

September 3, 2020

Pigeons Relay Vital Messages Throughout World War II

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



The US Army Signal Corps used these rectangular wooden cases as portable pigeon lofts during World War II. The lofts were tended by trained personnel assigned to the Signal Pigeon Corps who were responsible for caring for the birds and training them to carry messages. Paratroopers delivered birds from their home loft at headquarters to units in isolated or dangerous locations in a specially developed circular parachute cage. These units used the pigeons to send important battlefield communications. The birds, who had been trained to return to their home loft for food, carried the messages in capsules attached to their leg.

For over 2,000 years armies have relied on pigeons to quickly transport messages in the field. However, it was not until 1917 that the US Army Signal Corps established the nation's first pigeon service for military use. Pigeons successfully transported messages where other means of communication were impossible and without threat of interception by enemy forces.

Shortly after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the Signal Corps issued a call to civilian pigeon breeders, offering to purchase young birds for \$5 each. By 1943, the Signal Corps had acquired enough birds to start its own breeding program. Three breeding bases throughout the United States raised and trained thousands of birds for service in World War II. Over 3,000 soldiers and 54,000 pigeons made up the Signal Pigeon Corps.

Some pigeons even earned world-wide fame: during the Italian Campaign, U.S. signal pigeon G.I. Joe successfully delivered a message that saved the inhabitants of Calvi Vecchia, Italy and British soldiers of the 56th London Infantry. On October 18, 1943, air support had been requested against German positions near the town, but G.I. Joe's message that the London Infantry had captured the village arrived just in time to avoid the bombing, saving many lives.

By the end of World War II, the US Army Signal Corps Pigeon Service sent approximately 30,000 messages, 96% of which successfully reached their destination. The U.S. Army continued to use pigeons to deliver messages until 1957. When the Pigeon Service was disbanded, 15 "hero pigeons" went to live at zoos and 1,000 others sold to private homes.