

# BRAVE BIRDS

By: PDSA - the UK's leading veterinary charity.  
Additional text and photos courtesy of Australian War Memorial and UK  
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6 YUNGABURRA  
9 KAIRI  
12 ATHERTON

The most famous and the oldest of the charity's awards is the PDSA Dickin Medal. It acknowledges outstanding acts of bravery displayed by animals serving with the Armed Forces or Civil Defence units in any theatre of war, worldwide. The Medal is recognised as the animals' Victoria Cross and is the highest British honour for animal bravery in military conflicts. The medal was instituted in 1943 Maria Dickin.

## Maria Dickin CBE

PDSA owes its foundation to the vision of one woman - Maria Elisabeth Dickin - and her determination to raise the status of animals, and the standard of their care, in society.

During the First World War, [Maria Dickin CBE](#) worked to improve the dreadful state of animal health in the Whitechapel area of London. She wanted to open a clinic where East Enders living in poverty could receive free treatment for their sick and injured animals.



Left: Despite the scepticism of the Establishment, Maria Dickin opened her free 'dispensary' in a Whitechapel basement on Saturday 17th November 1917. It was an immediate success and she was soon forced to find larger premises. Photo PDSA.

Within six years this extraordinary woman had designed and equipped her first horse-drawn clinic and soon a fleet of mobile dispensaries was established. PDSA vehicles soon became a comforting and familiar sight

throughout the country.

With success came increased attention from her critics at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the Ministry of Agriculture. By providing free treatment for animals belonging to the poor, attracting charitable support and by training her own practitioners Maria Dickin was seen as a threat to the establishment. In 1937 she was forced to defend PDSA in a letter to the Royal College: *'If you are so concerned about proper treatment of the sick animals of the poor, open your*

*own dispensaries ... Show owners how to care for their animals in sickness and health. Do the same work that we are doing. Instead of spending your energy and time hindering us, spend it dealing with this mass misery.'*

Soon an agreement was made with the veterinary profession allowing PDSA to continue its work unimpeded. Later, the charity's role was defined by two Acts of Parliament in 1949 and 1956, that continue to govern its activities today.

### **PDSA Dickin Medal: 'the animals' VC'**

During the Second World War (1939-45), PDSA's founder Maria Dickin CBE. was aware of incredible bravery displayed by animals on active service and the Home Front. Inspired by the animals' devotion to man and duty, she introduced a special medal specifically for animals in war.

The PDSA Dickin Medal, - recognised as the animals' Victoria Cross, is awarded to animals displaying conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty while serving or associated with any branch of the Armed Forces or Civil Defence Units.

The Medal, can only be considered on receipt of an official recommendation, was awarded 54 times between 1943 and 1949. The recipients comprised 32 pigeons, 18 dogs, three horses and one cat.

**Right: The Dickin Medal is a large, bronze medallion bearing the words "For Gallantry" and "We Also Serve" all within a laurel wreath. The ribbon is striped green, dark brown and pale blue representing water, earth and air to symbolise the naval, military, civil defence and air forces. Photo PDSA.**

Sixty-two PDSA Dickin Medals have been awarded to date, of which 32 were awarded to pigeons.

The citations on the following Roll Of Honour are a moving and unique insight into the role pigeons have played in the service of man in a time of war.



### **Pigeons - Roll of Honour**

**White Vision** - SURP.41.L.3089 - 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** - NEHU.40.NS.1 - 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."



**Left: USA Army Pigeon GI Joe with his medal. Photo PDSA.**

**Tyke** (also known as **George**) - 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** - 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."



Left: A wireless operator with one of the homing pigeons, which were always carried in case of a forced landing.

Right: 1943  
Two homing pigeons are carried in special containers in case of need.

Photos in this page:  
Flightglobal  
Archive.



**DEMOCRATIC CO-OPERATION :** An air crew of the Royal Dutch Naval Air Service emplaning in an American-built Lockheed Hudson for a patrol with the R.A.F. Coastal Command. Points of interest are, the beam-firing Vickers K gun ; the Williamson oblique camera mounted in the adjacent window, and the basket of pigeons in the charge of the wireless operator. The bulge on the inside of the door contains the collapsible dinghy.

**Gustav** - NPS.42.31066 - 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** - NPS.43.9451 - 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."



Left: 1943, 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Pigeon Section. These baskets were used to convey pigeons to forward areas quickly by motorbike.

Photo:

<http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/058851>

Below : 1941-12. Three birds trained by 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Corps Signals Carrier Pigeon Selection, about to be released on a trial. The birds were obtained from the free French, who used the service with excellent results in the mountains and difficult country.

Photo:

<http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/022224>

**Kenley Lass** - NURP.36. JH.190 - 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** - NPS.41.NS.2862 - 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."

Below:

Photo

<http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/022216>



In order that the Carrier pigeons would not be bruised while being carried by dispatch riders, they were carefully strapped into elastic hammocks which swung freely in the baskets. On release the birds returned to their home lofts.

**Flying Dutchman** – NPS.42. NS.44802 - 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** - NURP.41. A.2164 - 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** - NURP.38.EGU.242 - 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** - NURP.40.GVIS.453 - 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."

**Ruhr Express** - NPS.43.29018 - 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."

Below: Photo <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/UK2489> Plymouth, England. 1945-



01-18. **Aussie** - No. 4112, a blue checker cock pigeon which returned to RAF Station Mount Batten with an SOS message from a ditched Sunderland aircraft of No. 10 Squadron RAAF on 1944-09-16.

**William of Orange** - NPS.42.NS. 15125 - 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** - NPS.42.21610 - Date of Award: June 1945, "For bringing 38 microphotographs across the North Sea in good time although injured, while serving with the RAF in Holland in September 1944."

**Billy** - NU.41.HQ.4373 - 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."



Right: **Stitching one of the wounds inflicted by a hawk. The bird will be fit for service again in a short time.** Photo: <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/085510>



Left: 1944, New Guinea. Feeding captured Japanese pigeons at Lae. It was discovered that the pigeons would feed only off rice. Photo :

<http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/017484>

Below: 1941. Two of the pigeons of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Corps Signals. Careful mating plays an important part in the training of carriers. Photo:

<http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/22222>



**Broad Arrow** - 41.BA.2793 - 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** - NPSNS.42.36392 - 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** - NURP.40.WCE.249 - Date of Award: November 1945, "For outstanding endurance on War Service in spite of wounds."



Right: New Guinea, 1944. A member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Pigeon Section Headquarters demonstrates the special plastic message container attached to the leg of a pigeon.

Photo:

<http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/074799>

**Tommy** - NURP.41.DHZ56 - 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** - NURP.39.SDS.39 - 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** - 42WD593 - 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** - NURP.37.CEN.335 - 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** - USA43SC6390 - 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."

Left: Lincolnshire, England, 1943. The only female squadron leader flying in the RAAF in the UK is 'SQN LDR SNOW WHITE' who was awarded the DFC (Military Cross) by the fellow members of her crew after a trip to Berlin. She is a year-old white pigeon with brown patches, and has been out with the Lancaster Aircraft of no. 460 Squadron RAAF of Bomber Command, based at RAF Station Binbrook, on about one hundred operations, during which she has in three occasions been concerned in rescues, being launched from rubber dinghys. Photo: <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/UK0536>

Right: Plymouth, England. 1945. Perfect wing formation of Aussie, a Blue Checker cock pigeon housed in the pigeon loft at RAF Station Mount Batten. Photo: <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/UK2490>

**Duke of Normandy** - NURP.41.SBC.219 - 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."

**Right: Portrait of mounted carrier pigeon, Blue Bar cock DD43 T139, with Dickin Medal.** This pigeon was awarded the Dickin Medal for gallantry as a result of a flight he undertook through a severe tropical storm near Madang, New Guinea, on 12 July 1945. At the time the pigeon was located at 10 Pigeon Section (Type B) attached to Detachment 55 Port Craft Company, Madang. On that day he carried the following message, from a foundering boat to Madang, flying 40 miles in 50 minutes: 'To: Detachment 55 Australian Port Craft Company, MADANG. From: A.B. 1402. Date: 12.7.45. Engine Failed. Wash on to beach at WADAU owing very heavy seas. Send help immediately. Am rapidly filling with sand. TOO: 0800 - Senders signature - HOLLAND Cpl. TO Liberation 0805 - No. of copies 2. TOR at Loft - 0855'. As a result

of the successful delivery of the message the boat together with valuable stores, ammunition and equipment was salvaged. The bird had previously completed 23 operational flights over a total distance of 1,004 miles. Photo <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/P07772.001>



**Pigeon** - DD.43.Q.879 Blue Chequer cock (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** - NURP39.NPS.144 - Date of Award: unknown, "For homing from a crashed aircraft over Cologne although seriously wounded, while serving with the RAF in 1943."