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## PIGEON RACING

Like many sports, pigeon racing claims a history going back many hundreds of years. The predecessors of today's racing pigeons were bred for their homing ability, primarily to carry messages. "Pigeon posts" were established all over the world and, while mainly used for military purposes, some are still in service today.

Modern pigeon racing originated in Belgium in the mid-19th century. Organised pigeon racing in Victoria commenced in the late 19th century with the importation of quality breeding stock from Belgium and Britain, in particular, the Royal Lofts at Sandringham. The Victorian Homing Association (VHA) was formed in 1900 to consolidate the many pigeon racing clubs in the state, for the regulation of the sport, care and protection of pigeons and advancement of the association and its members.

Although the sport has declined in recent years, there are still over 600 'racers' in Victoria who own over 90,000 pigeons. The racing season extends from July to November with many races each weekend over distances from 100 km to 1,000 km with pigeons being released from many points in Victoria and interstate.



In still, mild conditions, racing pigeons can travel 800 km in a day at speeds reaching 130 km/h with a favourable wind. However, hazards including bad weather, power pylons, television aerials and birds of prey, in particular the peregrine falcon, are often present.



Portrait of mounted carrier pigeon, Blue Bar cock DD43 T139, with the Dickin Medal, known as the Victoria Cross for animals. This pigeon was donated to the army in 1943, as a patriotic gesture by a civilian pigeon fancier, Mr George Adams of Footscray, Victoria, for use in signals units in New Guinea.

Mr Adams, however, was not the bird's breeder. As part of his effort to obtain birds for the war effort he approached members of pigeon clubs in the Melbourne area. A member of the Yarraville Pigeon Club, Mr Gordon Whittle, whose family had bred and raced pigeons for many years, donated a number of birds. One of the pigeons he bred (DD43 T139) was awarded the Dickin Medal for outstanding gallantry as a result of a flight he undertook through a severe tropical storm near Madang, New Guinea, in July 1945.

At the time the pigeon was located at 10 Pigeon Section (Type B) attached to Detachment 55 Port Craft Company, Madang. On that day he carried the following message, from a foundering boat to Madang, flying 40 miles in 50 minutes: 'To: Detachment 55 Australian Port Craft Company, MADANG. From: A.B. 1402. Date: 12.7.45. Engine Failed. Wash on to beach at WADAU owing very heavy seas. Send help immediately. Am rapidly filling with sand.'

As a result of the successful delivery of the message, the crew and the boat together with valuable stores, ammunition and equipment were saved. The bird had previously completed 23 operational flights over a total distance of 1,004 miles.

Another Australian pigeon (DD43 Q879) received the Dickin Medal for saving 200 troops pinned down on Manus Island under heavy Japanese fire. The released pigeon flew 30 miles in 47 minutes, aircraft were sent and the troops were rescued.

The illegal 'tote' operated by John Wren in Collingwood during the 1890s received race results (and the scratchings from the next race) by carrier pigeons from various racecourses in the suburbs of Melbourne. The time taken from Flemington to Collingwood was less than three minutes depending on wind direction.

In the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Ernie Lawry was said to be a better cricketer than his younger brother Bill, but preferred to stay home on Saturday afternoons and wait for their racing pigeons to home. Bill persevered with his cricket.

—Graeme Ryan

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