

Flying Off to Combat?

Birds Alerted for War

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Would you believe that war is for the birds?

So much so that hawks and doves might fight side by side or that parrots, ducks, chickens, pigeons and even mynah birds could be drafted to help defend the flag in some future war.

Whatever you might think of the scheme, the Pentagon is all for it. Consider the description of the \$600,000 contract the Defense Department has with the Psychology Department of the University of Mississippi:

"This program is based," the contract reads, "on the supposition that birds will eventually replace humans for activities that are dangerous, difficult, expensive or boring."

Among the activities the Pentagon has in mind are "aerial photography, gunnery, steering of missiles, detection

of mines and search and destroy operations."

Just how the Pentagon plans to get birds to do all these things is anybody's guess, but it does mean to try.

"Much of the research will relate to complex forms of stimulus control," the contract with the University of Mississippi reads, "for example, visual search, auditory pattern recognition, pursuit and tracking, controlled locomotion and operation of manipulanda while flying."

"This is not a development contract," explains a Pentagon spokesman. "What we're trying to do here is to see if birds can be trained to do certain things."

The Pentagon admits it won't be able to use all birds in its research but it would like to train most species of wild birds for combat flying.

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"Especially crows, ravens, jays, hawks and vultures," the contract goes on, including "doves, parrots, mynahs, chickens and pigeons."

The use of warbirds is not a new one, though its past is hardly glorious.

The most serious attempt to use bird-like creatures was in a program called X-Ray, in which bats carrying incendiaries were to be flown into Tokyo during World War II. The idea was to get the bats to roost in the

eaves of Tokyo's wooden buildings, where the bombs would go off when the bats flipped upside down to sleep.

"The trouble with that one," said one scientist who worked on Project X-Ray, "was that it almost burned down an Air Force base in New Mexico." X-ray never made it to Japan.

The latest scheme for warbirds came to roost when the Pentagon circulated a letter advertising for ornithologists to work on it.

"I read it, I re-read it, and I read it

again," one scientist said, "and I still couldn't believe it. It's insane."

Critics notwithstanding, the Pentagon is going ahead with its bird scheme.

"This program is just getting started," it says. "Hopefully, it will go on for 10 or 20 years."

The project is supported by a three-year "Project Themis" contract, at \$200,000 a year. Project Themis is a program aimed at beefing up basic research in universities that have not had strong science programs.