The PIGEON HERO of World War I
The incredible true story of Cher Ami, the bird that saved nearly 200 American soldiers during World War I

By Lauren Tarshis
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. It would leave 17 million people dead and pull more than 135 countries into battles around the globe.

Right now, in a dark forest in France, hundreds of American troops were in a fight for their lives. They were surrounded by enemy German soldiers. Machine guns rattled. Bombs rained from the sky. The Americans needed help. Their only hope was to get a message to their commanders, 25 miles away.

But how? There were no walkie-talkies or cell phones in 1918. There were 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 just like this. She took the message and raced 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 (French for “dear friend”) was one of thousands of pigeons that served with American soldiers during World War I. These birds, a breed known as carrier pigeons (or homing pigeons), had an important job: to carry messages.

Why would the military use pigeons as messengers? These pigeons are fast—some can fly up to 90 miles per hour. They are also smart. 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. Pigeons can be trained to recognize letters and words and even misspellings.

But what truly makes these pigeons ideal for carrying messages is their innate ability to return to their home nest, no matter how far away it is. No one needs to show them how to get home. They just know. These humble gray birds can travel over seas and mountains, across hundreds of miles, and they almost never get lost. This remarkable navigational power makes pigeons great messengers.

During war, to use a pigeon as a messenger, you would establish a home nest for the bird. Then you would take the bird with you as you traveled with your troops. When you wanted to send a message, you would write it on a piece of paper and place it in a small metal tube attached to the pigeon’s leg. You’d release the bird, and it would carry your message back to its home nest, where other troops would be waiting to read it.

**Brutal Battles**

Long before the days of phones, texts, and FaceTime, the only
way to send a message over long distances was to send human runners—or pigeons. 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 3,000 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 changed the way people communicated. But in wartime, getting information across long distances was still hard, 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 huge 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 defense. Airplanes dropped bombs that triggered **colossal** explosions.

New technologies had made killing all too easy. But when it came to sending messages from a battlefield, no new invention was as reliable as a pigeon.

**Fear and Rats**

Cher Ami was born in England and trained by a famous pigeon expert. She was brought to France to serve during World War I. Her home nest was at the American army headquarters near the edge of a forest called Argonne.

In peacetime, Argonne

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**Wartime**

From sniffing out bombs to carrying the wounded, animals have had many jobs in wartime.

**Cats: Pest Patrol**

During World War I and World War II, thousands of cats were employed to eat rats, mice, and other critters that can spread disease and ruin food supplies in trenches and on ships. Cats—along with dogs, pigs, and other animals—were also kept as pets and mascots to raise morale during wartime.

**Dolphins: Underwater Protectors**

Dolphins have been trained to locate underwater mines that can destroy submarines and other sea vessels.
was beautiful. But by the time Cher Ami arrived in France, World War I had been dragging on for four years. The forests and fields of France had become blood-soaked battlefields.

These battles were fought with something called trench warfare. Trenches were deep, narrow ditches that stretched for miles. Soldiers would stay inside the trenches, which offered them some protection from bullets and grenades, until it was time to push forward. During a battle, opposing forces would try to take each other’s trenches, advancing from one to the next. Progress was slow and bloody. Each time the men left their trench, they faced gunfire and bombs.

But men didn’t just fight from the trenches. They lived in them, often for weeks at a time. They coped with knee-deep mud, the stench of garbage and human waste, rampant disease, and constant fear. The noise of machine guns and bomb blasts made it hard to sleep. Soldiers who did manage to fall asleep often awoke to find rats scurrying across their chests.

Cher Ami joined the men of the 77th Infantry Division, part of a large battalion of American soldiers. The man in charge, Major Charles Whittlesey, had been ordered to lead his troops in an attack on the Germans in Argonne. Cher Ami was one of eight pigeons brought on the mission. The birds lived together in a cage. A young soldier from New York took care of them. He did his best to keep them safe as the troops moved through the forest.

Under Attack

Deep in the forest, on October 3, Whittlesey’s men crossed paths with a large German force. The Americans were soon surrounded and under attack.

The men (about 550 of them) tried to fight back. But they were low on ammunition, badly outnumbered, and exhausted. Many had barely slept for weeks.

Food had run low. The only way for the men to get a sip of water was to crawl through the mud to a stream.

The Germans blasted the American troops with powerful explosives, grenades, and machine guns. With each passing hour, more men were killed or wounded.

Whittlesey sent out pigeons carrying desperate requests for help. But one by one, the pigeons were shot or disappeared.

The next day, American planes appeared overhead. Whittlesey’s men cheered. They thought the planes would drop much-needed food, ammunition, and other supplies. But it wasn’t food and bullets those planes were dropping.

It was bombs.

Whittlesey realized with horror that the Americans didn’t know that he and his men were in this part of the forest. The bombs

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**Dogs: Super Sniffers**

Today, dogs serve in the military as bomb sniffers, using their superior noses to detect explosives. Throughout history, dogs have also been used as messengers and scouts and to help rescue the wounded.

**Glowworms: Nature’s Nightlight**

The European glowworm is a bioluminescent beetle that gives off light. During World War I, men collected these insects in jars to create nightlights that helped them read letters, maps, and reports in the trenches.

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**A GLOBAL CONFLICT**

World War I (1914-1918) was fought across Europe as well as in Africa and the Middle East. The major allies were Great Britain, France, Russia, and the U.S. on one side and Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire on the other.
Create a museum exhibit about Cher Ami and her heroic last flight. List the types of objects you would include in the display. Then write the information that will appear next to the display. Send your work to Pigeon Contest. Five winners will each get Truce by Jim Murphy.