

Inside the Story

OLIVE BRIGHT, PIGEONEER

by Stephanie Graves

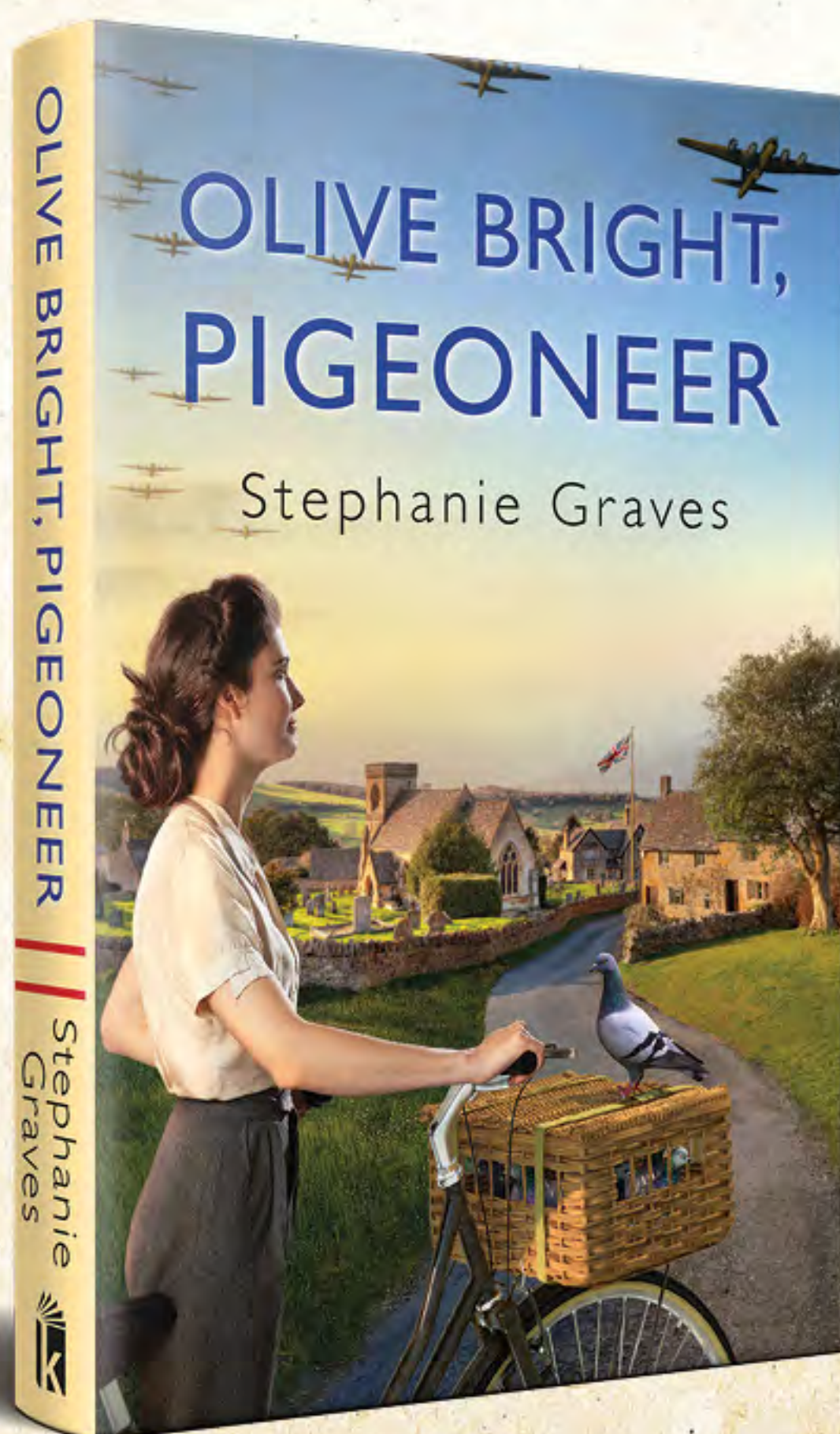
"If it became necessary immediately to discard every line and method of communications used on the front, except one, and it were left to me to select that one method, **I should unhesitatingly choose the pigeons.**"

—Major General Fowler

About the Novel

Set during World War II, *Olive Bright, Pigeoneer* introduces a spirited young veterinary student desperate to do her bit for the war effort after she is evacuated from London back home to the little village of PIPLEY, Hertfordshire. Olive fills her days working in her father's veterinary practice and tending to her beloved racing pigeons, in the hope that the National Pigeon Service will enlist the Bright Loft's highly trained birds to deliver critical, coded messages for His Majesty's forces.

But the strangers who arrive in PIPLEY are *not* from the NPS—instead, Jameson Aldridge and his associate are tied to a covert British intelligence organization known as Baker Street. They want her, as well as her birds, but insist on absolute secrecy. Olive balks at such a deception, but it seems PIPLEY is harboring other, much more dangerous secrets, and soon, local busybody Miss Husselbee turns up mysteriously dead outside Olive's pigeon loft. Can the murder be tied to her new assignment? With the gruff, handsome Jameson as an unlikely ally, Olive intends to find out.



Through the eyes of an amateur sleuth who is tired of living vicariously through the characters of her beloved Agatha Christie novels, *Olive Bright, Pigeoneer* sheds a light on the little-known but heroic role of pigeons and pigeon fanciers in the Allied victory of World War II, the efforts undertaken to train the birds for these tasks, and the many aspects of the war effort on the British home front.



For more information about the book, visit MsStephGraves.com.

A Message from **Stephanie Graves**

Dear Reader,

After years of writing happily-ever-afters, I found myself in the mood for a murder. Nothing too hideous or graphic, merely a bit of deadly foul play—the sort to send wisps of gossip swirling through a village. That there would be a village was decided instantly. And pigeons, definitely pigeons. Perhaps it was an odd choice, but they've been hovering at the back of my mind for nearly fifteen years, ever since I took my now-grown sons to see *Valiant*, an animated Disney movie loosely based on the role homing pigeons played in World War II. The movie wasn't a particular favorite, but the few paragraphs at the end that detailed the true role of these amazing birds in the war against the Nazis prompted a certain (obviously long-standing) fascination. The result is *Olive Bright, Pigeoneer*.

Of necessity, the process of writing a historical mystery started with several quite marvelous months of research. My initial Internet search for "pigeons in WWII" led to information on racing pigeons, the Special Operations Executive (Baker Street), including their schools, agents, and missions, Girl Guides, the Women's Institute and their various fundraisers and schemes, Mass Observation, victory gardens, rationing, BBC Radio, and so on. I loved every minute of it, but as is often said, the book wasn't going to write itself. From that string board of research emerged the story of a young woman inspired by her mother's legacy in the Great War to make a difference in the one that now overshadowed her world.



Olive Bright is back home in Pibley, her studies at the Royal Veterinary College in London put on hold. She's plotting how best to do her bit—preferably something daring and exciting—while biding her time on tasks for the WI and care of the family's racing pigeons. The Bright birds are some of the best, but her father's overbearing reputation has kept them from being accepted by the National Pigeon Service and put to work for the war effort. The arrival of Captain Jameson

Aldridge of Baker Street with an alternate offer seems relievedly timely, until it becomes clear that the top secret arrangement he's proposing involves Olive, as well as her birds.

She's only just agreed to work for Baker Street—and resigned herself to the romantic entanglement required to explain "Jamie's" presence—when the village gossip is found dead right outside Olive's dovecote. It's deemed a Death by Misadventure, but Olive knows it was murder. A keen admirer of Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's little Belgian detective, Olive feels duty bound to investigate, even as she prepares her birds for their first mission. Caught up in her own deception, Olive is shocked to realize that the entire village is keeping secrets, including her own father. But only one of them led to murder, and may again...

I hope you enjoy the mystery and my imagined slice of village life on the home front, and I'd love to know what you think of Olive, Jamie, and the pigeons. You can contact me on my website at MsStephGraves.com.

Happy reading!

Stephanie Graves

Stephanie Graves



Facts About Pigeons in World War II

Over the course of the war, National Pigeon Service members provided an estimated **200,000 pigeons** for use by the British military.

In 1943, the Dickin medal was instituted as an award to be given in recognition of **the heroic feats of animals** serving with the British Armed Forces or the Civil Defence Service. Fifty-four of these bronze medallions were given for service during the Second World War, **thirty-two of them to pigeons**—more than to any other animal by far.



Like her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before her, **HM Queen Elizabeth II breeds racing pigeons**. The Royal Lofts at Sandringham have produced first-class birds, among them winners of all major races in Britain, as well as a **Dickin medal recipient for service in the Second World War**. Each of them wears a leg ring marked with the Queen's cipher: ER. HM The Queen is the patron of the Royal Pigeon Racing Association and the National Flying Club.



It was a **pigeon named Gustav** that brought back the first news of **Operation Neptune**, the code name given to the **Normandy landings**, also known as D-Day. In order to preserve the critical element of surprise, the landings were carried out under radio silence, and **hundreds of pigeons were standing by**, waiting to carry messages home amid the threat of enemy fire and German-trained falcons. Gustav set a pace of **nearly sixty miles per hour** and was awarded the Dickin Medal for his impressive effort.

Brickendonbury Manor was requisitioned for the war effort, initially as War Station XVII, the site of explosive trials. It subsequently became the **headquarters for the Special Operations Executive European Theatre of War and Special Training School 17**, specializing in industrial sabotage and espionage operations to be carried out in Occupied Europe. **Several grenades and unexploded shells were discovered** in the moat during renovations carried out by the property's current owner.

The Special Operations Executive was effectively a guerilla force, tasked by Winston Churchill to "set Europe ablaze." Liaising with resistance forces in occupied countries, **they focused on sabotage and subversion**, earning the resentment and suspicion of the Secret Intelligence Service and the British military. Perhaps not surprisingly, these proponents of "ungentlemanly warfare" were **the only organization to allow women** (typically those enlisted in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, or FANY)—**to engage with the enemy** in the Second World War.

In 1943, Maria Dickin, founder of the veterinary charity, People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, instituted an award to be given in recognition of the heroic feats of animals serving with the British Armed Forces or the Civil Defence Services. A bronze medallion, the Dickin bears the words, "For Gallantry. We Also Serve," encircled by a laurel wreath. Fifty-four medals were given for service during the Second World War, thirty-two of them to pigeons—more than any other animal by far.

When Neville Chamberlain declared war on Germany in September 1939, it was a call to arms for the whole of Britain. While a cursory glance at the unassuming pigeon offered little hint as to its intelligence, loyalty, stamina, and endurance, history had told an entirely different story. Memories of pigeons' heroic exploits in the Great War had not been forgotten. Prior to that, the unique qualities of the breed had been instrumental in the establishment of Reuters news service. Pigeons had, in fact, been carrying messages in war and peacetime as far back as Greek and Roman times.

Bred and trained to fly hundreds of miles at an impressive speed, from an unfamiliar location to its home loft, a racing pigeon could carry critical intelligence in a canister strapped to its leg. It filled the gaps left by wireless communications, saving pilots downed in the Channel and regiments under fire. It braved harsh weather conditions, artillery fire, snipers, and predators, at times impeded by considerable injury. It was, in short, a perfect soldier and much needed in the fight against German military might.

As such, British pigeon fanciers were encouraged to join the National Pigeon Service and offer their birds to the war effort. Even the King, who had been introduced, with his father and grandfather, to the sport of racing pigeons by King Leopold II of Belgium, provided birds from the Royal Lofts at Sandringham. The Air Ministry was then responsible for supplying the various branches and organizations of the British war machine. The Army set up mobile pigeon lofts on the front lines in Europe, North Africa, India, and the Middle and Far East, and all Royal Air Force bombers

PIGEON MESSAGE FORM.

To:— *Publications London*

From:— *Taylor for Reuters* Date _____

Series No. _____

We are just twenty miles or so off the beaches. First assault troops landed 0750. Signal says no interference from enemy gunfire on beach. Passage uneventful. Steaming steadily on formations. Lightnings. Siphons. Fortresses crossing since 0545. No enemy aircraft seen.

Liberated 0830

Time of origin: _____

Sender's Signature: *Taylor*

Time received at loft: *1346*

Should this bird fail to return to its own loft, the finder is requested to telephone or otherwise deliver the message it carries to the nearest R.A.F. Unit, or Post Office. It may save life if this is done promptly.

A Historical Note from **Stephanie Graves**

and reconnaissance aircraft had at least one pigeon aboard, tucked carefully into its own watertight container, complete with a parachute. In the event of an unscheduled landing, the bird would be released, returning to its home loft with the information necessary to facilitate a rescue mission. The Special Operations Executive (SOE), nicknamed Baker Street for its headquarters, used them as well, dropping pigeons along with secret agents behind enemy lines, where both were equally at risk.

SOE agents went through a rigorous training program before being inserted into Occupied Europe. They were assessed for physical and mental suitability and then instructed on every little detail of the job that lay ahead—from the proper way to ask for coffee and how to pick a lock, to the quickest way to bring a factory to a grinding halt. Special Training Schools were established, one of the first being at Brickendonbury Manor in Hertfordshire. It would become Station 17, the school for sabotage and site of explosive trials, thus amply contributing to Churchill's directive to "set Europe ablaze," in missions such as Operation Josephine B. Many SOE agents filtered through Brickendonbury Manor, and it's entirely possible they had a pigeoneer at their disposal.

The Germans were fully cognizant of the wartime benefit of pigeons: the state run German National Pigeon Society supplied birds for use by the military, the Schutzstaffel (SS), and the Gestapo. They were also keenly aware of the threat presented by Allied pigeons. Not only did they establish a hawking division in the German Air Force to intercept birds along the Channel, they made the strategic decision to clear the pigeon lofts in the countries they occupied. The result was that any unidentified bird—and the person who harbored it—came instantly under suspicion, their lives forfeit. To the Nazis, these foreign pigeons signified treachery and betrayal, whereas to the Resistance, the birds symbolized hope and freedom. They were a connection to the Allies and provided the means for them to assist in the fight.

It was a pigeon named Gustav that brought back the first news of Operation Neptune, the codename given to the Normandy landings, also known as D-Day. In order to preserve the critical element of surprise, the landings were carried out under radio silence, and hundreds of pigeons were standing by, waiting to carry messages home amid the threat of enemy fire and German-trained falcons. Gustav flew a hundred and fifty miles, against a 30mph headwind, in five hours and sixteen minutes, setting a pace of nearly 60mph over the duration. He was awarded the Dickin medal for this impressive effort.

Over the course of the war, an estimated 200,000 pigeons were put into service by the British military; what they accomplished is little short of amazing.



An Excerpt from *Olive Bright, Pigeoneer*

The dutiful Watson to her high-handed Sherlock, Olive's best friend, George, has joined the Royal Air Force and has been shipped off for training in service flying at a RAF base outside of London.

While he's away, Olive pens him a letter describing the village dance, Miss Husselbee's death, and her suspicions on the Spam cake, and George's response brings her comfort as she searches for Miss Husselbee's murderer. Read on for an excerpt of the letter from *Olive Bright, Pigeoneer*:



8th May, 11:30 a.m.
RAF Brize Norton

Dear Olive,

Damn if it doesn't seem as if more has happened in Pibley in the week I've been gone than in the twenty-odd years I lived there. If you're having me on, it's not a bit funny, and I will find a way to get even. Miss Husselbee, dead? I fully expected my children's children to run in fear of the tap of that umbrella. And murder by Spam? I'm looking forward to a long write-up of your investigation, complete with suspects, clues, and the unmasking of the murderer. If anyone can puzzle it out, you can, Sherlock. I suppose it's not possible that she's rigged the whole thing as an elaborate red herring, and any moment now she'll spring to life again, criticizing the mishandling of the whole affair? I truly wish it were—what a damn shame.

I imagined you'd be chomping at the bit for a little excitement, but I should have known you'd find it. I expect you've convinced (or coerced) the NPS to sign you on as well. Training here marches on. We're now flying Hurricanes, and they're rather old school, but they certainly get the job done. We've not heard yet if we're being sent on—although with the weather as cold and wet as it's been, we're all daydreaming of warmer climes.

Please say hello to all, with a kiss for my mother and Gillian.

Your devoted Watson,

George

P.S. You've garnered quite a reputation among the chaps, what with being a pigeoneer and an amateur sleuth. Half of them have a crush on you already.



An Interview with **Stephanie Graves**

What prompted you to write a novel set in Britain during WWII?

World War II has long lived in the corners of my mind as a great paradox. Amidst a maelstrom of prejudice, violence, and hate, regular people selflessly stepped up and risked everything to fight against the tide of evil.

It was humanity at its best and at its worst, and those long years should never be forgotten. Even seventy-five years later, so much of it has never been widely told. I chose to set this story in an English village because I wanted to set a lighter tone and focus on lesser known aspects of the war.

What was the most challenging aspect of writing this book?

I found the most challenging part of the writing process to be the act of reining in the research in order to get on with the task of writing. There is a veritable treasure trove of information available on the war years, and while at times it may seem as if an answer is troublingly out of reach, at others, the extra effort of searching may, in fact, lead to an intriguing line of inquiry in another direction entirely. There've been many days I've slipped down the rabbit hole, only to surface hours later, feeling a satisfied sense of accomplishment, despite not having discovered what I set out to. I love reading all the personal stories, jam-packed with quirky little details that paint such vivid and varied pictures of life during that momentous time in history. Those details aren't the ones taught in history books.

What sort of research do you do throughout the process of writing a novel?

To get a feel for village life during the war—and put me in the mindset of wartime Britain, I watched *Home Fires* and *Foyle's War*. At the same time, I scoured the Internet for details on the little-known role of pigeons during the war, as well as the Special Operations Executive, particularly their school for sabotage, Station XVII: Brickendonbury Manor. With this base of knowledge and an ever-developing plot, I focused my research on fleshing out the details for individual character storylines, searching for information on the Women's Institute, the Girl Guides, RAF training, evacuees, and Mass Observation, just to name a few. I found so many wonderful details in the articles of the BBC's WW2 People's War and collections of Mass Observation diaries.

Do you have a favorite character in the story? Who was the most fun to write?

Olive is my favorite, but Miss Husselbee was the most fun to write. I love writing dialogue for a character that has no compunction about the words coming out of her mouth. It's utterly freeing. But sadly, my time with Miss Husselbee was cut a bit short. I hope to have plenty of opportunity to put Olive in all sorts of funny, awkward, dangerous, and emotional situations to really see her shine.



Discussion Questions

These suggested questions are to spark conversation and enhance your reading of *Olive Bright, Pigeoneer*.

Before reading *Olive Bright, Pigeoneer*, what did you know about homing pigeons used in World War II? Can you name additional animals that have served in times of war? After reading this book, do you feel the same about pigeons as you did before?

In the first chapter, Olive's father tells her, "You always did want to be smack in the centre of things. Just like your mother. Sometimes, my dear, it's more courageous to be the one left behind." What does this quote mean to you? Literally and metaphorically, is it sometimes more courageous to be left behind? Why?

After setting up for the Daffodil Dance, Olive tells the shy librarian Rose Darling, "The world is in an uproar as it is—I suspect there's not one of us who will emerge from this war unchanged—so you may as well take advantage. Let them see who you really are and what you're capable of." In what ways did Olive take her own advice? How does this quote apply to what is going on in today's world?

Olive Bright, Pigeoneer is peppered with diary entries by the grumpy Miss Husselbee, who eventually dies by eating the mysterious Spam cake. How do her diaries propel the story? Did you enjoy reading her version of events? Did peeks into her side of the story make you feel differently towards her, whether positively or negatively?

As Olive gets involved in solving the mystery, she finds herself channeling her inner Poirot, and even copying his mannerisms. Have you ever gotten into character without realizing? Have you ever loved a character so much you started adopting their personality traits?

Olive and George never had a romantic relationship, having shared a brief kiss that instantly convinced them they were strictly meant to be friends. And yet Olive struggles to write in her letters to George anything about Captain Aldridge. Is it possible that George's absence made her realize she may have unresolved feelings towards George? Why else would she not tell him about Captain Aldridge?

Olive's sidekicks—George, Aldridge, and Jonathon—all tend to be male. Why do you think that Olive never chooses females as the Watsons to her Sherlock?

Rose Darling lives in the shadow of her mysterious and beautiful sister, Violet. How can the difficulty of living in someone's shadow—especially another family member—drive a person's behavior, and affect his/her sense of self?

It is repeated throughout *Olive Bright, Pigeoneer* that Olive's father is a liability, which is why the National Pigeon Service and Baker Street choose not to use his expertise. But readers come to find that Olive can get herself into trouble too. In what ways is she like her father? From what little we know about her mother, how does Olive seem to take after her?

The book explores the theme of feeling trapped in a myriad of ways: Olive, wanting to leave but needing to stay; Olive's mother, caught in her web of lies; Lady Camilla, dealing with the shame of an adulterous husband; and Harriet, facing a future shaped by a debilitating illness are just some examples. Is life simply a series of traps, and are an individual's story and character determined by how he/she chooses to navigate them?

What do you think is next for Olive Bright and friends?

Murder by...Spam cake?

In WWII, Spam—launched by Hormel Foods in 1937—became a staple of soldiers' diets, with over 150 million pounds used in the war effort. American soldiers introduced Spam to the locals in each country they were stationed, and British housewives were quite taken with it, which may be why someone thought it would be a good idea to bring a Spam cake with whipped potato icing to a dance—even though only one person ate it, and she ended up dead...



Here's a similar recipe for **Spammy Cakes** from Spam's website to try!

No. 1 Breakfast
SPAM 'N' PANCAKES

ANY MORNING is a good morning for pancakes—and piping hot fried SPAM. Here's how: easiest is to add liquid to your favorite prepared pancake mix; or, sift together 3 tsp. baking powder, 1/2 tsp. salt, 1 tsp. sugar and 2 cups sifted flour. Combine 2 well beaten eggs with 1 1/2 cups milk. Then add flour mixture and beat until smooth; add 2 tbsp. melted shortening. Spoon on hot griddle and bake until first bubbles break, then turn. Makes 2 dozen small cakes.

PERFECT MATES, deluxe eating for lazy breakfasts. Make fluffy scrambled eggs with cream and butter—perhaps a dash of Worcestershire. Crisp-fried, meaty SPAM.

DIG OUT that old family recipe for corn bread. Fry tender, juicy oblongs of SPAM while it bakes. With chilled applesauce on the side, there's an "anytime" meal.

SUNDAY NIGHT SPECIAL. Make tender-crisp golden waffles, using a prepared biscuit mix. Generous slices of browned SPAM complete the picture—and how?

COLD OR HOT SPAM HITS THE SPOT!

HORMEL
 GOOD FOOD

SPAM is a registered trademark for a pure pork product, packed only in 12 oz. cans by Geo. A. Hormel & Co., Austin, Minn.

- Ingredients**
- 1 (12-ounce) can SPAM® Classic, diced
 - 1 1/2 cups flour
 - 1 teaspoon baking powder
 - 1 cup sugar
 - 1/4 teaspoon salt
 - 1 1/2 sticks butter, melted
 - 1/2 cup milk
 - 2 large eggs
 - 2 teaspoons vanilla extract, divided
 - 3 medium potatoes, peeled and boiled
 - 3 tablespoons butter
 - 3/4 cup powdered sugar

- Directions**
- Preheat oven to 350° F.
 - Line a muffin pan with 12 cupcake liners.
 - In a large skillet, brown SPAM® Classic until golden. Drain on paper towel.
 - In a large bowl, combine flour, baking powder, sugar, and salt.
 - Add SPAM® Classic, saving aside 1/4 cup; stir until combined.
 - In a medium bowl, whisk melted butter, milk, eggs, and vanilla together.
 - Add to the flour mixture and stir until combined. Do not over mix.
 - Spoon batter into each cupcake liner. Bake 20 to 25 minutes or until cooked, then let stand in pan 5 minutes before removing to wire rack to cool.
 - Mash potatoes until smooth. Add butter and stir with fork until butter is melted and potatoes are smooth. Stir in powdered sugar.
 - Spoon mixture into a piping bag. Pipe potato mixture onto cakes. Sprinkle with reserved SPAM® Classic.

SOURCES:

Smithsonian Magazine: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/food/how-spam-went-canned-necessity-american-icon-180963916/>

Art of Manliness: https://www.artofmanliness.com/articles/americas-miracle-meat-the-story-of-spam-3-recipes/?xid=PS_smithsonian

Spam: <https://www.spam.com/recipes/spammy-cakes>



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For interviews, events, and other publicity-related queries,
please contact:

Vida Engstrand, Director of Communications
VEngstrand@KensingtonBooks.com

Larissa Ackerman, Communications Manager
LAckerman@KensingtonBooks.com

Visit the author **Stephanie Graves**
at MsStephGraves.com.

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