



SUPPLY LINE LESSON PLAN

GET THE MESSAGE

COMMUNICATION DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

OVERVIEW

This lesson introduces some of the different methods of communication used by Canadians overseas during the First World War, both to transmit information on the battlefield and at sea and to remain in contact with loved ones in Canada. Students can try their hand at a variety of different communication methods. The teacher may choose to focus on one or more of the different methods.

GRADE LEVELS:

7 to 12, Secondary 1 to 5 in Quebec

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS:

Social Studies; History; Language Arts; Media Arts; Geography

ESTIMATED TIME:

3-4 class periods

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explore and identify the objects contained in the First World War Discovery Box;
- Appreciate how objects can teach us about history;
- Learn about the people who participated in the First World War.

MATERIALS REQUIRED

- Objects from the First World War discovery box
 - Soldier's Photo album
 - Semaphore flags
- Artifact Information Labels for the selected items
- Artifact Backgrounders for the selected items (optional)
- Art material: paper, pencils and pencil crayons
- Stopwatch or other device for measuring time
- 2 texting devices
- Photocopies of Appendices and Worksheets
- Interactive whiteboard (optional)

Important:

The First World War discovery box includes both authentic artifacts from the First World War (about 100 years old) and high quality reproductions of objects from the First World War (made more recently). All objects, whether authentic or reproduction, should be treated with care.



LESSON

PART A – INTRODUCTION

Start the discussion by asking students how they would send a message to a friend who lives nearby. How would they contact a friend in another province? How would they communicate with a friend in another country?

When their parents were in high school (approximately 30 years ago) how would they have communicated locally, between provinces, and internationally?

How did their grandparents (approximately 60 years ago) communicate?

How did their great-grandparents (approximately 90 years ago) communicate?

Some forms of communication that are listed may include:

- Smartphone (first appeared in mid-1990s, mass adoption by mid-2000s)
- Skype (mid-2000s)
- Social media (early to mid-2000s)
- Email (commonly used since early to mid-1990s)
- Cell phones (commercially available in mid-1980s)
- Pagers (first introduced in early-1960s)
- Telephones (developed during the 1860s and 1870s, more widely used in the early 20th century)
- Telegrams (commercially available in mid 1840s, first transatlantic transmission in 1858)
- Letters (some form of postal system has existed in Canada since French settlement)

The objective of the discussion is to get students thinking about changes in communication technology. These changes have increased the speed and simplicity with which we communicate.

For the soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, transmitting messages reliably, quickly and accurately was very important. There were a variety of methods of communication used within the military during the war. Messages were sent via electric telegraph, visual communication methods like semaphore, or handwritten documents delivered by runners or animals such as service dogs or carrier pigeons. Radios and telephones were also used but the technology was new and not always reliable.

For communicating with family on the home front soldiers used handwritten letters and postcards. The soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force would not speak directly to their families during their time overseas.

PART B – MORSE CODE

Display Appendix A – Telegrams (pages 2 and 3 of the Soldier’s Photo Album) on an interactive whiteboard. Alternatively, display via overhead projector or distribute photocopies for student to examine.

Discuss the fact that these messages were transmitted using electric telegraph technology. The message to Will van Allen alerting him to the fact that his militia unit had been called out would have been received in Morse code by a telegraph operator, transcribed onto a message form and delivered to Will by hand. Will then gave his handwritten response to a telegraph operator who would transmit the message in Morse code. Discuss with students that Morse code was not a code for concealing messages but rather an internationally used language for communicating.

Morse code was also used on ships during the First World War. Though Canada’s navy was small in 1914, it expanded rapidly over the course of the war. Still more Canadians and Newfoundlanders served with the British in the Royal Navy.

Have students test their ability to learn a new code and to transmit messages via Morse code. See **Appendix B – Morse Code Alphabet** for a copy of the Morse code alphabet used to train soldiers during the First World War.

A full lesson plan for communicating via Morse code can be found on the Canadian War Museum’s [Canada’s Naval History Website](#).

For the sake of comparison, explain to students that a telegraph operator during the First World War could communicate a message of 40 words in 1 minute. As a class, compose a message of 40 words. Ask for a volunteer from the class to “race” against the telegraph operator. Give the student a cell phone and him or her to send the message via text to the second cell phone. The teacher should set a timer for 60 seconds. Can the student beat the timer?

PART C – SEMAPHORE

Display Appendix C – Semaphore Instructions on an interactive whiteboard. Alternatively, display via overhead projector or distribute photocopies for student to examine. Explain that semaphore was a visual form of communication used by armies and navies during the First World War. Though it was not as rapid or convenient a form of communication as telephone and telegraph, it did not require communication wires or cables and served as a reliable method of transmitting information over a distance.

Give students the **Semaphore Flags** from the Discovery Box and have one student transmit a word or message using the semaphore alphabet and ask the class to attempt to decode. This activity can be repeated over increasing distances, including taking the activity outside.

A full lesson plan for communicating via semaphore can be found on the Canadian War Museum’s [Canada Naval History website](#).

For the sake of comparison, explain to students that two ships communicating using semaphore flags during the First World War could transmit a message of 15 words in 1 minute. As a class, compose a message of 15 words. Ask for a volunteer from the class to “race” against the semaphore signaller. Give the student a cell phone and him or her to send the message via text to the second cell phone. The teacher should set a timer for 60 seconds. Can the student beat the timer?

PART D – WRITTEN COMMUNICATION TO THE HOME FRONT

Display Appendix D – Field Service Post Cards – Whiz Bangs (**pages 28, 29 and 30** of the **Soldier’s Photo Album**) on an interactive whiteboard. Alternatively, display via overhead projector or distribute photocopies for student to examine.

During the First World War the technology for transatlantic telephone calls did not exist. Soldiers posted overseas used written forms of communication to keep in touch with loved ones. This included telegrams, letters and post cards. Field Service Post Cards were an easy way for soldiers to send a message quickly and for the military to ensure that sensitive information was not being transmitted. These post cards were commonly called “[Whiz Bangs](#)” after light calibre German shells that arrived with little warning.

As a class or in small groups, have students examine the post cards.

- What do you think it is? What kind of source is this?
- Who created this post card template?
- When was it completed? By whom?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is it saying? What are the other options?
- What is it used for?

To move toward making inferences...

- What do the instructions tell the reader?
- For what purpose(s) was this created?
- What do the specific details in the source suggest about conditions on the Western Front or soldier’s experiences?
- What specific decisions has the military made in producing the cards?
- What is NOT stated in this source? Why?
- If you were Van Allen’s family, what questions remain?
- Is this source an important piece of evidence? What makes it so?

Distribute photocopies of **Appendix E – Blank Whiz Bangs** to students and have them “write” a message from the perspective of a fictional soldier.

PART E – CENSORSHIP

In light of the discussion in Part D, consider some of the following questions as a class.

- Why would government choose to act this way?
- Was it necessary?
- Does it demonstrate malice on the part of the government?
- Can we try to understand the imperatives of government?
- How does this relate to other major censorship/government control issues in the 20th Century? (Japanese Internment, Vietnam, Iraq War, Communism-Cold War)

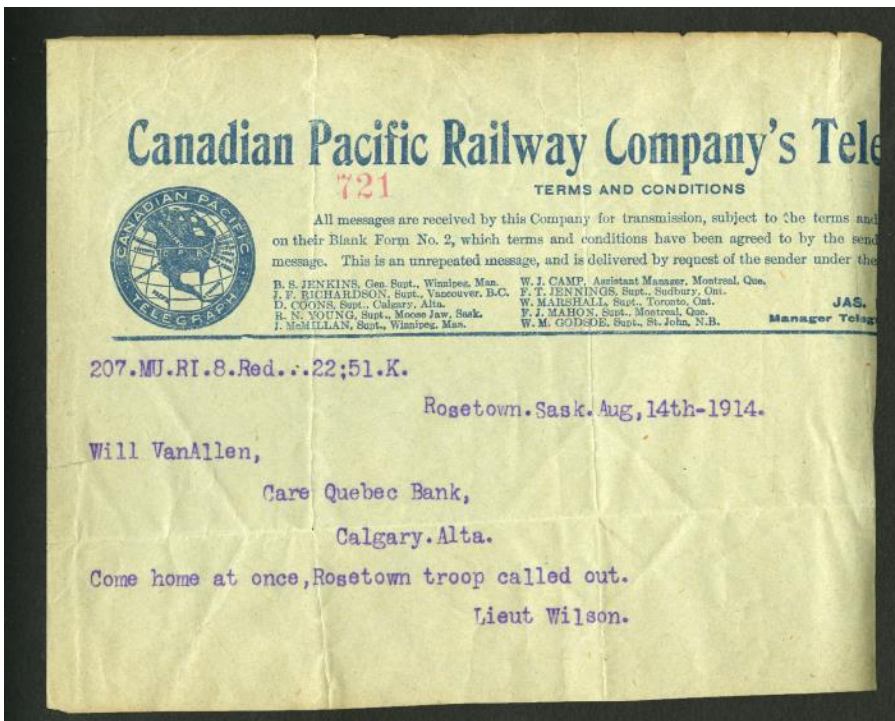
EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

- Using the Whiz Bang message that the students created in **Part D** have them create a diary entry for a fictional soldier based on the information provided in the post card.
- Ask students to create their own Whiz Bang form. They can look through past text messages to consider phrases they use most commonly.

APPENDICES

- 1 – Telegrams
- 2 – Morse Code Alphabet
- 3 – Semaphore
- 4 – Field Service Post Cards – Whiz Bangs
- 5 – Blank Whiz Bang

TELEGRAMS



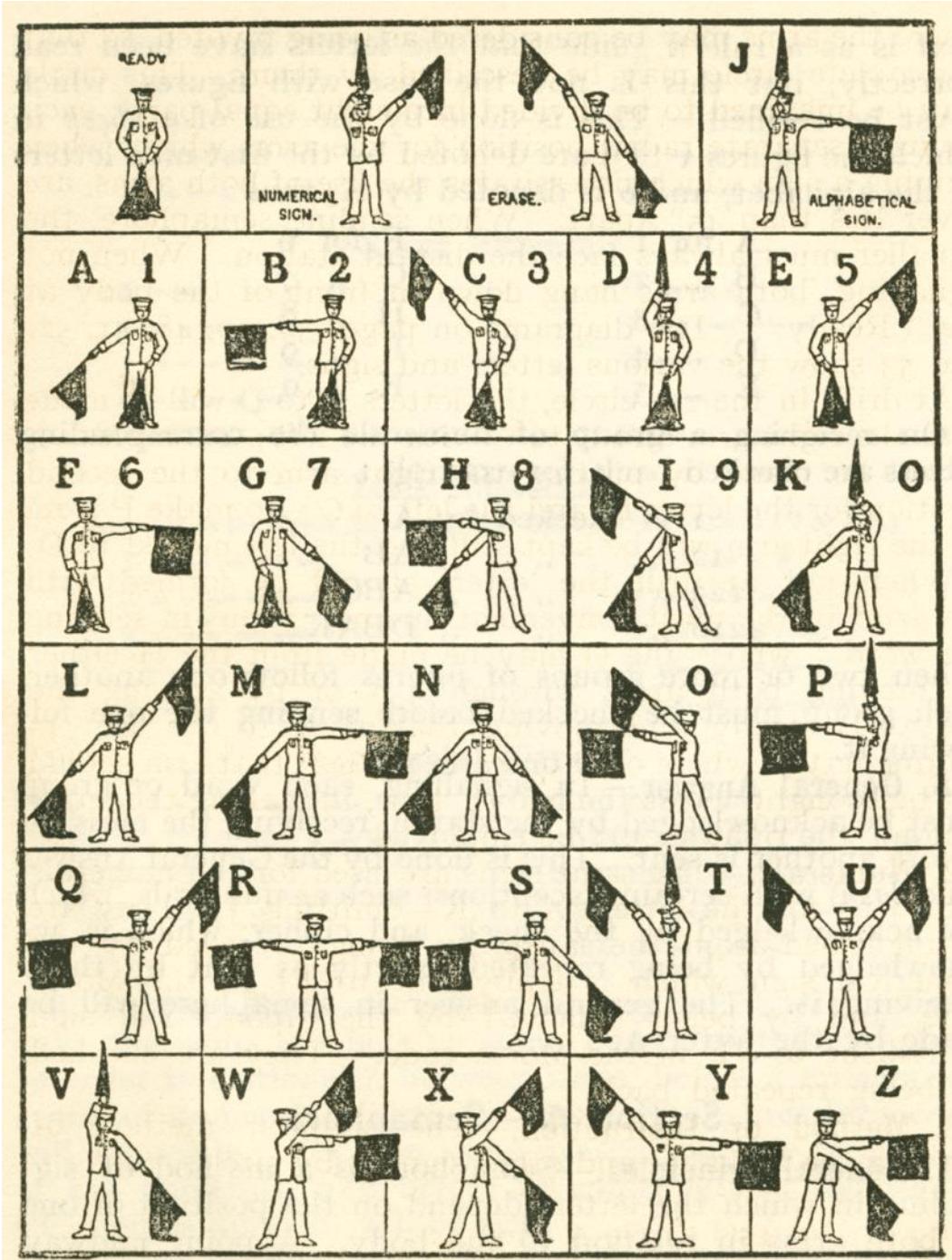
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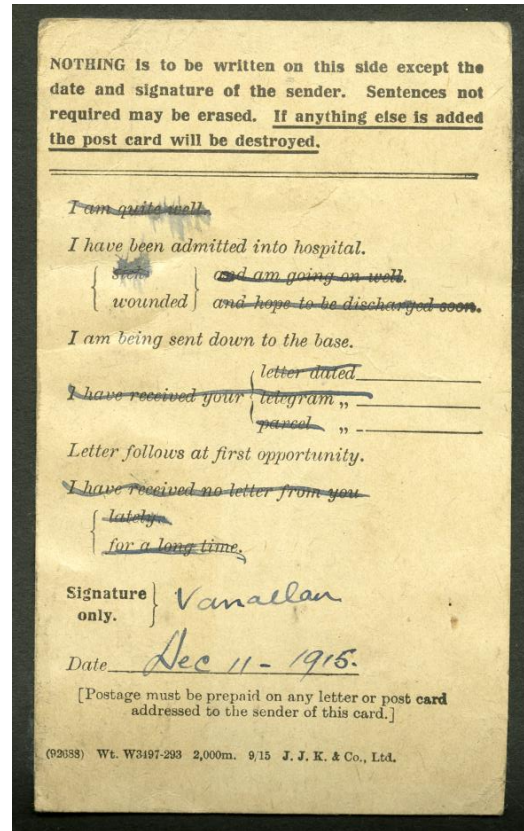
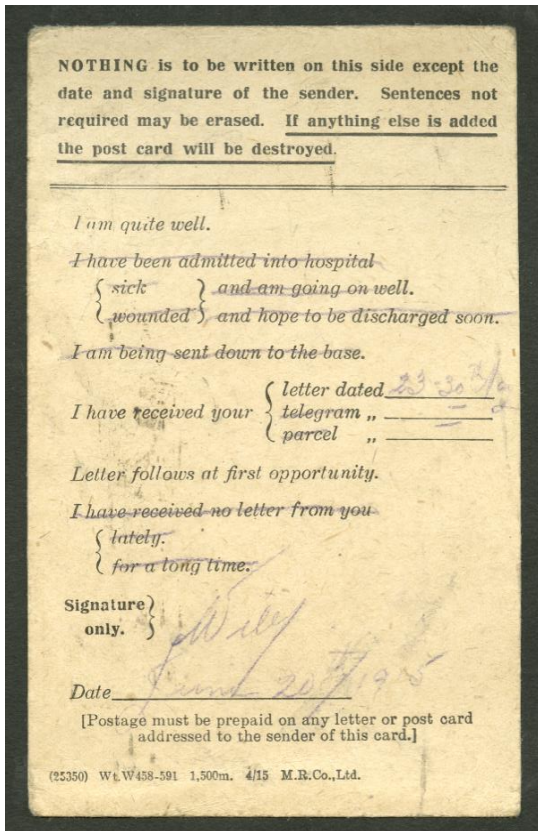
MORSE CODE ALPHABET

A • —	B — • • •	C — • — •	D — • •	E •	F • • — •
G — — •	H • • • •	I • •	J • — — —	K — • —	L • — • •
M — —	N — •	O — — —	P • — — •	Q — — • —	R • — •
S • • •	T —	U • • —	V • • • —	W • — —	X — • • —
Y — • — —	Z — — • •	0 (zero) — — — — —	1 (one) • — — — —	2 • • — — —	3 • • — — —
4 • • • • —	5 • • • • •	6 — • • • •	7 — — • • •	8 — — — • •	9 — — — — •

SEMAPHORE

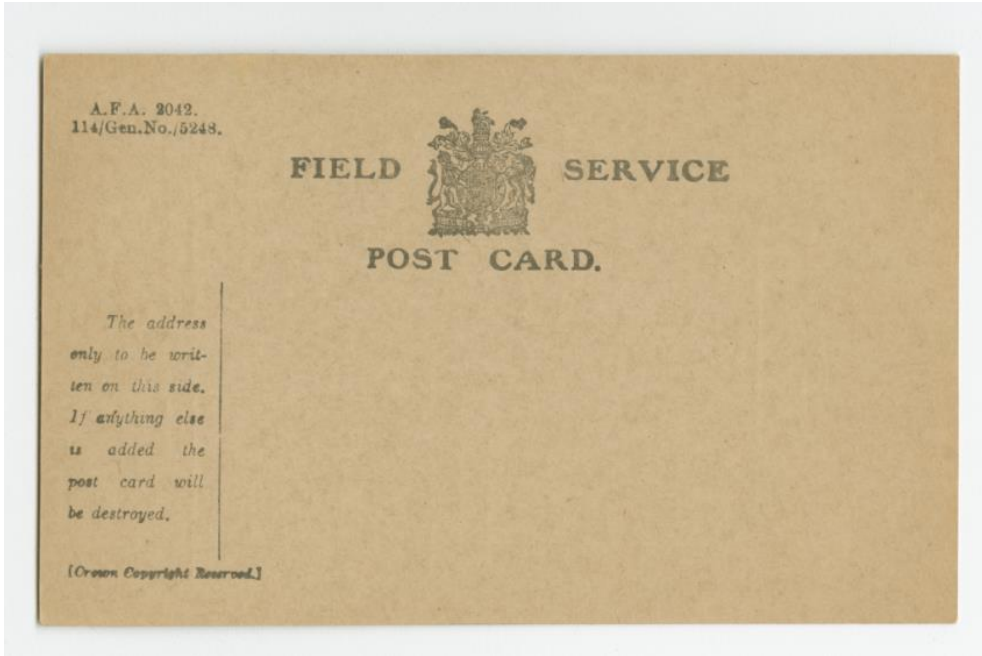


FIELD SERVICE POSTCARDS – WHIZ BANGS



BLANK WHIZ BANGS

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