Pigeon vs telephone: which worked best in the trenches?

Video transcript – Telephones and telegraphy

Rory Cellan-Jones: So this museum is showing us the entire history of the development of communications in the First World War. What would you point out to us?

Collin Cunningham, Royal Signals Museum: This is an assortment of different forms of field telephones, some earlier ones, some later ones, that were used in the First World War. Any person could pick up the phone, make a call and answer a call, without special training.

CC: This is a cable wagon, of which there were many hundreds in use in World War One. Almost all of World War One was fought using cable, initially for telegraph and then subsequently for telephony.

RC-J: And how much cable was laid through the war?

CC: Many hundreds of thousands of miles over the course of the war. Probably in excess of a million miles were laid on the Western Front.

RC-J: What were the challenges, then, of laying all of this cable?

CC: When the artillery barrages started the cable got blown apart, so they had to go out and repair it under conditions of shell fire. As the shell fire got heavier and shells got bigger they discovered they had to dig the cable into the ground to protect it. Now you can imagine the amount of manpower that was involved in that.

RC-J: So what difference did the arrival of telephony make to the war?

CC: Telephony gave you an immediate contact between two people. However, what we didn’t realise at the time was that because of the way we constructed telephone circuits, that the enemy could hear what we were saying, and for the first year or so we didn’t even know that.

RC-J: Were there specific examples where security was breached and the Germans got to know things they shouldn’t have known?
CC: On one occasion, when we overran a German position, we discovered a complete transcript of the British operation order. A brigade staff officer had dictated the entire operation order over the telephone, and the Germans of course had heard that as well.

RC-J: So how, by the end of the war, had the telephone changed communications between commanders in the front line?

CC: As the war developed, and people found ways of combating the security problem I mentioned, and things were happening much faster, that increased pace of warfare, where people could very quickly issue instructions or possibly minor changes and so on, and it became far more commonly used.