

The incredible story of spy pigeons, the drones' precursors

David STEIN : 2-3 minutes : 2/28/2021

Tech

Drones pictures have become ubiquitous. But did you know that long before these flying machines arrived, a man installed his cameras on... pigeons?



© Getty Images

Drone and pigeon

Our story begins in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. The year is 1903 and at that time **Doctor Julius Neubronner** was an apothecary ([equivalent to our current chemists](#)) and passionate about photography. He used still the unrecognized **sixth sense of pigeons** to make **urgent drug deliveries** to a sanatorium not far from his home in Kronberg.

Discover our latest podcast

But in 1907, one of these pigeons **disappeared for four weeks** before returning to the nest as if nothing had happened. Neubronner then wondered what his

pigeon may have done and then came up with a revolutionary idea to study the route of his protégés: **equip them with an on-board camera taking in-flight pictures**, as described by the New Yorker.

Exceptional shots

Strapped to the belly of the animal, the small **device weighing 75 grams** (to give you roughly an idea, it is as if you were carrying a backpack of ten kilos. While flying.) was the subject of numerous tests and adjustments by the doctor before producing the first [successful aerial shots](#).

And the least you can say, is that for the time, the images are quite simply exceptional. While [images taken from drones impress us today](#), know that at the time **aerial photos were very rare** and most often taken via balloons or kites, but never before had we been able to see pictures taken in flight, through birds.

A particularly famous shot was that of the **Château-Hôtel de Kronberg**, which apart from the magnificent panorama allows us to glimpse **the tip of the pigeons' pinions at the edge of the frame**, signing its photo in the sky with the tips of its wings.

Spy pigeons during the Great War

It was not long before the process **caught the interest of the army**, which made use of photography with pigeons during the First World War to carry out **reconnaissance** in the field. However, the process would gradually be abandoned [in favour of aviation](#), and pigeons would instead be used as **messengers** during the First and Second World Wars.