

World War One: The Battle for Communications

Semaphore Flags

During the First World War, the Royal Navy used a two flag 'semaphore' system to send messages. Letters were spelled out according to the position of the arms of the signaller.

Lightweight silk flags were used. These were portable but needed good visibility and daylight. Semaphore flags used a form of signalling based on Morse code and required a trained signaller and a trained receiver, with a telescope, pencil and notepad, at either end.

Visual signalling were quicker than sending a messenger but were easily intercepted by the enemy and could only be used over short distances. As a result, semaphore signalling fell out of use in conflict communications by 1916.

This photograph shows two members of the Girl Guides (established in 1910) practising semaphore signalling in Britain during the First World War.

Try sending a message using the semaphore flags.

What do you think the problems were with using flags like this to send messages during war time?



Girl guides practising semaphore signalling in Britain during the First World War.

*Image available in the public domain via the **Imperial War Museum**.*



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