

Racing Pigeon Post

World War 2 and Long Distance Racing Pigeons

While the history of long distance racing pigeons began many years ago the impact of the Second World War was such that it almost had to begin again in 1944/5. Jules Gallez expressed it this way in the opening to Part 1 of **The History of the Belgian Strains** *“The few pigeons from before 1940 that survived the war, and the few that were produced during the war, are responsible for the best lofts of the 1945 to 1972 period.”* To understand the full impact of this period requires some study of the war itself.

When the German army invaded Poland on 1st September 1939 both Holland and Belgium, along with many others no doubt, hoped to remain neutral. The Belgian Government immediately announced its neutrality on 3rd September and later, on 7th November, a joint public appeal was made by the King of Belgium and the Queen of the Netherlands calling upon all parties to enter into mediation and end the war. On 10th May 1940 Germany invaded Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg as part of the Greater Battle of France and whilst the invasion was resisted this was soon overcome. Just a glimpse at the photograph below, Rotterdam after the terror bombing, will tell you why, the assault was so fast, fierce and powerful that it could not be overcome. The bombing lasted little more than 15 minutes but the effects were devastating, fires raged through the town leaving more than 24,000 homes in ashes. Some 800 people were killed and 80,000 were left homeless. The Germans threatened the same treatment to Utrecht but understandably the Dutch forces capitulated on 15th May, the day after the Rotterdam bombing, and Belgium surrendered shortly after on 28th May. So began several years of occupation.



The ruins of Laurens Church, Rotterdam, and its surroundings.

The nature of the occupation that followed was similar in many respects from country to country but while the Governments of both Holland and Belgium sought exile, as did the Dutch Royal family, the King of Belgium, who had surrendered contrary to the advice of his government, remained in Belgium throughout the war as a prisoner of the occupying German forces. Germany then appointed a German Civilian Governor over Holland but Belgium was ruled under a Military regime, unlike France and Denmark who retained their own Governments acting under the control of the occupying force. The majority of Jewish citizens were deported to various camps, the history and fate of which has been described elsewhere. Life and indeed death for the non Jewish population that remained was little better and in some instances, as we shall see, quite as bad. As is usual in such circumstances some elements of the population collaborated with the occupying forces, some actively resisted and others made of it the best they could. This suggests a clear and simplistic set of classifications, reality was of course quite different as hardship, envy, suspicion, betrayal and severe punishments were in abundance. The primary concern of a ruthless occupying force is never the health, wealth and welfare of the occupied population but rather to force it into a submissive state enabling both easier

regulation and manipulation. Here it soon became apparent that the occupied countries had to assist the German war effort and local companies were absorbed into that economy with assets, stock and materials confiscated at will.

Initially life for the majority population went on much as before but quite quickly the demands from the fronts brought scarcity to the occupied territories. Many foodstuffs were taken out of the free market and distributed by ration card at fixed prices. Then as the ration of foodstuffs spread from bread, coffee and tea in June 1940 to milk, meat, cheese, eggs, jam and potatoes in April 1941 other common necessities like textiles, shoes and cycle tyres joined the list of things that could only be obtained by ration card. The traders had to maintain strict records with receipts sent to a centralised agency, failure resulting in prohibition from purchasing further supplies. This of course encouraged a black market not only in the products but ration cards as well. The occupying force tried to eliminate this but hunger and necessity are hard task masters and so it grew. With a growing demand amongst the population farmers and traders with initiative and cunning risked life itself at times seeking ways round and through regulation and scrutiny. Farmers for instance were allowed to keep those animals that had to be put down through injury and so, in Holland, between 1940 and 1944 about 44,000 more animals were put down in this way than in peacetime. The population individually had to tread a very careful path often weaving between collaboration and resistance, or at least the appearance of it, just to survive or obtain the best conditions they could for themselves and their families.

Whilst this occupation continued the war itself raged on ebbing and flowing with attack and counter attack and new fronts opening up extending both the scope of the war itself and the resources required to fight it. None of this made things any easier for the occupying force or those subjected to it. Times were hard for all but those suffering beneath the oppression found it hardest. As time went on things only got harder and harder. The black market continued to grow and so did the resistance bringing out both the best and the worst in people as courage and sheer desperation drove people to do things they would not ordinarily contemplate while others took the opportunity to exploit those more vulnerable than themselves. It was not until late in 1944 that Belgium was liberated together with the southern part of Holland. The word liberate makes it sound like an amicable exchange but again reality was different. Liberation only came about after fierce fighting particularly around the deep port of Antwerp and its approaches. This delayed the liberating forces that were unable to retake all of Holland before winter and it was that winter of 1944/5 which brought some of the worst conditions to northern Holland.



It wasn't just food in short supply but electricity and fuel of all kinds. Here locals strip the wooden blocks from between the tram lines to provide heat for the home.

Photo courtesy of the Netherlands National Archive.

Since the D-days landings, which began on 6th June 1944, things became increasingly worse in the occupied part of Holland. This great push from the allied forces placed enormous strains on the defending German troops which in turn placed impossible demands upon the occupied territories. Food and supplies that might have found its way to the ration system was now diverted to the troops. As the German forces were beaten back they destroyed roads, bridges and rail links as they went, together with much of the farmland, and this had a more detrimental effect on the black market than any measures they had taken before. The winter itself brought some of the severest weather for many years which added to the difficulties for the allied advance but this was nothing compared to the effect it had upon the Dutch population. Now at the worst of times the Germans cut off supplies to Holland almost completely and the population was left to starve. From September 1944 to May 1945 more than 22,000 died, in that part of Holland, either directly or indirectly from hunger and it became known for all time as the "Hunger winter". May 1945 finally brought the hunger and occupation to an end but the hardship was not over as the battle to rebuild all that had been damaged or destroyed had only just begun.

What part did pigeons play in all this?

Quite a big part is the short and simple answer. Much has already been written about the use of pigeons in war and while that is not the main theme of this article it is not something that can be entirely ignored. Prior to launching the war it would seem that Germany had plans to use pigeons. Intelligence sources suggested that after coming to power the Nazi party had taken over all the pigeon lofts in Germany and that Himmler, who was apparently a fancier himself, had introduced the use of pigeons to the Gestapo. It should be no surprise therefore that soon after the occupation of Holland, Belgium and France had begun restrictions upon pigeon fanciers were introduced. On 13th June 1940 a brief announcement appeared in the Antwerp press that after meeting with the military Government individuals were only allowed to keep pigeons if they complied with a brief set of regulations. They were required, as of 12 noon that day, to prepare a detailed list of all the pigeons they owned in triplicate. Two copies were to be handed to their Club or organisation and then passed forward to the “government” while the third had to be retained by the fancier and be available for inspection. The rings of any birds killed or that died had to be handed in with suitable amendments to the list. Beyond that it was strictly forbidden for any racing pigeons to be at liberty or leave. Similar restrictions were made across all the occupied territories. This was the first warning to fanciers, other measures were to follow and punishments for breaches or non-compliance could be severe.



From June 1940 the regulations, and pigeons, in Amsterdam were controlled by a special Police Unit “The Pigeon Brigade” and between 1940 and 1942 32,709 pigeons were so recorded.

Photo courtesy Archiefbank Stadsarchief Amsterdam

Despite the risk chances were taken and it is rumoured for instance that during this time Lionel Haspesslagh, whose company later became famous in the pigeon world, started to produce pigeon rings. Innocent enough perhaps but what he is rumoured to have done is make double rings so that one could be fitted to a pigeon and the other handed in to the authorities indicating its death. This ruse is alleged to have allowed many fanciers to retain their favourite or champion pigeon and keep it safe through these harrowing years. True or not, we really don't know because like many things in this period of time it was not documented, spoken of or recorded for fear of discovery and the inevitable punishment that would follow.

Some things were recorded and usually for a clear purpose. The notice banning pigeon keeping in parts of France stated clearly "Publish and display immediately" its purpose being quite clear. This sort of notice was usually published in two languages, German and the local language, and as we see here punishment was always a theme.



A German Poster published in France translated below.

Publish and display immediately

NOTICE

subject the prohibition on holding
carrier pigeons

The Military Commander in France bans the holding of pigeons in the Department of Lower Charente, under Section 14 of The Ordinance on Pigeons of September 20, 1940, published in the Official Journal containing the Orders issued by the Military Governor of Occupied French Territories p.104 para 11.

If other birds are kept in lofts, it is forbidden to let them fly.

Wild pigeons, that is to say those that breed freely and do not return to lofts at night can continue to remain free.

Anyone who violates this order shall be punished according to the Ordinance.

La Rochelle, 24th February 1941.

The Field Commander.

The message was not always the threat of punishment but sometimes confirmation that punishment had been carried out. Here, below, a frenchman had been shot in his home country as a traitor because he had released a pigeon allegedly to take a message to England. The message for the community was clear but as there is no record of the evidence in this case we cannot be sure what his actions really were. Flying your pigeons out could be a dangerous game. This poster was also published in Jersey, in English, warning off as many as possible with this same story.

NOTICE:

LOUIS BERRIER

a resident of ERNE
is charged with having
released a pigeon with
a message for England.
He was, therefore, sentenced

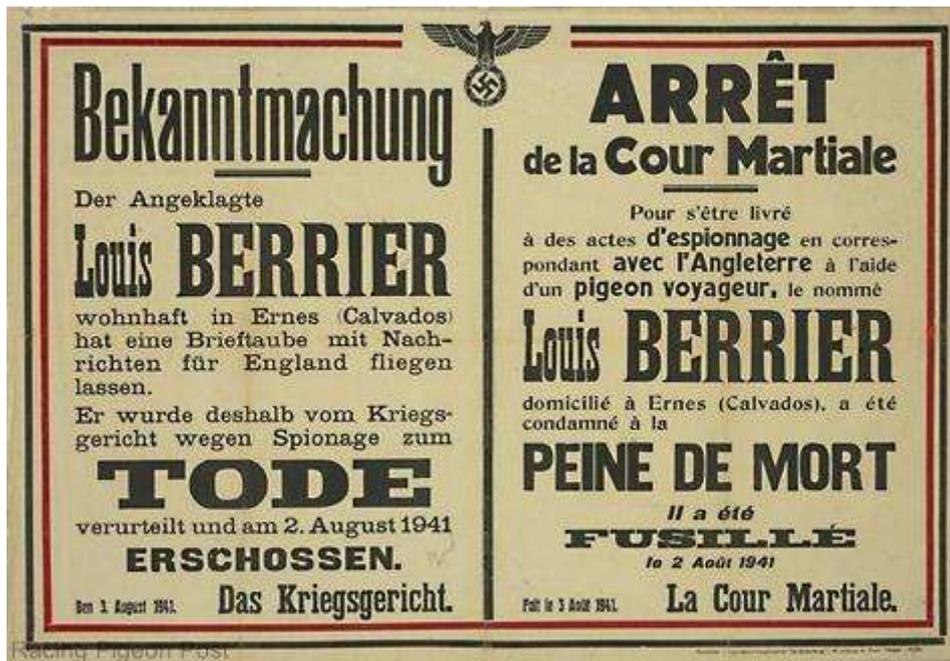
TO DEATH

for espionage by the
Court Martial and

SHOT

on the 2nd August

August 3rd 1941 Court Martial



These regulations ran across the occupied countries but were implemented by the local Governing body. In Holland it came under the regulation of the Reich Commissioner for the occupied Dutch territory dated August 3, 1942, and Vol. 86, where keeping pigeons was prohibited subject to similar ring registration we have seen above. In this order we can see more clearly the stipulated punishments:

“A person who intentionally or by the wrongful acts contrary to one of these provisions shall be punished with imprisonment of at least three months but not exceeding five years, in particularly serious cases, prison sentence of at least one year but not exceeding fifteen years imposed.”

And also exceptions:

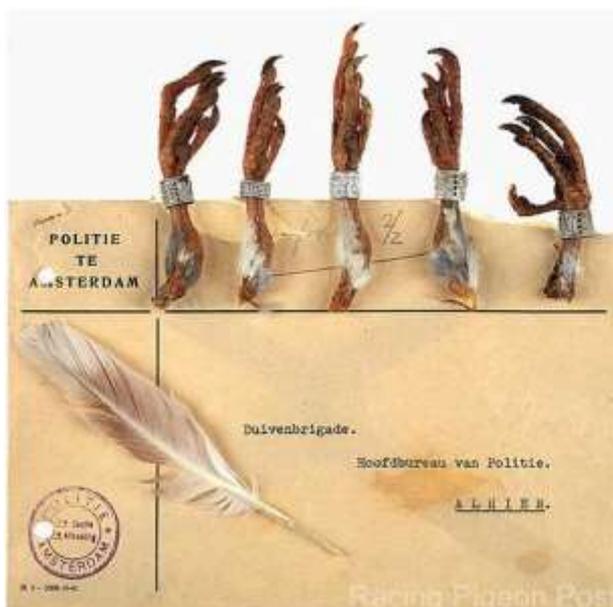
“These provisions shall not apply to:

- 1. Pigeons, which the German Wehrmacht used or confiscated;*
- 2. Birds, which by the Reich Commissioner for the occupied Dutch territory (Commissioner-General for Finance and Economic Affairs) made an exemption for its exceptional breeding qualities where the exemption conditions are met;*
- 3. Pigeons, which are kept in zoos in such a manner that they cannot fly;*
- 4. Ring Neck doves, which are held in separate cages.”*

The first of these exemptions brings us to another feature of the occupation where the Wehrmacht seized, used or confiscated, various pigeons and held them in centralised lofts. Again we suffer from a lack of documents or records to say just how many pigeon were seized in this way, how many centralised lofts there were and what exactly was their purpose.

The second exemption relates to pigeons chosen for their exceptional breeding qualities and implies that these are different to the pigeons that had been seized. In their excellent history of the Jan Aarden strain, “**Jan Aarden en de geschiedenis van de Nederlandse fonduif**”, the authors Sira Hendriks and Machiel Buijk give quite a detailed account of the seizure of the entire stock of hotelier Jan Aarden from the lofts at his [Hotel](#) which were then housed in the Wehrmachtshok, as these centralised lofts were called, in Steenberg. They also refer to the pigeons of Oomens Brothers being seized in a similar way, and these were housed in a Wehrmachtshok at [Haagdijk 183, Breda](#), which makes it sound as if exemptions 1 and 2 were much the same.

The other development highlighted in this book was that at the time the Jan Aarden lofts were seized, 14th May 1943, all the other pigeons in Holland, other than those in the various Wehrmachtshok, were ordered to be put down. This meant that apart from those few pigeons which had been hidden and kept secret, at great risk to the owners, all the remaining pigeons in Holland were in the hands of the occupying force.



When the pigeons were put down rings, feet and feathers were retained and submitted as proof of death.

Photo courtesy Archiefbank Stadsarchief Amsterdam



It was then the task of “The Pigeon Brigade” to reconcile these remains with the registered pigeons to ensure that none survived.

Photo courtesy Archiefbank Stadsarchief Amsterdam

Slightly different circumstances pertained in Belgium as described by Jules Gallez in his book “The History of the Belgian Racing Pigeon” where:

“Many fanciers were hit hard by the authorities who required them to take their birds to a large building in Vorst-Brussels”.

But he goes on to explain a different requirement for some:

“Other famous fanciers, such as Oscar Devriendt and Vander Espt, etc, did not have to take their birds to Vorst but had a German soldier stationed right at their house. The soldier was in charge of the loft and all pigeons. The owners couldn’t even go in to their own lofts. Other fanciers who were not supposed to keep pigeons kept them under cover in hiding places. Alois Stichelbaut in Lauwe hid his in his underground air-raid shelter.”

Towards the end of the occupation these Centralised lofts became known to the allied forces on an intelligence level as there was concern that they would be used as a “Stay behind pigeon service” when the allied forces advanced. An entry in a 1944 Irish Guards War Diary lists some of the known centralised lofts:

“Central lofts are known to exist at COLOGNE, FLUSHING, BERG (in the island of TRIEL) and possibly at PARIS and BRUSSELS which may still be operating from underground.”

The entry goes on:

“Apart from their own birds the Germans have commandeered French, Belgian and Dutch pigeons. The German birds carry rings of the following types:-

(a) WBNI plus number (WBNI standing for WEHRMACHT BRIEFTAUBE NEIDERLAND)

(b) WBB0 plus an number (WBB0 standing for WEHRMACHT BRIEFTAUBE BELGIEN)

The majority of the German birds also carry on their rings the word WEHRMACHT or WEHRMACHT BRIEFTAUBE.”

On October 4th 1944 all 402 pigeons in the Breda Wehrmachtshok were taken away by the German forces and once again we can rely on Hendriks and Buijk to tell us what actually happened to the Steenbergen Wehrmachtshok. Apparently, on Monday October 30 1944, as soon as the allies mounted their attack on Steenbergen Willi Schumaker, the German Officer who had been in charge of the Wehrmachtshok, together with a special army unit gathered up the pigeons and made off for Germany. How far they got and what happened thereafter we do not know but we do know that before he left Schumaker gave Jan Aarden several pigeons, possibly as a thank you gesture. Aarden and Schumaker had enjoyed a fairly close relationship, perhaps another wartime accommodation, where Schumaker needed advise and expertise in order to carry out his task and Aarden wanted to keep as close an eye on “his” pigeons as he could. Schumaker also gave a couple of pigeons to the sons of the house that had been commandeered and used as the Wehrmachtshok. These were quickly sold as the demand for pigeons spiralled with the euphoria of the

liberated population as the occupation ended. Another illustration of the urgency of this demand arises from the fact that while Breda was only liberated by Polish troops on 29th October 1944 just ten days later, on 8th November, Piet de Weerd together with the Oomens brothers set off on their bicycles to visit some of those more fortunate lofts who had not lost all their pigeons in search for stock.

During the fighting, as was inevitable, some pigeons escaped and over time some of these found their way back home. In some places some Wehrmachtshok pigeons also became available and of course Germany had not been the only army to engage with pigeons. Thousands of pigeons had been used by the allied forces some on aircraft to be used as “MAYDAY” messengers in case of emergency but many more were despatched to the occupied territories under various clandestine arrangements to send intelligence back from the resistance and spy networks. Finally, when the occupation was over, some pigeons became available from other sources, though not always as many as desired, as Jaap Breeman, a 75 year member of a Dutch pigeon club, recalled: *“Immediately after the end of the war birds were available from England. For Nieuwe-Tonge 12 pigeons were available and we had 13 members.”*

Quite clearly the war had a devastating effect on the people, the land and the pigeons. With the lack of food, hunger and starvation as it was it is surprising that any pigeons survived at all but pigeon people can be quite determined and show great resolve. Once peace arrived, life and normality was gradually restored. The pigeon stock also rose and the reputation of Steenberg and its pigeons rose with it. In the words of Hendriks and Buijk: *“The reason Steenbergens quality outstripped the rest of the country was mainly due to the birds of the Wehrmacht lofts.”* Clearly there was a lot of truth in this as we can see, within the pedigrees of those days, references to those **Wehrmachtshok** birds but also, almost hidden away, is the occasional reference to another source, ["Engelse Legerduif"](#) or English Army Pigeon, that should not entirely be forgotten.

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