From L. Chamboissier (v.b.).
Loading the mail bags on a balloon.
On July 18th, 1870, the French Emperor Napoleon III declared war on King Wilhelm I of Hohenzollern’s Prussia, but after suffering defeats at Sedan on September 1st and 2nd he had to capitulate. The French Empire ended, and on September 4th, 1870 the Republic was declared.

The Prussians invaded France and on September 19th they completed their surrounding of Paris. The siege was long and ended only on January 28th 1871 with the surrender of Paris and with the armistice. During the siege, postal communications by land were interrupted.

Apart from some rare ‘boules’, however, which were recovered in the Seine only at the end of the war, it was the pigeons and especially the ballon montés that kept Paris connected to the rest of the world.

Below:

4 September 1870. Day of the end of the French Empire and declaration of the Republic. Paris is not yet in a state of siege. Cover from a soldier of the ‘72 de Ligne’ sent P.P. (port payé) from Paris La Gare d’Ivry to “Condel par Rubastens Tarne” where had already arrived on September 5th through Paris to Toulouse A and Perigueux to Toulouse C railway postal services. In spite of the fatal defeat at Sedan having just occurred, the railways and the post were still working properly.

3 November 1870. Small entire from Neuilly sur Seine, a town a dozen km from the centre of Paris in an area not yet occupied by the Prussians, sent P.P. (port payé) to Paris (there is no arrival stamp). A soldier with the "Garde mobile de la Seine" 7th bataillon writes to a friend expressing sadness for his own condition and for having to stay in a fortification for three hours while ready to start fighting for our "cochons de Parisiens ... nothing in the heart ... I do not need money ... I hope to meet you on Sunday".
Gambetta, who was he?

Léon Gambetta (1838-1882) was a lawyer and a politician. On September 4th, 1870 he became Minister of the Interior for the Republic. On October 7th, he left besieged Paris on board the 6th balloon. The Armande Barbès left at 11am from Place St.Pierre, in Montmartre. Under the command of the airman J. Trichet and with another passenger - E. Spuller - on board, it also carried a hundred pounds of mail and 16 pigeons. Given the particular load he traveled at great height and landed after four and a half hours at Bois Favier, near Epineuse, a hundred kilometers north of Paris. Gambetta then moved with the Government first to Tours then to Bordeaux. He also became Minister of War. His political life was chaotic until the end.

Brief introduction to present this incredible telegram of seven-pages of which, for obvious reasons of space, I can show only images of the first and last page. Below is a literal translation (the numbers are those marked on the sheets).
The first message tells that the balloon “Gambetta” (so called in honour of the Minister, the 56th in chronological order), left from the Gare du Nord on January 10th 1871 at 4am piloted by the airman Charles Duvivier with the engineer Michel Eugène Lefebvre de Fourcy, three pigeons and 240 pounds of mail. Despite a weak wind, a very cold night and a lot of rain, it had arrived at 2.30 pm in Ouanne, 20 km from Auxerre (Yonne), 200 km south of Paris. Duvivier and Lefebvre de Fourcy reached Bordeaux by post courier the following day. This permitted the drawing up of the circular for the prefects and the generals with the news of the fighting around Paris and the bombardment of the city.

To the Bordeaux government

The military report of the evening of the 9th says that several fights took place yesterday towards Malmaison. This morning the enemy renewed his attempts against the Maison Crochet for the fourth time from the Carrierès side to the left of Rueil. The mobile troops of lower Seine and of Aisne have repelled the enemy causing serious losses. The borders of the Panthéon and the ninth sector have received heavy shelling tonight, of which more than thirty were of large-caliber. The Hospice of Piety was attacked. A woman was killed there. Patients in a room had to be evacuated to a cellar. The Val de Grâce was also shelled. The enemy seems to take aim at Paris hospital establishments, showing once again hateful measures with no respect for the laws of war and humanity. During the night and towards this point of the day, the Prussians fired intensely on the southern forts. It was done today with less violence than the previous days. Close estimates report at 2,000 the number of howitzer shots fallen this night in Paris. Some women and children have been killed or injured. The news brought yesterday by a pigeon has produced an immense effect. The population is more than ever animated by the feeling and resolution of a stubborn resistance.

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From J. Le Pileur (v.b.). This is how the cages with pigeons and the mail bags traveled on a balloon.

From L. Chamboissier (v.b.). The departure of Léon Gambetta on the balloon Armand Barbès (chronologically number 6).

From J.C. Lettré (v.b.). The cages with pigeons ready to be loaded onto a balloon.

Right page: Map showing the landing points of the Ballon 6 (north of Paris) and the Ballon 56, 200 km to the south.
Le marché Saint-Germain pendant la ségrégation.

Finally the fog disappeared. One of your pigeons arrived here in the evening of January 8th, bringing us the official dispatches of the second series N. 35 36 37 and 38 and the private and micro-dispatches from page 1 to 63 of the second series and from 1bis to 14bis. We were happy with the good and numerous news brought by your message when it was finally deciphered. The Russians are in a hurry and they are bombing Issy, Vanves and also a little Montrouge. The howitzers shots change over the Panthéon the Odeon St Sulpice and the rue de la Babylone. The population is admirable, (showing) no fear. The news brought by your pigeon and those learned on the 9th from the newspapers double everybody’s courage. Long live the Republic!

The second message is directed to François Frédéric Steenackers (sometimes Stenackers, or Steeneckers) appointed by the minister Gambetta as director of the Posts and Telegraphs. It talks about the arrival of a pigeon with micro-filmed messages and the further bombardment of Paris.
Leveillé head of the telegraphic administration office at Stenackers, General Manager.
Paris January 10th January

Weak bombardment, except at night. Numerous howitzer shells on the St. Jacques district. Population reassured by the happy news from the province and more from the 30,000 private dispatches carried by your pigeon, endures the challenge without hesitation. Gambetta thanks you.
Long live Paris! Long live France! Long live the Republic!
CC to the director of transmissions, [?]

The third message is also for Steenackers and in addition to the usual bombing, it talks of a pigeon that had arrived with 30 thousand private messages (they might have been microscopic, but the figure, for a single pigeon, is incredible!) which reassured the population. Great patriotic expressions at the end.
This telegram is an Official Dispatch or Service Dispatch transmitted by the main telegraph office in Lyon at 3 hours and 50 minutes in the evening received by the Administration of the Telegraphs Service of Bourg at 4 (also in the afternoon) of the “11/1”, as also the octagonal stamp Bourg 11 Janv 71. The transmission of this dispatch shows how the telegraph lines functioned quite well despite the war and the still precarious electrical installations of those times. The telegraphic circular which actually issued from Bordeaux on January 11th 1871 (where Gambetta had withdrawn with part of the Government of “Free France”), reached the office of Bourg, now Bourg-en-Bresse, from the Lyon telegraph station. It is just 60 kilometers from Bourg, while Bordeaux is on the Atlantic Coast, more than 500 kilometers from Lyon. More than from the point of view of the telegraphic forms, this long telegram is of great historical, interest and especially of postal historical interest. In fact, besides the firsthand news of the war operations that were taking place, it offers proof of the efficiency and importance of the mail transported by the ballon montés and by the pigeons during the siege of Paris.
24 January, 1871. Letter handstamped Paris R. Cardinal Lemoine covered by a star-shaped stamp with points, sent to Paris, Avenue des Amandiers (there is no arrival mark). Written in Créteil, a town about ten kilometers from the centre of Paris in an area not yet occupied by the Prussians. A soldier with the “Garde Nationale mobilitée” writes to his mother telling her that he had received her letter, but not the newspapers. He’s in the barracks at Créteil “… on Saturday night we had an alert … none of us fired a shot … we are very calm at the outposts. … the great amount of false news … we do not know what is going on in Paris … we do not know when we will return to Paris … we have been here for fifteen days … I hope we will return to Paris this week… I embrace you. “Then, added in pencil:” Monday 10 hours in the evening. I just received your good letter. I do not think of coming to Paris before the end of this week. I will not disturb you. … I have just read in the “Electeur Libre” about the order to leave Paris and that the fighting at the Hotel de Ville is over. I am sending my letter through Gustave in Bobigny. Goodbye dear mother “. Another addition: “excuse my handwriting, but it is the fault of the Prussians”. A letter that shows all the uncertainty and excitement of those moments: Four days later Paris would surrender to the Prussians.

From L. Chamboissier (v.b.).
The projection of microfilm messages carried by pigeons.

Essential Bibliography
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