

NATIONAL PIGEON

SERVICE

In 1936 and again in September, 1938 resolutions were passed by the International Pigeon Board for conveyance to the Under Secretary of State, War Office to the effect that in the event of hostilities the members (numbering some 120,000) of the Unions affiliated to the International Pigeon Board would be pleased to give every assistance in regard to the supplying of pigeons for use in the carrying of messages.

Acknowledgement was made to the Secretary of the International Pigeon Board that the resolution of September 1938 had been passed to the Director of Signals Air Ministry and arising from which a conference was called by the Deputy Director of Signals Air Ministry in February, 1939, when the National Pigeon Service Committee was formed of 3 leading fanciers with the Secretary of the International Pigeon Board as Secretary to the Committee.

The Committee was empowered as circumstances demanded to co-op additional members to the Committee. Eventually the Committee consisted of 7 members, each member being allocated charge of National Pigeon Service affairs in the respective military areas namely, Western, Southern, Eastern, South Eastern, Scottish, Northern and Northern Ireland.

The Committee operated under the direction of the Air Ministry. The duties of the members of the Committee were varied and consisted of the formation of civilian groups of pigeon keepers for the supplying of pigeons which were used during the 1939/45 conflict. Other duties consisted of inspection of lofts and the settling of disputes in groups, the detailing and the laying on of Services, the checking up of lofts in connection with the issue of food coupons, the vetting of prospective applicants for enrolment to the Services as Pigeoneers/Pigeon keepers. In addition, the members of the Committee acted in a general advisory capacity on pigeon matters in liaison with Service personnel. The Committee met at approximately 100 conferences during the period of hostilities.

MEMBERSHIP

On the formation of the National Pigeon Service membership was open to those fanciers who bred and trained homing pigeons and who maintained lofts of at least 20 pigeons of quality approved by the Committee. Members had to give an undertaking to carry out the instructions of the committee and to be prepared to place their own services and/or the services of their birds at the disposal of the Service departments when necessary. Members were issued with a Badge and a Certificate of Membership.

It was originally planned to recruit to the Service 40,000 members, but enrolment was not rapid until the middle of 1940 when membership increased from some 2000 to approximately 7,000.

At this juncture the Air Ministry in consultation with the National Pigeon Service Committee agreed a policy to lower the original recruitment figure to allow enrolment of sufficient members who could provide the anticipated number of trained birds and produce the anticipated number of young birds likely to be required by the Services from time to time. This step was also necessary in view of the impending shortage of pigeon foods.

FIRST ACTIVITIES OF COMMITTEE

One of the first activities of the Committee was the compilation of a register of members who would supervise the organisation of pigeon lofts which would be required to work with the R.A.F. in peace-time. From this register one of the first needs had to be met, namely the equipping of reconnaissance aircraft with pigeons as an additional safety measure, for use in the event of wireless communications breaking down.

It was planned that pigeons for use with aircraft should be drawn from lofts of members living in the neighbourhood of certain R.A.F. stations. It was agreed that a grant of £5 per year be paid to owners whose pigeons were accepted for service of the Air Ministry to cover the use of 10 birds at any time. Grants were also made to cover the use of telephone.

National Pigeon Service Groups were formed for the supplying of pigeons to R.A.F. stations and each group was controlled by a civilian Pigeon Officer under the title of Pigeon Supply Officer and a Deputy Pigeon Supply Officer was also attached to each group. The duties of these 2 officers was to ensure supplies of pigeons from group members being available when needed by the Service.

The service of these officers was on a voluntary basis they only received reimbursement of actual out-of-pocket expenses in connection with postages, travelling to air stations and other incidental matters.

The actual supplying of pigeons for operational purposes was first commenced in the R.A.F. in November 1939. On the commencement of operational duties of N.P.S. groups the original system of £5 per year to members for supplying 10 pigeons was dispensed with in favour of the payment of 4d per bird per Service flight, and this method of payment was maintained until the end of hostilities.

In May 1940 the War Office inaugurated the Army Pigeon Service in conjunction with the N.P.S. in a similar manner to that of the R.A.F. the only difference being that in the use of N.P.S. members birds for Army and Home Guard Services the payment made was 2d per bird per flight. The reason for the difference in the amount paid for these services being based on the fact that pigeons used for ordinary Army, Home Guard Services did not have to fly the distance as that flown in the case of birds in use from aircraft and therefore the risk of loss of birds was very much less.

Pigeons were also supplied from N.P.S. Group Members lofts for use with Police Pigeon Services and National Fire Service and Civil Defence Units. Pigeons were also supplied for use by the United States Army Air Force and also the Canadian Air Force.

Under the direction of the Army Pigeon Service a special service was put into operation to supply birds for use by the Intelligence Services and for the purpose of supplying the required birds, Army Pigeon Service Special Section Groups were formed. Pigeons belonging to some 1,850 N.P.S. members were used on operations carried out by pigeons in connection with the Special Section.

In the case of all N.P.S. members who actually had birds used on operations a certificate of exemption was issued, exempting these particular lofts and birds from destruction in the event of an invasion. Certificates were issued in triplicate a copy being sent to the member operating the loft, a copy to the local N.P.S. representative and a copy to the local Chief Officer of Police. The latter 2 copies were essential as it would be the local N.P.S. representative under the direction of the local Police who would be responsible for the destroying of pigeons in the event of an invasion.

SECURITY MEASURES

In its early stages the N.P.S. Committee was charged with the appointment of what was to be known as Official Representatives, the duties of these representatives being mainly to assist the respective local Police Authorities in carrying out any regulations appertaining to pigeons which would be brought into force in the event of hostilities. Originally some 200 of these representatives were registered in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but eventually it was found necessary to increase the number of these representatives to about 1,500.

Many duties were actually carried out by these official representatives after the outbreak of hostilities, one of their principle duties being that of visiting lofts in company with Police officials in connection with the carrying out of Defence Regulation 9 of the Emergency Powers Defence Act 1939. Further assistance was rendered by these representatives in the issue of the special transit labels which it was necessary for pigeon fanciers to use in connection with the conveyance of pigeons to training and race points, these labels having to be signed by the Chief Officer of Local Police and countersigned by official N.P.S. Representatives with a view to preventing the labels getting into the hands of unauthorised persons. They also assisted in the matter of the signing of documents at points at which large Federations were liberating pigeons during the war period for racing purposes. A special form of permit D.R. Form 11 R was brought into use on the authority of the Home Office in connection with transit and liberation of large convoys of pigeons travelling in charge of convoyers, the use of these forms prevented the signing of hundreds of official labels. These forms of declaration had to be signed at the point of origin of the convoy by the Chief Officer of Police and at the point of liberation, the actual liberation had to be witnessed by an official N.P.S. Representative or a Police Officer who countersigned the form of declaration which was eventually passed back to the Police Office of origin.

Inspection of pigeon lofts was also carried out from time to time by Police Officers and N.P.S. representatives to check up on the birds contained in the respective lofts and that no birds of foreign origin were present in the lofts.

Measures were also taken whereby National Pigeon Service Representatives were charged by their respective local Chief Police Officers with the destruction of pigeons in any area in imminent danger of invasion from an enemy force. Certificates were issued to each official representative through the National Pigeon Service Committee authorising his appointment.

Under a Home Office instruction issued after the declaration of war was made in September 1939 a signal was sent out to each of the original 200 representatives instructing them to report to their nearest Police Office and make it known that their services would be available immediately or when required. These representatives carried out their duties in such a manner as to earn them the grateful thanks of respective Chief Officers of Police and also the thanks of the Secretary of State as contained in letter.

PRODUCTION OF YOUNG BIRDS

Possibly one of the heaviest demands made upon N.P.S. members generally was in regard to the production of young pigeons for supplying to the various Services. A great deal of work was involved in this direction and during the period of hostilities the members of the National Pigeon Service supplied some 215,750 young pigeons. No payment was actually made in respect of these young pigeons, compensation was made to breeders in the form of a free issue of pigeon food. Members were made a grant of 1 cwt of pigeon food free of cost in respect of each 8 young birds which they produced and which were accepted by the Services.

The various Services would make indents for the number of young birds required each year, giving their monthly requirements. Breeders were then notified through N.P.S. Headquarters that so many young birds were required from them at a given date and it was always endeavoured to have the birds produced within the areas to which they had to eventually be delivered. Much work was entailed in the routine in regard to notification for production of the birds, which also entailed the issue and registration of specially marked identification rings issued to the breeders. When the birds had been produced the breeders were provided with a card to notify N.P.S. Headquarters. Transit forms and labels, together with instructions as to the destination of birds, were then sent to the respective breeders and the necessary records then made on ring records. When the birds arrived at their destination acknowledgement was made of receipt of birds to headquarters who proceeded then to issue through the respective department the Free Food Vouchers to the breeders. Eventually, the Vouchers after having been handed to the Corn Retailers, were passed back to N.P.S. Headquarters for the attention of the Finance Branch.

In order to deal with the influx of young birds and their distribution to the various R.A.F. stations, Army and U.S.A. and Canadian Units, depots were set up under the control of N.P.S. Committeemen and R.A.F. pigeon keepers at Edinburgh, Stepney (London), Slough and Manchester.

PIGEON FOOD

Towards the end of 1940 the situation in regard to supplies of pigeon food caused some concern and conferences were called between Ministry of Food, Air Ministry and War Office Representatives and the N.P.S. Committee and finally it was decided that rationing of pigeon food and control of prices would be necessary. It was ultimately decided that it would be necessary to confine the sale of pigeon food to those fanciers who had been enrolled to membership of the N.P.S. and whose trained birds would be required for use by the Services or those who were likely to be called upon to produce young birds. The method of rationing was carried out in accordance with the Feeding Stuffs National Priority Mixture Order 1941 by means of coupon cards which were issued through National Pigeon Service Headquarters. The first issue of ration coupons was made on the 1st February 1941 and the coupons were issued to approximately 9,000 N.P.S. members on the basis of 7lbs of mixture per week in respect of each 10 birds owned by each member.

In 1942 a further shortage of pigeon food necessitated members only being allowed feeding stuffs for a maximum of 40 pigeons except in special cases where for Service purposes it was necessary for members to maintain a larger number of birds. In June 1944 a further drastic cut had to be made and all members were only allowed feeding for a maximum of 20 pigeons.

In addition to the issue of the ordinary basic ration coupons a great deal of work was done by the N.P.S. Department concerned in the issue of Free Food Vouchers issued to members operating pigeons on R.A.F. and Army Pigeon Service Groups.

INCIDENTAL ITEMS

In the case of members operating with recognised N.P.S. Groups either with Army or R.A.F. Services the installation of telephones was arranged at the residences of the Group Members.

The N.P.S. were also charged with the issue of petrol coupons to Committee Members and Pigeon Supply Officers and to Official Representatives, in order to enable them to make use of private cars for official duties.

Pigeon Supply Officers were granted exemption from Home Guard duties by the National Service Department as in the event of pigeons on use, it was essential for Pigeon Supply Officers to be available at their homes.

Other matters in which N.P.S. members and representatives have rendered assistance was in regard to the wanton shooting of pigeons in various districts and also assisting in the destruction of hawks in scheduled areas, as an amendment made to regulation allowed of the destruction of hawks which were a menace to Service pigeons.

In connection with the transit of pigeons between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and vice versa an inspection of pigeons had to be made at the ports and declaration forms signed. These duties were carried out by N.P.S. Port Inspectors at Liverpool, Milford Haven, Fishguard, Holyhead, London Docks and Belfast.

WAR SERVICE AND THE DICKIN MEDAL

Thousands of pigeons were used in the war effort. Every reconnaissance and bomber aircraft carried a homing pigeon and pigeons were used widely for returning messages from the front line, not just in Britain and Northern Europe, but Africa and the Mediterranean countries too. These pigeons undoubtedly contributed to the saving of many lives and the success of vital operations.

Mrs. Maria Dickin, the founder of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, was so moved by the contribution of animals to the war effort, that she instituted the Dickin Medal, often referred to as the 'Animal V.C.' . It was awarded to any animal displaying conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty associated with, or under the control of, any branch of the Armed Services or Civil Defence units during World War II and its aftermath. The award was made only upon official recommendation and was exclusive to the animal kingdom. Of 53 Dickin Medals awarded 31 were presented to pigeons.