

# PIGEONS IN BRAS GO TO WAR

*Exploring the Maidenform Collection in the Archives Center of the National Museum of American History, intern Lindsay Keating found an interesting story about how pigeons supported World War II.*



**Photo: The pigeon vest. National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Maidenform Collection, 1922-1997, 0585, Box 51, Folder 22.**

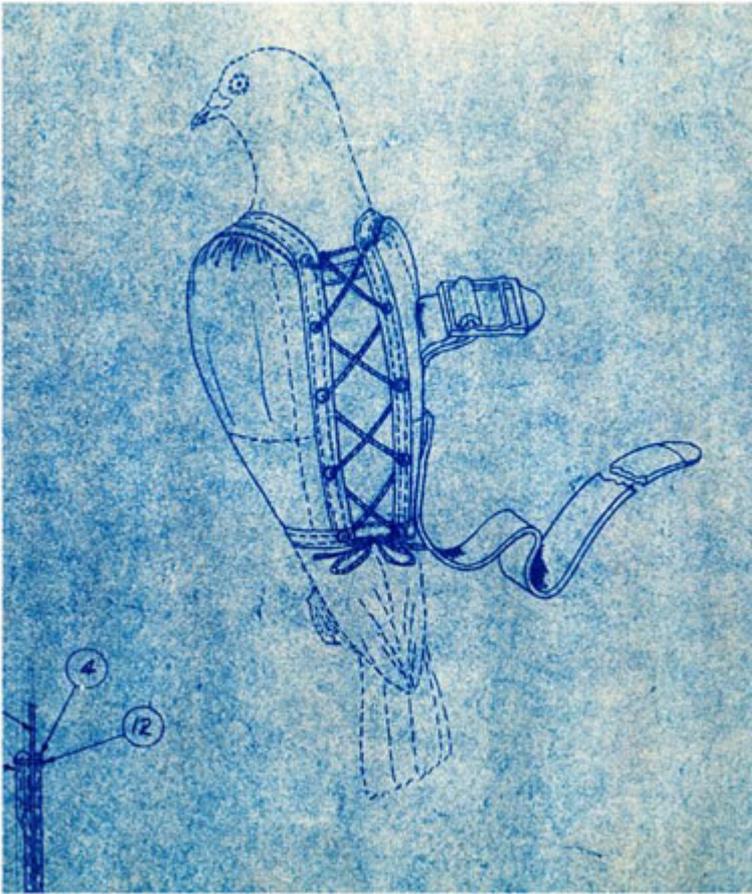
What does a brassiere company have in common with World War II? Why, the pigeon vest of course.



The pigeon vest was a vest that was created to protect carrier pigeons as they parachuted through the air strapped to the chest of paratroopers during World War II. Once the paratroopers hit the ground behind enemy lines, they would release the pigeons so they could fly off to deliver important messages.

And what does this have to do with brassieres? The pigeon vest was designed and manufactured by the brassiere company, Maidenform. On December 22, 1944, Maidenform agreed to make 28,500 pigeon vests for the U.S. government, switching, as many companies did, from peacetime production to producing necessary supplies for the war. In addition to the pigeon vest, Maidenform also made parachutes.

**Photo to the left:**  
"There is a maiden form for every type of figure!" Even the figure of a pigeon! National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Maidenform Collection, 1922-1997.



Left: Pigeon vest blueprint. It states: "Important: Do not retain pigeon in vest in excess of six hours." National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Maidenform Collection, 1922-1997.

Below: Pigeon vest development model. National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Maidenform Collection, 1922-1997.

This is an early model of the pigeon vest dated June 19, 1944. The vest was made out of porous materials, with a tighter woven fabric underneath so the pigeon's claws would not damage the mesh. It also included an adjustable strap for the paratroopers to strap across their chests. The vest was shaped to the body of the pigeon, leaving their head, neck, wing tips, tail, and feet exposed. The vest would be attached to the outside of the paratrooper's jacket as seen in the photo in the next page.



PIGEON VEST PG-106/CB (Development Model)

Bottom View . Showing Construction of Wing Pockets

DATE 6-19-44 SIGNAL CORPS GROUND SIGNAL AGENCY WAGC 11674



**Left: Pigeon in pigeon vest harnessed to a paratrooper. National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Maidenform Collection, 1922-1997.**

The pigeon carried messages in a tiny capsule attached to their leg. The capsules could contain messages, blood samples, or even tiny cameras. Oftentimes, these carrier pigeons, also called homing pigeons, were the only form of communication during World War II. They were also the most secure and reliable. Homing pigeons were the least likely form of communication to be intercepted. More than 95% of the messages they carried were successfully delivered. Due to their obvious necessity for wartime communication, approximately 56,000 carrier pigeons were trained for war missions in World War II. This was the height of carrier pigeon use.

The pigeons' average speed was 50 miles per hour and their average flight distance was 25 miles, although they could travel up to 2,000 miles. They helped with tactical gains but also saved many lives.

**Right: Insert from the above photo, Pigeon in pigeon vest harnessed to a paratrooper.**

Thirty-two pigeons received medals for their service in World War II. One of those pigeons was named G.I. Joe. He carried a message to cancel a bombing mission and, in doing so, saved the lives of about 1,000 Allied troops.



Craving more pigeon history? The museum's collection also includes Kaiser, a captured German carrier pigeon, who was trained at Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey, and who was used in training homing pigeons for the U.S. Army during World War II, as well as World War II pigeons Anzio Boy and Global Girl. Cher Ami, a carrier pigeon from World War I, was awarded the French Croix de Guerre for his service.

Photo: [Cher Ami](#), stuffed carrier. Source: National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center.

Cher Ami was a registered Black Check cock carrier pigeon, one of 600 birds owned and flown by the U.S. Army Signal Corps in France during World War I. He delivered twelve important messages within the American sector at Verdun; on his last mission, October 4, 1918, he was shot through the breast and leg by enemy fire but still managed to return to his loft with a message capsule dangling from the wounded leg. The message Cher Ami carried was from Major Charles S. Whittlesey's



"Lost Battalion" of the Seventy-seventh Infantry Division that had been isolated from other American forces. The message brought about the relief of the 194 battalion survivors, and they were safe behind American lines shortly after the message was received. For his heroic service, Cher Ami was awarded the French Croix de Guerre with palm. He was returned to the United States and died at Fort Monmouth, N.J. on June 13, 1919, as a result of his wounds. Cher Ami was later inducted into the Racing Pigeon Hall of Fame in 1931, and received a gold medal from the Organized Bodies of American Pigeon Fanciers in recognition of his extraordinary service during World War I.

*Pigeon vest materials, including photographs, pattern pieces, blueprints, and business documents, are located at the Archives Center in the Maidenform Collection #585. [Lindsay Keating](#) was a summer intern in the Archives Center Intern at the National Museum of American History.*

See also an earlier published article on these pigeons on <http://www.aviculture-europe.nl/nummers/10E01A11.pdf>

And a video of pigeons in WW1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2A3GORFCPg> with our thanks to Mick Bassett.

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