed as German soldiers on one of the buses used to ferry them from one site to another. And as we were driving around, they'd ask, 'what movies have you done, Dave?' To which, I'd say, 'well, none actually. This is the first one.' Then, they'd go, 'ah, but you were in the army weren't you?' And I'd reply, 'no'. They'd then look at me in a

puzzled, bemused sort of way, and ask: 'how on earth did you get this job then?'

"Well, the answer is luck. That and 10 years of research."

In fact, it could be argued that the road to *War Horse* stretches back a good deal further than that and has its roots in a childhood love affair with horses that has blossomed into a fascination in mounted combat in the 19th and 20th centuries with a particular focus on the first world war.

Related on his mother's side to the Bullard-brewing family and with a great, great uncle who was colonel of the Norfolk Yeomanry, he grew up at Lingwood, surrounded by horses, before heading off to Norwich School in the mid-1970s.

"I've been riding and involved with horses since I was about eight years old and my family have had horses at various times. So, I guess you could say I've been around them virtually all my life."

A career as an archaeologist followed, in parallel with a growing interest in the first world war. "I spent a lot of time pursuing both interests, in horses and military history, separately until, around about 1998, I bought a first world war cavalry sword at an auction and that was the starting point for a plan to write a book which turned into a plan to do a PhD."

Along the way, he branched out into battlefield archaeology, co-authoring a book and co-presenting two television series on the subject with his business partner Andy Robertshaw.

Dubbed the 'Trench Detectives', the pair work together under the banner of Battlefield Partnerships. "We do all sorts of things connected with the first world war and military history," says David, who serves as director of the Thiepval Wood Great War archaeology project and a consultant to the Seddulbahr Fortress Project on Turkey's Gallipoli peninsula as well as working as a manager at the Royal Gunpowder Mills in Essex.

"Basically, we do anything that takes the subject to an audience and that includes battlefield tours, public lectures, TV work, archaeological investigations and, when we can get it, advisory work for films."

The company was only six months old when it landed its first movie assignment - the extraordinary story of a horse called Joey's wartime odyssey from Devon to the Western Front and of a teenager's dangerous quest to find him and bring him home.

Originally published in 1982, the best-selling *War Horse* has gone on to become a multi award-winning stage hit on both sides of the Atlantic, famed for its remarkable horse choreography



Expert help: Norfolk-born David Kenyon, who Steven Spielberg turned to for advice during the filming of *War Horse*.



Giving truth to

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featuring an array of life-size puppets. And then along came Steven Spielberg and Dreamworks.

With actors of the calibre of Benedict Cumberbatch, Tom Hiddleston and Jeremy Irvine signed up and a host of technical experts and stuntmen on hand, shooting for the film was ready to begin in the summer of 2010 at sites across southern England, from Dartmoor via Stratfield Saye to Wisley airfield in Surrey.

All that was missing was a military historian with specialist knowledge on first world war horse combat to serve as cavalry consultant.

Cue one David Kenyon, complete with PhD and a remarkable book in the pipeline challenging many of the myths about the contentious role of the British cavalry on a western front characterised by trench warfare.

Recently published as *Horsemen in No Man's Land*, his compelling re-appraisal, which sheds provocative fresh light on the contribution of mounted soldiers to the final victory, is a personal triumph that has garnered richly-deserved praise.

"As an enthusiast for horses and horsemen, I wanted to do them justice while at the same time applying academic rigour to the subject," he says. "I'm not trying to argue the cavalry won the war. They didn't. But they did contribute more than many people have credited them with and they could have done more, as was shown on occasions, if there'd been more of them and the control and command had been better."

"Not only were they able to act spontaneously, unlike tanks, but they

were able to gain more ground when the infantry attack ran out of steam and stalled.

"The idea that a Haig-style breakthrough would have happened and they would have all ridden on to Berlin is unrealistic, but that doesn't mean they were inherently useless. They were capable of doing other things in collaboration with other arms as was proved in 1917 and 1918."

So much for the history lesson, but none of it answers the central question of how a respected authority on cavalry but minus a track record in the essentials of movie making find his way on to the set of one of the highest profile films made about the first world war in living memory.

"Well," explains David, "through a series of contacts, my colleague Andy was approached to be historical advisor. His area of expertise is trenches and trench warfare and he told the filmmakers he'd very much like the job, but said that for the cavalry side of the work the person they needed was me."

He'd seen and admired the story performed on stage but confesses to never having read the book. "I actually had a copy," he says. "My mother had bought it for me about five years ago on the grounds it was a novel about the cavalry and I ought to have it, but I regret to say I never read it."

Happily, such an oversight proved no impediment when the film people got in touch. "I went and had a brief chat with them and they thought I was the man for the job and the result was that one or other of us was on the set during all of the military scenes throughout the course of the three months' shoot."



an epic of war

The cavalry action took place on the Duke of Wellington's estate, just off the M4 between Reading and Basingstoke. It was here, over the course of six summer weeks, that a full dress charge and a spectacular combat scene were filmed under David's expert gaze.

"It was amazing, a once in a lifetime opportunity," he says. "Having spent 10 years looking at black and white photographs and reading accounts in books, it was absolutely incredible to see it all explode into life. To be there in the midst of 90 to 100 cavalry charging en masse was pretty special. I have to say the military scenes are spectacular."

"On some occasions, I'd be standing at one end of a field with the stunt coordinator holding a big red flag, trying to look nonchalant and unimpressed while they rushed towards us."

But, of course, David wasn't merely there as a spectator. His advisory role took many forms and even resulted in him achieving the unusual distinction for a military historian of contributing some lines of dialogue which made it through the editing process into the final cut.

"War Horse, of course, is a work of fiction and compromises had to be made for the story the filmmakers wanted to tell," he explains, "so my main interest was ensuring the look and feel of the cavalry scenes were correct and that the film created the right atmosphere."

"For example, in some of the scenes where Ben Cumberbatch had to give orders, either he or, in one case, Spielberg would come and ask me what orders would be given in certain situations. I told them and Spielberg said that's too

many lines, which bits can we leave out? So, I gave them a couple of lines and some hand signals and they got into the film!"

There were times, however, when any even the most well-intended advice proved entirely unnecessary, as David explained. "Even before we went on location I'd met Ben and Tom Hiddleston, who plays the cavalry officer who buys Joey and takes him off to war, and I gave them reading lists and coached them a bit on how to portray a first world war cavalry officer."

"I thought it would be helpful if they understood something about the characters' social background and their likely attitudes. And to get some idea as to how much of a stretch it was going to be to portray the characters I asked them about their own personal background. It turned out one went to Eton and the other to Harrow. It was then I realised this wasn't going to be very difficult."

His work done, filming moved from Stratfield Saye to Wisley airfield just off the A3 where a first world war battlefield featuring mud-caked trenches and a shell-pocked no-man's-land the size of two or three football pitches had been constructed.

It was there his partner trumped his script-writing effort by claiming a brief on-screen appearance. "He's the British officer blowing the whistle to send them all over the top for an epic battle sequence," says David. "It's his own little five seconds of fame."

"I wasn't allowed to dress up because I'm 6ft 6in tall and it would have looked a bit odd. Still, you can't have everything."

As for the future, well, there are no more

films on the immediate horizon but David remains hopeful. "A Spielberg movie isn't a bad way to start," he says, "and with the centenary of the first world war just a couple of years away there's likely to be more projects."

"After all when Spielberg makes a film about something it tends to set a bit of a fashion, so you never know..."

War Horse is released in cinemas nationwide on Friday.

Horsemen in No Man's Land: British Cavalry & Trench Warfare 1914-1918, by David Kenyon, is published by Pen & Sword, priced £19.99.



Main picture: One of the scenes on War Horse which David has helped to make as authentic as possible.

Above, top: David Kenyon at a cast screening of War Horse. **Above, middle:** Filming War Horse brought Munnings' painting of the Flowerdeu charge to life, says David.

Above, bottom: The reality of the western front.

Left: Steven Spielberg on set during the filming of War Horse.