

FIRST WITH THE NEWS

How pigeons helped to create scoops for newspapers in the 1930s

by Frank J Hughes

A great transatlantic liner docks at New York. Off the boat steps a society big shot, a political mogul, and a movie star. One of the first things they see, is their own picture in the newspaper. Under the picture is the caption: "So-and-so arrived today from a sojourn in Europe." Naturally, they wonder what sort of journalistic necromancy made such a thing possible. "Why, the paper was on the street two hours before the boat left Quarantine," they say.

There was no miracle performed. The instance only serves to show what can be accomplished by the use of racing pigeons in conveying pictures and news to various newspapers. In the case of the notables returning from Europe, photographers boarded the boat at Quarantine and shot their pictures. The birds then carried off the film and the photographs were in the

papers before the boat docked, three or four hours later.

The racing pigeon air service has established not only a new beat of time on boat assignments, but has also developed an almost infallible method of swiftly transferring films of great news import. Although there are but few agencies utilising the bird express, results are sufficiently significant to warrant a general employment of pigeon transport by newspapers and news agencies.

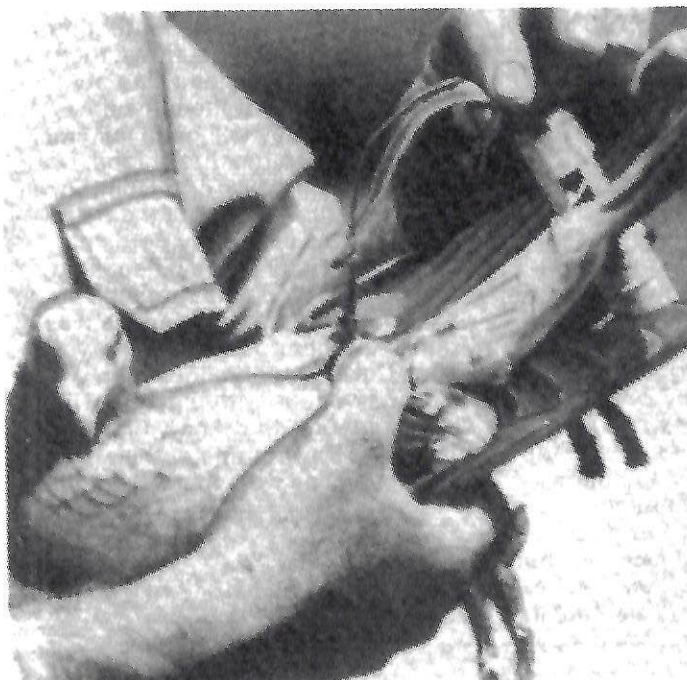
Efforts at forming a carrier pigeon express service have been started from time to time. But it remained for Amster Spiro, city editor of the *New York Evening Journal*, to work out a practical bird transport system. Aided by Bob Keogh, manager of the *Journal's* photographic department, Mr Spiro

bought 60 pedigreed birds, all bred from pigeons with a World War record.

A pigeon loft was constructed on the roof of the *Journal* building. The birds were turned over to Harry Meyers, whose services had been obtained from the headquarters of the carrier pigeon division of the United States Army Signal Corps, at Fort Monmouth, NJ. Mr Meyers and his pigeon crew trained the birds for over a year.

Last fall during the football season, when the rivalry between evening newspapers was intense, Mr Spiro put his pigeons into active service, and succeeded in beating his competitors to the presses with action photographs of the game.

The manner of operation was this. After an exciting play at a football



The photographer places his negatives in a small cylinder attached to harness on the pigeon's back.



These pigeons, released from an incoming ship, will carry films to the *New York Evening Journal*.

game had been shot by the photographer, he unloaded the exposed film in a changing bag, and placed it in an aluminium tube which was then strapped by a little harness to a pigeon's back. The bird was released and within approximately 20 minutes, since the distance was not more than 15 miles from the newspaper office, the films were landed and rushed to the darkroom.

These birds average speed of approximately 50mph from the time they get their bearings. Naturally, they lose a little time getting on their course. Sometimes, because of head winds, their flying speed may be reduced, but again, with a tail wind of 30 to 40 miles an hour, they have been known to make record flights as high as 80 or 90mph.

Pigeons can be used to transport both copy and film, and they are utilised for all spot news. Harnesses are no longer employed for the carrying of film or copy. The negatives or copy are now placed in a leg band of aluminium. A strip of adhesive tape is fastened around the band to prevent the pigeon's leg from becoming chafed.

These bands come in three sizes. The one-inch band is employed for one sheet of copy. For two or three sheets, a 2¼-inch band is used. If four or five films are to be sent at one time, a little wider band is used.

Not only have pigeons been the means of thrilling newspaper readers with pictures of the early action in football games, but the birds are now used in carrying fight pictures and negatives covering other sports events, as well as spot news, within a radius of 30 miles of the *Journal* office.

In order to prevent the overloading of pigeons, Keogh had the Big Bertha cameras, used by *Journal* photographers, reconstructed to make 3¼ x 4¼ film negatives instead of 5 x 7 plates. The cameraman is cautioned against carelessness in loading his negative into the leg band. Since it is necessary to roll the film quite small, there is danger of cracking or scratching it. Stories typed on flimsy paper are also attached to the birds' legs.

It takes a carrier pigeon about 15 minutes to fly from Baker Field to a metropolitan newspaper office – a distance of 12 miles. It may require more or less time, according to the wind. The time saved in transportation from the steamers at Quarantine is approximately two hours. If the ship is held up by fog

or tide, a greater saving of time is obtained.

Not long ago when a former mayor of New York arrived at Quarantine from a European trip, a rival paper tried to compete with the *Journal* on pictures of the politician. The opposing paper rented some pigeons, gave them a brief course of training over the route they were to fly, and when the day arrived, carried the birds to Quarantine. Photographs were made of the incoming "Biggie", the film was loaded on the rented birds, and they were shooed off. But the plan didn't work.

In the first place, they were too heavily loaded, and secondly, the birds were not familiar with the route. Flying back to the ship where the *Journal* birds were just taking off, they attempted to follow but with disastrous results. One bird was lost and the others got back to the office after the last edition of the paper was on the street.

The *Journal* now has 120 racing pigeons in service. In addition to two mobile units, the paper maintains a travelling squadron which cruises about the suburban territory in an automobile. This latter consists of a reporter, a photographer, and a bird trainer with a crate of 20 pigeons.

The motorised unit recently demonstrated its efficiency in the coverage of a bank robbery at Paterson, New Jersey. While cruising in that vicinity the unit, which reports by phone every half hour, was ordered to cover the theft. Story and pictures were procured in record time and sent to the office by pigeon express. The *Journal* thus scored a news beat of several hours over its competitors.

The effectiveness of pigeons in covering spot news in remote areas where the use of telephone and telegraph is not possible, was shown by the Salt Lake *Tribune-Telegram* in covering the discovery of a wrecked Western Air Express transport plane which crashed near Lone Peak, high in the Wasatch Mountains.

The ledge between Lone Peak and Chupman Peak, on which the tragedy occurred, is nearly 18 flying miles from Salt Lake City. On the ground the distance is 40 miles and the telephone nearest to the wrecked plane was 15 miles away.

The first accurate news and the first photographs of the plane's discovery were brought from the

scene by pigeons, scoring a scoop of more than a hour over messengers who fought through the rugged country on foot and horseback to reach a telephone.

The Salt Lake *Tribune-Telegram* maintains a loft atop its building where pigeons are kept. They were loaded into baskets and sent to the site with reporters who were equipped with ordinary cameras, rice paper, and aluminium capsules, made so they could be strapped to the leg of the pigeons. Fresh pigeons were sent each morning, from Alpine, about 15 miles from the rescue camp, to carry on the messenger work.

The dispatches were written on rice paper, in what is termed *cablese* by the reporters, and sent out at intervals by pigeon express. Pictures were taken, films unloaded in changing bags, rolled into small cylinders, and capped inside the bag. The cylinders were then attached to the birds and the birds released.

Each of these dispatches were timed on leaving the site. The longest elapsed period for a pigeon flight from the crash to the newspaper office was an hour and 15 minutes. The flight was made during a heavy storm, during which rain, sleet, and snow fell. The fastest record for any bird was 25 minutes.

It is interesting to learn how the pigeons make their landings at the newspaper office. When they arrive at the loft, an automatic switch lights a large electric bulb and sounds a buzzer in the editorial room. It is only ten minutes from the time the pigeons lands until the story is ready to set in type.

There are, in many parts of the country, equally impressive and successful experiments with carrier pigeons as airway express agents in the transportation of important news events. The development of this service seems phenomenal, considering the short time it has been used. Experts declare that this method will soon be adopted almost universally by papers and news agencies, becoming an important factor in news transmission under certain conditions.

This contemporary account of pigeons messenger services appeared in the February 1938 issue of the American publication 'Popular Photography.'