

Record Traffic From The Past



Pigeons—you can find them in the cities of the world. At least you can easily find where they have been. Yet, with their commonality, pigeons provide us with a degree of nostalgia. The nostalgia comes from a special breed of birds called the homing pigeon. These birds have an uncanny ability to find their way home when released hundreds of miles away, even when flying in bad weather. Before the wireless, news agencies employed homing pigeons as did the military.

The Army first used pigeons to carry messages while we were taming the western frontier. In 1878, pigeons were used by Colonel Nelson A. Miles' 5th Infantry in the Dakota Territory. The use of pigeons reached its peak during World War II with 56,000 birds in service. Even later, the August 1950 issue of FM 24-5 advises that pigeons should be, "... used when all other means of signal communications are inoperative or unavailable, or when radio silence must be maintained"

GI JOE

The World War II birds made names for themselves; but, perhaps, GI Joe was the most famous. Joe was credited with saving the lives of over 100 British soldiers. The British had requested that the town of Colvi Vecchia, Italy, be bombed. However, on 18 October 1943, unknown to the Army Air Corps, the British had secured the town before the bombing was to take place. Joe was sent with a message to abort the mission and he reached the airfield just before the planes were to take off on the bombing run. He traveled the 20-mile distance from the British 10th Corps HQ to the Allied 12th Air Support Command in less than 20 minutes. For this feat, on 4 November 1946 Joe was awarded Britain's highest medal for animals, the Dickin Medal. It was an especially distinctive honor since Joe was the first non-British animal to be so honored. In 1955, the United States Congress, in a joint resolution, called on the Department of Defense to issue an appropriate citation for Joe. The certificate citing GI Joe as one of the most outstanding heroes of World War II was finally issued on 22 April 1975.

After World War II the Army, with greatly reduced strength, went back to training and a peacetime posture. Fort Monmouth continued the mission of breeding and training pigeons as they had been doing since 1917.

The Signal Corps Was For The Birds

by
Major Ron Frain

Then the birds were again to leave the lofts. The Korean War saw them flying combat missions, although there was a steady encroachment upon their domain from the world of electronic technology.

The Korean War was over and the pigeons' days in the Army were numbered. Radio and telephone technology had simply made too much progress for them to compete. There were regrets, nostalgia, and resistance. The pigeon handlers, just as the mule and horse soldiers before them, resented a cold piece of machinery replacing their beloved creatures.



THE GREAT PIGEON SALE

Electronics finally zapped the pigeons on 30 November 1956. On that day the order was given to discontinue breeding and training pigeons and to dispose of them. The great pigeon sale took place on 23 March 1957. On that day Fort Monmouth looked like a Rolling Stones concert. The pigeon lovers and breeders started to arrive at 2 a.m. to purchase the 1,018 birds that were to be sold. At five dollars per pair, a person was allowed to purchase one to five pairs of birds. All the birds were sold by 11:43 a.m. and hundreds of bird fanciers went home without so much as a feather. Famous pigeons, including GI Joe, were not

a part of this sale. The war heroes were presented to zoos. GI Joe went to the Detroit Zoological Gardens where he died on 3 January 1961. After death, he was stuffed and put on display at the Signal Corps Museum, Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.

PIGEONS COME HOMING TO ROOST

May 1957 brought the final chapter in Army pigeons when the Pigeon Breeding and Training Branch, Academic Services Department, US Army Signal School, was discontinued. The lofts were closed. However, it was not that easy to stomp out the pigeons. Mr. Otto Myer, for years after the closing of the lofts, gave a pigeon orientation to each Signal Officer Advanced Course. Sadly, now that, too, is gone. What's left? Nothing except that bit of melancholy and nostalgia whenever one thinks of the colorful days when we used the bird against our enemies.

Editor's Note: While researching this article, our staff discovered that an attempt was made to use homing pigeons in Vietnam. Officers of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) obtained two pigeons—Ralph and Suzy—in an effort to check their effectiveness. Ralph went AWOL on his first flight and a terrible fate befell Suzy. On her first mission, she was spotted by an alert M1 officer while she sat atop a telephone pole. This officer, seeing that something was strapped to Suzy's leg, ordered a soldier to shoot her down. (The officer was suspicious since he knew the Army no longer used pigeons and believed the bird might be on a spy mission.) The ill-fated pigeon never knew what hit her when the rifleman fired his M-16. The M1 officer was dumbfounded when he read the message retrieved from the bird's leg. It was addressed to the CG, 1st Cavalry Division.

The history of pigeons actually used in RVN was thus drawn to a quick close with Suzy gunned down and Ralph, so to speak, having flown the coop.

