

Inside the Story



DURING THE LONDON BLITZ OF WWII,

thousands of homing pigeons enlisted by the British Services transported messages across enemy lines, carrying the promise of salvation for a country and two orphans. Now with compassionate insight, beautiful detail and meticulous research, Alan Hlad illuminates mostly-forgotten corners of WWII history, conjuring a deeply moving wartime experience from a time when hope truly was...

the thing with feathers.



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The History Behind the Story

anyone crack the pigeon's wartime message?

Deaths Anniversary

LONDON (Reuters) - A World War Two code found snipped to the leg of a dead pigeon stuck in a chimney for the last 70 years may never be broken, a British intelligence agency said on Friday.

The bird was found by a man in Surrey, southern England while he was cleaning out a disused fireplace at his home earlier this month.

A group of five letters each, was inside a red waxer sealed envelope at his home earlier this month.

...stumped code-breakers from Government ... electronic intelligence.

The New York Times

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2012

A Bird Skeleton, a Code and, Maybe, a Top Secret

By ALAN COWELL

It took an owner for decades. It was at the process. At that point, a release about, read for a head-hunt mission. ...

...decades after the fact. ... military carrier pigeon. ... the bird's secret message. ... a member of ...

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News

23 Nov 2012

Coded carrier pigeon message baffles experts 70 years on

A carefully crafted message sent by pigeon remains a mystery after intelligence officials admit defeat and appeal for help from former code

ABC News

Carrier pigeon's skeleton sparks WWII code mystery

... skeleton sparks WWII code mystery

RIDDLE OF PIGEON'S WWII NOTE

Sorry, I haven't a code

INTELLIGENCE experts have been left stumped by a secret World War II message found on a dead pigeon's leg.

... message found on a dead pigeon's leg.

... message found on a dead pigeon's leg.

CAN YOU CRACK THE CODED?

... message found in capsule attached to bird

... message found in capsule attached to bird

spies unable to crack coded message from WWII carrier pigeon

Reliable War Messengers

Message is hidden and ...

... message from WWII carrier pigeon



INSPIRED BY REAL EVENTS...

Through Operation Columba during WWII, British Services enlisted over 200,000 homing pigeons to carry coded messages across enemy lines and into Nazi-occupied France.

In 2012, newspapers across the world reported that a man renovating an old house in Surrey, England had discovered the remains of a homing pigeon along with a tiny capsule containing a vital coded message—one that has yet to be deciphered by code breakers around the world even today...

from a time when hope truly was... the thing with feathers.



B&W image of man in plane holding pigeon: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205212714>
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Feathers & Hope



Homing pigeons were used extensively in World War II. In fact, “Source Columba” (later in the war referred to as Operation Columba) was the actual code name for when Britain dropped 16,000 homing pigeons into German-occupied France and the Netherlands in the autumn of 1940 as a method for locals to provide intelligence to Britain.

The war pigeons were placed in small cages with an attached parachute. To transport them, the Royal Air Force flew risky missions deep into enemy territory. Inside each of the cages was paper, a pencil, and instructions written in French. It was the hope of British services that some of the pigeons would end up in the hands of French Resistance, who would write intelligence on the paper, and then place it inside a small canister attached to the bird's leg. Once released, the pigeon would fly home to its loft, hundreds of miles away.



B&W image of birds being released from plane:
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205197484>
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A Note from Alan Hlad, Author of *The Long Flight Home*

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

In 2012, I became captivated by a British news report about a man who made an extraordinary discovery while renovating an abandoned house in the Surrey countryside. In its chimney, he found the skeletal remains of a homing pigeon. Attached to its leg was a small canister that contained a coded message that had been written during World War II—one that has yet to be deciphered by cryptologists around the world.

Did you know that homing pigeons played an important role in World War II? I must admit, I knew little—prior to conducting research for this book—about pigeon fanciers or the heroism of their war pigeons. But as I investigated this news story, I was surprised to learn that homing pigeons were used extensively in World War II. In fact, the National Pigeon Service, a volunteer civilian organization in Britain, delivered over 200,000 war pigeons to British services between 1939 and 1945.

There are several theories for the extraordinary navigational abilities of homing pigeons, including one belief that they can detect the Earth's magnetic field lines to find their way home. Pigeons live in groups and both parents raise their nestlings. I simply like to believe that homing pigeons are devoted to family, and they will go to great lengths to find their way home.

While the story of Susan and Ollie is fictional, the novel is based on real historical events, which I strived to accurately weave into the timeline of this tale. The setting of this novel takes place during the early stages of the war, a despairing time for Britain. In June 1940, the British evacuated over 300,000 Allied troops from the beaches and harbor at Dunkirk, and Hitler's army conquered France in 46 days. The outlook for Britain and the Allied forces appeared grim, especially with the United States refusing to join the war. Matters grew worse a few months later when Germany commenced a massive bombing campaign against Britain, which would result in immense destruction and the deaths of 43,000 civilians. I will forever be inspired by the resiliency of the British people who endured eight months of relentless bombing—from September 1940 to May 1941. In addition to the valiant efforts of war pigeons and their keepers, it is my hope that this story will honor the men, women, and children who perished in the Blitz.

I often wonder what is written on the indecipherable message, carried by the war pigeon that was found in the Surrey chimney. Maybe it contains information about Operation Sea Lion, code name for Hitler's plan to invade Britain. Perhaps it is a last-ditch communication from a lone British soldier, trapped behind enemy lines, or like *The Long Flight Home*, the encrypted note is far more than military intelligence. Until the code is broken, I like to believe the message will someday reveal—despite the tragedy of war—that hope is never truly lost.

All the best,

Alan Hlad

Duchess

The bird, unique with its glowing purplish-green neck plume, more appropriate for a peacock than a pigeon, fluttered to the floor and waddled to Susan's feet.

"I'm afraid I've spoiled you." Susan poured feed into her hand and kneeled. Duchess pecked at the grains.

The touch of the beak tickled Susan's palm. She knew she shouldn't be hand-feeding a pigeon—it wasn't the Pigeon Service's protocol, or her grandfather's—and would no doubt cause problems if Duchess were put into service. But this bird was different. All because a feral cat had managed to scratch its way under the door and take the lives of Bertie's prized racing pigeons, Skye and Islay.

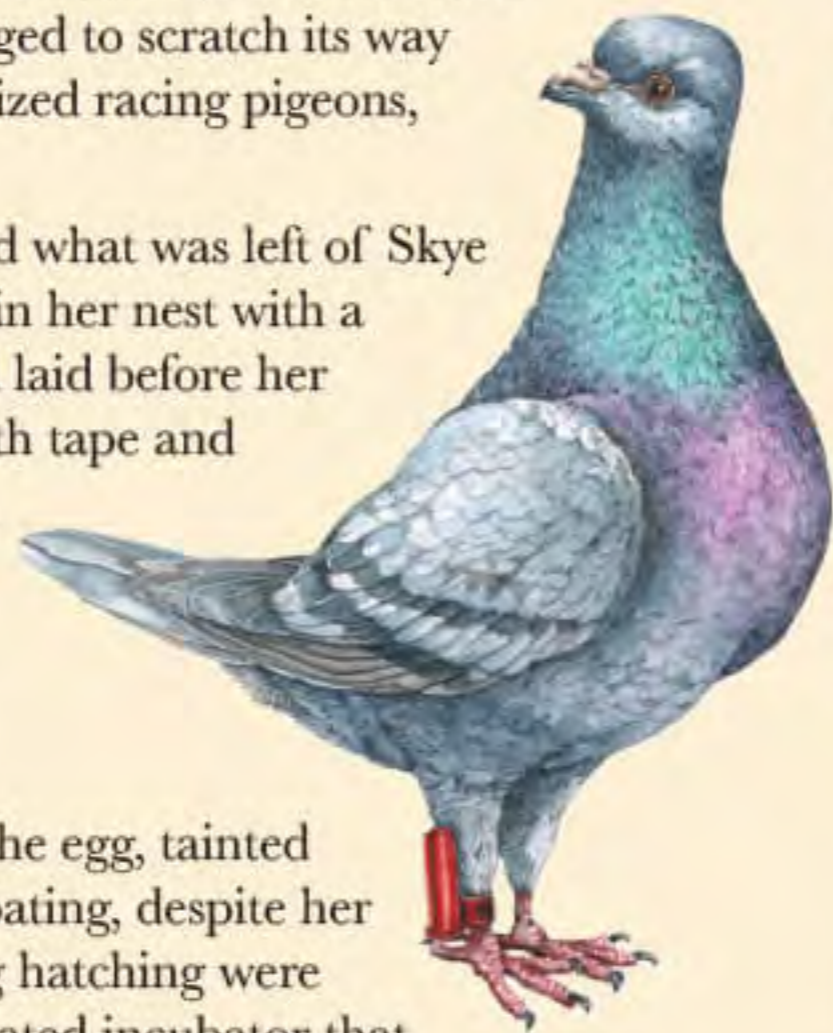
Three years earlier, Susan and Bertie had found what was left of Skye behind the grain barrel. They had found Islay in her nest with a severely injured wing, sitting on an egg she had laid before her attack. They had tried to repair Islay's wing with tape and splinters of wood, but she was too weak to eat, and sat feebly on her egg for five days before she passed. They had buried her in one of Bertie's tobacco boxes, next to Skye near the edge of Epping Forest.

When none of the other pigeons would sit on the egg, tainted from the feline tragedy, Susan insisted on incubating, despite her grandfather's belief that the chances of the egg hatching were extraordinarily slim, especially without a calibrated incubator that they could not afford. Stubborn like her grandfather, Susan retrieved a blue ceramic bowl, once used by her grandmother to eat oatmeal. She warmed the bowl with water from the teakettle to establish a good base temperature, then delicately wrapped the egg in a lightly moistened towel and placed it inside. Setting the bowl under Bertie's desk lamp, she adjusted the distance to reach the ideal temperature by using a medical thermometer, which she had tested by sticking it under a nesting pigeon.

For two weeks and two days, Susan rotated the egg every eight hours and sprinkled drops of water onto the towel to keep the proper humidity. And despite the odds of having to bury the egg next to its parents, the egg quivered early on a Sunday morning. Susan and her grandfather skipped church, pulled up chairs, and watched for three hours as the egg slowly cracked open. As church bells rang over Epping to release their congregations, a shriveled hatchling poked its way into the world.

It had been a miracle, but Susan knew that this hatchling still had a slim chance of survival without the aid of her parents' pigeon milk. Undeterred, she took to grinding seed into paste and feeding the hatchling by hand.

Within a few days, the hatchling was



An Extraordinary Bird

able to stand, unfurl its wings, and peck. One week later, it was eating feed with the others in the loft. And Susan named her Duchess, despite her grandfather's fondness for naming his racing pigeons after remote Scottish land masses, none of which they had ever visited.

Duchess had grown into something extraordinary. And it wasn't just her looks, even though her neck plume shimmered like mother of pearl. It was the bird's intelligence—or odd behavior, as her grandfather believed—that made her stand out among the flock. While homing pigeons were trained by the reward of food, Duchess seemed to be driven by the need to understand the world around her, a strange sense of curiosity hidden behind her golden eyes. Instead of joining the group, Duchess was content to watch her companions eat as she stood on Susan's shoulder, cooing in response to Susan's words, as if the bird enjoyed the art of conversation. And even more impressive was Duchess's athletic ability, typically the first to arrive home after the pigeons were released at a distant training location. Bertie had commented that Duchess was the fastest to return, only because of her desire to get a few minutes of Susan's undivided attention. Susan laughed but knew there was some truth to what he said.



Duchess's Journey

Communicating in Code



This map shows Susan and Bertie's cottage and pigeon loft adjacent to Epping Forest, where they would have lived approximately two miles from North Weald Airfield. It shows the nearly 200-mile path Duchess would have flown back-and-forth between Susan in Epping and Ollie in Airaines, France, where he and Lieutenant Boar hide out after their crash. Also represented on the map are the general flight path of the German bombers during the Blitz.

Bertie slipped on his glasses, unscrewed the canister cap, and slid a note into his hand. With arthritic fingers, he carefully unrolled the paper. As he scanned the writing, his eyes widened. "What does it say?" He took a deep breath, exhaled, and handed her the paper. Susan placed Duchess on the table and held up the note.

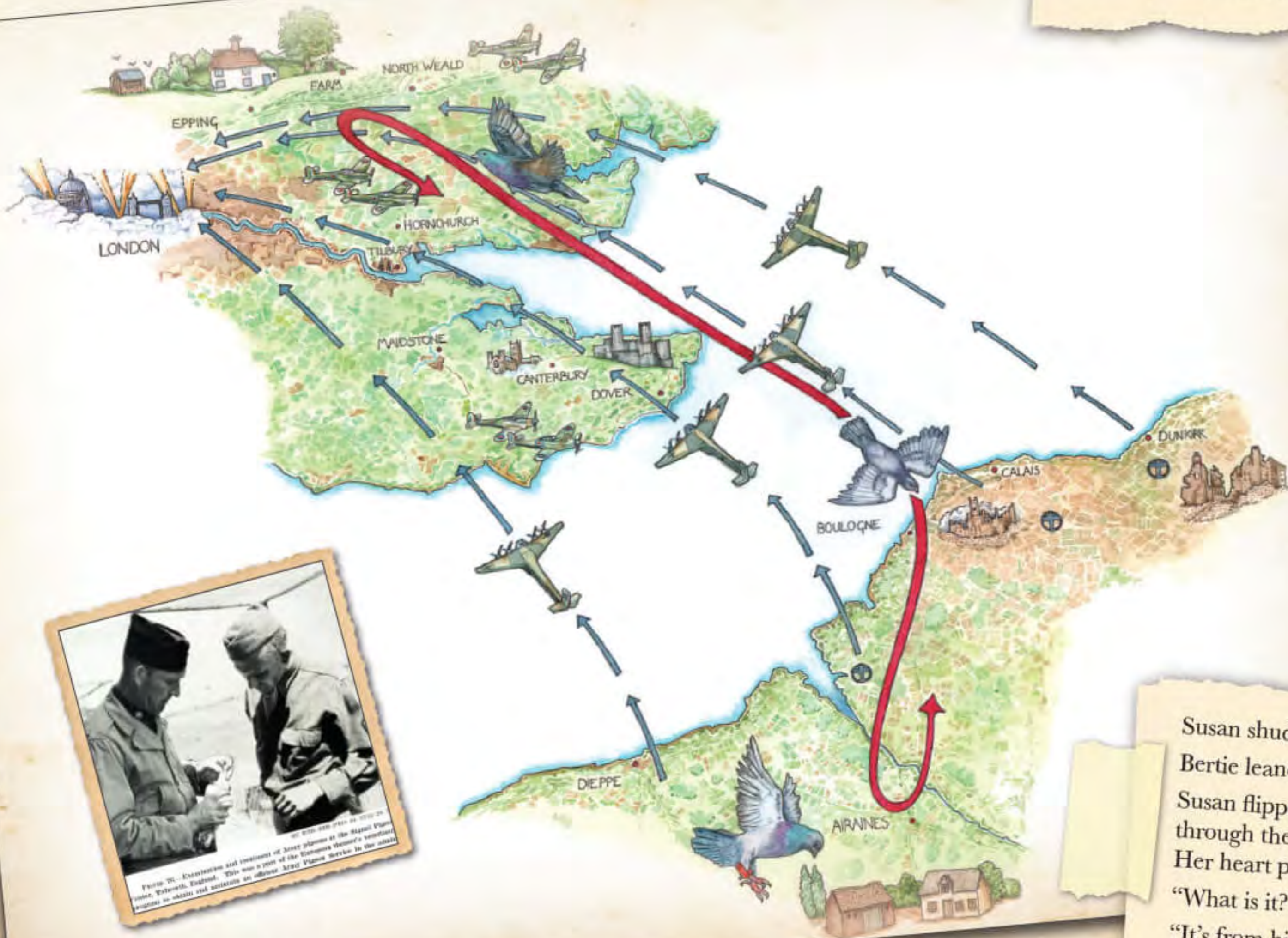


Figure 10. Examination and treatment of three pigeons at the Signal Station, Farnborough, England. This was a part of the program to train the pigeons to obtain and deliver an message. Signal Station, Farnborough, England.

PXXGB VIYSQ MCBIA
 QUZPZ ZTNXZ UMPLO
 HIWIF CNXNE AUZVO
 POBIY YTPAB PCBLS
 GPWPEK ENZA

Susan shuddered as she opened the codebook. Bertie leaned over her shoulder. "It's all right, my dear." Susan flipped pages and scribbled onto the stationary. Barely through the first sentence, she stopped and reread the words. Her heart pounded. She dropped the pencil. "What is it?" Bertie said. "It's from him."

Discussion Questions

The Long Flight Home by Alan Hlad

These questions may be used to spark discussion at book clubs. For a very unique enhanced reading experience, OnceUponABookClub.com has created a special box featuring autographed editions of *The Long Flight Home* along with gifts and replicated items from within the novel. Unwrap each item as you reach the relevant pages in the story and feel as though you are truly living in this amazing novel!

1. What are Susan's fears during the Blitz? Why does she believe her pigeons can help save Britain?
2. What did you learn about the German bombing offensive against Britain in 1940 and 1941?
3. If Ollie's parents had not been killed in a car accident, do you think he would have embarked on a quest to join the fight? How does his encounter with an air vice marshal for the Royal Canadian Air Force, as well as being robbed in a train station, influence his decision to defer college and travel to Britain?
4. Describe Susan. What kind of woman is she? When Susan attends the Source Columba meeting in London, she is the only woman in the group. Describe Susan's courage, compared to other members of the National Pigeon Service, to confront a senior military officer on the mission's errors. What is meant by her affirmation, be an egg? Describe her relationship with her grandfather, Bertie. What role does Bertie play in shaping Susan's values and beliefs?
5. While working to prepare pigeons for the mission, Susan and Ollie fall in love. What brings them together? Why does their relationship develop so quickly? How is the war, particularly the nightly Luftwaffe bombings, a catalyst for their affection?
6. Duchess is Susan's loyal and devoted pet. What characteristics make her unique?
7. Before reading *The Long Flight Home*, what did you know about homing pigeons used in World War II? Can you name additional animals that have served in times of war? What were the views on animal rights during World War II? After reading this book, do you feel the same about pigeons?
8. How do you envision what happens after the end of the book? What do you think Susan and Ollie's lives will be like?



Color image of boy holding bird
© IWM (TR 42)





☆☆☆
**THE LONG
FLIGHT HOME**
by Alan Hlad



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Images courtesy of the
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