

## Pigeons in the North African Campaign - WWII

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. On 24 December 1943, an article titled "Bird Hero Wins Purple Heart in Saving Message" appeared in *The Signal Corps Message*.

Lt Harold L. Holmes, of Fort Monmouth, had recently returned from the North African Campaign and reported in this article that "carrier birds" had been used extensively in the African Campaign. Holmes, a pigeon fancier most of his life, is quoted as saying "the pigeons returned to their home lofts in more than 90 percent of the trips, several of them with bullet holes through their wings."

This feature in the *Message* described a bird named "California Lady", who had been shot by enemy sniper, and had been awarded the Purple Heart. This is the only notation of the decorated bird. The Lt also related a story about a pigeon that carried the first word about the recapture of Gafsa, Tunisia, traveling 78 miles, at a rate of from 40 to 50 miles an hour.

The article goes to discuss a pigeon named "Lady Astor", a "blue checkered pigeon" stationed in French Morocco that had flown 90-miles to deliver a tactical message. When she arrived at the loft, she dropped exhausted, having been shot twice through the crop and once through the wing.

Describing the pigeon's value to the War effort, the writer of the article notes that during the climax of the African Campaign, over a five-day period, 45 "secret" and "urgent" messages were delivered by pigeon. At the close of the battle, pigeons also carried an additional 25 messages.

According to Lt Holmes, you had to be a psychologist to understand pigeons; pigeons, he stated a handler could control a pigeon's flight, "up to its maturity" by feeding it. After that the male or female pigeon would "always fly home to its mate." Holmes also noted that there was little difference in flying ability between males and females, and that "one was as good as the other, unless it is involved in a broken love affair with his or her mate."

The article concluded by stating that the birds had remarkable sight, and "almost never fail to find their lofts no matter how hidden away they may be under trees or in holes."