



# BASKETRY

## Then and Now

### PIGEON BASKETS

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**320,000 carrier pigeons were used by all sides during the First World War and many were transported in wicker baskets. This research considers some of the designs of baskets in use at the time.**

Carrier pigeons were a vital form of communication during the First World War, when wireless and telephone communication was often unreliable or unavailable – in the trenches, in tanks, in aeroplanes, on boats, and even in submarines. Pigeons could easily and reliably deliver messages over distances of fifty or sixty miles, and in some cases flew much further.<sup>1</sup>

Britain formed the Carrier Pigeon Service in 1915, with divisions for the Army, Air Force and Navy and, from 1918, an intelligence service.<sup>2</sup> Its infrastructure was highly organised. Within the Army division, both stationary and mobile lofts – some motorised (often from converted London buses) and some horse-drawn – were used for

*Above image: A motorcyclist of the Royal Engineers (Signals) sets out with a basket on his back, containing four pigeons to be taken from the lofts at Sorrus to the frontline, 2 June 1918. This was a dangerous job and the riders were often targeted by snipers. © IWM (Q 8878).*

housing the pigeons.<sup>3</sup> The pigeons were transported to the front lines, where they were released when needed to carry their messages back to the lofts. The pigeons, which were used to operating out of fixed bases, sometimes had difficulty in finding their way back to the mobile lofts. However, as pigeons are able to see and distinguish between colours, the lofts were painted with different coloured stripes to enable the birds to identify their own lofts. The lofts also had a yellow flag with a black pigeon to enable aircraft to identify them. Young birds, known as 'squeakers', were always used, as old birds would have to be broken in to a new loft.<sup>4</sup>

The pigeons carried their messages in small aluminium canisters, which were already attached to the bird to save time when it came to sending a message. Two pigeons carrying the same message would be despatched where possible to increase the chances of the message getting through. Carrier pigeons were often the target of nearby enemy soldiers, who would try to shoot them down, and could fall prey to the patrols of hawks used as a defence. The birds also had to battle against terrible weather and long distances, particularly those used in the Navy and Air Force.

At the end of the war there were 22,000 pigeons in the Carrier Pigeon Service, with 150 mobile lofts and 400 qualified 'pigeoneers'. In total, 320,000 pigeons were used by all sides during the war.<sup>5</sup>



*Image: Pigeons were housed in mobile lofts, often made from converted buses. Note the four-compartment basket for transporting pigeons to the front lines. © IWM (Q 8999).*

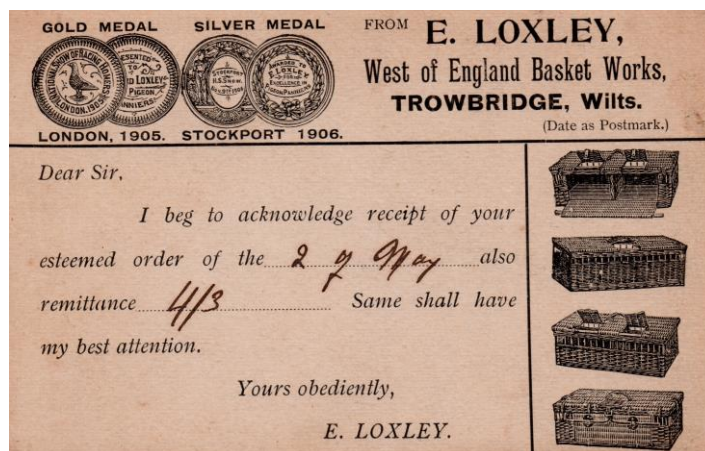
A huge number of containers was required for transporting the pigeons around, and baskets were an obvious choice – although wood, metal and textile crates were also used. Photographs from the First World War period show a wide range of baskets in use for various purposes – from large panniers carrying 20+ pigeons used aboard trawlers, to baskets carrying 5–10 pigeons worn on the backs of motorcycle riders to take them to the front lines, and to baskets for just one or two birds used in the trenches and in aeroplanes.<sup>6</sup> Within the intelligence service, small baskets attached to parachutes and containing a single pigeon with a message on its leg were dropped by balloon into occupied France and Belgium.<sup>7</sup> Some baskets were single-tiered with one door, while others were double-layered with multiple doors. Given that one pigeon weighs approximately 1lb, some of these baskets would have been quite heavy when full.<sup>8</sup>



*Image: Basket for one or two pigeons being loaded onto a seaplane. © IWM (Q 18611).*

It is believed that many of the baskets used were of a fairly standard design – often based on those used by the pigeon racing fraternity before the war – although the particulars varied. At the time there were three major manufacturers of pigeon baskets, including Shepherds of Leicester and Loxleys of Trowbridge, as well as many other smaller makers.<sup>9</sup>

The British Amalgamated Union of Journeymen Basket, Cane and Wicker Furniture Makers trade list of 1916 lists three types of pigeon basket. The 'Homing Pigeon Basket' was available in five sizes, from 15 x 10 x 9 inches to 30 x 8 x 9 inches, and was available in two designs – the first with a large lid to open and a trap lid in the top, and the second with a drop lid on the front and an open-work lid on the top. The 'Society Homing Basket' had a fall-down front, and was available in three sizes, from 34 x 19 x 10



*Image: Loxleys was one of three major manufacturers of pigeon baskets before the war, and continued to make them for the war effort. Courtesy of Trowbridge Postcards and Ephemera on Flickr.*

inches to 42 x 21 x 10 inches. It had a randed and open-work lid, with a trap lid. The 'Pigeon Basket' was divided into two, four, or six compartments, with each being available in two sizes. The smallest had two compartments and was 12 x 8.5 x 8.5 inches; the largest had six compartments and was 32.5 x 12 x 8.5 inches. Each compartment had a small lid.<sup>10</sup> A Loxleys advert from the 1916 Racing Pigeon Annual offers the 'Indestructible pannier' in nine sizes, the smallest at 22 x 13 x 11 inches for 10 birds, and the largest at 45 x 26 x 12 inches for 50 birds.<sup>11</sup>

The Royal Pigeon Racing Association has an exhibition at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire called 'Pigeons at War'. This exhibition includes an original First World War basket of the type used by the Royal Engineers in the trenches. The basket was designed to take two birds. It had a door at either end, and a diagonal divider which could be removed if transporting only one bird. It had a wooden base and was lined with canvas, and had a leather handle on the top.



*Image: A First World War pigeon basket for two pigeons at Bletchley Park. Courtesy of Greta Bertram.*





Image: Left: Two-tiered pigeon basket at the Imperial War Museum, Duxford. © IWM (FEQ 813). Right: Pigeon basket of the same design in use in Salonika, 1918. © Royal Signals Museum.

Photographs show similar baskets with willow handles. These baskets often had a canvas pouch fixed to the side for a message book and pencils.<sup>12</sup>

The Imperial War Museum in Duxford has a two-tiered basket with straps for wearing on the back. Each level of the basket has a door at either end, and there would have been fabric inserts to divide the compartments diagonally, allowing four pigeons to travel comfortably. The doors are built on galvanised wire frames and are fitted to the basket with hinges. The Imperial War Museum also has a collapsible basket with openwork sides and a net floor and lid. These baskets would take at least ten birds, but were only used for short journeys, such as to return the pigeons to the lofts. They were still being made by Shepherds in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

Many other designs of basket were in use, and these varied across the fighting nations. There are photographs showing folding wicker baskets used by the German forces,<sup>14</sup> and photographs showing baskets in which the pigeons are held in place in a sling used by the French forces.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of the sling was to prevent damage to the feathers as the birds were jolted around inside the basket. However, these baskets were never used by the British forces.<sup>16</sup>



Image: The role of pigeons in the First World War is fascinating and, at times, unbelievable. Here, German signals troops are loading carrier pigeons into little caskets on dogs' backs for transportation. © IWM (Q 48444).

### Collections

- Imperial War Museum, Duxford: Has several pigeon baskets from WWI and WWII, including single-tiered, double-tiered and collapsible baskets.
- Royal Signals Museum: Has a WWI pigeon basket.
- Pigeons at War exhibition, Bletchley Park: Wide variety of material relating to pigeons in both the WWI and WWII, including an original WWI basket.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Osman, A.H. (1929). *Pigeons in the Great War: A complete history of the Carrier-Pigeon Service during the Great War, 1914 to 1918*. London: The "Racing Pigeon" Publishing Co. Ltd., p.57.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.
- <sup>3</sup> Harfield, A. (1989). *Pigeon to Packhorse: The illustrated story of animals in army communications*. Picton Publishing (Chippenham) Ltd., pp.92–94.
- <sup>4</sup> Hill, C., Royal Pigeon Racing Association, personal communication, May 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Osman, A.H. (1929). *Pigeons in the Great War: A complete history of the Carrier-Pigeon Service during the Great War, 1914 to 1918*. London: The "Racing Pigeon" Publishing Co. Ltd., p.29.
- <sup>6</sup> Photograph collections, Imperial War Museum and Royal Signals Museum.
- <sup>7</sup> Osman, A.H. (1929). *Pigeons in the Great War: A complete history of the Carrier-Pigeon Service during the Great War, 1914 to 1918*. London: The "Racing Pigeon" Publishing Co. Ltd., p.46.
- <sup>8</sup> Hill, C., Royal Pigeon Racing Association, personal communication, May 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Hill, C., Royal Pigeon Racing Association, personal communication, May 2017.

<sup>10</sup> British Amalgamated Union of Journeymen Basket, Cane and Wicker Furniture Makers. (1916). *List of prices, sizes and particulars of hampers, baskets, railway, market gardening, laundry carriage and general household for all areas*, pp.108–110.

<sup>11</sup> (1916). *Racing Pigeon Annual*, p.179.

<sup>12</sup> Hill, C., Royal Pigeon Racing Association, personal communication, May 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Hill, C., Royal Pigeon Racing Association, personal communication, May 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Imperial War Museum. [Online]. Available at: [www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205245058](http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205245058)

<sup>15</sup> Imperial War Museum. [Online]. Available at: [www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205194800](http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205194800)

<sup>16</sup> Hill, C., Royal Pigeon Racing Association, personal communication, May 2017.