

PIGEONS IN WAR —THE BEGINNING

Most pigeon fanciers are fully aware of the part played by pigeons during the two world wars. However, I wonder how many are aware of how it all started. It is perhaps appropriate that as we approach the centenary of the First World War, it would be worth investigating how it was thought to be worthwhile employing the use of pigeons as a means of communication.

The late 1800's are considered by many, to be the most formative years of our sport. There were visionaries such as A H Osman and J W Logan MP making such progress in both the breeding and performance areas of racing pigeons.

On Wednesday 28th April 1898 the first edition of *The Racing Pigeon* was published, its founding editor was A H Osman. In the 7th December issue of the same year, captioned 'Pigeons as War Messengers' in which he proposed testing the serviceability of pigeons as messengers in time of war. It was proposed, with the assistance of fanciers in the southern and eastern counties, to conduct one or two experiments during that winter. Winter was chosen because the dependence of the pigeon to act as a messenger had to be tested in bad weather. Everyone knew that given good weather and training the birds could be relied upon, but the crucial test was could they be relied upon during cold wintry conditions.

A H Osman considered these experiments so important that he approached the Admiralty to see if they would provide a gun boat for the experiment. Needless to say they declined. However, he was not deterred, and a boat was hired to carry the birds. The proposal was to conduct the experiment by way of a toss for the birds within 30 miles of the English coast, somewhere between Margate and the Isle of Wight on 17th December. The plan was to send around 30 birds obtained from lofts in the southern and eastern counties of England. It was proposed to send a convoyer in charge of the birds, and the aim was to liberate them before noon unless there was dense fog. The liberation however, would not take place before 10am because they wanted the birds to experience conditions they may encounter in times of war. They wanted to see what birds could really do with about 4-4 1/2 hours of daylight available to them. To make it more interesting it was decided to offer a first prize of £3, a 2nd prize of £2 and a 3rd prize of £1 plus special diplomas for the first three birds making the highest velocity from telegraphed times.



A H Osman

In the issue of *The Racing Pigeon* dated 14th December 1898, fanciers were told that birds intended for this experiment had to be sent to *The Racing Pigeon* offices at Temple Chambers, London, and J W Logan would supervise the marking of the birds. Entries were received from places such as Dartford, Devon and Dunstable, with many times more birds than expected, in fact the total number of 153. The birds, after being marked, were duly put on a train for Littlehampton where they met up with the boat that was chartered by *The Racing Pigeon* to take them to the liberation area. Since being marked the birds were in the charge of the convoyer, a Mr Truso.

The convoyers report on the liberation was quite informative. The birds were released a bit earlier than planned, 9.30am. The weather at the time of release was described as fairly clear, with a moderate WSW breeze. Visibility was said to be around five miles. Immediately after the release the sun appeared for a few minutes but was soon obscured again. At 9.50 a slight drizzling rain began. As one can see, not an ideal liberation. However, returns were not ideal either, certainly not as far as time taken was concerned. The first news was received from Brighton at 11.35. Brighton from the place of liberation was around 31 miles, that pigeon recorded a speed of around 16 miles per hour. As A H Osman said at the time, "Surely it would have to be an old boat of the worst possible description that could not beat that time". Interestingly it would appear that none of the birds from coastal lofts excelled. There was however, one bird that seemed to give everyone hope for future trials and that was to a Mr C Bampfylde of Bushey Heath, Hertfordshire. His pigeon was recorded at 3.17pm after an 81 mile flying, taking five hours 47 minutes.

Of course this experiment and those that followed their critics. But, as J W Logan, A H Osman and others knew, wars are fought in all weathers and in those conditions you will need something better than fine

weather pigeons.

It was thanks to the foresight of those early pioneers that pigeons came to play such an important part in two major world conflicts.

