

The Pigeon Service in War Time (1918)

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. While researching, the Historians found an Appropriation-related document that serves as a description of the Pigeon Program during World War I (*Army Appropriations Bill, 1919*).

The document provides testimony by the Chief Signal Officer, GEN George O. Squier and his assistants for an appropriation of \$795,000 for "Pigeons, maintenance, equipment, and supplies." Squier introduced pigeons into the testimony, stating that unless one was familiar with the "pigeon industry" they would hardly believe what had to be done; "it is serious business." Squier's testimony indicates that pigeons were trained in the U.S, and that there was coordination with others (i.e., the Pigeon Fanciers' Association).

Squier said pigeons were used with advanced infantry, because that worked, battle tears wire to pieces (referencing traditional wired communications). In response to questions on operations, Squier said pigeons were released from their cages at the front line to fly back to the artillery behind, and that "they are a very valuable aid" and also could be used from "aeroplanes." An aide said pigeon-carried cameras were not used (they were in Europe); he stated we were using "aeroplanes" for that. The aide elaborated - there were large numbers "of pigeons in cages on the first line, and the pigeons come back to the rear line all shot to pieces. They are more or less illtreated on the front line, and as soon as they are liberated they fly as fast as they can back to where they belong."

Another testified the birds came from the U.S., England, and France, and that there were lofts in the U.S. and abroad. He stated birds could be taken as squeakers or at 1 to 2 years old and trained. Trainers, he said, came from the Pigeon Fanciers' Association, and Training abroad could be under battle conditions. He also stated while trained for everything else, pigeons did not have to be trained to get home. He said they were treated well at the rear of the line ("his coat is kept clean and everything is arranged to make it easy for him, so that he likes to stay there"), whereas at the front of the line it is the other way – and when set free they make a "bee line for home."

Squier described the men - in part from the Signal Corps; four men and a pigeon expert for each Signal Division. The service included 10 officers and 732 men, there were four officers and 110 men in France with 2,600 birds and a supply of six months food, "at 1 pound per week per bird, and there are 12 trench mobile lofts for the battle front."