

# The Animals' War: Personal accounts

## Dogs and pigeons involved in WWI

**Both sides used dogs and pigeons to carry messages on the battlefield.**

### **Signaller Bert Chaney, 1/7<sup>th</sup> London Regiment, 1918**

*One by one our telephone lines were smashed. We endeavoured a number of times to repair them, going out into the barrage, creeping down communication trenches trying to find the ends of the wires, but in that mist and in that barrage it was a hopeless task, and we had to get back to our dugout thankful to be in one piece. Looking across in the direction of our visual communication system on the mound, we saw that it was impossible to see anything: the Aldis lamps were unable to penetrate the mist, even the telescope did not help.*

*Dashing down into the dugout, I scribbled two similar coded messages on the special thin paper, screwed them up and pushed them into the little containers that clip on to the pigeon's leg. I and one of the boys, each carrying a pigeon, crept up the steps and, pushing the gas blanket to one side, threw our birds into the air and away they flew. We watched them as they circled round a couple of times and then they swooped straight down and settled on top of our dugout. We retrieved them and tried once more, but those birds refused to fly.*

*We knew so little about homing pigeons we could not understand why. Those birds had been trained to fly direct to their loft, in that mist they would not fly on a blind course and would not start until they could see their loft. So down into the dugout again and another message was written and put into the small pouch attached to the dog's collar. Leading it to the entrance, I gave it a parting slap on the rump, at the same time shouting firmly, 'Home, boy! Allez!'*

*I watched it for a minute or two as it trotted off, then dropped the gas blanket back. Even while we were still sighing with relief, a wet nose pushed the blanket aside and in crawled the dog, scared out of its wits. All our efforts could not budge him, we pushed and shoved him, pulled him by the collar to get him moving, but he just lay down, clamped his body firmly to the ground and pretended to be asleep. He was a lot smarter than we were.*

*All we could do was swear a lot, give him a kick or two in the hope of moving him but without success. We eventually took the message from his collar, put it on the other dog, and tried to send that one on his way. Whether he was more timid than the first dog, or sensed its fear, he would not even move.*

*He dropped flat on his stomach and there was no shifting him. Once again we went through the pushing and pulling, but it was no good. So ended all our wonderful preparation for keeping communications going during an attack. Within a few minutes of its commencement we had become entirely isolated.*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p261/2

### **Private Thomas Hope, 1/5<sup>th</sup> King's Liverpool Regiment, 1917**

*Idly I watch the pigeon man and officer fix messages to the legs of two pigeons, free them, and up they soar. One second they are there, thirty feet above the ground, the next they have gone, just disappeared. A feather or two floats down gently, and the pigeon man makes off for another pair of birds. He had only been gone three or four minutes when a lance corporal pokes his head round the traverse shouting, 'Duggan's hit, sir.*

*'Badly?' inquires the officer.*

*'Dead, sir, a shell got him.'*

*'Had he the birds with him?'*

*'Don't think so, sir; didn't see them.'*

*'All right, corporal.'*

*Then turning to me. 'See if you can get those pigeons and bring them here.'*

*'Very good, sir' – and off I go.*

*There's very little semblance of trench left, and I have to crawl past the spots where the parapet has been blown down, over dead bodies, and past wounded who groan when I knock up against them. I step over Duggan's body, he's dead all right, and further along in a little niche cut out of the trench side I find the wooden cage with the two pigeons. I wait a little as three shells fall in quick succession on the trench just ahead, then make a bolt back to my own section.*

*One of the birds is taken out. Poor creature, it is cooing away as if it was in some quiet country loft, or at some village race meeting. The message is soon fixed and up the bird goes. I watch it until it is lost to sight, but the lieutenant keeps his glasses trained on it, then as he lowers them:*

*'It's down, we'll have to send a runner.'*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p241/2