

It is a very short note but historically a very significant one. Gustav had delivered the first report to reach England on what turned out to be a critically important day for everyone involved in the European war. Thousands of men died, and tens of thousands were injured, but the invasion was successful and led to the eventual downfall, after more than five years, of the enemy.

France and England are separated by not much more than thirty kilometres of water, but to reach his home loft Gustav had to fly in a huge circuit which took him nearly two hundred and fifty kilometres. This meant braving the battle that was raging all around him, and flying through gunfire, mortar explosions and thick smoke from all the warships and aircraft supporting the invasion.

A second pigeon was sent back with a message describing exactly what this was like: *Shells exploding all over beach and out at sea as wave after wave of Allied ships as far as eye can see sweeping into shore.* And a third carried a message from a reporter describing what he could see from his dugout: *bombs, shells, bullets and mines, to say nothing of booby traps, which make each hour an age of grim experience.*

Of course these were the lucky ones because, inevitably, many other birds did not make it home at all. Even Gustav, fit and fast as he was, took five hours and sixteen minutes to reach his loft in Hampshire. But, braving bullets and overcoming an animal's natural fear of smoke and gunfire, he flew through the chaos of the battle to bring home the best possible news: that the war, finally, was beginning to come to an end.