



SUPPLY  
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Artifact Backgrounder

# Semaphore Flags



## DEFINITION

**Semaphore flags** were hand-held beacons used in a daytime signalling system by navies and armies throughout the First World War. The signaller held one **semaphore flag** in each hand and extended his or her arms in specific positions or angles relative to the body, with each formation corresponding to a different letter or numeral.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Semaphore was developed in France in the 1790s as a way to communicate over long distances by relaying messages visually from signaller to signaller. For example, a team of ten signallers with telescopes placed at 500-metre intervals could transmit a message across a 5-kilometre stretch much more quickly than a horse and rider could travel the same distance.

By 1850, France had a network of 556 semaphore stations spanning a total distance of 4,800 kilometres. A message could be sent from Paris to Lille — more than 200 kilometres — in just two minutes. In effect, semaphore was the first modern telecommunications system.

## EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

The original French semaphore network comprised a series of towers or tall buildings with very large mechanical arms mounted on top of them (instead of hand-held flags). As the technique was widely adopted for use on ships during the 19th century, brightly coloured hand-held **semaphore flags** came into use.

By the time of the First World War, navies and armies had widely adopted the semaphore system, even as telephones and radios became increasingly important to the military.

Although these more sophisticated technologies offered convenience and speed, they could be unreliable, and transmissions were easily intercepted by the enemy. **Semaphore flag** signalling, in comparison, required only proficient training and clear visibility. For these reasons, modern navies continue to use **semaphore flags** in emergencies, and for close-range applications.