

D-day 6th June 1944 Australia's Contribution and that of our Feathered Friends

By Paul Gibbs

While we commemorate ANZAC Day each year on the 25th April and remember those that served and paid the ultimate sacrifice at Gallipoli during 1914/15 at the beginning of WW1, and in the Pacific against the Imperial Japanese Forces and against the German Forces in the Middle East during WW2 it is easy sometimes to over look Australia's involvement in the European Campaign, especially during the invasion of Normandy in the Allied Forces bid to defeat the Germans and end the war.

Although the Americans, British and Canadians made up the major number of military personnel made up of some 190,000 sailors, 130,000 soldiers along with 7,000 aircraft and their crews that included bombers, fighters, transport planes and gliders which were used to transport three divisions of airborne paratroopers, a small contingent of Australian personnel had a hand in many of the operations, albeit that our contingent of personnel only amounted to around 3,000.

This as many of you would know was because the bulk of our military personnel were engaged a lot closer to home in fighting the Japanese in the South Pacific region.

The total number of Australian personnel that served with the allied services in the European campaign is sketchy due to many of the personnel being scattered between the various service sectors within the British armed forces.

It is estimated that about 200 Australian sailors served on around 600 navel and merchant navy vessels and that around twenty five Army personnel were among the 130,000 or so military personnel that landed on the beaches of Normandy on D-day with no loss of Australian lives being reported.

By far the biggest contingent of Australian personnel (around 2500) served with both the RAAF and RAF in various squadrons that included fighter, bomber, transport and glider units. In all a total of fourteen Australians were killed on D-day – 2 serving with the RAN and 12 with the RAAF. In all there were over 200,000 Allied forces casualties and around 240,000 German casualties.

One of the Australian Airmen killed during the D-day campaign was Pilot Officer Fredrick James Knight whose grave is located in the Bayeux War Cemetery (refer to attached photo) Fredrick was a pilot in NO 460 Squadron and the only Australian

member of his Lancaster Bomber crew. All seven airmen were killed on the 7th of June 1944. Fredrick was only 21 years of age.



The other photo attached is of the Australian members of NO 196 Squadron RAF with one of the units Stirling aircraft in the background. This squadron was involved in towing guilders to Normandy on D-day.



In the lead up to the invasion there was no radio communications between naval vessels, aircraft and Head Quarters back in the UK. As a result the humble homing pigeon was used to relay important updates to HQ. In all there were some 7,000 pigeons used during the D-day operations.



The first news report of the D-day landings came via a pigeon named "Gustav", a RAF homing pigeon released by the Reuters news agency correspondent Montague Taylor. The message read - *"We are just twenty miles or so off the beaches. First assault troops landed 0750. Signal says no interference from enemy gunfire on beach....Steaming steadily in formation. Lightnings, Typhoons, Fortresses crossing since 0545. No enemy aircraft seen"*.

It took Gustav 5 hours and 16minutes to cover the 150 miles across the English Channel to his RAF loft at Thorney Island in Hampshire. For his effort Gustav was

awarded the Dickin Medal on September 1, 1944. The citation read – *“For delivering the first message from the Normandy Beaches from a ship off the beach-head while serving with the RAF on June 6, 1944”*.

In all there were four pigeons that included Gustav that were awarded Dickin Medals for delivering timely messages throughout “Operation Overlord” (the D-day operation co-word).

These four pigeons were:

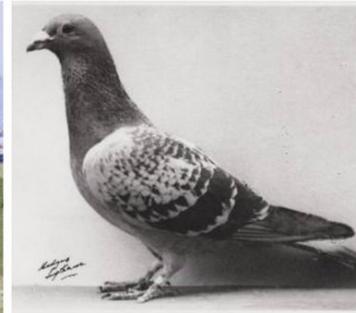
Gustav, a Blue Checker Pied NPS-42-31066. Bred by F.E. Jackson, Cosham.
Date of Award – September 1, 1944. For delivering the first message from the Normandy Beaches from a ship off the beach head while serving with the RAF On the 6th of June 1944.

Paddy, (Colour unknown) NPS-43-9451. Bred by A.S. Hughes, North Ireland.
Date of Award – September 1, 1944. For the best recorded time with a message from the Normandy Operations, while serving with the RAF in June 1944.

Navy Blue, a Blue Bar NPS-41-NS-2862. Bred by the Royal Air Force.
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.

Duke of Normandy, a Blue Checker NURP-41-SBC-219. Bred by G. Noterman, Shepherbs Bush.
Date of Award – January 8, 1947. For being the first pigeon to home from paratroops behind the German lines on D-day in adverse weather after five days detained in a small container.

The PDSA Dickin Medal is awarded to any animal displaying conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. Of the 53 Dickin Medals presented during World War Two, 32 were presented to pigeons. In all it is estimated that nearly 250,000 pigeons were used by the Army, the RAF and Civil Defence Services during WW11.



It is little mentioned or reported that during WW11 all Bomber Crews and many other Military Aircraft always carried with them two homing pigeons in case they were shot down to alert rescue aircraft/naval vessels as to their last known position as to help facilitate their rescue. (Refer to photos showing Air Crew members holding homing pigeons).



Over the years there have been many documentaries and war movies made that depict some of the greatest WW11 battles, to name a few – “A Bridge Too Far” and two of the most widely known based on the landings at Normandy – “The Longest Day” and “Saving Private Ryan” where the humble homing pigeon unfortunately never got a mention.

It's a shame that the true and complete story never seems to be told. Without the pigeons contribution many more lives would certainly have been lost.

This year will mark 74 years since the Normandy landings and the beginning of the end of the Second World War, so on June the 6th spare a thought to the many on both sides of the fence who paid the ultimate sacrifice and to our "Feathered Friends" for their contribution as well.

In closing I would like to quote a line from what I believe is one of the greatest songs ever written – "Imagine" by John Lennon, who wrote – ***"Imagine all the people living life in peace"***. (If only. Rest in peace JL).