

SKY PILOT NEWS

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Patron: Rt. Rev. Bishop W. G. Hilliard, M.A. Director: K. Langford-Smith, F.R.G.S. Secretary: Norma K. Warwick.

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Homing pigeons returning from a training toss.

PIGEON POST: A story from the Sky Pilot's Log (2CH Broadcast).

When the aeroplane "Sky Pilot" was stationed in Arnhem Land, I established a pigeon post to enable messages to be received from outlying stations. I had a stockman neighbour, Jim, who was interested in birds, and he came over to see my lofts.

First of all we went into the stock lofts, where the breeders were busy making nests and looking after their young. Jim knew something about fowls, but nothing about pigeons.

"My word, Smithy," was his first remark, "you've got a fine lot of birds here. They're all properly married, too—look at the wedding rings on their legs! What's the idea of the

rings, anyway?"

"Each ring has the initials of a homing pigeon club or federation, and a number. If one of these birds were picked up anywhere in Australia, the owner could be traced without any trouble."

Jim was surprised. "Do you mean each pigeon breeder has his own number?"

"No," I explained, "every bird has its own number—no two rings have the same number and initials."

"That's interesting; but how do you know that someone won't change the rings?"

"They couldn't get the ring off without cut-

ting it. The rings are intact and are put on the leg as a youngster in the nest. Later, his foot grows too big ever to get the ring over it again, though it's quite loose on his leg, of course."

Jim showed a great interest in the pigeons, and continued to ask questions. "In this breeding loft, Smithy, how many hens do you put with each male bird?"

"Only one," I answered, "these are not fowls! With very few exceptions, each bird takes a mate for life, and remains faithful to it; that is, of course, unless we take the mate away and give it a new one. In that case, it soon takes to the new mate. Pigeons are great believers in home life. When the time comes to nest, the hen sits in the box they have selected, and her mate carries up the sticks and straw for the building of the nest. When the nest is finished, the male bird starts what we call 'driving to nest'."

"What on earth's that?" asked Jim, in surprise.

"He drives her all about the loft and makes her walk up and down without ceasing, all day long. If she tries to rest, he pecks at her and keeps her on the move. Backwards and forwards they go without a spell. It's for exercise, that's all. It's just nature's way of making sure that the hen is not over-fat or out of condition before she lays. Homing pigeons have a job to do, and any that are not perfectly fit cannot stand up to hard flying. Then, when the period of exercise is over the hen lays an egg, then misses a day and lays the second egg on the third day. There are always just the two eggs."

"Doesn't the first egg hatch a couple of days before the second one?" Jim asked.

"No," I replied, "they only stand over the egg till the second one is laid, then they sit on them and incubation commences."

"You say **they** sit," Jim remarked. "Do you mean that both parents share in the work? I never see the roosters in my fowl yard taking a turn at hatching the eggs."

"With pigeons, all the work is shared equally. The hen sits at night, and at about 10 o'clock in the morning her mate takes over and sits till late afternoon, when the hen takes over again."

Jim chuckled. "Well, I think the hen gets the best of it. If I was broody I think I'd rather sit at night, and have a free day. And how long do they sit?"

"About eighteen days. After seventeen days, both parents form milk in their crops, which they pump into the tiny youngsters, or squeakers, as they're called. Day by day this milk gets a little thicker. After a week,

it contains ground-up grain about the size of sago grains, and gradually the size of the grains is increased, till after a fortnight the squeakers are fed on whole grain, just softened in the parents' crops."

"Well, I didn't know that!" Jim exclaimed. "I've heard of pigeon's milk, but I thought it was only a joke! And how long is it before the youngsters are left to fend for themselves?"

"Oh, about four or five weeks. But we always take them away on the thirtieth day, as they are beginning to use their wings and can feed themselves by then. Actually, when they are about two or three weeks old, the hen lays again, and she leaves most of the feeding to Dad."

"Well, Dad certainly is a family man! I suppose he still has to take his usual day shift on the second nest, and in his spare time rear the youngsters from the first nest?"

"Yes," I agreed, "he does his share, all right. But we only let them rear two, or, at the most, three nests a year. If they tried to rear more than this, the youngsters wouldn't be as well reared and couldn't stand up to hard flying over long distances when they grew up."

Jim wanted to know more. "And how did you get all these birds, Smithy? I guess they're expensive to buy or import?"

"Yes. A Belgian fancier named Gits, in 1880, refused to accept a pair of the best carriage horses obtainable in England for one pair of his pigeons. Even in Australia, I remember when £100 was paid for one pigeon. But all these pigeons I have here were gifts from the racing pigeon fanciers in Sydney to help establish a pigeon post in Arnhem Land. They willingly gave of their best birds."

"Yes," said Jim, "I've read about them donating pigeons to the Government, free of cost, in war time. All pigeons used by the Army were obtained as gifts. But what I want to know is, how the pigeons find their way. Is it just some blind instinct born in them, or do they have to be trained?"

"They have to be trained very carefully, and even so it's only very few of them that are able to fly the longer distances of, say, 500 to 1000 miles. But there isn't time to go into that this afternoon; I'll tell you about the training some other day. Of course, these stock birds are not used for carrying messages. Come over here, and I'll show you the flying loft."

We moved along to the next loft, and I pointed out to Jim the birds trained to carry messages. I added a word of explanation. "Most of the birds are away at the moment

at their posts of duty. At every isolated station within 100 miles there is a pair of trained birds. Every month they will be replaced with fresh ones and brought back to undergo a refresher course of training. In case of emergency these birds will be released, with a note. They come straight back here at a rate of about 60 miles an hour, and I can take the aeroplane out immediately, and so save days, or even weeks—which may mean a life saved."

"How are the messages carried?" Jim asked.

"In a little aluminium tube that clips on to the pigeon's leg. In war time . . ."

Jim interrupted excitedly. "Look, Smithy, look over there! Isn't that a pigeon flying over those trees? Yes, and there's another one with it! They're coming straight here. Just look how they're racing!"

"Stand back a bit, Jim," I said hastily, "they don't know you. They're probably carrying an urgent message, and if they get frightened they'll lose time. That's right, stand under that tree. Here they come."

The faithful little birds lit on the roof and went straight into the loft. It took only a few seconds to read the note, which was carried in duplicate by the two birds. It was from a station 50 miles away, where a man had been thrown from a horse and seriously injured. In no time the aeroplane was pushed out from its hangar. I swung the propeller, and when the engine started I left it to warm up while I got the medical kit. In less than ten minutes we were ready, chocks away, and racing down the runway for the take-off . . . and another life was saved.

Do you think that story needs an application? Do you believe it was just some blind chance that caused the wonderful homing pigeon to be created? Oh, yes, I know that man has developed it from the wild rock pigeon and, by selection and training, has gradually increased the distance it can fly. But he has only brought out what was already latent in the make-up of the tiny feathered wonder. Every time I see one of these birds come home from a race or training toss it strengthens my faith in a wise and loving Creator and Designer. Those who are unable to see the hand of God in the wonders of creation and the beauty and mystery of nature are either wilfully blind or they do not want to see Him.

And the final entry in to-day's log is taken from the first chapter of Genesis, "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good."

DARK CHILDREN. We are pleased to

report that the dark children continue to improve in health; those who go to school have settled in happily and are the envy of the smaller ones as they set out each morning for the school 'bus. During the month, Kim left us, and she is now with her mother on the North Coast. However, her place has been taken by Lily, who is three years old and came to us through the Aborigines' Welfare Board. She had just had a spell in hospital before coming to us, but she is now progressing satisfactorily and taking her place with our dark family. Some of the dark children attended a Sunday School picnic as the guests of Banksia Free Church, and had a wonderful time, and (most important to them) plenty to eat.

During the month three churches have kindly donated to us the goods from their Harvest Thanksgiving Services. These were very much appreciated and were a wonderful help in catering for our large family, who could not believe their eyes when they saw the big pile of fruit, vegetables and groceries in the kitchen.

THE "SKY PILOT". God has answered our prayers (and yours) in a wonderful way, and preparations are almost complete for Mr. Langford-Smith to take his long-awaited trip to Arnhem Land. Through the kindness of friends, he has obtained the loan of both a rifle and a shotgun, not to mention much other valuable camping equipment. Our heartfelt thanks go to all who have made the trip possible, and especially to our Heavenly Father, Who has provided in a wonderful way for His servant. We all pray that Mr. Langford-Smith will return to carry on his life's work with renewed health and strength. During his absence the whole of the responsibility for this work will fall on the womenfolk, and we do ask you to pray that they may be upheld by the power of the Holy Spirit and that all financial needs may be met.

MARGARET LANGFORD-SMITH. We are pleased to welcome Margaret back from England this month. Although her return was earlier than expected, because of her father's illness, she has benefited greatly from her working holiday and gained wide experience in her work. During Mr. Langford-Smith's absence she will be a tower of strength to her mother in her added responsibilities.

MISSION FARM. There had been a long, dry spell following the excessive rain of the previous summer, and without suitable water supply for irrigation it was useless trying to

grow any extensive crops. However, there were several nice falls of rain during the month, and, hoping that other autumn rains would follow, we have put in patches of lucerne, clover and other fodder crops, as well as a few vegetables. We are fortunate to have the services of Mr. A. Dunkling every Saturday. He has been a tower of strength in the past, and while Mr. Langford-Smith is away he will come for a couple of hours' work several times a week, as well as on the Saturdays.

Recently the P.M.G. Dept. condemned our telegraph poles, and insisted on their renewal. Only two had to be put in, but the quote to supply and erect these was about £30. Fortunately, we were able to cut two poles in the bush paddock of the Mission Farm. Mr. Dunkling towed these into position with his truck and then dug the holes. They were too heavy for us to erect without proper equipment, but a party of young people from Punchbowl Baptist Church came to visit us, and, with the help of VOLUNTEERS who were PRESSED into service by their leaders, the poles went up in no time. We are truly grateful for this assistance, which has saved us a considerable amount, which can be better spent in catering for the dark children.

We were pleased to welcome many visitors during the month, and we specially thank those who treated the children to afternoon tea, showed them films, and brought various gifts, either for use on the Mission Farm or sale at the Street Stalls and Fetes. Folk from Punchbowl, Leichhardt and Kurrajong earned the affection of all the dark children by providing them with "parties" on different occasions.

Amongst our visitors were the Rev. and Mrs. F. J. Roberts, who are on furlough from their Mission work in Malaya. We were most interested to learn something of their work, and as they return we wish them Godspeed

and His richest blessings in their efforts to win souls for His kingdom.

SALE OF WORK. We remind friends that the next Sale of Work will be held (D.V.) on Saturday, 1st June, in the Lower Hall, Sydney Town Hall. We hope to be able to get more copies of the "News" printed in time for reminders to be sent, but owing to Mr. Langford-Smith's absence and the extra work for the rest of the staff, this may not be possible. So will you make this a booking in your diary? We would love to meet you all at this function, and we are looking forward to a time of happy Christian fellowship. The doors will open for sale of goods at 10.30 a.m., and the public meeting will commence at 2 p.m. The dark children from the Mission Farm will sing at the meeting; those who have heard them before will not want to miss their items this time.

We would be glad of gifts for the various Stalls. These may be mailed to K. Langford-Smith, Parramatta Railway Station, or posted to Marella Mission Farm, Acres Road, Kellyville, or brought to the Town Hall on the day.

HOME OFFERING BOXES. We remind box-holders that these are due for opening at the end of March. Please send contents to the Secretary, Marella Mission Farm, Kellyville, and mention, when writing, if you would like another label for your box. If you are interested in helping the work in this way, just drop a line to the Secretary, or 'phone her at YA2427, and one will be posted to you. A few pence put away regularly soon mount up, and it is amazing how a work like this can be carried on by small amounts given regularly. Remember, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Will you do your part by supporting this work with your gifts, and, most important, by your prayers?