

**KRISTA'S MISSION:** to write a picture story book based on WW2 carrier pigeons

by Krista Bell

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For almost a decade I had my own flock of pigeons in my suburban backyard in Melbourne and although I had minimal knowledge, I loved them dearly and was intrigued by their inbuilt GPS that always brought them home to me. Having seen a documentary on SBS TV about army messenger pigeons flying in Europe during WW2, as the author of 21 books for young readers I was fascinated to discover that the Australian Army also used pigeons as war zone communication in WW2. I had thought pigeons always flew back to their birth loft and was amazed to find out the army trained squeakers to fly back to mobile lofts that were moved around the war zone.

I'm a curious person, or appropriately in this case a sticky beak, and once focused on this idea I had to find out more about it. So in May 2004 I went to Canberra to research a picture story book I wanted to write for primary school aged readers about a pigeon flying in WW2 for the Australian Army. I was amazed that at the Australian War Memorial reference library I was allowed to handle precious historical documents about carrier pigeons and I watched an inspiring soundless black and white documentary film which had been made by the army in the early nineteen forties up in northern Queensland. I marveled at gentle way the soldiers (many of whom were pigeon fanciers before the war) handled and trained their charges, some even feeding their favourite birds by mouth.

I was intrigued to discover that hundreds of thousands of pigeons were trained by the army in Australia during the war and that most of those birds had been bred by home breeders. On my return to Melbourne I spoke with several pigeon fanciers, including Charlie Morris of Braybrook, Victoria. Charlie was one such home breeder who donated countless pigeons to the army during the war and I am greatly indebted to Charlie for his generosity in sharing so enthusiastically his memories of those unique times with me.

At the AWM I examined a triplicate notepad made of rice paper that was used by soldiers for writing messages during combat. The first copy would be put in the cylinder attached to the leg of one pigeon, the next copy attached to a second pigeon (in case the first pigeon was shot down and did not get through to headquarters) and the third copy was kept as a record. The AWM also had lots of photos of things like the bakelite cylinders that were put on a pigeon's leg with the message inside, and the cane hampers used to transport the pigeons on the back of motorbikes. As well as giving me all sorts of inspiration for my picture book story, these photos were great reference material for the period details when David Miller came to create his superb paper sculptures that were then photographed to become the illustrations in *Lofty's Mission*.

More research in Canberra revealed that several Australian pigeons had been awarded the Dickin Medal for Bravery (an award originating in England) during WW2 because they had made courageous flights under enemy fire. These pigeons had taken messages from the war zone back to the safety of their mobile lofts, passing on vital information to headquarters and saving many soldiers from certain death. Some of them were seriously wounded, but kept flying. These were the heroes I wanted to commemorate in my picture

book, even though my story is totally made-up and not based on any real person, bird or event.

So my fictional picture story book, **LOFTY'S MISSION**, is a wartime story, set in the early 1940s in suburban Australia. Frank McNamara and his young son Harley breed racing pigeons. When the army asks Frank to supply carrier pigeons for active service in New Guinea, he gives them Harley's special baby bird, Lofty, a six week old squeaker, because he shows the promise of becoming a strong flyer. Harley is devastated as he has bred this bird to be a champion racer. His dad insists that 'everyone has to make sacrifices for the war effort'.

Lofty heads north to be trained by the Army and fly behind enemy lines in New Guinea. Months later, when his platoon is ambushed, Lofty bravely carries a message through heavy enemy fire, sustaining major injuries, but reaching headquarters so that the entire platoon is saved. Meanwhile down south, there is a parallel story. Harley has suffered a case of infantile paralysis and has been hospitalised. Finally back home, Harley has no motivation to walk again and spends each day in bed reading books and watching his dad's pigeons return from their training toss.

But when Harley learns that not only has Lofty won the Dickin Medal for bravery, but that he is safe, can be decommissioned and returned home, Harley finally gets out of bed and walks again, so he can make preparations for his hero's return. Lofty's mission has been twofold: to save his platoon of soldiers up north - and down south to motivate Harley to walk again. When Lofty returns to Harley they aim to create a new dynasty of champion racing pigeons, beginning with Lofty's son, Nifty.

There is a two-page glossary at the end of the book, explaining historical pigeon and army terms chronologically as they appear in the story.

**LOFTY'S MISSION** written by Krista Bell and illustrated by David Miller, is published by Lothian Books in hardback for \$28.99 and is available from bookshops, or if you would like a copy inscribed and signed by Krista please email your order to [kristabell@optusnet.com.au](mailto:kristabell@optusnet.com.au)