Port History of The Australian Corps of Signals
Pigeon Service
1942
Early in 1942 when Australia was threatened by invasion the communication for the defence of the country was chiefly by line and wireless. However, when the whole defence system was reviewed certain weaknesses were discovered in the existing facilities. Line was very vulnerable to enemy action, wireless could be overheard by an enemy, and if a landing did take place the use of messengers or liaison officers would not always be practicable. The need for an alternate means of communication was most apparent. This means had to be relatively safe from enemy action, quick, secret and reliable.

To investigate the possibilities of homing pigeons to fulfil this demand, a conference was held between prominent civilian pigeon fanciers and Senior Army Signal officers, the outcome of which was that selected pigeons were to undergo a series of trials. Trials were conducted and proved so satisfactory that the formation of a Pigeon Service was decided upon.

As the Australian Corps of Signals had the responsibility of supplying communications to the Army it was decided to incorporate the Pigeon Service with this Corps, so this new Service was adopted by the Corps of Signals and was known as the Australian Corps of Signals Pigeon Service. The original role for this service was to provide an alternate means of communication between the coast defences of Australia in the event of invasion or damage to existing means by enemy action.

With this plan in view a number of personnel serving in the Army who had been Pigeon Fanciers in civilian life were selected and formed the trained nucleus of the Pigeon Service and in addition, many civilian Fanciers were enlisted. An appeal was then made to Fanciers throughout Australia to donate pigeons to the Service. The response to this appeal was so overwhelming, both in the quantity and quality of the birds that the Service requirements were completely filled. In all, during 1942-43 a total of 13,500 birds was donated by generous Fanciers, who received no monetary gain from this magnificent effort.

Lofts were organised and by the end of 1942 a complete coverage of the strategic parts of VICTORIA, NEW SOUTH WALES, QUEENSLAND and WESTERN AUSTRALIA was obtained, linking the various aircraft spotting, coast watching, and Volunteer Defence Corps posts. An alternate role was given these lofts in providing communication between Army Small Craft and the coast. This service was so successful that it was soon realized that the use of pigeons in Jungle Warfare had vast possibilities as the use of line and wireless was severely handicapped by the difficult country being encountered.

As the war progressed and the Japanese were pushed back along the Kokoda Trail, 8th Australian Pigeon Section arrived in PORT MORESBY during Dec 1942. The lofts were located at PAGA, BOOTSLESS BAY and MILNE BAY carrying messages for shore batteries, US Small Ships, and craft of 1st Australian Water Transport Group.

During this time reinforcement birds for the Sections in New Guinea were being flown from Australia, where generous Pigeon Fanciers were donating young birds to the Army. It was found, however, that the sudden change of climate and the humid conditions were very detrimental to these young birds and usually caused an outbreak of roup.

To overcome this difficulty, Army Breeding Lofts were established to breed pigeons in the area in which they were to operate. These lofts were stocked with the pigeons donated in Australia.

The training and maintenance of efficiency of pigeons under tropical conditions presented many difficulties not normally encountered in milder climates.

To overcome these difficulties an officer at Headquarters, Australian Military Forces who had had much experience in the breeding
and handling of pigeons, was fully employed in investigating each problem. From the information collated, a system of training and feeding that overcame these obstacles was developed.

The undermentioned points may be recorded as difficulties that arose and were overcome –

(a) Detachments or complete Sections must be sited by D + 3 if full and successful use is to be made of pigeons used with ground forces and birds must be mobile-trained to enable them to settle quickly.

(b) Detachments cannot function satisfactorily without transport, jeeps and trailers for preference should be allotted on the basis of one for each Detachment. Transport is essential to train the pigeons quickly.

(c) Young pigeons 3 to 5 months old, preferably bred under tropical conditions, and mobile-trained, proved more tractable than birds approaching 12 months old and over.

(d) In the early stages of the New Guinea Campaign it was found that personnel using pigeons had little appreciation of their value and practically no knowledge of their care and handling. This was overcome to a very large extent by attaching lofts to Signal Schools, Infantry Training Schools and Wagon Transport Schools both on the mainland and overseas. Personnel passing through these schools received instruction and practical demonstrations in the use of pigeons.

(e) The retention of one additional loft for each section as a reinforcement and training loft also proved most satisfactory and necessary. This loft made available a reserve of trained pigeons. In addition the extra loft made it possible to train young pigeons without interfering with the routine and commitments of an Operating Detachment.

(f) The supply of reinforcement personnel who had not had civil experience with racing pigeons did not prove satisfactory.

(g) It was found that to maintain pigeons in the best condition possible it was imperative for lofts to be well ventilated. Ventilation was obtained through a 3” opening along the top of the back.

(h) It was found necessary to withhold all morning exercise flights. Exercise around the loft, if necessary, was carried out in the late afternoon thus minimizing the danger of pigeons “breaking” and endeavouring to find their old location.

(i) The maximum “safe” distance which pigeons can be flown under tropical conditions was found to be 50 miles. If the distance is greater than this it is preferable to install an intermediate loft.

(j) It was found that coloured pigeons such as pieds, mealys, and red chequers frayed very heavily in the flight feathers so a policy was adopted that only dark feathered pigeons were sent to forward areas.

(k) It was found that grain forwarded to the tropics in bags deteriorated rapidly due to weevils and other vermin. Grain that was clean when leaving the mainland soon became infested when lying in Base Store Depots. To counteract this it was decided to forward all grain in airtight drums. This had the desired effect of preventing it from becoming infected from outside sources.

(l) Experience has shown that the undermentioned ration scale was quite suitable for pigeons operating under tropical conditions:
The heat and humidity caused feather lice to be very prevalent and this pest had to be kept in check by frequent dusting of pigeons with a suitable insecticide powder.

Towards the end of hostilities experiments were carried out with DDT for this purpose and a very small percentage of DDT in Talc proved very effective. Pigeons showed no adverse effect or loss of condition through the use of this insecticide even when used in the proportion of 50% DDT and 50% Talc.

As a result of experience gained the Australian Corps of Signals, Pigeon Service was re-organised, early in 1944. Two types of Sections were formed and organised to perform separate roles. These were:

A Pigeon Section "Type A" which was designed for use within Field Formations and consisted of:

- A Headquarters
- One Breeding Loft comprising 100 stock birds (donated by civilian fanciers)
- Five Operating Detachments each equipped with one 30-bird loft

A Pigeon Section "Type B" was designed for employment with Small Craft, Line of Communication Areas, and Training establishments and comprised:

- A Headquarters
- One Breeding Loft of 200 stock birds (donated by civilians)
- One Operating Detachment of 120 birds
- Four Operating Detachments of 60 birds

The personnel who trained and maintained the birds in each Section consisted of:

1 Officer (Lieutenant)
1 Sergeant
5 Corporal Clerk
5 Corporal Loftmen
6 Signalmen Loftmen (Trade Group 3)
1 Batman Driver

The transport allotted to these Sections varied according to the Section’s operational role, but was fairly standardised at six 1½-ton Jeeps for mobile work and one 1½-ton Jeep for static roles.

In addition where three or more Sections operated within a formation a Captain was included on the Chief Signal Officer’s Staff in the capacity of technical adviser on the use of pigeons.

The re-organisation of the Pigeon Service on these lines proved highly satisfactory and efficient.

In 1943 due to the increased demands for pigeons in New Guinea, 1st Australian Pigeon Section was moved from QUEENSLAND to FORT MORESBY on 14 July 43, taking over the territory of 8th Australian Pigeon Section which moved its Headquarters to Buna and operated with small craft along the eastern coast of New Guinea.

In Sep 43, 3 lofts of 1 Section were located at BULLDOG, CENTRE CAMP and FOXES SADDLE to assist in providing communications for Engineers building the Bulldog-Wau Road. The pigeons of these lofts
situated in the Owen Stanley Ranges were called upon to operate under conditions which probably no other Army pigeons had to endure. Fortunately the distances they had to cover were not great but at times the birds had to rise 2,000 ft in a distance of 3 miles with torrential rain or mist a distinct possibility. Losses in pigeons were fairly considerable but fortunately rarely was a message not delivered. Pigeons naturally could not operate with normal efficiency under such conditions but they filled a gap caused by the frequent disruption of line communication by the almost incessant rain causing washaways and landslides along the road.

At this time 7th Australian Pigeon Section was located at DARWIN and was carrying messages from shore batteries and small craft. In addition valuable work was being carried out by this Section in experimenting with pigeons for mobile warfare.

In Dec 43 several lofts were attached to the American 6th Army; the plan being to train American Infantry troops in the handling of pigeons prior to the landings at SAIDOR, ARAWA, and the ADMIRALTY ISLANDS. When landings at these points were made, these lofts manned by Australian personnel with Australian pigeons accompanied the Task Forces and gave complete satisfaction to the American Commanders.

The undermentioned example is typical of the work done by pigeons in these areas.

During the fierce struggle for MANUS ISLAND, now an Allied Naval Base, the United States Marines sent a reconnaissance patrol to the strategic village of DRABITO to investigate the enemy's strength and dispositions. The patrol was undetected on its way in but was strongly attacked by Japs whilst returning with the information that about five hundred of the enemy were concentrating in DRABITO in preparation for a counter-attack. The patrol's radio was rendered inoperative during the action so two pigeons were released warning the Headquarters of the impending danger. The Japanese knowing that receipt of this information would interfere with their plans intensified their efforts to wipe out the patrol. These two pigeons were unfortunately shot down immediately they were released leaving Army pigeon 879 DD 43 Q as the sole remaining means of contact with the Force Headquarters. This pigeon was released during a lull in the fighting and despite heavy fire directed at it on release reached Headquarters thirty miles distance in 47 minutes. As a result of this gallant effort DRABITO was heavily bombed causing the enemy to retire thus allowing our patrol to return safely.

The Chief Signal Officer of the American Forces in the South West Pacific Area showed his appreciation in a memo to the Signal Officer in Chief Australian Military Forces in which he stated, "The co-operative action taken by your Office in furnishing pigeon communications for United States troops during recent operations is greatly appreciated. Reports from the field indicate that the value of pigeons, as an auxiliary means of communication has been established on a firm basis of successful flights performed. The birds, equipment and personnel furnished from Australian sources have proved of the highest value in this respect."

In Australia a policy was being adopted that reinforcement personnel being sent to New Guinea should receive instruction in the use of pigeons. At Infantry re-inforcement centres and at Water Transport Training Schools selected reinforcements received instruction on the care and handling of pigeons. In this important work 2nd Australian Pigeon Section and 6th Australian Pigeon Section, which was previously located at THURSDAY ISLAND, performed a valuable role and as a result of their enthusiasm, the confidence of the fighting soldier in the use of pigeons increased a hundredfold. At these centres these Sections also carried out useful research and experimental work in the care, breeding and handling of pigeons under Army conditions.

During Feb 44 the lofts on the Bulldog-Wau Road were withdrawn and a loft was located with New Guinea School of Signals, KONIKAI. This loft did sterling work in the training of signal personnel in the handling and care of pigeons.
In May 44 8th Australian Pigeon Section returned to Australia and was allotted to 7th Australian Division Signals. 1st Australian Pigeon Section which remained in New Guinea took over the commitments of 8 Section. At the same time all lofts were withdrawn from the American Forces and concentrated at LAE, 1st Australian Pigeon Section moving its Headquarters to that area from MORRESBY. Lofts were allotted to 23 Brigade at WAU and 3rd Australian Division at BULOLO and were used as a means of communication from WAU to BULOLO and for training with infantry patrols.

In June 44 lofts were sited at HANSA BAY and MILLAT for employment with 5th Australian Division and another was sited at MADANG for use with 1st Australian Water Transport Group.

Pigeons by now were in big demand as a means of communication from barges and small craft, many crews refusing to leave without them. The following examples show only too clearly that the confidence of these crews was not misplaced.

During an exceptionally heavy tropical storm in June 1945, Army boat 1402 foundered on WADAU BEACH in the HUON GULF and sent the following cryptic message to its Headquarters at MADANG. "Engine failed. Washed on beach at WADAU owing heavy seas. Send help immediately. Craft rapidly filling up with sand".

Army pigeon 139 DD 43 T, a blue bar cock, carried this message through heavy rain to MADANG, a distance of 40 miles in 50 minutes. As a result a rescue ship was sent and the craft, together with its valuable cargo of ammunition and stores, was saved. This pigeon had flown a total of 23 operational flights totalling a distance of 1004 miles.

In March 1945, Water Transport Group Headquarters at MADANG received the following message by pigeon - "Steering cable broken am in middle of RASCH PASSAGE. Send help URGENT". A rescue craft was sent immediately and reached the stricken barge just in time to prevent it from being washed onto the reef. The saving of this barge, loaded with valuable equipment, was achieved only by the speed the message for assistance was delivered. Army pigeon 1582 QPS 41 a Blue Bar Cock flew the 4 miles to Headquarters in five minutes. This bird had previously done 31 operational flights totalling 1,257 miles.

Lofts of 1st Australian Pigeon Section were attached to the 5th Australian Division which captured MADANG in 1944 and pushed on towards ALEXISAPEN and HANSA BAY. The force was so widely scattered and the use of line or Despatch Riders so impracticable that the use of a comprehensive Pigeon Despatch Service had to be resorted to to supplement wireless. This service covered the whole of the Division's area of responsibility extending from SAIDOR in the south to HANSA BAY in the north and as far inland as the upper reaches of the SEFIK RIVER. In a period of about 4 months in mid-1944 the pigeons attached to this Division handled a large amount of traffic, at least six times more quickly than it could have been handled by native carrier or watercraft.

Towards the latter part of 1944 the 8th Australian Pigeon Section arrived in New Guinea and relieved 1 Section of its commitments in that area, 10th Australian Pigeon Section locating its lofts with 3rd Australian Water Transport Group at PORT MORRESBY, LAE, MADANG and JACQUINOT BAY.

On 1st Australian Pigeon Section being freed of its responsibility in New Guinea it moved to BOUGAINVILLE in Oct 1944 for duty with 1st Australian Water Transport Group operating in that area. As operations progressed 60-bird lofts were located at SAPOSA ISLAND in the North, GAZELLE HARBOUR in the South with a 240-bird loft at Section Headquarters at FUKIATA ISLAND. This Section was now carrying 800 messages a month, some birds carrying 4 and 5 operational messages a week. In addition to providing a service for small craft pigeons from this Section were used extensively by War Correspondents who found that due to heavy operational traffic on the normal lines of communication the length of their despatches there was a delay of 48 hrs in transmitting their reports from the battle area to TORKINA. Pigeons...
proved the answer to this bottleneck and it is due to these remarkable birds that news of campaigns in this area was made available to the public 24 hrs after an action took place.

On one particular occasion when the battle for BUNIN ROAD was at its height a pigeon carried a special press announcement of 2,000 words for a distance of 50 miles in 75 minutes. This despatch had to be carried in a special container as it was much too large to place in the normal carrier. As a result of this exceptionally fine effort the Australian public had the news of the BUNIN ROAD success only twenty-four hours after it actually happened. If this pigeon had not carried the message it would have taken several days to deliver this announcement to the Australian wireless terminal as the forward wireless sets were fully occupied in passing operational messages and all roads had been washed out by heavy rains.

The 7th Australian Pigeon Section which had previously been operating at DARWIN arrived at BOUGAINVILLE in Oct 1944 and lofts were allotted to Brigade and Battalion level.

As the Australian troops advanced, lofts from this Section moved forward with them, pigeons carrying messages from Infantry patrols, personnel of these patrols having the utmost faith in the birds.

During this campaign, in July 1945 a loft was established at TCHO on the southern coast of BOUGAINVILLE. On one occasion an Infantry Company of the 3rd Australian Division was pinned down and surrounded by a superior enemy force. The Japanese had cut off or destroyed all means of communication to Battalion Headquarters except two pigeons carried by the Company. Army pigeon 3863 DB 44 was despatched with an urgent call for reinforcements and artillery support in order that the position could be relieved by nightfall. Despite heavy tropical rain and the fact that this bird was fired on by 60-70 Japanese immediately on release, Army pigeon 3863 DB 44 flew the 22 miles in 3 hours arriving at the loft in an exhausted and wounded state. As a result of this gallant effort artillery support was given and the Company with its wounded was withdrawn safely before dark.

Work such as this was not quite common and the pigeons were definitely established as a means of communication in Jungle Warfare. Demands for pigeons were now so great that it was becoming exceedingly difficult to meet all demands, in some cases pigeons were liberated singly instead of the normal procedure of liberating in pairs.

During Nov 44, the 4th Australian Pigeon Section arrived at ATTARA from the mainland and moved with Sigs 6th Australian Division down the coast until WOBWAK was reached.

Lofts worked with Infantry Battalions and Cavalry Commando Squadrons. During Feb 45 an important Infantry patrol known as JOCK FORCE had been out of communication with 6th Australian Division for some days when 4 Pigeon Section was ordered to drop pigeons from aircraft to the patrol for the purpose of carrying vital reports back to Division Headquarters. Shortly afterwards six birds were successfully dropped by parachute to the patrol. Despite the fact that these pigeons had only previously been used on the coastal areas over distances up to 10 miles and high features in the Terricell Mountains had to be negotiated, the first pigeon brought back a message a distance of 46 miles in 50 minutes after being fired on by the enemy on release. From information carried by these birds many successful air strikes were made and future operational moves were planned.

Also in Nov 44, the 9th Australian Pigeon Section arrived at NEW BRITAIN and set up their headquarters with Sigs 2nd Australian Division at JACQUINOT BAY. On arrival a 30-bird loft moved with 36th Infantry Battalion to OPEN BAY where the birds did valuable work with Infantry Patrols. Another loft was attached to 13th Brigade at TOI PLANTATION.

The demand for pigeons in this area was so great that it was necessary to increase the detachment by another 30 birds.

During Feb 45 a detachment of 5th Australian Pigeon Section left BRISBANE with 22 Line of Communication Sigs for MOROTAI. Pigeons travelled well as
made for the loft to be erected on the deck of the ship. The loft was eventually moved with 26th Brigade to TARAKAN. Pigeons were successfully flown, without difficulty and were soon proving their worth in operations with a Machine Gun Battalion and Small Ships Company. Monthly traffic handled by this loft was 4,500 groups, distances flown averaging 30 miles.

In April 45, 3rd Australian Pigeon Section complete, moved from TOWNSVILLE for LABUAN with the rear party of 9th Australian Division. Due to lack of space on the ship it was impossible to arrange deck loading for the loft and the pigeons were therefore confined to the baskets, their condition suffered accordingly and many were badly picked about the eyes and some suffered wing cramp. Detachments were later attached to the Brigades and good results were achieved.

Also in April 45, the balance of the 5th Australian Pigeon Section left CAIRNS for MOROTAI. Deck loading of loft was arranged and all pigeons were given freedom of loft whilst in transit. All pigeons arrived in first class condition and resettling of pigeons in Operational Detachments was carried out within 7 days. This Section was located at "M" Aust Corps Sig. MOROTAI, and filled an important role as its trained young birds were made available to both 5 and 6 Pigeon Sections. In addition the Section controlled all breeding activities, using in addition to its own Breeding Detachment the Breeding Detachments of 3 and 8 Pigeon Sections. A fine type of young bird was bred and given early training prior to its despatch to an Operating Detachment.

During May 45, the 8th Australian Pigeon Section moved from TOWNSVILLE with Sigs 7th Australian Division en route to BALIKPAPAN. Here again it was necessary to confine the birds to the baskets for the whole of the journey which necessitated a period of time being allotted for recuperation.

This Section averaged 7,500 groups per month and the messages carried were all of an operational nature from forward patrols, distances covered by the birds ranged up to 25 miles and an average velocity of 40 mph was maintained.

Very meritorious work was carried out by Detachments of this Section, as an example, a patrol of the 2/9th Infantry Battalion located enemy positions approximately 16 miles from RIKKO where an advanced 30-bird Pigeon Detachment was established. Two pigeons were released after being confined 3 days in a 2-bird container and flew the 16 miles in 28 minutes. The information carried was of such a nature that valuable data was obtained as to enemy strengths not previously available.

As a further example of the fine efforts put up by these feathered messengers, 2 birds accompanied a forward patrol of 9/14th Infantry Battalion, the patrol was ambushed and pinned down by a strong party of Japanese causing casualties to our men. The pigeons were despatched with a message calling for air support and blood plasma for the injured. The air strike was successful causing the enemy to abandon its position and arrangements were made for the delivery of the blood plasma. The distance covered was 38 miles and was flown in 40 minutes.

The high standard of efficiency attained by the Australian Corps of Signals Pigeon Service was rendered possible by the technical knowledge and keenness of its Officers and Men.

All Officers and NCO’s had had wide experience in civilian pigeon racing and the practical experience of such Officers as Capt D.H. Day, Capt B.T. Cornish, Lt S. Cranfield, Lt R. Ware, Lt Richmond, Lt E. Gofton, Lt A. Imber, Lt L. Roach and Lt K. Wrightson together with the enthusiasm and knowledge of the NCOs, made the success of this branch of the Australian Corps of Signals assured.

A contributing factor to the achievements of the Pigeon Service was the outstanding quality of civilian-donated birds and fanciers can be justly proud of their magnificent contribution to the War effort.