

In the year 427 BC there were no telephones. There were no fax machines, no radios, and no television. In short, there were none of the instruments of instantaneous communication which we rely on today. When you stop to think about it, the pace of the modern world has largely been set by our ability to use the electromagnetic spectrum to talk to each other. Light travels "faster than a speeding bullet", or, more precisely, at around 300,000 kilometers per second. Radio waves travel at the same speed. Satellites around the earth relay signals to every corner of the world in an instant. Even if we bounce a signal off the moon, it takes less than three seconds to get there and back. Modern technological advances have meant that the 20th century has been able to exploit this particular characteristic of radio waves. We've come to depend on it for business contacts, news, daily activities, and talking to friends in Kamchatka or Katmandu. But we also rely on it in life-and-death situations. We dial 911, and help comes. A ship sinking off the Grand Banks radios the Coast Guard, and helicopters are sent. The delay these days is not in communicating the emergency, but in the arrival of help.

So back to our opening statement. In the year 427 BC there were no telephones. But why is this so important? Why was it more significant in the year 427 BC than in any other year before Alexander Graham Bell? Well, perhaps it wasn't. There must have been countless tragedies throughout the history of humankind which could have been averted by this particular aspect of modern technology. But the difference is that in the year 427 BC we know of one particular incident which dramatically emphasizes just how tragic this lack of communication ability could be. This was the year in which the Athenians decided to punish their rebellious allies in Mytilene.

The background of the story goes like this. After the Persian Empire had sent its vast force against the Greeks in 480 BC, the Athenians and many other Greek states, mostly the island states of the Aegean Sea, decided that it would be a good idea to put together an alliance, a mutual defense network, in case of such a thing happening again. It was agreed that the Athenians would be the leaders of this organization, and all the member states swore an oath that they would never desert the alliance or the Athenians. This was all very well, and the first years of this alliance, known to modern historians as the "Delian League", were glorious ones. To be sure, one or two states tried to drop out, and Athens used military force to constrain them; still, for the most part things went well. But as time went

on, Athens became more and more imperialistic in her behaviour, and her allies became more and more unhappy. And not only was it her Delian League allies that were unhappy with her, it was also the major states of the Greek mainland, such as Corinth, Thebes and particularly Sparta. These states, members of the "Peloponnesian League", the alliance headed by Sparta, were apprehensive at Athens' growing power. The increasing tension between Athens and Sparta finally erupted in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), the long and bitter war which put an end to the Classical Age of Greece.

Technically, the war was fought between Athens and her allies on the one side, and Sparta and her allies on the other. But of course, one way to fight a war like this is to undermine your enemy's alliance. And in the Athenian alliance, the Delian League, there was plenty of discontent. As the war dragged on, Athens was more and more troubled by rebellions among her allies. Although in the first years of the war her hold on the alliance was still pretty firm, in the year 428 one of her most powerful allies, Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos, revolted. In fact, the revolt was not limited just to Mytilene, but spread to most of the rest of the island. The Mytileneans barricaded their town, set a guard on the harbours of the island, and prepared for hostilities with the Athenian fleet.

The Spartans had promised to aid the Mytileneans, but in the end (as was often the case with Spartan military actions) they were dilatory and of no real help. Mytilene had no hope of withstanding the forces of Athens and her loyal allies, and by early 427 she was under siege and forced to capitulate. The Athenian commander at Mytilene, the general Paches, set the terms of their surrender, and allowed the Mytileneans to send an embassy to Athens to plead their case, promising to harm no one until it returned and further instructions should arrive from Athens.

And so the Mytileneans sent their embassy to Athens. In the past, the Athenians had often dealt with rebellious allies by confiscating their ships and forcing them to pay a war-indemnity. Severe measures, perhaps, but the kind of thing that the Mytileneans felt they could survive. Imagine their astonishment and terror when they learned what the Athenian people had in mind for them: the execution of every adult male of Mytilene, and the enslavement of her women and children. The devastated town, with the Mytilenean population wiped out, could then become a home for Athenian settlers. It seems that Athens had been particularly enraged by the fact that she had always treated this treacherous ally as a partner rather than a subject; furthermore, Mytilene had committed the terrible crime of conspiring with the Spartan enemy.

The outrage that the Athenian people felt was so enormous that their assembly decreed that a ship be sent immediately with a message to Paches, so he could begin carrying out the wretched task of mass executions. But the Athenians were not all monsters; they were simply swept away by the emotions of the moment, and were probably the target of skilful, if unscrupulous, orators. The very next day, they felt remorse and decided to call another assembly. And this time, although it was a close call, they decreed that the execution order should be revoked.

But now you can see the insurmountable problem they faced: the ship carrying the original order for the annihilation of an entire people was already on its way, with a 24-hour headstart. It was not carrying a radio, and Paches didn't have a field phone with him. There weren't even any carrier pigeons available to fly a message. So what could the Athenians do?

Well, the history of Greece tells us that the Athenians were nothing if not resourceful. The consequences of their first decree were potentially drastic, and they moved heaven and earth to try to avert the tragedy from taking place. Let's let Thucydides, a contemporary Athenian, tell the rest of the story:

*They sent another ship off immediately, for fear that the first, which had a day and a night's start, might have arrived first and the destruction of Mytilene already have taken place. The Mytilenean ambassadors provided wine and barley-cakes for the crew, making them all kinds of promises if they only arrived in time. This caused the men to exert their utmost energies on the voyage. They ate and drank at the oar, and only slept in shifts while someone else kept rowing. Fortunately, the winds were with them. As for the first ship, it had been in no hurry, since it had been sent on such a dreadful task; the second, on the other hand, raced on as I have described it, so that in the end it arrived just as Paches had read the decree and was about to put it into effect. And so it averted the massacre.*

The ships which made this race were Athenian triremes, the classic fighting ship of ancient Greece. Their main source of power came from the 170 rowers they each carried, although, when not in battle, they could supplement this with sails. As Thucydides tells us, the favouring wind which helped the second trireme had its own role to play in preventing the slaughter of the Mytilenean population. But the chief credit has to go to the Athenian rowers who laboured at the oar all day and night, eating as they worked, and not pulling in to land until they arrived at the island. The distance from Athens' harbour to Mytilene is about 340 kilometers; if the Athenian oarsmen had been pulling at a continuous speed of about 8 knots (as fast as they could be expected to, even on a mission of such dire importance), it would have taken them about 24 hours. So they apparently doubled the speed of the first trireme's voyage, but still arrived, quite literally, in the nick of time. And their feat means that the story of the race to Mytilene is an exciting and dramatic, rather than tragic, illustration of a life-and-death emergency in the age before telecommunications.