



## HISTORY OF SIGNALLING IN 100 OBJECTS THE HELIOGRAPH LIGHT SIGNALLING SYSTEM



Light and runners have long been methods of communications used by armies. The battle of Marathon in 490BC, legend has it, had a runner to announce the victory in Athens over

the Persian Army and the “Shield of Marathon” flashed a signal to assist the Greeks to win a victory. Sadly, the Greek Marathon messenger died after delivering his news, but we still remember the race to this day. Light remained a means of communication to present times. A survival pack often still includes a mirror so an alarm can be raised if in distress or to attract urgent support.

The heliograph (left) with its case, in a similar way to the metal shield, uses sunlight to flash signals in Morse Code. This instrument now resides in the Royal Signals Museum having been captured from a Boer HQ by a British flying column led by Lt Col De Lisle CB DSO during the Boer War in 1901. He subsequently presented it to the museum. It originally belonged to General Christian Rudolf de Wet

(1854 - 1922), who was one of the most successful Boer commanders fighting against the British in the South African wars. Heliographs was used by both sides during the Boer War, in other colonial wars and in WW1 & WW2. The problem with the heliograph is that it requires sunshine, which is often missing in temperate climates, but in good conditions these instruments could operate over 40 miles. There are two mirrors at right angles and with an added oscillating mirror a

beam of reflected light from the sun, can be interrupted to transmit in Morse code at high speed.

The 21 Sikh sepoy shown in the picture to the left are commemorated for their vital part played at the Battle of Saragarhi in 1897. They were manning a small fort that linked two larger forts by a heliograph. They were attacked by 10,000 Afghan tribesmen and rather than surrender fought to the death, killing 180 attackers and wounding many more.

When you look at the instrument you can only feel grateful that we now have small radios and telephones, which are easier to manage!

