

U.S. ARMY HELIOGRAPH SYSTEM (1886- 1890)

Heliogram. August 18, 1886. Lt. McDonald, Camp Rucker.

“Geronimo and band reported at Fronteras. Take your command as quickly as possible to Cajon Bonito and cover the country. Wilder and McDonald start at once for Fronteras to strike hostiles or receive surrender, if possible.”

--Sgd. E.B. Beaumont, Major

It was the **“talking mirrors”** of the Army’s heliograph system, **introduced into the Geronimo Campaign in 1886** that provided instant communication for those soldiers chasing the Geronimo band throughout the Southwest border region.

The **“field” heliograph consisted of an adjustable mirror mounted on a tripod.** The heliograph stations were usually operated on mountaintops by a team consisting of a signal corpsman, a sergeant and three privates. Messages called “heliograms” were flashed from some **51 stations** across sunny skies of southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

The formative heliograph system developed and used by the British Army during the 1870’s was modified by the U.S. Signal Corps and introduced into the Southwest Indian Wars by General Nelson Miles in May 1886. The system was abandoned in October after the surrender of Geronimo in September of that year. The Fort Bowie station first placed on Helen’s Dome and later on Bowie Peak, was the strategic and central hub of the system. Here, more messages were sent and received than any other station.

In 1890, four years after the exile of the Chiricahua Apaches, experimental heliograph maneuvers were performed to test the efficiency of the system. Bowie Peak was again the focal point of the operations.

The **average distance between stations was about 25 miles**, although 50 or more miles were sometimes achieved. An incomplete message of about 120 miles was once recorded. During the 1886 campaign a message of 27 words was flashed via eight relay stations and an answer returned in two hours and 20 minutes.

Bowie Peak, rising 1,300 feet behind Fort Bowie, was named after the fort. Col. George Washington Bowie was the 5th California Volunteer’s commander in 1862.

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