

Did the Telegraph Save the British in 1857?

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Introduction

The story of the Great Mutiny of 1857 or the First War of Indian Independence has been told many times. The success of the British in subduing the revolt has been attributed to many factors including the courage and fortitude of the English; the lack of leadership and cooperation among the Indians; the non-involvement of the Madras and Bombay Presidency armies; the disinterest shown by many Indian rulers and the active support of the Sikhs and Gurkhas. Perhaps the most important reason-the use of the telegraph - has not been given its due importance. Had the rebels understood the value of this technological marvel, and made efforts to disrupt it, British rule in India might have ended ninety years earlier.

Brief History of the Telegraph in India

The first attempt at visual signalling making use of alphabets was the semaphore telegraph developed in 1792 by Claude Chappe, who established a system comprising twenty-two stations between Lille and Paris, known as the 'tachygraphs'. Four years later the Admiralty approved the construction of a 'semaphore' system developed by George Murray between London and Portsmouth. In 1813 William Boyce submitted a plan for establishing a telegraph system across the Peninsula of India. The plan was to construct two routes, one linking Bombay to Calcutta and the other from Bombay to Madras. Boyce was summoned to Calcutta in 1816 and asked to construct an experimental line between Fort William and Barrackpore. In 1817 the Government approved the construction of a telegraph line from Calcutta to Chunar. The responsibility for carrying out the survey was assigned to Captain George Everest of the Regiment of Artillery, who was destined to become the Surveyor General of India and give his name to the tallest peak in the World.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVII, No. 568, April-June 2007.

Assisted by Lieutenant Fergusson of the Ramghur Battalion, Everest finished the survey in 1818. Work on the first semaphore telegraph system in India began immediately and was completed in 1821. It had 45 stations, separated by a distance of about 10 miles. Each station was manned by five to seven *tindals* (workers) and *qasids* (messengers). The system used four large balls, about five feet in diameter, numbered from one to four. These were suspended by pulleys from a yard, which was mounted on top of a mast or a tower, about 100 feet above the ground. The balls were raised or lowered in accordance with a simple code, which was known to the person at the next station, who used a powerful telescope for sighting the balls. The total expenditure on the system came to about a thousand rupees a month and it took about an hour for a message to traverse the distance of over 400 miles between Calcutta and Chunar. Compared to the existing arrangement of *harkaras* (runners) who carried the *dak* (post), this was a huge improvement. (The beat of a *harkara* was eight miles, and the post travelled about 70 miles in a day). Unfortunately, there was only one telescope at each station, which had to be turned round from one side to the other, often leading to the instrument being damaged. In 1828 the Superintendent of Telegraphs, Captain CTG Weston made a strong bid for a second telescope. However, Sir Charles Metcalfe felt that the system had no military value and was wasteful, and recommended its closure. When it was found that the monthly expenditure had increased to about two thousand rupees, the Governor General-in-Council ordered that the system be closed down. On being informed of this, the Directors in London gleefully reminded the Bengal Government that on first hearing of the project they had expressed great doubt as to its practical value.¹

The electric telegraph came to India almost ten years later, when Dr. WB O'Shaughnessy, an assistant surgeon who held the appointment of Professor of Chemistry in the Medical College at Calcutta, set up 21 miles of experimental line from Calcutta towards Diamond Harbour in 1839 and began conducting experiments. This was just two years after Cooke and Wheatstone had worked the first telegraph line in England along the railway track between London and Slough in 1837, and only a year after Samuel Morse had demonstrated his telegraph system between Washington and Baltimore in 1838. O'Shaughnessy was soon joined

by Seebchunder Nandy, a young Indian with exceptional technical aptitude who became his personal assistant. Their efforts impressed the young Marquis of Dalhousie, the Governor General of India, who, having been the Post Master General in England where the telegraph was making rapid progress, saw the immense possibilities in India. Responding to Dalhousie's urgent plea, in March 1850 the Court of Directors of the East India Company sanctioned the first experimental line between Calcutta and Diamond Harbour. The first message on the line was successfully transmitted in October 1851.

Enthused by the success of the experimental line, Dalhousie asked O'Shaughnessy to work out a telegraph system for the whole of India, based primarily on military requirements. In April 1852, the Governor General-in-Council approved the network linking Calcutta to Peshawar, via Agra, which was also to be connected to Bombay, Ootacamund and Madras. Considering the importance of the work, Dalhousie despatched O'Shaughnessy to London to personally explain the scheme to the Court of Directors, who granted their approval in June 1851. O'Shaughnessy was appointed Chief Superintendent of Telegraphs and spent the rest of 1851 and the greater part of 1852 in England, collecting and despatching to India the huge quantity of stores required for the project. Work on the line started in November 1853, and by the time Dalhousie left India in February 1856, the job had been completed. More than 4,000 miles of wire had been laid, the total cost being twenty one lakh rupees, or a little over five hundred rupees per mile; that the Governor-General could receive reports and send instructions to the Governors of the three Presidencies within minutes, was a remarkable achievement in those days. O'Shaughnessy was knighted in appreciation of his services and appointed the first Director General of the Indian Telegraph Department. By the end of 1856, and on the eve of the Sepoy Mutiny, there were 4,250 miles of telegraph lines in India and 46 receiving offices.²

On 28 February 1856, while laying down his office Dalhousie penned his famous Minute on the administration of India, which enumerated several examples of the military utility of the electric telegraph. Adding a note to the Minute, he wrote:

I venture to add another and a recent instance of the political value of the electric telegraph which has occurred since this Minute was signed. On the 7th February, as

soon as the administration of Oude was assumed by the British Government, a branch electric telegraph from Cawnpore to Lucknow was forthwith commenced. In eighteen working days it was completed, including the laying of a cable six thousand feet in length across the River Ganges. On the morning on which I resigned from the Government of India, General Outram was asked by telegraph: 'Is all well in Oude?' The answer: 'All is well in Oude' was received soon after noon, and greeted Lord Canning on his first arrival.

The Outbreak in Meerut

As is well known, the insurrection started in Meerut on 10 May 1857. On Saturday, 9 May 1857, a parade was held in Meerut to announce the sentences awarded to eighty-five troopers of the 3rd Light Cavalry, who had refused to use the greased cartridges in April. After announcing the sentences of rigorous imprisonment, the men were stripped and put in fetters, in front of the entire garrison. Under a burning sun, the men of the three Indian regiments - 3rd Light Cavalry, 11th and 20th Native Infantry - watched in sullen silence as black smiths put leg irons on the ankles of each prisoner. The men being shackled implored the Divisional Commander, Major General William Hewitt, to have mercy, and when this failed, loudly called upon their comrades to come to their aid, heaping insults on their commanding officer, Colonel GM Carmichael Smyth, whose folly in holding the parade on 24 April had triggered the crisis. To deter any untoward incident, two British regiments - the 60th Foot and 6th Dragoon Guards - had been placed behind the native troops, in addition to some artillery guns. After the parade, the prisoners were sent to jail, the troops being marched back to their lines. The British officers went back to their bungalows, remarking on the salutary effect the punishment must have had on the natives. As they went to bed that Saturday night, nothing was farther from their minds than a mutiny, in which most of them were to lose their lives. Among them was Colonel John Finnis, commanding the 11th Native Infantry, who had retired after dining at the residence of another officer, where Mr. HH Greathed, the Commissioner of Meerut was also present.

On 10 May 1857, the European community in Meerut was enjoying a lazy Sunday, after the morning church service. Due to

the excessive heat, most of the day was spent indoors, in rooms whose doors and windows had been sealed with *khus tatties* (cooling mats, made of 'khus', a scented plant), which had to be sprinkled with water every few minutes by water bearers sitting outside. The hot winds passing through the *tatties* dried them quickly, the evaporation bringing down the temperature, so that the air passing through them was much cooler when it reached inside. The larger rooms had a big *punkha* (fan) hanging from the ceiling, to circulate the air inside. Motion to the *punkha* was provided by means of a rope passing through a hole in the wall, which was pulled by a coolie sitting outside in the verandah.

The mutiny started in the evening, when members of the British community were getting ready to go to evening church service. As the 60th Rifles, a British unit then in Meerut, was assembling for the church parade, a cry was raised that the British soldiers were intending to descend on the Indian troops, disarm and put them in chains. This caused a panic, precipitating the outbreak. Some Indian troopers galloped to the jail and released their comrades who had been imprisoned the previous day. The whole of the 3rd Cavalry then joined the soldiers of the two Indian infantry regiments who had assembled on the parade ground. Colonel Finnis, commanding the 11th Native Infantry, rode to the parade ground as soon as he heard about the outbreak. He harangued the men, and asked them to return to their duty. His own men had been the last and most hesitant of the rebels: Finnis was confident that his men loved him and would listen to him. But the men of the 20th had no such compunctions. They fired a volley and Colonel Finnis fell, riddled with bullets. He was the first victim of the Great Mutiny.³

The Soldiers were soon joined by a mob of civilians from the *bazaar* (market), who proceeded to murder Europeans and set fire to their houses. Though the troopers of 3rd Cavalry started the mutiny, they did not harm any of their officers. When they set free their colleagues from the jail, they did not release the other prisoners, who were later set free by the mob from the town. They also did not harm the British jailor. In fact, many of the British officers and their families escaped death only because of the help given by Indian soldiers and servants, some of whom risked their lives for this. Among them was the Commissioner, Mr. HH Greathed and his wife, who had moved to the terrace of their bungalow, along

with two British women who had sought shelter with them. When the mob reached his bungalow, it overpowered his guard, set fire to the house and began looking for the occupants. The Greathed's servant, Golab Khan, assured the horde that he knew where the Commissioner and his family were hiding and offered to take them there. The mob agreed and followed the servant to a haystack, allowing the Greathed's to come down and escape into the garden. The mob returned, infuriated with the deception that had been practiced on them, Golab Khan's life was in danger, but he managed to escape. The mob burned down the bungalow, which soon came down with a crash. The Commissioner and his companions spent the night with the gardener, who concealed them till the morning, when they made their way to the Dragoon Lines.⁴

The Telegraph at Delhi

The telegraph office at Delhi was under the charge of Charles Todd, who was assisted by two Eurasian signallers, Brendish and Pilkington. During the hot weather, the telegraph office remained closed between nine and four on Sundays. All three had been at work since daybreak and were about to close the office at nine and return to their bungalows for rest. As Brendish rose from his desk, the telegraph needle began to move. It was an unofficial message from Meerut that described the excitement that prevailed there on account of the sentences that had been passed on the men of the 3rd Light Cavalry for refusing to use the new cartridges. It stated that eighty men had been imprisoned and were to be blown away from guns. (Actually, eighty-five men had been given sentences ranging from five to ten years). However, there was no indication that an uprising was in the offing, and the telegraph office was closed at the usual hour, at Delhi as well as Meerut.

When Todd reopened his office at four, he discovered that the line to Meerut had been cut. He sent Brendish and Pilkington across the bridge of boats to check the line at the point it entered the River Jumna, from the north-east. They found that the line was working with Delhi, but not towards Meerut. Since it was getting dark, Todd asked them to come back. Meanwhile, at Meerut, the mutiny erupted in the evening, but the information could not be passed to Delhi because the line was not working. However, at midnight the postmaster at Meerut managed to send a private telegram to his aunt in Agra: 'Cavalry have risen setting fire to houses having

killed or wounded all Europeans they could find. If aunt intends starting tomorrow please detain her.'¹⁵ This telegram was shown to the Sir John Colvin, the Lieutenant-Governor at Agra, who immediately conveyed the information to Lord Canning, the Governor-General in Calcutta.

Next morning at about eight, Todd set off in a *gharry* (carriage) drawn by two ponies to locate the break in the line. When he did not return for several hours, his assistants began to assume the worst. This was confirmed by news picked up by the messengers attached to the telegraph office, who informed that the mutineers had crossed the bridge of boats and entered Delhi. Very soon, they met fugitives from the city who told them that mutineers were looting and murdering shopkeepers, and any European they came across. Brendish and Pilkington proposed heading towards the Flagstaff House Tower on the Ridge, where the officers and European refugees were congregating. However, Mrs. Todd was reluctant to leave without her husband, and it was only at about 2 p.m. that she finally agreed. Before leaving his office, Brendish sent the following message to Ambala: 'We must leave office. All the bungalows are on fire, burned down by the sepoy of Meerut. They came in this morning. We are off. Mr. Todd is dead, I think. He went out this morning and has not returned yet. We heard that nine Europeans were killed.

When Brendish, Pilkington and Mrs. Todd reached the Flagstaff Tower at around three in the afternoon, they found it overflowing. The main circular room was crammed with European refugees and their Indian servants, making it so hot and airless that one observer dubbed it the Black Hole in miniature. Pilkington had a withered leg that needed a special boot, but was relieved when an officer asked if he could return to the telegraph office with an escort and send another message to Ambala. He agreed, and sent the following official telegram from Brigadier Graves, Commanding at Delhi, to the Brigadier Commanding at Ambala: 'Cantonment in a state of siege. Mutineers from Meerut - 3rd Light Cavalry - numbers not known, said to be one hundred and fifty men, cut off communication with Meerut; taken possession of the bridge of boats. 54th Native Infantry sent against them refused to act. Several officers killed and wounded. City in a state of considerable excitement. Troops sent down, but nothing known yet. Information will be forwarded.'¹⁶

This was the last message from Delhi. Later that afternoon the signaller at Ambala noticed the telegraph needle moving as if someone was trying to send a message. But as the sender refused to identify himself, the signaller assumed it was somebody unfamiliar with the apparatus and that all the staff of the Delhi telegraph office had been murdered. Within hours, the message reached every major British cantonment and garrison in the Punjab. The telegraph line had not been extended to Simla, where the Commander-in-Chief, General Sir George Anson, was convalescing. The commander of the Sirhind Division, Major General Sir Henry Bernard, despatched his son, Captain Bernard on horseback from Ambala to Simla with a copy of the telegram. Having warned the various British detachments en route at Kasauli, Dagshai and Subathu, Captain Bernard reached Simla late in the afternoon on 12 May. In spite of his illness, Anson immediately set out for Ambala, where he established his advance headquarters, and began collecting the relief force. On his way to Delhi, Anson died of cholera at Karnal on 26 May, and Major General Sir Henry Bernard temporarily assumed command of the field force. Later, General Sir Colin Campbell was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army. The subsequent operations for the suppression of the mutiny are well known and will not be described here. However, the story of two stations where the telegraph played a major role - Lucknow and Lahore - will be recounted.

The Telegraph During the Siege and Relief of Lucknow

The telegraph line from Calcutta to Delhi passed through Varanasi (then called Benaras), Allahabad, Kanpur (then called Cawnpore), Agra and Meerut. The British garrison at Kanpur had surrendered on 27 June, but had been recaptured by Havelock on 17 July. In Lucknow, Sir Henry Lawrence, finding himself hopelessly out numbered, withdrew his troops into the Residency and the Machhi Bhawan. After a few days, Lawrence decided to abandon the Machhi Bhawan, and hold only the Residency. The distance between the two buildings was about 1500 yards, and since both positions were surrounded, it was impossible to send the message through courier. A primitive semaphore had been erected, comprising a post with a bar at the top, from which were suspended a row of black stuffed bags, each having a pulley to raise or lower it. Captain GWW Fulton, Bengal Engineers, assisted by two

volunteers, operated the Residency terminal, 'under a most tremendous musketry and round shot which knocked the post down, jammed the pulleys and cut the ropes several times'. It took Fulton three hours to pass the short message to Lieutenant JJ Macleod-Innes, also of the Bengal Engineers, who was manning the terminal at Machhi Bhawan: 'Spike the guns well. Blow up the fort and retire at midnight.'⁷

Though Lucknow had been linked to the British telegraph network before Dalhousie left India, the line had been destroyed by the rebels, 'who cut up the wires, hammered them into bullets, used the wooden telegraph supports for firewood and adapted the cast-iron tubing into rifled barrels'.⁸ Without the telegraph, Lawrence had considerable difficulty in communicating with other British garrisons. In fact, he had no news of the fate of the British, and whether he was likely to be relieved at all. Messengers had been sent, but most of them had been caught, and killed, after being tortured. The exceptions were Angad Tewari, a pensioned sepoy, and Missar Kanauji Lal, a minor employee of a mofussil court. The exploits of these two master spies, and the ingenious means used by them to convey messages to and from the besieged garrison in the Residency have been documented in *Memories of the Mutiny* by Lieutenant Colonel FC Maude.

On 25 September, a force under Brigadier-General Havelock and Sir James Outram fought their way into the Residency. Angad had made five trips outside the Residency, carrying messages between Lawrence and Havelock, during one of which he had been captured, but was able to escape. With Havelock's entry, the garrison in the Residency was reinforced, but the siege continued. It was only on 7 November that a messenger arrived with the welcome news that a strong army led by the Commander-in-Chief himself was likely to reach Lucknow in the next few days. On 12 November Sir Colin Campbell reached Alam Bagh, just south of Lucknow. Once again, a semaphore was established between Alam Bagh and the Residency, to exchange messages. However, before this could be done, it was necessary for both sides to have the same code. The job of conveying the code from the Residency to Alam Bagh was performed by Kanauji Lal, after the first messenger, a *qasid*, was captured and killed.

Captain P Stewart had taken over as Superintendent of the Electric Telegraphs in India after the departure of O'Shaughnessy. Stewart was in Ceylon when the uprising began, but had rushed back to India, to complete the coastal line linking Calcutta with Madras and Ceylon. On 2 November, he joined Campbell's column at Allahabad on its way to Lucknow. After reaching Kanpur on the 3rd, he immediately began construction of a telegraph line to Lucknow, and by 5 November had managed to lay almost 20 miles. By the time Campbell reached Alam Bagh, the telegraph line had also reached, but unfortunately, the rebels soon destroyed it.

Lucknow was relieved on 17 November but subsequently evacuated, leaving a small force under Outram at Alam Bagh. The Commander-in-Chief returned to Kanpur and established his headquarters there. Preparations began for the reduction of Oudh, and the capture of Lucknow. He also gave orders that the telegraph line linking Kanpur to Lucknow should be made functional, so that he could get regular reports of the progress of convoys and troops. Stewart not only had to re-construct and repair the line over a distance of 53 miles, but open telegraph offices at several places en route. By 19 February 1858, the line to Alam Bagh had been repaired, and offices at Banni Bridge, Nawabganj, Bantera and Alam Bagh had been established.

By the end of February, the army had concentrated at Alam Bagh, and operations against Lucknow commenced on 2 March 1858. Dilkusha was occupied on the 4th, and the telegraph line extended up to Bibiapur, just short of Dilkusha. On the 6th, Outram crossed the River Gomti, and after making a detour, camped at Chinhat on the Faizabad road. As this was not on the direct line of attack, it was decided not to extend the line further until the Martiniere was captured. However, communication with the force at Chinhat was essential, and it was decided to use the semaphore for this purpose. Working round the clock, two double-armed semaphores were constructed by Stewart within the next two days. One was erected on the roof of the Dilkusha, while the other was dispatched to Chinhat, along with the codes. Stewart personally took the semaphore to Chinhat on 9 March but circumstances precluded their use. Describing the incident, Stewart writes:

"The one on the left bank of the Gomti was never erected, for I found on arrival at the Chucker Kothee, the only

prominent building in the neighborhood of the advanced position that morning taken up by General Outram, from which communication with the Dilkusha could be readily carried on, that the lower story of the house was still held by a few of the so called rebels who had already caused a number of casualties by firing from the dark cells they occupied. Shortly after I arrived, an order was given to vacate the building to allow of using guns against it. Part of the building was soon afterwards on fire and I found it too late to commence the use of the semaphore".⁹

Meanwhile, La Martiniere had been occupied, and the objection to the extension of the telegraph removed. In Stewart's absence, inspector McIntyre had erected the line from Dilkusha to the entrance of La Martiniere within two hours of the capture of the latter. The headquarters moved into the building on 10 March. During the day, a telegraph line was taken across the Gomti to a building on the left bank close to Outram's headquarters. On the 12th, the telegraph office was moved from La Martiniere to a tent next to the one occupied by the Commander-in-Chief, enabling him to be in constant touch with Outram, as well as with the rest of the Army. Lucknow fell on 18 March 1858, and the telegraph office moved into the city, with the others at Alam Bagh and at Outram's headquarters closing down.

This was perhaps the first time that the telegraph had been used in battle, to provide minute-to-minute communications. A correspondent of the London Times wrote:

"Never since its discovery has the electric telegraph played so important and daring a role as it now does in India. Without it the Commander-in-Chief would lose the effect of half his Force. It has served him better than his right armso much for its importance. As to the daring action of the telegraph, which includes of course those who direct it, I need only observe that in this war, for the first time, a telegraph wire has been carried under fire and through the midst of a hostile country. *Pari passu*, from post to post it has moved on with our artillery and scarcely has the Commander-in-Chief established his headquarters at any spot where he intended to stay for

a few days when the post and the wire were established also. The telegraph was brought into communication with the Governor-General at Allahabad, with Outram at Alam Bagh, with Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and the most remote districts over which the system is distributed."¹⁰

The Events at Lahore

The story of Lahore is no less interesting. Punjab had become part of British India in 1849 after the end of the Second Anglo-Sikh War, which marked the end of the kingdom established by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the transfer of the Kohinoor diamond to the crown of British monarch. The news of the mutiny reached the telegraph office at Anarkali in Lahore, the capital of Punjab, on the morning of 12 May 1857. Sir John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner of Punjab was then at Rawalpindi, en route to the Murree Hills, to join his family. The senior civil officer present in Lahore was Robert Montgomery, the Judicial Commissioner, whose grandson, BL Montgomery, was later to attain fame as the victor of El Alamein. Shortly after the arrival of the telegram from Ambala conveying the news about the mutiny, Montgomery received the alarming information from a spy that the four native regiments at Lahore were about to join the uprising. Without wasting any time, Montgomery rushed to the cantonment at Mian Mir and conveyed the information to Brigadier Stuart Corbett, the commander of the Lahore garrison, suggesting that he should confiscate the sepoy's ammunition.

Corbett quickly appreciated the danger. There were four native regiments at Lahore - the 16th Grenadiers, the 26th Native Infantry, the 49th Native Infantry and the 8th Light Cavalry. The European troops comprised the 81st Foot and some European horse artillery. The 2,500 Indian soldiers outnumbered the 600 Europeans more than four times. Half a regiment of native infantry and one company of Europeans garrisoned the Lahore Fort. If the native troops rose and took possession of the Fort, it was quite likely that the Sikhs and Muslims in the city, numbering almost one lakh, would join them. Montgomery's suggestion to disarm the native troops appeared to be sound, but he knew that it would cause outrage among the officers. Even as Corbett was pondering over his options, further intelligence was received from the cantonment magistrate that the four native regiments were planning to seize the Fort on

15 May, when the monthly relief took place, doubling the number of armed sepoy in the Fort to over a thousand. It was also revealed that simultaneous mutinies would occur at other stations in Punjab. Corbett decided to go all the way and disarm all native troops in Lahore.

Corbett ordered a general parade of all troops on 13 May. So as not to raise any suspicion among the native troops, it was decided that the ball hosted by officers of the 81st Foot would be held on the previous evening, as planned. Most of the Europeans, including the ladies, knew about the plan to disarm the native troops next morning, but kept up their smiles as they performed their waltzes and quadrilles, so as not to alarm the Indian bearers and mess servants. Early on the morning of 13 May, the four native regiments were drawn up in columns on the grand parade at Mian Mir. Facing them were ten 6-ponder guns and two 12-pound howitzers of the European Horse Artillery. Behind the cannons were six companies of the 81st Foot, their muskets loaded. Riding to the middle of the parade ground, in front of the European officers at the head of the native columns, Brigadier Corbett addressed the men. After praising them for their past deeds he told them that what he was doing was only to keep their name unsullied; he was going to order them to show their loyalty by laying down their arms. The scene has been described by Saul David, who writes:¹¹

Then came the critical moment. 'Order the 16th to pile arms!' commanded Brigadier Corbett. All European eyes were on the tall, black-faced ranks of the 16th Grenadiers - one of the 'beautiful' regiments that had fought under Noli at Kandahar - resplendent in white trousers, tight red coatees with white cross-belts and black shako headdresses that resembled inverted coal scurries. 'Grenadiers, 'shouted their commanding officer, 'shoulder arms!'. They did so. 'Ground arms!' It was done. 'Pile arms!' A few complied, most hesitated. But a quick glance at the black artillery muzzles must have proved decisive. All muskets, bayonets and swords were placed on the ground. 'Stand away from your arms.... Right about face...Quick march!' And away they went unarmed.'

The 26th Native Infantry, which had been made a Light Infantry Corps for sterling service in the First Afghan War followed suit, as

did the 49th. It was then the turn of the 8th Light Cavalry, whose *sowars* were ordered to drop their sabres, pistols and carbines. They obeyed, backed up their horses and rode off the parade ground. While the native troops were being disarmed at the parade ground, the weapons of those in the Fort were removed by the remaining four companies of the 81st Foot. As it soon became clear, the quick action of Montgomery and Corbett had been taken just in time. It was discovered that the disarmed regiments were planning to march that night to Ferozepore and seize the magazine. The previous evening an Indian regiment at Ferozepore had mutinied when it saw the guard on the magazine being replaced by European troops. However, they failed to secure the magazine and fled. (Two months later, the 26th Regiment met an unfortunate end when it mutinied after killing its commanding officer. Many were drowned in the Ravi River being chased by villagers; while the rest were put to death by Sikh levies at Ajnala, under the orders of Frederick Cooper, the Deputy Commissioner).

According to a senior Punjab official, by enabling the authorities at Lahore to disarm the native troops before they had received one word of the uprising at Meerut and Delhi, the telegraph played a key role in the preservation of British India. '*The Electric Telegraph has saved us*' wrote Donald Macleod, the Financial Commissioner of Punjab. He was right. If Lahore had fallen to the rebels, the rest of Punjab would probably have followed suit. And if Punjab - where the majority of European troops were stationed - had been lost, British India might not have endured.¹²

Robert Montgomery, the Judicial Commissioner of Punjab, whose timely action saved the day at Lahore, also gives credit to the telegraph. Using almost exactly the same words as Macleod, Montgomery wrote to C Raikes, ICS, in Agra on 18 August 1851: 'Under Providence, the Electric Telegraph has saved us'.¹³

Conclusion

If it were not for the foresight of Dalhousie, the telegraph would not have come to India when it did. Had the uprising occurred ten years earlier, it would have been extremely difficult for the British authorities to crush it, without the means of rapid communication like the electric telegraph. Fortunately for the British, the rebels failed to appreciate the value of the telegraph. If they

had, it would not have been difficult for them to disrupt the system as they did at Meerut, Cawnpore and Lucknow, where they cut the telegraph wires. Who knows what would have happened if the British did not have the telegraph in 1851, or had been denied its use? In truth, as far as the revolutionaries were concerned, the telegraph was the accursed string that strangled them.

END NOTES

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10. Barreto, *History of the Corps of Signals, Volume I*, p. 33
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12. Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny -1857*, p, xxiii.
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