
The Greatest Pigeon Of World War II



Animals played a key part in bringing down the Nazis, especially our fine feathered friends. In the past, we've read about some really weird World War II weapons involving birds, but while plans to build [pigeon-guided missiles](#) were eventually scrapped, pigeons remained important in the war against the Germans.

Since pigeons have the uncanny ability of finding their way back home from pretty much anywhere, these guys served the Allies as messengers. In fact, the US government thought pigeons were so crucial to national defense that in 1917, the US Army Signal Corps set up a pigeon service and encouraged pigeon fanciers to register their lofts for military service. Bases like Ft. Monmouth in New Jersey were used as breeding facilities, and Congress even thought about banning people from hunting pigeons.

The birds were carried into battle in specially made baskets or slings, and they were sometimes even dropped out of planes in parachute cages. Life as an Army pigeon was pretty dangerous. They were released in the middle of war zones, with shells going off everywhere. Also, the Nazis and the Japanese were equipped with shotguns, so they could prevent the pigeons from making it back to base. They had good reason to be scared. Out of the 30,000 pigeon messages sent overseas, a whopping [96 percent](#) made it back to camp.

And perhaps none of those messages were more important than the single scrap of paper carried by one gutsy bird named G.I. Joe.

On October 18, 1943, the Allies were trying to take the Italian village of Colvi Vecchia. The British were on the ground, and the Americans would attack from the sky. But the Germans didn't even put up a fight. They took off running, and the Brits took the town without a problem. Now, they just had to contact the Americans and call off the bombing—but their radios weren't working.

It wasn't like they could send a jeep, either. The American base was 30 kilometers (20 mi) away, and the bombs were set to drop in 20 minutes. After taking the town from their enemies, the British were going to die at the hands of their allies. But they sent G.I. Joe, an American-born pigeon, with a message on his back. Some of these birds flew up to 80 kilometers (60 mi) per hour, and G.I. Joe tore through the air, across country he'd never seen before, making it to the base just as the planes were about to take off.

G.I. Joe saved the lives of [over 1,000 men](#), and for his service, he was awarded the Dickin Medal for Gallantry, the highest award the British gave out to animals.