

The 1920s Era Pigeon Service

The Army's Signal Corps used pigeons for communications from WWI, and into the Korean War; to this end, the Pigeon Service was active at Fort Monmouth until its discontinuance in 1957. A 1940s history of Fort Monmouth provides a concise discussion of the Pigeon Service in its early days at the Fort. The story begins....

Based upon observations of pigeon use by the French and Britain armies during WWI, General Pershing was so impressed that he requested a Pigeon Service. The service was formally requested by letter to the Chief Signal Officer (General George O. Squier), and was established in November 1917 under MAJ Frank Griffith and relocated to the Fort after the War.

By 1925, the service had a breeding base of 75 pairs and lofts for a variety of uses. It boasted 30 long distance flyers, and was breeding 300 birds per season to fill requisitions from eighteen lofts scattered throughout the U.S. and its possessions. Pigeon training, a 12-hour course, had also been incorporated into ROTC training and in signal school maneuvers. Birds were also trained in flights from Wilmington, DE to the Fort (89.74 miles away).

To maintain a fit pigeon service, yearly entries were made in pigeon association races and shows. Monmouth birds always performed well in competition, winning prizes in races and exhibitions. In the Army Championship in Washington in April 1926, the pigeon "General Pershing" won the championship by covering the distance to Fort Monmouth in 5 hours and 20 minutes. During that year Monmouth birds took three silver cups, eight special ribbons, twenty-four first prizes, fifteen seconds, ten thirds, seven fourths, and eight fifth prizes.

Night flight had proven difficult. In 1928, the Pigeon Section conducted experiments using four birds taken at night five miles out and liberated; two of the birds homed and trapped in ten minutes, the others remained out until sunrise. In December 1928, intensive night training was started. Twenty birds were liberated each evening at increased distances; by February 1929 some of the birds flew three miles without lights, and by March were able to cover four miles in 11 minutes. Segregated at birth, birds breed from these "night flyers" were taken at 18 days old to a landing board at dusk to survey the surrounding countryside, and were in time taught to fly. With three weeks of this training, the birds would start homing at 200 yards and in full sight of the lofts. The distance was increased nightly until the adults were consistently able to orient themselves and fly home from five miles away.

The referenced history states "pigeon breeding and training had transcended the novelty stage in 1930. New and revolutionary techniques were establishing the Monmouth birds as probably the outstanding stud in America."