

The U.S. Signal Corps

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On February 4, 1863, Admiral Samuel DuPont of the U.S. Navy had a creative solution to a new problem. Prior to the Civil War, communications between ships had been conducted by flying a series of different color flags from the top of the very high masts which graced wooden fighting ships of the day. With the advent of the new ironclad class of warships this earlier form of communication was now impossible as these metal vessels did not have or require masts since they did not have sails. This made it difficult for the crews of the ironclads to communicate with other ships or land-based forces.

To address this issue, DuPont turned to his military colleagues on land. Since the late 1850's the U.S. Army had been using a system of movements called wig wag to transfer signals. Using a flag during the day or a torch or lantern at night, the signalmen would make a series of movements that represented a sort of Morse code by which information could be transmitted.

This system was invented by an Army surgeon named Albert J. Myer. Myer developed his system while stationed in Texas during the mid-1850's and in 1858 Myer appeared before a board of soldiers who had been charged with investigating the system. The board was chaired by none other than Lt. Colonel Robert E. Lee, who would rise to fame on the Confederate side several years later. The board recommended field tests of the system and these were conducted successfully during the next year. Secretary of War John B. Floyd recommended to Congress that the system be adopted and that Myer be appointed head of a new U.S. Signal Corps. This became official on June 21, 1860.

The flags used by the men of the Signal Corps were typically white with red markings and were easily visible against varied backgrounds. Special black flags were used during times

of snow. Messages could be encrypted if both the sending and receiving parties had cipher disks that allowed prearranged letters to substitute for others.

The men of the Signal Corps were involved in all the major battles of the war and the Confederates formed their own signal corps. Strangely enough, the first use of the wig wag system in the war was by the Confederates. Confederate Captain Edward Porter Alexander, who had served under Myer before the war and participated in the field trials, used the system to warn of the Union advance at the first Battle of Bull Run. From that moment until the end of the war, the signal corps on each side became integral to battlefield success and failure. The final recorded signal message of the war came at Farmville, Virginia, just two days before the surrender at Appomattox.

The work of the men of the Signal Corps was fascinating and a bit of an enigma to soldiers on both sides, but all realized their value. Many of the men waving the flags lost their lives or got sent to Confederate prisons as they were prominent targets and always near the scene of the heaviest fighting. During the war, some of the wig wag function was slowly replaced by use of the emerging telegraph technology. Today's United States Signal Corps manages communications and information systems support for all of the nation's combined military forces.