



HISTORY OF SIGNALLING IN 100 OBJECTS GENERAL FOWLER'S COCKED HAT



Released Prisoners
Back row (left to right): Sepoy Banghar, Spr. Chanda Singh, Havildar U.K.'s army, Sepoy U.K.'s army, Sepoy Faquir. Front row: Fowler, Edwards (Biddy), Rassaul Khan (E's Orderly)

Lt General Sir John Fowler KCB, KCMG DSO was Director of Army Signals of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in August 1914 and remained in post until 1919. The RE Signal Service had 72 officers and 2,200 soldiers supporting the BEF in 1914; by the end of the war this had risen to 70,000 men. During his time as Director radio had come to stay, vast quantities of buried armoured telephone cables had come into use and the Signal Service had developed a very close link with General Post Office (GPO) engineers, which has remained to this day between Royal Signals and British Telecom. Following WW1 he took up several senior Army and political appointments, hence the object in this story being the General's cocked hat, which he wore when he was GOC Singapore and later GOC China. He was respected by both military and political figures. He was promoted to Lt General in 1926 and retired from the Army in 1928. He was therefore the natural choice to become the first Colonel Commandant of the newly formed Royal Corps of Signals, an appointment he held from 1923 to 1934.

This distinguished career nearly came to a dramatic end on the North West Frontier of India at Chitral in 1896. Fowler had progressed from the Telegraph Bn RE in 1889 to the Bengal Sappers & Miners in 1892, which took him on active service on the NW Frontier. He was involved in fighting with tribesmen, which began in January 1896. Fowler was based with some 20 Sappers in Chitral, but in March was ordered to give assistance. This he did accompanied by a second RE officer, Lt Edwards. They fought a successful skirmish, which they won, but let their guard down following an agreed ceasefire. During a game of polo they were taken hostage. The outcome of British and Hindu soldiers in these circumstances usually ended very badly - normally execution with extreme cruelty. Luckily this time their release was successfully negotiated. The picture shows this, taken at the end of March 1896. It was thought at the time that he might receive the VC, but this was not to be (allowing himself to become a hostage?). However, he was awarded the DSO. The tribesmen returned his boots, but the rest of his kit had all been stolen. He spent two years in dispute with the Army Bureaucracy attempting to obtain compensation for all his equipment that had gone missing. He failed with this (we have all been there) and he also failed to obtain exemption from the Staff promotion examination!

John Fowler was born in 1864 and died in 1939. He is considered to be the man who established Royal Signals and persuaded HRH Princess Royal to become the first Colonel in Chief.