

Cher Ami

On Remembrance Day, a few weeks ago, I was browsing an online site with poppies of all different kinds and memorials to those who fell on Flanders Fields. The bloodred petals made me think of war and all the suffering it causes, all the dying. In this emotional state I came upon a war story that was heart-breaking and inspirational in equal measure.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, communication technology was far more primitive than it is today. In preparation for dire circumstances, six hundred carrier pigeons were provided to the Army Signal Corps to be used when neither signal flag nor field telephone were available. The pigeons were donated by breeders in Great Britain, then trained by specialists in the Signal Corps. Against appalling odds, the birds performed brilliantly on the battlefield, and one of them became a decorated war hero.

On October 3, 1918 the 77th Infantry Division's "Lost Battalion," fighting on the Western Front, was pinned down by enemy fire on the northern slope of the Charlevaux Ravine during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Casualties were heavy and being made worse by "friendly fire" from misguided allied troops trying to protect the battalion with artillery while ignorant of its precise location. Trapped, and with no other way to communicate with his support troops, Major Charles Whittlesey dispatched a carrier pigeon with the message, "Many wounded. We cannot evacuate." The bird was spotted by enemy sharpshooters and didn't get very far. Whittlesey sent up a second pigeon with the message, "Men are suffering. Can support be sent?" That pigeon was also shot down. There was just one left. His name was Cher Ami, French for "dear friend." Cher Ami had been on the front lines for several months at that stage of the war. He was a veteran of a dozen vital missions. The Major wrote a third note: "We are along the road parallel to 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For heaven's sake, stop it." He rolled up the tiny slip of onionskin paper and squeezed it into the canister attached to Cher Ami's leg. Then the Signal Corpsman launched the little bird into the air.

Enemy gunners spotted him almost immediately and trained their fire on him as he flapped his wings trying to gain altitude. He was shot down but somehow managed to take off again. This time he made it beyond the range of the guns and flew all the way back to his loft at division headquarters.

Though badly wounded, he covered the 25 miles in as many minutes. He had been shot through the breast and the leg and blinded in one eye. The canister still attached to his shattered leg contained the message that saved the lives of 194 men.

Army doctors cared for him as they would any wounded soldier. They were unable to save his leg, but one of the men carved a little wooden one for him to use. When he had recovered enough to travel, he was sent to the United States, seen off at the docks by General John J. Pershing himself.

Cher Ami died of his war wounds at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey on June 13, 1919. France awarded him the Croix de Guerre with palm for heroic service. Later, in 1931, he was inducted into the Racing Pigeon Hall of Fame and received a gold medal from the Organized Bodies of American Racing Pigeon Fanciers. The man who trained and cared for the pigeons in the Signal Corps—Enoch Clifford Swain—was also given an award. In November 2019 Cher Ami became one of the first winners of the Animals in War & Peace Medal of Bravery, bestowed on him posthumously at a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

Cher Ami, the hero of the 77th Infantry Division, was as familiar to American school children in the 1920s and 1930s as any World War I hero.

When it was agreed that this famous pigeon should be enshrined in the Smithsonian Institution, his body was stuffed and mounted by a taxidermist, who discovered that Cher Ami was actually a female. An inspiration to all, she is on display in the National Museum of American History's "Price of Freedom" exhibit.

