

***Cher Ami*: Heroine of men**



Cher Ami

Smithsonian. National Museum of American History. Cher Ami.

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How do I begin to describe my short, but fulfilled, life as a homing pigeon? I was one of 600 Army Signal Corps pigeons dispatched to France to aid in battlefield communication. After rescuing 194 war survivors, I was given the appellation *Cher Ami*, which means "dear friend", and I was presented by the French government with the *Croix de Guerre* for courage on the battlefield, one of the many accolades I received, after surviving my final and most recognised mission. After being wounded through the breast, blinded in one eye, and only being left with one leg hanging on by a tendon, I died prematurely and wore the scars of the war, symbolising my heroic sacrifice, which was recognised when I returned home. Out of the 554 soldiers caught in the battle, 107 had been killed, 63 were missing, and 190 were wounded; only 194 were unharmed physically.

My home nest was near Argonne, at the American army headquarters. Argonne was a lovely woodland with towering trees in peacetime, before the war unfolded which killed and wounded millions of human beings and animals. However, the Great War had converted France's woodlands into battlegrounds. Whittlesey, a United States Army Medal of Honor recipient, conducted an attack on the Germans in Argonne in the fall of 1918. Whittlesey's soldiers confronted a formidable German force deep in the woods on October 3. The Americans were quickly surrounded and attacked. The men attempted to retaliate but they were short on supplies and exhausted. The food supply had run out, and it was difficult to obtain water and other supplies crucial to survival. More soldiers and innocent people were killed or wounded every hour, and Whittlesey dispatched and entrusted pigeons like me, with messages for assistance, but the pigeons I was trained alongside were often shot, or disappeared one by one, making it only a matter of time until we would perish or eventually succumb to injuries caused by disease, the harsh conditions or combat.

As carrier pigeons we have been treated as invaluable, especially as a form of communication. I remember when my life purpose was chosen for me, being one of almost 600 carrier pigeons employed by the US Army Signal Corps, sent to France to assist with communication on the battlefield. We were trained to be a reliable source between the soldiers, especially on the battle front, to send messages as an alternate form of communication through the radio, which I have witnessed between the humans. Before us, radios were often used to communicate and receive important messages but were often unreliable because radios are bound by delicate wires, which can often be extremely dangerous to replace and is a time-consuming process. The average that a homing pigeon can fly is approximately fifty miles per hour, making us a quick method of communication, but still, we are always a target to enemy gunfire, despite our speed and endurance. Additionally, we are always a risky form of communication and way to communicate, because if we are shot down, our messages we are entrusted to carry can be easily intercepted by enemy forces and pay the price of defending our country and its brave soldiers, by facing death. I have always wanted to make my trainer Captain John L. Carney proud. Carney has not always been a pigeon breeder; he delivers newspapers in his spare time and is a war veteran of Pittsburgh. I am proud to be from America and sacrifice my life to save the lives of American soldiers stuck in battle and stranded at war; a small price to pay for my country. As carrier pigeons we are not always recognised for our valiant efforts; especially when our fellow pigeons are dropping dead and being killed one by one by soldiers. I am a veteran, with twelve previous missions at Verdun, meaning I am no stranger to enemy fire.

It is early October; American soldiers have come from the 77th division and become trapped in the Argonne Forest behind German lines on the slopes of a hill. Reports have been issued by the humans that this has cut around 550 men that are from the 306th, 307th and 308th regiments under Major Charles Whittlesey from accessing reinforcements and critical supplies for several days, keeping them out of radio range, making communication difficult. The skies are just as dangerous as the ground; there is a barrage of machine guns and rain. The last pair of birds have been released and I have seen them both fall from the skies, their tiny bodies torn apart by German fire. Major Whittlesey whispered to me in desperation telling me that he needs to send me, and I am his only hope. I look into his loving eyes, I am scared, but I know what I must do, all help is lost for all of us if I do not make it. I make my flight but soon after take-off I am hit, a bullet straight in my chest. It stings so badly; I am bleeding, and I flutter helplessly to the ground. I peer up out of one eye, as the bullet has blinded me and I see the soldiers' faces, they are looking at me in horror. Against all odds I wobble up and I take flight again, I am airborne, charging head on into a wave of bullets. I fly as fast as I can and I cover 25 miles to the command post and arrive at the base heavily wounded, my left leg is hanging off attached only by a thin tendon, the messenger canister is still attached. Army medics work on me and as I am going in and out of consciousness, I hear them say, she has just saved 194 men, she has just saved The Lost Battalion. I feel proud as I think of the men, my friends. It feels like it has been weeks, but they tell me it has been a few hours since they operated on me. I look down to see bandages wrapped around my chest, from under the bandages I catch a glimpse of a little wooden leg a soldier has carved especially for me.

"She's awake," calls a nurse. She runs her fingers ever so softly about my brow, stroking my ruffled feathers. "Good girl, you have done your country proud."

It takes me back to when I was a fledgling, and my mother would tussle my fluffy immature feathers across my face. She picks up a bowl of maple peas, wheat, unpolished rice, and linseed and begins to feed me slowly. "Eat up my darling, tomorrow you make your journey back home, Captain John Carney is waiting for you."

