

No white feathers

Pigeon fanciers flocked to Lancashire at the weekend hoping to make it into the Guinness World Records. The British Homing World Show of the Year saw thousands of visitors go through the doors of the Winter Gardens over the weekend to see some of the world's finest racing and show pigeons. This year's show featured a unique history exhibition in the Empress Ballroom, charting pigeons' involvement in the war efforts, on the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. Show chairman David Trippitt said: "We've had the largest collection of Dicken's Medals, the equivalent of the animals Victoria Cross, they were awarded to 32 racing pigeons after the wars and we had 12." Here the Royal Pigeon Racing Association tells the story of the feathered heroes

“At the outbreak of the Second World War, thousands of Britain's pigeon fanciers gave their pigeons to the war effort to act as message carriers.

During the period of the war nearly a quarter of a million birds were used by the army, the RAF and the Civil Defence Services including the police, the fire service, Home Guard and even Bletchley Park.

Pigeon racing was stopped and birds of prey along the coasts of Britain were culled so that British pigeons could arrive home unhindered by these predators.

There were tight controls on the keeping of pigeons and even rationing for pigeon corn.

Homing pigeons were used not only in Western Europe by British forces but also by American, Canadian, and German forces in other parts of the world during the war – Italy, Greece, North Africa, India and the Middle and Far East.

One pigeon, GI Joe, saved the lives of thousands of British troops who were preparing to take an Italian town after the US Air Force had bombarded the Germans.

However, the British forces found no resistance from the Germans and so entered the town unchallenged.

Unfortunately the US-AF were already en route to



Harald Klusak (from German Pigeon Union) – and Stewart Wardrop (Royal Pigeon Racing Association) with the 12 Dickin medals on the table
Picture: CHRIS SUTTON

bomb the town and with radio contact broken GI Joe flew over a mile a minute (60 mph) back to the base.

He arrived back just in time for the air raid to be called off before the USAF would have bombed our troops.

All RAF bombers and reconnaissance aircraft carried pigeons and, if the aircraft had to ditch, the plane's co-ordinates were sent back with the pigeon to its RAF base and a search and rescue operation was

effected. Thousands of servicemen's lives were saved by these heroic birds that flew often in extreme circumstances.

During the Second World War homing pigeons were seconded into the National Pigeon Service from Britain's fanciers, including one from the Royal Lofts.

One pigeon, Royal Blue, was the first pigeon to bring a message from a force-landed aircraft on the continent.

On October 10 1940 this young bird was released in Holland.

He flew 120 miles in four hours 10 minutes reporting the information regarding the situation of the crew.

In 1943 the Dickin Medal was instituted by Maria Dickin, founder of the PDSA.

Commonly known as the Animal VC, it was awarded to 53 animals, of which 32 were homing pigeons, including Royal Blue.

Pigeons carried their messages either in special message containers on their legs or small pouches looped over their backs.

Quite often pigeons were dropped by parachute in containers to Resistance workers in France, Belgium and Holland.

This was often quite precarious as it was a bumpy landing and very dangerous for the Resistance workers if they were caught with a British pigeon.

Aircrew carried their pigeons in special watertight baskets and containers, in case the aircraft had to ditch into the sea.

Pigeon lofts were built at RAF and army bases but the mobile lofts had to be constructed so that they could

The founder of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, Mrs Maria Dickin, instituted the award, popularly referred to as the Animal VC, and was made only upon official recommendation and was exclusive to the animal kingdom.

One of the most famous pigeons was called White Vision.

It received its Dickin Medal for "delivering a message under exceptionally difficult conditions and so contributing to the rescue of an air crew while serving with the RAF in October 1943".

This hardly tells the story!

A Catalina flying boat had to ditch in the Hebrides at 0820 hrs one morning. Sea rescue operations were hindered by very bad weather and air search was impossible because of thick mist.

At 1700 hrs that afternoon

White Vision arrived at her loft with a message giving the position of the ditched aircraft and as a result the



move easily over land.

The Dickin Medal was awarded for any animal displaying conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during the Second World War and its aftermath.

Of the 53 Dickin Medals presented, 32 went to pigeons.

search was resumed, the aircraft sighted and rescue of the crew effected.

White Vision had flown 60 miles over heavy seas against a headwind of 25 miles per hour with visibility only 100 yards at the place of release and 300 yards at the place of arrival."



DICKIN MEDAL WINNERS

White Vision

Date of Award: 2 December 1943

"For delivering a message under exceptionally difficult conditions and so contributing to the rescue of an Air Crew while serving with the RAF in October 1943."

Winkie

Date of Award: 2 December 1943

"For delivering a message under exceptionally difficult conditions and so contributing to the rescue of an Air Crew while serving with the RAF in February 1942."

Tyke (also known as George)

Pigeon Number 1263 MEPS 43

Date of Award: 2 December 1943

"For delivering a message under exceptionally difficult conditions and so contributing to the rescue of an Air Crew, while serving with the RAF in the Mediterranean in June 1943."

Beach Comber

Pigeon NPS.41.NS.4230

Date of Award: 6 March 1944

"For bringing the first news to this country of the landing at Dieppe, under hazardous conditions in September 1942, while serving with the Canadian Army."

Gustav

Date of Award: 1 September 1944

"For delivering the first message from the Normandy Beaches from a ship off the beach-head while serving with the RAF on 6 June 1944."

Paddy

Date of Award: 1 September 1944

"For the best recorded time with a message from the Normandy Operations, while serving with the RAF in June 1944."

Kenley Lass

Date of Award: March 1945

"For being the first pigeon to be used with success for secret communications from an Agent in enemy-occupied France while serving with the NPS in October 1940."

Navy Blue

Date of Award: March 1945

"For delivering an important message from a Raiding Party on the West Coast of France, although injured, while serving with the RAF in June, 1944."



During the late war many pigeon fanciers voluntarily offered their own services and the use of their birds for special operations. I wish to record my deep appreciation for the valuable services rendered by

J. Prescott Esq.

at a time of grave national danger.

J. J. Lawson
Secretary of State for War

*The War Office,
London,
December, 1945.*

Following Victory in Europe, the Secretary of State for War issued this letter to fanciers who'd contributed to the war effort

Flying Dutchman

Date of Award: March 1945

"For successfully delivering messages from Agents in Holland on three occasions. Missing on fourth mission, while serving with the RAF in 1944."

Dutch Coast

Date of Award: March 1945

"For delivering an SOS from a ditched Air Crew close to the enemy coast 288 miles distance in 7½ hours, under unfavourable conditions, while serving with the RAF in April 1942."

Commando

Date of Award: March 1945

"For successfully delivering messages from Agents in Occupied France on three occasions: twice under exceptionally adverse conditions, while serving with the NPS in 1942."

Royal Blue

Date of award: March 1945

"For being the first pigeon in this war to deliver a message from a forced landed aircraft on the Continent while serving with the RAF in October, 1940." Royal Blue was owned by King George VI at the Royal Lofts, Sandringham.

Ruhr Express

Date of Award: May 1945

"For carrying an important message from the Ruhr Pocket in excellent time, while serving with the RAF in April, 1945."

William of Orange

Date of Award: May 1945

"For delivering a message from the Arnheim Airborne Operation in record time for any single pigeon, while serving with the APS in September 1944."

Scotch Lass

Date of Award: June 1945

"For bringing 38 micro-photographs across the North Sea in good time although injured, while serving with the RAF in Holland in September 1944."

Billy

Date of Award: August 1945

"For delivering a message from a force-landed bomber, while in a state of complete collapse and under exceptionally bad weather conditions, while serving with the RAF in 1942."

Broad Arrow

Date of Award: October 1945

"For bringing important messages three times from enemy occupied country, viz: May 1943, June 1943 and August 1943, while serving with the Special Service from the Continent."

Pigeon NPS.42.NS.2780

Date of Award: October 1945

"For bringing important messages three times from enemy occupied country, viz: July 1942, August 1942 and April 1943, while serving with the Special Service from the Continent."

Pigeon NPS.42.NS.7524

Date of Award: October 1945

"For bringing important messages three times from enemy-occupied country, viz: July 1942, May 1943 and July 1943, while serving with the Special Service from the continent."

Maquis

Date of Award: October 1945

"For bringing important messages three times from enemy occupied country, viz: May 1943 (Amiens) February, 1944 (Combined Operations) and June, 1944 (French Maquis) while serving with the Special Service from the Continent."

Mary

Date of Award: November 1945

"For outstanding endurance on War Service in spite of wounds." Mary survived an attack by a German-kept hawk in France, returning with wounds to her neck and breast, and on another occasion returned with a wing tip shot off. In her final trip she sustained neck muscle damage due to shrapnel; her owner made her a leather collar to hold her head up and immediately retired her. Mary had also survived her loft being wrecked by a bomb during the raids on Exeter in 1942, which had killed many of her fellow pigeons."

Tommy

Date of Award: February 1946

"For delivering a valuable message from Holland to Lancashire under difficult conditions, while serving with NPS in July 1942."

All Alone

Date of Award: February 1946

"For delivering an important message in one day over a distance of 400 miles, while serving with the NPS in August, 1943."

Princess

Date of Award: May 1946

"Sent on special mission to Crete, this pigeon returned to her loft (RAF Alexandria) having travelled about 500 miles mostly over sea, with most valuable information. One of the finest performances in the war record of the Pigeon Service."

Mercury

Date of Award: August 1946

"For carrying out a special task involving a flight of 480 miles from Northern Denmark while serving with the

Special Section Army Pigeon Service in July 1942."

Pigeon NURP.38.BPC.6.

Date of Award: August 1946

"For three outstanding flights from France while serving with the Special Section, Army Pigeon Service, 11 July 1941, 9 September 1941, and 29 November 1941."



GI Joe (above)

Date of Award: August 1946

"This bird is credited with making the most outstanding flight by a USA Army Pigeon in World War II. Making the 20 mile flight from British 10th Army HQ, in the same number of minutes, it brought a message which arrived just in time to save the lives of at least 100 Allied soldiers from being bombed by their own planes."

Duke of Normandy

Date of Award: 8 January 1947

"For being the first bird to arrive with a message from Paratroops of 21st Army Group behind enemy lines on D Day 6 June, 1944, while serving with APS."

Pigeon NURP.43.CC.1418

Date of Award: 8 January 1947

"For the fastest flight with message from 6th Airborne Div. Normandy, 7 June, 1944, while serving with APS."

Pigeon DD.43.T.139 (Australian Army Signal Corps)

Date of award: February 1947

"During a heavy tropical storm this bird was released from Army Boat 1402

which had foundered on Wadou Beach in the Huon Gulf. Homing 40 miles to Madang it brought a message which enabled a rescue ship to be sent in time to salvage the craft and its valuable cargo of stores and ammunition."

Pigeon DD.43.Q.879 (Australian Army Signal Corps)

Date of award: February 1947

"During an attack by Japanese on a US Marine patrol on Manus Island, pigeons were released to warn headquarters of an impending enemy counter-attack. Two were shot down but DD43 despite heavy fire directed at it reached HQ with the result that enemy concentrations were bombed and the patrol extricated."

Cologne

Date of Award: unknown

"For homing from a crashed aircraft over Cologne although seriously wounded, while serving with the RAF in 1943."



A toy showing a German soldier killing a pigeon