Pigeons in war

Transcript

Hello, my name is Joanna, welcome to the Australian War Memorial. I'm here in Canberra which is beautiful Ngunnawal country. I'd like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal elders both past and present, and also acknowledge the elders of the land on which you're joining us today.

Today we're going to go on a short tour to find out about the role of one special pigeon during the Second World War.

This is a bird called Q, who worked with 1 Australian Pigeon Section. Q was given to the Army by a Victorian breeder, to help the war effort during the Second World War. Carrier pigeons like Q, had messages attached to their legs.

Let's head in to the galleries, to look at some of the places where pigeons were working.

Pigeons served in the Pacific and encountered tough conditions. There could be thick jungle, tropical storms, and lots of loud gunfire.

Q was sent to assist our American allies, as they were trying to recapture Manus Island, just north of New Guinea. The American soldiers were creeping through the jungle, trying to find where the Japanese soldiers were hiding. They took a radio and a basket of pigeons with them. The Americans were spotted by the Japanese, and a big fight broke out. The radio wasn't working, and so the soldiers released the pigeons, with messages calling for help. While some of the pigeons didn't make it, little Q flew 48 kilometres back to the base to deliver the message. Help was sent, and the patrol was saved.

Q was awarded a special medal for brave animals, called the Dickin Medal. Here you can see my pigeon is wearing that same medal. I wonder if you were to design a medal for animals in war, what sort of symbols, words, or colours you would use?

Here at the Australian War Memorial, we have several sculptures and memorials dedicated to animals in war. You can see a donkey, a dog, and this horse head that is made from bronze.

In 2009, the Animals in War Memorial designed by artist Steven Holland, was installed in the Sculpture Gardens. This was a project between the Australian War Memorial and the RSPCA, to remember the roles that animals have played during times of war.

The bronze horse head has an interesting history too. It used to be part of a Memorial in Egypt, designed by Charles Web Gilbert in 1932. In 1956, the Memorial was destroyed by rioters, but this piece survived, and was returned to Australia.

Right next to this memorial, a plaque was added in 2019 to also remember pigeons in war. It says "Commemorating the service of the many thousands of Australian pigeons and their handlers that helped the Australian Corps of Signals maintain communications during the Second World War".

Now when people see these memorials in the gardens, they can take a moment to remember all animals who have served. Today, we also have live pigeons that visit the Memorial. In 2019, we had a resourceful little pigeon who was taking the poppies from the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Solider, and using them to build a nest high up in the Hall of Memory. The pigeon laid an egg in the poppy nest, which hatched shortly afterwards.

Craft instructions

Today I'm going to show you how to make your own pigeon. Here are the materials that you'll need:
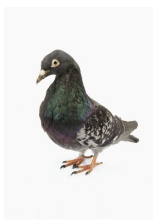
- Pencil
- Pigeon template
- Scissors
- Glue
- Blank paper
- Something to colour in with (textas, pencils, paint etc)

1. Colour in the pigeon pieces

2. Cut out the two pigeon pieces and the small container

3. Glue the pigeon pieces together

4. Trace your hands on the blank piece of paper. These will be the wings of the pigeon

5. Colour in the wings and cut them out

6. Make a 1-2 cm fold on the top of your hand pieces

7. Put some glue along the folds (wings) and attach these to the pigeon

8. You might also like to glue the container to the pigeon's leg. This was used to carry a message

And here we have our finished pigeon. You might even like to make a medal for your pigeon, just like Q would have received.

I hope you have enjoyed just a quick look at one of the stories that we have here at the Australian War Memorial. Bye!

Images from the Memorial's collection

Dickin medal winning pigeon, known as "Q", 1943, RELAWM30792
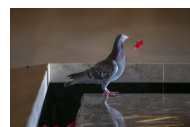

Charles Gilbert Web, Steven Holland, Bertram Mackennal, Paul Montford, and Kell & Denson Stoneworks Pty Ltd, *Animals in war memorial*, (2009, stainless steel, bronze, concrete and granite, 237 x 285 272.2 cm, AWM ART93929)

Ceremony to commemorate animals in war, Canberra, 2009.
AWM PAIU2009/060.017

Horses attend the ceremony for animals in war, Canberra, 2009.
AWM PAIU2009/060.05

Pigeon takes a poppy from the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier, Canberra, 2019.
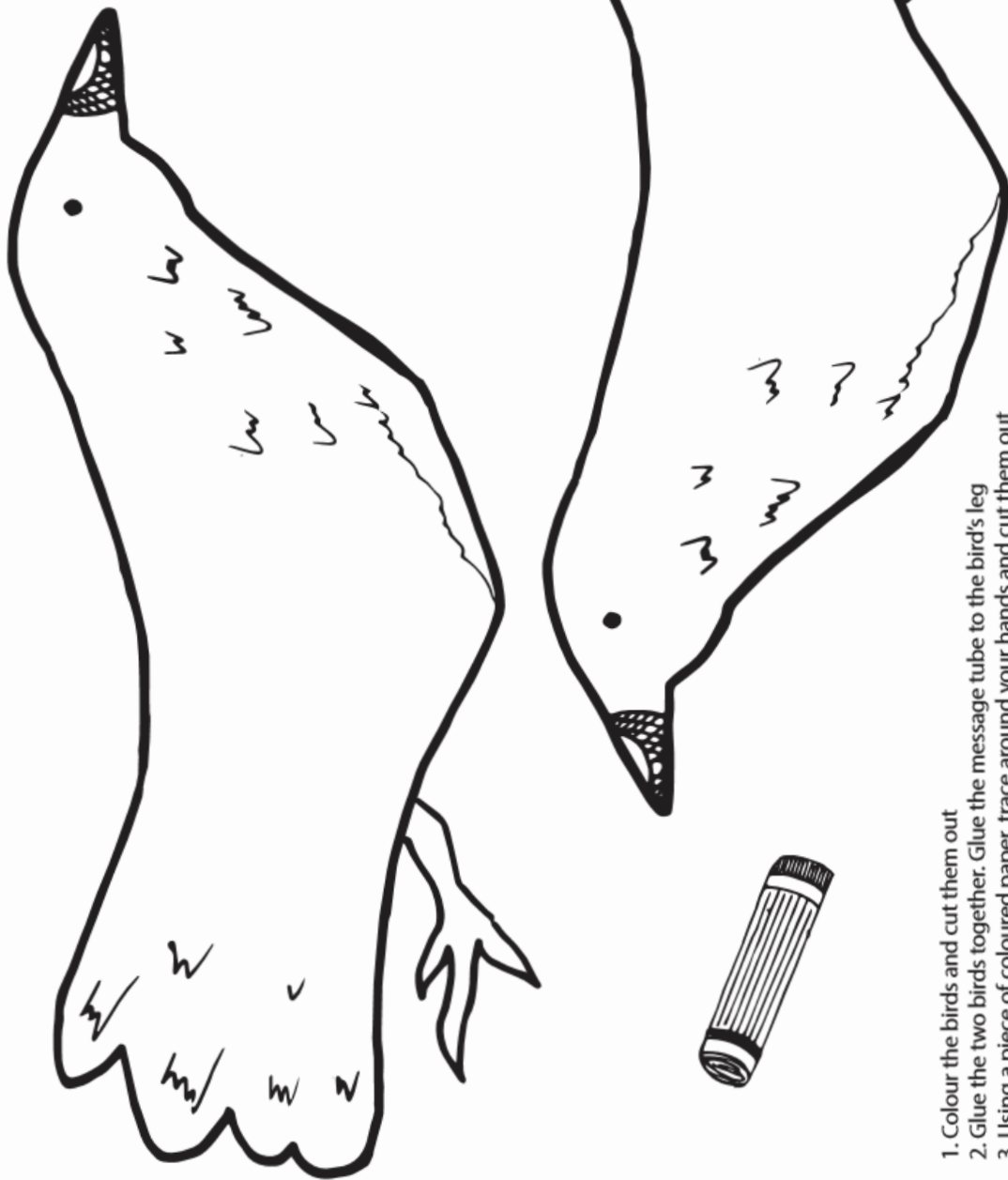AWM2019.4.218.5

Pigeon sitting in a poppy nest, Canberra, 2019.
AWM2019.4.226.4

Baby pigeon, Canberra, 2019.
AWM2019.4.256.2

Pigeon template

1. Colour the birds and cut them out
2. Glue the two birds together. Glue the message tube to the bird's leg
3. Using a piece of coloured paper, trace around your hands and cut them out
4. Glue the palms of the hands on the sides of the birds