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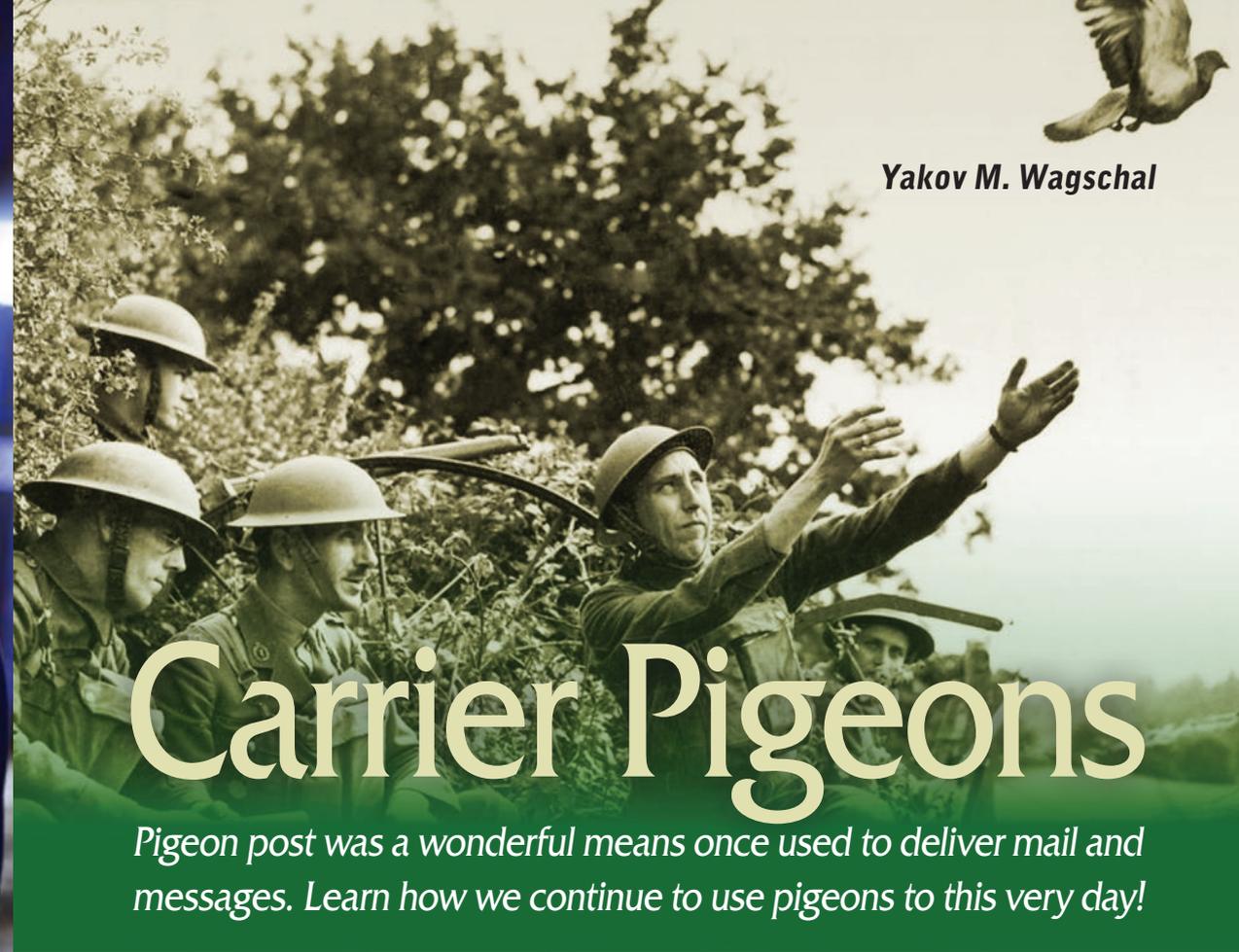


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Yakov M. Wagschal



# Carrier Pigeons

*Pigeon post was a wonderful means once used to deliver mail and messages. Learn how we continue to use pigeons to this very day!*

Imagine sitting at home on the third floor of a building in a busy city. You're nursing a mug of coffee while you sit back and enjoy the latest issue of *Zman*. Just then you hear a knock at the window.

You rush to the window. Oh, nothing to worry about. It's only a pigeon. You open the window and a small gray-green pigeon flies in, completely exhausted from a long trip. A small package hangs from one of its red feet. Your long-awaited mail has arrived.

In today's world of e-mail and text messaging, when some leaders in technology are working on a plan to have your washing machine delivered to you by pilotless drone, it is very hard to imagine the methods once used to deliver messages. However, the above description was a common occurrence for thousands of years. Granted, third story windows may not yet have been part of the landscape, but countless messages were transmitted by pigeons and other birds.

Jewish sources also make reference to the use of birds to deliver messages, and even larger items. The first is obviously the bird sent by Noach to verify whether solid ground had yet become visible. The bird returned with an olive branch to deliver the message. Then there were the ravens that fed Eliyahu Hanavi with food from the king's table, as he hid from the wicked Achav and Izevel.

The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 95a) records that when David Hamelech was captured by Yishbi, the giant-brother of Goliath, Avishai ben Tzeruyah came to his aid. According to one version of the event, Avishai was tipped off that David was in danger when a dove appeared before him with a broken wing. He understood this to mean that a public figure representing all of Israel, who is likened to a dove, was in danger.

However, here we are talking about something else: pigeons that were trained



Left: Serviceman takes pigeons with him on an airplane during WWII. If the airplane is marooned he can send a message with the pigeon giving his position. Right: Serviceman during WWI driving truck of pigeons.

Left: WWII soldiers with their pigeons. Right: Pigeon released from a tank to carry a message during WWII.

for years specifically to serve as message carriers. The premise behind it is simple. Pigeons become very attached to the place where they were raised and they will return there even from locations hundreds of miles away. A pigeon that was raised in, say, New York City, can then be transported to Florida. If an urgent situation arises, a brief message can be tied to the pigeon and it will instinctively return to the site where it was raised in New York, an act known as *homing*.

Of course, raising homing pigeons is not as simple as that. They need plenty of food and constant care. Yet, when there is no alternative, the ability to transmit messages, even secret ones, becomes invaluable.

The main reason pigeons were chosen over other species of birds is because of their extreme loyalty. They will do everything in their power to deliver their message no matter the obstacles. Furthermore, they are a very prolific type of bird, and families of loyal pigeons can be bred.

Understandably, during wartime, when a sentry notices a bird flying by with a message tied to its leg, he will do whatever he can to shoot it down. However, if the bird is a pigeon he will have a hard time, since it usually flies with others. This provides pigeons with wonderful camouflage as it tries to deliver the message it bears.

The history of using carrier pigeons goes back a mere 3,000 years, when the Greeks used them to update their capital about the winners of the Olympic competitions. Later, the Romans (who stole many of their

technological “innovations” from the Greeks) used pigeons to deliver war news from the battlefield in their many conflicts around the world.

The first documented use of pigeons in a regular post system dates to the year 1150, when the ruler of Baghdad used a pigeon to receive the latest news from his troops at the front. Around the same time, the legendary Mongolian warlord Genghis Khan also used carrier pigeons to keep him updated.

An interesting episode occurred during the Crusades, when the army of Richard the Lionhearted captured a pigeon that was delivering a message to a Muslim city that had been besieged. The message told the beleaguered garrison to remain strong because reinforcements were on the way.

Instead of destroying the message, the clever English king replaced it with a new one. This false message stated that the Muslims inside the city were on their own; no help would be forthcoming. This brought the Muslims within the city to the brink of despair and they surrendered. When the reinforcements arrived several days later they found the Christians already in control of the city.

Over the years, many kingdoms invested large sums into developing a reliable network of pigeons to deliver their priority mail. The main problem was that pigeons could only be used in this manner to provide one-way service. The sender might have to wait many weeks for a response, or even just to receive confirmation that his message had arrived.

Another use of pigeons that dates back to at least to the Talmudic period and still exists today is for racing. Pigeons were trained to fly long distances at high speed and under difficult conditions. Then they competed against each other to see which would arrive first at the appointed destination. These races were generally intended for entertainment purposes and often involved gambling on the pigeons. The Talmud states that those who engaged in this behavior were invalidated from testifying in court because they were transgressing a rabbinic decree.

It often happened, though, that the king or local duke was in urgent need of pigeons to send to the warfront. The royalty would join these competitions in order to purchase the best birds for their own use. During wartime, every minute spent waiting for a message to arrive could prove critical.

While the use of carrier pigeons has virtually disappeared today, pigeon racing remains a large industry. The media reported just recently that police were searching for a pigeon valued at \$184,000 because of its speed!

The high cost of training and maintaining homing pigeons prevented them from ever becoming used in a systemized postal network. Nevertheless, during wartime armies often looked for a few good pigeons. Matters went so far that opposing armies began training falcons and other birds of prey to intercept carrier pigeons. Special guards kept a close watch for pigeons flying to or from the direction of the enemy. When

they spotted one, they would release the falcon, which had been trained to go after pigeons only.

The Chinese, who used pigeons for mail during the 12th century, found a way around this problem. They hung bells on their pigeons to chase away flying predators. The interceptors were confused by the unexpected clanging and kept their distance.

Militaries were not the only ones to



Modern carrier pigeon in Fort Collins, Colorado, that delivers memory cards.



Illustration of pigeons waiting to be sent out with their mail.