

# Pigeons as Birds of War

*Their Uses Include Carrying of Messages and Pictures, and Even the Taking of Photographs : They Now Make Return Trips and Fly at Night*

By FRANK W. LANE

PIGEONS have done invaluable work in the war. Not only have they returned with messages from crews of dinghies whose radio failed, but they have brought home messages reporting "All Safe" from crews forced down in Germany. The first pigeon to do this was owned by H.M. The King. The speed of pigeons is remarkable. 400 miles in ten hours has been achieved more than once. One bird covered 130 miles in the dark between 1.50 a.m. and 7.20 a.m.

It has been estimated that during the first World War over half a million pigeons were used by the combined Allied forces. Add to that the number of birds used by the enemy and you have a total of about a million. This figure gives some idea of the immense importance attaching to pigeons in time of war.

But it is only one particular breed of pigeon which is used in war—the racing- or homing-pigeon, *not*, be it noted, the carrier-pigeon.

Several factors are responsible for making the pigeon an efficient message-carrier. In the first place, it is a wonderful natural flying-machine. Its compact, streamlined body is an ideal base for the attachment of the strong wings and highly flexible tail and for housing the powerful "engine" which supplies the energy for flight.

Some idea of the power of the pigeon's driving mechanism can be gathered from the fact that the greater pectoral muscles, i.e., those used primarily to actuate the wings, weigh about one-quarter of the bird's entire body. In flight a pigeon develops nearly 0.02 horse-power, which represents 0.057 h.p. per kilogram of weight. This is some six times greater than that which a man can develop over a period of any length.

A first-class racing-pigeon, going all-out, is one of the speediest things in Nature. With maybe a little help from a following wind, a pigeon can touch 100 m.p.h. for a short distance. I understand that the highest speed ever maintained by a pigeon over a long distance was 93 m.p.h. for 80 miles. I think it is a fair inference that for such an exceptional record we must assume the bird was getting considerable help from the wind—or gale! But, even so. . . .

Add to such superb natural flying equipment the facts that it seems to possess an almost psychic knowledge of weather lore and aerial navigation; that its feathery "flying coat" insulates its body so perfectly that it can fly through the foulest weather with probably little discomfort; that it has the faculty of finding its way to the home loft from distances of hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles, and it will be realised why the homer proves such an invaluable message-carrier to nations at war.

At the outbreak of the present war every known loft in this country was

visited and the pigeons were forced to fly. If the birds had come from another loft they naturally flew home—and some of the birds didn't stop flying until they reached Germany! But they carried none of the valuable messages which they probably would have done a little later.

I understand that since the "fifth-column" pigeons were sent packing, the Germans have tried to drop further supplies of native birds by parachute at night. Apparently more than one Nazi spy, on being captured after parachuting down, has been found to have a wicker basket containing a homer or two.

## Teaching Immediate Delivery

Pigeons do not become effective Service message-carriers without some training. One important duty they have to be taught is to deliver the message they are carrying immediately they arrive at the base loft. Young, untrained pigeons sometimes have a tendency to hang about on reaching home, and a good deal of coaxing is necessary to get them to come to earth. In war, such delay in delivering a vital and urgent message might be disastrous.

This difficulty is overcome by teaching young birds that a good feed is always ready when they return to the home loft. When this lesson has been learnt there is far less desire to waste time after a long and gruelling flight.

Birds for use with the Army have to become accustomed



The wireless operator attaches the aluminium message container to the leg of a pigeon before releasing it from a flying boat.

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