



Minnie with Driver (AWM C04359)

# Animal Heroes

Stories on incredible animals that have worked and played alongside Australia's fighting forces

It wasn't all dread, however. Somewhere in France, Driver became a father. Some said the mother was Snapper, the silky terrier who'd come with them from Sydney. Whoever it was, the pups certainly had long, silky grey hair and droopy moustaches like their father. In fact the engineers kept one of the female pups, who they called Minnie, to be a companion mascot with Driver. And together, father and daughter travelled northwards into Belgium with the armies as the Great War drew to an end.

When it was time to come home, Leslie Ross went to England to join the returning troopships. Driver went with him of course – but Minnie had to stay behind. Like so many mascots, she became lost, and Leslie was never able to find out what became of her.

As for Driver, Ross got him safely aboard the transport ship *Castalia*, which left for Australia in April 1919. But a problem arose when Driver was spotted by the ship's master, Captain Erskine.

By special proclamation that year, no dogs were allowed to enter Australia from Britain, for fear they might introduce diseases such as rabies. Driver would have to be destroyed. They wouldn't even allow him to be put in quarantine.

So Captain Erskine demanded that Leslie Ross hand Driver over to him. But the man refused. And when he persisted, the captain angrily threatened to throw the dog into the ship's furnace. Still Leslie Ross held firm.

"Excuse me, sir, but I don't think you will."

The soldiers, gathered around on the troopdeck, murmured their support.

"There are 700 men on this ship. Driver is our mascot. He's served through the war. Where he goes, we follow."

Not even their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel MacCartney, could make them give up the dog. "Anyone who takes Driver's life," the men warned, "will suffer a similar fate." Nobody dared find out if they were joking.

The issue simmered during the six weeks' voyage to Australia, but men knew it would reach a head at Sydney. The quarantine authorities would surely be told about the dog. Driver could be seized and destroyed as soon as he and Leslie Ross went ashore.

What could they do?

The answer was simple. A mate offered to smuggle Driver ashore at Melbourne. If he landed the dog safely, he promised to send Driver by train to Sydney, for collection at the railway station.

He even had an idea about the smuggling. He cut a canvas kit bag in half, and sewed the bottom part inside his greatcoat. It made a snug pouch to hold a small silky terrier. As the ship steamed along the coast, the men practised with Driver, getting him used to the bag and the need to lie very still inside the coat.

The *Castalia* berthed at Port Melbourne early one May morning. Just after breakfast, Leslie Ross popped Driver inside the pouch, and whispered encouragement.

"In you go, old chap. Not a sound or a wriggle to let them know you're there. I'll watch you ashore, and see you later in Sydney."

With a wag of his silky tail, Driver disappeared inside.

The disembarking soldiers assembled on deck. Leslie's mate had a kit bag on his shoulder, and the khaki greatcoat with the dog slung over his arm. Slowly they moved down the gangway, past the quarantine men, waving to their families crying, "Welcome home!"

Orders were for the men to put their gear in front of them on the wharf, and line up while General Brand inspected them and made a speech. For fully twenty minutes the soldiers stood on the parade – with Leslie Ross watching from the ship's rail, his heart in his mouth.

Surely Driver couldn't lie still and hidden in the greatcoat for all that time? Surely he'd get restless and start to whimper, and want to come out of the pouch? And then what? He'd be seized by the quarantine officers and never heard of again.

Not for one moment did Ross take his eyes off that coat.

"Good boy, Driver," he whispered under his breath, willing the dog. "Not a murmur. Not a muscle twitching. The best you've ever been. Nothing to let them know where you are."

And it worked.

"It was almost as if Driver knew," Leslie remembered years later. "He never moved an inch."

At last, the parade was dismissed. The returning soldiers kissed and hugged their loved ones, and drove into town for a civic reception. But not before a certain greatcoat was handed over for safe-keeping.

"Look after this for me, Dad."

"It's a bit heavy for an overcoat, son."

Quietly, Leslie's mate explained – and left directions for a dog crate that would be needed for a railway journey.

Sure enough, when the *Castalia* berthed at Sydney a few days later, Leslie Ross and his parents went to Central Station. And there, waiting for them, was Driver.

How the dog barked when he saw them! How he threw himself into his master's arms, and joined in the celebrations when they got home! It took the silky terrier a long time to settle down that night – to curl up beside Leslie's feet and go to sleep.

What a day. What a dog.

"He deserves a medal," they said.

Earlier this year The Australian Museum had an excellent exhibition celebrating the vital contribution animals have made to protecting our shores. Australia's history is rich in stories of heroic animals that have assisted our ANZACs. Horses, camels and donkeys risked their lives to carry our troops to battle. Pigeons have been awarded medals of bravery after flying through enemy fire to deliver vital information to headquarters.

Anthony Hill is a Canberra based writer who has meticulously researched the amazing tales of animals involved in assisting our troops. He's an award winning author, former journalist and former speechwriter for the Governor-General. In addition to this, he's a fond animal lover and anyone who has read his book, 'The Shadow Dog', will understand his compassion and affinity for animals.

'Animal Heroes' is a book that gives us all an insight into the special role these animals had, and often, the strength of the human animal bond. As Hill writes, "Companionship. Unconditional and uncomplaining affection. Hope. Laughter. Relief from the daily horrors and stresses of conflict. The knowledge that, however far from home, servicemen and women have someone close to share their gentler feelings."

'Animal Heroes' has twenty-one fascinating stories all with photos. Here are just two stories of a couple of mascots that were involved in our war effort.

## DRIVER – the puppy who went to war

A little Sydney silky terrier called Driver has a special place in the story of our animal heroes. He was one of the very few soldiers' mascots to leave Australia and be smuggled home again at the end of the First World War.

Driver was only ten weeks old when he left Sydney in November 1915, hidden in the pocket of his owner, Fred Roberts. Fred was a horse transport driver with a company of field engineers, and was afraid his wriggling grey puppy might not have been allowed on the troopship.

He needn't have worried. The men had carried many other pets aboard. There was a kangaroo, several wallabies, a possum, and another silky terrier called Sapper, who gave birth to a whole litter of pups during the voyage to Egypt.

We don't know what happened to all these animals. Perhaps Sapper went to another company of soldiers. The marsupials probably ended up in the Cairo zoo, joining their many cousins who'd come across with other Australian diggers.

What is certain is that Driver became the mascot of the 7th Company Field Engineers. With them he went to France – to suffer the same cold and endless mud as the men, with all the despair of war on the Western Front. The only warm place Driver found was between his master's feet in the horse wagon, or back at camp.

Never mind which master. When Fred Roberts returned sick to Australia and Leslie Ross became Driver's new master, the dog's favourite spot was always curled up by Leslie's feet. But it wasn't safe. One night a bomb fell very close to the horses, and over forty animals were killed.

After that, Driver learned to listen for the sounds of approaching enemy aeroplanes. Whenever he heard a German bomber overhead he'd rush to the nearest trench, and shelter trembling until it had gone.

There were other terrors: deadly shellfire, shrapnel and bullets, and the seeping stench of mustard gas across the battlefields.

To avoid the worst dangers, the transport drivers often carried their supplies to the front after dark, and Driver always went with them. But the guns pounded all night long, the sky alight with scarlet flashes. And the dog was once so frightened that he jumped from the wagon and fled. Driver was lost for two days until he limped back to his company.

*"Animals are reliable, many full of love, true in their affections, predictable in their actions, grateful and loyal. Difficult standards for people to live up to."*

– Alfred A. Montapert



*"No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings."*  
- William Blake

But the family couldn't tell anybody else about Driver's war record. If the authorities heard, the dog could still be seized. So they kept the secret to themselves and the few comrades who knew, during all the years that followed.

Driver had just turned eleven when he died in October, 1926. It was a good age for a silky terrier, especially one who'd been to the Great War. But the family took it hard, for they'd grown to love the dog. So Leslie took Driver's body to the taxidermist at the Australian Museum, to be mounted.

It was the sort of thing people did then with their animals, more than they do now. Still, it was a bit of a shock when Leslie's father found Driver standing on the dining table one day, his glass eyes catching the light and with a front paw raised, as in life.

A few months later, Driver was presented to the Australian War Memorial with his collar and tag. He is still in the repository, his silky grey coat well cared for. Thousands of people saw Driver in a glass case when he was on public display, and read the story of the little Sydney terrier who went to war as a puppy, and came safely home again an animal hero.

But only the family of Leslie Ross, and the men who served with him in Egypt and France, knew the living reality behind the mascot whose dog tag simply says:

DRIVER  
7th Field Coy Engineers  
AIF  
Born 15/9/15

And they, too, have now passed on.

## ROBERT - mascot of HMAS Melbourne

Shed a tear for Robert the parrot, one among the many casualties of war.

Robert had been acquired by the crew of the first HMAS Melbourne during one of their voyages to foreign ports, and he joined the various pets they always carried on board.

There were at least two dogs, and a fine black cat who featured on postcards of the ship. But Robert was a particular favourite. He was musical, as we can see by the photo of him on the ship's drum. He'd squawk along whenever the band played; and every time the sailors sat down to mend their clothes, Robert entertained them with a tune or two.

He felt they so enjoyed his company, he'd tear the buttons off their uniforms with his powerful beak. The men would have to spend twice as long sewing them back on, and listening to his song!

Yet life on a warship had its limitations for a bird born to fly free in tropical jungles. Perhaps Robert sensed the faint aromas of home carried on the sea breeze. Perhaps the cat was after him. Or perhaps he just had enough. For one day, Robert was swept up by the wind and blown into the water - where he sank, singing a colourful lament, beneath the waves.

Afterwards, the crew printed a memorial photo of the bird sitting on his drum, which somebody wrote his epitaph:

'ROBERT'

DROWNED AT SEA 13 MARCH 1916

NO MORE WILL ROBERT'S 'NOTE'  
DISTURB OUR 'MAKE & MEND',  
NO MORE WE'LL SCRATCH HIS HEAD,  
WHILST HE OUR BUTTONS REND,  
WITH LIFE ON A 'MAN-O'-WAR'  
HE'D GOT 'FED UP' - 'T'WAS SAID,  
LIKE US - HE WANTED A CHANGE  
SO - THE-POOR-OLD-BIRD-IS-DEAD!



This is an edited extract of Animal Heroes by Anthony Hill - Penguin Books rrp \$17.95



Robert - HMAS Melbourne (AMW EN0104)



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