

## PIGEONS AT WAR

Pigeons have played an important role in wars for a long time. They were often used as military messengers, thanks to their homing ability, speed and altitude.

In 1871 during the Franco-Prussian War when Paris was surrounded by Prussian troops, hot air balloons were used to transport homing pigeons past enemy lines. Microfilm images were then taken of hundreds of messages, allowing letters to be carried back into Paris by the pigeons from as far away as London. More than one million different messages travelled this way during the four month siege.

Homing pigeons were used extensively during World War I. In 1914, during the First Battle of the Marne, the French army had 72 pigeon lofts which advanced with the troops.

The US Army Signal Corps alone used 600 pigeons in France. One of their homing pigeons, a Black Check cock called "Cher Ami", was awarded the French "Croix de Guerre with Palm" for heroic service delivering 12 important messages in Verdun. On his final mission in October 1918, he delivered a message despite having been shot through the breast or wing. The crucial message, found in the capsule hanging from a ligament of his shattered leg, saved around 200 US soldiers of the 77th Infantry Division's "Lost Battalion".

During World War II, the United Kingdom used about 250,000 homing pigeons. The Dickin Medal, which is the highest possible decoration for valour for animals, was awarded to 32 pigeons, including the United States Army Pigeon Service's "G.I. Joe" and the Irish pigeon "Paddy".

The UK maintained the Air Ministry Pigeon Section in World War II and for a while thereafter. A Pigeon Policy Committee made decisions about the uses of pigeons. The Head of the section, Lea Rayner, reported in 1945 that:

*"We can now train pigeons to 'home' to any object on the ground when air-released in the vicinity...*

*Bacteria might be delivered accurately to a target by this means,"*

*"With the latest developments of explosives and bacterial science I suggest that this possibility should be closely investigated and watched."*

*"A thousand pigeons, each with a two ounce explosive capsule, landed at intervals on a specific target might be a seriously inconvenient surprise."*

The ideas were not taken up by the committee, and in 1948 the UK military stated that pigeons were of no further use. However, the UK security service MI5 was still concerned about the use of pigeons by enemy forces. In order to prepare countermeasures, they arranged for 100 birds to be looked after by a civilian pigeon fancier, up until 1950.

Source: Wikipedia