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RSPCA remembers animal heroes and champion inspectors this VE Day

Tales of bravery and gallantry of both people and animals before the historic end of World War II, and a special message from Dame Vera Lynn and Michael Morpurgo

As the RSPCA today is battling to help animals in need during a crisis, the charity marks the 75th anniversary of VE Day by taking a look back at the animals and inspectors that also risked everything to protect the country from danger all those years ago.

From search and rescue dogs digging injured civilians from the rubble of their destroyed homes, carrier pigeons transporting urgent messages to protect troops from attack, and heroic inspectors who risked their lives searching for missing pets or injured animals in abandoned homes, World War II saw enormous bravery, dedication and sacrifice for both humans and animals, with many lives saved until the world was finally brought to peace.



Victory in Europe Day, generally known as VE Day, is a day celebrating the formal acceptance by the Allies of World War II of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender of its armed forces on 8 May 1945.

During this war (1939 - 1945), the RSPCA fought hard to protect animals, from pets caught up in bomb damage, livestock in need of rescue after keepers and farmers were tragically killed, to ensuring the release of Government advice to help owners do all they could to keep their beloved animals as safe as possible. During the six year war, the charity rescued and treated over 256,000 animal victims of enemy action, in addition to more than one million animals suffering from general injury and sickness.

Dermot Murphy, the RSPCA's Chief Inspectorate officer who leads the RSPCA's animal rescue teams said: "This landmark 75th Anniversary of VE Day is of course a time to reflect on the human and animal pain, distress and losses caused through the conflict - in particular for us, the five



RSPCA officers who lost their lives during WW2 - but it's also a time for us to remember and really celebrate those who risked everything to help each other, humans and animals alike.

“As a nation of animal lovers, some of the stories and memories we have learned about our colleagues and animal friends back then during what must have been an unimaginably difficult and challenging time are truly inspiring, and really do reflect the British spirit and love for animals. We hope we never have to experience the horrors of what they faced, but we aim to honour and continue their dedication and commitment to making the world a kinder place for animals, some 75 years on.”

In the 1937 Census of Greater London it was estimated that there were 400,000 dogs (not including puppies under six months) more than one million cats, 40,000 horses, 18,000 pigs, 9,000 cattle and 6,000 sheep, all whose lives were at risk from the bombing.

Heroic inspectors:

- In 1940, 37 silver medals were awarded to our inspectors who risked their lives carrying out animal rescues in areas barred to the public because of delayed time bombs. Of the animals rescued from bombed sites, 10,100 pets sadly had to be put to sleep due to injury, but 5,940 animals survived and were successfully rehomed.
- Inspectors were well known locally, and many were contacted by injured people from hospital, desperately asking them to search the ruins of their bombed homes to find their beloved pet - including cats, dogs, tortoises, rabbits and more. Many animals were successfully recovered by these brave inspectors (pictured right.)
- One particular inspector crossed danger cordons into a row of homes evacuated due to a number of dropped time bombs, in search of missing pets. He recovered three cats, two dogs and a cage of budgies to safety.
- A number of male and female RSPCA ambulance drivers risked their lives during the war collecting injured animals from across towns and cities (pictured top.)
- Christmas Eve 1940 an inspector in Southsea recovered hens, rabbits, a canary, a jackdaw and several terrified cats from a bombed home and Anderson shelter, taking them all back to his home on Christmas morning where he cared for them for several days.
- The BBC allowed RSPCA inspector Sargeson to speak on the wireless on the subject of ‘the care of the horse during wartime.’
- Many dogs were known to run away during bombings, and were usually rounded up by police, who then handed them to the RSPCA inspectors to be returned to their owners.
- Extra inspectors had to be drafted in to deal with oiled seabirds caused by sunken submarines.





- During 1942 alone, £27,000 worth of supplies were dispatched to other countries such as Greece, Russia and Australian cavalry operating in Syria and Lebanon to help the people care for a treat injured or needy animals.

Champion animals:

- A dog named Peggy was given an inscribed collar by the RSPCA in recognition of her life-saving actions of her family's baby. When a high explosive bomb was dropped on the home in **East Anglia**, rubble, debris and dust covered the pram, and though Peggy had a route of escape, she jumped onto the pram and began furiously digging a hole through the rubble leaving a gap for the baby to breathe. Mother, child and Peggy all escaped with their lives.
- Naval dog Daisy was also given a special collar from the charity (pictured right) after her trawler ship was bombed and crew were flung into the ice cold sea. Daisy swam from crew member to crew member licking their faces through the night, keeping them awake and positive, until all were rescued and brought to **Newcastle**. Daisy went on to have two puppies and lived out her days at a seaman's hostel in the city.
- The first news of the Dieppe raid was brought by carrier pigeons. A pigeon named Winkie escaped from a sinking ship in the North Sea and flew to Scotland where her code number was traced and rescuers were sent to save the crew. Winkie was given a 'banquet' meal in celebration and given a bronze plaque for her gallant flight.
- Dogs were used to guard air fields, ammunition supplies and much more. They were also trained to detect mines, even those encased in wood, plastic or glass. These dogs received special collars 'for valour' from the RSPCA. A German shepherd named Brian was a patrol dog of the 13th Battalion Airborne Division. He landed in Normandy with his division and was officially named a paratrooper.
- The RSPCA appealed in The Times newspaper for a foster home for a newborn foal whose mother had been killed outright in a bomb attack the night she gave birth. After being cared for at **RSPCA Putney** clinic for injuries to her eye, and with many offers of a home, the foal, named Doodles, was adopted by well-known actress Jane Carr, to a beautiful **Shropshire** countryside home.



Preparing for war

- The RSPCA headquarters was inundated with phone calls from people anxious to do their best for their pets,
- Many people requested gas masks for their pets, but the RSPCA was quick to point out that much training would be needed for an animal to





become accustomed to wearing one. A concerned bee owner even enquired to the charity about the possibility of a mask for her bees!

- In 1936 the RSPCA produced a pamphlet No.326, known as 'Air Raid Precautions for Animals' which became a bestseller with more than 100,000 copies issued. It was also partly adopted by the Ministry of Home Security - even the Egyptian Government adopted the advice! The Society also provided an information leaflet named 'How to feed dogs and cats in Wartime.'
- The grasper was invented by an RSPCA officer after his experiences during the First World War, where he found some cats and dogs too terrified to emerge from debris. Quick release halters for cows and horses were also championed by the RSPCA so that animals could be efficiently released in the event of fire. Even an airborne corps unit wrote to the charity asking for a supply of this device!
- There was great concern about horses during the blitz, so much so that a conference was held at the RSPCA headquarters, presided over by the Duke of Portland and comprising of vets, drivers and horse owners, and a plea was issued to the public for any spare stable or garage space to shelter horses, especially as many cars had been requisitioned. Even the King allowed part of the Royal Mews for horses whose stables had been bombed. Some 'lucky' stout cart horses were housed in the luxurious royal stables for some time!
- Many domestic chickens were left straying or abandoned after bombs attacks, and there was great concern over providing them with food. The Minister of Agriculture agreed to release emergency coupons for poultry food to the RSPCA.

Crucial work of RSPCA branches and hospitals

- The imminence of danger prompted the RSPCA to open a series of animal rescue centres - by 1944, we had established 734 animal rescue centres to deal with the casualties, strays and the sick, staffed mostly by volunteers and partly funded by animal charities from across the world including Canada, America, Australia and South Africa.
- Much of our work was carried out with the support of dedicated volunteers, who helped us appeal for more funds and veterinary supplies when required, and even helped search for lost animals (pictured right.)
- Ten RSPCA clinics were damaged by bombs and those in Southwark, Bristol and Manchester were completely destroyed, and the Manager of RSPCA's Camberwell clinic sadly lost his life during a bomb attack.





- The former headquarters at 105 Jermyn Street, London, suffered bomb damage too (pictured right.)
- If a clinic was destroyed, staff would set up a table in the street and carry out treatments in the open air.
- The Birmingham branch of the RSPCA was responsible for quarantining the last dog rescued from Dunkirk. Many dogs were smuggled over by troops who had become so attached to them, and most were quarantined before being found new homes.
- The RSPCA gave £100 for the production of special biscuits to be sent to Malta in 1943, as part of special relief efforts for the suffering cats and dogs there. The biscuits were stamped with a 'V' for victory!



Dame Vera Lynn also sent the charity a special message, saying: "Hello everyone, I hope you are all keeping well and safe. It is of course very important that we also look after our dear animals; they are a great comfort to people, especially if you are self-isolating. We are very fortunate that we live in the country and so our little dog can run around the garden and we can take him into our field.

"We must never forget the huge part played by the animals during the War - they are really stars; from horses to pigeons and of course dogs, who did the most wonderful work in all sorts of ways - carrying messages and finding other animals and of course people, who perhaps were trapped in bomb sites. Of course the sniffer dogs are still doing great work in the present time. We are lucky to be a nation of animal lovers, and although there are some people who are not kind to them, there is also a huge amount who are. My kind wishes to the RSPCA and to all who are looking after those unfortunate little creatures who need our care."

Author Michael Morpurgo said: "War is cruel to everyone. People make war, animals don't. They just suffer, and often die. In that sense they are like children, helpless and innocent, and like children they have to be cared for. The best way to do that is not to make war. The second best way to have an army of carers and rescuers to help animals through. The RSPCA has done that, heroically. And still does to this day."

To help the RSPCA continue rescuing, rehabilitating and rehoming animals in desperate need of care please visit our [website](http://www.rspca.org.uk) or call our donation line on 0300 123 8181.

Ends

Notes to editors:

- Photo and information credit to RSPCA England & Wales archives / 'Animals Were There'



book by Arthur W. Moss and Elizabeth Kirby.

- Images can be downloaded here: <https://spaces.hightail.com/space/N6yRSLRPwp>

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