



Black Jack: The Soldier Who Never Spoke

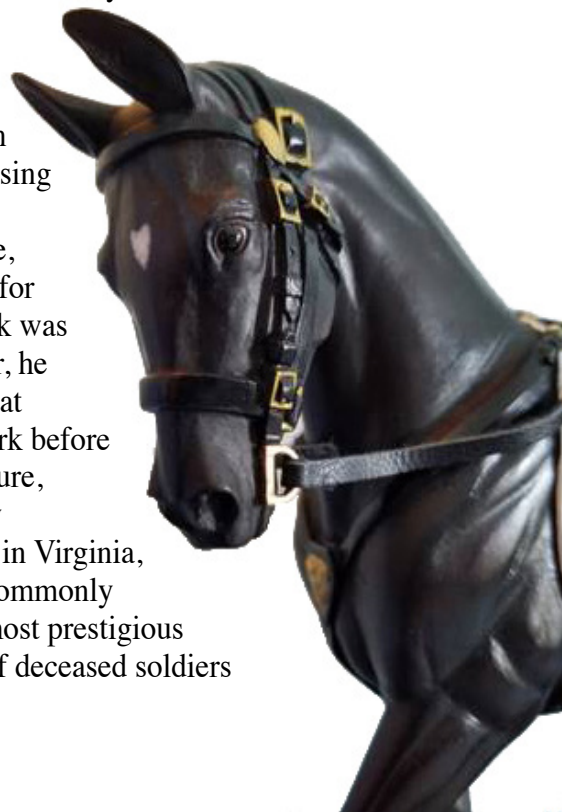
Georgia Andrews

Among the most iconic and solemn symbols of American military tradition is the riderless horse, seen during funerals of high-ranking military officials. This horse, caparisoned (fully equipped with a saddle, bridle, and other accessories) but riderless, represents a fallen leader who will never ride again. One horse, in particular, has come to embody this tradition in a way that few others ever have — Black Jack.

Black Jack was a coal-black Morgan-American Quarter Horse cross, born on January 19, 1947. Although he stood just 15 hands (60 inches) tall, his presence towered over the many ceremonies he participated in. His name, derived from General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing, symbolized his military importance. Over his 29 years of life, Black Jack served as the riderless horse for over 1,000 military funerals, including some of the most historic events of the 20th century.

Early Life and Training

Black Jack was foaled at the U.S. Army Remount Depot in Fort Reno, Oklahoma, a facility dedicated to breeding and raising cavalry horses for the military. He was a blend of two strong breeds: the Morgan horse, known for its versatility, endurance, and calm demeanor, and the American Quarter Horse, prized for its speed and power. Despite this excellent lineage, Black Jack was a difficult horse in his early years. Known for his fiery temper, he often resisted training and had a reputation for being somewhat rebellious. It took years of patient handling and persistent work before Black Jack was ready for ceremonial service. His spirited nature, though challenging, made him a striking figure in the military processions he was destined for. He was trained at Fort Myer in Virginia, where he would later serve the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, commonly known as “The Old Guard.” This unit is responsible for the most prestigious ceremonial duties in the U.S. Army, including the escorting of deceased soldiers to their final resting places.



The Role of the Riderless Horse

The tradition of the riderless horse in military funerals has ancient origins. In Roman times, fallen leaders were honored by having their horses paraded with empty saddles as a symbol of their passing. In the United States, this tradition was first seen at the funeral of George Washington in 1799. The caparisoned horse, often adorned with boots reversed in the stirrups, symbolizes the leader looking back one last time at his troops before his final march.

This ceremonial role was vital to the sense of respect and dignity surrounding military funerals, particularly those of high-ranking officers and presidents. It required a horse of exceptional composure and poise to fulfill this duty, and Black Jack would prove to be that horse.

Historic Funerals

One of Black Jack’s earliest prominent appearances was during the funeral of General Douglas MacArthur in 1964. MacArthur, one of the most celebrated military figures in American history, received a grand military funeral, and Black Jack, as the riderless horse, played a central role. Draped in a saddle and bridle, with MacArthur’s boots reversed in the stirrups, Black Jack’s steady presence amidst the mourning was powerful and unforgettable.



He was cremated, with his remains laid to rest in a plot at Fort Myer, Virginia, on Summerall Field; his final resting place lies 200 feet (60 m) northeast of the flagpole in the southeast corner of the parade field. He is one of four horses in United States history to be buried with Full Military Honors, the others being Chief, Sergeant Reckless, and Comanche.



However, it was the funeral of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 that cemented Black Jack’s place in history. On November 25, 1963, Black Jack led the procession through the streets of Washington. Black Jack died after a 29-year military career on February 6, 1976.

