

Free as a bird



‘My grandfather was a signaller in the First World War and used pigeons to send messages,’ said Paul.

‘Really? How did that work?’ said Barry.

‘They carried pigeons in a basket on their back, put the message in a canister and strapped it to the bird’s leg. Then they released them in pairs and hoped the Germans didn’t shoot them or the hawks attack; the hawks were trained to attack. When they arrived ‘home’ a bell rang, the message retrieved, and sent to the right person,’ said Paul.

Paul and Barry met at High School and made a point of catching up for the ANZAC Day match at the MCG. But this was 2016, the 100th anniversary of the 1916 game where soldiers played in London. Barry flew in from Adelaide and they met outside Gate 2 before making their way to their fold-down seats. Paul always had a Camel lit. He had shorn grey hair and yellow teeth from years of smoking. He managed a paint store, two cans of VB from home, married late in life and inherited a

teenage stepdaughter who talked back. Barry was not a smoker but usually stayed until last drinks. He ran his own business and had travelled overseas for 35 years. He did not care that his team was not playing, he just loved footy, his friends, and being at the MCG. After Barry's first child was born, he put their names on the MCC waiting list. She learnt to sing, 'It's a Grand old Flag' before, 'Twinkle, Twinkle,' and now they go to the Grand Final together.

Paul and Barry had arrived in time to watch the commemorative celebrations where the pigeons and seagulls were still freely strutting and pecking unaware of the ensuing battle. They stood for the last post and the minute silence held.

'Where was he posted?' asked Barry.

The siren blared and the balled bounced, the battle had begun.

'He was shipped to St Yves, Belgium, 3rd Division late 1916. My grandfather told me he strapped a camera to the pigeon's chest to get photos of Germans' locations and numbers,' said Paul.

'That's crazy,' said Barry.

‘Yeah, that nearly got my grandfather caught. Snipers watched for pigeons and projected back to release locations. It may have been the reason for the pre-empted gassing in the Wood, who knows,’ said Paul.

There was a clash of bodies high in the air and then stumbling, fumbling, and running. The action was fierce and fast, one way then another, ‘*go Pies*’, ‘*come on you Bombers*,’ ‘*Gooooooooo ...*,’ ‘*What was that for you white maggot?*’ and ‘*baaaaaalllllll*,’ the all-encompassing growl from the bleachers. Enormous flags waved side to side behind the sticks and the roar deafening as the umpire signaled a goal.

The offensive was planned for the 7th of June, 1917. They had miners from Australia, Britain and Canada tunneling for two years, heading for the German frontline. The plan was to pack them with explosives and detonate at 3:10am to gain control of Messines Ridge. The Germans knew something was about to happen and at 11pm on the 6th of June, shelled the Wood, a critical location killing a mass of Allied troops. If the shrapnel did not hit you, the gas would kill you, or worse.

The pigeons moved out of the way as the action approached. Sometimes they ran, other times flew a little way and if the action kept coming, flew up high but this

time a bird got smacked by the ball and the stadium heaved, ‘ooooooooohhhh.’ The bird somersaulted in mid-air and dropped to the ground. He was on the fifty-metre line, so the umpire blew his whistle and stopped play.

‘Who’s responsible for the wildlife?’ said Paul.

The umpire cleared the area for the Security guy to collect the bird but before he could get there, it fluttered, flipped, and stood on its wobbly red legs. The pink and green opalescence flickered around its neck as its Egyptian head movement commenced and flew off to the cheer of 100,000 fans.

The focus now was on surviving the next four hours. If the armies were not in place for the offensive, the whole mission would fail. It was a hot steamy night and gas masks made it hard to see. They had box-respirators strapped to their chests, ammunition, guns, and some carried equipment. There were fumes and dust and officers had to remove their masks to direct troops and keep their regiments together. The gas shells kept on coming, whirring, and whining before exploding. Men were falling and those that could, continued to the trenches. At 3:09am the men were on high alert. They were waiting for the rumbling explosion to tell them that the battle

had begun. There was an almighty burst of flames and dirt that shot up into the night sky before shuddering back to earth. Thousands of Germans had been wiped out.

‘He told me about being gassed, having to carry heavy box-respirators and that they lost pigeons but successfully took Messines Ridge early on the 7th of June. He released pigeons at daybreak with news of shelling and casualties. Which reminds me; King George used pigeons to get updates as well,’ said Paul.

Half time at the footy, Paul and Barry stood up.

‘Pie?’ said Barry.

‘Yeah, that might warm me up,’ said Paul.

After Barry left to get food the kid behind him started kicking the seat. Paul put up with it expecting the dad to say something but soon turned to the kid and said, ‘Please stop.’

The dad, hearing this chimed in, ‘Stop that, Ben.’

‘Collingwood’s looking good,’ said Barry as he handed the pie to Paul.

‘Cheers. Yeah, bugger,’ said Paul,

‘I thought pigeons were a pest, don’t they call them rats of the sky?’ said

Barry.

‘Well we caused the problem. People took them when they emigrated, put them in dovecotes, farmed them for meat and now people race them. And the façade of city buildings is like the rock cliffs where they came from. There’s food and not many hawks, so as far as pigeons are concerned, a city is the place to be.’ said Paul.

‘Was he wounded?’ said Barry.

‘His folks gave him a ring when he enlisted, and it got caught on a hook as he jumped out the back of a truck – ripped off his finger. And that was before he got to the front line. He mentioned a couple of flesh wounds from hot bullets but lucky really, not that he told me much. The mud must have been bad though ‘cause he mentioned how it stuck to his boots, trucks got bogged, and it was hard to stay dry in the trenches - with the rats.’ said Paul

‘Cooooooooollingwooooood!’ echoed around the ground.

‘Who’s down?’ said Paul.

‘I think it’s Collingwood’s Ruckman - here comes the stretcher. I can’t watch when their leg goes the wrong way,’ said Barry.

The ANZAC Day medal is awarded to the best on-ground player that displays the ANZAC spirit. A splatter of red and black Essendon players stood, crouched, and

wandered in a contained area distinct from the black and white of Collingwood. Red and black drained down veins of the stands as Essendon supporters filed out, like blood leaving the body. The medal was awarded to the Collingwood halfback Flanker who continually repelled Essendon Bomber's advances.

Paul and Barry left their seats to the chorus of, 'Good old Collingwood forever,' and walked through the parkland toward the city.

'My grandfather told me Australian pigeons were awarded medals, they had enlistment numbers and were part of the infantry. Cher Ami was famous in World War One for helping a group of American soldiers get a message to their army who were firing on them. She got hit by a sniper, recovered to deliver the message but was covered in blood when she arrived. They saved her but she lost a leg. After she died, they stuffed her and put her on display in the Smithsonian in Washington with the French medal, Croix de Guerre,' said Paul.

'Never heard of that,' said Barry.

'In the Second World War, Australian pigeons were useful for getting messages over mountains and sections of ocean where radio communication wasn't.

An Australian pigeon, DD battled a tropical storm to get 'home' delivering the

location of the ship which saved the ship, crew, and cargo. The Australian War Museum has the medals and plaques to War Pigeons on display,' said Paul.

'Well, we had a relative that ended up in Changi as a P.O.W. I remember mum saying she was not allowed to walk behind him. He enlisted - probably never left the country town he was born in – of course everyone knew if you were not helping out. Anyway, the poor bastard shot himself after being home for about six months. His gravestone has the rising sun symbol,' said Barry.

'It's a mongrel of a thing,' said Paul.

'Young and Jackson?' said Barry as they continued walking toward the city talking about football and their families.

Sitting side on to the life size nude of Chloe they began to plan the next football weekend and discuss their hopes for their teams.

'Any games for the Dees in Adelaide?' said Paul.

'Yeah one, August. Hawks are looking good again this year, we're fucked as usual,' said Barry.

Paul lifted the beer to his lips, tipped his head back and a blue rubber bracelet appeared on his wrist. It read LEST WE FORGET.