

Featured Felines: Cats in Wartime

(page checked July 2026)

Meo

The Cat from Hué, Vietnam (2013)



John (Jack) Laurence, considered one of the finest TV war correspondents of the time, was covering the Vietnam war from the 'hotspot' of Hué in February 1968; he had been due to go home at the end of his tour, but had been persuaded to return to Hué to cover what turned out to be an extended battle. One day he encountered a small, starving, homeless and orphaned kitten in a bombed-out house; it was dirty and dishevelled, with its fur sticking out, and had fleas in abundance and a possible eye infection. He put some of his C-rations down for it, but although desperately hungry and with its ribcage showing — it was probably too thin to have been considered worth putting into a cooking pot — it wouldn't approach him. He left food for it when he left the house.

A friendship begins

Returning next day, he found the kitten emboldened and it accepted food from his fingers, also allowing him to clean some of the fleas and dirt from its face and ears. It seemed to be a tricoloured cat, white, with some orange and black. Due to be getting a lift by jeep out of Hué, on a sudden compulsion and wave of compassion Laurence scooped up the kitten, knowing that if left there its chances of survival were slim. And, 'It gave me something to worry about apart from myself,' he said. He ensconced it in one of his pockets, from where it scratched him through the thick material he was wearing. The kitten nearly escaped when they made a stop at an aid station, but he managed to recapture it. On learning that the Vietnamese for cat is 'meo' (pronounced *may-oh*), it was decided that **Meo** would be the youngster's name.

Escape from Hué

Eventually the pair continued their journey to Danang, away from the combat zone, by helicopter and then in a C-123 plane. In both craft, Meo explored and clambered up onto the pilot's shoulder straps in the cockpit.

Confined to the networks' barracks room at the Combat Information Bureau in Danang, Meo prowled restlessly, looking for an escape route. News of him as 'the lucky little cat that survived the battle of Hué' spread to the US bases in the area, and many people came to visit him and take photos. Generally he was very unsociable, either scratching people or fleeing to hide; he seemed to be particularly anti-American! As time went on he gained the run of the press centre, returning to the barracks room only to eat and sleep. He slowly grew bigger, ate 'like a little lion' four or five times a day and gradually gained in confidence, although still startled by loud noises. Sometimes he would sleep at the foot of Laurence's bed.

Hotel accommodation

During March 1968 Meo was flown to Saigon in a cardboard box, so as not to disturb the pilot on that flight. The cat was furious and tried ceaselessly — but unsuccessfully — to escape. Laurence took him, still howling, up to the hotel room where he was to be based and gave him the run of the place, including the balcony. He was given food and shelter, but otherwise looked after himself; he loved to sit on the balcony ledge for long periods and watch goings-on in the street below. The Vietnamese hotel staff enjoyed bringing him titbits and treats.

Upon arrival in Saigon he had been given his one and only bath — which he strongly resented and resisted — and was revealed as mostly white with a few bits of orange — no black, which had just been accumulated dirt! By April he was clean all over, growing fast and still had a ravenous appetite. He kept himself to himself, tolerated the Vietnamese 'room boys' but still seemed to bear a grudge against other humans, especially Americans, and would attack without provocation. They decided that he was a 'Viet Cong cat'! He was a fierce hunter, taking on all creatures great and small; he had no fear. He dominated the hotel grounds, including the feral cats that lived there. Sometimes he'd disappear for several days on expeditions of his own, but always returned. He had a tendency to visit other hotel rooms at night, looking for food, but never got caught.

Meo goes to America

By May 1968 Laurence was booked to go home to the US — but what was to be done with Meo? The two of them had gradually bonded, and the cat made fewer unprovoked attacks. If left behind he would either become feral or get cooked and eaten. He couldn't be sent back to Hué, so it was decided he would travel to America. He was given his shots and a health certificate at Saigon Zoo. A few days after Laurence had left, Meo was flown in the cargo hold to New York's JFK airport — a 36-hour trip plus further delays at the airport. He was not pleased!

While Laurence looked for his own place, Meo went to Connecticut to stay with Jack's mother, an animal lover, and settled down to a life of sleeping, eating, hunting and ruling the roost over the existing house cat Clem, who initially was terrified of him. Meo actually became quite a favourite with the neighbourhood children and would play with them when they came to visit and stroke him.

An accident, then illness

One day he disappeared, uncharacteristically not coming in for his supper. Everyone searched and searched, with no result. On the fourth day he was found in the garage, to where he had managed to make his way back after, presumably, a traffic accident. Rushed to the vet's, he was found to have a shoulder broken in two or three places and a broken paw; it seemed to be touch and go whether he would survive. But he was young and tough; he rallied and next day was operated on to set the broken bones and have a metal pin inserted. He spent six weeks at the animal hospital; the bill was 1500 US dollars (*worth more than today — Ed.*). Back home it was hard to keep him indoors and eventually he was allowed out, where he carried out his own vigorous programme of rehabilitation.



Then he caught pneumonia. It was back to the hospital, that time for three weeks; Meo wasn't happy, but with a course of antibiotics he recovered, although the illness left him with fits of sneezing that never entirely left him afterwards.

His own place

Some months later Jack and his girlfriend Joy moved into their own small apartment in Manhattan and Meo went to join them. Jack returned to Vietnam in May 1970 for a while; letters from Joy said the cat seemed to miss him. She reported that one day he had fallen into the toilet! Towards the end of June Jack returned; Meo ignored him at first, but sniffed all his baggage in great detail, inspecting it as though it reminded him of something he couldn't quite put his paw on. When John went to bed early to sleep, Joy said the cat sat near his head and looked at his face for ages. He could still be irascible, but not all the time, and his ambushes seemed now to be more playful than malicious. He still apparently saw most American men as enemies, though.

Living in London

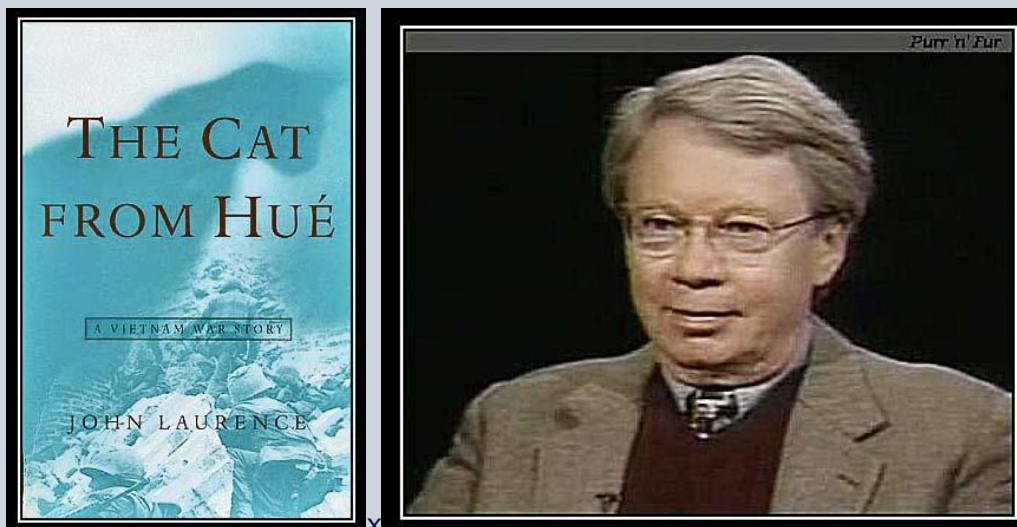
In June 1970 Laurence's work took him to London, where he and Joy married and eventually had two daughters. Meo had to spend six months imprisoned in quarantine and although they visited him every week and took him treats, they felt he never forgave them. Back in their new apartment, he was wilder than before and tore around the place like a demon. But in the end he settled down into a life of comfort and regular meals, supplemented with treats from young daughter Jessica. He slept a lot, but not always peacefully; his body convulsed sometimes as though he were wrestling with ghosts.

He observed mail coming through a slot in the door, and decided the hand pushing it through belonged to an enemy. One day he lay in wait and attacked the postman's fingers; the man said it was the first time he'd ever been assaulted by a cat!

Final days

Meo liked to share some brandy with Jack sometimes, licking it off his fingers; at times the two of them would stagger off to bed quite tipsy! Meo seemed to have gained wisdom; he knew the two of them were friends. 'Our long, angry, loving relationship had come to symbolise in some way the bond between our two countries, drenched in each other's blood, locked in an unbreakable embrace of life, suffering and death,' wrote John. Meo caught pneumonia again in 1981 when he was aged 13, and this time did not recover. Jack thought it was the English climate that finally finished him off.

Information taken from John Laurence's 850-page book [The Cat from Hué: A Vietnam War Story](#) (archived copy), widely thought to be one of the best accounts ever written of America's involvement in Vietnam; published in 2002 by PublicAffairs Ltd, ISBN 1-903985-10-2. But note: this is not, of course, a book about the cat Meo; I have picked out parts relating to him.



John Laurence in 2002 following his book's publication

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Two mascots from nineteenth-century wars (2008)

Tom, the Sevastopol cat from the Crimean War

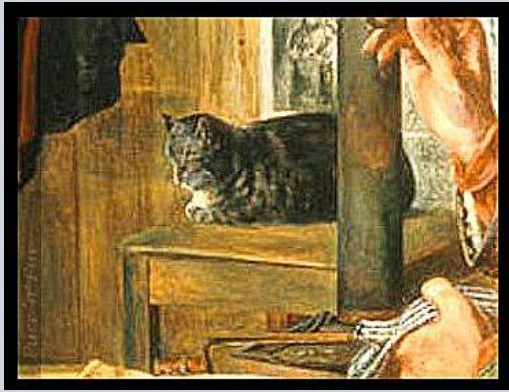


In September 1854 the French and British armies began a siege of the Russian port of Sevastopol (also known as Sebastopol), on the Crimean peninsula. As the weeks went by they were exposed to the rigours of a Russian winter; and in addition to the cold the water was brackish, food was scarce and there was little in the way of medical relief for the wounded. It was a year till the siege ended and the victors were eventually able to march into a largely demolished citadel in search of stores, shelter and warmth.

When the troops were searching the remains of the port, one particular cellar was entered by Captain William Gair of the 6th Dragoon Guards (the Carabiniers) and his men. He found a large, wide-eyed tabby cat sitting regarding him from on top of a pile of rubbish between two badly injured people. He was described as 'covered in dust and grime, but serene', and seemed totally unperturbed by the noise and commotion going on around him. He was quite tame and friendly towards the strangers and didn't hiss or scratch when Captain Gair approached and bent down to pick him up. Whether he'd been someone's pet, or a stray, no one knew, but he appeared to be 7 or 8 years old. He'd survived the whole fierce campaign, lasting nearly a year; but while humans suffered food shortages, there was never a lack of mice in the port area, so cats like him could count on their food supply, summer or winter. The cat was taken back to the officers' shelter, where he was much admired, and even though the men were short of food it was noticed that he was sleek and appeared to be in good health. He became known as Tom, and eventually as **Sevastopol Tom** (or, in some accounts, **Crimean Tom**), one of the most famous animals in history.

Why? The soldiers had noticed that not only the cats, but also the Russian defenders of the city seemed relatively well-fed, despite a lengthy siege, so they must have had continuing access to food supplies; but had those been left behind and, if so, where? That was where Sevastopol Tom came in.

Hurrying out from the military compound and followed by some of the men, the cat stopped at a place near the docks where piles of rubble had denied access to what lay beneath — except to cats! Clearing the rubble, the men gained entry to a storeroom behind — and it was full of food, still mostly edible. Tom, of course, had been attracted by the rats and mice that had also found the food store, but for the occupying troops it meant salvation and the relief of their hunger. Word got around, and in due course Tom showed the way to other caches of supplies, all stockpiled near the waterfront.



There were many hundreds of stray and anonymous cats in Sevastopol, and we can never know what they, and Tom, may have suffered during the military action. But now this particular cat, no longer anonymous, was cherished and hailed as something of a hero. He slept and ate in the officers' accommodation, was brushed and cared for and had plenty of friendly laps to doze on.

Finally, when the time came for the soldiers to return to England, there was no way they were going to leave Tom behind — although how they obtained permission to bring him with them remains a mystery. They were very grateful to him and were not going to abandon him. He travelled and marched with them on their journey home and ended his days as the beloved figurehead of one of the most controversial campaigns in British military history — the siege of Sevastopol during the Crimean war.

Unfortunately Tom didn't actually survive to a ripe old age; the siege had ended on 9 September 1855, and he died on the last day of the following year. His body was stuffed (*above right*), as was perhaps more the fashion in those times than it is now, and presented to the Royal United Service Institution. It's now permanently in the Royal Army Museum in London.

With acknowledgements to Silent Heroes, an excellent and very readable book by Evelyn le Chene, published 1994 by Souvenir Press of London, ISBN 0 285 63214 0.

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Tom Cat, Confederate mascot

Does he still man the fortifications?



Fort McAllister was part of the defensive ring protecting the Confederate city of Savannah, Georgia, during the American Civil War. Unlike its sister fort, Fort Pulaski, it was built of earthworks, sods and mounds of mud from the nearby Ogeechee river, and these earthen walls were very successful in simply absorbing the cannonballs that the Unionists hurled at them.

This fort therefore held out much longer than the more modern Pulaski, which fell to Union forces in 1862.

All kinds of mascot were adopted by soldiers of both sides in the conflict, to relieve the boredom and rigours of camp life. McAllister's cherished mascot was **Tom Cat**, a large black cat adored by the garrison. He is said to have run back and forth along the defences during battle, dodging the hail of musket fire and cannonballs that flew overhead.

Early in 1863 the Unionists began a series of determined naval assaults on the fort; during the second of those its commander, Major John B. Gallie, was decapitated. A month or so later, on 3 March, Tom's luck ran out when a stray bullet ended his life — he was the only Confederate casualty during seven hours of intensive bombardment on that day. Tom was buried with full military honours, and in the official report of the action his death was communicated to General Beauregard (*see plaque photo below*). His loss was keenly felt by the defenders, but didn't signal their defeat; they held out until near the end of 1864, when the fort fell to the land forces of the unstoppable General Sherman — it was the final hurdle in his 'March to the Sea'.

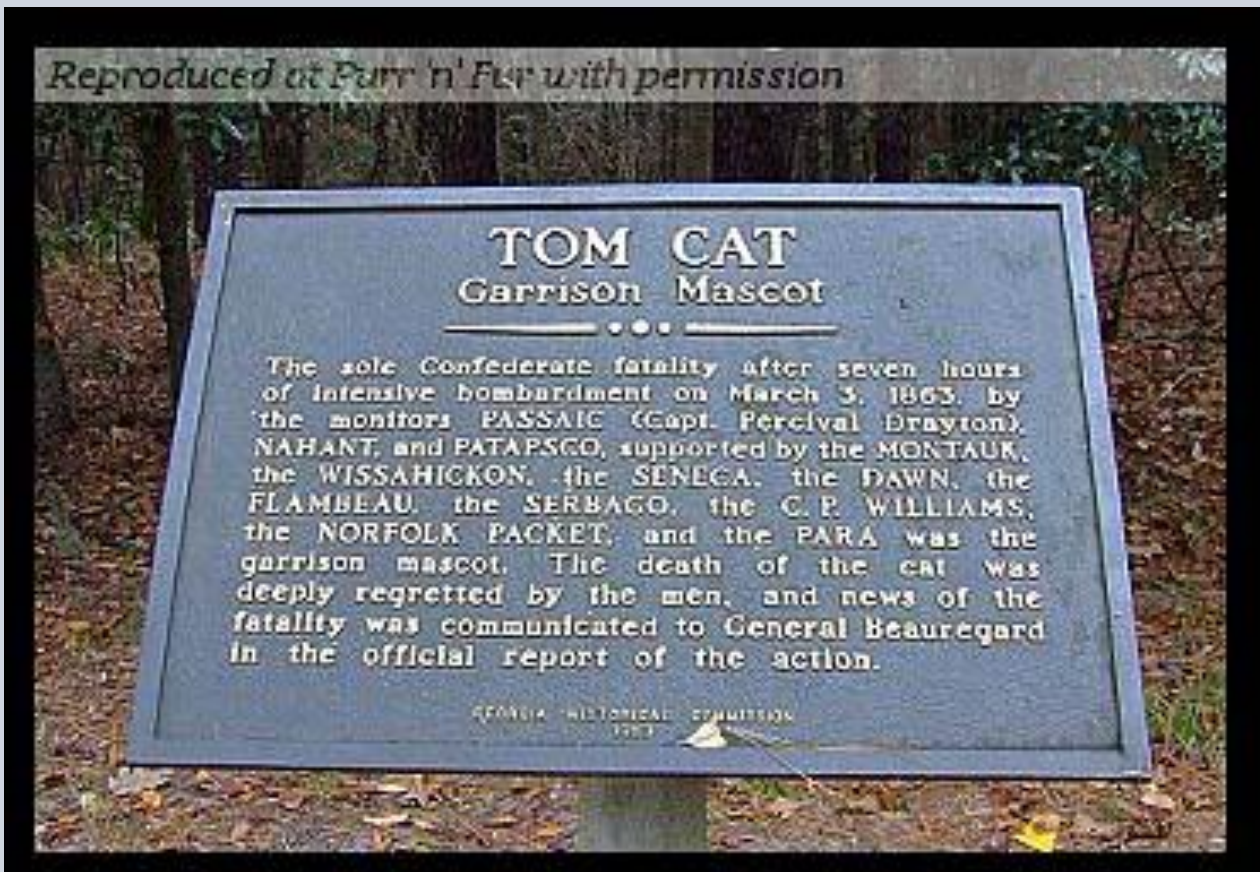
Today Fort McAllister is the best-preserved earthen fortification in the South, following extensive reconstruction in the 1930s by Henry Ford, who took a great interest, actually buying it and using his own money for the refurbishment. Even at that time, workers on the site refused to spend the night there because of strange, unidentified noises heard in the grounds. Today, visitors, staff and re-enactors have all reported seeing a black cat running along the ramparts, in some of the rooms, and peering out towards the river. Others say they have felt a touch on their legs, as though a furry, arched back was rubbing against them. All the staff and administrators insist that there are no real cats living in the park grounds.

Other visitors — and, during one particular incident in the 1960s, also some of the groundsmen — have reported seeing a headless body, in Civil War-era officer's uniform, pacing near the ramparts. It seems that Major Gallie and Tom Cat continue to mount guard at the fort they defended over 150 years ago.

The following photos, taken at Fort McAllister in April 2008, are shown by kind permission of Shawn Allison: there are many more to be seen at her [Flickr pages](#) (*use Edge*).



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Other links for Fort McAllister:

[Fort McAllister Historic State Park](#) (*archived copy*)

[Our Georgia History: Fort McAllister](#) (*archived copy*)

[CivilWarAlbum](#) has more details of the defence of the fort, and many pages of images of this historic site today. (*archived copy*)

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