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IN REPLY REFER TO:
SPSMT 319.1 ETO

WAR DEPARTMENT
ARMY SERVICE FORCES
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF SIGNAL OFFICER
WASHINGTON

SPSMT-3

14 September 1944

Subject: Use of Pigeons in the Invasion of France.

To: Commanding Officer, Army Pigeon Service Agency,
17th and Sansom Streets, Architect Building,
Philadelphia 3, Pennsylvania.

The inclosed letter with one inclosure, subject as above,
is forwarded for your information and possible use in the training
program.

By order of the Chief, Personnel and Training Service:

J. R. Spangler
J. R. Spangler,
Major, Signal Corps,

Executive Officer, Military Training Branch.

1 Incl:
Ltr, 27 July 44, w/1 Incl.

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2D PLATOON (SEP)
230TH SIGNAL PIGEON COMPANY
APO 503, US ARMY

47826

THS/cma

27 July 1944

SUBJECT: Transmittal of Pigeon Report.

TO : Signal Officer, Twelfth Army Group, APO 655, US Army.

1. Transmitted herewith is report entitled, "Use of Pigeons in the Invasion of France".

2. It is requested that copies be furnished the following Headquarters:

- Chief Signal Officer, War Department, Washington D.O.
- Chief Signal Officer, Signal Division, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force.
- Chief Signal Officer, ETOUSA, APO 887, US Army.
- Signal Officer, First US Army, APO 230, US Army.
- Commanding Officer, Army Pigeon Service Agency, Signal Corps, Architects Building, 17th and Sanson Streets, Philadelphia 3, Pa.

1 Includ. Rpt on Use of Pigeons in the Invasion of France

THOMAS H. SPENCER, *1st Lt.*
1st Lt., Signal Corps,
Commanding.

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Report
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2D PLATOON (Sep)
280TH SIGNAL PIGEON COMPANY
APO 505, U.S. ARMY

27 July 1944

USE OF PIGEONS IN THE INVASION OF FRANCE

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Reports, Historical

273th

I. INTRODUCTION.

The 2d Platoon, 280th Signal Pigeon Company, arrived in the ETO September 12, 1942, and after equipping itself and arriving at its final destination immediately engaged in instructing tactical troops that were present in the Theater. This platoon has instructed various corps and divisions in the care and use of pigeons and their equipment, this training continuing right up to D day. The corps and divisions trained in pigeon communication by the platoon formed most of the units comprising the First U. S. Army.

II. TACTICAL MISSION.

The tactical mission of the platoon was supplying pigeon communication from the shores of Normandy to the United Kingdom for the First U. S. Army.

III. GENERAL INFORMATION CONCERNING THE ENGLISH CHANNEL AND ITS COASTAL AREAS.

1. TERRAIN. The terrain of the British coast from the Straits of Dover to Portsmouth varies from tidal mud flats at water level, to chalk cliffs and ridges 100 to 400 feet high. The terrain is chiefly rolling downland interspersed with cultivated fields bounded by hedgegroves. From Portsmouth to Plymouth the land is largely the same as that mentioned in preceding sentence, except barren moorland, rocky ridges, and mountains extending to 600 feet in height characterise Dartmoor, Bodmin Moor and Cornwall, the areas surrounding Plymouth. The topography of France from Cherbourg Peninsula to Dunkirk may be compared to that along the English coast.

2. CLIMATE. The climate of England, while of a temperate nature, varies from the temperate climate in the coastal areas of the U.S.A. in that extremes of heat, cold, drought and flood, do not occur. The average day in England is slightly overcast with intermittent rain or slight drizzle. During much of the year steady or gusty winds prevail. For details of weather conditions over the English Channel from 5 June to 19 June 1944, as supplied by the Air Ministry, See Appendix A.

Pigeons
no

IV. EMPLOYMENT OF PIGEONS IN THE INVASION OF FRANCE.

1. GENERAL. The use of pigeons in the invasion of France was limited to 446 carefully trained and selected birds issued to using formations. Returns of operational messages was still further limited, although the number of pigeons homing to the U.K. without messages were numerous. While the percentage of returns were not as large as originally anticipated, it is believed the pigeon returns were creditable, when adverse weather conditions are considered. The chief detriment was the head-on winds prevailing either steadily or in squalls from D Day on. Further, quantities of pigeons were kept basketed by using formations for as long as eight days prior to use. This long imprisonment naturally impaired the pigeons' condition. That these birds home at all is a tribute to the excellent quality of pigeons supplied by the civilian and Royal Air Force (RAF) lofts organized under the Air Ministry, and in the greatest extent to the close cooperation given by the British Army Pigeon Service in helping with training, supplying emergency needs for equipment, and through giving

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Pigeons

personal liaison whenever the need arose.

2. USAS. Pigeons were issued to using formations as shown in Appendix #B. They were to be used for carrying:

- a. Ammunition Status Reports
- b. Undeveloped negatives (film)
- c. Emergency messages when other means of communication failed.
- d. Messages when radio silence prevailed.

3. LOFTS USED. Lofts used fell into two categories - Civilian National Pigeon Service Lofts (NPS) and RAF lofts. The NPS lofts were organized under the Air Ministry early in the war, and allotted to the Special Section of the British Army Pigeon Service. These lofts were called special service lofts, and prior to their use by this organization, were employed by the British Army for obtaining intelligence reports from allied sympathizers living on the European continent and especially the areas of France attacked by the First U.S. Army. The RAF lofts were established by the Air Ministry for the purpose of carrying SOG messages from distressed aircraft forced down in the southern coastal waters of Great Britain. The lofts were obtained from the British Army and Air Ministry, under a SHAEF directive, after several months of the closest liaison between the British Army Pigeon Service, the Air Ministry and this organization.

4. TRAINING. Pigeons in the lofts used, having been born in said lofts, were naturally well settled and acclimated for the rigors of channel flying, which condition dictated their choice. Months before these lofts were officially taken over, their training was changed in accordance with the pre-battle plans of the invasion. This was made possible, without breaking security, through the enthusiastic aid of Major Sidney H. Heap, O.C., Special Section, British Army Pigeon Service, who, asking no questions, allowed the personnel of this unit to start training the birds for our tactical mission. The training started in January 1944, while the lofts were still under Major Heap's direct command. Pigeons were tossed several times weekly, distance depending on weather conditions. Birds from Plymouth were tossed along the coast from the Isle of Wight in the East, down to Falmouth in the West. Birds from Portsmouth to Weymouth in the East and Brighton in the West. As the weather improved and spring drew near, arrangements were made with the U.S. Navy to have personnel of this organization toss pigeons over water from L.C.T.'s from as far as twenty miles air line off shore. Birds that had been so trained were used on the large pre-invasion amphibious exercises of "Duck" and "Tiger", where they rendered great service. Pigeons were also used in smaller exercises rehearsing certain phases of the coming operation. Thus, when birds were issued for the invasion, only NPS pigeons of known ability and RAF pigeons recommended by the Air Ministry were used.

5. PERSONNEL. The personnel of this platoon have a high degree of training, 49% of the men with three years or more service in the Army, 46% with over two years' service and only 5% with less than a year in the Army. Of the total strength of the platoon 75% of the platoon have had five to fifteen years' experience, averaging nine years each, in breeding and training, and racing homing pigeons in civilian life. All men have received continuous training in pertinent subjects from elementary to the advanced. They were qualified tactically and administratively in all their duties during the invasion, and special training was given men assigned as messengers for the purpose of patrolling lofts and delivering messages to combined headquarters message centers located at Plymouth and Portsmouth.

V. METHOD OF ISSUING PIGEONS

1. Pigeons were issued to using formation in the Marshalling Areas just prior to

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As the time and place of embarkation of using formations could not be accurately known, arrangements were made for these units to contact the platoon headquarters at Plymouth, who in turn ordered the appropriate detachments of the platoon to make deliveries. As deliveries had to be made on very short notice, twentyone (21) peeps were kept in readiness at both Plymouth and Portsmouth. However, some using units embarked many days prior to D Day and other units called for their pigeons before they were actually supposed to embark. These circumstances accounted for pigeons being kept basketed for as long as eight days prior to their use. Whenever possible, replacements were made to units that had called for their birds too soon. Due to the fact that units embarked at one point in England and the boats moved to other ports, it was not always possible to make these replacements. At this stage, it became necessary to tour the invasion fleet in a boat and search out the unit requiring replacements. This was done, but only a percentage of replacements could be made.

VI. EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES.

Pigeons
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1. Pigeons were issued in PG 49 and 50's, accompanied by empty PG 60's. Instructions and an extra weeks supply of feed in cloth bags were wired on top of the crates. This meant, it was hoped, that pigeons would be confined in PG 60's for as short a time as possible. Birds were transferred from crates to PG 60's just before or when the invasion crafts were on their way to France. None of the equipment issued has been returned to this unit. It is reported that several of the PG 49, 50s and 60s were seen damaged on the beaches of Normandy. The loss of this equipment was anticipated and a signature was taken for all equipment issued.

VII. CARE OF PIGEONS BY USING PERSONNEL.

1. Message center personnel of major organizations had been instructed by this unit in the care and handling of pigeons and the Signal Offices concerned were fully versed in the capability and limitation of pigeons as a means of communication. From reports based on personal observation of an NCO (Pigeoneer) of this command, who visited Normandy, pigeons were being cared for in an excellent manner by message center personnel.

VIII. DELIVERY OF MESSAGES.

1. Messages received at the lofts were carried by special messengers of this platoon to the message centers of the combined headquarters of either Plymouth or Portsmouth. The combined headquarters concerned forwarded the message to the addressee by the most expedient means of communication. Signal Corps Message Envelope M40 was used in delivering messages from lofts to combined headquarters message centers and the envelope retained by the messenger as a receipt.

2. It was anticipated that some pigeons would get back to England but not necessarily home to their lofts. To cover such a contingency, the Air Ministry furnished all police with Defense Regulation 9, paragraph 4, British War Office. This Defense Regulations deals with the disposal of stray, injured or dead homing pigeons, and through this information all police stations were prepared for just such an occasion. Message pads issued with pigeons bore a stamp stating that it was an operational message and that the finder should call the message to the British War Office. ~~RESTRICTED~~ This form is attached as Appendix C.

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Pigeons
no

1. The average distance flown was approximately 125 miles air line in those cases where pigeons flew direct from the point of liberation to their loft; however, it is believed that a large percentage of birds flew 475 miles air line, due to the pigeons following the coast of France to Dunkirk, crossing to England over the Strait of Dover (the narrowest place of the Channel) and down the English coast to their lofts. The great majority of birds returning to England carried no message, and as time of liberation is not known, an estimate of average speed cannot be derived. It is felt that birds issued from Portsmouth had a better average speed than those birds issued from Plymouth. The best time made by an RAF pigeon was 4 hours 50 minutes.

A. SUMMARY.

1. It is understood that communications were extremely good. Radio operated successfully from D Day and messenger boats operated on schedule from the beach-heads, commencing with D Day. Airplane messenger service commenced with the capture of landing fields suitable for use by liaison planes (L 5's). Because of these facts it was not necessary to utilize pigeons as a means of communication, thus accounting for the small number of operational messages carried.

2. It is felt that if information as to actual location and times of departure of the invasion fleets were known, birds could have been issued fresh to using formations, and thus long confinement, which impaired so many pigeons, could have been avoided. This would have greatly increased the number of pigeons homing to lofts, regardless of weather conditions.

Pigeons
no

3. It is further felt that in similar large operations, security conditions will cause pigeons to again be delivered to using units some days in advance of H hour. Thus it is suggested that a container the size of the PG 105 CB is not adequate for such long periods of confinement. The crates PG 49 and PG 50 in which the pigeons were issued were also unsatisfactory, insofar as:

- a. It is not practical to water pigeons in crate PG 50.
- b. A suitable container for feed does not exist on either crate.
- c. The weight of the crates is such as to make it unwieldy for soldiers to carry.
- d. Wire netting extending from bottom of crate to top allows drafts to stir up the wood dust present in shavings, which adversely affect the pigeons' eyes.
- e. The crate is not high enough to comfortably use the pigeons.

4. It is suggested that a collapsible wicker crate fitted with a canvas

Pigeons
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Pigeons

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for carrying feed, and designed along civilian lines from the point of view of rush weaving and muslin lining, would prove a more efficient means of carrying pigeons for periods in excess of 48 hours.

5. It is further believed that a collapsible cardboard 2 or 4 bird container should be issued with these crates so that landing parties could drop the crates on boats or beaches and advance inland with the pigeons held in cardboard containers.

Thomas H. Fincher
THOMAS H. FINCHER,
1/Lt. Signal Corps,
Commanding.

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WEATHER CONDITIONS, ENGLISH CHANNEL, DURING THE PERIOD 5 JUNE TO 19 JUNE 44

- 5 June - fresh easterly winds, to west-north-west, slowly moderating overcast, raining heavily.
- 6 June - westerly wind 15 to 25 mph, overcast, rain shows. Visibility good apart from showers.
- 7 June - moderate north west wind, much broken cloud, rain showers.
- 8 June - North west wind backing and moderating, intermittent rain or drizzle.
- 9 June - Wind between west and south west 5 to 10 mph, occasional rain, visibility mainly moderate or good.
- 10 June - West south west wind 10 to 15 mph, changing to north west and west, general overcast with rain and patches of coast fog, visibility improved late in day.
- 11 June - North westerly wind 10 to 15 mph, changing to west and north west, general overcast with rain and patches of coast fog, visibility improving late in day.
- 12 June - westerly wind 5 to 10 mph at first, south westerly 10 to 15 mph, later, cloudy with intermittent rain or drizzle, visibility moderate to pouring rain, coast fog.
- 13 June - westerly wind backing south west 10 to 20 mph, rising to 30 mph, in gust, fair periods and showers, local thunderstorms. Visibility moderate or poor with coastal fog.
- 14 June - Wind south west to south 15 to 25 mph up to 30 mph locally, varying westerly to later north west. Cloudy with periods of continuous rain, thunder and hail locally with some bright periods. Visibility moderate or poor with coastal fog.
- 15 June - Wind westerly 15 to 25 mph, fair apart from local showers. Visibility good except during local rain.
- 16 June - Wind westerly backing south west to south, 15 to 20 mph, mainly fair. Visibility good.
- 17 June - Wind westerly moderating to 10 to 15 mph, intermittent rain in east channel. Visibility poor locally in rain or drizzle. Overcast low cloud.
- 18 June - Wind north west to north 15 to 25 mph, moderating to 10 to 15 mph, mainly fair with local drizzle early visibility good, overcast.
- 19 June - Wind north easterly 15 to 20 mph, freshening to 25 mph, mainly overcast. Visibility moderate or good, but poor at first under low cloud.

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PIGEONS ISSUED TO FIRST U. S. ARMY

INITIAL ISSUE

No. of Pigeons

Unit

12
16
12
36
12
196
40
24
12
12
28
4
4
8
33

First U.S. Army (Hq Ship)
V Corps (Hq Ship)
VII Corps (Hq Ship)
VII Corps (Alternate Ship)
Hq XIX Corps
101 A/B Division
82 A/B Division
1st Infantry Division
4th Infantry Division
29th Infantry Division
50th Signal Bn
First U.S. Army Ammunition Officer
Ranger Group
5th Engineer Sp Brigade
7 Dets, 165 Sig Photo Co

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499 Total initial issue

PIGEONS ISSUED PLUS 1 TO D PLUS 14

56
56
98

Hq Eng Sp Brig Group
5th Eng Sp Brig
6th Eng Sp Brig

160 Total Issued D plus 1
to D plus 14

609

TOTAL ISSUE

RETURNS

18 Operational messages
3 msg. date of liberation only
64 carried empty capsules
127 carried no message or capsule
113 returned in baskets by using units

330 total returns

279 missing

609

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MSG CEN NO.

HOW SENT

MESSAGE

(SUBMIT MESSAGE CENTER IN DUPLICATE)

(CLASSIFICATION)

DATE

ADMITTED

OPERATIONAL MESSAGE. Telephone to War Office
Signal Office WHITEHALL 9400.

OFFICIAL DESIGNATION OF SENDER

TIME SIGNED

AUTHORIZED TO BE SENT IN CLEAR

SIGNATURE OF OFFICER

SIGNATURE AND GRADE OF WRITER

★ U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1942 10-27880-1

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