

# Carrier Pigeons (Portugal)

By [João Moreira Tavares](#)

Since ancient times, carrier pigeons have been used successfully in various armed conflicts. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, several European armies created a pigeon service. During World War I the losses of killed, wounded or missing carrier pigeons are estimated not to have exceeded 5 percent, which represents a success rate of 95 percent in delivering pigeon-grams, or messages carried by pigeons in the form of orders or sketches.

## Table of Contents

[1 Development of the Portuguese Military Pigeon Service](#)

[2 Portugal's use of Carrier Pigeons in World War I](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

## Development of the Portuguese Military Pigeon Service

The importance of carrier pigeons was widely recognized in European armies, especially after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71. [France](#) rushed to create lofts in all strongholds across its eastern boundary. For its part, [Germany](#) was the first country to organize an army pigeon service while also enhancing the civilian service. However, it was [Belgium](#) - considered the home of pigeon-raising and where pigeon racing had become a national sport - that bred the best specimens of carrier pigeons and exported to other countries, including [Portugal](#), where the first specimen arrived in August 1875.

From 1881, the Portuguese military pigeon service began to take shape, though in a rather irregular manner at first. After 1888, according to a plan never fully achieved, lofts were built throughout the country, furnished with pigeons which came from Belgium and France in 1884, 1887 and 1901. Subsequently, in 1904, a photographic cabinet was created for the enlargement or reduction of messages and began operating the following year. With respect to legislation, the establishment of the service was regulated for the first time in 1888, but it was not until 1 July 1903 that a specific regulation for that service was published, inspired by the French model. Until then, the related provisions had been inscribed in the regulation of [telegraph](#) service. Legislation was then implemented to protect birds from constant attacks from hunters.

## Portugal's use of Carrier Pigeons in World War I

During World War I, Portugal did not mobilize its pigeons to France or [Africa](#). They were only used internally on the adjacent islands. In 1918, ten couples were sent to the Azores. In Madeira, the pigeons that were owned by a civilian pigeon enthusiast in Funchal made the connection to Porto Santo possible. This was a necessary link, as German [submarines](#) came to this island before approaching Madeira, making it possible for the military commanders to arrange for the proper protection of life and property at sea and ashore.

However, the [Portuguese Expeditionary Corps](#) (CEP), which was sent to [Flanders by the Portuguese army](#) to support the Allies in the fight against the Germans, made use of carrier pigeons supplied by [Great Britain](#). Little is known about their use, such as their usefulness and the frequency of their employment.<sup>[1]</sup> A single [photograph](#) by [Arnaldo Garces \(1885-1964\)](#), a photographer

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hired by the Portuguese army, confirms that the Portuguese army employed carrier pigeons.<sup>[2]</sup> André Brun (1881-1926), a CEP official, refers to them in his memoirs as the lucky ones “that never make more than a day in the trenches and are rendered every morning,” vowing to “never have to use these ultimate features that, for lack of work, spend their lives cooing.”<sup>[3]</sup>

On one occasion, the pigeons also fell prey to their human caretakers. After the CEP arrived in Flanders, a senior Portuguese official received a basket of carrier pigeons from a British division and, by mistake, sent them to be cooked with rice. He only realized his mistake upon thanking the British general for his gift, mentioning that they had been much appreciated in the mess.<sup>[4]</sup> This picturesque episode, also reported by André Brun, satirically reveals the initial ignorance of the role of carrier pigeons in the CEP. However, by the end of September 1917, after the troops had remained in France for several months, the commander of the CEP, General *Fernando Tamagnini de Abreu e Silva* (1856-1924), asked the head of the telegraph service to inform him on the advantage of Portuguese soldiers attending the course on carrier pigeons proposed by the British army.<sup>[5]</sup> Once the proposal was accepted, the three day courses must have started on 9 October 1917. They were continuously attended by six soldiers from one or two battalions of the 5<sup>th</sup> **Infantry** Brigade in Delaval Creton's Loft (Lacouture), until a sufficient number of trained personnel was reached.<sup>[6]</sup> In the structure of the CEP, the Pigeon Service operated alongside, but autonomously from, the telegraph troops. It consisted of a directorship, with a junior officer, a sergeant and a soldier, as well as a fixed and a mobile loft, each one staffed with a corporal and two soldiers.

In other armies, the use of carrier pigeons took place mainly after 1915. The **immobilization of troops** on the ground, caused by a complex defense system based in trenches and **barbed wire**, as well as the violence and persistence of the bombing that destroyed the regular telephone and telegraph networks and prevented the easy and rapid movement of couriers, led to the choice of this means of transmission in the absence or at the expense of others.

As a result of this intensive use and service development, at the end of the conflict thousands of carrier pigeons were in action, together with fixed and mobile lofts. The **United States** had 20,000 birds and fifty mobile lofts; **Italy** had 50,000 pigeons; France had 60,000 pigeons and 400 mobile lofts of different models in addition to other fixed lofts; Germany had 150,000 pigeons and over 700 mobile lofts. As far as Great Britain is concerned, it was not until 1917 that it began to use carrier pigeons on a large scale, borrowing from French civilian lofts.

It is estimated that the losses in killed, wounded or missing pigeons did not exceed 5 percent, which represents a success rate of 95 percent in delivering pigeon-grams. One carrier pigeon was even awarded, posthumously, the Legion of Honor, after having carried vital messages through the intense **artillery** fire to the French army at the **Battle of Verdun** in 1916.

João Moreira Tavares, Universidade Nova de Lisboa

Section Editor: [Ana Paula Pires](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ During the **Battle of the Lys** on 9 April 1918, at least four birds were dropped to ask for help when all the other means of communication failed. See Afonso, Aniceto and Gomes, Carlos de Matos (eds.): *Portugal e a Grande Guerra (1914-1918)*, Lisbon 2013, p. 433.
2. ↑ This photograph served, years later, as a source of inspiration for **Alberto de Sousa (1880-1961)**, a watercolorist who reproduced it in the form of watercolor, which was subsequently publicized in a series of postcards.
3. ↑ Brun, André: *A malta das trincheiras*, Lisbon 1919, p. 94.
4. ↑ *Ibid.* p. 98.
5. ↑ The correspondence between both armies as well as a British leaflet on carrier pigeon use, dated October 1916, which had been translated into Portuguese, are the only other records located in the official documentation depicting the use of carrier-pigeons by the CEP. The instructions, in addition to teaching bird-care techniques, warn of the danger of rats, as they had already killed many pigeons. Furthermore, they define the rules for a successful messaging. See Military Historical Archive, Lisbon, Portugal, PT AHM/DIV/1/35/202/3 (doc. 26).
6. ↑ See Military Historical Archive, Lisbon, Portugal, PT AHM/DIV/1/35/89/32.

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## Citation

Tavares, João Moreira: Carrier Pigeons (Portugal) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2016-02-12. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10828**.

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