



Flávio Colombini

Illustrations by
Hugo Araújo

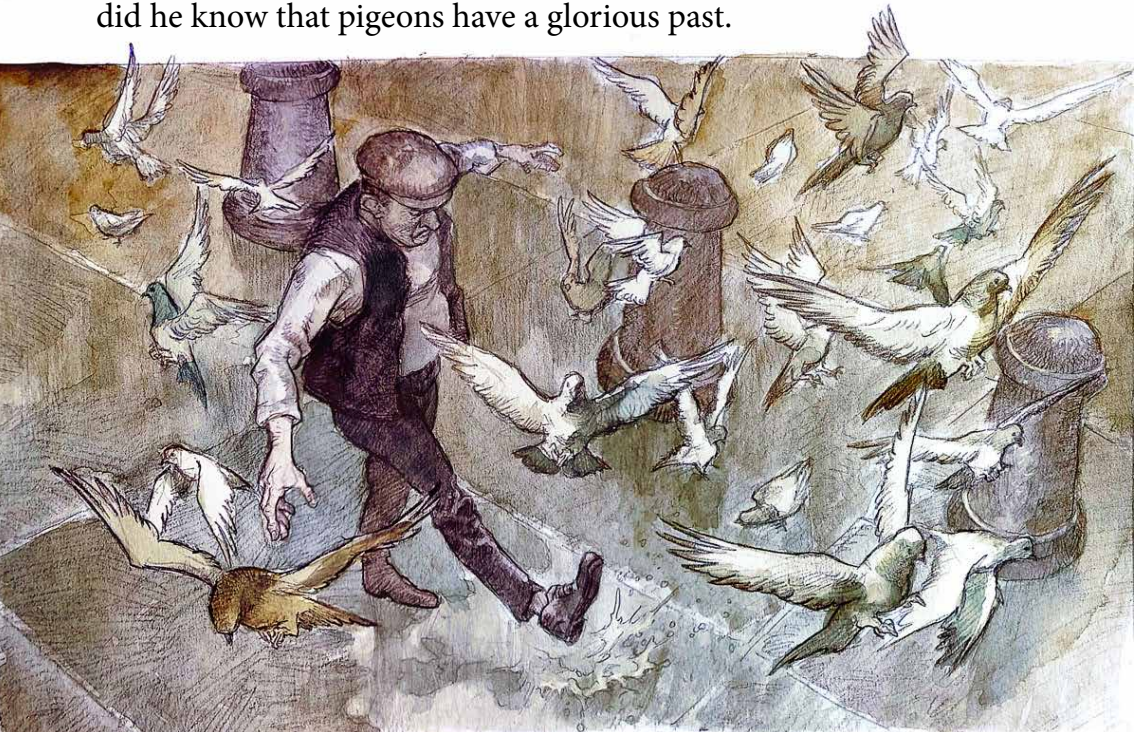
MESSENGER

PIGEON

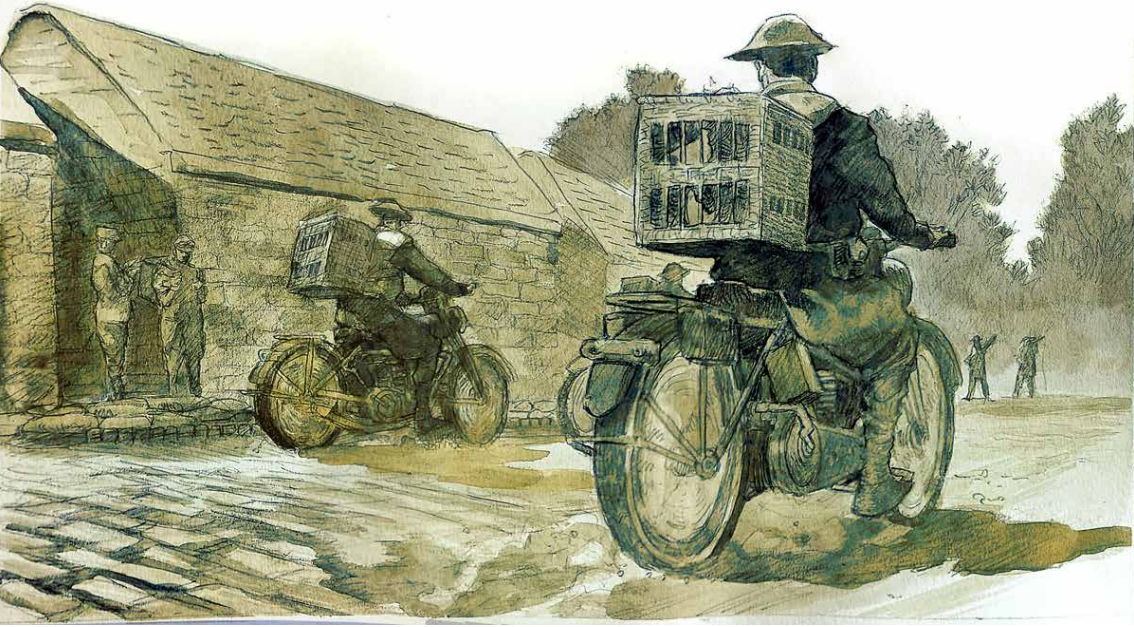
I was at the square with my friends, pecking and eating the crumbs on the ground, when a man walked past us and said: “These pigeons are a plague!”



He tried to scare us away. I was sad at the man's contempt. Little did he know that pigeons have a glorious past.



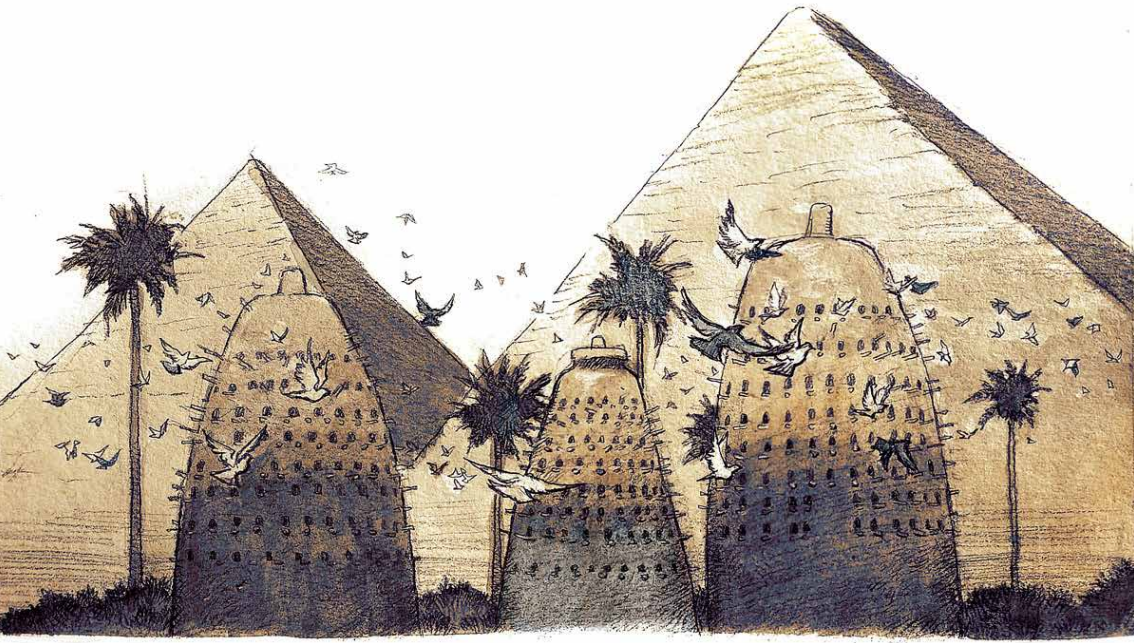
In the past, we were raised and cared for with the utmost care. We were valuable. Do you know why? Because we carried important messages over long distances. We were messenger pigeons.



Humans have always been fascinated by pigeons' homing ability, the capacity to navigate and find the way to their home loft. Even when released more than a thousand kilometres from its home, the pigeon manages to return to it, flying at an average speed of 100 kilometres per hour.



Three thousand years before Christ, pigeons were already used to send messages in ancient Egypt.



The Greeks sent pigeons to announce the winners of the Olympic Games to the various cities in ancient Greece.



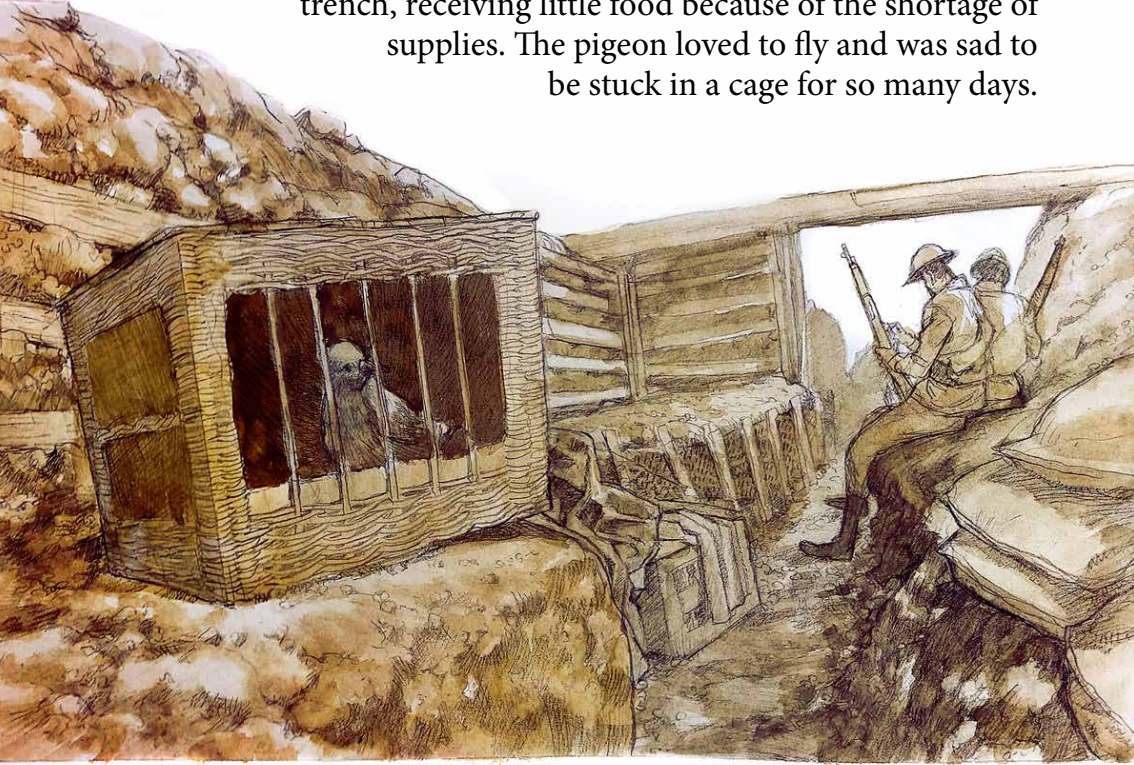
The army of the Roman Empire used carrier pigeons to communicate in the midst of battles and conquests.



In my humble opinion, the pigeon that faced the most difficulties in delivering a message was a British pigeon called Princess.



In 1918, during World War I, Princess was taken, along with other carrier pigeons, to the battlefield on the border between France and Germany. She was kept for several days in a dirty, gloomy trench, receiving little food because of the shortage of supplies. The pigeon loved to fly and was sad to be stuck in a cage for so many days.



The worst thing was the sound of gunfire and bombs, which scared her all the time. Private Brown, who looked after the pigeons, was also upset that he couldn't feed them properly.



A few days later, the detachment of English soldiers was surrounded by the German army. They needed urgent help. It was time to use a messenger pigeon. A distress call was written on a small piece of paper. Private Brown took a pigeon called Dorian and put the message in a small container, which was tied to the bird's leg. Then the pigeon was released and flew into the air. All the soldiers looked up, pinning their hopes of rescue on that bird.



But then the pigeon was shot and fell out of the sky.



“Oh, no,” Lieutenant Little shouted in despair, “the Germans are using snipers to hit our pigeons and stop us from asking help!”

“What do we do now?” asked Brown.

“We have to send another pigeon,” the lieutenant ordered. The soldier picked up a pigeon called Tommy, prepared it and released it.



It rose into the air. German sniper fire was heard. The pigeon managed to fly higher and higher until it was shot and fell.



The English soldiers could hardly believe it! They were devastated and some even began to cry.

“What do we do now?” Private Brown asked the lieutenant.
“We have no choice. We need to send another pigeon,” he said.
“But there’s only one left, Princess.”
“So, get her ready,” ordered the officer.



Heartbroken, Private Brown picked up the pigeon and affixed the all-important message to its paw. With tears in his eyes, he stroked it, afraid that it would be the last time he would see it.



Lieutenant Little spoke to all the soldiers:

“Those of you who are religious, please start praying and ask God to protect this dove, which is our last hope of rescue.”

The men began to pray, each in their own way.



Later, the lieutenant ordered: “Pick up your weapons and fire in the direction of the Germans. We need to provide cover so that our dove can take to the sky and carry our message to headquarters.”

The soldiers started firing, and Brown threw Princess into the air.



She flapped her wings and flew upwards. She was frightened by the noise of the gunfire but kept soaring. Some shots whizzed past her, but she was not hit. When the English soldiers saw that the pigeon had managed to take off, they shouted with joy.



Up there, Princess found it difficult to orientate herself. She got confused and started flying the wrong way. But she soon managed to find herself, retraced her course and proceeded in the right direction.



Princess moved away from the battlefield, but not from the danger. Little did she know that the Germans had sent a hawk to hunt her down in mid-air. The hawk's strategy is to fly higher than the other birds, spot them, dive quickly into the air and use its powerful claws to grab the smaller bird.



The pigeon had to pass over another battlefield, where the Germans had just dropped a bomb that released mustard gas, which was highly toxic and spread through the air.



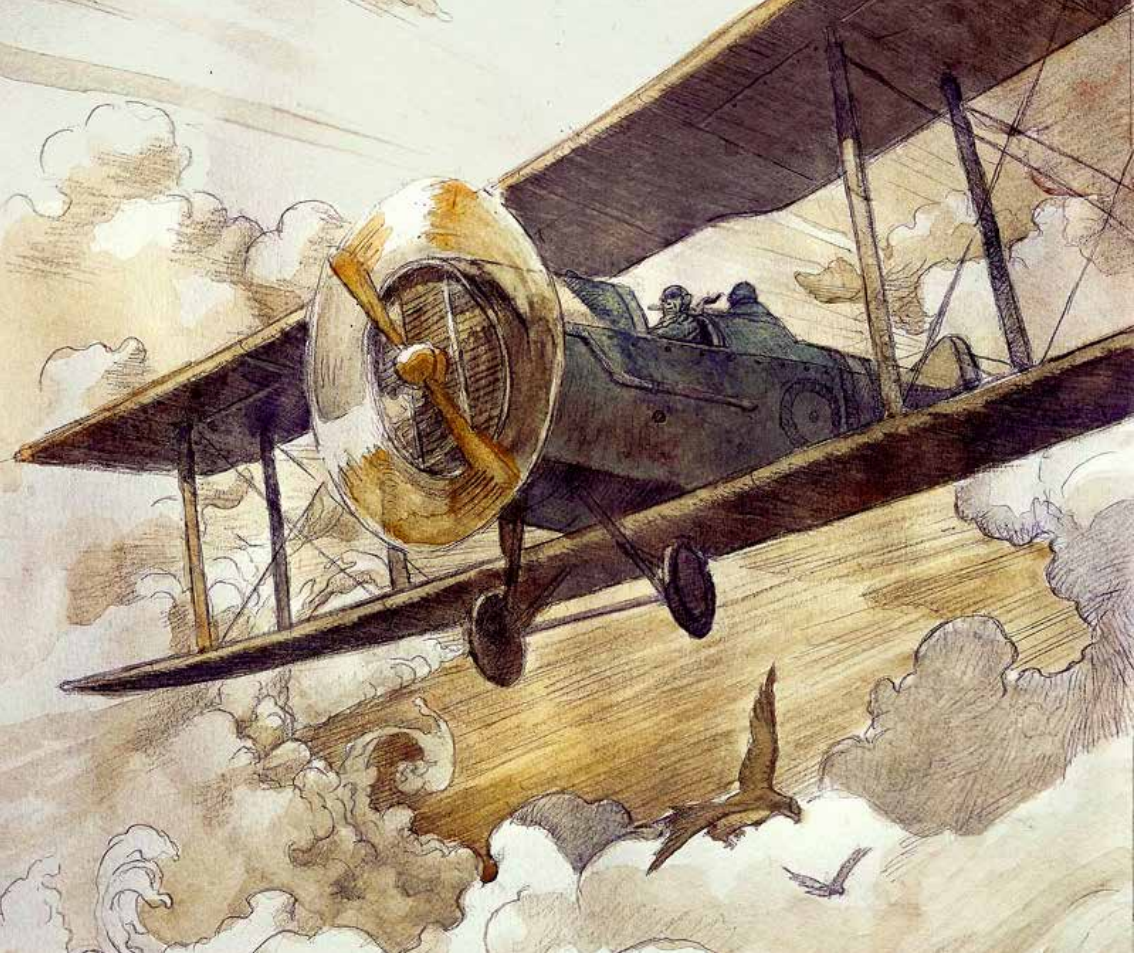
Innocently, Princess went inside a yellow cloud filled with mustard gas. Her eyes began to burn, and she found it difficult to breathe. For a moment, it seemed she was going to faint and fall, but she managed to keep flapping her wings and moved away from the toxic cloud. She then breathed fresh air again and regained her senses.





Suddenly, the hawk swooped down at high speed and grabbed the pigeon, which lost consciousness as a result of the strong impact.





At that moment, a German aeroplane flew by firing at the trenches. The hawk got frightened and released the unconscious pigeon, that began to fall and fall until it suddenly regained consciousness. Princess immediately flapped her wings and flew away.



The pigeon got rid of the predator, but her problems were not over. She was yet a long way from her destination and soon began to face a strong wind, contrary to the direction in which she had to go. She had to flap her wings with more vigour to face this difficulty.



After that, it started to rain. And it wasn't just any rain, it was a downpour. The pigeon could barely see her way with so much water hitting her face. But she persevered.



Lightning flashed from the clouds. She heard a loud thunder and got scared, but kept flying.



The bird was getting exhausted. After eating badly for days, would she have the energy to keep flying and deliver the message? The men at the front continued to pray, even while under fire from the advancing enemy.



The bird must have felt that positive spiritual energy, for it kept flying until it finally arrived at headquarters.



A soldier received her in the dovecote, took the message and immediately passed it on to his superiors, who telegraphed for other units to go and rescue the surrounded soldiers.





Finally, the allied troops managed to break the siege and rescue the trapped soldiers, who were taken to safer positions. Thanks to the heroic efforts of that courageous pigeon, hundreds of men were saved.



A few months later, when the war ended, Princess received a medal of honour. Her picture appeared in many newspapers and she became very famous.



Flávio Colombini

Writer

This book is loosely inspired by the true story of a carrier pigeon in World War I called *Cher Ami*. Even after being wounded by enemy fire, he managed to deliver a message that saved many American soldiers. For that, he became very well known at the time.

When I was a kid, I remember my grandfather taking me for walks in a square full of pigeons. He used to buy me a little bag with bran and seeds. I loved to throw that food to the pigeons, who would come very close to eat it and sometimes even perch on me.

As an adult, I've heard some people complain that pigeons are dirty and useless. This book will hopefully help them know how important pigeons have been in human history.

If you'd like to see other books I've written, visit my website:

www.flaviocolombini.com/english

Illustrator



Hugo Araújo

I've been an illustrator since I was little, when I liked to draw the characters in the books and comics I read. Nowadays, I work mainly producing illustrations for school textbooks, as well as collaborating on other children's books and comics abroad.

Have a look at other drawings I've done on my Instagram [@bruxarium](https://www.instagram.com/bruxarium)