



Captain's Code – Semaphore Flags

The semaphore flags held by the sailors in the *Captain's Code* exhibit should spell C-O-O-K. The name 'semaphore' comes from the Latin *sema* (sign) and *phoros* (bearing). Semaphore is a method of visual signalling, usually by means of flags or lights. They are used in railways and between foreign navy ships to communicate messages over long distances.

The semaphore alphabet system is based on waving of a pair of hand-held flags in a particular pattern. The flags are held, arms extended, and each letter is made by a different position of the arms (see *Semaphore flag positions* at the end of these notes).



Semaphore flag

Semaphore signalling is usually carried out using flags because the signals are more distinct and can be read further away. However it can be done with the arms alone. Also, shore stations and big ships can be equipped with mechanical semaphores, which consist of a post with oscillating arms.

Before the invention of the telegraph, semaphore signalling from high towers was used to transmit messages between distant points. This was established in France in the 1700's with England following immediately after. The system consisted of large mechanical semaphores located in towers especially constructed for the purpose of semaphore signalling. They were located on a high spot on the terrain, usually about 25 km apart. An operator would send a message by manipulating the controls of the semaphore. The operator on the next hill over would copy the message and relay it by semaphore to the next operator on the next hill. This proved especially valuable along the coasts to announce the arrival of a ship to harbourmasters.

In the late 18th century, optical telegraphs were invented by Claude Chappe in France and by George Murray in England. Called semaphores, these telegraphs relayed messages from hilltop to hilltop with the aid of telescopes.

Appendix A – Semaphore Flag Positions

