

# SERGEANT BILLY

The True Story of  
THE GOAT  
Who Went to War



Mireille Messier

Illustrated by Kass Reich

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES



# Sergeant Billy

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### NOTE TO TEACHERS

Although war is not an unfamiliar concept in the present day, some younger students' knowledge of World War I may be limited. You may wish to share some information about the war before beginning to read the story out loud.

### Some simple age-appropriate questions and answers include:

- **When did World War I begin?** (1914)
- **How long did World War I last?** (four years)
- **What countries were involved in World War I?** (More than 100 countries, including the United States and Canada, were involved or connected to World War I.)

Many younger readers may find some of the vocabulary associated with war unfamiliar. Consider pre-teaching any vocabulary you think might be challenging and/or check for students' understanding as you read and after you finish reading the story. Examples of potentially challenging vocabulary include:

- **Front lines:** The point at which the armies meet in battle. This is where most of the fighting takes place.
- **Trench:** A long, narrow ditch that is dug into the ground for soldiers to protect themselves.
- **Recruit:** A new member of the army.
- **"Fallen friends":** Friends in the battalion who did not survive the war.
- **Morale:** How the troops are feeling emotionally as a group.
- **Treason:** The act of betraying or going against your own country.
- **Shell shock:** The emotional stress felt after a traumatic experience, such as after a particularly dangerous battle.
- **Trench foot:** An infection in the foot caused by never being able to fully let the foot dry.

More experienced readers may be able to understand the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary from the context of the story.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Daisy

- Daisy plays an important role in the story of Sergeant Billy, but she is only mentioned at the beginning and end of the story. Why was she important?
- How do you think Daisy was feeling when the soldiers asked her if they could borrow her goat?
- What would you have done if you were Daisy in this situation?
- The story mentions that Daisy was “very fond of her goat.” What does it mean to be “fond” of something? Think of an example of something or someone that you are very fond of.
- Why did Daisy agree to let the soldiers take Billy?
- How do you think Daisy felt when Billy came home again?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.2

### Sergeant Billy

- After Daisy agrees to let the soldiers take Billy, the author writes, “And that’s how Billy’s extraordinary story began.” Do you think Billy’s story is extraordinary? Why or why not?
- How did Billy earn his title of Private Billy by the time the soldiers reached training camp?
- Why was Sergeant Billy well-suited to life at the front lines?
- What were some of the conditions at the front lines mentioned in the book that Sergeant Billy didn’t mind or enjoyed that caused the soldiers to suffer?
- There are at least two instances in the story that indicate Billy was injured. What were these instances?
- Sergeant Billy played a key role in keeping up the morale of the Battalion. What kinds of things did Billy do that helped keep everybody’s spirits up?
- “Private Billy became instrumental in battle – even the Colonel had to agree.” What does it mean to say that he became “instrumental” in battle? How had he become instrumental?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.2

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## Bravery

- Sergeant Billy was awarded a medal to recognize his “exceptional bravery in the face of danger.” What does “bravery” mean? What is another word that means something similar?
- What are three examples of Billy acting bravely during World War I that were mentioned in the story?
- Think of a time that you or somebody you know has acted bravely. What was the situation and how did you or the other person exhibit bravery?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.2

## Army ranks

- The members of an army are organized according to their rank. What are ranks? What are some of the rank mentioned in the book?
- What rank was Billy assigned when he first joined the Battalion?
- Private Billy received a promotion. What does it mean to be promoted? Why did Private Billy get promoted?
- Plot out the hierarchy of army ranks. Refer to this website <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/defence/caf/military-identity-system/army-ranks.html>
- What is the highest rank mentioned in the story?
- What are the Colonel’s feelings about Billy at the beginning of the story? How do his feelings about Billy change as the war goes on?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.2

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# Mascots

- What is a “mascot?” What is an example of a present-day mascot?
- “Mascots were strictly forbidden at the front.” Why do you think mascots would have been forbidden at the front?
- A mascot is a person or thing that is supposed to bring good luck or acts as a symbol of a particular event or organization. Do you think Billy ended up being more than just a mascot? Explain your thinking.
- What event in the story caused the Colonel to realize the important role Billy played in keeping up the Battalion’s morale?
- At the end of the book, the author explains that there were many animals involved in World War I. What are some of the animals that she mentions, and what roles did they have?
- What do you think the author means when she says of the animals in World War I, “But no matter their role, all of them were heroes . . . including Billy!”?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.2

# Setting

- Where does most of this telling of Billy’s story take place?
- The illustrations provide clues about the differences in lifestyle at the time of World War I and the present day. What are some details in the illustrations that show differences in transportation, clothing and technology?
- The author uses powerful vocabulary to describe the ship’s voyage home at the end of the war: “. . . with feverish hearts, they crossed the hundreds of miles of smoldering land and hundreds of miles of stormy sea.” What does the phrase “feverish hearts” tell you about how the soldiers were feeling on their way home?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.2

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## SUGGESTED FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

### Sergeant Billy is a hero!

- The Mons Star was a bronze medal awarded to recognize service in World War I. Sergeant Billy was awarded the medal “For exceptional bravery in the face of danger . . .” Have students imagine that they were responsible for designing war medals in World War I and that they have been asked to design a medal specifically for Sergeant Billy.
  - What would the medal be made of?
  - What would the medal look like?
  - What other special features should be included?

Encourage students to explain their answers to the questions above and then paint, draw, or sculpt a medal for Sergeant Billy.

- Have students think of somebody that they know in real or imagined life (for example, in a book or movie) that they think has acted bravely. Design a medal to award the real or imagined person to honour their bravery. Write two to three sentences that explain who and why this person is receiving the award.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.2

### Writing letters

- “Instead of writing about their own hard times, the soldiers often wrote about Private Billy in letters to their loved ones back home.” Ask students to imagine they are soldiers in the Fifth Battalion and that they are going to write a letter home about Billy to a family member or friend. Since the book is a creative retelling of real events, students may choose to write about events described in the story, or they may wish to write about imagined events. Remind students about the basic elements of a letter:
  - A greeting (for example, “Dear . . .”)
  - The body of the letter (for example, the information you are including in the letter)
  - A closing (For example, “Love,”)
  - Who the letter is from

Have students include a drawn “photograph” to send along with the letter.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.2

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## Learn more about goats

- Students who live in urban communities may not be familiar with facts about goats. For example:
  - Baby goats are called kids
  - Goats have four stomachs
  - Goats only have bottom teeth
  - Goats live about as long as dogs
  - Goats are good climbers

Have students complete a research project about goats. Once students have reported back what they have learned, have students think about what made a goat a good choice as a mascot for the Fifth Battalion (for example, goats have super sensitive hearing) and what would have made a goat a challenging choice for a mascot. What other animals may have been suitable mascots? Have the students explain their thinking.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.5

## Learn more about other animals in the military

- At the end of the story, the author explains that “. . . many animals helped out in World War 1, such as dogs, horses, goats, cats, bears, pigeons, pigs . . . and even a duck!” Assign each student a military mascot to research and determine the types of roles this animal had in World War I.
- The Canadian military has a long history of animal mascots. Have students research the history of animal mascots in the Canadian military.
- At the same time Billy joined the Fifth Battalion, there was a bear cub who became the mascot of the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade – and who later became the inspiration for the famous literary character Winnie the Pooh. Have students research the history of Winnie the mascot. Younger students may wish to read her story here: <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsclc2/the-feed/the-real-life-canadian-story-of-winnie-the-pooh>

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.7

## Write a comic

- Sergeant Billy is a creative retelling of Billy the goat’s experiences in World War I. Based on the author and illustrator’s retelling of the story, have students write a comic or short graphic novel that tells a similar story.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.5

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## CONNECTIONS TO COMMON CORE

### SPEAKING AND LISTENING

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.2

Ask and answer questions about key details in a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.5

Add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions when appropriate to clarify ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

### READING: LITERATURE

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1

Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.2

Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.4

Identify words and phrases in stories or poems that suggest feelings or appeal to the senses.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.7

Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting or events.

### WRITING

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.2

Write informative/explanatory texts in which they name a topic, supply some facts about the topic and provide some sense of closure.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.7

Participate in shared research and writing projects (e.g. explore a number of “how-to” books on a given topic and use them to write a sequence of instructions).

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