

Carrier Pigeons an Aid to Preparedness

Europe's War Has Shown That Homing Birds Often Beat Aeroplanes and the Wireless in Carrying Military Dispatches

By Cyrus F. Wicker.

HAVE you failed to join the preparedness movement because you do not exactly know how your services can be of value? Perhaps you are unable to go to Plattsburg, or to the girls' training camp at Chevy Chase; or are prevented even from joining the association of amateur wireless operators and keeping a wireless set in the attic. Then this article is to tell you how you also can prepare at home, and do interesting and valuable work for the United States Intelligence Service by raising and training homing pigeons.

The world war, which seizes upon everything for its own ends, has recently and marvelously developed this neglected

Wires may be cut, wireless destroyed; but nothing yet made can recall a pigeon once on the wing with news of his country's invasion and peril. They were Belgium's Paul Reveres; and their service and that of their owners should not be forgotten in Belgium, nor the lesson neglected by ourselves.

Unfortunately, most Americans think of carrier pigeons in the past tense; but that is because very little pertaining to their present work has been allowed to leak out. The standard reference is to the siege of Paris in 1870, when pigeons, once the investment was complete, and a few balloons offered the only means of communication between Paris and the outside world. Two hundred and sixty-three pigeons in all were flown during

covers approximately a radius of forty miles or an area of 5,000 square miles. Blessed besides with immeasurable clearness of sight, it is rather the wisdom of the bird which leads it, after arriving at the spot where its home had been, to circle in an ever widening radius until the familiar roof is seen and then to go straight for it. That lifts the performance out of the instinct class and places it on the border line of intelligence. When wireless fails these are allies worth having.

At this moment, according to letters received from a French Captain in the English-French Interpreter Service, there are 18,000 carrier pigeons employed with the allied armies in France alone, of which 15,000 are reserved for use with

pets; they are doing a bit of unique and much appreciated work under definite war conditions with both the Teutonic and allied armies, and America should know that they became available for military purposes only through the adoption of what was already a popularly organized and widespread sport, which was able at an instant to supply France and England and Belgium in their need with a rapid and truly national system of intercommunication, entirely independent of railroads, telegraphs or wireless.

Just what will a homing pigeon do? It will, as a young bird, two months old, and if properly trained, fly from forty to one hundred and fifty miles in a straight line to its home; that is, to the place where it was bred and where it took its first short flights. An older bird will fly up to five hundred miles in a day, between daylight and dark. They will not fly by night; but a good bird will, without stopping for food or water, resume flight at dawn on the next day and so continue until it arrives or dies.

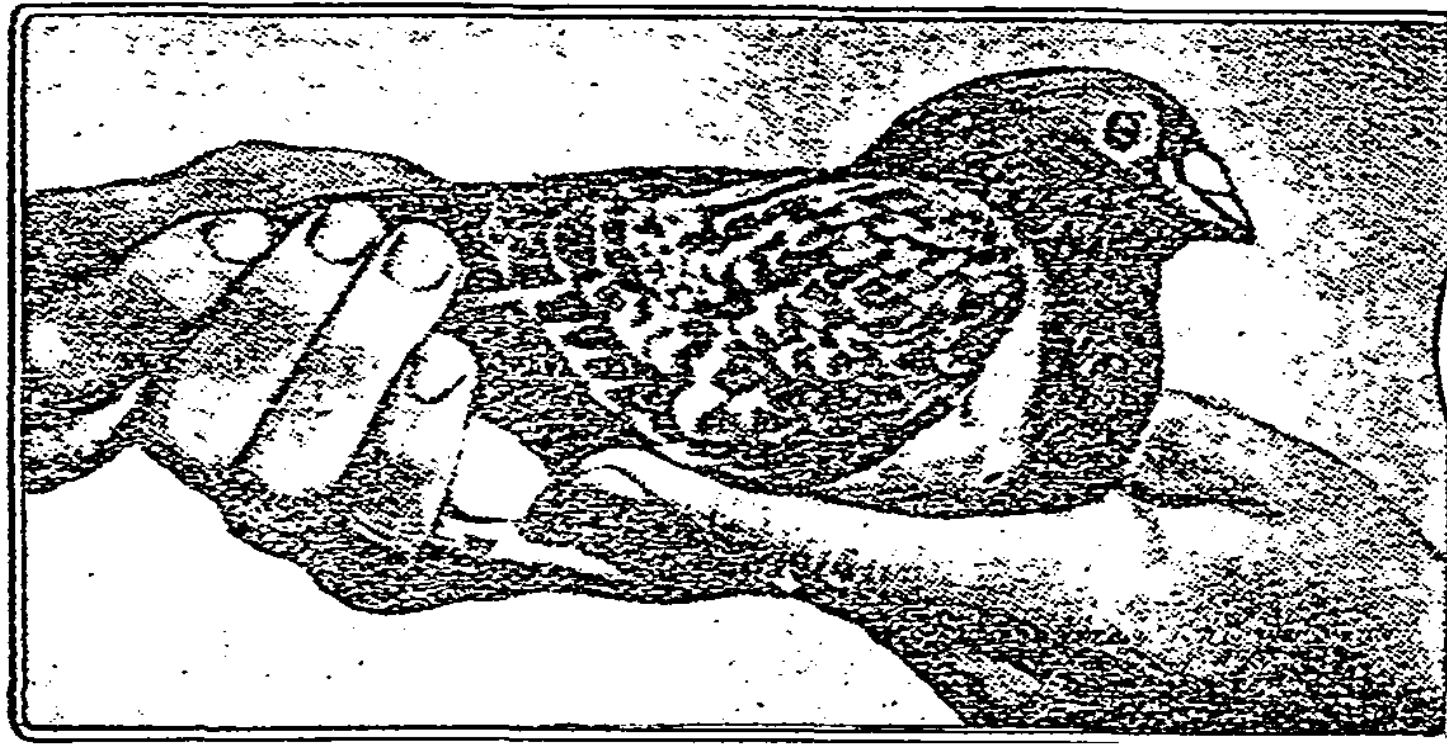
If, then, a message is tied to its leg before release, either wrapped around the leg and fastened with a rubber band, as they do in England, or placed in a tiny aluminium case with cover, as they do on the Continent, the pigeon will carry it with him. Of course, a pigeon will fly only one way—to its loft. To bring a message to a certain spot the bird must first be bred there and then when sent away, to the firing line, on board a ship, or up in an aeroplane, it must be kept prisoner until the occasion demands its release with a message fastened to its leg.

To my own "preparedness" loft in Burlington, Vt., I can fly youngsters bred in May of this year from the training camp at Plattsburg, N. Y., forty miles away, with the broad water jump of Lake Champlain between, beating the telegraph, which has to be relayed twice between the two points. Thus the training camp at Plattsburg can be kept in touch with the United States cavalry post at Fort Ethan Allen, in Burlington, without the use of telephones, telegraph, or wireless, just as might be the case under actual war conditions. It is a form of preparedness.

Burlington is forty miles from the Canadian border and ninety miles from Montreal, and the Champlain Valley has from Indian times been an invasion route to the United States. Now, I can receive a pigeon message from that city in one hour and forty minutes. Moreover, I have a few Canadian-born birds kept prisoners in my loft that will fly home when released with a return message. Every good loft keeps for breeding purposes birds which, if released, would fly to their original homes in many different directions. That is what happened in Belgium, where the people supplemented with their own birds those officially trained for the army.

Think what such service would mean in our great country, with communication severed and a long lake or a range of mountains between posts. Think particularly what an adequate pigeon service would now mean in Mexico in the pursuit of a bandit or of raiders; how quickly information could be received from distant points and how many weary miles of dispatch riding those pigeons could have saved. With pigeons in active service I believe we could have gotten Villa; and could not our army—at present I believe almost entirely ignorant of their existence—now advantageously use carrier pigeons with the expedition in Mexico?

With pigeons bred, let us say, in twelve of the nearest border towns and distributed among all Americans in Northern Mexico, the trail of every returning raiding party could be kept hot and our pursuing troops kept closely and accurately in touch with their every movement. What happens now? A returning band of raiders passes through a Mexican village, say twenty miles from the border. An American or native there may perhaps catch his horse, ride the twenty miles or more to the nearest United States post and report. The troopers



A male blue pigeon

and, in our country, almost unknown branch of the Signal Service. What was merely a fascinating sport in time of peace has become in an instant deadly serious in war, as Belgium knows. The German order promulgated throughout invaded Belgium: "Bring in your homing pigeons and firearms" is significant of their relative importance in the moment of impact, and all the pigeons that were turned in were shipped back to Germany, where they are now breeding carriers for the German Army, Navy, and aeroplane services.

Two hundred thousand homing pigeons were registered in Belgium at the outbreak of the war; now there are none, and the lofts famous throughout the world—Gits, Grooter, Hansenne, Soffle, and a dozen others, where international winners were bred—are empty, and their occupants in alien hands. In America we read lightly of racing pigeons being eaten by invading armies and of innocent fanciers shot against the walls of their lofts for no object whatever, and are only just beginning to learn that homing pigeons are valuable and fanciers not always innocent.

In Belgium every loft was registered as a part of an organized intelligence service, and homing pigeons were undoubtedly used in transmitting to all parts of the country the first news and the direction of the German advance. Every city, every village in Belgium had its pigeon club and there was a frequent interchange of birds. With telegraph and telephone wires cut, and wireless rendered unserviceable by day or in the presence of German counterwaves, news of the invasion was sent from village to village by carrier pigeons at the rate of a mile a minute; and if owners were shot dead it was not because they kept pigeons but because they sent and could continue to send information in a way the Germans could not stop.

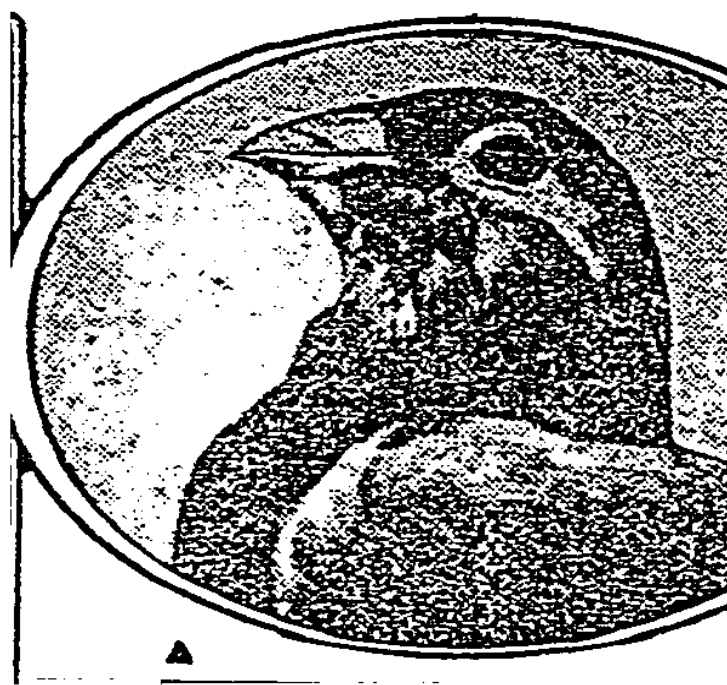
How much of the heroic Belgian defense was made possible by the prompt transmission of information borne by pigeons will probably never be known with exactness. It must have been considerable, for all ordinary means of communication were paralyzed at the outset either from without or by German agents residing in Belgium.

In England all pigeons on the south coast were killed within a few weeks after the war began to prevent their use by German spies; a good pigeon being able easily to carry a message 300 miles to the German frontier in a single day.

that siege and of these one carried no less than 40,000 messages in a single flight. The messages were first printed in ordinary type on large sheets, each sheet containing some 50,000 words, and then micro-photographed on films of collodion paper some two inches square. Sixteen of these papers, rolled and inserted into goose quill, weighed only one-twenty-fifth part of an ounce, which a pigeon could easily carry over the enemy lines. But, of course, to these messages there was no reply; the service was only in one direction, since a pigeon will fly only to its own home.

This obstacle has now been overcome; the location of the home can, it seems, be easily shifted, and last year saw the successful experiment by the French of breeding the birds in motor vans, stationed either near headquarters or in telephonic communication with them, and some distance in the rear of the trenches. As these vans were painted in different and brilliant colors, the pigeons soon came to recognize them as their homes, returning to them, even though in the meantime the van had been moved a considerable distance from its former position. One instance is officially reported of a van being moved 140 miles from the point at which the pigeon was taken out to be sent to the front in connection with the aeroplane service, and of the bird finding its way home to the van less than six hours after its release.

These pigeons, moreover, like many song birds, do not seem to mind the noise of battle and when released fly to their vans at speeds varying from 1,700 to 2,000 yards a minute for short distances, and at a height of from 500 to 600 feet in the air, from which point their vision



A steel-grey pigeon



Attaching messages under the tail

the French army. Special soldiers are detailed to look after them and a new branch for both the army and navy, the pigeon service, has been created. Carrier pigeons are employed to a greater or less extent by every nation engaged in the struggle, except possibly the Japanese, and from what little the censor lets through are doing extraordinarily valuable service in the transmission of messages and military intelligence. This is because a pigeon may go with his message where a man cannot live, and at hours when wireless is impracticable.

They are used not alone for taking messages from the trenches; they have taken pictures in tiny cameras; they are flown from ships at sea; they even go up regularly in aeroplanes, an observer taking a half dozen or so in a hamper beside him and releasing them as occasion demands, each with its message, and although the plane may subsequently be shot down or drop within the enemy lines and be captured, the report has gone back to headquarters quicker than the aviator himself could have carried it. Wonderfully endowed with instinct or intelligence—the controversy over which has lasted for decades without conclusion—and gifted with memory, speed and an amazing power of vision bred into the carrier pigeon for generations, it has remained for the great war to enlist these peculiar characteristics in the service of national defense.

Some birds, like human beings, continue their daily round, though the country be invaded or the heavens fall. Hens and ducks still serve as food; but the homer, the aristocrat of the feathered world, volunteered at once for the war and became at once an aviator, a wireless installation, and a faithful and distinguished member of the Secret Service.

These racing homers are not mere

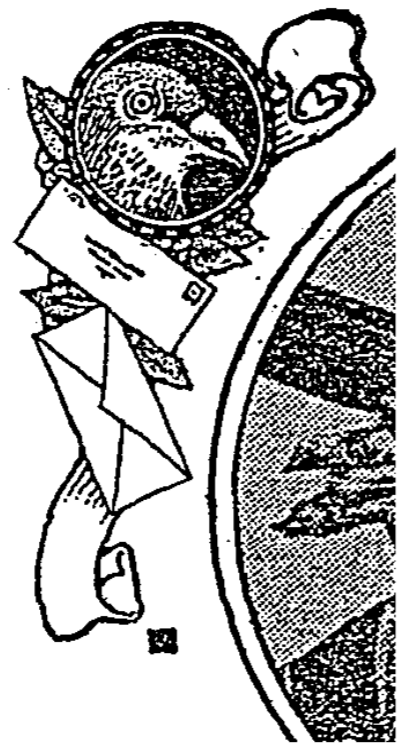
must then ride the same twenty miles or more to reach the village. Forty miles and the trail lost, as the informant does not know for certain which way the raiders have gone.

If he had merely sent a pigeon and, following at a safe distance, another and another, headquarters would have known within the half hour and could, in turn, have kept in touch with the flying column sent in pursuit, as each new message was received, by means of birds kept prisoners in camp, but bred in a van accompanying the troops. The birds when released would pick up the van with the latest information, furnishing a doubly efficient service; not only information as to the position of the raiders, but also orders sent to the pursuers.

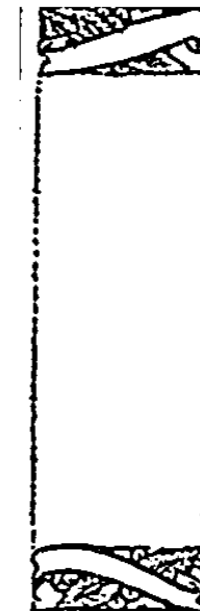
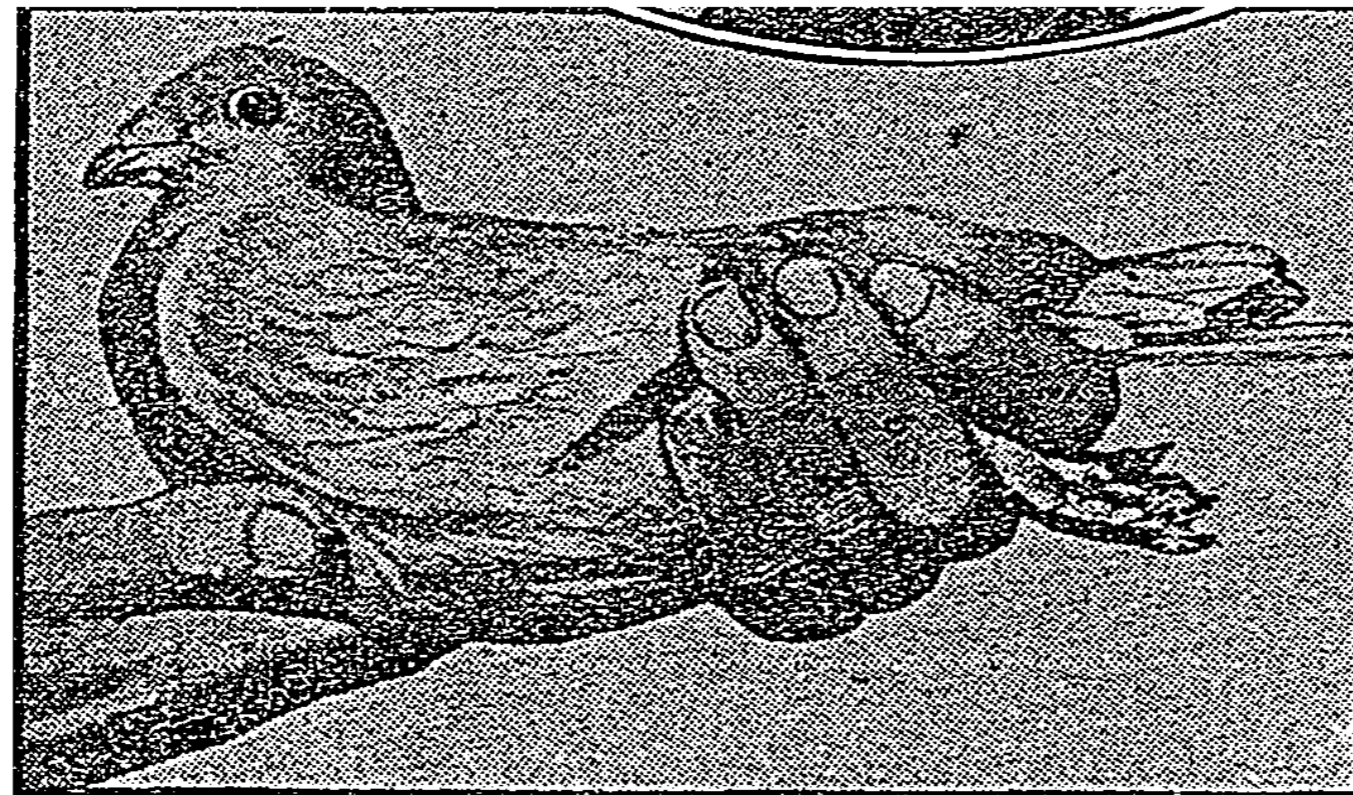
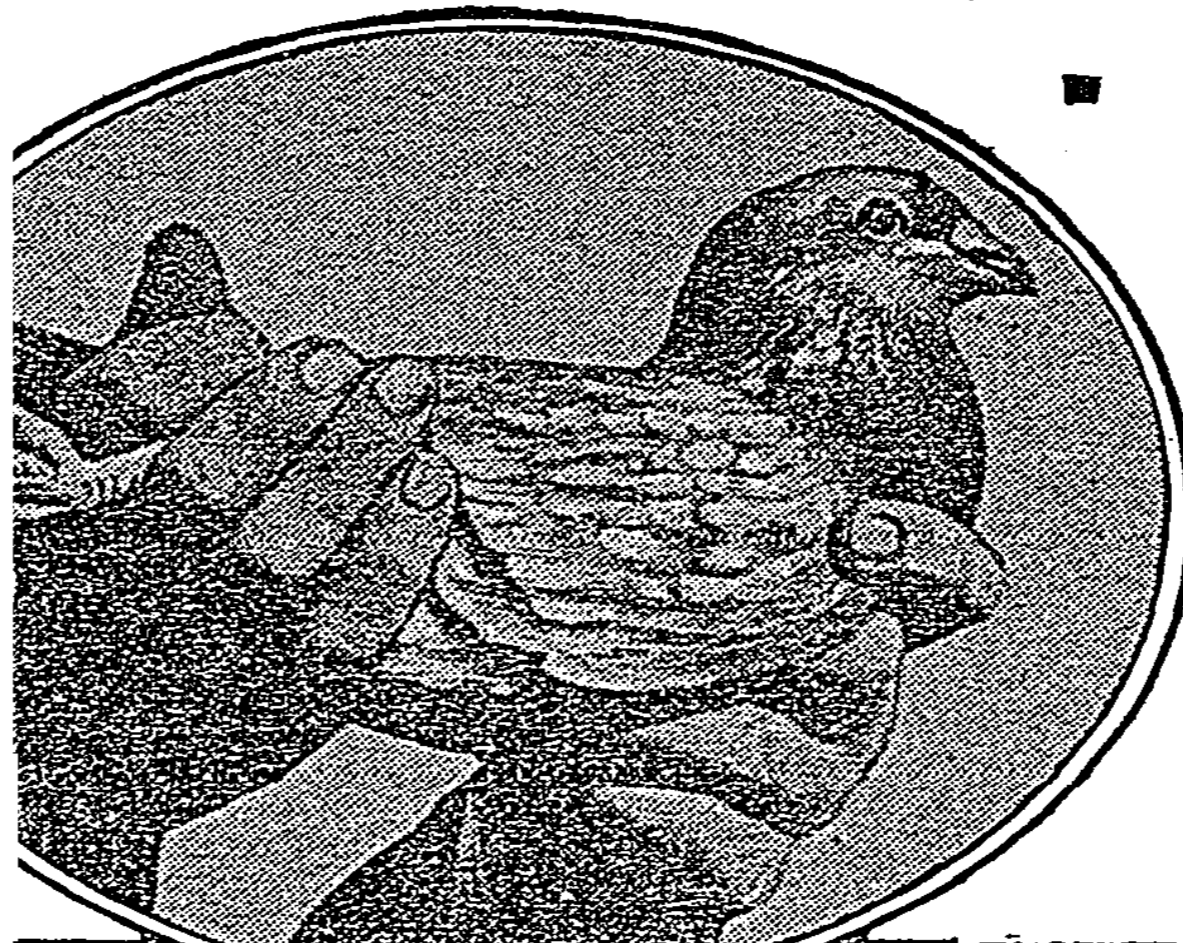
It seems impossible, but it is really very simple. It is the only service available in a broken and desolated country, where wires do not exist, where hills render the heliograph impossible, and where wireless is cumbersome, useless by day, and uncertain. Added even to our aeroplane service it would immeasurably have increased its efficiency, for an aeroplane that can send a dozen messages without returning to report is more effective than one that needs to return, land, and present its operator at headquarters with each new important item of information.

Some aviators ran out of gasoline and were lost for days in the desert with no possibility of communicating either their information or their plight to headquarters except to walk there. Pigeons, carried in a pannier so light as to be almost negligible, would have saved hours, days, almost weeks, of uncertainty.

Even in time of peace the military and civil service of homing pigeons would be of great value. Scouting parties seeking topographical information usually consist of one officer and four or five men.



White pigeon with grey carnail



A male grey pigeon

These are sent back at intervals to report, and when the last man has returned the officer comes back, and the expedition is over. Because of this necessity for communication, the radius of action is limited and food and water for all

five men must be carried. Individuals of such a party cannot carry a wireless set, yet one man with pigeons could divide the labor by five and permit of a correspondingly increased field of operation. And yet army publications on the

carrier pigeon ceased twenty years ago with the brief statement that while much development had been promised along these lines, the introduction of wireless rendered the employment of pigeons useless.

And you, the reader, may take part in such a nation-wide scheme of preparedness by raising and training your own homing pigeons and holding them ready for the service of the military authorities in time of war or of your community in time of peace. On every motor trip you can take a few pigeons and fly them back home from various distances, or any friend in a distant town will delight in flying them to you and telegraphing the moment of release. Express companies on all railroads carry crates at low cost, and I have uniformly found their agents courteous and willing to release the birds on arrival and to ship back the empty crates.

It is not difficult. Prepare your loft, get a few pairs of good birds from any reputable fancier and breed your own youngsters, registering them with one of the racing pigeon unions and banding them when four days old with the Union band, an aluminium ring bearing the number and year. This is slipped over the foot, to insure subsequent identification. If you have not the time, purchase youngsters already banded, which are able to fly and have not yet learned their loft. It takes eighteen days for the eggs to hatch, and four weeks later your pigeons are ready for the road and that personal training which makes the racing pigeon what he is and carries on his fine traditions. Perhaps not this year or the next, but some time your pigeons are going to be useful to your country or community, and, meanwhile, by introducing an intelligent and living wireless into your own home, you are busy preparing.