

The Avian

“Before the advent of radio, carrier pigeons were frequently used on the battlefield as a means for a mobile force to communicate with a stationary headquarters. Cyrus, king of Persia, used carrier pigeons to communicate with various parts of his empire. During the Franco-Prussian War, besieged Parisians used carrier pigeons to transmit messages outside the city. In response, the besieging German Army employed hawks to hunt the pigeons.

During the First and Second World Wars, carrier pigeons were used to transport messages back to their home coop behind the lines. When they landed, wires in the coop would sound a bell or buzzer and a soldier of the Signal Corps would know a message had arrived. He would go to the coop, remove the message from the canister and then send it to the right persons by telegraph, field phone or personal messenger.

Carrier pigeons did an important job. It was also very dangerous. If the enemy soldiers were nearby when a pigeon was released, they knew that the bird would be carrying important messages and tried their best to shoot the pigeon down so the message couldn't be delivered.

Some of these pigeons became quite famous among the infantrymen they worked for. One pigeon named "The Mocker", flew 52 missions before he was wounded. Another was named "Cher Ami". He was injured in the last week of the war and it seemed impossible for him to reach his destination. Though he lost his foot, the message got through to save a large group of surrounded American infantrymen.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carrier_pigeon]

“Over 200,000 carrier or homing pigeons were used by the Allied forces during World War I and II in order to conduct surveillance and relay messages to the front.



U.S. Army

The U.S. Army used specially trained homing pigeons to carry messages during WWI and WWII. They were considered an undetectable method of communication. Fort Monmouth, New Jersey was the home of the U.S. Army Pigeon Breeding and Training Center from 1917 until 1957. A small capsule



[British soldier with pi-



[WWI carrier pigeon roost]

Allied Forces!

would be placed around the leg of the pigeon and a paper message was put into the capsule. The bird would be released to fly to its home loft with the message.

Pigeons have been known to fly hundreds of miles in a day with a mile a minute being the average speed. Military historians claim that over 90% of all messages sent by the US Army using pigeons were received. Pigeons were also used to carry maps, photographs and cameras. The birds are credited with saving thousands of lives. The U.S. Army discontinued using pigeons as message carriers in 1957 due to more modern and faster transmission methods

British Army

During World War I the British Army had a unit called the Carrier Pigeon Service (CPS) which was led by Lt. Col. A.H. Osman. Carrier pigeons were used by the Brits during the Second Battle of Ypres in May of 1915. The Carrier-Pigeon Service was only used when telegraph and telephone communications failed and was soon overtaken by the development of Wireless Telegraphy (i.e. Radio), further limiting their usage; hence, they were only used for emergency or espionage purposes. The avian unit saw further success at the Battle of the Somme and at Verdun, often against screens of poisonous gas and heavy shelling from the opposition.

During the D-Day invasion of World War II, many soldiers were sent with a pigeon beneath their coats. This was a period of radio silence, so the use of pigeons for relaying messages was optimal. The pigeons were able to send back information on German gun positions on the Normandy beaches. Thirty-two pigeons were awarded the prestigious Dickin medal, Britain's highest award for animal valor. Recipients included a bird named "G.I. Joe," who flew 20 miles in 20 minutes with a message that stopped U.S. planes from bombing an Italian town that was occupied by British forces.

Australian Army

The Australian Army made extensive use of pigeons in WWII in New Guinea and the islands. Surrounded by rugged terrain and unusual atmospherics, wireless communications often failed. Bert Cornish was the Aussie behind their pigeon forces. Some 13,500 birds were used in the Pacific Theater by the Australian Army. They awarded two Dickin medals to pigeons that aided them in the war." [Harlan Whatley, <http://www.suite101.com/content/carrier-pigeons-in-the-word-wars-a40392>]



[Pigeon soldier]

[Thanks to John Boal, CA, for this]

