

MYSTERY AT 35,000 FEET

If anybody knows why a homing pigeon doesn't need oxygen at 35,000 feet altitude or why it doesn't swell up like a balloon in the low pressure of that altitude, the men who supervise the handling of pigeons with the Army Air Forces would be glad to hear the answers. They aren't losing any sleep over the matter, but they are rather curious and the flight surgeons just shake their heads when the question is put to them.

The matter came up when the boys were experimenting with the use of pigeons in high altitude bombers. The pigeons, of course, are message bearers, and are being used in everything from submarine to airplanes by the Navy, all branches of the Army, the Air Forces and even by the Secret Service. They can get through with messages when all other means of communication fail. During one six-months period of the war, 307 out of 320 messages sent from aircraft were safely delivered. The British say that one out of every seven RAF men rescued after being forced down at sea owes his life to pigeon messages.

So our Air Force were experimenting with pigeons at extreme altitudes. One problem was releasing the birds safely at high altitudes and high speeds. That was solved with paper bags. Take a No. 12 paper bag, slit it down one side, and you have a perfect container. To release the pigeon, you tuck it in the bag head-first, fold the bag neatly around it, hold the package (which looks like a couple of pounds of pork chops fresh from the butcher) out into the slip stream and let it go. It drifts back and down and pretty soon the bag flutters open and the bird comes out, spreads its wings and goes about its business. Released thus, at 25,000 ft. a pigeon usually goes into a big spiral and glides 20,000 feet or so before levelling off. The bag protects it from the initial shock of the slip stream, which could easily rip the wings right off the bird. Pigeons have been

released this way from planes going 375 miles an hour.

Another problem was simplifying message procedure. The standard pigeon message isn't very complicated, but when a airplane is in distress there isn't much time to fill in any type of form. So the researchers worked out a special form requiring only ten simple entries. This form can be filled out, rolled, tucked in a capsule and the capsule fastened to the bird's leg in less than one minute.

Finally there was the problem of containers for carrying pigeons on board ship. The standard container is both big and heavy, so a compact two-bird carrier was worked out, a box not much bigger than a shoe box, which can be opened with a minimum of trouble and which has message blanks and capsules conveniently at hand right on top. This box is tucked under two shock cords on a bulkhead, usually within arm's reach of the waist gunners, who are assigned to release the birds.

That pretty well solved the problems. But then came the high flights. The birds were taken up to 15,000' and showed no ill effects. Then up to 20,000', still no trouble, although the men themselves needed oxygen. Thirty thousand and the birds didn't mind a bit; 35,000 and those birds just sat there in their boxes, eyes half shut, feathers fluffed against the cold, which ran as low as 45° below zero; and when released at that altitude they simply spiraled down to a more hospitable level and headed for home. They got home safely, and apparently in as good health as ever.

That solved the problems; the specified tests had worked out. But the boys who held the trials scratched their heads and puzzled over the way those birds acted or failed to act. They put it up to a flight surgeon. At first he thought they were ribbing at him. When he had been convinced that there was no hoax to it, he took a couple

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Life is more to pigeons than pie

Racing's poor relations

By Tony Linnane
courtesy *Daily Liberal Dubbo*.

Birds of a feather flock together — at least in pigeon racing.

Flapping the wings for 600 miles would be enough to make any bird turn it up but not our fearless feathered friends.

It's a tough life pigeon racing — daily 6 a.m. starts, 7-day weeks, weekly training hit-outs of up to 50 kms, and 5 month racing seasons where a bird could fly up to 1000 kms. But it's worth it — well at least for the males.

A long flight usually results in bed, dinner and a female acquaintance for the evening. But first they have to endure a little teasing, according to Dubbo pigeon racer Paul Martin.

"We let the cocks stay with the hens for

about 15 minutes without letting them mate," Martin said.

"They are then shipped off to the racing start points knowing that they will see the hens when they get back. Their reward after the race is usually being allowed to mate with the hens, a feed and a perch.

Racing pigeons is operated on two different systems, the widowhood system and the natural system.

The widowhood system is where the cocks will return to the loft knowing that a 'date with destiny' is in store.

The other is more subtle and natural.



Dubbo Pigeon Fancier, Paul Martin.

Hens are allowed to lay eggs and raise their young along with their partners. When taken away to race they return to the loft to protect their families and young.

Some 18 members make up the Dubbo Pigeon Racing Club, each a breeder, owner and racer of pigeons from their homes. It's like horse racing says Paul Martin, who doubles up as the publicity officer of the Dubbo Club.

"The system is the same as for race horses," said Martin.

"You breed the birds for stamina, body type and conformation. The best is put to the best, bloodlines to bloodlines and you just don't put any old bird to something else.

"We try to breed the birds to what their parents are and their type but it doesn't always turn out like that — the same as race horses."

The costs involved with breeding and racing the birds are also exorbitant, not quite as hefty as race horses but still pricey much the same.

A good bird in England or Belgium may sell for up to \$50,000. Recently, a bird sold for a world record price of \$57,000.

Known as Vlekje, the bird went to a Leicestershire pigeon stud, after the new owners had to outbid a large Japanese consortium.

Closer to home the expenses do curb, but not by much.

"Birds here in Australia sell for anything up to \$12,000," Martin said.

"But the average bird is usually from \$400 to \$600. We race for Sires Produce race of \$1,500, a sale race for \$1,200 and a special ring race for yearling birds of \$500.

"I guess it's like any sport — unless your professional you can't make any money from it. Out here in the country it's like that because we only race for about \$100 each race."

The club members in Dubbo keep their

birds at home and average about 90-100 per loft.

Most of the times the hens turn out to be the better stayers and usually they win the greater share of distance races.

The poor old cocks, through the ways of habit, fail to see out the long journeys of distance racing and make better sprinters.

"The cocks are better over short distances because it is hard to keep their minds on the job," Martin said.

"The hens are the good distance flyers."

Training and keeping the birds in condition can be an exacting pastime.

Rising early each morning to set the birds on their way, making sure to wear the same clothes and do the same things all the time is just part of the routine of keeping pigeons.

"The birds get to know you so you have to wear the same sort of clothes, not go out one day with a red jumper and the next in a yellow jumper or something," Martin said.

"The birds go out for a fly every morning, usually before everyone is awake and might have training tosses of 20km to 50km a couple of times a week.

The runs get the birds into shape for the gruelling racing season which usually runs from mid-June to the October long weekend.

During that period they may have anything up to 12 races, ranging in distance from 500 kms to a testing of 1050 kms, starting from Launceston in Tasmania.

While a lot lose their way or meet up with friendly and not so friendly characters along the flight home, owners can expect to have 99 per cent of their stock return in a good season.

It's a funny business though. Fed corn and water and trained each day of the week, one wouldn't be surprised if more of the birds gave their owners the 'go bye'.

Maybe they do. I bet the racers wonder why some of their birds get back so late. Could there be a secret rendezvous for racing pigeons?

Who knows?

BEGINNER'S CORNER

The Squeakers today are the birds of next flying season

Although it is generally appreciated that the squeakers in the nest at present or walking around the loft are our flying teams of 1990, one is apt to overlook the fact that they do need the same close attention that we give our own birds in full training. Thus it is that many flyers aren't so hard to beat anyway.

It is in the formative stages that the birds need every attention. Actually although your competitive spirit, ego, call it what you will, generally spurs you to devote a lot of time to the birds once they are in training and racing, in reality they don't need it, and in fact, would probably be better off alone once they have been given their training spin and food. The young pigeon is like a baby and requires almost complete attention if development is to be complete. Psychologists tell us that even if a pigeon is prevented from flying at all until three months of age it will still be able to fly equally as well at six months as one that was allowed free flight, and that such things depend on maturation and learning. Maybe they are right for all intents and purposes but flying as they would interpret it isn't flying as pigeon men would interpret it.

NATURAL CONDITIONS

If we refer to the old time greats you will realise that their birds were reared "naturally" and that they gave the birds as near a "natural" existence as possible, the idea being that the birds that lived and did well under "natural" conditions were the hardy ones.

In other words any sickly squeakers or

those that received a setback were smartly dispatched just as they would be if being reared as a wild bird in the bush, where Mother Nature is a hard task mistress yet one that brings the best out.

Thus it is that by giving close attention to the young stock, one notices any falling behind of any particular squeaker to the others of the same age.

I am not suggesting that you dispatch all small birds and only keep the big framed ones. This thought is farthest from my mind, but the birds that can't find a perch readily, are being pushed around by their fellows, the ones that never seem to relish their food or exercise, and the ones that always look ruffled and despondent.

These are the birds that you can well do without. Some new flyers adopt the attitude "Oh anyone or anything can get sick, and it is only a matter of time for the patient to get better and you'd never know the difference." This is where they err. I know I'll draw a lot of critics to this statement, but I do know from experience and watching others who fell for the same thing end up the same way, and that was in inoculating the loft against pigeon pox.

All the birds naturally got the "wog" as it was given to them scientifically, and all of those birds failed to win a race. The idea was to inoculate them so they wouldn't get the disease during the racing season and get sick, thus losing form. I needn't have worried as none of them ever had any form to lose. I know some flyers will say that they inoculate the flying team and they win. Well those I've known personally didn't and yet the season before and the season af-