

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

TELEGRAPHIST'S SACHEL FOR OPTICAL COMMUNICATION

Different fabrics, leather, paper,
wood, rubber, glass, iron
Portugal, circa 1942
MAH.R.2017.1967

This satchel contains all the utensils needed by the soldiers of an optical, electrical or solar telegraphy station. It includes dispatch forms, writing pads, and the respective envelopes to be delivered by courier, pencils and respective sharpeners, and a bag with tools and utensils for repairing electrical connections. It also includes darkened glasses, which allowed the luminous signs to be easily seen, on days or hours with more intense sunlight, and the messages, in Morse, perfectly understood.

These satchels were part of the equipment of military heliograph operators, like the one which was already displayed in August 2021. Also under the care of the Military and Armament Conservation Unit of Angra do Heroísmo Museum, the Mance Mk V Heliograph was mounted on a tripod, including two characteristic mirrors 5-inch diameter, as well as the manual system instructing on the light impulses generation.

The use of visual coded signals in military communications, like flags, traffic lights, sunlight reflection or even fires and light (night-time communications) dates back to antiquity. However, optical communications were never completely abandoned, in spite of the technological innovations that allowed wire telegraphy (WTP), wireless telegraphy by radio waves (WTS), and, more recently, satellite transmissions.

Despite the range limitations, the ease with which they could be intercepted and decoded by the enemy, their simplicity and diverse usage, including in adverse contexts, led to that some of them still remain in use.

During World War II, radio communications were already perfectly established and widely implemented on ground, naval, and air forces. Optical telegraphy stations were, therefore, an integral part of military communication networks, not only in Portugal but also abroad.