

The Magazine of the Halifax Military History Society



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Editor's Notes

Welcome to the Autumn edition of the Halifax Military History Society's eMagazine.

We begin with photos of our patron, Peter Liddle, receiving his OBE from the Princess Royal in Buckingham Palace, a very proud moment for Peter's family, captured beautifully by the official photographer.

Peter has always been a prolific writer and now 'in high old age', as Peter himself puts it, he has been able to experience 'such an enhancement of my enjoyment of books that I feel I must write about it.'

The end result, 'bookworming', takes us into on a 'Desert Island Discs' style review, except drawing on the literary rather than musical world. What results is a recommendation list certainly, but it also gives us many glimpses of Peter's life and times. The extract here looks at the books of The Great War.

An article by Ben Staples draws our attention to research done into Ezra Woodhead, an unknown veteran of the Crimean War who is buried in the Coley Church graveyard (between Shelf and Hipperholme).

Graham Bradshaw continues the story of Marine David Moffatt, the local Halifax man who became one of the immortalised 'Cockleshell Heroes'. With recent local developments moving towards the creation of a permanent memorial for David Moffatt in Halifax, Graham has fittingly taken a look at the other memorials that already exist which commemorate Operation Frankton and its 'Cockleshell Heroes'. It is hoped that Graham's three articles will, with additions from other sources, form the basis of an information package for the Central Library.

Speaking at HMHS in October, Peter Walls gave us an eloquent account of balloon technology at the Siege of Paris 1870-71. These extraordinary stories of daring do were so reminiscent of Michael Pallin's 'Ripping Yarns' you would swear it was made up. But it wasn't and it is with great pleasure that we have included some of its content here.

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The Magazine of the Halifax Military History Society

Peter Liddle at the Palace:



A very special day out.



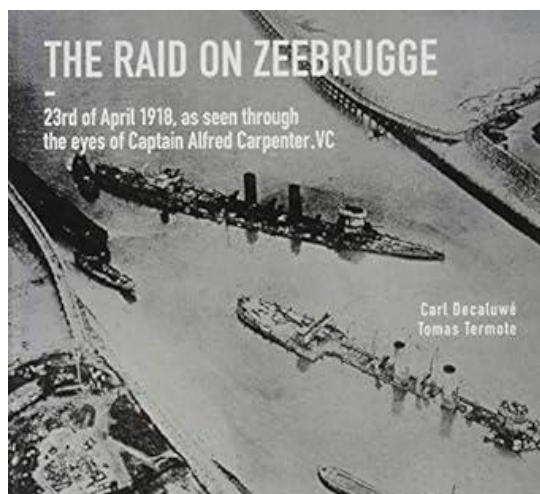
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Bookworming: The Great War

Peter Liddle

Unless I rely too much on what I believe I know about the war and my judgements, having devoted so much of my academic life to studying it, I have an advantage here being familiar with the subject. There are no contentious issues to dispute in my first example, Henry Askins' *A Marine at Gallipoli and on the Western Front*. This is a transcript of a very graphic diary expanded by recall. It is convincingly grim reading with an additional point to note that he is quite extraordinarily critical of some of his same unit comrades, not something I have found frequently the case except concerning regular mention of a single unfortunate and unpopular individual.

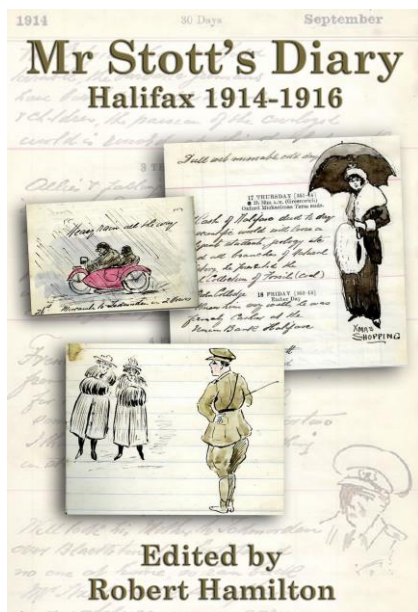
There was something of especial interest for me in the grandson of Sgt TW Chisholm's *Diary* in that the diarist was in the same PoW Camp as my father, Alan Liddle. It is a slender volume but reads well. Rather slight of text too but full of photographs and artwork was Carl Decaluwe and Tomas Termote's *The Raid on Zeebrugge*. It re-offered information, admiration and, correctly, no new inflated claim for the raid's strategic success.



Bookworming:

Mr Stott's War: Halifax 1914-18, is a transcription edited by Robert Hamilton of the original illustrated diaries of a Halifax industrialist. It really is excellent, and I found interest on every page. Though of course it records minutiae of social visits 'from and to', it covers many significant aspects of the Domestic Front. Additionally, Mr Stott's reaction to wider concerns of the war is regularly recorded vividly too. His drawings of local characters and issues such as recruitment are delightful, and I found it piquant that a major concern for him was that his son should avoid military service because of his need in the family business. In the diary, Tribunal Appeal attendance vied somewhat with his son's addiction to countryside motorbike and car outings. In the cause of the Firm's Business, I could not help but wonder?

The second published volume of the diaries is a delight too. I wrote of it: : 'Wonderfully educational, simply fascinating. Packed with interest and far wider than regionally significant. Reflective of a justifiable even if not a conclusively justifiable perspective.'

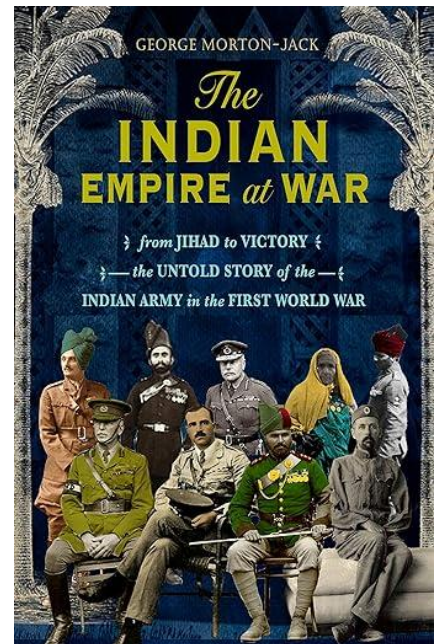


Bookworming:

Not so long ago I had the pleasure of editing for publication chapters on British and US propaganda during the First World War and then reading further on the subject. Recently I tackled Henry Hammond's book, *Our Man in New York*, who was of course, the American, Bill Stephenson. It proved very informative though perhaps insufficiently indicative of the successful work of Britain's own endeavour towards engineering US entry into the war and frustrating German propaganda activity in North America.

Readable and interesting was a memoir of the Western Front and North Russian intervention service of *L W Jacques*, *A Life of Service*, produced by his Grand-daughter. More than forty years ago this RAMC veteran gave me his diary which is in the Liddle Collection at Leeds. The diary is nicely non-judgemental concerning his experiences.

George Morton-Jack's well-researched, *The Indian Empire at War, 1914-18*, has as its underlying theme the growth of Indian nationalism but it makes abundantly clear the Indian Army's huge contribution to the allied war effort and the winning of the war on subsidiary fighting fronts. I could not help being regretful that his sources did not include the Liddle Collection because in this archive British officers in Indian regiments reflect in their diaries, letters and recollections virtually uniform respect, and even more than just respect, for their men. I don't believe that the story of the Indian Empire at war, even with this author's sub-text, is complete without such evidence being noted.



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Bookworming:

Ben McIntyre is deservedly rated highly for his investigative research into aspects of Second World War history but he had a truly amazing journalistic coup into a minuscule tragedy in the First World War which left this reader almost breathless with the tension of the story, tear-stained with the first denouement and heart thumping with the scarcely credible decades later final conclusion. Please believe me, I do not exaggerate. *A Foreign Field* is about the fate of a group of British soldiers cut off from their units in the early days of movement in the fighting in France, the help of French villagers from all stations of life, the remarkable evasion from capture as the front solidified, the threat and reality of betrayal, their capture and execution and then, scarcely credible, the author meeting the widow of the central character at a memorial to the executed men more than seventy years after the event.

I feel I must add that in my view this stunning story is a little marred by McIntyre's interpretation of the causation and conduct of the war where I feel sure he is adrift.

It is perhaps worth mentioning here that in an essay, *Unfinished Business: Remembering The Great War*, in the Annual Transactions of the Royal Historical Society in 2021, while Jay Winter is superciliously and naively deriding the re-enactment societies, he does make two fair points with regard to the later world war. His points are that first, the inappropriate nature of re-enacting the Nazi invasion of Russia with its consequent initiation of the Holocaust, and second, that the lack of representation of Black, Brown and Yellow personal experience of the war, is striking.

A second illustration in this section of echoes of my Past occurred by my being introduced to Sara Woodall's *A Voice from the Trenches*. This book is from the very beautifully illustrated diary of Bernard Eyre Walker which the diarist gave me for the Liddle Collection many years ago. The artwork is fabulously good but the book needed better informed editing.

The Crimean War and Coley

Ben Stables

In the new section of Coley Church graveyard (between Hipperholme and Shelf) is the grave of Major Michael Stocks, a well-known veteran of the Crimean War. There is at least one other Crimean War veteran buried at Coley, Ezra Woodhead, a weaver from Shelf whose military career ended in ignominy and an early death at the age of just 29 years.

The Crimean War is best remembered for 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and nurses Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole. It was fought between Russia and Western European allies to protect Ottoman Turkey from Russia. In September 1854, the Western European allies landed in the Crimean peninsula, and planned to capture Sebastopol (now known as Sevastopol), the main naval base for Russia's Black Sea fleet. Just a few days after landing the allies were engaged with fighting the Russian forces in the 'Battle of the Alma' which ended within just a few hours with a decisive victory for the allies. The allies then proceeded to Sebastopol where began the lengthy siege of the city.



Image by
Valentin Ramirez
taken of Franz
Roubaud's
panoramic
painting Siege of
Sevastopol.
Wiki Commons.

The Crimean War and Coley

The siege dragged on for nearly a year, creating alarm in England. After about six months a letter arrived at Shelf all the way from Crimea and was printed in the local newspapers in its entirety:

Camp before Sebastopol, March 24th, 1855.

'Dear Father, - I take the opportunity of writing a few lines to you, hoping to find you in good health, as they leave me at present. I am very happy to inform you that I am getting on quite well in the Crimea, for we are a great deal better off now than the poor men were in the winter, when they had to go into the trenches for 24 hours in the frost and snow, and when they came home had to lay down in their wet blankets, oftentimes having nothing to eat, nor any warm coffee to revive them; but now, thank God, it is quite different, for the weather is very fine, and has been so a long time. Now our rations are very good, we have plenty of biscuit, salt[ed] meat, tea and coffee. Our hours for stopping in the trenches are 24. Our regiment (or brigade rather) has volunteered to go into the advanced trench every night it is our turn to serve in the trenches. On the night of the 22nd of March, the enemy attacked our advanced trench, and owing to the sentinels not being posted out from the entrenchments far enough, they came close upon them without being noticed, and fired a volley into a working party that were building a new battery in front of the advanced trench, which killed and wounded a great many of them before they could look round for their belts and fire-locks. The enemy carried away their picks and shovels, but they lost a great many in retiring, both killed and wounded and a great many were taken prisoners, for some of our men followed them down into a ravine, and well repaid them for their trouble. Give my respects to Thomas Wood. I do not think he would know me now, as I have not shaved since I left England. We find it difficult to get paper here, even by paying for it. I now conclude; give my kind love to relatives and all enquiring friends; so no more at present from your affectionate son, Ezra Woodhead.'

No. 4118, 1st Battalion Rifle Brigade.

The Crimean War and Coley

Ezra Woodhead served with the 1st Battalion Rifle Brigade, probably as a Rifleman. According to the History of the Rifle Brigade' published by Sir William H. Cope in 1877 his battalion set sail from Portsmouth on the 13th July 1854 aboard the steamship 'Orinoco.' They stopped in Malta before heading for Constantinople where they had to disembark and set up camp because of an outbreak of cholera onboard. In August they were inspected by Prince George the Duke of Cambridge (1819-1904), a cousin of Queen Victoria, "who expressed his satisfaction with its state and its fitness for immediate service." In September they fought in the Battle of the Alma and then headed towards the port city of Sebastapol where the Allies dug in with trenches and began the Siege of Sevastopol. In October 1854 the Russians attempted to break the siege with the Battle of Balaclava and Ezra's battalion was ordered out to repel the attack. This battle is best known for the devastating 'Charge of the Light Brigade' which was immortalised in poetry by Lord Tennyson.



The Crimean War and Coley

So who was Ezra? Ezra Woodhead (1831-1861) was born to William Woodhead, a weaver of Upper Brackens. In 1851 the family were living at 2 Spring Head on Halifax Road and William was working as a power loom weaver. His military career ended in ignominy when he was convicted of deserting his regiment at Aldershot in 1856. He returned to Shelf and in 1858 he was described as a warehouseman of Shelf when he married Sarah Ann Whitaker at Halifax Parish Church and they went on to have two children. He died in 1861 aged just 29 years and was buried at Coley. Sebastopol fell on the 9th September 1855 – marking the beginning of the end of the Crimean War. The telegraph brought news of the Fall of Sebastopol to Bradford on the 10th September 1855 and “the liveliest joy was excited among all classes...demonstrations of the delight of the inhabitants were exhibited, such as flags, bonfires, fireworks, and the roar of cannon.” We are told that “the glorious news of the fall of Sebastopol was received here [in Shelf] with great rejoicing on Tuesday morning” (the 11th September). A few weeks later on Saturday the 30th September 1855:

‘the people of Stone Chair, young and old, rich and poor, turned out to give public expression to their joyous feelings at the glorious intelligence from Sebastopol. A large fire was kindled, and a number of fireworks provided for the occasion were let off during the evening. There was also a continuous discharge of guns.’

Cockleshell Heroes:

Part 3 Remembrance

Graham Bradshaw

Eighty years after Operation Frankton, in November last year, the Halifax Courier carried a report that Calderdale Council were considering how Halifax's own Cockleshell Hero can be better remembered. Marine David Moffatt's name is in the War Memorial Book at the Town Hall, and on the war memorial in St Bernards Church, where he was a member of the boy scouts. These are the only dedications to him in Calderdale so it was felt that more should be done. Now one year later the installation of a memorial is going to go ahead with the scheme at planning stage. The following looks at the existing memorials to the Cockleshell Heroes and what has been done in other towns in the UK and in France. Memorials have been erected at some of the towns where the marines lived, where they trained, in naval establishments and in Bordeaux and surrounding area where Operation Frankton was carried out.

Bill Sparks, who was one of the only two survivors of the mission, was instrumental in the first memorial erected in this country to the men who took part in the Operation Frankton. Bill who had been awarded a Distinguish Service Medal, felt that there had been insufficient recognition for the men who didn't come back from the operation. In 1983 he unveiled a memorial in the Royal Marine Base, Poole which is the base of the Special Boat Service, the elite maritime counter-terrorism unit of the Royal Navy. Most of the operations carried out by the SBS are highly classified so little is known about them by the general public. It is not surprising that there is little information about the memorial nor that recent enquiries to the main library and the museum service in Poole found that they were not aware that it existed.

Cockleshell Heroes:

Part 3 Remembrance

There is a blue plaque on the house where Bill lived in Loughton, north-east London, after the war. He later moved to Canvey Island where a plaque was unveiled in the Bay Museum, in August 2013 to commemorate him.

There is also a blue plaque on the former home of the only other survivor and the leader of the operation, "Blondie" Hasler, in Catherington, Hampshire. It was unveiled in October 2016 by the late Paddy Ashdown MP, who served in the SBS before becoming an MP.

On the 50th anniversary of the raid in 1992, Bill was called upon to unveil a sculpture in the form of a cockleshell in the Rose Garden on the Esplanade in Southsea, where the marines trained for the mission. There is a plaque on the Lanzaretto War Memorial on the shores of Holy Loch, Scotland where they also trained and sailed from, on board HMS Submarine Tuna, to participate in Operation Frankton.

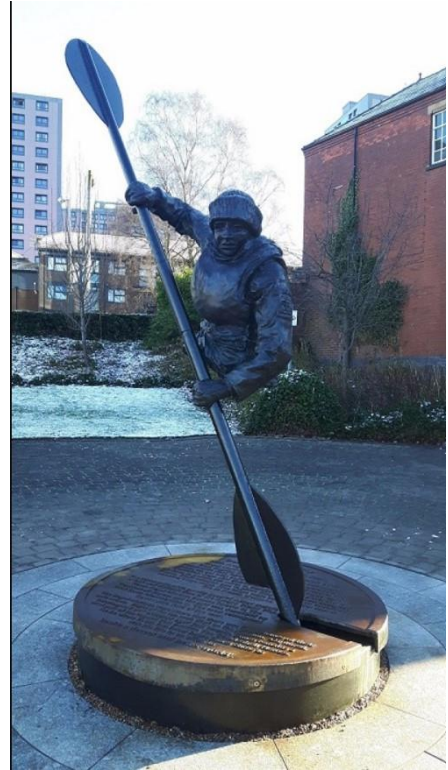
To mark the 70th anniversary in 2012 a memorial was erected in the grounds of the Royal Marines Museum in Eastney, comprising of a grey slate tablet attached to a rough-hewn stone with the names of the ten men who took part in the actual raid. In the same year the two houses in Southsea, where they were billeted, also had blue plaques unveiled. A similar memorial was installed in Birkenhead later the same year. This plaque lists the names of all thirteen men who set off on the mission including a reserve marine and two who were forced to return home because their boat was damaged when being launched from the submarine in which they had sailed to France. The names of the cockleshells and their crews are shown with age and hometown and whether they survived or were lost. David Moffatt is named in the "**Conger**" cockleshell as: **Marine David Moffatt (24) Halifax (Drowned)**. There is an error with David's age (he was 22 when he drowned), this is the only memorial where his home town is identified.

Cockleshell Heroes:

Part 3 Remembrance

Two memorials are dedicated to particular marines in their hometowns. One is a plaque on Kettering's main war memorial dedicated to Walter Henry Mills and the other is a bronze sculpture near to Stockport town hall dedicated to James Conway. The sculptor, Luke Perry, during the development stage consulted with historians, relatives of James and viewed the remaining artefacts from Operation Frankton, which are housed at various museums in the country, all with the aim to produce a historically perfect representation.

Monument in Stockport
to James Conway



Three years later a Great Western Railway intercity express train was named in the honour of George Sheard, from Plymouth, fellow crew member of Conger who drowned with David Moffett. Among those honoured at the same time by having trains named were the Gurkha Tulbahadur Pun VC and Harry Billinge MBE, the D-Day veteran. There is a stone of remembrance with a plaque in North Corner, Devonport dedicated to local heroes of World War II. There are five "North Corner Heroes" named including George Sheard, with some of his other brave family members.

The memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum comprises of a plaque commemorating the Cockleshell Heroes and unusually another with the names of 35 French resistance fighters and civilians who risked their lives to help the two survivors escape. A bench in the symbolic shape of a Cockleshell canoe is positioned in front of the plaques.

Cockleshell Heroes:

Part 3 Remembrance

There are memorials in Bordeaux and the area around the Gironde river as well as 20 plaques around the region dedicated to the Cockleshell Heroes. The names of Alfred Laver and William Mills are inscribed on the war memorial in the town of Montlieu-la-Garde. The marines were captured and shot after they had been spotted near to the village and betrayed. There is a memorial to Samuel Wallace and Robert Ewart near to where they were captured by a German anti-aircraft battery and were shot in the village of Blanquefort near Bordeaux.

David Moffatt, the nephew of Marine David Moffatt, over almost twenty years has put a lot time and energy into keeping the memory of his uncle alive. He and his family have been to many commemorations dedicated to the Cockleshell Heroes in France and in the UK and have paid their respect at many of the memorials in both countries.



David Moffatt
jnr with wife
Angela

Cockleshell Heroes:

Part 3 Remembrance

He says that the memorials and commemorations are very moving, and he will never forget any of the occasions that mean so much to him and his family. All have left a lasting impression on him but none more than when he went to a commemoration on the Ile de Re where his uncle's body was buried in an unmarked grave in the sand dunes. He met an old man who told him tearfully how he as a 16 year old boy had discovered on the beach the mutilated body of David's uncle, whilst walking with his father. They left the beach for fear of being discovered by German patrols. There are two simple plaques on the wall of the Le Bois cemetery on the Ile de Re where other allied servicemen are buried, whose bodies were found on the island's beaches during the war. One plaque has photographs of David Moffatt and George Sheard, the other plaque has details of the fate of the Operation Frankton marines.



David Moffat memorial, Isle de Re, France.

Note Names of some of the Cockleshell Heroes are on memorials to other men who died in World War Two, such as the Royal Naval Memorial in Plymouth where all the eight men who died in Operation Frankton are named, amongst the 23,220 men who died in both world wars. All similar memorials have not been located and are therefore not included in the above.

Balloons and the Siege of Paris:

By Peter Walls

On July 19th 1870, for a variety of reasons, but largely because both nations wanted it, war was declared between France and Prussia.

The Emperor of France, Napoleon III, was trying to recapture the glory of his more illustrious uncle, whilst Prince Otto von Bismarck was keen to unite the various independent German states and begin to challenge the power of the French and the British. Looking at things from the outside, the French had two main problems: the first was that they had a very exaggerated idea of the power and capability of their army; and the second was that, whilst Bismarck was intelligent and very politically astute, Napoleon III was as thick as a brick and completely under the thumb of his wife! Bismarck's machinations successfully pushed the French into declaring war, ensuring that any allies of France would not be drawn in – France was not being attacked, after all – and that the other German states would rally round to support “one of their own”.



Colourised
image of French
artillerymen.

The result on the battlefield was a shock to the French, but probably not to impartial observers: the French army suffered a disastrous defeat at Sedan, Napoleon III was captured – along with 100,000 French troops – and went into exile in Britain, the Prussians invaded northern France and, by mid-September, Paris was surrounded.

The siege lasted from mid-September 1870, until the end of January 1871, during which time the Prussian Headquarters were in Versailles, which is where the creation of the German Empire was announced, on January 18th, 1871, with King Wilhelm I of Prussia becoming Emperor – or Kaiser. Also, during this time, the French declared the end of Napoleon III's Empire, creating a Government of National Defence and sending a delegation to Tours, so that they could keep operating, even whilst the Prussians were cutting Paris off from the rest of the country.

Once the encirclement of Paris was complete, communication between the capital and the delegation in Tours became problematical – not to mention any communication between those living in Paris with relatives, friends or business associates in the rest of France. And this is where the balloons came in.

As the inevitability of that encirclement became glaringly clear, the city authorities began to think about how they would be able to maintain contact with the rest of the country. And it was soon accepted that the most readily available means – and probably the safest – would be the hot air balloon.



A balloon called “Neptune” [left] was released on September 23rd, carrying a pilot and 125kg of mail, destined for the government delegation in Tours. The Postmaster General and several other government ministers were present at the launch of the world's first airmail flight, following which plans were drawn up for a production line of custom-made balloons that would provide a public mail service, as well as carrying government communications.

During the period of the siege, there were 67 balloon flights and, given that they had to go where the winds were blowing, they literally, went to all points of the compass. Only about half a dozen were captured by the Prussians, including one that was carrying secret government plans to co-ordinate action between Paris and the French Armies outside the capital and another that was carrying gold to the value of 7 million francs, that was intended for the purchase of arms. All of the pilots and passengers captured were released at the end of the war and all of the mail they were carrying was, likewise, delivered once hostilities had ceased. Two of the flights disappeared without trace – one into the Irish Sea, with some of the mailbags it was carrying being picked up near the Lizard, in Cornwall, and the other into the Bay of Biscay.



Attaching messages to the pigeon's legs

Given the nature of these enterprises, virtually every flight has an interesting or entertaining story attached to it, but one of the most amazing surrounds the flight of the "Ville d'Orléans" launched in pitch darkness at 11pm on November 24th. Accompanying the pilot, Paul Rolier, was a sharpshooter named Léonard Bézier, three hundred kilogrammes of letters, a cage containing six carrier pigeons, and a package of government despatches.

Incredibly, they spent almost 15 hours in the air, covering nearly 800 miles and eventually landing in Norway! Their balloon was donated to the University at Christiana, on condition that it should be exhibited for the profit of victims of the war and, once they had raised sufficient funds to continue their journey, Rolier and Bézier travelled by boat to London, train to Southampton, boat again, to St Malo, then train to Tours! So, the mail they delivered eventually travelled roughly 2200 miles to finally arrive just 200 miles from their point of departure!

In fact, balloons worked quite well for getting mail out of Paris, but were not really a practical option for getting messages back in. Pigeons had been used to deliver messages since Roman times so, after the first couple of balloons, ALL carried at least some pigeons to bring messages back. At first, these consisted of a single message, written on paper and attached to a bird's leg, so really each bird could only carry one message, which would have to be extremely short – really, they couldn't do much more than acknowledge the safe arrival of the balloons. However, the development of the microfilm process by René Dagron, resulted in the birds being able to carry many more messages.

Having said that, I'm afraid the success rate for the pigeons was not very high. During the whole period of the siege, the balloons carried 407 pigeons out of Paris and only 73 successfully made the return journey, which is around 18%. One significant reason was that it was a particularly bad winter, which meant that the pigeons were not only targets for Prussian soldiers, but they might equally be shot by hungry Frenchmen, and then there were also natural predators. The news on the Pigeon Front wasn't all bad for everyone, however. The 73 birds that made it back carried in all 95,642 messages, which is an average of 1,310 messages per bird. And the Post Office charged 50 centimes per word for these messages! It has been estimated that this service, which cost the lives of roughly 80% of the living creatures who took part in it, made a profit of over 400,000 Francs and places the French Post Office among the worst-ever war-time profiteers in history.