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<th>Cher Ami: A Pigeon’s Role in Breaking WWI Communication Barriers</th>
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Cher Ami
A Pigeon's Role in Breaking
WWI Communication Barriers
In October 1918, during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of World War I, the 77th Infantry Division of the United States Army became trapped behind German lines in the Argonne forest of France. Under misdirected barrages and in desperate need to communicate with headquarters, the soldiers turned to Cher Ami, a homing pigeon, to deliver a message conveying their location. Cher Ami’s success broke battlefield communication barriers, helped to save 194 lives, and reminds us of the continued importance of military animals.
Communication Barriers Throughout History

**Impediments:**
- Time
- Distance
- Weather
- Enemies
- Unsafe terrain

**Why Homing Pigeons?**
- Speed
- Intelligence
- Innate navigational abilities

**Homing Pigeon Use Pre-WWI**
- ~900 BCE: Egypt/Persia: Were raced and delivered messages.
- ~776 BCE: Athens Olympic Games: Sent to villages to reveal event winners.
- 1850: Reuters News Agency
- 1870: Franco Prussian War: Carried more than 1 million messages across France.
- 1872: Europe: Military use established.

(Caption) Paul Julius Reuter, 1860, Wikimedia Commons.

(Caption) Egyptian hieroglyphic showing pigeons being released. 1300-1201 BCE, Napp

“...the famous news agency Reuters relied on 45 birds to transmit the latest news and stock prices between Germany and Belgium, finding them more reliable than the new telegraph and faster than the railway.” G. Paul Garson, 2019, “Warfares Unsung Pigeon.”

(Caption) Balloon used to transport pigeons across France during the Siege of Paris, 1870, Wikimedia Commons.
Messenger Pigeons in WWI

Specific WWI communication barriers included unreliable radio technology, danger in laying cables, artillery/explosives, poisonous gas, and trench warfare. Pigeons were the most reliable way to communicate across the battlefield. Troops took pigeons into battle and put notes inside a small metal tube on a pigeon’s leg to take to headquarters.

(Caption) “A Pigeon Being Released from a Tank during World War One,” August 9, 1918, The Telegraph.

(Caption) U.S. Army Signal Corps recruitment poster, 1919, Library of Congress.

(Caption) Soldiers using pigeons in the trenches, 1918, National Archives.

(Caption) Signal Corps pigeon trainer and his pigeon loft, 1918, National Archives.

(Caption) “U.S Army Signal Corps cap/sleeve braid,” The Salute Uniforms.
Messenger Pigeons in WWI

“Captured homing pigeons betrayed nothing of their point of origin or their destination, and those that made it through completed their journeys tirelessly and as rapidly as possible.”

(Caption) WWI poster, before 1919, UK Government.

(Caption) “Gun crew from Regimental Headquarters Company, 23rd Infantry, firing 37mm gun during an advance against German entrenched positions,” 1918, National Archives.

(Caption) Mobile pigeon carrier station, 1917-1918, National Archives.

“They ate little and were easy to transport. More important, they could travel at speeds well in excess 60 m.p.h.—an impressive achievement when the alternative method of communication was sometimes a man on horseback—and unlike the messenger dogs tried by the Germans at the height of the 1914-18 conflict, they could be relied on not to be distracted by the tempting smells of rats and rotting corpses.”

“Pigeons turned out to be conveniently immune to tear gas, then so common in trench warfare.”
Christopher Sterling, 2008, “Military Communications: From Ancient Times to the 21st Century”.

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In October 1918, during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of World War I, the 77th Infantry Division of the United States Army became trapped behind German lines in the Argonne forest of France. Under misdirected barrages and in desperate need to communicate with headquarters, the soldiers turned to Cher Ami, a homing pigeon, to deliver a message conveying their location. Cher Ami's success broke battlefield communication barriers, helped to save 194 lives, and reminds us of the continued importance of military animals.

Cher Ami was one of 600 pigeons employed in WWI by the U.S Army Signal Corps. Her “nest” was the American Army headquarters on the edge of the Argonne forest.

(Caption) Cher Ami, 1919, Atlas Obscura.
The Lost Battalion

On October 2, 1918, under the leadership of Major Charles Whittlesey, 690 men of the U.S. 154th Infantry Brigade, 77th Infantry Division became surrounded by German soldiers during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Outnumbered and lacking resources, their first attempts to send messages failed. On October 4, misdirected American artillery barrages began. The soldiers’ last hope was Cher Ami. She carried the message 25 miles to headquarters in 25 minutes, arriving with numerous injuries. The message was taken to the 154th Brigade’s artillery unit and barrages ceased.

“(The) barrage came plowing it’s way down the hill, directly towards us. It blew dirt high in the air as it moved on across the valley. There was absolutely nothing we could do. We just had to take what came, knowing without a doubt that it was our own artillery. It stopped right on our position and continued well over an hour... Everyone was expecting the next shell to hit him. There were many direct hits blowing men to pieces and wounding dozens more... And this shelling blasted away a good part of our bushes and timber, making it easier for us to be seen by the enemy.” Private John W Nell, autobiography published 2004, “The Lost Battalion: A Private’s Story”.

(Caption) Major Charles Whittlesey, 1918, Wikimedia Commons.

(Caption) John Carney, Cher Ami’s trainer, n.d, United States World War One Centennial Commission.

(Caption) The 77th Infantry Division, 1918, Wikimedia Commons.

(Caption) “Map to illustrate the Meuse-Argonne Offensive: first, second, and last phases”, 1918, Library of Congress.
The Lost Battalion

"Without food, water, medical supplies or blankets, they steadfastly refused to give up through attack after attack." Robert Laplander, 2017, “Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America’s Famous WWI Epic”.

“...Major Whittlesey turned our last homing pigeon loose, with what seemed to be our last message...We knew without a doubt that this was our last chance. If that one lonely scared pigeon failed to find it’s loft... We would go just like the others who were being mangled and blown to pieces. When he let this last pigeon loose, it flew up and landed in a tree near my position. We all started throwing rocks and sticks at the bird so it would continue on its way...” Private John W Nell, autobiography published 2004, “The Lost Battalion: A Private’s Story”.

(Partion)"Pigeon Message from Major Whittlesey to the Commanding Officer of the 308th Infantry,” 1918, National Archives.

(Partion) "U.S Army 77th Sustainment Brigade Unit patch, successor to the 77th Infantry Division,” The Salute Uniforms.

“...But Cher Ami would not budge. Obviously something had to be done, and quickly. Making up his mind for better or worse, Pvt. Richards swore heartily, and then suddenly jumped up, darted down the hill and began to shimmy up the tree, shaking it as he went... "Come on you goddam bird!” he yelled into the roar. "Fly!" Richards climbed still farther up the tree until at last he could reach the branch, shook it firmly and finally Cher Ami took off, circled above the ravine, in the direction of the 77th’s main line, gaining height as he went.” Robert Laplander, 2017, “Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America’s Famous WWI Epic”.

“Cher Ami was hit in the chest soon after takeoff... American soldiers watched in horror as their last hope hit the ground. Against all odds though, Cher Ami got up again! Wounded but still alive, the little bird took flight again, charging head-on into wave after wave of gunfire. By the end of the trip, [she] covered 25 miles in roughly half an hour. [She] arrived at base heavily wounded, but alive. Army medics were able to save Cher Ami’s life, but [her] right leg was barely attached to [her] body and [she] was blind in one eye.” Adam Bieniek, no date, “Cher Ami: The Pigeon that Saved the Lost Battalion”.
Impact

On October 8th, 1918, the soldiers received supplies, medical attention, and eventually returned home. Cher Ami helped to save at least 194 lives. She received significant awards and died a hero in 1919. Major Whittlesey was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and received the Medal of Honor.

(Caption) "Demobilization - Miscellaneous - View of some of the veterans of the Argonne, 77th Division in parade, New York City", 1918, National Archives.

“Cher Ami recovered from his wounds to come home to a hero’s welcome, crossing the ocean to the States in an officer’s Berth on the USS Ohioan and having a full honor guard when the ship docked in Hoboken, well ahead of the 77th division.” Robert Laplander, 2017, “Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America’s Famous WWI Epic”.


“During what remained of the little pigeon’s life, he received the Croix de Guerre with palm from the French government and a full pension(!) from the U.S government, as well as a wooden leg hand carved by the men of the Signals Platoon of the 308th Infantry (which he politely refused to wear). Retired to the Signal Corps “old pigeon’s home” (yes, a real place) after going all over the country on a Liberty Loan tour following the Armistice, the feathered hero died there in June of 1919, and was immediately stuffed. It was only when they did so that it was discovered that Cher Ami was not a male at all, but instead a female! She can be seen to this day still on display at the Smithsonian Museum of American History.” Robert Laplander, 2017, “Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America’s Famous WWI Epic”.

(Caption) The Croix de Guerre, 2005, Wikimedia Commons.

The Story Continues
(Caption) “French Croix de Guerre 1914-1918 ribbon,” The Salute Uniforms.

(Caption) “Cher Ami,” 1919, Smithsonian Institution.

“Cher Ami was later inducted into the Racing Pigeon Hall of Fame in 1931, and received a gold medal from the Organized Bodies of American Pigeon Fanciers in recognition of his extraordinary service during World War I.” - Smithsonian Institution, no date, “Cher Ami”.

The success of the 100,000 WWI pigeons used to aid communication led to pigeon use in WWII and the Korean War. Cher Ami’s legacy lives on through descendants of the surviving soldiers. She was awarded the 2019 Animals in War and Peace Medal of Bravery. Military animals continue to be used to break barriers today.

(Caption) WWII Army Signal Corps PG-67 Pigeon Message Capsule


(Caption) Inaugural Animals in War and Peace Medal Ceremony, 2019, arpu_pigeon.

“This pigeon saved my great-grandfather’s life in WWI and in doing so ensured not only my existence but countless others in my family. I’m so glad I can see a piece of history that has so profoundly impacted my life.” Patrick Burke, 2019, “Cher Ami”.

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The Story Continues

“In World War I, the Signal Corps reported an overall message delivery rate of 95 percent. In 1944, the Army reported pigeon-delivered tactical message rates at 99 percent. After success with combat operations in Europe in World War I, the U.S. military employed pigeons in the Pacific, Europe, and North Africa in the second war.” - Frank Blazich, 2019, “In the Era of Electronic Warfare, Bring Back Pigeons”.

“My great grandfather was the pigeon carrier for this bird! He was the soldier who shimmied up the tree amongst gunfire and shooed the bird into the air after it was scared into the tree.” Leanna Richards, 2019, “Cher Ami”.


“The more we’re out there with the combat commanders, they see. They see that the dog just saved their soldiers’ lives. That dog just saved that entire platoon.”


Conclusion

Homing pigeons have been used to break communication barriers throughout history. WWI presented specific barriers addressed by the use of pigeons. Cher Ami’s role in breaking barriers is an example of the life-saving contributions of military service animals.
Cher Ami:
A Pigeon’s Role in Breaking WWI Communication Barriers
Summer Short
Junior Division
Individual Exhibit
Student-composed Words: 500
Process Paper: 500 words
When I started to choose my topic for National History Day, I wanted to make sure that I selected something that was unique and that I was passionate about. Because I have an interest in animals and their impact on this world, I began researching animal heroes throughout history. I read through many stories, but the account of Cher Ami, a homing pigeon that helped save American soldiers during World War I, was particularly interesting. I had never considered that a message delivered by a pigeon could be so impactful. I want to share this story with others because it is not widely known and is a historically important example of animals being used to break barriers.

My research started by reviewing sources on the Lost Battalion and Cher Ami in order to build my main argument. This helped me gain a deeper understanding of the battle in which Cher Ami delivered the message. To obtain accurate information, I focused on reputable websites including the Library of Congress and the National Archives. Later, the research focus narrowed as I compiled information to support my thesis and create a clear connection to this year’s theme.

Next, I researched the broad topic of homing pigeon usage over time and created a timeline demonstrating that pigeons have been used for a very long time to break communication barriers. I thoroughly read and collected additional sources on the specific communication barriers in WWI. Sources including images, quotes, and reputable websites helped me to see firsthand how pigeons overcame barriers including poisonous gases, explosives, and trench warfare. For my impact and legacy sections, I relied on quotes, images, and newspapers to show the importance of Cher Ami’s work and the recognition she received.

Last year, I competed in National History Day with an exhibit and found it to be a fun and challenging experience. I used the knowledge I gained to create an exhibit again this year.
By attending the 2019 and 2020 Colorado National History Day Project Development Workshops, I learned valuable skills and received advice on my project. I used blue and gold on my exhibit to represent the official colors of the 77th Infantry Division as well as a cap/sleeve braid, unit patch, award ribbon, and pigeon message capsule as related artifacts. After the State competition, I took the judges’ feedback and made revisions.

As I thought about how this topic related to the theme of breaking barriers, I took into consideration the many different kinds of barriers, including those related to communication. The Lost Battalion was in desperate need to communicate with headquarters. Cher Ami broke barriers by reaching her destination and delivering the message in spite of the multiple injuries she encountered. Without her contributions, 194 American soldiers might have lost their lives. The legacy of her story lives on through the descendants of the Lost Battalion, helps to remind us of the importance of military animals today, and demonstrates how animals and people can work together to break barriers.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Books


I used this autobiography of a soldier who fought in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive to provide a quote in the main argument section of my board. This quote describes firsthand what it was like being barraged by their own artillery and how much they needed to communicate with headquarters.

Letters


This message was very significant to my project. It was the actual message Cher Ami delivered to the 77th Infantry Division’s headquarters. I used this piece of evidence in my main argument section of my board.

Maps


I used this map in my main argument section to describe the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. This source helped me understand how the 77th Infantry Division used this same map as a plan for the offensive, but headquarters mistook their location.

Newspapers


This newspaper article was used in my impact section to show how famous Cher Ami was right after her contributions in the Meuse Argonne Offensive. The image of Cheri Ami and her trainer were seen by the many people reading the New York Tribune and helped them gain a further understanding of what was happening during the war.

This newspaper shows how recognized homing pigeons were because of their work in WWI. I included this in my impact section because it helped me understand that pigeons were so important that they were being featured in the media.

Photographs


This image is shown in my main argument section to illustrate what Cher Ami looked like. Although it was taken after her heroic efforts, I placed this photo at the top of my board to show the main focus of my exhibit.


In my background section I wanted to make it clear that pigeons were being used for military communication before WWI. This image shows pigeons being used in an important historical event to break communication barriers during the Franco Prussian War.


This image (taken by the American Pigeon Racing Union) helped me understand the legacy of Cher Ami and her efforts in WWI. Many years after her heroic flight, Cher Ami is still being recognized and was posthumously awarded a medal less than a year ago. I placed this photo in my legacy section.


I used this image in my main argument section to acknowledge John Carney’s role in training Cher Ami. It helped me develop a greater understanding that both the trainer and the animal need to work together to be successful. Cher Ami would not have been able to deliver her message without John Carney’s training.

I used this photo in the build-up section of my board to show how careful the soldiers had to be when it came to communication. This helped me understand more about the barriers and dangers out on the battlefield in WWI.


This photo helped to support the timeline in the background of my exhibit, which mentions how Paul Julius Reuter used pigeons to deliver news. The photo helps to personalize the topic by showing an individual who broke communication barriers through the use of pigeons. I’ve learned that Reuters is still a news agency today and might not have gotten as far as it did if it wasn’t for the use of homing pigeons.


I used this photo in my background section to show how long pigeons have been used throughout history. It helped me understand that since the beginning of time, humans and animals have been interacting and benefiting each other.

Photographer Unknown. “Cher Ami.” Smithsonian, 1919, americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_425415.

This is an image I used in my impact section. It shows Cher Ami’s stuffed body, which is on display at the National Museum of American History. I learned that Cher Ami’s role in history was so important that her body and story are still being preserved for the public to see.


This picture of the French Croix de Guerre was very important to my project. I used it in my impact section to show exactly what Cher Ami was awarded. I learned that this is a very prestigious military award.


This image is shown in my build-up section to depict the use of homing pigeons in WWI and where they were kept when not in combat. It helped me understand what the pigeons’ homes looked like other than the wicker cages on the battlefield and how easy they were to transport and use for communication.

I used this photo in the build-up section of my exhibit to show pigeons being used in action by WWI soldiers. This source helped me understand how the soldiers handled the birds, what they carried them in, and how they equipped the messages to their legs.


This photo was used in my legacy section to show how animals are still being used in the military today. By using this photo and reading the article it is in, I learned how dolphins are currently being used in the military.


I used this image in my impact section to show the survivors of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive being celebrated. If it wasn’t for the contributions of Cher Ami, this parade never would have happened. This photo helped me to understand how even the smallest bird can make a huge impact on nearly 200 soldiers.


This photo of a war-time poster helped me understand how much homing pigeons were valued for their work. I included it in my build-up section because it relates to the overall theme of pigeons in WWI.


Major Whittlesey was an important individual in the Meuse Argonne Offensive. He was the one to make the decision of writing a note to headquarters and releasing Cher Ami. I included this photo of him in my main argument because of all his contributions during WWI.


I came across this image while searching for pictures of the Lost Battalion. It was very helpful in my legacy section. I learned that the Lost Battalion survivors had reunions for many years. This source is a picture of their 50th year reunion in 1968.

War Department. “The 77th Infantry Division.” Wikimedia Commons, 29 Oct. 1918,
I used this photo in my main argument section to convey who exactly the 77th infantry division, or “Lost Battalion” was. This image helped me understand more who was actually involved in the events I describe in my exhibit.

Physical Objects


Although I couldn’t find a pigeon message capsule from WWI, I used this capsule from WWII to show what the pigeons carried messages in. It struck me that this capsule was so small and how hard it must have been to write messages that small.

Posters


I included this poster in my build-up section to show all the different jobs within the U.S. Army Signal Corps, specifically the category “carrier pigeons”. I learned that the WWI Signal Corps was in charge of communications in war, including messenger pigeons.

Quotes


This quote is located in my legacy section to show what impact Cher Ami had on the families of the 77th infantry division. Because of this source, I understood more fully how one bird could have such a large influence on someone’s life.


This quote is located in my legacy section to show a direct connection to Cher Ami’s story. It helped me see a personal perspective of Cher Ami’s legacy and how it impacted Leanna Richards and how it lives on through her family today.

Secondary Sources

Books

Laplander, Robert J. *Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors Myths and Legends*. Lulu

I used this book to find quotes for the main argument and impact sections of my board. I found it interesting that this source was made up of so many diary entries from soldiers in the Lost Battalion.


I used this book to find a quote for my build-up section. The quote greatly supports my own writing in that section, on the topic of communication barriers.

**Documentaries**


Watching this video really helped me as a visual learner. I took notes and gained a better understanding of how pigeons were used in WWI.


As I watched this video I took notes and learned more about Cher Ami’s unique story. The information from this video matched the information from more reputable sources and helped reinforce my knowledge through an engaging format.

**Magazines**


I used this source for my timeline located in the background section of my board. It gave me a lot of information on pigeons in the Franco Prussian War and also helped me understand the benefits of using pigeons in WWI. In addition to this, this source helped me learn more about communication barriers in WWI, which I included in my build-up section.


I used this newspaper article to obtain some background information on my topic, such as what Cher Ami’s note said. I also learned that the 77th Infantry Division had their own patch that they would wear on their uniforms, which I ended up including on my board.
Physical Objects


I used this ribbon in my impact section to signify the award Cher Ami received, the Croix de Guerre. Soldiers who were awarded the Croix de Guerre would wear this ribbon on their uniforms to show that they were awarded the medal.


I wanted to have a variety of materials on my exhibit board so I decided to put this cap/sleeve braid in the build-up section to represent the U.S. Army Signal Corps. I purchased it from a certified manufacturer of uniforms and insignia. Their website also provided some historical context which helped me become more familiar with the role of the U.S. Army Signal Corps.


I was looking for colors to use on my exhibit board and decided to use the colors of this patch. The 77th Infantry Division was a very important focus of my project, and I learned that blue and gold are their official colors. I also learned that the Statue of Liberty represented the many soldiers that came from New York City.

Websites


The 77th Infantry Division played a key role in Cher Ami’s story. I used this website to learn more about the 77th Infantry Division and included the Division’s official patch on my board to represent them.


This article from the official website for BBC History Magazine helped me find information for the timeline in the background section of my exhibit. I also understood more clearly a British viewpoint of pigeon usage in WWI after reading the article.

Cher Ami endured many injuries while delivering her impactful message to headquarters. This website helped me gain information and a quote about Cher Ami’s injuries. The quote is located in my main argument section.


This article, written by Dr. Frank Blazich, a curator of modern military history at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, contained information about the military use of pigeons. Along with teaching me more about Cher Ami, this source provided a quote for my impact section about the message delivery rate of pigeons and their use in various wars.


This reputable article from the US army website supplied me with a quote to use in my legacy section to help explain the contributions of military animals today. The quote helped me understand that the dogs working with the U.S military make a huge difference just like Cher Ami did in the Muese-Argonne Offensive.


I wanted to create a timeline showing pigeon usage throughout history. This article on the Warfare History Network website helped me find information for my timeline. I found it interesting that pigeons have been used to communicate since ancient times. I also used a quote from this article about Paul Julius Reuters and his use of pigeons which helped to support my background section.


I used this website to research information for my main argument section. I also was able to collect various photos from this source to use in my main argument section. Because this source is from the National Archives, I knew that all of the information, including the dates, were accurate. One of the most interesting things about this source was that it included a picture of the message that Major Whittlesey wrote and Cher Ami delivered.

I used this newspaper article to develop a timeline in my background section. The article helped me understand the use of homing pigeons before WWI. I also used it to gain a better understanding about homing pigeon usage in modern times.


Before starting on this project, I had little understanding of WWI. This website provided me with an encyclopedic overview of WWI.