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Pigeon Search and Rescue Project (PROJECT SEA HUNT)

During the 1940s pigeons in a Tufts University laboratory had proven the exceptional ability to pick out certain shapes and colors in exchange for food. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the US Coast Guard decided the same abilities could be useful while searching for men and equipment in open water. Navy scientist Jim Simmons, PhD, used conditioning to train pigeons to conduct search and rescue from Coast Guard helicopters.

These experiments, called PROJECT SEA HUNT, used three pigeons a small observation bubble on the underside of a helicopter. The birds faced 120 degrees from each other so that they covered the entire 360 degrees under the aircraft. The pigeons were trained to recognize objects floating in the water and communicate with the helicopter pilots by pecking a key that would help guide the pilots to the targets. The pigeons were 93 percent accurate at locating objects floating at sea and their false positive rates were extremely low. Human flight crews were accurate 38 percent of the time. When combined with human searchers, the pigeons' success rate was nearly perfect. Also, unlike humans, the pigeons did not get bored as Simmons had trained them to respond even when there were hours between sightings. Eventually, the Coast Guard recognized the value of Simmons' pigeons and called this project "the best daylight search system" yet developed.

The project, however, was plagued by problems as two helicopters crashed either destroying or damaging the pigeon system. The project, unfortunately, never got out of the testing phase and was ended in 1983 due to federal budget cuts. Though innovative in theory, the project ultimately proved impractical. In the end the birds never did get a chance to save any lives.

Further Information:

- [News articles, documents and reports](#) including a report entitled "Evaluation of the Detection Capabilities of the Sea Hunt System" by L. Nash and H. G. Ketchen, U.S. Coast Guard Research and Development Center, July, 1983.
- [Naval Ocean Systems Center Technical Report 746](#): "Project Sea Hunt: A Report on Prototype Development and Tests," by J. V. Simmons, Jr., July, 1981.

Photographs:

Official Coast Guard Imagery (click on thumbnail for High resolution image)

Caption/ Historical Information



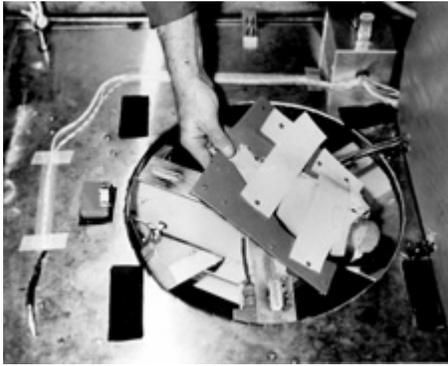
The complete apparatus outside the helicopter



Crewman handling the secured pigeon



Crewman works on the observation bubble



View showing how each pigeon was secured



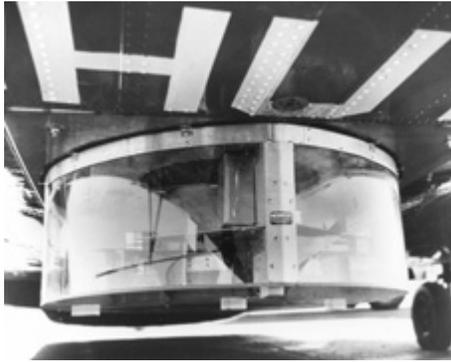
One of the helicopters involved in the testing



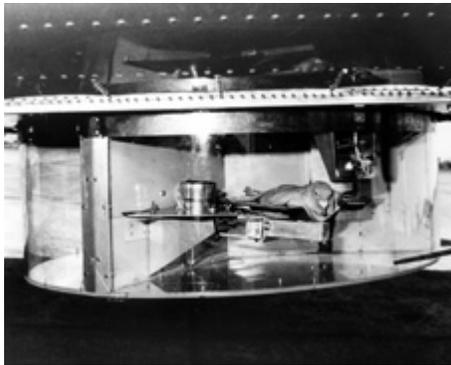
One of the testing flight crews



The instrument pecked by the pigeon to communicate with the crew



View of the tested observation cupola



View of the compartmentalized observation cupola



Project Sea Hunt poster



Project Sea Hunt cartoon