

# The PIGGEON HERO of World War I



The incredible true story of Cher Ami, the bird that saved nearly 200 American soldiers during World War I

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GL ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (BACKGROUND); SCIENCE HISTORY IMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (PIGGEON)



**Problem and Solution** As you read, look for the problem soldiers faced and how a pigeon helped solve it.

LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 10 WORDS IN BOLD



The American soldiers were doomed. It was October 1918, not long before the end of World War I. This was a war more brutal than any before in history; it would leave 17 million people dead and pull more than 135 countries, including the United States, into battles around the globe.

Now, in a dark, rainy forest in northeastern France, several hundred American troops were in a fight for their lives. The men were surrounded by enemy German soldiers. Machine guns rattled. Bombs rained from the sky. The Americans needed help. Their only hope was to get an urgent message to their leaders, 25 miles away.

But how? There were no walkie-talkies or cell phones in 1918, no computers to send emails. And the army radios weren't working.

Luckily, there was one brave warrior who had been trained for a moment exactly like this one. She took off with the message on a life-or-death race across the forest.

Her name was Cher Ami, and she was not a soldier. She was not even a human.

She was a pigeon.

### Incredible Powers

Cher Ami (French for "dear friend") was one of thousands of pigeons that served with American soldiers during World War I. These birds were a breed known as carrier pigeons (or homing pigeons). They had an important job: to carry messages.

Why would the military use pigeons as

messengers? For one thing, these pigeons are fast—some can fly up to 90 miles per hour. They are also smart. A pigeon's brain is no bigger than a wad of bubble gum. But like the tiny chip in an iPhone, that pigeon brain is packed with power. For example, pigeons can be trained to recognize letters and words.

But what truly makes these pigeons ideal for carrying messages is their ability to return to their home nest, no matter how far away it is. Nobody needs to show them how to get home. They just know. These gray birds can travel over seas and mountains, across hundreds of twisting miles. They almost never get lost. It's this remarkable power of **navigation** that makes pigeons such good messengers.

If you wanted to use a pigeon as a messenger, you would teach it that its home was on your roof. You could take the bird with you to your friend's house, keeping it safe in its cage. When you were ready to be picked up, you would write a message and place it in a pinkie-sized metal tube attached to your pigeon's leg. You'd release your pigeon, it would carry your message back home, and soon someone would come to get you.



### Brutal Battles

Long before the days of phones, texts, and FaceTime, the only way to send a message over long distances was to send a human runner—or a pigeon. Ship captains used pigeons to send weather reports back to shore. Knights took pigeons with them into battle and used them to send news back to their kings. At the first Olympics, nearly 3,000 years ago, pigeons carried the results of **chariot** races to surrounding cities.

In the 1800s, new inventions like the **telegraph** and the telephone transformed the way humans communicated. But in wartime, getting information across long distances was still difficult, especially during battles.

And in World War I, the battles were bigger and bloodier than the world had ever seen. New weapons unleashed terror and death on a massive scale. Machine guns fired hundreds of bullets per minute. Poison gas caused blistering burns and scorched lungs. Airplanes dropped bombs that caused huge explosions.

Modern technologies had made killing all too easy. But when it came to sending messages from a battlefield, no new invention was as reliable as a pigeon.



Releasing carrier pigeons with messages from the battlefield, 1915



This automatic camera strapped to Cher Ami took photos of the battlefield as she flew home.

### ONE-WAY TRIP

Though carrier pigeons were effective messengers, they could only be used to send messages one way.

### Mud, Rats, and Fear

Cher Ami was born in England and trained by one of the country's most famous pigeon experts. She was brought to France to serve during World War I. Cher Ami's home nest was at the American army headquarters near a forest called Argonne.

In peacetime, Argonne was a fairy-tale forest of towering trees and babbling brooks. But by the time Cher Ami arrived in France, World War I had been dragging on for four years. The forests and fields of France had been

## Animals in Wartime

From sniffing out bombs to carrying the wounded, animals have had many jobs in wartime.

**Horses: Powerful Warriors**  
Horses have been used in military operations for thousands of years. They pulled chariots in ancient times and carried medieval knights into combat. During World War I, horses were ridden into battle and helped transport equipment.



**Cats: Pest Patrol**  
During World War I and World War II, thousands of cats were brought in to eat rats, mice, and other critters that can spread disease and ruin food supplies in trenches and on ships. Cats—along with dogs, pigs, and other animals—were also kept as pets and mascots to boost soldiers' spirits during wartime.



**Dolphins: Underwater Protectors**  
Dolphins have been trained to locate underwater explosives that can destroy submarines and other seacraft.



transformed into blood-soaked battlefields, haunted by the ghosts of hundreds of thousands of dead soldiers.

These battles were fought with something called trench warfare. Trenches were deep, narrow ditches that stretched for miles. Soldiers would stay inside the trenches, which offered them some protection from bullets and grenades, until it was time to push forward. Progress was slow—and bloody. Each time the men left their own trench, they faced a storm of gunfire and bombs.

But men didn't just fight from the trenches. They lived in them—24 hours a day, often for weeks at a time. They coped with knee-deep mud, with the sickening stench of garbage and human waste, with **rampant** disease, with constant fear. The noise of machine guns and bomb blasts made sleep almost impossible. Soldiers who did manage to fall asleep often awoke to find rats scurrying across their chests.

Cher Ami joined the men of the 77th Infantry Division, part of a large **battalion** of American soldiers. The man in charge, Major Charles Whittlesey, had been ordered to lead his troops in an attack on the Germans in Argonne. Cher Ami was one of eight pigeons brought on the mission. The birds lived together in a cage. They were cared for by a young soldier from New York. He did his best to keep them safe as the troops moved through the forest.

### Dogs: Super Sniffers

Today, dogs serve in the military as bomb sniffers, using their sensitive noses to detect explosives. Throughout history, dogs have been used as messengers, scouts, and rescuers of wounded soldiers.



### Glowworms: Nature's Nightlights

The European glowworm is a beetle that lights up in the dark. During World War I, men collected these insects in jars to create nightlights that helped them read letters, maps, and reports in the trenches.



## A GLOBAL CONFLICT

World War I (1914-1918) was fought across Europe as well as in Africa and the Middle East. The major **allies** were Great Britain, France, Russia, and the U.S. on one side and Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey and nearby countries) on the other.

### Under Attack

Deep in the forest, on October 3, Whittlesey's men marched into the path of a large German force. The Americans were soon surrounded and under fierce attack.

The men—there were about 550 of them—tried to fight back. But they were low on **ammunition**, badly outnumbered, and exhausted. After all, many hadn't had much sleep for weeks. Food had run low. The only way for the men to get a sip of water was to risk crawling through the mud to a stream.

The Germans pummeled the American troops with **artillery**—blasting them with powerful explosives and grenades and rapid-fire machine guns. With each passing hour, more men were killed or wounded.

Whittlesey kept sending out pigeons carrying desperate requests for help. But one by one, the pigeons were shot or disappeared.

Finally, the next day, American planes appeared overhead. Whittlesey's men cheered.

They believed the planes would drop much-needed food, ammunition, and other supplies. But it wasn't food and bullets those planes were dropping.

It was bombs.

Whittlesey understood with horror that the Americans didn't realize that he and his men were in this part of the forest. The bombs were meant for the Germans, but instead, they were killing



Above and left: Troops in trenches in Europe during World War I

Whittlesey's men.

The major frantically scrawled a message announcing their location in the woods and that they were under American attack.

The message ended with a plea: FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, STOP IT.

### A Feathered Missile

By this time, only two pigeons were left: Cher Ami and one other. It was the other pigeon that was pulled from the cage first. But the bird was so terrified that it flapped away before the message could be placed into its tube.

Now it was up to Cher Ami.

Hands reached into the cage and gently lifted her out. When the message was secure, she was set free. She fluttered up to a tree branch and perched there, rock still. It was as though she needed a moment to

FIND A POEM PAIRING FOR THIS ARTICLE ON PAGE 15!

gather her courage.

And then she took off, like a tiny, feathered missile.

The sky was a storm of bullets and **shards** of bomb-shattered trees. Almost immediately, a bullet hit her in the eye. She began falling toward the ground, bleeding. But Cher Ami didn't give up. She flapped her wings and rose skyward again.

Another bullet hit her, this time in her chest.

But she kept flying.

A third bullet struck her right leg and nearly tore it off.

But she kept flying.

Twenty minutes after she'd taken off, Cher Ami—bloodied, half-blind, with her leg hanging by a thread—arrived at headquarters with her message. The bombing was halted and soldiers were sent to rescue Whittlesey and his embattled men.

Meanwhile, **medics** worked feverishly to save Cher Ami's life. Her leg had to be amputated, but Cher Ami survived. She was fitted with a tiny wooden leg. News of her miraculous journey spread around the world. She was awarded a medal and sent to America, where she was greeted as a hero who had saved the lives of nearly 200 men.

World War I ended five weeks after the last flight of Cher Ami. This terrible war caused death and suffering for people around the world. But in the midst of this misery emerged stories of great bravery and heroism. Like the story of Cher Ami, the courageous pigeon hero of World War I. ■

## WRITE TO WIN

You just found the journal of a World War I soldier who lived thanks to Cher Ami! What would it say for the day of the rescue? Send a journal entry with details from the article to "Cher Ami Contest" by May 1. Ten winners will receive *Stubby the War Dog* by Ann Bausum. See page 2 for details.

FIND AN ACTIVITY ONLINE!

