

An Experiment with Teaming Pigeons and Dogs

Pigeons were vital to communications during war and in peacetime as carriers of messages. The Signal Corps used pigeons from WWI, and into the Korean War. The Pigeon Service active at Fort Monmouth until its discontinuance in 1957. In 1944, an experiment using pigeons and “war dogs” as a means of military communication took place. This experiment is described in the January 1944 Signal Corps Technical Information Letter (SCTIL).

The experiment involving the 828th Signal Pigeon Replacement Company took place at Cat Island (Mississippi) at the “War Dog Training Center” (resembled the South Pacific). When the 828th arrived, dogs were being trained for scouting to detect the adversary by smell, casualty aid to find wounded and bring help, and for messenger service. Messenger dogs carried communications in a leather collar pouch in areas where man could not travel easily.

Mobile lofts were established and the birds conditioned to work in the heat of the day. In seven days a line of pigeon communication was established. Though there were difficulties settling the birds due to glaring sand and water surrounding the center confusing the birds, shortly the birds also provided communication on the island.

The pigeons were incorporated into the dog training program in seven days and were soon training under simulated battlefield conditions. Experiments included dogs carrying a pigeon to an isolated outpost inaccessible by vehicle or man, and the simultaneous release a dog and pigeon on a 1-1/4 mile course-the dog finished in 8-minutes, the pigeon in 1-1/4 minutes.

Dogs carried pigeons in a harness mounted wicker carrier that was cylindrical at the mouth and roughly contoured to the pigeon’s body; the pigeon was unable to balance itself and rough handling as the dog ran damaged the pigeon’s plumage. Redesign was underway. An emergency pigeon carrier fashioned from cylindrical cardboard canisters from shell casings from the artillery did prove to be an excellent carrier. The mosquito’s that infested the island also were as annoying to the pigeon as they were to man resulting in a finer mesh added to the loft.

The experiment was deemed a success and the experiences were incorporated into a training film. The conclusions, were dogs carrying pigeons to forward positions was both practical and feasible; dogs and pigeons combined providing communication short distances in the “jungle” was tactically sound; the wicker carrier was impractical and a new design was prepared by the “War Dog Pigeon Detachment Commander”; a possible substitute was to carry the pigeon in the cardboard canister fashioned from cardboard used to protect artillery projectiles; Pigeons, as well as personnel, must be given some relief from mosquito’s when operating under tropical or semi-tropical conditions.