

***UNITED STATES.
WAR
DEPARTMENT,
UNITED STATES.
ARMY. SIGNAL
CORPS***



***THE HOMING
PIGEON***

**United States. War Department, United
States. Army. Signal Corps**

The Homing Pigeon

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This manual supersedes TM 11-140, 10 September 1940

SECTION I

GENERAL

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1. Purpose

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This manual provides instructions for proper breeding, care, and training of the homing pigeon, and for the selection and training of enlisted pigeoneers. With certain modifications this information can be used by all pigeon units serving field forces, both in theaters of operations and in the zone of the interior. Instructions in FM 24-5 for units using the homing pigeon in communication have not been repeated. The mission, function, and operation of a signal pigeon company and the tactical employment of pigeons are described in FM 11-80.

2. Methods

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The methods prescribed in this manual are based upon experience. Accordingly, if any new procedures are found by experience to improve pigeon communication they should be submitted to the Chief Signal Officer for consideration.

3. Origin and History

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The homing pigeon used by the Army for signal communication (referred to in this manual as “pigeon,” “homing pigeon,” and “bird”) is a distinct variety created through careful cross-breeding to obtain maximum distance and speed in controlled and directed flight. Homing pigeons are grouped in families or strains usually identified by the names of the civilian pigeon fanciers who bred them for many generations to develop certain characteristics of performance and appearance. When the several varieties of pigeons used to breed the modern homing pigeon actually originated is not certain. It is known, however, that the following varieties existed in England and Belgium before the nineteenth century, although the exact percentage and order of their blend have not been determined: Smerle, Horseman, Cumulet, Dragoon, Carrier, and Owl.

4. Nature

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The principle of using homing pigeons as messengers is based on their instinctive attempt to return to their home lofts whenever they are removed some distance and released. They will do this even with an attached message or other light article. This desire to return is largely based on natural urges of hunger and reproduction. Because the pigeon has only one mate the reproductive urge is often the stronger. These impulses can be stimulated by *controlled* feeding, mating, and breeding without harming the pigeon’s health.

5. Utility

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The pigeon's usefulness to the Army is measured by the reliability and speed with which it returns to its loft. Speed and reliability are largely determined by the pigeon's strain, physical condition, training, and treatment. Therefore any lowering of standards for these factors will be a serious handicap. Further handicaps are discussed in e below. Section V sets minimum ability standards for properly-trained, well-bred, healthy birds to be used by combat units as message carriers.

a. BREEDING. Since physical characteristics and homing instinct are usually inherited from the parents, records are maintained for each pigeon. Then pairs are selected, mated, and allowed to produce young birds on the basis of these records, plus other desirable attributes described in section VI.

b. CONDITION. The physical condition of a pigeon greatly affects its performance. Therefore, study physical characteristics of pigeons and enforce procedures prescribed in sections III and VII for feeding, watering, and maintaining proper physical condition.

c. TRAINING. Training of the pigeon begins at an early age, and is progressive and constant. The object is to settle the pigeon in its home loft in order to develop reliability and speed as described in section V.

d. TREATMENT. The pigeon is highly sensitive and responsive to kindness, firmness, reward for good performance, and calmness of personnel handling it. Make the loft as attractive as possible because the pigeon prizes its home.

e. HANDICAPS. Bad weather, darkness, and injury, as well as inadequacies in breeding, conditioning, and training, reduce efficiency of pigeons (see [par. 9c](#)).

(1) *Bad weather.* This includes snow, fog, rain, and adverse winds, or any other conditions which reduce visibility or oppose the flight of the pigeon. Generally, flights may be predicted according to certain atmospheric conditions as follows:

<i>Conditions</i>	<i>Results</i>
Blue sky, high ceiling with white fleecy clouds, and low humidity.	Very fast speed.
Solid grey or bluish grey sky with low ceiling, no clouds, and high humidity.	Very slow speed, losses may occur.

(2) *Darkness.* Pigeons never lose their initial fear of flying at night, but it is possible to train them to overcome this fear to a great extent. Their natural instinct and intelligence will come to their aid. Night operation, however, is considered impracticable for the Army pigeons because of the highly mobile tactics of modern warfare.

(3) *Injury.* Injuries are commonly caused by improper handling, predatory birds (such as hawks), enemy shellfire, or obstacles pigeons strike in flight. Protect pigeons by destroying all hawks in the vicinity of the lofts with shotguns provided for that purpose. Select safe locations for releasing pigeons. Minor injuries rarely prevent a homing pigeon from returning to its loft as long as they do not hamper it from determining the proper course of flight. When vitally injured, the pigeon will continue its return flight until physically

exhausted. Any injury which permanently impairs the eyes or wings of a pigeon makes it unsuitable for any employment except breeding.



SECTION II

DESCRIPTION

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6. General Appearance

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Pigeons must look healthy, well-balanced, alert, intelligent, and showing abundance of rich feathers and sheen. Figure 1 shows the main parts of the homing pigeon (the right wing is extended for ease of description).

7. Weight

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A cock weighs from 14 to 17 ounces; a hen, from 13 to 16 ounces.

8. Plumage

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Rich, abundant, and soft plumage should cover the entire body. The color itself is of no importance, but rich shades, with the checkered pattern (if present) standing out brightly and distinctly, usually indicate good health and satisfactory condition. For classification of pigeons according to color see paragraph [26](#).

9. Head

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The head should be of a medium size, round or oval shaped, of broad structure and strongly set. It should not be tight or drawn at any one place.

a. BILL. The bill should be of medium length with small to medium wattles and set well into the head. No openings should be noticeable when the bill is closed.

b. EYE. See [section VI](#).

c. EAR. The ear seems to play an important part in the bird's sense of direction. It includes three parts: external ear, middle ear, and inner ear. At the top of the inner ear there are three semicircular canals which appear to be the nerve conductors of orientation. Although no one knows just what helps homing pigeons find their loft, it is possible that the great sensitiveness of their ears enables them to receive magnetic and atmospheric impression, and thereby to determine direction either at departure or during flight. This theory is based on the fact that atmospheric disturbances often cause the bird temporarily to lose its way.

10. Neck

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The neck is of medium length, with no sign of dewlap at the throat. It tapers to a wide, well-sprung chest.

11. Body

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a. BREAST. The breast (or chest) is broad and full in front; depth of breastbone should not exceed the width.

b. SHOULDERS. The shoulders are heavy and strongly reinforced with muscles.

c. BACK. The back is well-feathered, strong, flat and broad at the shoulders, narrowing toward the rump.

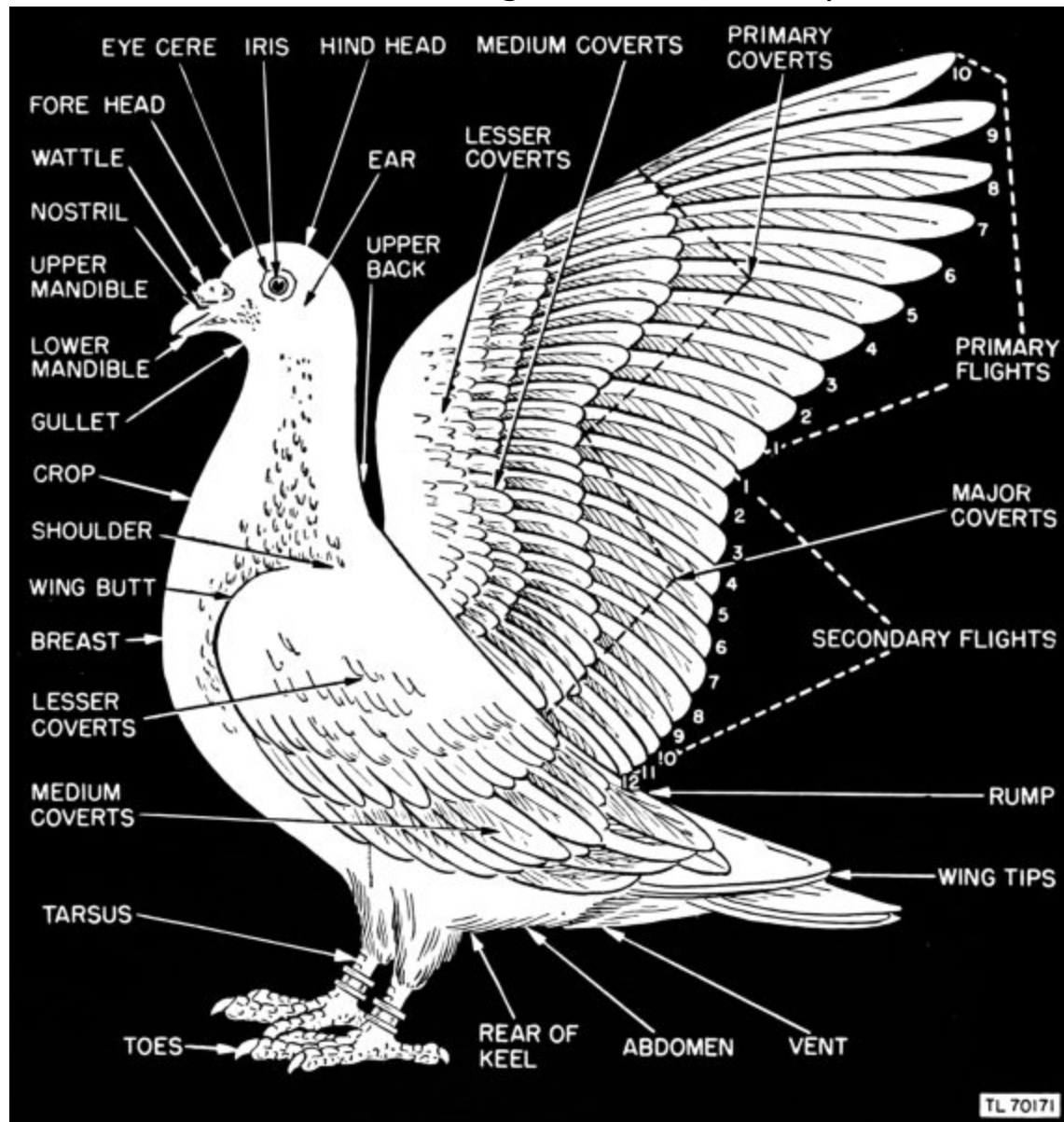


Figure 1. Parts of homing pigeon.

d. KEEL. The keel is strong, arched in front, and of medium length and depth. Width of keel denotes strength.