

ON GALLANT WINGS

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SYNOPSIS

Thirteen-year-old Ava lives in Darwin with her family and their homing pigeons, of which Essie is Ava's favourite. A Japanese family live next door and their son, Kazuo, is Ava's best and only real friend. Her father is serving overseas.

While Essie is taking her first flight, Ava overhears an argument between her mother, and her brother Fred, who has lied about his age to join the militia. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he trains in Darwin and later helps set up a pigeon service in Townsville. When most civilians are sent to safety down south, Ava remains in Darwin because her mother (who works in the post office) is essential to the war effort. Later that day, military police take Kazuo and his family away in a truck to a holding camp—much to Ava's distress—along with many other Japanese people who call Australia home.

On February 19, 1942, Darwin is bombed, and Ava and her mother are evacuated in a cattle train with the remaining women and children. After a very difficult journey, they arrive, exhausted, at her grandparent's home in Lake Boga, where they discover the extent of the damage to Darwin is being concealed from the population. Even those who were actually there know only part of the truth.

Desperate to do something to contribute to the war effort, Ava's mother joins the WAAAF and begins work at the secret Catalina Flying Boat Base.

In the meantime, the authorities decide to transfer Kazuo to the men's camp, separating him from his parents and siblings.

Living by rules and rituals has always been how Ava has felt safe, but when Kazuo escapes, she is faced with the hardest decision of all—whether to report a 'potentially dangerous' escapee to the authorities, or to protect a beloved friend ...





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Helen Edwards is an award-winning author and speaker. She has a PhD in Psychology and a long background working in mental health. Helen is a mid-career SA State Library Fellow in 2025, supported by Writers' SA, researching a new magical historical novel. *On Gallant Wings* is her third middle-grade novel. Helen grew up surrounded by books. She 'published' her first book at age 6, for which she won the Children's Book Week prize at her school. Ever since, she has wanted to be an author. Helen writes stories that reduce stereotypes, increase understanding of diversity, and feature Australian history and nature. She includes characters in her stories who are neurodivergent and/or who live with physical and mental health conditions, out in the world, having adventures. She is on the SA committee for the Children's Book Council of Australia, part of the Author Pen Pals initiative and a Role Model for Books in Homes. Helen has been shortlisted in and won a number of awards, including being a South Australian State Finalist for Australian of the Year for her work in diabetes.

Helen is passionate about inspiring action for our beautiful, fragile planet and nature features in all of her books. She finds history fascinating and uncovers stories that may have been forgotten, or hidden, and brings them into the light. She lives in Adelaide with her lovely family, two cats and a very active rescue kelpie! When not reading, writing or watching good stories, you'll find her walking in nature, going on road trips, discovering new story ideas, laughing a lot, and listening to music.

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS THAT CAN BE EXPLORED USING ON GALLANT WINGS

ENGLISH

Literacy

- Responding to literature
- Examining literature
- Interpreting, analysing, evaluating
- How language use is determined by different contexts
- Building knowledge and understanding, and communicating emotions, opinions and ideas with others

Critical and Creative Thinking

- Listening to, reading, viewing, creating and presenting texts
- Developing critical and creative thinking through interacting with others, creating and experimenting with literary texts, and discussing the aesthetic or social value of texts
- Critically analysing the opinions, perspectives and unstated assumptions embedded in texts
- Expressing personal responses and preferences, stating and justifying points of view, and responding to the views of others in discussing texts
- Considering the authors' innovations, planning, exploring and creating ideas for imaginative texts, in particular the combination of facts and fiction
- Using and adapting language to represent novel ideas

Personal and Social Capability

- Development of understanding that language is central to personal and social identity
- Exploring diverse perspectives and how these shape different interpretations and responses to both text and ideas
- Interacting with others in formal and informal settings to become effective communicators
- Articulating opinions and collaborating with others to analyse text and create your own
- Through close reading and discussion of the text, students experience and evaluate different personal and social behaviours and perspectives. They develop connections and empathy with the main characters in different contexts and through diverse experiences.

Intercultural Understanding

- Developing intercultural understanding through texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts—in this case the ways in which Japanese and other migrants in Australia were treated during WW11 and the difficulties associated with war.



- Exploring cultural perspectives and world views from the past and present
- Interpreting and analysing the authors' ideas and points of view represented in the text
- Appreciating issues of intercultural meaning and sensitivity

Ethical Understanding

- Developing ethical understanding as they explore ethical issues within real-world and fictional settings—in particular Ava's decisions about protecting Kazuo, as well as the ways in which different cultures relate to each other during war
- Identifying moral messages, ethical concepts, bias and stereotypes, and their representation in texts
- Comparing, evaluating and discussing how these messages are created through language
- Analysing ethical perspectives on contemporary issues and the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which arguments are represented

HASS: HISTORY

- Understanding how WW11 affected Australians at home – particularly the bombing of Darwin
- Learning about the Catalina Flying Boat base and the secret work of the WAAAF and RAAF
- Women's roles in the 1940s and how they changed during and after WW11
- Developing a sense of wonder, curiosity and respect about places, people, cultures and systems throughout the world, past and present, and an interest in and enjoyment of the study of these phenomena
- Key historical, geographical, civic, business and economic knowledge of people, places, values and systems, past and present, in local to global contexts
- Understanding and appreciation of historical developments, geographic phenomena, civic values and economic factors that shape society, influence sustainability and create a sense of belonging
- Capacity to use disciplinary skills, including disciplinary-appropriate questioning, researching using reliable sources, analysing, evaluating and communicating

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

The English curriculum and Humanities and Social Sciences share a focus on analysing, interpreting and evaluating information and texts. Both learning areas consider the ways in which perspectives and points of view shape texts and represent ideas. Both learning areas help students to develop written, visual, digital and multimodal texts by selecting text structures and language features for a range of purposes and audiences.

In On Gallant Wings these areas include:

- Australian history
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Neurodiversity
- Society and culture

THEMES

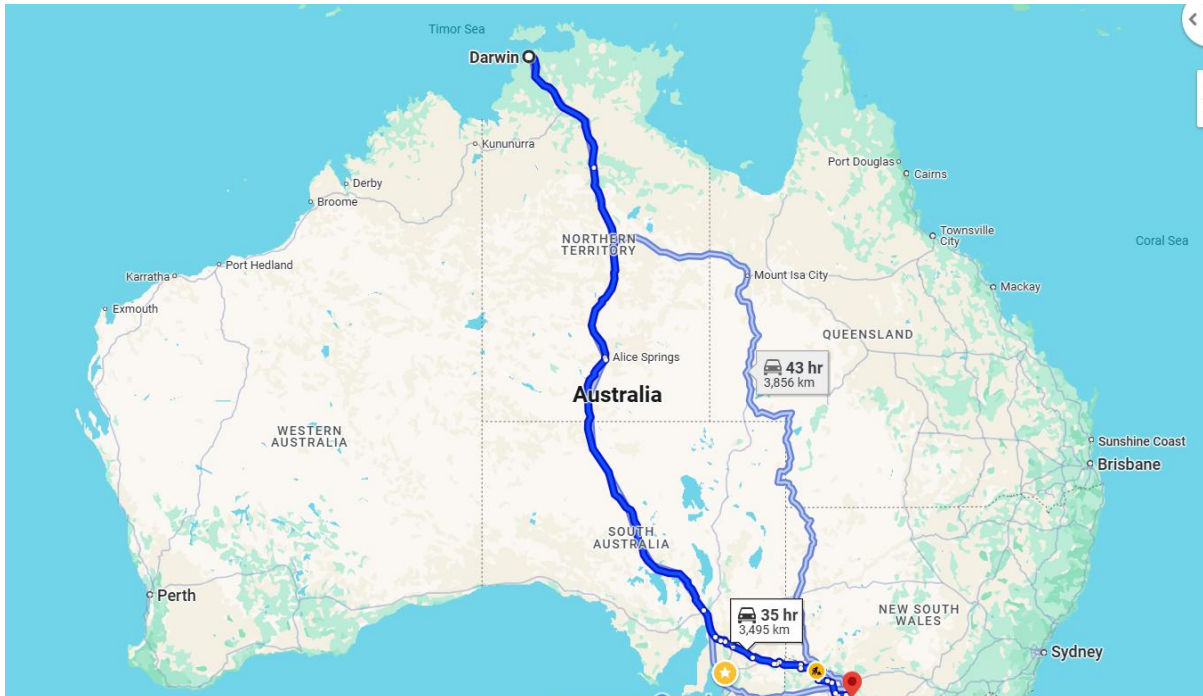
- Laws, rules and how to deal with people who break these—delving into the complexity of these issues
- How we champion and stand up for those who cannot do this for themselves
- Family relationships
- Grief and loss
- Courage and self-belief
- Mental Health
- Neurodiversity
- Growth, change and identity
- Australian WW11 history
- Using the past as a vehicle to explore themes in the present and future
- Our relationship with Nature

USE IN THE CLASSROOM

- As an example of middle-grade Australian historical fiction.
- As a basis for writing exercises on characterisation and diversity.
- As a basis for writing exercises related to the use of historical events in stories and how to blend fact and fiction.
- To explore the use and power of metaphor in describing emotions.
- To explore Nature in fiction and stories that feature the environment — in this case birds in particular.
- As a portal to learning about the history of WW11, the bombing of Darwin, Japanese internment in Australia, the RAAF and WAAAF, the Australian Corp of Signals Pigeon Service and the secret Catalina Flying Boat Base
- To discuss mental health issues affecting young people and developing resilience.
- To discuss the impact of grief and loss and the importance of seeking support.



- To consider the ethics of right and wrong and when someone might break the rules.
- How to ask for help and understanding who a support for you can be when you have problems.
- Family relationships and extended family.



DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Before reading the novel, have a look at the cover and identify the following:
 - The title of the book
 - The author
 - The publisher
 - The blurb.
2. Based on the cover and the blurb, what do you think this story is about? Compare your ideas with other people in the class. What do you think the main themes are?
3. Do you know what is going to happen? When you have read the book, go back and see if you were right and if there was anything you didn't predict, or anything that surprised you.
4. Read the first five chapters of the book and write down some of the things you think might happen. Later, check back to see if you predicted anything and discuss what the key aspects of the story were that led you to these predictions. If you were surprised, how do you think the author managed to do that?
5. In the story, Ava and her mum are evacuated from Darwin and travel south to her grandparents' farm in Lake Boga. Plot their journey through



the centre of Australia as shown in the map and see if you can find at least five of the places they stopped on this journey.

6. What do you think it might have been like to travel all that way in 1942 on trains and trucks?
7. Creating a complication for a character in reaching their goal, or solving their problem, is an important aspect of creating tension in a story. How do you think the author does this in Ava's situation? Other than the obvious historical events during the war, what are some of the complications that she has to face personally? Would you add any other complications?
8. Where do you think the highest point of tension is in the story? This is often called the climax and commonly falls somewhere in the middle of the book. What are the things that make this the climax in *On Gallant Wings*? Can you identify other parts of the story where there is tension?
9. Ava is the main character in *On Gallant Wings*. Note down all of the words you can think of to describe her. You can draw her if you would like. Consider how she looks, her voice and personality, how she thinks, acts and feels. Then discuss this as a class and see if there were some common words or ideas. Compare differences or similarities.
10. There are also a number of important secondary characters in the book, including her brother Fred, best friend Kazuo and her new friends Pete, Jenny and Stevo. Her parents and grandparents are also important. Complete the same exercise as above, for one or two of the secondary characters.
11. Fred lies about his age to join the militia. Many boys and young men did this, some younger than Fred. Discuss what it must have been like to go to war at such a young age and what it might have been like for the families.
12. A major theme in this book is one about what 'enemies' are and how we see people from different countries when there is a war. Did you know that people from Japan, Italy and Germany were sent to internment camps in Australia? Research the Tatura Internment camps and see what you can discover. Write a poem about what it might have been like to be locked up in one of these camps.
13. Throughout the book, people call Japanese people 'Japs'. This is considered to be a racial slur now but was the common way people talked in Australia about Japanese people in the 1940s. How do you think this might have made Kazuo feel? Why do you think this upset Ava so much?
14. Ava feels a little bit like an outsider when she gets to Lake Boga. Have you ever started at a new school or moved to a new town and what was this like for you?
15. The author has used letters in the story. These are scattered throughout and used to add impact to the narrative, introducing historical events and experiences outside of Ava's point of view. In addition, they are written in cursive and have sections of them blacked out by the 'censors', to make them authentic. Research the censorship of letters in Australia in WW11 and think about what it might have been



- like to receive a letter with sections of it impossible to read. How might it have felt to have no other way of communicating with your loved ones? How did it make you feel to be unable to read all of the letters?
16. Have a try at writing a paragraph of a letter in cursive. Do you think this is an easier or harder way to write and read?
 17. The complete letters are included at the end of these notes. So that you can see the parts that were censored. Pick one or two to read as a class and then analyse them for how they make you feel, how they drive the story onwards and how they add to the narrative. By blacking things out, did that change the story for you? In what ways?
 18. Write a letter yourself—either as the person who is away at war, back to your family at home, or as the person back home, writing to their loved one who is away in the war. Which parts do you think might have been censored?
 19. Did you know that there were many different battles and campaigns in WW11? Townsville and Broome were also bombed by the Japanese. Research some more about the war in the Pacific and pick one aspect of this to write one page about.
 20. At the end of every story there is a resolution. In Ava's case, there were some important scenes in the closing chapters – including understanding her bravery and coming to terms with the ongoing impacts of the war, as well as having to send Kazuo back to the camp. Write down and then discuss, what themes and issues she was able to resolve and what were the things that supported her to do so?
 21. Design a different cover for the book that incorporates something from the story that you really enjoyed. If you would like to, also create a new title and see if you can write a tagline for the book that will encourage people to want to read it.
 22. Choose your favourite character from the book and draw a picture of how you think they look. Write a letter from this character to another character in the book. Make sure you use some of the language or expressions that they use, so that you are staying true to their character.
 23. What do you think it might have been like to live through the bombing of Darwin? The senses are important in writing a book, it helps to place the reader in the story. Describe how the bombing scene used metaphors and senses – how did it make you feel?
 24. Why do you think senses are important in writing and how do they connect you to memories of your own life? Do you have a favourite smell, song, or object that connects you to a memory? Write a poem that uses these senses.
 25. In this story the author used first person past tense narrative. Why do you think the author did that? How do you think the story might have changed if she had used third person perspective?
 26. Break into small groups and choose a theme from the book. Choose some examples from the text that show how this theme is explored.
 27. Retell the scene where Ava and the others go inside the Catalina from one of the other character's perspective. How does this change the story and the narrative flow? Does it add or take anything away from the story?



28. Ava has a lot of rules and rituals. She believes in these giving her 'good luck'. Do you have anything that you do for good luck?
29. Ava realises as the story goes on that not all rules are good ones. Discuss a rule that you think should be changed.
30. Ava finds great solace in nature, especially spending time with birds. It has been shown that time in nature is good for our mental health. Discuss some of the places you enjoy spending time in nature and why they make you feel good.
31. Describe a time where you have felt grief about someone or something you have lost. Write a short story about how you felt and use metaphors to illustrate these feelings. If you are comfortable, share these stories with a small group of other people in the class.
32. In small groups, select a chapter of the book and turn this into a play. Act this out in front of the class. Analyse what you did and how you created action from a written story.

LETTERS FROM ON GALLANT WINGS

10th December 1941

No. 460 Squadron

Dear Ava

I'm sorry it's taken me a while to write back. It's been very busy here. How are you feeling about Fred going away? No matter what, I know you'll be okay because you're strong and capable. You remind me a lot of your Mum.

Not long now until Christmas and your birthday. I can't believe you'll be turning 13! I'm sorry I won't be there to share it with you. Hopefully by your next birthday, the war will be over and I'll be home. Things are going all right here. I've made some mates in the squadron and there's a lot of camaraderie between the Aussies and the Brits. We've even had a few games of cricket—we're the better team of course. I made 84 on my last inning!

I've been navigator in a few different types of planes now. We're not allowed to give you details, in case the enemy reads our letters, but I can tell you that in the bigger one, it's noisy and cramped and a bit like being inside the Sydney Harbour Bridge! It's very cold here in England, which seems strange after the heat of Darwin, especially at this time of year. The nights are longer than the days too. They reckon we'll have a bit of a lunch for Christmas, and perhaps even some singing. But I'll miss you all.

Have a celebration for me, make sure you do, because it will make me happy to know you are safe and enjoying Christmas and your very special birthday. I look forward to your next letter. Remember our deal—to take nothing for granted and be grateful for everything we have, especially each other.

Love, Dad

PS. Your mum told me what an excellent job you've been doing with the



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pigeons! Thank you for looking after them so well.



22nd December 1941, Darwin

Dear Dad

Thanks for your letter and your good wishes. We aren't doing anything much for my birthday, but Fred will have leave for Christmas day, so at least he'll be with us for lunch. I think your mate Mick is coming too—I can't wait to show him Essie—as well as Mum's friend Barb from the CWA. Mick's in the army now, so I don't know what will happen to his pigeons when he goes away. Fred seems excited about joining the army. Mum isn't happy about it though. I don't know what to think.

Since your last letter, I have been imagining you in your uniform, making sure the pilot knows which direction to fly in. What's it like looking out over the world from up there?

Even though we're in different Hemispheres, I feel like the nights are longer than the days here too—isn't that strange? I guess it's probably cause I miss you and Fred the most at night. The house seems sadder too, as if it's waiting for someone to walk in the door, but they never do—the darkness makes that worse. I often think of you when I can't sleep.

I hope you like the drawing of Essie, and the photo of her first flight. Mum let me take two photos so I could send one to you. She also made a Christmas pudding which should arrive with this letter. She said they keep for ages. Maybe you can share it with some of your mates. When you left, Fred took over some of your jobs at home, like you told him to. He still does what he can on his days off, but mostly me and Mum do everything now. There was a snake in the loo last night, and I screamed, and Mum came running and screamed too! Luckily it slithered away, probably because of all that screaming ... Fred would've dealt with that snake faster than a spinning wheel on Cracker Night!

Mum says it's up to us to keep everything running smoothly and that we might as well just get used to it. We're managing, but it's lonely with you, Fred and Kazuo all gone. I don't want to get used to it, Dad, I just want things to go back to the way they were. I worry about you and Fred, and also about Kazuo and his family, locked up in Adelaide River in those holding camps. Everyone seems more and more angry at the Japanese people who live here. I don't understand why they don't understand that Kazuo and his family and others like them, had nothing to do with what happened at Pearl Harbor. They're just as horrified about it as we are.

I've stopped trying to argue about it though. Mum says it isn't worth it. I think it probably would be, if I could just get them to stop and think about what they are doing, or get them to imagine how they would feel if it was their family being sent to a holding camp. There are hardly any women and children left in Darwin now, just nurses or telephonists like Mum, and other women who are essential services. I sometimes bump into a few of their



kids, but they definitely aren't my friends, especially Billy Jackson. His mum works at the hospital. I wish he hadn't stayed, so I didn't have to keep dodging him. Sometimes he hangs around the wharf, but he is always on his own. It almost makes me feel sorry for him. Almost.

Sometimes I climb the big Moreton Bay Fig tree on the vacant block, make my way up through its thick twisted arms and pretend I can see all the way to you on the other side of the world. Mostly, I read, especially Winnie the Pooh. You know that's my absolute favourite book. Remember how you used to read it to me all the time? Every time I read it I think of you.

I also help Mum around the house—and look after the pigeons, of course. I spend a lot of time waiting for letters from you, and Fred and Kazuo. At least I have the pigeons for company, especially Essie. She's smart and fast. I've been training her to fly a bit further from the loft and she's making progress. You'd love her. I wish you could come home for Christmas.

Stay safe up there.

Love, Ava xxx

28th December 1941,

Darwin

Dear Kazuo

It's been strange without you here, especially on Christmas Day and my birthday. Fred came for a while and a couple of people Mum and Dad know, but it wasn't the same. I missed our annual game of marathon chess. It's hard to imagine what your Christmas was like camp.

Did you get to celebrate? I hope so. Mum said even if you didn't, at least you have somewhere to sleep and three meals a day. I told her you already had that here. There's hardly any kids sometimes see Billy Jackson in the distance, but I just stay out of his way. Essie is doing really well. Fred and I are planning to take her on a longer solo flight soon. I'm training her to fly on her own, without the flock.

I asked Mum if you would be in the camp for much longer. She said she doesn't know. I'm not sure anybody knows, which makes me sad.

I just want things to go back to the way they used to be.

Barb, Mum's friend from the CWA, said that your mother didn't have to go with your father and you. Is that true?

Please stay safe and write back if you can.

Your friend, always

Ava

PS. How is Rita? Make sure you tell her I have her doll. It fell out of the truck, but I picked it up and I'm keeping it safe for her.

14th January 1942
Adelaide River Holding Camps

Dear Ava

It's true, my mother didn't have to go with us. They told her she could stay in Darwin, but she said wherever me and Rita and Dad go, she goes too. We're doing okay. There's always a lot going on. Dad and I work long hours helping the soldiers camp, but we have enough to eat and somewhere to sleep. It feels like our lives are on hold, which is funny since we're in a holding camp! There are other Japanese people and some Germans and Italians here. The camp is in the middle of nowhere. Mountains surround us and lots of scrub and trees.

Make sure you continue to keep away from Billy the Bully. If you do come across him, just dazzle him with facts. You could always tell him all the different types of wings at him like you taught me—elliptical, high speed, long soaring and high lift, broad soaring—he probably won't understand any of it. Are you impressed that I remembered them all?

If you could grow wings, what type would you want? behind the barbed wire fences here, I've been wishing for broad wings like the hawks and the eagles. Then I could just soar away. I sit and watch the birds sometimes and think about you and Essie. Write soon and let me know how Essie is going with her flights.

*Your friend, always,
Kazuo*

8th March 1942
No. 8 Pigeon Loft,
Australian Corps of Signals Pigeon Service

Dear Ava

I was so relieved to hear from Mick that you and Mum were all right and had gotten out of Darwin. We heard there were a few people killed, but at least it wasn't as bad as Pearl Harbor. Word is, Broome was also bombed last week. I've been thinking about you and Mum a lot. And missing you. Mick tells me it's natural to be worried. Being with Essie helps. I know you used to say she made you feel better. Well, she makes me feel better too.

More military services are slowly starting to arrive in Townsville—Yanks and Aussies. Some of the locals don't seem happy about it. And I have to admit, it might feel like an invasion if this was your home. They've used the old stables at the side of the bank building for a loft and they're made from red-brick, so it's very different for the pigeons. They seem to be adjusting and there's plenty of room for them. Despite being different to what the flock is used to, the loft is well set up, with lots of birds sent to us, along with Mick's flock and now yours. The bank building is very grand. At the back they have also built a concrete bunker. The pigeons were excited to see me when they arrived. You always told me that pigeons have excellent memories for people's faces and they definitely knew me. They weren't in the best condition after



the trip, but over the past couple of weeks, they've started to get into top form again. Especially Essie. I promise you, I will keep them safe.

You should've seen her this morning. When I let her go, she bent her knees and propelled herself upwards, finding her centre in the sky. She knew what I wanted her to do, and the other pigeons gathered and waited, as if they knew she was going to lead them. Essie turned her beak towards the loft and led the way. Mick and I packed up the baskets and went quickly back to the loft. I remembered what you said last time, about us needing to get there first, so she'd know we believed in her. I sat inside and waited, and soon after, she flew straight to me through the open window. I even put a little bit of seed in my mouth and Essie pecked it straight from my lips! Tommy did all right too, although when he got back, he was far more interested in food than he was in me! Essie is a true leader now.

I don't know about you, but I wonder all the time if Dad is safe. I haven't had a letter for him in ages, but I'm not very good at keeping up with letters myself. Have you heard from him? I hope you've made some friends. It's great to have Mick here, and I've made a couple of new mates as well. I don't know what's going to happen next, but at the moment we are all okay. Hope you are too.

Love from your brother,

Fred. xx

PS here's a feather from Essie. She dropped it when she flew in this morning, and it floated through the dusky light of the loft like a fairy. I told her I'd send it to you.

30th June 1942

Dear Kazuo

Thank you for your last letter. It sounds like there are parts of the camp that you like and parts that you don't. I know it's not the same at all, but sometimes I feel like I don't belong either. Although I can't imagine what it's like to feel like you are stuck between two cultures, or to be locked up. I wish I could visit you.

After you were taken, and I had to leave Essie behind, I was determined not to make any more friends. But Mum insisted I meet some of the locals—Pete and Stevo and Jenny—and they turned out to be okay.

I think you would like them.

I do have some birds for friends too, of course. There's one particular pelican called Kevin. He's very friendly. If you go on another picnic, look out for him. He has a scar on his right leg, and he will probably be there on his own. He seems to be the reconnaissance pelican of the flock.

I hope that you don't hate me for making friends—human ones, that is! You're my best friend—no-one will ever replace you—but being alone was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I hope you've made friends as well.

It's cold here too. We have been going for walks around the lake and watching the pelicans. Grandad RaRi built me a loft and I have a few pigeons. I have been drawing too. Mum is going away for her WAAAF training soon. There are other things happening here, but I'm not allowed to talk about it, and they'll probably cut it out of my letter anyway, if there is someone reading this before it gets to you.

Miss you always, Ava

PS. I'll be starting school soon.

PPS. When they let you out of the camp—whenever that is—make sure you come visit me. We are about 5 miles out of Lake Boga, on the road that goes straight down the main street. Pass the pub and keep going West on the Lake Boga-Ultima Road. Just past Round Lake on the left, you'll see the rusty gate and the stone farmhouse at the top of the hill on the right. There is a statue made of old pieces of iron at the gate in the shape of an aeroplane. Grandad RaRi made it years ago.

**20th July 1942,
Lake Boga**

Dear Fred

Mum has her wish. She's signed up to the WAAAF. They've changed the rules to allow women with children to enlist. Apparently, she was allowed to sign up because Grandma Dot and Grandad RaRi agreed to look after me. When she told me, she had the biggest smile on her face. I tried to be happy for her. I told her I was glad. I'm happy she feels like she's doing something. But I'm not glad for me, because that's another person gone. I'm the only one left now. Grandad RaRi and I have built a loft. We have six pigeons—two pairs—Alvin and Mae and Hector and Hazel. They've just had their first chicks—Walt and Piglet. I am hoping to train them when they're ready to fledge.

One day, when this is all over, I wonder if we'll look back on it and feel how I do when I hear *The White Cliffs of Dover* playing on the radio, like somehow the war was all about medals and military magnificence when really, it's about people being scared. About people being hurt and killed and hating each other when they don't know why, breaking rules and making rules and following rules that should never have been needed. Dad loves that song, but I don't like it at all.

One of Grandad RaRi's mates here is a local Aboriginal man. He lives with his family on the eastern side of Lake Boga, with lots of other families. Grandad RaRi said many Aboriginal men are serving in the war, fighting alongside other Australians. He said people ought to treat them equally, to realise we're all in this fight together. We should notice each other more, don't you think?

I'm starting high school at Swan Hill after the August holidays. It's all arranged and I'm sort-of looking forward to it. I'm glad I have Pete and the others to help me get used to school again. We've been going for long walks around the lake because it's too cold to swim. We sit beneath the peppercorn trees and share stories about what we're going to do when we leave school. Kevin's always there, even if the rest of his squadron aren't. It's funny how we call them that. Maybe it's because they fly like a squadron of planes.

My friend Pete says he's going to Melbourne after he leaves school to study aeronautical engineering. He wants to fix and build planes, but he's a bit worried about the maths. I told him he shouldn't give up. Jenny wants to be an actress, and Stevo plans to stay here and help his family on the farm. As for me, all I know is that I want to do something with birds. Mum told me there weren't many jobs she could do when she was leaving school, but things are changing with the war. Women are working in factories and driving trucks and doing all sorts of things now. They're even helping fix planes and flying boats. Have you thought about what you want to do when this is all over?



Please give Essie a big kiss for me, and make sure you both stay safe.

Ava xxx

PS. It's really cold here. There are actual seasons! It's taken a while to get used to, but I like it.

10th August 1942

No. 8 Pigeon Loft,

Australian Corps of Signals Pigeon Service

Dear Ava

I'm so glad you have pigeons again! I can't wait to meet them when I come home. I'm doing fine here in Townsville, but we've had three air raids by the I'll never forget that sound. Do you feel the same?

I remember you telling me how it was like the world was screaming. I get that now. I can only imagine what it was like that day in Darwin.

They're talking about the possibility of sending some pigeon lofts to New Guinea. There's a lot going on there and with the terrible conditions, they are having trouble with their lines of communications. I know we could help. I also know you wouldn't want Essie going there, into the conflict, but Ava, I think she could do just about anything. I've been watching her a lot, and she is so clever. I believe in her. I hope you can believe in me.

I've been remembering that time when you and me and Kazuo were little, and we went for a picnic on our own. I fell off my bike and you were on the back. You were crying and your knee was all knocked up. I didn't know how to calm you down, but Kazuo, he poured some water over your knee and wrapped it up in his clean hanky. Then he sat you down and told you, 'You're a bike rider now Ava! Like me and Fred.'

And even though you weren't really, you looked so proud of yourself, and all your crying stopped. I thought he was a hero that day. He was always like that at school too, helping people when he saw a need. I really admire him for that. So, even though I talk about the Japs being our enemy, I know Kazuo is a decent person— even though it's taken me a while to remember that. I just wanted you to know.

Stay well and look after Grandad RaRi and Grandma Dot.

Love Fred xx

**15th September 1942,
Lake Boga, Victoria**

Dear Dad

Thank you for your last letter. We have had a few letters from Fred, too, so I know he and Essie, and the flock are doing okay.

Grandad RaRi and I built a loft and we've eight pigeons, now. There's lots of native birds here too. The crested pigeon pair at the farm have had chicks. I checked the hakea bushes and sure enough, I found their nest. The chicks are doing well. It won't be long before they're out with their parents.

It's funny, but I was thinking about how different birds attack each other when they feel threatened and yet they live side by side. Human beings are a bit like that aren't we—imagine what it'd be like, if we could stop fighting and just let each other sit happily in our nests, sharing the space. Sharing the world.

I have a confession to make. Sometimes, when I'm in the middle of a conversation with Grandad RaRi, or baking with Grandma Dot, or chatting with my friend Pete, I forget about the war for a moment. For those few minutes, everything seems normal, but that feels wrong. Do you think it's wrong? Do you ever forget, Dad? I guess that's a stupid question to ask. It must be impossible to forget given where you are.

I'm at the school in Swan Hill, now. It's only a small school, so there aren't many kids there. Having friends already has really helped. I don't know why I was so against going back to school when we first got here—it's nowhere near as bad as I thought it would be.

Everyone at school is helping with the war effort—some are knitting, others are collecting recyclable materials like rubber and paper—we're turning the school into a 'salvage depot for freedom' like Prime Minister Curtin asked us to. I copied some of the letter out for you, as I thought you might like to read it. Our teacher said it was sent to every school in Australia.

My friend Pete was pretty excited when the letter came. It does feel good to be helping in some small way, but I don't know about 'cheerfully taking up our part.' I'm not sure we have much choice. Mum's still away on her WAAAF training. And I haven't had a letter from Kazuo for a while. Grandad RaRi says are being stopped. I'm worried he hates me now because in my last letter, I told him I have made some new friends ...

I have been imagining you flying in those planes and Essie flying with Fred. It's like you're all in the sky and that's our connection. The other day there was a huge rainbow, and I imagined you were at one end and Fred and Essie were at the other.

It made me feel better.

Stay safe.



*Love from your daughter,
Ava xxx*

*“My Dear Children,
You, the children of today are passing through a terrible period in the world’s history. We, the people of Australia, have cheerfully taken up our part in this struggle to secure for you a way of life more peaceful and happy than is ours today. Now I want you to do your bit for the safety of this wonderful country in which we live.
John Curtin, September 1942”*

4th December 1942
No. 8 Pigeon Loft,
Australian Corps of Signals Pigeon Service

Dear Ava,

Well, we made it to New Guinea. Essie and the flock weren’t impressed with the flight. To tell the truth, I didn’t like it much either! I think Essie wondered how she was in the sky when she wasn’t even moving her wings! I managed to be sick only once, which was a miracle, but the others still made fun of me. I told them, I’m definitely not made for this. I’m a bloke who likes to feel the ground under my feet.

Essie and the flock will be with me and Mick at a place called Bootless Bay. There’s lots of coconut trees here, like in Darwin. The natives can climb up them in a flash. They’re friendly and helping our blokes out in all sorts of ways. The islands are covered with jungle and hills and mountains. There’s a ward hospital, where the sick and injured are lying and the sisters have their own mess hall. I eat with the blokes in another one.

It’s hot and humid. Lots of blokes walk around without their shirts on when they’re doing heavy work, wearing just their shorts and helmets. The rain every afternoon is even worse than in Darwin too. It starts about 2 in the afternoon and buckets down until 10 at night.

Lots of people are getting malaria and dysentery. I’m trying to stay well. More reinforcement pigeons are being flown from Australia, as lots more fanciers have donated their young birds to the Army. We’ve noticed that for some of the birds, the sudden change of climate and the humid conditions are bad for the younger ones and can lead to an outbreak of roup.

Essie is fine, and Dash and Violet. I guess they so were bred in the humid conditions in Darwin. Don’t worry too much about them. I’ll keep them well. We have some plans to make sure all the pigeons stay healthy and we’re going to start a breeding programme soon, which should solve that problem.



Birds that are trained on the portable lofts, like Essie, seem to be doing better too as they're more adaptable. We're also making sure the lofts are well ventilated. Tommy is happy with the food situation! We've found it's best to bring seed here in airtight drums. Essie loves the Milo! And Tommy, as usual, loves all of it. We do find that we have to withhold all morning exercise flights. We let them out around the loft, if we need to, in the late afternoon to try and stop them breaking and trying to find their way home to Australia! We definitely don't want them to do that!

*Most birds can't fly more than 60 miles in a day, which is a long way, but if we need them to go longer, we'll need to install an intermediate loft. I'm fairly sure Essie could fly further than that. We're all safe, so try not to worry too much about us. I am sure we'll be home again soon and I'm trying to stay out of trouble. Give my love to everyone there, especially to Mum. Tell her I'm well. I know she'll be sad that me and Dad can't be there, but I'm sure you will keep her happy. I'm going to miss Christmas with you all, but apparently there'll be some sort of celebration here. Enjoy your 14th birthday. Eat lots of Grandma Dot's Yorkshire pudding and Christmas cake for me.
Love Fred xxx*

5th November 1942 -

Boronia Creek Cattle Station, Alice Springs

Dear Ava (Bird Brain!)

I bet you never thought you'd hear from me again! Well, here I am. What's it like at Lake Boga? They said at our post office that this would go to your post office and you would collect it from there. We are about three hours away from Alice, so I don't get much chance to send letters, or do anything else. I don't know how far away you are from the nearest town. I have been working on the station and learning a lot about how to muster the cattle and all sorts of other things, including drenching, which is giving them medicine with a special gun thing, so they don't get worms and ticks and stuff like that! It's hot here, hotter than Darwin I reckon. There's nobody else for miles. Daphne has been doing correspondence school, which means she has to sit and do the lessons. Mum helps her. I've been working instead.

Dad's still in Darwin and Jimmy is overseas somewhere. We don't hear from him much. Mum is pretty down a lot of the time, but she has plenty to do, looking after Daphne, and helping Aunty Joan with managing the place and keeping an eye on the jillaroos who come. There aren't too many blokes around at the moment, so it's pretty hard yakka. There's a big demand for beef for the forces, so we might be losing most of the herd anyway. I don't know what we'll do then.

Have you heard from Kazuo? And how about Fred? I saw some of the birds you told me about. Budgerigars are my favourites. I saw a huge flock of



them a few weeks ago. They were flying in a big group and every time they changed direction, the whole flock moved as if they were dancing together, all doing the same move at the same time. It made me think of you and your pigeons.

I hope we get to meet again one day. There are no other kids around here and nobody else will ever understand what we went through in Darwin.

Write back and tell me some interesting stories

From your friend, Billy

(formerly Billy the Bully, but not any more!)

162

**1st December 1942,
No. 8 Pigeon Loft,
Australian Corps of Signals Pigeon Service
New Guinea**

Dear Ava

I am sending this letter with my mate Dave, who was injured and is being sent home. His family don't live very far from Lake Boga, so he will bring this to you, which means we don't have worry about the censors—and I can write you a longer letter than usual! A lot of the blokes have been doing that when the opportunity comes up. I reckon the ones who have to carry them, spend their first weeks back home doing mail deliveries!

Please keep everything I tell you to yourself—except for Grandad RaRi and Grandma Dot, and Mum of course.

I'm okay but I do have to tell you some bad news. Tommy has been killed. The other day, Essie, Dash, Tommy and a white hen called Cotton, came on a trek into the jungle and I was the loftman caring for them along the way. It was hot and sticky, and as we advanced up the narrow track, the soldiers had to manoeuvre through coconut trees and vines and kunai grass. Some of the local men travelled with us and made sections of the track passable, slashing away the jungle. The forward scouts wheeled out their wire cable behind us, in case we needed to get in touch with headquarters.

We pushed through thick jungle and up a steep hillside towards the summit. On the left of us, going down the hill, was another company. Some local men were with them, carrying an injured soldier on a stretcher. A moment later we heard the sound of machine guns, making some of the men shout and others stop so suddenly they almost fell over each other.

We were in the thickest of thick jungle, barely any light and air, with no way to see ahead of us, and we'd walked into an ambush. The company commander took the field phone, which was attached to the wire the signals men had been rolling out behind us, but it was dead. The Japs had cut the line, and it was useless.

They tried using the wireless radio, but the jungle was too thick, and it couldn't transmit. The fighting got worse and the commander



yelled at me to get the pigeons out. We had tanks within 20 miles, with air force there, artillery, everything we needed—we just needed to get hold of them, to tell them we needed their help. The commander had no idea about the pigeons, so I showed him how we attach the messages. Essie was the best choice, but he chose Tommy, because he was the biggest.

I tried to tell him that the biggest wasn't always the best, but he yelled at me that he was a Major and I was only a loftman, so I had to do what he said. So I wrapped the cannister around Tommy's leg and let him go. But as he circled above us, Tommy dove towards the ground nearby and began to peck at some seeds in the grass. As you know, Tommy's a hungry bird and with the no breakfast policy, he was more interested in food, than flying home to the loft. I yelled at him, and he turned and looked at me, flying upwards and away, hovering high above. I urged him on, but then, machine gun fire rang out and Tommy was hit. He fell down into the thick jungle where I couldn't get to him.

We had to send Essie and Dash then. They were so brave. They seemed distressed, and spent a little time searching for Tommy, but they soon flew fast away. And Ava, they saved us. We were surrounded by jungle and machine gun fire, with no-one to help us. No-one but Essie and Dash.

A few hours later, two tanks came screaming through the jungle along the narrow track, hitting coconut trees and vines, and burst into the clearing where we were hiding. Despite heavy fire, they charged forward to take on the enemy. Once the tanks had cleared the way, Mick managed to get an aerial radio up a tree and use the wireless to contact headquarters. They told him they couldn't help until the morning, so we just had to wait it out.

The tanks stayed at the front, protecting us and fighting off some heavy attacks. The tank crews slept inside them, because they knew we'd be attacked at first light. If they'd gotten out of the tanks, they would've been goners.

Sure enough, the next morning, we came under very heavy attack, and to make things worse, we were nearly out of ammunition.

Thankfully, the tanks were able to wipe out the enemy. Finally another troop of tanks came up to relieve us and we were able to get back to headquarters, where I found Essie nestled in the loft with her wings folded.

I am so sorry about Tommy. We are all sad about losing him. I stayed with Dash and Violet and Essie for ages, stroking their crowns and feeding them seed. I knew how much they'd be missing him.

I promise to do my best to keep Essie and Violet and Dash safe. I don't really know if I could have done anything differently, Ava, but I'm still really sorry. It was my responsibility to look after him. Maybe I should have stood up to the commander, but the rules here are strict and you have to do what's ordered or you could be court



martialled—even shot.

I miss you so much. I may not get another chance to send a letter this way, but I will write again when I can.

Give my love to Mum and Grandad RaRi and Grandma Dot.

xx Fred

PS. How are the preparations for Christmas going?

15th December 1942, Lake Boga

Dear Fred,

Thanks for telling me about Tommy. I'm glad we've always told each other the truth. Nothing—not even the war—should stop us doing that. It's devastating to lose Tommy, but it must be worse for Essie and Dash and Violet. And for you. I'm glad they have you. And what happened wasn't your fault. It's the war's fault—every bit of it.

I really wish you were here. Grandma Dot has just put the tree up.

Mum will be home for Christmas lunch and a few days after.

Sometimes she joins us at the lake for a swim, depending on her shifts.

The weeds grow high around the jetty, but some people row out in boats and cut them down. It makes the perfect swimming spot. Nobody likes to swim among the weeds. You never know what's hidden beneath them and strings stick to your legs like tentacles, but now, we have a beautiful clear patch to swim in. The pelicans even join us sometimes, especially Kevin. It's a funny name for a pelican I know—but for some reason, that's what the locals call him.

The other night I went to a picnic dinner with Mum at this place they call The Prairie. A fire was blazing, and my friend Pete's dad was there, as well as some American and Dutch officers, whose Catalinas needed repairs. Me and Pete and a handful of other kids whose parents are based at the barracks, were the only ones allowed to come, for that one special night.

Even though I'm missing you and Dad, and Essie, I felt really happy. In that moment, it was almost like we weren't at war. It made me realise we're all under the same stars and endless, endless space. Essie, Dash and Violet and all those other pigeons, they're flying across that sky, so in a way, they're connecting us—the stars and the birds. If I had wings, I'd fly through that night sky to you and Essie and give you both a big hug. But I guess our letters are our wings for now. Stay safe. Hopefully you'll all be home soon.

Love, Ava xxxx