

USE PIGEONS TO CARRY ORDERS

Despite the amazing multiplicity of mechanical means for carrying on the war it is almost equally astonishing to note from time to time how men revert to implements of warfare that were old twenty years ago. We have seen the soldiers returning to mediaeval times and protecting themselves with armor; we have seen the revival of the handgrenade, we have heard of the Ghurkas throwing aside their rifles and crawling into the enemy trenches with only their knives as weapons, and many similar instances might be recalled. The papers have told us that the Germans at the Somme now rely upon pigeons to carry messages when their telegraphs and telephones fall. Since the pigeons travel behind the German lines they are safe from bullets, and they go faster than a human messenger could be despatched unless he used an aeroplane. Moreover, the pigeons could be turned loose by the hundred, or even by the thousand, and thus perform a service that would require a whole battalion of aviators to accomplish.

As usual, when a reference to pigeons gets into a newspaper the birds are referred to as carrier pigeons, but while they are carriers of messages, they are by no means carrier pigeons, the birds thus named by fanciers being a show variety with huge wattles which could hardly fly a hundred yards, being unable to see properly, and also, having such large bodies, a bird with wings by no means adapted to swift or sustained flight. Nowadays pigeons that carry messages are known as homing pigeons, or, more briefly, as homers. They are medium-sized birds, something like the pigeons one sees sometimes picking up a living about the market, and have properly more intelligence than any other feathered creature, not even excepting the parrot. For short distances in favorable circumstances, that is to say in clear weather, and preferably with a tail wind, these birds can travel at the rate of a mile a minute or even faster. An all-day flight of 500 miles is considered first-class work, though 600 miles and even more have been traversed in races.

These birds have been known to return home a distance of 1,500 miles, and sometimes after an absence of years. How they find their way is a mystery upon which scientists are divided, but undoubtedly the pigeon's eye is of prime importance, and his memory for distinctive landmarks approaches the uncanny. Probably for the comparative short flights that the birds are required to make along the Somme they can see their destination as soon as they rise and make the first preliminary circle. Since the Germans remained in their Somme positions from the Fall of 1914 until last July they had ample time to breed pigeons in lots at the rear of their lines, for the birds would be capable of flights of fifty miles or so when four months old.

The French, too, and no doubt all other combatants, have put their pigeons to use in the present war, and only a few days ago an illustrated magazine reproduced a photograph of a movable French loft back of the lines. Pigeons played an important part in carrying messages in those early days of the German advance through Belgium, for Belgium is the home of the modern racing pigeon and pigeon-flying was the national sport of the Belgian people. In those parts of France nearest Belgium the sport was in great favor and the Allies were well supplied with some of the finest birds in the world for conveying news of the German approach at points cut off from telegraphic communication with the rest of the world.

In the Franco-Prussian war homing pigeons became famous for their service to beleaguered Paris. What was called a pigeon post was established, and huge sums were paid by the inhabitants for the privilege of writing a message to outside friends which would be carried by a homing pigeon. The messages were sometimes inserted in a hollow quill feather, sometimes fastened to the leg by means of a piece of elastic. The messages were first written out and then reduced to almost invisible proportions by means of photography. Thus a long communication might be conveyed on a mere scrap of paper, which would be photographed and enlarged when it reached the person for whom it was intended. In the present struggle wireless has hopelessly outclassed the pigeon as means of swift communication where the telephone or telegraph was impossible but, as we have seen, circumstances arise where no mechanical means will avail, and the homing pigeon and the dog, man's best friend, prove to be man's most trusted messengers.