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# **THE PIGEON THAT SAVED 200 SOLDIERS**

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High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

## **WHAT'S INCLUDED**

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

**GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4**

*Reading they'll actually do.*

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### WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

# THE PIGEON THAT SAVED 200 SOLDIERS

In October 1918, during the final weeks of World War I, a pigeon named Cher Ami flew through a storm of bullets to save nearly 200 American soldiers from certain death. She completed her mission with one leg hanging by a tendon, blind in one eye, and a hole through her chest.

The soldiers were part of the "Lost Battalion"—554 men from the 77th Infantry Division who had advanced deep into German-held territory in France's Argonne Forest. They quickly found themselves surrounded, cut off from supplies, and under constant attack. Worse still, American artillery units didn't know their position and began accidentally bombing their own men.

Major Charles Whittlesey desperately needed to get a message to headquarters. He had already sent two carrier pigeons, but both had been shot down by German fire. Cher Ami was his last hope.

The message attached to her leg was urgent: "We are along the road parallel to 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For heaven's sake, stop it."

Cher Ami launched into the air—and immediately drew enemy fire. German soldiers knew what carrier pigeons meant and tried to shoot her down. They succeeded partially. Bullets tore through her breast and leg. She fell.

Then, somehow, she rose again.

Blinded in one eye, with her leg barely attached and blood streaming from her wounds, Cher Ami flew 25 miles through enemy territory in just 25 minutes. She arrived at headquarters with the message still attached to her shattered leg. The artillery barrage stopped. The battalion was rescued.

Of the original 554 men, 194 survived—largely because of one small bird who refused to stop flying.

Cher Ami became a war hero. Army medics saved her life but couldn't save her leg. She was awarded the French Croix de Guerre with Palm for her bravery. When she died a year later from her wounds, her body was preserved and placed in the Smithsonian Institution, where she remains today.

She weighed less than a pound. She changed the course of a battle.

Word Count: 341 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Smithsonian National Museum of American History

## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1

**Why did the Lost Battalion need to send a message so urgently?**

- ☐ A) They needed more food and water
- ☐ B) Their own artillery was accidentally bombing them
- ☐ C) They wanted to surrender to the Germans
- ☐ D) They had captured an enemy general

2

**What injuries did Cher Ami suffer during her flight?**

- ☐ A) A broken wing and lost feathers
- ☐ B) Blindness in one eye, chest wound, and leg nearly severed
- ☐ C) Burns from artillery fire
- ☐ D) She was uninjured

3

**What does the phrase 'she rose again' suggest about Cher Ami's actions?**

- ☐ A) She was lifted by the wind
- ☐ B) She recovered from being shot down and continued flying
- ☐ C) She grew larger during the flight
- ☐ D) She was replaced by another pigeon

4

**Which detail from the passage best demonstrates the danger Cher Ami faced?**

- ☐ A) She weighed less than a pound
- ☐ B) The message was urgent
- ☐ C) Two previous pigeons had been shot down by German fire
- ☐ D) She was awarded the French Croix de Guerre

5

The passage ends with: 'She weighed less than a pound. She changed the course of a battle.' Why do you think the author chose to end with these two short sentences? What effect does this contrast create?

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6

Cher Ami was awarded military honors and preserved in a museum. Do you think animals should receive the same recognition as human soldiers for acts of bravery? What does honoring an animal say about how we value different kinds of courage?

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## ANSWER KEY

### The Pigeon That Saved 200 Soldiers

**1. B) Their own artillery was accidentally bombing them**

*DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'American artillery units didn't know their position and began accidentally bombing their own men.'*

**2. B) Blindness in one eye, chest wound, and leg nearly severed**

*DOK 1 — Recall. The passage describes her as 'blind in one eye, with her leg barely attached' and having 'a hole through her chest.'*

**3. B) She recovered from being shot down and continued flying**

*DOK 2 — Inference. The passage describes her falling after being shot, then states 'she rose again' and continued her flight despite severe injuries.*

**4. C) Two previous pigeons had been shot down by German fire**

*DOK 2 — Text evidence. The fact that both previous pigeons were shot down establishes that the Germans were actively targeting the birds, making Cher Ami's flight extremely dangerous.*

**5. Sample Response:**

The author uses contrast to emphasize how remarkable Cher Ami's achievement was. 'Less than a pound' highlights how small and seemingly insignificant she was, while 'changed the course of a battle' shows her enormous impact. The short sentences create emphasis and leave readers reflecting on this contrast. The ending suggests that size and appearance don't determine importance—a tiny bird saved nearly 200 human lives.

**6. Sample Response:**

Answers will vary. Arguments for: Cher Ami's courage saved lives regardless of whether she 'understood' the mission; honoring her recognizes that bravery takes many forms; it acknowledges the animals who serve in wars. Arguments against: Human soldiers choose to serve and understand risk; animals act on instinct and training. Strong responses will consider what 'bravery' means and whether understanding is required for an act to be courageous.

## **TEACHER GUIDE**

The Pigeon That Saved 200 Soldiers

### **STANDARDS ALIGNMENT**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

### **PACING OPTIONS**

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Cher Ami was shot down but rose and kept flying. Can animals be 'brave,' or is that a human concept we project onto them?
- She was awarded military honors and preserved in a museum. Should animals receive the same recognition as human soldiers?
- Two previous pigeons were shot down before Cher Ami succeeded. How do we honor those who tried but failed?

### **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

- Research: Investigate how carrier pigeons were trained and used in WWI. Create an infographic.
- Writing: Write the message Cher Ami might have carried if she could express her own experience.
- History: Find another animal war hero. Create a 'trading card' for both animals comparing their service.

### **DIFFERENTIATION**

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

### **SOURCE**

- Smithsonian National Museum of American History