

# Operation Columba

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*A wistful wartime offering from pigeon fanciers, accepted with indulgence by Allied intelligence, is vindicated by the enemy.*

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In early March 1944, when SHAEF staff in London was beginning to go all out with preparations for the June invasion of Normandy, we in G-2 were approached by a group of British pigeon fanciers determined to volunteer to intelligence the services of their pigeons. Their argument was simple: they bred carrier pigeons which were guaranteed to return to their owners' lofts; could we not use these birds in some way to bring information back from Europe?

Actually, carrier pigeons were already being used quite successfully as a link between the French Resistance and various intelligence headquarters in London. They had proved effective and valuable in supplementing the overtaxed and precarious radio links that were so hard to establish and so easy to blow. Thus the pigeon fanciers' idea was not novel. But we did not see how birds that would return to lofts scattered all over England would fit into systematic communication with resistance or espionage operations: checking up on our messages would keep us paging pigeons from one end of the UK to the other.

The best idea we could conjure up was a scatter-shot project. It was known that northwest France, Belgium, and Holland formed a region that was saturated with pigeon breeders. There might be some prospect of results if we dropped the offered pigeons by parachute at random in that region. They would be packaged in neatly crated pairs with an attached letter saying in effect: *These birds if released will return to England. If you are a pigeon breeder, hold them until you or your friends have something to tell us. If you don't keep pigeons, give them to someone who*

*does and let him take it from there.* From the counterintelligence viewpoint the proposal seemed very safe, since carrier pigeons do not possess national characteristics; are resistant to interrogation, and once in a loft would be indistinguishable from local birds. The real question was whether any substantial number of recipients would have anything of significance to tell us.

## **Light Risk, Low Stakes, Little Return**

As we weighed the potential of such an operation, we came more and more seriously to doubt that, while safe, relatively simple, and very cheap to mount in terms of energy expended, it would pay off at all appreciably in terms of information received. In other words, it came to a balance but the weights on each side of the scale were so slight that the whole thing looked insignificant. The project might therefore have been turned down but for the deciding weight cast in by the attitude of the pigeon fanciers. They were earnest, decent people, and their pigeons obviously represented their greatest treasure in a grim, war-torn world. They all tended to be thin; we suspected that they were sharing their scanty rations with their birds. Above all, we were conscious that they were seeking to give up their most dearly loved possessions in the Allied cause. You just can't say no to a high sacrifice offered in the hope that it will help. And it might pay off, after all: surprise jackpots had been hit in the past. So we adopted the scheme, dubbed, naturally, in a staff thickly laced with University dons, "Operation Columba."

The work-up of the plan was uncomplicated. The pigeon men provided neat standard traveling cases, each adapted to and containing two feathered tenants. The parachute designers, accustomed now to delivering anything by air from a jeep to the Daily Mail, quickly whipped up the necessary gear. The American and British Air Forces agreed without demur to drop our birds in the course of their regular night operations. G-2 contributed the letter, printed in French, Flemish, and Dutch, that was to find the pigeons friends and homes on the other side of the Channel.

Only two snags appeared. One was of apprehension. While the Air Force commanders and their staffs had been very cooperative, we were

morally sure that opposition would spring up eventually at the pilot level. It was quite true that the operation involved no additional danger; the planes would drop the birds from normal flight altitudes and without having to pinpoint their targets. Nevertheless we could understand the natural feelings of the pilot who, keyed up to his best to deliver a massive load of destruction at great personal risk, would find himself sidetracked en route by Operation Columba. It was too much like stopping off at the supermarket on the way to your wedding. We knew, before the first pair of pigeons was dropped, that we could soon expect ungracious references to what might euphemistically be rendered "those *fluttering* birds." We realized thoroughly that a long life for Columba depended on getting early results.

The second hazard was brought out by the pigeon fanciers themselves. They told us something that most of us had never known and that had not greatly impressed those who at one time or another had had cognizance of it. It seemed that total war had included pigeon warfare earlier. When Britain had braced to meet invasion in 1940, fears had arisen that enemy agents in England might be using carrier pigeons as a means of secret communication with the Continent. As part of the counterespionage campaign it had therefore been decided to ban destruction of the predatory hawks, falcons, and kestrels nesting in the chalk cliffs along England's east coast. Now our men pointed out that the predators would not discriminate between patriotic British pigeons and treacherous Axis birds; please then would we have these enemies of the pigeon restored to their true status as vermin. Grumbles arose in G-2: was this a pro-intelligence or an anti-hawk project? Nevertheless we went ahead and had the predators declared free game. This wrapped up the operation, and in about a week after it had come to our attention the first pigeons were dropped behind enemy lines.

A week went by without a reaction. Then a second. Then a third. Comments on "those *fluttering* birds" began to bubble up to us through the chain of command. We also began to harden ourselves for the task of telling the pigeon men that their patriotism, devotion, and sacrifice had come to nothing. Then in the fourth week a delegation of the pigeon fanciers came up to see us. A bird, one bird, had returned! It had brought back a message. The message, to the effect that there were "lots of Germans around Lier," was however hardly news.

While not substantively helpful, the return provided some encouragement; at least it would stave off the day of reckoning with our

pigeoneers. We reported the good news to the Air Forces, possibly with a little exaggeration of the information's importance, and asked for Columba's continuation. The airmen loyally obliged.

This general sequence was repeated as the pattern of the whole operation until it came to its natural end with the Normandy invasion. Every two weeks or so, just as our hope for the pigeons was at the vanishing point, in would come another vague, unenlightening message. In all, after the dispatch of hundreds of birds, five or six responses were recorded. None of them had material intelligence value.

## **Modest Jackpot by Accident**

But that was not the whole story. As the pigeon dropping went on, we began to get indications of uneasiness among the German military government people in the Low Countries. They had picked up, of course, a few parachuted crates and so become aware of Operation Columba almost from its first implementation. They could not have been very anxious about it as an Allied source of information, but apparently they became outraged at their inability to control this physical penetration of their defenses. From underground sources we received reports of enemy fumings and proclamations, the latter ranging from paternal and advisory to minatory and vindictive.

Pigeon fanciers were warned against harboring strange birds. They were threatened with liquidation of their totes in the event of detection. Later they were told that harboring of alien pigeons was espionage and carried with it the penalty of death by shooting. No one, apparently, was ever shot for this offense, nor so far as we could find out were any lofts destroyed (although healthy apprehensions may well have hastened some of the birds, stringy as they were, into the pot rather than into the tote). Our original calculation that there is nothing self-betraying about a pigeon in a loft seems to have held up: the Germans' intentions were probably lethal enough, but they just never caught anybody.

All this sound and fury, however, did have a fine subversive effect on the pigeon fanciers and their friends. These people, as we had already noted among their British colleagues, felt that a man's inalienable right to the pigeons of his choice was subject to no question. The stronger the

German reaction, the more the pigeon men lined up with the Resistance. And as they perceived that the enemy was unable to identify violators and reluctant to resort to mass reprisals over such ridiculous things as pigeons, the curve of local effrontery and rebelliousness shot up. The whole affair became cumulative, and what had started out as a dubious intelligence operation developed into a serious contribution to the build-up of resistance.

Nor was even this all, we discovered after reentry into the Continent. As a matter of routine we had cleared Operation Columba in advance with the deception specialists. They had given us an almost perfunctory response to the effect that from their point of view they saw no harmful implications in the undertaking. But the Germans found implications. After they had picked up a few baskets of parachuted birds, their intelligence began a systematic plotting of the points of impact. It was not long before they could conclude that the drops were all falling north of the Somme River and the historic Amiens-Abbeville line. Now why was this? they asked themselves, and gave themselves a pregnant answer.

They might have reconstructed our thought that the pigeon-rich lowlands formed the safest and most logical area for the random dropping of carrier birds. But no; to them it was abundantly clear that this was only one more symptom of Allied interest in the Strait of Dover at its narrowest. Clearly we would try to cross the water hazard near Calais, just as any systematic professionals would, including themselves. They could not have regarded the pigeon-drop locations as primary evidence, but they came to accord them distinct value in confirmation of a theory that was already pretty well established. Thus Operation Columba made a small but significant unplanned contribution to the deception scheme that masked the Allies' intent to land in Normandy, well to the south and across the Seine from the Pas de Calais.

To sum up, then, this operation, undertaken as an inconsequential gamble with little expectation of returns was an intelligence failure; but a definite plus in contributing to the saturation of local enemy counterintelligence faculties and in building up opposition and resistance to the Germans; and a significant though minor element in the Allies' deception scheme.

# Reflections

This story of an intelligence failure, attended in its planning and execution by doubts and annoyances, has in retrospect the virtue of being gently amusing. But if the debris is looked over dispassionately, certain typical and permanent values can also be found in it.

Columba was launched primarily in order to take some advantage of unused resources. Many, if not most, intelligence operations are similarly undertaken in terms of the means available rather than of the ends sought. The happy picture of the unerring intelligence officer laying out his essential elements of enemy information and then devising foolproof means to check them out is a much idealized depiction of the state of the art.

Operation Columba was very much like trying to catch minnows with a salmon net: the shiners all got away. Unfortunately most intelligence operations have this shortcoming in greater or less degree, because the devising and creation of intelligence means is usually a slow and rigid process. Either you have to tailor a particular activity to one precise end, a process which is expensive and time-consuming, or you have to resort to a standardized procedure that never quite fits the precise needs of the moment.

No intelligence operation is an island. In the case of Columba we owed our plusses in subversion and deception to this fact. It is equally easy to damage or blow another operation by the execution of a project that in itself is sound, safe, and reasonable. The danger zone, of course, extends beyond the area of intelligence: the adversary can often derive material profits from intelligence operations which we have effectively executed but which nevertheless give him leverages—military, economic, or political. The work of the intelligence planner is not done until he answers satisfactorily both questions: *what happens if I fail?* and *what happens when I succeed?*

All this seems to point toward one major conclusion. If intelligence is a science, as we all hope it is, then it clearly belongs among the social sciences. This is not because its field and findings are often vague, as epitomized in Operation Columba. It is rather because its ultimate application is to man. We may search for statistics, for technical and technological characteristics, for the existence and capacities of such

things as roads and bridges, but in the last analysis we are always trying to find out what some men are going to do with these data and these means. We may be forced to analyze all capabilities, but each such analysis is also a tacit confession that we are unable to work out exactly what the other fellow is doing or plans to do.

This is not to be construed as an assertion that precision is alien to intelligence. Fuzzy problems are usually those that demand the most rigorous approach. Thus the sociologists, like ourselves, have continual recourse to the electronic computer. Thus the economists, like ourselves, resort to the theory of games and other advanced studies in probabilities. Intelligence is indeed a product of disciplined and precise thought; but its techniques, mechanisms, and occasional incantations should not blind us to the fact that its ultimate objective is the searching penetration of the mind of man.

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