

National War Animals Day

By Paul Gibbs

National War Animals Day (Purple Poppy Day) has only been recognised and celebrated in Australia since the 24th of February 2020, while in many other countries around the world they have recognised and remembered the important role that many animals played especially during WW1 and WW2 for many years.



This article is a follow up from one I wrote last year that covered the opening ceremony of the National War Animal Memorial Garden located in the grounds adjacent to the Australian War Memorial administration building in Canberra. Those that have read this article would remember it along with the wonderful photos of a pigeon release along with the Signal Corps banner that was taken on the steps at the entrance of the Australian War Memorial.

Well, twelve months on and my wife Helen and I travel to Canberra once more to meet up with several other pigeon fanciers along with their partners that included the President of the ANRPB, Greg Kakoschke and his wife Stephanie, ANRPB Director Stephen Shears and partner Sue and well-known pigeon personality Grant Patterson and his wife Kaye along with several local fanciers from the Canberra Combine Pigeon Club.



The occasion was of course to be there to represent all past pigeon fanciers and their birds that contributed so much during times of world conflict, and also those too that were involved with other animals during these times, dog handlers and their dogs, horses, camels and many others that are listed and recognised as have being indispensable.

Unfortunately due to Covid-19, the pigeon display that had been planned some months earlier was not able to be shown in its interiority. Originally most of the pigeon related items that are usually just kept in the AWM archives were not available for display as the space and time required to set up such a display was hampered by Covid restrictions. This combined with only a limited number of visitors that had to register on line before being able to gain access was deemed to not warrant the effort in putting together a large display for only a few days and limited visitors. This said, we were informed that “should” Covid-19 be under control and restrictions eased, then next years 2022 “National War Animals Day”, especially with regards to all the pigeon memorabilia will be on display for everyone to view.



The two days we spent in Canberra, especially at the AWM was still worthwhile, not only to catch up with people not seen since last year, but to also spend a day walking through the Memorial, viewing and taking in all the other exhibit's.

Over the last few years there has been extensive alterations and additions to the facilities at the Australian War Memorial and it is a must visit for all Australians at least once in their lives. Comfortable walking shoes are a must, and to really make it worthwhile allow two days.

Next year's National War Animals Day will be on the 24th February which will be a Thursday and I would encourage not only pigeon fanciers to attend, but all their friends and family members. For pigeon fanciers at this time of year there's not much happening with regards your pigeons breeding should have finished, training should not have commenced, with the birds having well and truly started their moult. Talk to family and club members, maybe hire a mini bus and enjoy a relaxing and educational few days.



The Memorial Garden is very new, and as such the sculptures/monuments have been done and presented in a very modern way. Readers of my previous article would be familiar with the plaque dedicated to the service provided by Australian pigeons during WW2 and to complement this article in recognition of some of the other animals I have included two other photos and a little about them so that they may be better understood.

The first one is dedicated to Military Working Dogs and is called the “Circle into Sleep”, the memorial features 37 paw prints cast in bronze laid out in a spiral, representing the pattern dogs make before they lay down to sleep. The centre of this memorial has a raised tear shaped granite stone made from an off-cut of a memorial created more than 10 years ago for animals in war.



Below this stone are the ashes of “Aussie”, a Labrador that served four deployments with the Australian Armed Forces in Afghanistan and the Solomon Islands before he retired, dying of old age in 2017, aged 16.

The second monument included in this article is one honouring horses that served so gallantry, both as horses used by the Australian Light Horse Unit and as transport/pack horses. Horses along with dogs, probably the most well-known of animals in most peoples minds that were used by the armed forces in WW1 and WW2.

The horse monument is made of metal from the remains of a monument damaged at the fall of Beersheba in the Middle East, and has been mounted on a circular granite stone pillar. It depicts the pain, suffering and death that many horses endured during times of conflict.



Overseas fanciers, looking to get away from the cold of the northern hemisphere at this time of year (if visiting Australia) should also take up the opportunity, as apart from a visit to the AWM there's lots to see and enjoy in and around Canberra.

The day concluded, (for those staying to the close of the AWM), with a sombre wreath laying ceremony with the ANRPB President, Greg Kakoschke laying a wreath on behalf of the pigeon fraternity at the base of the Pool of Remembrance located in front of the dome where the

Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is laid to rest. Either side of the Pool of Remembrance was lined with a Guard of Honour represented by members of the Royal Australian Navy who looked resplendent in their white Navy Uniforms.

Prior to the playing of the last post, Colonel Frank Colin of the Australian Army gave a very interesting and detailed account of an Australian Army Soldier that was attached to the Camel Corp in the Middle East during WW2 a story that brought home many of the traumas encountered by this particular individual.



Hopefully in years to come, on the 24th February, they will have another speaker that may give an account of dogs and their handlers, horses and their handler/trainers, or maybe we will be lucky and it may be pigeons and their handlers.

The playing of the Last Post is always one that evokes both sadness and pride for many individuals of which I am one, and as it was remembrance day for National War Animals I think it was a fitting conclusion to the day.

For those that may wish to view the closing ceremony and the playing of the last post you can do so via the following youtube link – <http://youtu.be/wiaDTWJH2x8>

In keeping with the content of this article, I would like to close with a quote by the late Sir Winston Churchill who once said - ***“A nation that fails to honour its heroes, soon will have no heroes to honour”***.