

Cats in Wartime – from Crimean War to the Present

By Alice Chau

Animals have always been playing an important role in our wars. With the open of the “Animals in War Memorial” in London, their war efforts are recently formally recognised. Traditionally, the contribution from our feline friend in our military services is far less common than other animals. Dogs, horses, pigeons, etc are more widely used for very obvious reason, anyone who lives with cats can tell you how many times their cat do what they say!

However, some of the very natural abilities of cat can be very useful in the military. Cats have been serving in our military services as mascots, as mousers in the trenches and ships, and also very importantly, as companions during some very tough time at wars. Even though most of our ‘animal war heroes’ remain anonymous, there are quite a few who got public recognition and even got treated as proper soldiers.

Crimean War

The earliest detailed record of a cat regarded as a member of the military was made regarding to the Crimean War. Sevastopol Tom (aka Crimean Tom) was found at the Russian port of Sevastopol by Captain William Gair of the 6th Dragoon Guards (the Carabiniers). Crimean Tom was a large, wide-eyed tabby who seemed totally unperturbed by the noise and commotion going around him.¹ His ability to find food supplies under the rubble was a huge relief to the much starved troop. According to the record, he slept and ate in the officers’ accommodation, was cared for and much loved by the soldiers. They were so grateful to him and they travelled with him on their journey home back to England. Tom died on 31 December 1866. His body was stuffed and presented to the Royal United Service Institution.²



Stuffed tabby cat 'Crimean Tom' [National Army Museum]

On the other side of the battle, there was also some very unusual use of cats in the army. It has been recorded that some captured Russian soldiers were found to be carrying kitten beneath their coats as both mascot and natural ‘hot water bottle’!³

American Civil War

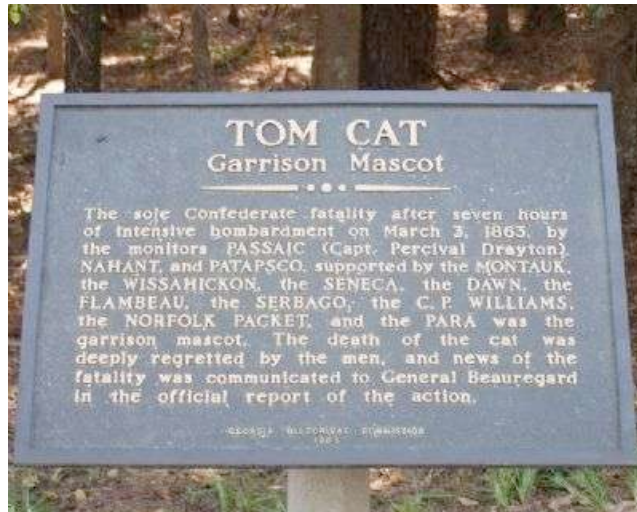
Tom Cat was a much cherished mascot of Fort McAllister during the American Civil War. He was a large black cat who would run back and forth along the defences during battle. On the 3 March 1863, a bullet from the Unionists ended his life, he was buried with full military honours.⁴

¹ Purr-n-Fur UK: Cats in Wartime 5, <http://www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/featuring/war05.html>

² National Army Museum, <http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/exhibitions/shortVisits/animals/page8.shtml>

³ Gardiner, Juliet, *The Animal War* (Portrait, 2006), p.141.

⁴ The Historical Marker Database, <http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=13038>



Historical Marker for Tom Cat

World War I

In World War I, cats have been informally kept by soldiers in the trenches as 'pets'. One could imagine that it happened so naturally. Since the condition in the trenches inevitably attracted rodents, so the cats stayed. Food supplies apparently were not the only reason they stayed with the soldiers, companionship and friendship seemed to be very attractive to our feline friends as well.⁵

Since the keeping of cats during this war was rather informal, it is difficult to trace the management and the welfare of the cat soldiers during that time. However, photos and documents proved that cats have indeed served in World War I.



The soldiers in this long war have many pets to help them to make dug-out life endurable. Here one is seen with the favourite cat of the quarters.

A World War I soldier holding a cat in the trench.



The cover of *The War Illustrated* showing the pets the soldiers adopted from the trenches.

⁵ Gardiner, Juliet, *The Animal War* (Portrait, 2006), p.47.



A kitten is held by a WWI soldier in a tank.



An officer of 444 Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery, smoking a pipe as he supervises a kitten balancing on a 12-inch gun shell near Arras, France, July 1918. Further information stated that the kitten originally lived in the German trench and later on joined the British trench as official mascot.



A photograph sent home to England probably in May 1917 by Lieutenant Lance Bettison, serving with the A Company, No.2 Platoon, Honourable Artillery Company in France. Note the old cook at the back row holding a cat. (Cats always know where the best jobs are...)

World War II

Cats being territorial creatures, life in the army is obviously not their favourite life style, with all the constant moving involved. As human warfare moved from land to air during World War II, cats found their new military career in the Air Force.

Sinbad was a small black kitten that the American flying ace Colonel Fred J Christensen flew with in the cockpit of his P-47 Thunderbolt during World War II.⁶ Sinbad brought her fellow war buddy so much luck that not only Colonel Christensen always came home safe, but he is also a record holder who shot down 22 Nazi planes during the war, including 6 in a two-minute span during one air battle. One time, a reporter arrived to do a feature at the base, Sinbad kept leaping among the packed parachutes when the reporter tried to get a photo. That day, all the pilots whose gear Sinbad had touched returned with air victories. Sinbad returned to the United States with her human friend after the war and lived with his family – as did a few generations of her descendants.⁷



Sinbad and Colonel Christensen in the cockpit.

Apparently, Colonel Christensen was not the only one who brought their mascot into the cockpit. A photo dated 1944 showed that a cat resting in the cockpit of an American B-25 Mitchell bomber during battle. Unfortunately, nobody seems to remember the cat's name.⁸



A cat resting (possibly sleeping!) during a battle in the cockpit of an American B-25 Mitchell bomber.

During World War II, a cat Prisoner of War was captured in South Wales near Newport when a German bomber was shot down. He became the first feline POW when he was taken to an animal shelter in the area, run by Our Dumb Friends' League (later part of the PDSA). He was named Tiger.⁹

Nobody has taken cats' war efforts more seriously than in navy. With their territorial nature and hunting skill, seacats are playing a vital role on the ships of which they treat as their own. By keeping the rodents away, they protect ropes, woodwork and food which could be a matter of life and death when you are sailing away on the sea for weeks or months. Cats prove to be highly adaptable to new surroundings compare to other animals who also served in the navy.¹⁰ The wonderful companionship and friendship also provides a sense of home and security to the sailors who tend to be away from land for long period of time. Being traditionally superstitious, sailors believe cats have magical power to detect weather. It could be

⁶ Obituaries, Washington Post, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/13/AR2006041302091.html>

⁷ Obituaries, the Boston Global, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/obituaries/articles/2006/04/10/fred_j_christensen_at_84_world_war_ii_flying_ac

⁸ Purr-n-Fur UK: Cats in Wartime 1, <http://www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/featuring/war01.html>

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Ship's cat, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship's_cat

scientifically explained for the fact that cats are very sensitive to the slightest change of air pressure. It was believed to be lucky if a cat approaches a sailor on deck, but unlucky if it only came halfway and then retreated. It was also believed if a cat licked its fur against the grain, it meant a hailstorm was coming; if it sneezed it meant rain; and if it was frisky it meant wind. Some sailors also believed that polydactyl cats made better 'seamen' since they got better balance!¹¹

Sailors took all these contributions very seriously. Some ships might even have more than one cat. In this case, the cats were able to 'rise through the ranks' as human do. From becoming the mascot of a particular part of the ship, they could ultimately go on to become the official mascot of the whole vessel. It has also become a convention for seacats to have their own kit, including their own proper hammocks and were listed on the ship's book.¹² Some of them might even get just as much gear as their human counterpart! Seecat Thomas Oscar who served on HMS *Scorpion*, was reported to have his own hammock completed with mattress, blankets and pillow, he also has his own kitbag, an HMS cap ribbon that he wore round his neck on Sundays and a rabbit-tail toy.¹³



Seecat Convoy of HMS *Hermione* resting with his fellows seamen.



Anonymous seecat of HMAS *Kanimbla* relaxing after his 'rounds'.



Anonymous seecat of HMS *Eagle* stretches out in the hammock and with his/her pillows.

¹¹ Moggies, an online cat guide, <http://moggies.co.uk/html/shipcat.html>

¹² Purr-n-Fur UK: Cats in Wartime 1, <http://www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/featuring/war01.html>

¹³ *ibid.*

Among thousands of seacats who have contributed to the World War II, there are a few 'war heroes' that are worth special salutes.

Tiddle was a true sea-cat. He has spent his whole life sailing on aircraft carriers, not many human counterparts can say as much. He was often seen at his favourite station, on the after capstan, where he would play with the bell-rope. He eventually travelled over 30,000 miles during his time in service.¹⁴



Seacat Tiddle of HMS *Argus* and HMS *Hermione* with his favourite station on the ship where he enjoyed playing with the bell rope.

U-boat served on HMS *Snowflake*. Like many other seacats, he had his own hammock, lifejacket and he was listed on the ship's book. According to one of the crew's memory, when 'action stations' was called, U-boat would make a beeline for the flour bin in the galley and would stay up on top of it until the action was over. He would also take 'shore leave' like his human counterparts whenever his ship docked. He would spend his days on shore, usually returning only just before his ship sailed. One day, U-boat was late for roll call and his ship was about to leave without him. Half of the crew were talking about jumping ship, as it was considered extremely unlucky to sail without the mascot. But as the ship pilled away from the quay, U-boat was seen running down the dock, made a death-defying leap across the widening gap of several feet between the ship and the quay! Just in time to make it onto the deck, he then proceeded to wash himself.¹⁵

Peebles was the seacat aboard HMS *Western Isles*. He was known to be very intelligent and would 'shake hands' with strangers when they entered the wardroom. His favourite game was 'jumping through the hoop'.¹⁶

Peeble in action. A game of 'jumping through the hoop' with Lieutenant Commander R H Palmer OBE, RNVR on board HMS *Western Isles*, at Tobermory, Mull, in 1944.

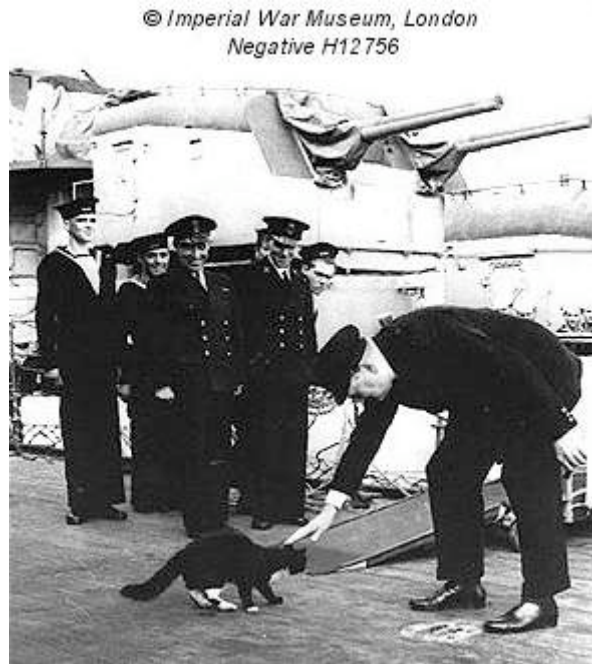


¹⁴ Purr-n-Fur UK: Cats in Wartime 1, <http://www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/featuring/war01.html>

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

Blackie (later known as Churchill) served on HMS *Prince of Wales*. He achieved worldwide fame after the incident on August 1941 during a meeting between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and United States President Franklin D Roosevelt. The two head of states were meeting up off the coast of Newfoundland on board of their battleships. But as Churchill was prepared to, attended by a five-man guard, step off the Prince of Wales; Blackie approached, seemingly to wish him well or to go aboard the USS *Augusta* with him. Churchill stopped to bid farewell to Blackie and the moment provided a moment for smiles from all ranks on both ships before the serious business began, meaning the signing of the Atlantic Charter. Blackie was immediately renamed Churchill after the incident.¹⁷



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Blackie (aka Churchill) was about to board USS *Augusta* with Prime Minister Winston Churchill during a meeting with US President Franklin Roosevelt.

Unsinkable Sam (aka Oscar) originally served on the German battleship *Bismarck*. When she was sunk on 27 May, 1941, together with the 116 crew that survived, Oscar was picked up by the destroy HMS *Cossack*. *Cossack* herself was sunk later that year on 24 October, but again Oscar was rescued and was taken to Gibraltar. He then served on HMS *Ark Royal* but she too was sunk in November that year. Oscar was again rescued. People started to be reluctant to transfer Oscar to another ship after seeing his track record. By now known as Unsinkable Sam, he was given a new job as the mouser in the Governor General of Gibraltar's office buildings. He was then transferred to the 'Home for Sailors' at Belfast.¹⁸

Among all the cat war heroes, Able Seacat Simon was of the highest honour. Simon served on HMS *Amethyst* during the famous Yangtze incident in 1949. He was wounded by shrapnel in the bombardment of the ship which killed 25 of *Amethyst's* crew. Being trapped on the Yangtze river by the Communists, life on board became hot, humid and boring, running out of supplies, boilers had to be shut down to conserve fuel, so there were times when there would be no ventilation and no refrigeration. Rodents multiplied during the time Simon was injured, especially under the condition the ship was in, food supplier was totally at stake.¹⁹ Without being completely recovered, Simon was back on his pest control officer duty as it was needed more than ever. Simon caught at least one mouse per day.²⁰ However, there was one particular large, bold and vicious rat that, together with his band of followers, was causing havoc not only with supplies, but also the sailors' quarters. The crew ironically named him 'Mao Tse Tung' following the occasion. Many attempts were made to trap him as the crew felt that Simon would not be able to cope with

¹⁷ Lewis, Val, *Ship's Cats in War and Peace* (Nauticalia Ltd, 2001).

¹⁸ Ship's cat, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship's_cat

¹⁹ Lewis, Val, *Ship's Cats in War and Peace* (Nauticalia Ltd, 2001).

²⁰ Obituaries, Time Magazine, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,854035,00.html>

him in his weakened state. One day, during a face-to-face battle, Simon killed the rat outright. Simon was then promoted to Able Seecat. On top of his mouser duty, Simon was also to nurse the wounded sailors. The fact that Simon himself has been through war injuries gave the seamen, especially the younger one, some inspiration.²¹



Able Seecat Simon, D.M. with his Distinguished Amethyst Campaign Ribbon.



Able Seecat Simon, D.M. relaxing on the deck with his fellow seamen.



Able Seecat Simon, D.M. was highly regarded as part of the crew by his fellow seamen.

²¹ Maritime Quest, http://www.maritimequest.com/warship_directory/great_britain/pages/sloops/hms_amethyst_u16_able_seecat_simon.htm



July 17, 1949: Crewmen of HMS *Amethyst* F-116 seen while trapped on Rose Island during the Yangtze Incident. Simon brought smiles on seamen's face even in such dreadful situation

As the days dragged on, more than two months after the original incident, the ship was still trapped. With no relief in sight, Captain Kerans decided to make a dash for it while it was still possible. The *Amethyst* finally made it to the open sea after a further series of adventures under cover of darkness. The whole ordeal lasted for 101 days. King George VI sent his congratulations and a special presentation was made on deck on 1 August, representing what the whole crew had been through. While both officers and men stood at attention, Simon was held by a boy seaman while a citation was read out by P/O Griffiths; the Able Seacat Simon was awarded the *Amethyst* campaign ribbon, citation as following:²²

'Able Seaman Simon, for distinguished and meritorious service on HMS Amethyst, you are hereby awarded the Distinguished Amethyst Campaign Ribbon.'

News of Simon's contribution to the war effort got around quickly and the Armed Force Mascot Club suggested that subject to the captain's recommendation, Simon should be awarded the Dickin Medal, the animal award for gallantry, often referred to as the 'Animals' Victoria Cross'. The award was confirmed on 10 August 1949 and

²² Purr-n-Fur UK: Simon, of HMS Amethyst, <http://www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/famous/simon.html>

was the 54th award of the medal. Not only was he the first — and so far the only — cat to be awarded the medal, but it was also the first time a Royal Navy animal had received it. A special collar in the colours of the medal ribbon was sent for Simon to wear.

An informal presentation was held at Hong Kong's China Fleet Club, P/O Griffiths read the citations while a guard of honour stood at attention, citation as following:²³

'Be it known that on April 26, 1949, though recovering from wounds, when HMS Amethyst was standing by off Rose Bay you did single-handedly and unarmed stalk down and destroy 'Mao Tse Tung', a rat guilty of raiding food supplies which were critically short.

'Be it further known that from April 22 to August 4 you did rid HMS Amethyst of pestilence and vermin, with unrelenting faithfulness.'

Griffiths saluted and the crew members present joined in three cheers.

The formal presentation was set for 11 December, but Simon could not live to see the day. Simon died on 28 November at the quarantine centre. Officially, he died from a virus, but a lot of his fellow seamen who have visited him claimed that he died of a broken heart, away from his ship and his men. Simon's medal was accepted posthumously on his behalf by the Captain of *Amethyst*, Lieutenant Commander Kerans and Mrs Kerans during the formal presentation. Citation reads as following:²⁴

"Served on HMS Amethyst during the Yangtze Incident, disposing of many rats though wounded by shell blast. Throughout the incident his behaviour was of the highest order, although the blast was capable of making a hole over a foot in diameter in a steel plate."



Dickin Medal awarded to the Able

Simon is probably one of the only cats that got his own proper obituary in *Time* magazine.²⁵ He was buried in the PDSA's animal cemetery at Ilford. A specially made casket was fashioned to hold the small body, wrapped in cotton wool, and was draped with the Union flag. The funeral was carried out with full naval honours with hundreds, including the entire crew of HMS *Amethyst* attended his funeral. A special stone monument was erected which remains to this day, read:²⁶

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Dickin Medal, PDSA, <http://www.pdsa.org.uk/dickinmedal.html>

²⁵ Obituaries, Time Magazine, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,854035,00.html>

²⁶ Purr-n-Fur UK: Simon, of HMS Amethyst, <http://www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/famous/simon.html>

IN
 MEMORY OF
 "SIMON"
 SERVED IN
 H.M.S. AMETHYST
 MAY 1948 — SEPTEMBER 1949
 AWARDED DICKIN MEDAL
 AUGUST 1949
 DIED 28TH NOVEMBER 1949.
 THROUGHOUT THE YANGTZE INCIDENT
 HIS BEHAVIOUR WAS OF THE HIGHEST ORDER

Headstone for the Able Seacat Simon, D.M. at the PDSA Animal Cemetery



Across the Atlantic, the services provided by our feline friends were also being taken very seriously. Pooli served aboard a United States attack transport during World War II. A veteran who rates three service ribbons and four battle stars.²⁷

Pooli, in her full uniform, celebrated her 15th birthday in 1959.



Ship's cat were so widely used and so officially regarded as part of the crew during World War II that Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty has even ordered 'all cats in naval establishments must wear collars at all times'. The collars were to have the ship's name embroidered on them in order to enforce have some sense of military discipline to the feline member in the Navy. However, everyone who lives with a cat knows how difficult it is to put things on them if they are unwilling, the order was slowly forgotten.²⁸



Anonymous seacat from HMS Vernon dutifully wearing his/her collar.

²⁷ Ship's cat, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship's_cat

²⁸ Lewis, Val, Ship's Cats in War and Peace (Nauticalia Ltd, 2001).

Iraq

The long time practice of mascot has basically died out officially when the Royal Navy banned cats from its ship in 1975 on hygienic grounds.²⁹ In 2005, the U.S Central Command even issued General Order 1-A to prohibit American soldiers in combat from keeping animals based on the perspective of morale and discipline. Alongside with the use of alcohol, drug use, pornography and gambling, soldiers who breach the policy on pets could face the threat of serious punishment, including reduction in rank and court-martial.³⁰ However, the companionship of a cat during the most stressful time of war is still very much irresistible to soldiers regardless of either nationality or location.

Private First Class Hammer is the mascot of the Hammer Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division. During their deployment in Iraq in 2004, an Iraqi born tiger-striped cat was born into the tent where Staff Sergeant Rick Bousfield and his men stayed. When the unit was under attack by mortar fire, Pfc. Hammer would jump and run to the bunkers like the rest of the company.³¹ The nearest soldier scooped him inside his body armour to wait out the attack. The cat has become part of the team and the men started calling him Private Hammer and he eventually got promoted to Private First Class after he successfully caught 5 mice!³² When Stg. Bousfield learned that the unit was leaving Iraq for home, the whole unit agree that Pfc. Hammer had to leave with the rest of them. Being a 19-year Army veteran, Sgt. Bousfield would not leave a member of his team behind.³³ After a painstaking process of emailing and calling different parties, finally Alley Cat Allies, Military Mascots and Pet Unlimited launched a 'Saving Private Hammer' campaign to raise fund to send Pfc. Hammer home via Kuwait City and the International Veterinary Hospital.³⁴ His fame continued as army veteran after he got home safely. He was on CNN, he meowed on radio talk shows around the world, he was in cat magazines and gave paw prints at cat shows.³⁵ He seems to be enjoying his new life as American citizen very much and has become the 'top cat' in Sgt. Bousfield's house.³⁶



Private First Class Hammer with his human war buddy Staff Sergeant Rick Bousfield. He is wearing his proper military 'dog tag'. On the back of the tag, reads: Pfc. Hammer, HHC 1/8 Infantry, Balad, Iraq.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ The Humane Society of the United States, http://www.hsus.org/pets/pets_related_news_and_events/enemies_of_the_state.html

³¹ U.S. Department of Defense, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=26813>

³² *The Gazette*, 24 September 2005.

³³ USA Today, http://www.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2004-07-13-cat-iraq_x.htm

³⁴ Alley Cat Allies, <http://www.independentcharities.org/search/detail.asp?ID=1675>

³⁵ *The Gazette*, 24 September 2005.

³⁶ *ibid.*



This Israeli soldier saved this kitten in the village of Kauzer during a mission in Lebanon, the first thing the cat and its new owner did after having crossed the border into Israeli was to share a military canned meat. The cat is now named Kauzer.³⁸



Liberty (aka Libby) was rescued by Major Warner in Iraq.³⁹

Since animals are never volunteers to our war, the use of animals for military purposes has been argued as inhumane recently as public awareness on animal welfare arises. However, cats have never really been 'forced' into the military due to their independent nature. If one gets to think about it, cats are probably the only animal that gets into our armed force voluntarily!

One might wonder why cats are so willing to be on our side during the most chaotic situations, stay with us, gave us the most desperately needed comfort and even physical help (as in the story of a war widow and her feline companion named Cat who hunted rabbits three or more times a week to feed the family or as in the story of Blue Cross holder Jim who saved his human companions when their house caught fire by waking them up in time)³⁷. Some might simply conclude that cats get food from our soldiers so they stay, but one cannot stop by wonder there is more than just food. They seem to enjoy the companionship and the friendship, just like the way we enjoy theirs. They might even also enjoy the soldiers treating them as just one of them – one of their comrades.

On the other hand, regardless of what the cats feel and think, human seem to get a good deal out of this relationship. According to many veterans, they got a sense of normality, home-away-from-home and an unbroken bond from their feline war mate as well.

³⁷ Purr-n-Fur UK: Cats in Wartime 1, <http://www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/featuring/war01.html>

³⁸ Personal story, Flickr, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/treesandrain/221121177>

³⁹ Air Force Link, <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?storyID=123008122>

Sometimes, cats and humans get into such an intense relationship maybe simply because during the most hopeless hours in a war zone, they are on the same boat. Facing the same challenge for basic survival, they have nothing nor nobody apart from each other. Other times, we might just need some hope. A story like the Unsinkable Sam got challenged for its authenticity, but a story like that might just be a way to give soldiers and civilians some hope – a hope that miracles do happen and we will survive.

To the contrary of what most people perceive, cats do not seem so selfish after all. They seem to be so willing to serve us in our society, would it be in official capacity or in everyday life. The question of 'why do they help us?', which remains a mystery, awaits further research.

In the meantime, I would like to dedicate this essay to all cats who served in all armed force around the world, who choose to stay with us.



An Israeli soldier gave this kitten a quick pet during a short break from combat.⁴⁰



A replica of the Able Seacat Simon, D.M. – a memorial at the Sea Cadet Corps unit of Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield in England.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Personal story, <http://lisbonlioness.wordpress.com/2007/04/15/7/>

⁴¹ Purr-n-Fur UK, <http://www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/famous/simon-tributes.html>

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