

EUROPIGEONS HISTORY

The “Engelse Legerduif “ or British Army Pigeon.

The details of this pigeon, even its very existence are unknown and yet it is cited quite clearly and authoritatively in some pedigrees. It would of course be very interesting to know if it existed at all and if so its ring number together with origin and breeding. "Mozes", allegedly a son of this pigeon was hatched in 1944 consequently his parents were hatched in 1943 or earlier. Holland was under occupation throughout this time and prior to that, on August 4th 1942, the occupying force ordered that all Dutch homing pigeons apart from those that they had seized be killed, a more detailed explanation of the times can be found at [World War 2 and Long Distance Racing Pigeons](#). From then pigeons, especially military trained, were a prime target of the occupying force. Those that survived only did so by being hidden and kept in secret against the threat of severe penalties from the occupying force, the fierce fighting that went on during 1944/45 and the dreadful winter that alone led to the death of thousands of people.

It is commonly believed, supported by the verbal testimony of his friends that on 5th September 1944 Toon Schouteren broke into the Wehrmachtshok (lofts maintained by the occupying force) in Steenberg, from where he stole three pigeons. However Machiel Buijk and Sjra Hendriks in their book “**Jan Aarden – en de geschiedenis van de Nederlandse fonduif**” rather dismiss this story when they say: *“It has been written on this “Mad Tuesday” a number of pigeons were stolen from the Wehrmachtshok. That story you must treat with a grain of salt.”* The day itself came to be known as [“Dolle Dinsdag”](#) or Mad Tuesday because rumours had rapidly spread that liberation was imminent causing a variety of premature actions as liberation itself was still months away.

Amongst the pigeons he allegedly stole were "Moses" and "Saar" and this only a few weeks before the stock was carried off on its way to Germany, under that increasing threat of liberation. So if these pigeons were stolen from the Wehrmachtshok how do we know their parentage? The truth is of course we do not really know but it is surely reasonable to assume that if Schouteren was prepared to take such a risk, the penalty for which was almost certain death, then he had some knowledge, some information about which pigeons to take, their breeding and potential. While the Wehrmachtshok were very much under the command of occupying soldiers there was often a strong liaison with local individuals in the pigeon world, arising no doubt from both mutual and conflicting interests and in Steenbergem there was certainly a close relationship between Jan Aarden and Willi Schumaker, the officer in charge. Information arising from these relationships would no doubt quickly pass around the pigeon community and act as a reasonable source for Schouteren. Whether he managed to obtain the pigeons he set out to get we shall never really know but what is quite certain the pigeons concerned laid the foundation to the European Long Distance racing that followed. Meanwhile Buijk and Hendriks seem to suggest that Schouteren was one of the first to be active in "catching" pigeons from the Wehrmachtshok, presumably in the period during and after the bulk of stock was carried off. In either event the origin seems common and only the method of acquisition differs.

Is it at all likely that a British Army Pigeon was in the Wehrmachtshok in Steenbergem? Again it is difficult if not impossible to make any categorically statement at this time in the absence of hard evidence. What is certain is that the occupying force went to great trouble to take control of the pigeons they wanted and to eliminate those they did not. Henk de Brueijns speaks of a conversation he once had with one of the German soldiers that had been involved in the control of pigeons in France during this time. He gave an example of how they took the rings from pigeons shot or captured from the "resistance" which they then placed on pigeons they bred. Later they would leave these pigeons in circumstances and places where they hoped the resistance would find them and use them to send messages. The pigeons would of course return to the occupying force both providing them with the information and preventing it reaching the UK. Clearly they were, as one would expect, up to every trick and device in the management of pigeons, information and misinformation – that was their job. A considerable

number of pigeons found their way to Europe during this time both sent directly to various resistance and intelligence groups and accompanying troops and aircraft for emergency use. Just as the occupying force would use the rings from British Army pigeons there is little doubt that if they came across a pigeon which they had reason to think had appropriate breeding potential they would use that as well, their function was after all to make the best use of pigeons that they could.

Just as a reminder of the times concerned on 19th September 1944, but a couple of weeks after Mad Tuesday, a Mosquito aircraft piloted by Wing Commander Guy Gibson V.C., D.S.O. & BAR, D.F.C. & BAR, Legion of Merit and of Dam Buster fame crashed on the edge of Steenberghe whilst engaged on yet another bombing raid. Both he and his navigator Squadron Leader Jim Warwick D.F.C. were killed. Despite



the extremely severe constraints of the time they were given a proper funeral and buried in Steenberg at the insistence and on the instructions of the deputy mayor. At that stage only Warwick had been fully identified by his "dog tags" and a laundry tag bore Guy Gibson's name so the grave was marked with a cross that just had Gibson name beneath Warwick's full details but later when he had been properly identified a new cross was erected with his full details. Subsequently streets were named after both men and one after the Mosquito aircraft. There is no suggestion that pigeons were involved in this particular crash but it was for precisely this sort of incident that pigeons were carried on many aircraft, to give the crew in the event of a crash an opportunity to despatch the pigeons with details of the location so that some rescue arrangements could be made. There were many crashes and consequently many opportunities for the occupying forces to capture the British Army or Air Force pigeons.

Was a pigeon from the Oomens Brothers in the Steenberg Wehrmachtshok when their pigeons had been incarcerated in a similar loft in Breda? Well clearly this is highly possible as Oomens Bros. pigeons could have made their way to Steenberg before the war and been seized in Steenberg. Equally pigeons could have been transferred between the various Wehrmachtshok. "Saar" is said to be of Oomens Bros. stock and this appears to be commonly accepted while Buijk and Hendriks say it was the only hen that Schouteren had at that time but they are not clear as to whether this was before the time of the alleged theft or after.

Quite interestingly in their book Buijk and Hendriks show two pedigrees that include "Mozes". In the first his parents are shown as two Wehrmachtshok pigeons while in the second as a Wehrmachtshok cock and the "Engelse Legerduif" hen, clearly both could be right. On balance it would seem that the "Engelse Legerduif" was real.