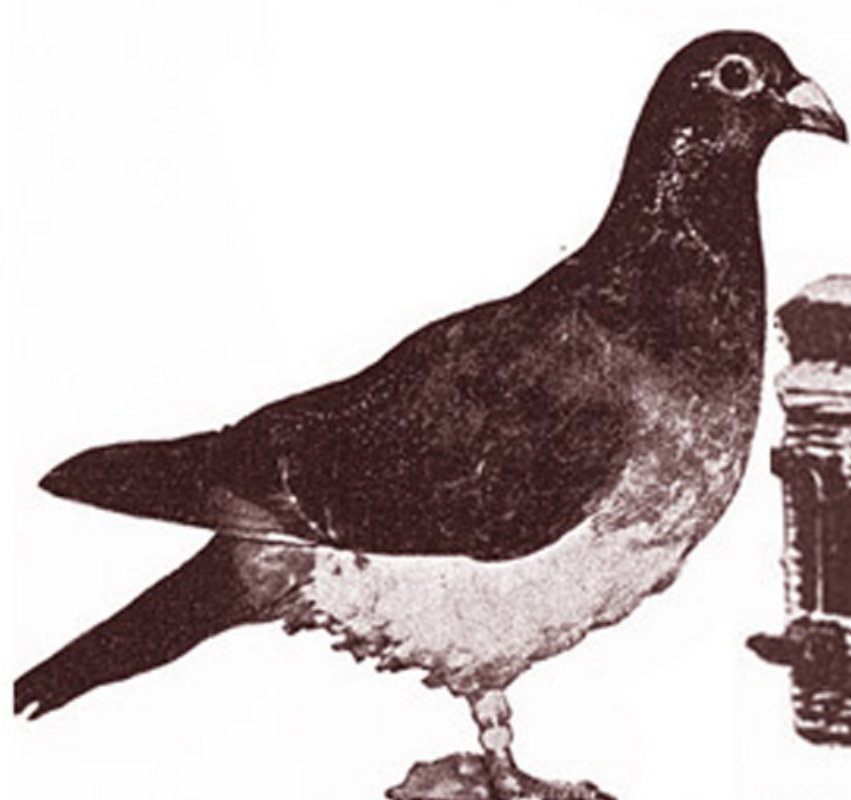


The AMERICAN LEGION Weekly

AUGUST 29, 1919: p. 18

They Winged Their Way Through Skies of Steel



*"President Wilson" lost a leg
at Verdun*



*"Cher Ami," saviour of the
Lost Battalion*



WHEN the history of the war comes to be written, that section which deals with aviation should be divided into two parts—flying men and flying birds. For the pigeons winged through the rolling barrage of high-explosive shells, they braved bursting shrapnel and gas and made their way through the rat-tat-tat of machine and anti-aircraft guns just as did the men who flew in things of steel and wood and gasoline. The feathered aviator played his part in almost as big and certainly in as brave a way as the man, and in hundreds of instances he died in the same splendid manner.

OldMagazineArticles.com

W.W. I Pigeoneers



"Big Tom," though wounded in the breast and minus a leg, delivered his message.

There is the story of Cher Ami, the pigeon which saved the "Lost Battalion" in the Argonne. And the pigeons of Verdun. "They shall not pass," the Frenchmen said, and, as though understanding it, these birds saved Verdun from the hordes of the German Crown Prince. Then there is Le Cirq, the pigeon which captured a German submarine and all its crew, and Babbette, a milk-white pullet, which was camouflaged as a crow, that the German Prince's "shot-gun squad" might not harm her, flew to French headquarters with a message from a secret observer within the German lines and enabled Allied guns to stop a surprise German attack on the Meuse. In numberless cases, pigeons saved hydroaeroplanes damaged at sea. They were the "wireless of the tanks." And today they are the pride of all bird lovers everywhere.

Pigeons are not new to war. It is on record that the Romans and Greeks used them and that Hannibal carried a cote crossing the Alps in order to send word back to Carthage of his progress. Coming down to modern times, it was a pigeon which first announced to an anxious London the victory at Waterloo!

At the time of the Mexican crisis an attempt was made to add a pigeon section to the Signal Corps of our army, but it was not until we actually entered the European conflict that the matter was taken seriously in Washington and an efficient pigeon section established. Then pigeon fanciers, attached to the army, scoured the country for good homing birds to be sent to France.

IN common with everything else connected with the A. E. F., haste was

W.W.I Pigeoneers



Releasing a pigeon from a seaplane

necessary in organizing the pigeon companies, but it was done, and the birds of the U. S. Army flew fast, straight and true and were a credit to the country from which they came. As a basis for organizing the pigeon service, our army had hundreds of instances in its possession showing how the pigeons with the French, British, Russians and Italians had rendered substantial service always and invaluable service hundreds of times. Not infrequently, the barrages which the Germans put over would entirely destroy all means of communication between advance troops and general headquarters, and that was when the feathered aviator did his bit. It was under such conditions that pigeons carried messages at the first battle of the Marne, at the Yser in Flanders, and aided the British in the capture of Neuve Chapelle. Pigeons died with the British Tommy at the second battle of Ypres when the Germans in their advance towards the Yser Canal used poison gas for the first time, after which gas-proof baskets and cotes were provided for them.

The birds at the front were kept in movable lofts or cotes built on wheels, so that they could follow an advancing army. They were kept from eight to ten miles from the trenches and trainers said the birds would get used to a new location and know it as "home" in about a week or ten days. They had to be coached as to where the loft was situated and this was done by careful instruction and patience. First, the bird would be released a few hundred feet away and permitted to fly back to the loft. Then the distance would be increased to several thousand feet and later to three or four miles. Each loft contained about seventy-five birds. A bird was taught to enter the loft immediately upon its arrival. None was permitted to loiter on top of

W.W.I Pigeoneers

the loft because such action would tend to delay the message it might be carrying. The entrances were so arranged that when the pigeon returned it would ring a bell.

Pigeons were used in all branches of the service. Because more men were in the infantry, more birds were supplied to that branch of the service than to any other. One man in each company, usually a lover of birds, was designated as pigeon carrier. He carried the pigeons in a basket slung over his back. This basket had attached to it a gas protector or cover which rendered the birds in it immune to a gas attack. The birds were changed at regular intervals and none was allowed to remain in a trench more than four or five days. They were always released and made to fly back to the loft.

PIGEON messages were written on fine tissue paper and folded into a small leather wad. This wad was inserted in the aluminum holder seared into the leg, so that it could not come off unless the leg did. The messages usually were written in code.

As a rule, the bird rises straight aloft, pauses an instant to get its sense of direction, and then flies toward "home." The birds became accustomed to barrage fire and flew through it seemingly unmindful. After the German army assigned expert trap shooters with shot guns to the duty of killing them, they learned not to pause when they spiraled aloft, because it was then that most of them were killed.

When the Seventy-seventh Division went through the Argonne Forest, the 308th Infantry made a rapid and splendid advance. A battalion of that regiment, under command of Lieutenant-Colonel Whittlesey, got farther afield than the remainder of the command. The Germans cut him off and there he and his troops were, entirely surrounded by superior forces, practically without provisions or water. The Germans demanded surrender. "Never." Colonel Whittlesey replied, and the next German "talk" was in the shape of high explosive shells.

With no other method of communication, the pigeons were called on. One bird after another was released with a message asking for reinforcement, and as

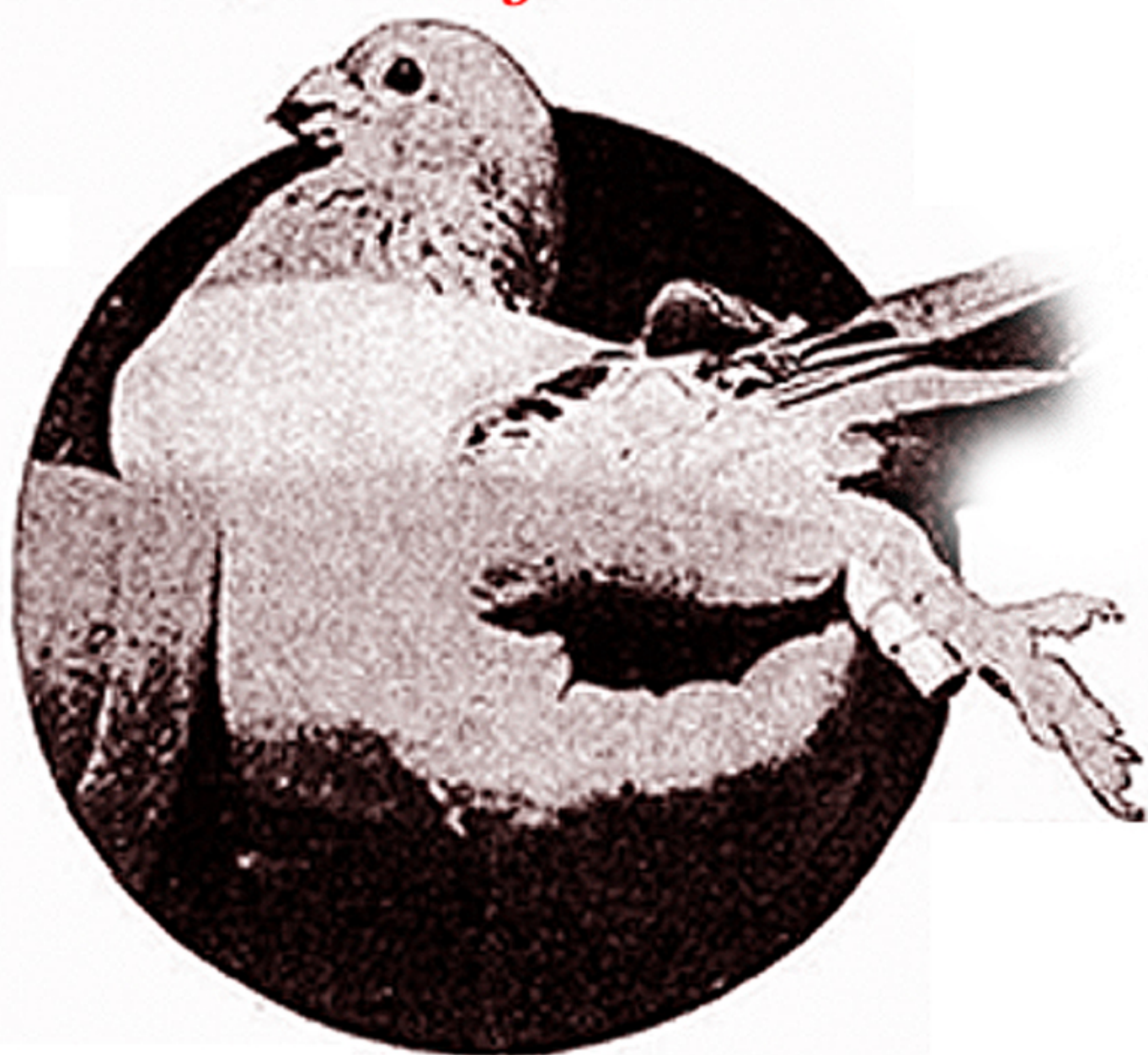
W.W.I Pigeoneers

each spiraled aloft to get his bearing he was shot down. Finally, the last bird was taken from the basket. It was Cher Ami. Again the message for help was penciled and placed in the little aluminum container and up went Cher Ami. A fusilade of bullets was shot at the bird and, to the dismay of the beleaguered Americans, the bird paused an instant, feathers began to fall and to the nerve-strained eyes of some of the onlookers the bird appeared to be falling. But not Cher Ami. With the "punch leg" dangling and a bullet wound in her breast bone she flew on and on.

HERE Captain Carney takes up the story:

"We had been informed of the loss of Whittlesey's battalion," he said, "and were told that none knew where it was. Presumably, the entire command had been wiped out. A crowd of the men were sitting around discussing it when we heard the bell in the cote tinkle. Tell-tale stains were on the entrance to the cote and we knew a wounded bird had come in. There, inside, we saw Cher Ami. She was in a state of complete exhaustion. From her dangling leg we took the message and despatched it in great haste to headquarters. It told the location of the 'Lost Battalion' and it wasn't very long before it was rescued."

Another famous pigeon now in this country is "President Wilson." One of his legs was shot away at Causy as he carried a message asking help. Despite his wound, he got to his cote and the outfit from which he flew was saved. "President Wilson was too good a soldier and reliable a bird, to be invalided home just because of the wound in his leg and after it healed he went again to the front. He was assigned to the tanks and when the "Treat 'Em Rough" boys got busy at St. Mihiel he was in the tank squad that was farthest advanced. Sometimes the tanks would send back word to the artillery giving the exact location of hidden machine-gun nests and such a message did "President Wilson" carry, despite the best efforts of sharpshooters to bring him down. Immediately after he was released from the gun turret, he flew straight for American headquarters. As a result of his message, our artillery laid a barrage on the machine-gun nests before our in-

W.W.I Pigeoneers

The message is carried on the leg

fantry advanced, and thus this pigeon undoubtedly saved the lives of scores of our doughboys. Another one-legged veteran of the American bird forces was Big Tom, who also had his breast bone carved by a German rifle bullet. Poilu and Spike were two famous friends of Cher Ami, who also distinguished themselves not once, but a score of times, by deeds of daring and danger.

L E CIRQ was a French bird which was born and reared in Normandy. During the great war "his bit" was patrol duty. That is, he was in a basket strapped on the back of a beach patrolman—one of those sturdy French peasants, who, familiar with every nook and cranny of his part of the shore line, kept constant look-out and made thorough search for any secret submarine bases that the Germans may have attempted to establish. Once, just before sundown, the peasant sighted in a little bay the periscope of a submarine. It rose to the surface and its officers and crew came on deck. The patrolman wrote a hasty message and slipped it in the aluminum basket on Le Cirq's leg and the bird was released. Straight he flew to his "home"—a cote at a nearby naval station—and in half an hour an American destroyer and a British gunboat captured the submarine.

All naval patrol boats and aircraft carried pigeons. Once a British patrol boat was torpedoed and shelled by a German U-boat. One of the first shots put the wireless out of order. The skipper wrote a hasty message giving his position and tied it to a pigeon's leg. The bird was

W.W. I Pigeoneers

released just as the gunboat sank and the captain and crew jumped into the water. While clinging to the wreckage, they saw the submarine's anti-aircraft gun fire a volley at the bird. Feathers flew and the bird began to fall, but suddenly the feathered avion paused and then started rapidly towards what the skipper knew was the coast line. It arrived at a naval station twenty miles away and a destroyer rescued the men in whose behalf it made such a splendid flight. This bird's tail feathers had been shot away and its wing slightly injured.

At 7:45 A. M. a British seaplane sent by two pigeons the following message: "Am down off Hartlepool, rough seas." Both pigeons arrived at home about eight o'clock. Half an hour later the aviator was rescued. In other words, just one hour and fifteen minutes after the birds were released he and his crew were saved. Another story showing the gallantry of a bird is being told today around Ramsgate, most spectacular spy captures in France came about through the sharp eyes and ears of a young girl about thirteen years old. With her mother she was riding on a railroad train. In the same compartment sat a priest, piously saying his beads. The young girl watched him and noticed that he failed to kiss the cross after his prayers, and this she thought a very peculiar omission for a priest. Then she heard a "coo-wah-wah" come from beneath the priest's habit. At the next station she informed a gendarme what she had seen and heard. The priest was seized after a fight. Beneath the cassock were two pigeons, one of which had cooed at the wrong time. The "priest" was executed and military "misinformation" was sent back to Germany by the pigeons.

An American destroyer once captured a German trawler, disguised as a fishing boat, north of the Orkneys. She was believed to have been on a spying mission, for she had on board more than a hundred homing pigeons.

The French began to camouflage their pigeons after the German Crown Prince assigned a company of trapshooters with shotguns to the duty of shooting down all carriers in the vicinity of Verdun. The birds were mostly dyed black and appeared to be crows.

ALMOST everyone knows the story of the fighting about Thiaumont, taken

W.W.I Pigeoneers

sixteen times by the Germans and re-taken seventeen times by the French. Once the brave little French garrison was being shelled to pieces by a German battery. Wireless and telephones to the rear were shattered. The garrison commander knew the location of the battery which was doing the damage, and if only he could get word back to the French artillery!

He sent up his last pigeon. Like the others, the bird was shot down immediately. Then the garrison waited—waited for death. The commandant gazed with his glasses longingly towards the French part of France—the French lines. He turned pale. He could scarcely believe his eyes. Across a terrain of bursting shrapnel, where high-explosive shells detonated so rapidly and so thickly that their smoke entwined and floated off like fantastic ghostly devil waltzers; there, where nothing should live, something was living! A black-looking object was moving. It would dart across the open fields, disappear into a shell hole and then re-appear. It came nearer and nearer, and the whole garrison gazed upon it in a sort of unbelieving horror. The thing was bewitched, else how could it live and move in such a place. As it drew nearer the glasses showed it to be a dog with something on his back. Breathlessly, the little handful of French poilus watched and prayed, and, when the animal dashed into the redoubt, they saw that he carried a small basket. In it were two pigeons!

The commander wrote his message twice, telling the location of the death-dealing German guns, and despatched both pigeons at once. Like tiny white geysers they rose straight upwards, poised an instant and flew. Shells screamed at them, buchshot from choke bore shot-guns whizzed thousands of tiny bullets at them; a gas shell whistled its way by them, but failed to explode at the proper time. Again the little garrison prayed and again the god of battles decreed that the dumb friends of man should prevail over the battle din which man had made! Again the living traversed a space where no thing could live, man thought. Both

W.W.I Pigeoneers

birds reached French artillery headquarters. The great German batteries were silenced and again Verdun was saved. Pigeons performed the same service numberless times at Verdun, and a score of the birds now wear the ribbon of the Croix de Guerre.

THE use of pigeons in the war was not without its amusing side. Some of the birds were "regular comedians," members of the pigeon companies reported. For instance, there was "Old Satchelback." He was one of the laziest birds in the A. E. F., and seldom was used as carrier of messages, but he was so "genial" that he was invaluable in getting frightened birds into a loft. Sometimes when a bird had made its first flight under shell fire, it would return to the loft in a highly nervous condition. This would be manifested by the pigeon constantly circling about the loft and refusing to alight. Not to alight at once meant delay, and delay meant the lives of hundreds of soldiers very often. In such a case "Old Satchelback" would be released. He would fly high in the air and then circle around the distraught bird, leading it down to the cote.

A story is related that "Old Satchelback" once was returning across a shell-torn area with a message. He got tired and alighted on a road which engineers were repairing. Quite calmly he waited until the road was repaired and then walked majestically past, thus avoiding the trouble of walking on the rough fields on either side.

Another pigeon story which made the entire Allied forces laugh was due to the commander of a contingent of troops from one of the smaller Allied countries, who did not realize the uses to which pigeons were put in war. On his arrival in a certain sector, a French commander sent to him a cote of seventy-five birds. The next day the Frenchman received the following amazing note:

"Many thanks for the birds. The mess thoroughly enjoyed pigeon pie last evening and with it drank to the health of your excellency and to our great common cause."

One of the last acts of a pigeon in the great war was to bring a message which stirred the hearts of all the men in the Allied Armies at the front. It came from a French battalion which, like Whittle-

W.W.I Pigeoneers

sey's, had been surrounded by the Germans. The message read:

"The Germans are upon us. We are lost, but have done good work. Have artillery open on our positions."

The 'S-3, America's largest submarine, finished her recent trial run in first-class condition. The boat is 231 feet long and carries 38,000 gallons of oil, which makes its cruising radius 10,000 miles. On her trial run the S-3 submerged to a depth of 210 feet. Her speed under water is about thirteen knots and on the surface eighteen knots an hour.