



Pigeon vs telephone: which worked best in the trenches?

Video transcript – Pigeons take flight

Halfway through the war, front line soldiers were still finding it difficult to share information with HQ.

The new technologies of radio and field telephones regularly let them down, so they decided to fall back on a 3,000-year-old way of delivering a message: the carrier pigeon.

When you need to pin your last hopes to something, you can do a lot worse than the leg of a pigeon. They were harder to shoot than runners or dogs, and they were fast and easy to carry around. What's more, a staggering 95% of their messages made it back from the trenches.

In fact, they were so important to the war effort that harming them became a criminal offence. They came up with some innovative ways of protecting them from a gas attack.

The only snag was that these birds couldn't deliver a reply; they only knew how to fly back to their home loft at base. Even so, they proved an invaluable way of telling HQ about a retreat or an advance.

Many pigeons were recognised for their wartime bravery. In October 1917 a wounded British bird, Pigeon 2709, staggered back to its home loft after a 21-hour flight with a signal from the front line at Passchendaele, before succumbing to its wounds.

But the most famous feathered hero of the war was the American-trained pigeon Cher Ami which, despite being shot through the leg and the breast, managed to complete a 25-mile flight.

The message it was carrying saved the lives of 194 US soldiers trapped behind enemy lines in the Argonne in 1918.