

## *Pigeons as Messengers of War.*

By A. H. OSMAN.



THE first extensive practical application of racing pigeons as messengers in time of war was when Paris was environed by the German army in 1870.

Some time after communication had been cut off from the outer world a number of pigeon-fanciers came forward and offered to place the services of their birds at the disposal of the authorities for the purpose of obtaining communication. This was ridiculed for some time, but at last an eminent aeronaut who had volunteered to cross the Prussian lines in a balloon agreed to take a consignment of pigeons with him, and it was by means of these birds that the first news was brought to the beleaguered citizens of Paris.

Only those who have been in such an unfortunate position can imagine the welcome extended to the brave little pigeon messenger. Others followed, and by means of further balloons some of the pigeons which returned made journeys over the Prussian lines as many as a dozen times—in fact, a pigeon post was established from Tours. This post was recognised by the English postal authorities, and letters at the cost of half a franc a word were sent from Tours to Paris as fast as the pigeons could be got out by balloon and conveyed from the places where they descended to Tours.

The letters, which were limited to twenty words, were set up in type, micro-photographed on thin films of collodion, inclosed in small quills, and attached to one of the tail feathers of the bird.

So complete was this organization that it gave an immediate impetus to other countries to establish pigeon posts. As soon as peace was restored France set to work to establish a complete pigeon post throughout the country. Germany, too, was not slow to recognise the immense value that such an auxiliary means of communication might be, and at the present time nearly every large fortification in Germany has a well-established loft of pigeons under command. Russia, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, and Portugal all have their pigeon posts. The birds are regularly trained and kept ready for service. It is to be regretted that military lofts had not been established throughout South Africa during the time of peace, for such messengers would undoubtedly have

proved invaluable in the case of Ladysmith, Kimberley, and Mafeking.

As it is, a few private fanciers placed their birds at the disposal of the authorities as in the case of the French fanciers in 1870, and it was by this means that the first tidings from our gallant troops who were confined in Ladysmith were received.

Mr. E. Lee, of Pietermaritzburg, was one of those who placed his birds at the disposal of the authorities. They were carried through to Ladysmith by an armoured train the day prior to communication being cut off; and the photograph of this gentleman and his bird is particularly interesting, as the bird depicted is the first to have been of service as a messenger of war to the English Government.

It may be interesting to consider the speed at which pigeons could convey messages of war. Much depends on atmospheric conditions and the time of the year. In the summer time birds are endowed with greater endurance than at other periods, and on a warm, genial day can easily cover a speed of 1,320yds. per minute. With a strong breeze behind them they will fly at an even greater speed than this. As to distances, I am firmly convinced that in order to place complete reliance on the prompt return of a pigeon messenger too excessive distances must not be asked of them, but they are thoroughly reliable in fine weather from 50 to 150 miles.

It is most essential, however, that in making use of pigeons as messengers of war they should be kept in perfect health and condition, for a bird that is not well cannot be expected to face the elements and return to its loft. The question whether it is sight or instinct by which the messenger is guided has been frequently discussed. After many years' practical experience with these little messengers I have come to the conclusion that sight and intelligence are the main factors guiding them to their homes, for the fact cannot be lost sight of that when sent on their journey in foggy weather, or at night, their faculties entirely fail them, whereas in the case of migratory birds guided by instinct, they fly by night as well as by day.

As showing the wonderful staying powers of these little messengers, I would refer to the performances of several racing pigeons





MR. LEE, OF PIETERMARITZBURG, WITH THE FIRST PIGEON WHICH BROUGHT NEWS FROM LADYSMITH. [Photograph.]

buryness. The Portsmouth lofts are situated in the Royal Clarence Victualling Yard, Gosport, and have a fine open sea-front, and great foresight has been displayed in the selection of the spot on which they stand. The birds in these lofts are numbered and registered in the same manner as our bluejackets.

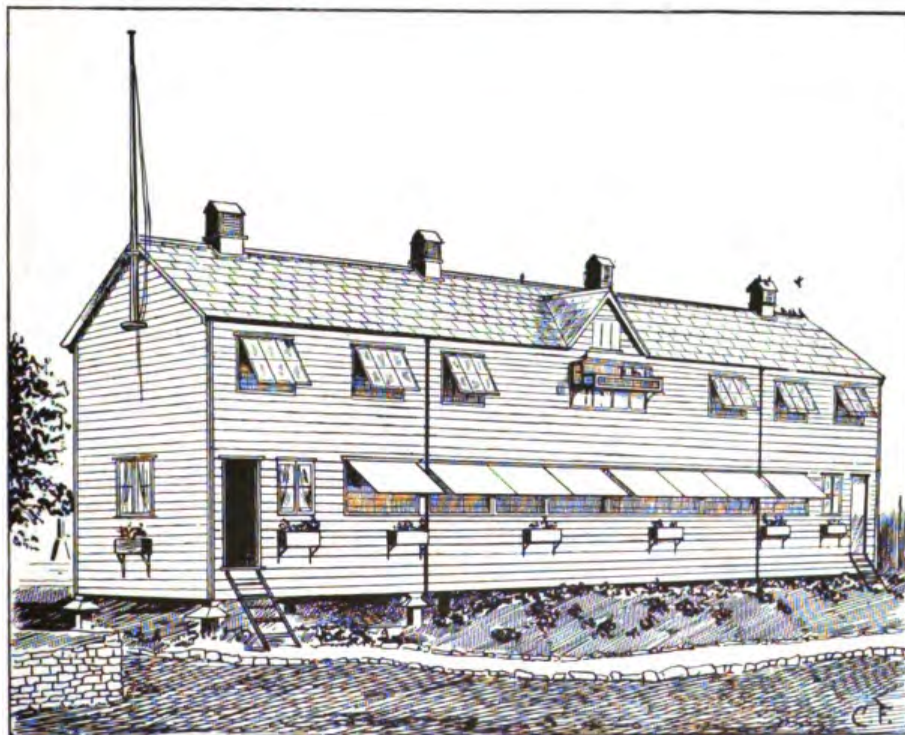
In one corner of the lofts an office is fitted up, in which the official log-books are kept. These

during the past season. In the National Flying Club's race from Lerwick, Shetland Islands, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, who owns a racing stud, had a bird which covered the distance of 510 miles at a speed of 1,307 yards per minute; Mr. P. Clutterbuck's bird, in the same race, flying at the rate of 1,298 yards per minute, covering a distance of 587 miles.

But although these distances are possible there would be great danger in placing reliance on pigeons as war messengers for such journeys in case the weather should prove unfavourable.

The first official recognition that pigeons might be of service in Great Britain was made a year or two back, when the Royal Naval Lofts were founded. There are three Governmental lofts — at Portsmouth, Dartmouth, and Shoe-

books are of the most elaborate description, giving every detail; they consist of one for keeping a record of liberation, another for a record of pigeons homing at the loft; and in addition to these, stud registers and weekly and monthly report books, so that the trials and experiences of every pigeon are duly entered up and reported to head-quarters. There is also a register of



From a]

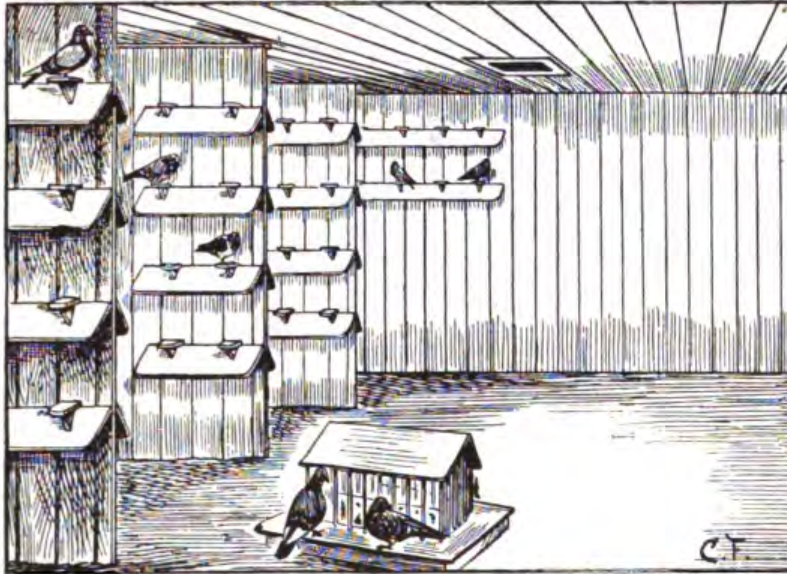
THE ROYAL NAVAL LOFTS, PORTSMOUTH.

[Sketch.]



messages kept, in which the messages carried by each bird are pasted up and details entered in a most systematic manner. Amongst the messages to be found in this book are several that have been sent to the lofts by Her Majesty the Queen and other members of the Royal Family when crossing the Channel.

From the illustration of the Royal Naval Lofts at Portsmouth, it will be seen that there is an upper and lower division. The



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INTERIOR OF THE ROYAL NAVAL LOFTS.

[Sketch.

lower portion is devoted to permanent occupants; these have been bought from all parts of Europe, the most recent purchases having come from the famous loft of the late M. Toulet, of Belgium. A very wise rule has been made in stocking these lofts, to purchase only the best proved messengers; and no doubt the English naval lofts, if for no other purposes, should prove excellent breeding establishments, for rearing birds with which to stock any lofts that it may now be deemed necessary to found in South Africa or any of the frontiers of India.

A noticeable feature in the naval lofts is the tameness and tractability of the birds; this is brought about by the naval officers in charge of the birds, who are taught to treat them with care, for pigeons are most intelligent creatures, and unless their attendant is very gentle with them they will not enter the loft on their return with a message.

For the purpose of avoiding complications and saving time an excellent plan has been adopted: the upper lofts are divided in the centre by a recess leading to the trap and entrance. On the eastern side of this recess is

what is described as the south-east loft. On the western side is the south-west loft. The birds in each loft are ringed with a ring on a different leg, odd numbers on one leg, even numbers on another, so that at a glance it can be seen if a bird is in its wrong loft. The occupants of the south-east loft are trained over courses in that direction, and those in the south-west loft treated in the same manner.

The bird's entrance to the loft and exit is through a trap; to reach the loft from the trap the birds have to pass through small boxes or apertures just sufficiently large for a pigeon to pass through. Directly a bird enters one of these boxes it is automatically shut in by a slide which slips down behind without any noise, and immediately an electric bell starts ringing in the office below, whereupon the attendant proceeds into the loft, removes the message from the bird, and it is let fly into its proper quarters without any possibility of spoiling it from entering again on some future occasion.

The method by which pigeons now carry messages is, if anything, a more simple one than that adopted in the Franco-German War of 1870. Each pigeon is, as I have already pointed out, known in the log by the metal band on its leg and the number. In addition to this, the other leg of the bird bears a stout rubber ring, and when a message is required to be sent, it is placed between the rubber ring and the leg, which keeps it in position, and the bird has no inclination to settle and pick the message off, having always been accustomed to wear the rubber band.

It may not be generally known that France and Germany are well equipped with war messengers in communication with the English coast. The Belgian fishing-boats frequently bring large numbers of birds up the Thames for liberation to return to both France and Germany.

So convinced are Frenchmen that pigeons might be a source of danger to their community that no foreigner is allowed to keep racing pigeons in France; and when English pigeons are sent there for liberation they have to undergo the supervision of the



French Customs and the Commissioner of Police, who attest to their liberation, for the danger to be feared is not so much of the birds knowing the district over which they have passed, but of spies being in possession of pigeons with which they could send prompt news to the enemy.

The illustration herewith depicts a loft in possession of the Boers, and there is no doubt



From a Photo. by]

A BOER PIGEON LOFT AT JOHANNESBURG. [Letter & Davies, Bulsbury.

they are making use of pigeons for spy purposes. One English fancier in Johannesburg, who had a very large established loft, in order to prevent the Boers using them, cut the feathers off one wing of each bird, so they were useless for carrying despatches. He was imprisoned in Pretoria, but managed to escape and get through to Cape Colony.

Some people are under the belief that pigeons could be of service in taking as well as bringing messages to the same place, and a tale is often told of the fair maiden confined in the upper storey of her house so that she should not communicate with the lover her father had forbidden her to meet, sending him messages and receiving them back by the same bird; the true explanation of this being that the pigeons were lowered in a basket, and simply carried messages back to the lady-love.

Pigeons have been of service on more occasions than one in saving life. A person who was once crossing an unfrequented moor fell down a deep pit and broke his leg. Fortunately a pigeon he had with him in a basket carried the news from the mouth of the pit to his home. He was thus able to obtain succour in time to save his life.

How invaluable in the same manner might pigeons have been to those gallant fellows at Nicholson's Nek, for had they been able to communicate their position and danger to the head-quarter staff at Ladysmith, it might have saved the first of the series of disasters by which our troops were overtaken; but unfortunately there were no established lofts at Ladysmith to which a pigeon could return

with the news, and, as I have pointed out, it is only to its established loft and home that the messenger will fly.

The greatest living authority on pigeons is Mr. J. W. Logan, M.P. Discussing the question as to whether pigeons would be useful or not in England in time of war, he contends that so long as we keep command of the Channel no invading army can land in England, but if we do lose command of the channel, and an army should land in England numerous and powerful enough to surround London, then a pigeon post will not save us, for London could not hold out for many days for want of food. Mr. Logan goes on to add: "I say that instead of bothering about a pigeon post for use when an army has landed, we had far better make perfectly sure, as far as we humanly can, that no invading army shall ever land. This means command of the Channel, and carries with it, to my lay mind, the ability to communicate by land by means of a despatch-boat; but," Mr. Logan adds, "matters are altogether different in South Africa and on our Indian frontiers; for instance, South Africa is a continent belonging to different Powers, the conditions of warfare are somewhat on all fours with what occurs on the Continent of Europe, and a well-organized pigeon post might prove of the very greatest service."

In the recent Spanish-American War America made good use of pigeons on several occasions, and the American navy is well supplied with thoroughly equipped and established pigeon lofts.

At the forthcoming Paris Exhibition arrangements have been made to devote a department to these messengers. Mons. Van Roosbecke has the management of this department. It is he who is renowned for the services he rendered to France in 1870 in managing the military pigeon post, in the same manner as an English fancier volunteered to go to the front in Ladysmith and organize a pigeon post there. This gentleman's name is Mr. A. Hirst, who formerly lived in Yorkshire before emigrating to South Africa.

The only pigeons available in South Africa were those lent by Mr. Lee and those belonging to a few fanciers in Durban, and it is a pity that military lofts had not been established previous to the war.

As an example of the retentive memory of a messenger pigeon, they have been known to regain their homes after three or four years' confinement in foreign lofts, and on their return have fought like gamecocks for their old perches in the loft.

It may be interesting to relate how far back pigeons have been trained as messengers. Egyptian records seem to show that war pigeons were recognised in the Nineteenth Dynasty (about 1350 B.C.). Grecian and Latin authors can also trace their history back to the days of Anacreon, Socrates, and Aristotle, so that it will be seen that pigeons have been of practical service for many centuries. When the great Battle of Waterloo was fought, pigeons conveyed the first news of the victory to the coast line, and thence by fast boat specially chartered for the purpose to London, on behalf of Messrs. Rothschilds, who thus obtained the news in advance of all other sources, and netted an immense fortune by doing so.

The pigeons that are used for carrying messages are bred solely for the purpose. Generation after generation they are trained, and the bad ones get lost. The young birds, after acquiring the power of flight and learning the contour of the country in their circuits around home, are taken by gradual stages over the course they are required to fly. First they are liberated at one mile, then two, and by gradually increased stages. This training is absolutely essential if birds are to be relied upon as messengers. The birds most valued are almost all descended from the racing pigeon—*le pigeon voyageur*—of Belgium, in which country pigeon-racing has been carried on for many years, and has attained its highest development, and it is

from Belgium that France, Germany, England, and other countries have obtained most of their best birds in the past.

In England at the present time there are over twenty thousand fanciers owning probably five hundred thousand birds, all of which would be willingly placed at the service of the English Government in case of necessity.

Of course great danger exists in a messenger being shot by the enemy when attempting to return to its loft, but far more reliance could be placed on getting news through an enemy's lines than by runner.

The management of a pigeon loft is a very simple matter: the birds require food, such as peas and beans, of the best possible quality, and, as with the case of all animals, must be kept perfectly clean and given fresh water daily.

As will be seen from the illustration of the Boer loft, they do not require a very elegant house to live in, but at the same time cats have a partiality for messengers, and the home has to be constructed out of reach of visitors of this description.

In India several lofts have been established at Secunderabad and Deccan by "Tommy Atkins," and it is hoped that now the valuable services have been so strikingly proved by the Ladysmith pigeons, no time will be lost in establishing military lofts throughout India.

In New Zealand the Great Barrier pigeon post has been established, and the New Zealand Parliament recognise the value of these messengers by allowing their owners to train them free of cost over the State railways.

Unfortunately, pigeons are frequently shot when returning to their homes. An Act of Parliament makes this penal if done wilfully and unlawfully. It is to be hoped that those who have now, for the first time, been made acquainted with the value of these birds as messengers, will hold their hand should an opportunity offer when out shooting, and think of the value of the brave little bird and the important message it may be in the act of conveying.

The value of these birds depends much upon their good qualities. The highest price ever paid for birds of this description was at a sale of Mr. J. W. Logan's birds in 1886, when some of the birds were knocked down at £30, £40, and £50 each, and there is no doubt at the present time that many of the finest birds in the world are descended from this famous breeder's stock.