



The American soldiers were doomed.

It was October 1918, not long before the end of World War I. This was a war more brutal than any before in history. Already millions were dead. More than 135 countries were losing soldiers in battles around the world.

Right now, in a dark, rainy forest in northeastern France, several hundred American troops were in a fight for their lives. The men were surrounded by enemy German soldiers.

Machine guns rattled. Bombs rained from the sky. The shouts and moans of wounded soldiers rose up. The Americans needed help. Their only hope was to get an urgent message to their commanders, 25 miles away.

But how? There were no walkie-talkies or cell phones in 1918, no computers to send emails, and the army radios weren't working.

Luckily, there was one brave warrior who had been trained for a moment exactly like this. She took off with the message, on a life-and-death race across the forest.

Her name was Cher Ami, and she was not a soldier. She was not even a human.

She was a pigeon.

INCREDIBLE POWERS

Cher Ami wasn't just any pigeon. Cher Ami (which means "dear friend" in French) was a special kind of bird—a carrier pigeon (sometimes called a homing pigeon). She was one of hundreds of carrier pigeons that helped the American military during World War I. Pigeons had an important job: to carry messages.

Why would the army use a pigeon to carry a message? For one thing, these pigeons are fast—some can fly up to 90 miles per hour.

They are also supersmart. A pigeon's brain is no bigger than a wad of bubble gum. But like the tiny chip in an iPhone, that pigeon brain is packed with power. For example, pigeons can be trained to



come si chiama il tubetto

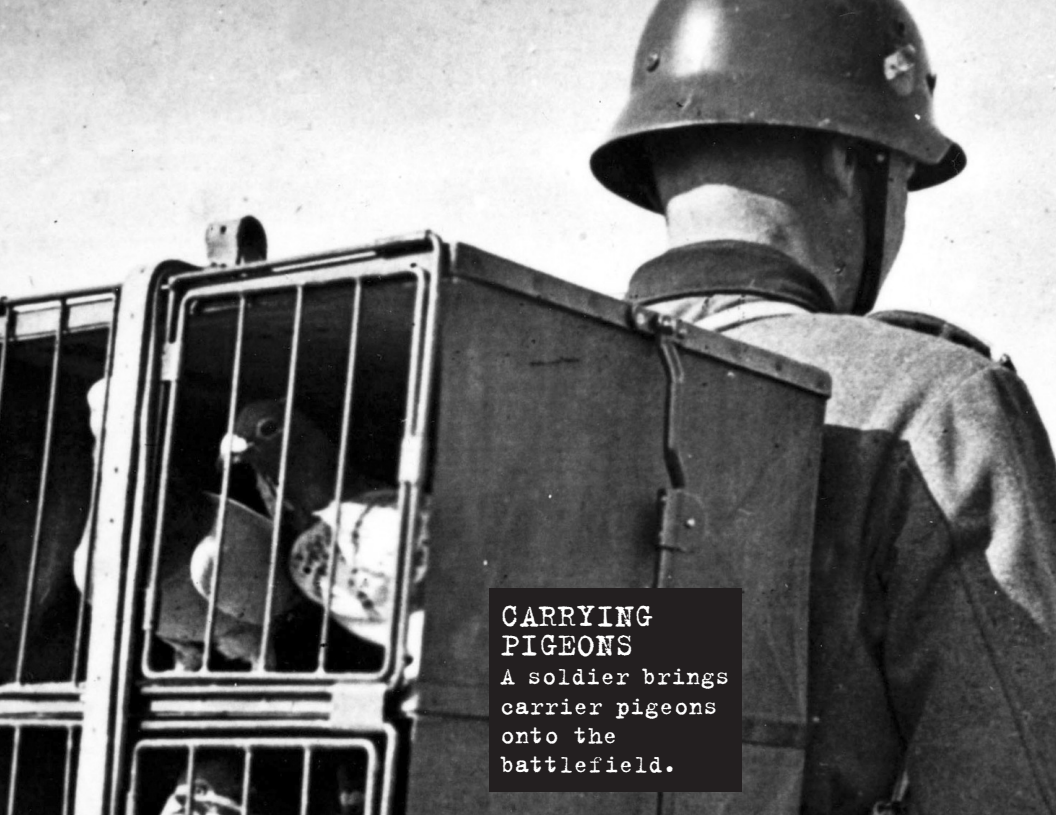
A message is slipped into a metal tube attached to a carrier pigeon's leg.

recognize letters and words.

But what truly makes these pigeons ideal for carrying messages is a unique talent. They always return to their home nest, no matter how far away it is. Nobody needs to show them how to get home. They just know. These humble gray birds can travel over oceans and mountains. They can fly across hundreds of twisting and turning miles. They can fly through thick fog and wild storms. And they almost never get lost.

It's this remarkable ability to navigate—to find their way—that makes them such incredible messengers.

But how does it actually work? How does the



CARRYING PIGEONS

A soldier brings
carrier pigeons
onto the
battlefield.



MISERY ON THE
BATTLEFIELDS
Soldiers wore masks
to protect them
from poison gas
used by Germany.



IN THE TRENCHES

Soldiers spent
weeks fighting
from these
muddy pits.



pigeon carry the message?

Imagine this. Say you wanted to use a carrier pigeon to carry *your* messages. First, you'd have to buy a carrier pigeon. You'd bring it home and create a nest for it at your house—on your roof, maybe, or in your yard.

Now imagine you are going to your friend's house. You would take the bird with you in a small cage. When you were ready for your parents to pick you up, you would write a message to them on a tiny piece of paper. You would roll the paper up and place it in a pinkie-sized metal tube attached to the pigeon's leg. You'd let your pigeon fly away. Its instinct would tell it to go to its home nest—back at your house.

Once it landed on its nest, a little bell would ring. This would signal to your parents that your pigeon was back. They would read the message—and head out to bring you home.

BRUTAL BATTLES

Of course, today it's much easier to just call or text your parents when you need something. Communicating is simple, even over long distances.

But until about 120 years ago, carrier pigeons like Cher Ami were actually the quickest way to

send a message to someone who was very far away.

Ship captains used pigeons to send weather reports back to shore. Knights took pigeons with them into battle and used them to send news back to their kings. At the first Olympics, nearly three thousand years ago, pigeons carried the results of chariot races and gymnastics tournaments to surrounding cities.

In the 1800s, new inventions like the telegraph and the telephone transformed the way humans communicated. But in wartime, getting

World War I was the first
time tanks were used on
battlefields.



information across long distances was still difficult, especially during battles.

And in World War I, the battles were bigger and bloodier than the world had ever seen. New weapons unleashed terror and death on a massive scale. Machine guns fired hundreds of bullets a minute. Poison gas caused blistering burns and scorched lungs. Grenades injured or killed multiple people at close range. Tanks plowed across lines of



THE WORLD AT WAR

Soldiers from countries around the world fought in WWI battles. The biggest and deadliest battles happened in France.