A Signal company for the birds

by Capt. Terry M. Mays

When Cher Ami arrived at the lofts, he had an eye and a leg missing and his breast bone shattered by a bullet. The message capsule, however, remained attached to the tendons of the missing leg.

During World War I, the U.S. Army began the organized use of pigeons as regular message carriers. General John Pershing, in response to the successful Allied and German use of pigeons, requested the initial procurement of two officers and 12 enlisted soldiers for the U.S. Army Signal Corps Pigeon Service on 18 July 1917.[1] The Army enlisted the assistance of racing pigeon associations to find experienced men to fill the requisitions and supply the birds.[2] The first officer and six enlisted soldiers of the new Pigeon Service sailed for France in October 1917 and the remaining men followed on a later ship.[3]

At first, divisions in the United States were allotted 14 men to support pigeon operations while divisions in France had only four, the larger number in U.S. divisions to allow for the training of personnel being trimmed for overseas deployment. However, this organization became impracticable in France due to the amount of work the four men had to do. As a result, the Signal Corps reorganized the Pigeon Service in the summer of 1918 to support the rapidly expanding American Expeditionary Forces in France. By 18 June 1918, the Signal Corps had a table of organization and equipment (TOE) for an Army-level pigeon company that would support five corps and 20 divisions.[4] According to it, the Pigeon Company, responsible for maintaining the breeding lofts and the command and support sections at its headquarters (Figure 1), consisted of nine officers and 324 enlisted soldiers (Figure 2). The company, which provided a pigeon group to support each corps and division headquarters (Figure 3), operated 90 mobile pigeon lofts, with the number of lofts assigned to each corps or division pigeon group dependent upon the military situation.

The logistics to support the Signal Corps Pigeon Service was almost developed from scratch, though the Signal Corps was able to copy the French and British models of willow and reed baskets. These specially designed baskets could hold two to four pigeons and were carried on a soldier's back or mounted inside a tank or other vehicle. The baskets contained small corselets suspended from the sides of the basket by elastic, in which the birds were securely fastened, permitting them to move about without being injured. In response to the threat of gas attacks, the allies also developed a special cover for the baskets that contained an air filter to protect the birds inside from airborne toxic substances. During a chemical attack, the pigeon handler simply had to pull a draw string and the birds would be sealed into a protective bag.[5] A storm bag was also developed to cover the basket and protect the bird during operations in foul weather, since mud caked on a pigeon's feathers hinders its ability to fly.

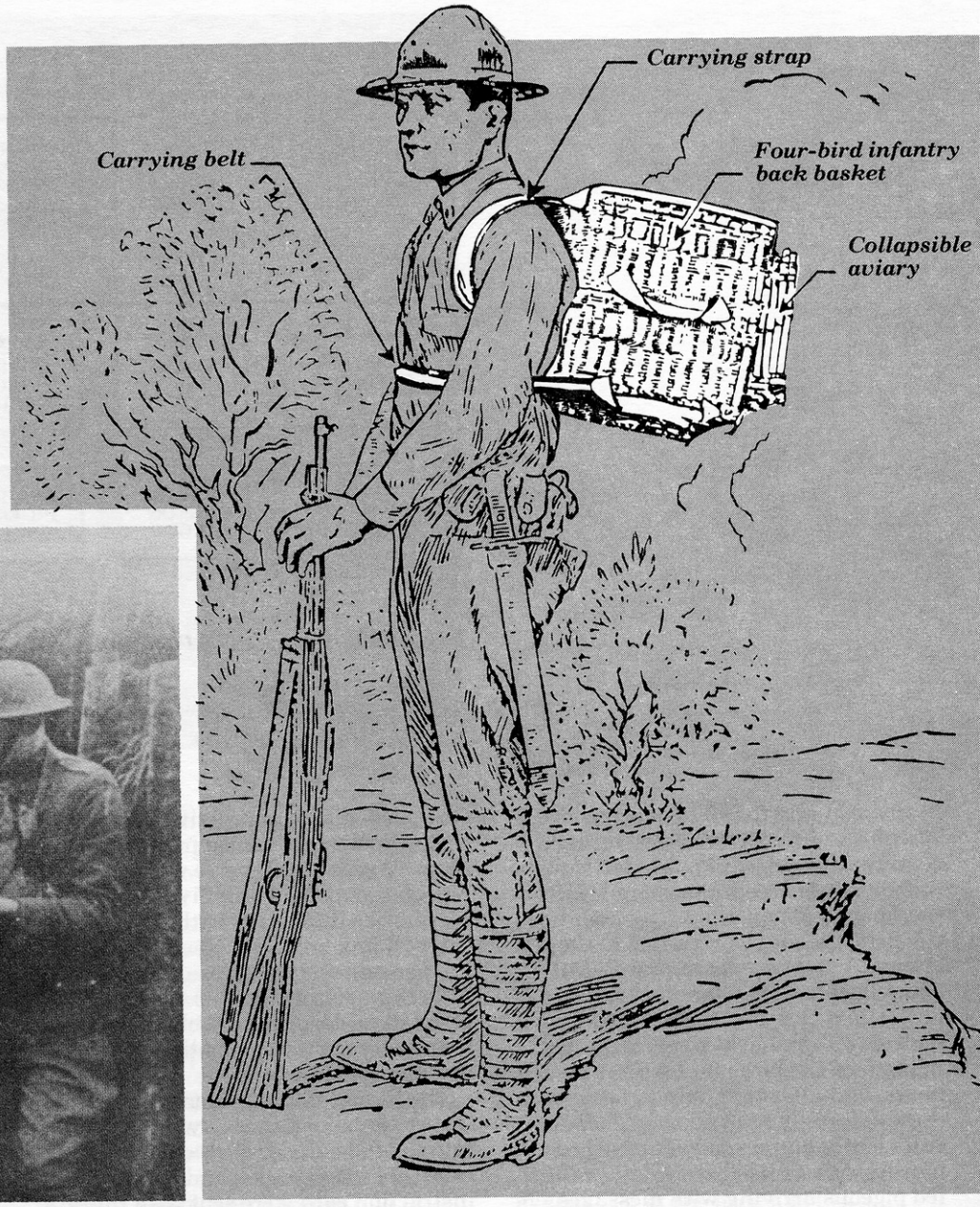
Another major problem faced by pigeoneers during the conflict arose from the long periods of static trench warfare. Rats accumulated in the trenches and devoured anything edible that was not secured from their reach, including pigeons. A wire rat-proof cage, designed to fit over the basket while it was located in the trenches, successfully prevented rats and other large vermin from consuming the birds. However, the baskets presented yet another problem for pigeon handlers: the prolonged internment of pigeons in the baskets or very rough handling of the baskets could injure or even kill the pigeons.[6] Approximately 24 pigeons were killed during the St. Mihiel offensive because of prolonged detention and rough handling inside of tanks.[7]

The Signal Corps purchased mobile lofts for use in France from a trailer manufacturer in the United States. The first lofts designed were top-heavy but this problem was corrected by increasing the width and adding heavier wheels. These mobile lofts were self-contained units for pigeon support operations. A tank was mounted on the rear of the loft to provide a sufficient quantity of fresh water to the birds, and each bird had a roost or nest inside the loft.[8] The loft's mobility allowed it to be relocated during movement of the corps or division it supported. The

RIGHT: Artist's sketch of WWI-era four-bird infantry basket. BELOW: Soldiers prepare pigeons to carry dispatches at Headquarters, 42nd Division, St Pol, France, May 1918.

lofts contained a trap that permitted the entry of a returning pigeon but denied exit to birds inside.

Pigeons are successful message carriers because of their ability to locate their "home" loft despite being many miles away (though they do have directional problems during



Personnel

Commander (1xCapt.)
Adjutant and personnel officer (1x1st Lt.)
Chief pigeoneer (1xmaster signal electrician)
Loft master (1xmaster signal electrician)
Acting first sergeant (1xSFC)
Clerk (1xSgt.)
Asst. loft master (1xSgt.)
Clerk (2xCpl.)
Orderlies (2xPFC)

Breeding loft pigeoneers (4xCpl.)
Breeding loft pigeoneers (10xPFC)
Breeding loft pigeoneers (10xPvt.)

Supply officer (1x1st Lt.)
Asst. supply officer (1x2nd Lt.)
Supply sergeant (1xSFC)
Supply clerk (1xCpl.)
Supply clerk (1xPvt.)

Mess sergeant (1xSFC)
Cooks (x3)

Transportation sergeant (1xSFC)
Mechanic (1xSgt.)
Mechanic (1xCpl.)
Chauffeur (x5)

Vehicles

5-passenger car (x1)
Motorcycle with sidecar (x2)
3-ton truck (x2)
1-ton truck (x1)
3/4-ton truck (x1)

Figure 1. HQ, Pigeon Service Company

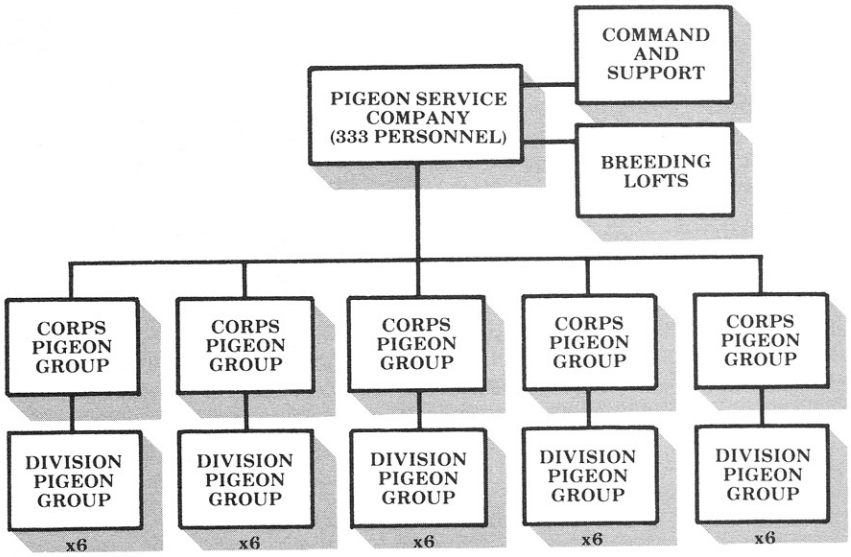


Figure 2. Army-level Pigeon Service Company

heavy rain and fog). The pigeons of World War I were "one-way" birds, conditioned by feeding at a particular mobile loft to accept that mobile loft as "home."[9] Upon release by a unit in the field, the pigeon returned to the "home" loft where it remained until being transported to another field unit. Units carrying the pigeons in baskets into the field were instructed not to feed the birds for the first 24 hours, and after that only to feed them sparingly at sundown. Though a sufficiently hungry pigeon returned immediately to its "home" loft, well-fed pigeons arriving with messages sometimes sat on the roof of the loft without entering. These birds occasionally had to be shot to acquire the message, since a stubborn pigeon could delay an important message from being acted upon to support a unit in trouble. Another method of training involved the use of brooding females, which made excellent carriers on short missions because of their desire to return to the loft and sit on their eggs.[10]

Pigeoneers trained the birds to recognize the surrounding terrain by releasing them at increasing distances from the mobile lofts. Since approximately two weeks were needed to fully accustom a pigeon to new surroundings, rapid location changes during an offensive made life difficult for pigeons and pigeon handlers alike. One particularly impressive pigeon performance was turned in during the Meuse-Argonne offensive when pigeon groups had only five days to familiarize their birds with the surrounding territory. Nevertheless, the pigeons relayed messages to their lofts from distances of 20 to 50 kilometers, despite the mobile lofts frequently changing positions throughout the offensive.[11]

The Signal Corps presented specific instructions to units carrying pigeons into the field. Food, message carrier tubes, message books, and an instruction card were sent with the birds. Each basket also contained a label giving the date the pigeons left the loft, allowing the unit pigeon handler to calculate the first meal for the birds in the field. The birds were always supposed to be released a considerable distance from a headquarters element to prevent them from being detected by enemy potters. Pigeons confined to the small two-bird assault baskets had to be released within 12 hours to prevent injury caused by the prolonged internment. The pigeons carried messages that were to be written (either "in the open" or encoded) on thin paper and placed into metal capsules on their legs. Units in the field released the birds, which carried the messages to the division or corps mobile lofts,[12] where the local pigeoneers removed the messages and relayed the contents to the supported headquarters.[13] The Signal Corps marked each pigeon to show which loft it belonged to in case a bird accidentally flew to the wrong loft or was returned to the wrong loft by a unit arriving from the field.[14] The Signal Corps was especially concerned with possible "unauthorized fraternization" among conscripted pigeons. Male and female birds (identified by red and blue marks respectively) were never placed in the same basket nor released together, in order to prevent a pair from developing a "relationship" and not returning to the loft. Pigeons of the same sex, however, were released in groups of two when possible to help ensure that at least one arrived at the mobile loft with the message.

The Air Corps also used pigeons to relay intelligence messages from observation aircraft. Care had to be taken when releasing a pigeon from an aircraft, because the sudden blast of wind upon release could not only injure a pigeon but also had the tendency to strip its feathers off. The Air Corps developed a standard procedure for the safe release of a pigeon. The pilot would throttle his engine to idle speed and slow the aircraft to approximately 70 miles per hour, while the observer would hold the pigeon well over the side of the

Corps Pigeon Group[1]

Personnel

OIC (1x1st Lt. or 2nd Lt.)
Corps group sergeant (1xSFC)
Asst. corps group sergeant (1xSgt.)
Pigeoneer (1xSgt. for every 3 mobile lofts)
Pigeoneer (1xCpl. for every 1 mobile loft without a Sgt.)
Pigeoneer (approximately 2xPFC for every mobile loft)[2]
Pigeoneer (approximately 1xPvt. for every 3 mobile lofts)[2]

Vehicles

Motorcycle with sidecar (x1)
Motorcycle without sidecar (x1)

Division Pigeon Group

Personnel

Pigeoneer (1xSgt. for every 3 mobile lofts)
Pigeoneer (1xCpl. for every 1 mobile loft without a Sgt.)
Pigeoneer (approximately 2xPFC for every mobile loft)[2]
Pigeoneer (approximately 1xPvt. for every 3 mobile lofts)[2]

Vehicles

Motorcycle with sidecar (x1)

Notes:
1. The number of mobile pigeon lofts assigned to a cCorps or division group depended upon the military situation.
2. A mobile loft was authorized 1 NCO (Sgt. or Cpl.) and 2 enlisted soldiers (PFC or Pvt.). A pigeon service company was authorized 150 PFCs and 30 privates to operate 90 mobile lofts. The rank of the assigned soldiers varied from loft to loft.

Figure 3. Corps and division level pigeon groups

plane at the height of his head and swing his arm downward, releasing the bird in the process. Pigeons were also used to relay intelligence status reports from balloons hovering near the battlefield.[15]

Little information is available concerning the actual employment of American pigeons during major offensives. During the August-September 1918 St. Mihiel offensive, 567 American pigeons were available for communications support. Line units of the First and Fourth Corps were assigned 384 of the birds. The tanks of the American Expeditionary Forces also carried pigeons into the field during this offensive.[16] During the September-October 1918 Meuse-Argonne offensive, 442 American pigeons were available for communications support.[17] America's best known pigeon, Cher Ami, made his name famous during this offensive by successfully delivering a message from the "Lost Battalion." This unit became separated from other friendly forces and was pinned down by German small arms fire and what was believed to be a misdirected American artillery barrage. Pigeons were the unit's only communications link to the 77th Division. The unit released several pigeons only to see them shot in midair by German marksmen. Two birds remained when the battalion commander decided to attempt another pigeon release. However, the pigeon handler did not properly remove a bird from the basket, and it flew away without a message attached to its leg. Cher Ami was the last pigeon with the unit. The pigeon handler attached a message to Cher Ami, giving the unit's position, and released the bird.[18] A reluctant hero, Cher Ami circled a few times and, instead of returning to the division mobile lofts, decided to land in the relative safety of a nearby tree. The soldiers shouted, waved helmets, and threw rocks at the perched bird. Finally, the pigeon handler had to shimmy up the tree and shake the branch until Cher Ami departed. The Germans spotted the bird and directed small arms fire at him as he circled to determine the direction to the 77th Division mobile lofts. When Cher Ami arrived at the lofts, he had an eye and a leg missing and his breast bone shattered by a bullet. The message capsule, however, remained attached to the tendons of the missing leg. In appreciation of his feat, the U.S. Army awarded Cher Ami the Distinguished Service Cross and a pension. General Pershing personally "decorated" Cher Ami and ordered that he be provided an officer's berth on a troop ship returning to the United States. A taxidermist stuffed Cher Ami after his death in 1919, and he is on permanent display in the Smithsonian Institution.[19]

While the heroism of Cher Ami probably saved the lives of a number of American soldiers, on at least one occasion the heroism of a dedicated pigeoneer saved the day for a group of otherwise doomed pigeons. On 10 November 1918, only one day before the armistice, the Black 92nd Division was engaged in a local action as part of a Second Army offensive when German shells struck a building being used as a communications center for the division, as well as a munitions dump in an adjacent building. Military Police ordered the immediate evacuation of the area due to continuous secondary explosions from the burning munitions dump. However, the 92nd Division pigeoneer defied the Military Police order and crept through their picket line, entering the damaged building amid secondary explosions to retrieve his pigeons.[20]

The Signal Corps' use of pigeons during World War I was highly successful. Pigeons delivered an estimated 95% of all messages entrusted to them despite many flights made through small arms fire and even gas barrages. Though the Pigeon Service was rapidly demobilized after the war,[21] due to their success in World War I pigeon units remained a permanent part of the Signal Corps until they were officially disbanded in 1957.

ENDNOTES

1. War Department, **Report of the Chief Signal Officer to the Secretary of War 1919,** Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1919, p.338. Two officers and 96 enlisted soldiers were requisitioned on 12 December 1917. They and the 14 men already in France were needed to complete the Pigeon Service in its support role for the headquarters of the American Expeditionary Forces, the First Corps, and six divisions. Authorization was granted the following day for 2 captains, 7 first lieutenants, 1 second lieutenant, and 602 enlisted soldiers to not only complete the Pigeon Service in France but, also, in the United States. One major, 6 second lieutenants, and 132 enlisted soldiers were added to the authorization on 5 January 1918 to join the original 14 men already there. Headquarters, American Expeditionary Forces, reported 120 Signal Corps pigeoneers in France on 20 April 1918.

2. Ibid., p.339. Ten thousand pigeons were purchased by the Signal Corps for two dollars each. Additionally, many pigeons were acquired from Allied nations when the U.S. Army replaced British and French units on the front lines. Because the pigeons were trained to recognize the local terrain, some of the British and French birds were turned over to the American units until their own birds could be trained. The Signal Corps felt that the French pigeons had received inferior training compared to the American birds.

3. Ibid, p.338.

4. Ibid, p.50. The War Department approved the recommendation on 30 June 1918 and authorized the formation of two pigeon companies on 9 July 1918. The war ended before the two pigeon company goal could be realized.

5. Lescaboura, Austin C. and Bird, J.M., editors, **Harpers Pictorial Library of the World War,** Volume VIII, "Inventive and Industrial Triumphs", Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York, 1920, p.329.

6. War Department, **The Homing Pigeon: Care and Training for Military Purposes,** Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1920, p.46.

7. War Department, **Report of the Chief Signal Officer to the Secretary of War 1919,** p.340.

8. War Department, **The Homing Pigeon: Care and Training for Military Purposes,** p.11. Army pigeon nests were earthen bowls containing, preferably, tobacco stems for nesting material. The Signal Corps advised pigeoneers to first place a handful of sawdust in the nest bowl and to allow the pigeons to carry the tobacco stems to the bowl from a rack on the loft floor. The pigeoneers occasionally dipped the nest bowls into a 10% solution of carbolic acid to deter vermin.

9. Lescaboura, Austin C. and Bird, J.M., editors, **Harpers Pictorial Library of the World War,** Volume VIII, p.329. The Signal Corps purchased tons of pigeon food to support its loft operations and shipped it to France in hermetically sealed containers to prevent mildew. The grains used for pigeon food included millet, Argentine corn, hemp seed, popcorn, and Canadian peas.

10. War Department, **The Homing Pigeon: Care and Training for Military Purposes,** pp.45-46.

11. War Department, **Report of the Chief Signal Officer to the Secretary of War 1919,** p.340.

12. Ibid., pp.97-98. Pigeon Company personnel and unit handlers received pigeon training at the Signal Corps overseas school in France. The pigeon communications course of instruction included classes on the bird's characteristics, care in the field, message preparation, and release to the mobile lofts. At least 20 field problems were included to ensure proficiency in pigeon handling.

13. The 18 June 1918 Pigeon Company TOE authorized the unit 41 motorcycles for messenger duties.

14. War Department, **The Homing Pigeon: Care and Training for Military Purposes,** p.39. The lettering was made by a rubber stamp and ink pad. The code is as follows:

H. Department headquarters loft
P. Military post loft
D. Division loft
T. Training loft
A. Air-service loft
S. Stationary loft
M. Mobile loft

Example:

D-M = Division mobile loft
A-S = Air-service stationary loft

15. Ibid., p.49-50. Pigeons were commonly released at altitudes of up to 8,000 feet and at a distance of 100 miles from their "home" loft. With proper training, the distance could be increased to 150 or 200 miles and the altitude raised to 15,000 feet.

16. War Department, **Report of the Chief Signal Officer to the Secretary of War 1919,** p.340.

17. Ibid..

18. Werstein, Irving, **The Lost Battalion,** WW Norton and Co, New York, 1932, p.141. The message Cher Ami carried is as follows: "At: 294.6-276.3 Date: 4 Oct. To: Delaware 1. We are along the road parallel 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For heaven's sake, stop it."

19. Ibid., pp.140-142.

20. War Department, **Report of the Chief Signal Officer to the Secretary of War 1919,** p.503.

21. Ibid., p.507. Pigeon units attached to the First and Second Armies were withdrawn to Langres. Service to the Third Army was reduced to only what was required for instructional purposes. This included 8 mobile lofts with 2 officers and 30 enlisted soldiers. At Langres on February 11, 1919, the Signal Corps selected 200 pigeons to be returned to the United States. The remaining birds were sold at a public auction. One officer and 55 enlisted soldiers departed on a troop ship from St Nazaire to the United States; 1 officer and 20 enlisted soldiers departed from Bordeaux to care for the Signal Corps pigeons on the homeward voyage; and 1 officer and 6 enlisted soldiers traveled to Koblenz, Germany to join the previously mentioned 32 personnel assigned to the Third Army.

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