

Feathered Heroes

When you think about animals that served in war, it's probably horses or dogs that immediately come to mind. But did you know that pigeons saved thousands of lives in World Wars One and Two? Read on to learn more about the pigeon and the incredible role this humble bird has played in wartime.

A Dear Friend

Imagine being surrounded by enemy forces. No ammunition. Hungry and dehydrated. Your only radio has been destroyed. You're trapped and time is running out. But you have one chance left—a pigeon.

This is exactly what happened in Northern France in October 1918. Hundreds of American troops were isolated in the Argonne Forest. The 'Lost Battalion' (as they later became known) were surrounded and had no contact with Headquarters. Not only were they under enemy attack, but they were also being bombarded by friendly fire. The troops' only hope was to send a message with their last remaining pigeon, Cher Ami (which means 'dear friend' in French). As she was released, Cher Ami was hit by gunfire. But miraculously, she did not give up. Blinded in one eye and with bullet wounds to her leg and chest, she returned to her loft with the vital message of the battalion's location. Her actions saved the lives of nearly two hundred soldiers.

The amazing story of Cher Ami is just one of the many heroic tales of wartime pigeons. So let's take a closer look at these magnificent birds and how they became the silent heroes of war.

The Earliest Messengers

Pigeons have been used as carriers of communication throughout history. As early as 2900 BCE Egyptians sent messages by pigeon. In ancient Greece, pigeons were used to announce the results of the Olympics. In Roman times, winners of chariot races were notified by pigeon. For hundreds of years 'pigeon post' was a primary method of communication. So what is it about the pigeon that makes them such successful couriers?

Firstly, pigeons are natural athletes. Twenty to thirty per cent of their weight is taken up by their huge flight muscles, and they are able to beat their wings 10 times per second. This means they can fly at speeds in excess of 100 kilometres an hour and maintain these speeds over huge distances.

Secondly, pigeons possess a remarkable ability to navigate back to their nest or 'loft'. Imagine being asked to find your way back from somewhere you don't know (without using the GPS on your smart phone). Yet pigeons can be taken to an unfamiliar location, more than a thousand kilometres from their loft, and still navigate home. So how does the pigeon find its way?

Better than GPS

The amazing 'homing' ability of pigeons has baffled scientists for decades. In spite of countless experiments and scientific investigations, the question still remains somewhat of a mystery.

Researchers believe that pigeons use both a compass and map mechanism. The compass mechanism helps pigeons find the right direction from the position and angle of the sun. The map mechanism lets them compare their current location to their home destination. For example, pigeons recognise familiar landmarks and roads and can use these to find their loft. But what about when they are a long way from home in a place

they have never been? Up until recently, there were two main theories: that pigeons use their sense of smell to find their way home, and that pigeons are able to detect and follow the Earth's magnetic fields. However, more recent research suggests that pigeons use low-frequency sound to generate sound maps. Most scientists believe that pigeons probably rely on a combination of these techniques.

Now that we know about the pigeon's remarkable abilities, let's look at how these were utilised in war.

Winged messengers

Nowadays, if you want to send a message, you can do so at the touch of a finger. Digital communications have revolutionised our life. But in World War One things were very different. Telegraph and telephone communications were easily broken or intercepted, and radio was unreliable. People turned to the ancient way of sending messages—the pigeon. During World War One over 100,000 birds were used by the allied forces. Pigeons were taken into the trenches so they could carry information back to Headquarters or mobile lofts.

Even though wireless and radar communications improved significantly by World War Two, the role of the pigeon remained. In fact, in 1939, a National Pigeon Service was established in Britain and over 200,000 pigeons were enlisted. Pigeons were used by ground forces and taken on warships and submarines. All aircraft carried two pigeons in a watertight basket. If the plane was forced to *ditch*—land on water—the pigeon would carry a message containing the plane's location, and a rescue could be mounted. This proved incredibly effective. Royal Blue (a pigeon belonging to King George VI) carried a message 190 kilometres when his plane came down in Holland. One pigeon named White Vision flew nearly 100 kilometres, through gale-force

winds and zero visibility, to deliver the coordinates of a plane forced to land in the North Sea.

The Australian Army Signal Corps also established their own Pigeon Service. These pigeons were useful in the South-West Pacific where communications across jungles, mountains and tropical seas were difficult. One pigeon, Blue Boy, carried a life-saving message when the cargo ship he was on got caught in a tropical storm. The ship was sinking with hundreds of Australian soldiers and vital supplies on board. Blue boy carried his message through severe weather to the Australian base at Papua New Guinea. As a result, the navy sent out a ship and rescued all those on board.

But it wasn't just in rescue operations where pigeons proved their worth. There is another side to the pigeons' war service—a much more secret one.

Pigeon Espionage

You've probably heard of MI5, but did you know that during World War Two there was actually a Secret Service for pigeons? MI14 established an elite group of pigeons who were trained at a secret location. Code named Operation Columba (*Columba* means 'dove' in Latin), these pigeons were secured in special cases and dropped by tiny parachutes into Belgium, Holland and France. Each pigeon came with a questionnaire and a pencil and paper for a return message. The intention was to gather valuable intelligence from the ordinary people living under occupied rule.

Dangerous occupation

The roles of wartime pigeons were fraught with danger. They were often forced to fly tremendous distances in hazardous conditions. They were at risk of being shot down by enemy soldiers. Specially trained hawks were even sent to attack them. One pigeon

named Mary of Exeter completed many missions in spite of severe injuries. On one occasion, she was attacked by a hawk and needed twenty-two stitches. Another time, three bullets had to be removed from her body and she lost the tip of her wing. On yet another occasion, she was hit by shrapnel. Mary even survived when her home loft was bombed. However, many other pigeons were not so lucky. Of the 16,000 pigeons used in Operation Columba only about one in ten made it safely back to their loft.

The heroes who had no choice

In 1943, The Dickin Medal was introduced as a tribute to the many animals who served in war. Equivalent to the Victoria Cross the medal rewards animals who demonstrate 'conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty'. Fifty-three medals were presented following world War Two, and thirty-two of these were actually received by pigeons (including Royal Blue, White Vision, Blue Boy and Mary of Exeter). The inscription on the medal states: 'We also serve'.

As we think of the great sacrifices made throughout war, spare a thought for the humble pigeon. Let us remember and honour these brave birds whose strength and determination saved so many lives.