

Antietam National Battlefield

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Flags that Talk Lesson Plan

Time: 45 Minutes to One Hour (more if you sew your own flags)

Suggested Age: 6th-8th Grade

Group Size: 4 or more Students

Subjects: Social Studies, Language Arts, Home Economics

Skills: Listening, Cooperation, Observing, Communication, Sewing

Method: Students will work together in groups to send and receive messages using signal flags that they have made.

Objectives: At the end of the activity, the students will:

- Have an increased understanding of the role of the Signal Corps during the Civil War;
- Be able to send and receive messages using signal flags and cipher disks.

Materials: Signal Flags, Cipher Disks, printed copies of [“The Signal Corps”](#) web page, attached handouts including “Signal Department” message sheet, historic photographs, quotes, and drawings.

Curriculum Link: National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, Standards in History for Grades 5-12; Era 5 Civil War and Reconstruction 1850-1877.

Procedure:

- Introduce the Battle of Antietam using the 2-page history of the battle and battle map in this lesson plan.
- Explain to the students that one way that the armies were able to gather information and communicate during and after the battle was to use signal flags.
- Have students read the [“Signal Corps Handout”](#) (<https://www.nps.gov/anti/learn/historyculture/signal.htm>) and show them the photograph of the Civil War signal stations.
- Explain that the students will be making their own signal flags and cipher disks and will then send and receive messages the way the Civil War soldiers did. Signal flags can be made like the originals by taking a two foot square of white fabric and sewing a square of 8” red fabric in the center. Sew two narrow ties of hemmed fabric to the top of the flag and two to the bottom. Use these ties to attach the flag to a broom handle or long dowel. Alternately, small flags can be made out of white and red paper.
- Copy the cipher disk page to card stock. Have the students cut out the cipher disk and attach the two circles with the smaller one on top using a metal-push through clasp.
- Students will divide into small groups. Each group will have a flag, cipher disk, “Signal Department” message sheet, and pencils. **Make sure everyone has their cipher disks lined up on the same “code.”** i.e. A = 11 or B = 2122.
- Tell the students to write down the left and right flag signals as they are received. Then they should translate those lefts and rights into ones and twos, and then into letters. A left is a “one” on the cipher disk and a right is a “two” on the disk. (See drawing for “left motion” and “right motion”). Remind students that the lefts and rights come from the perspective of the person sending the message (see drawing).
- When sending a message, students should pause briefly between each letter holding the flag vertically. They should dip the flag straight down once at the end of a word, twice at the end of a sentence, and three times at the end of a message (see drawing of “three or front” motion).

The Battle of Antietam

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P. O. Box 158
Sharpsburg, MD 21782



Dawn approached slowly through the fog on September 17, 1862. As soldiers tried to wipe away the dampness, cannons began to roar and sheets of flame burst forth from hundreds of rifles, opening a twelve hour tempest that swept across the rolling farm fields in western Maryland. A clash between North and South that changed the course of the Civil War, helped free over four million Americans, devastated Sharpsburg, and still ranks as the bloodiest one-day battle in American history.

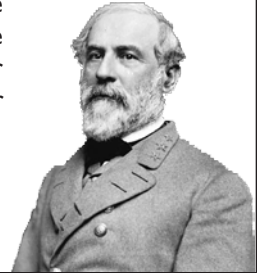


"...we are driven to protect our own country by transferring the seat of war to that of an enemy who pursues us with a relentless and apparently aimless hostility."

Jefferson Davis
September 7, 1862

"The present seems to be the most propitious time since the commencement of the war for the Confederate army to enter Maryland."

General R.E. Lee
3 September 1862

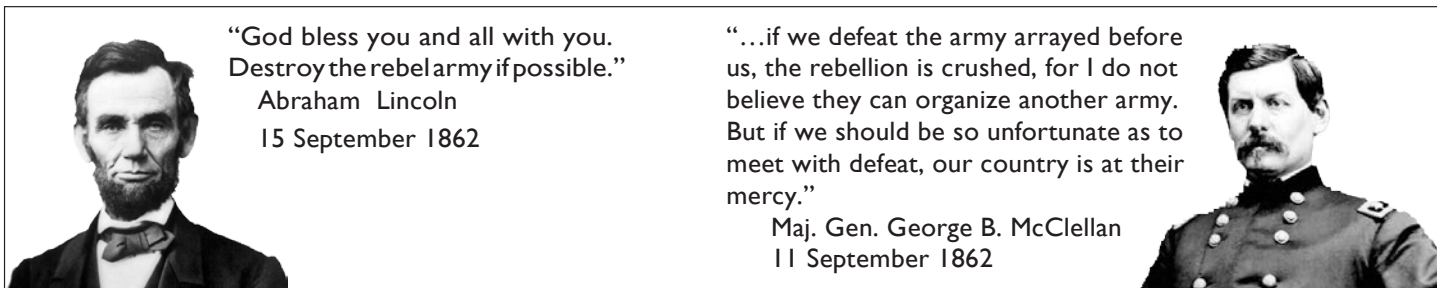


The Battle of Antietam was the culmination of the Maryland Campaign of 1862, the first invasion of the North by Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. In Kentucky and Missouri, Southern armies were also advancing as the tide of war flowed north. After Lee's dramatic victory at the Second Battle of Manassas during the last two days of August, he wrote to Confederate President Jefferson Davis that "we cannot afford to be idle." Lee wanted to keep the offensive and secure Southern independence through victory in the North; influence the fall mid-term elections; obtain much needed supplies; move the war out of Virginia, possibly into Pennsylvania; and to liberate Maryland, a Union state, but a slave-holding border state divided in its sympathies.

After splashing across the Potomac River and arriving in Frederick, Lee boldly divided his army to capture the Union garrison stationed at Harpers Ferry. Gateway to the Shenandoah Valley, Harpers Ferry was a vital location on the Confederate lines of supply and communication back to Virginia. The 12,000 Union soldiers at Harpers Ferry threatened Lee's link south. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and about half of the army were sent to capture Harpers Ferry. The rest of the Confederates moved north and west toward South Mountain and Hagerstown, Maryland.

Back in Washington D.C., President Abraham Lincoln turned to Major General George B. McClellan to protect the capital and respond to the invasion. McClellan quickly reorganized the demoralized Army of the Potomac and advanced towards Lee. The armies first clashed on South Mountain where on September 14 the Confederates tried unsuccessfully to block the Federals at three mountain passes – Turner's, Fox's and Crampton's Gaps.

Following the Confederate retreat from South Mountain, Lee considered returning to Virginia. However, with word of Jackson's capture of Harpers Ferry on September 15, Lee decided to make a stand at Sharpsburg. The Confederate commander gathered his forces on the high ground west of Antietam Creek with Gen. James Longstreet's command holding the center and the right while Stonewall Jackson's men filled in on the left. The Confederate position was strengthened with the mobility provided by the Hagerstown Turnpike that ran north and south along Lee's line; however there was risk with the Potomac River behind them and only one crossing back to Virginia. Lee and his men watched the Union army gather on the east side of the Antietam.



"God bless you and all with you.
Destroy the rebel army if possible."
Abraham Lincoln
15 September 1862

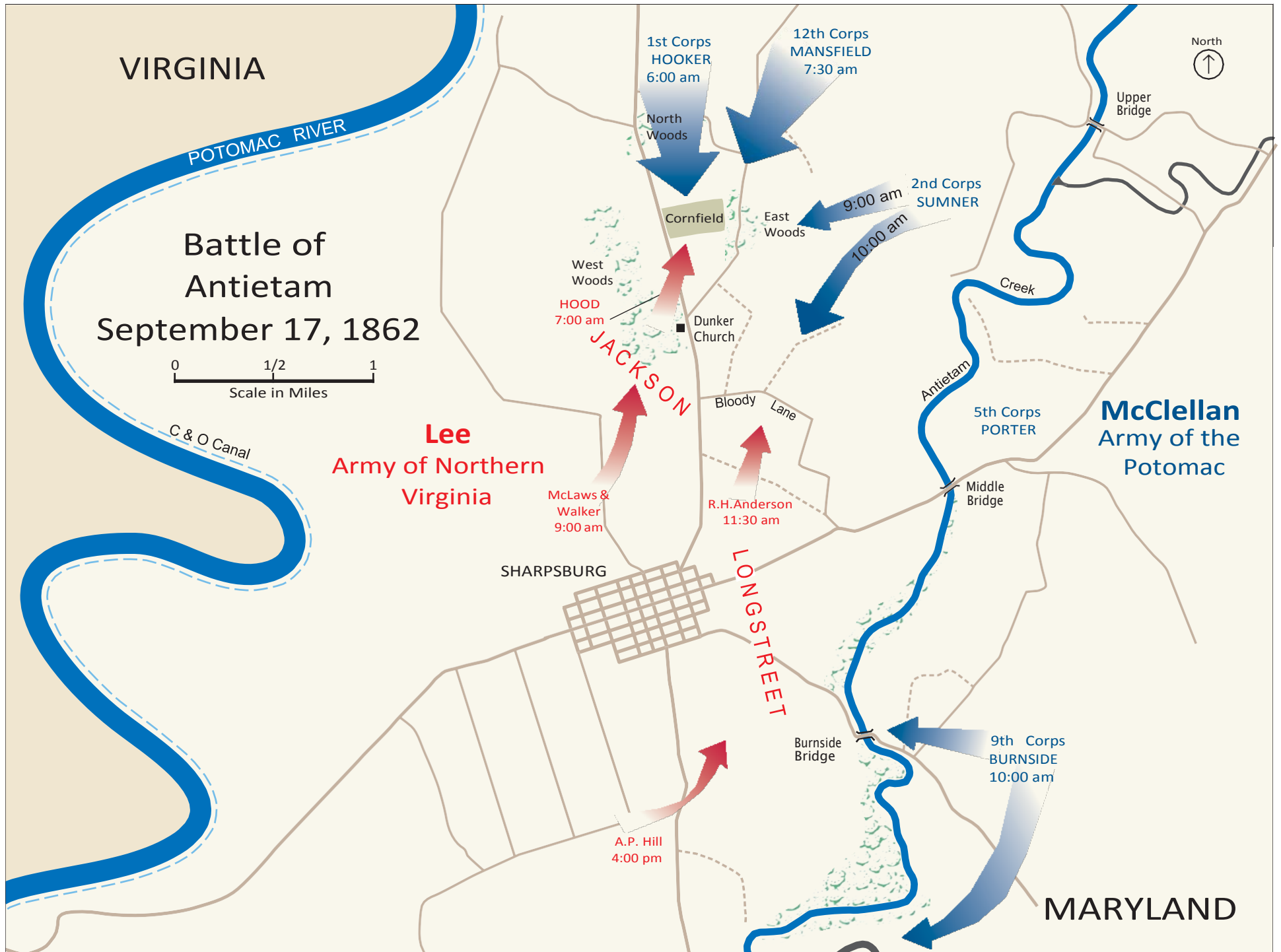
"...if we defeat the army arrayed before
us, the rebellion is crushed, for I do not
believe they can organize another army.
But if we should be so unfortunate as to
meet with defeat, our country is at their
mercy."
Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan
11 September 1862

Thousands of soldiers in blue marched into position throughout the 15th and 16th as McClellan prepared for his attempt to drive Lee from Maryland. McClellan's plan was, in his words, to "attack the enemy's left," and when "matters looked favorably," attack the Confederate right, and "whenever either of those flank movements should be successful to advance our center." As the opposing forces moved into position during the rainy night of September 16, one Pennsylvanian remembered, "...all realized that there was ugly business and plenty of it just ahead."

The twelve hour battle began at dawn on the 17th. For the next seven hours there were three major Union attacks on the Confederate left, moving from north to south. Gen. Joseph Hooker's command led the first Union assault. Then Gen. Joseph Mansfield's soldiers attacked, followed by Gen. Edwin Sumner's men as McClellan's plan broke down into a series of uncoordinated Union advances. Savage, incomparable combat raged across the Cornfield, East Woods, West Woods and the Sunken Road as Lee shifted his men to withstand each of the Union thrusts. After clashing for over eight hours, the Confederates were pushed back but not broken, however over 15,000 soldiers were killed or wounded.

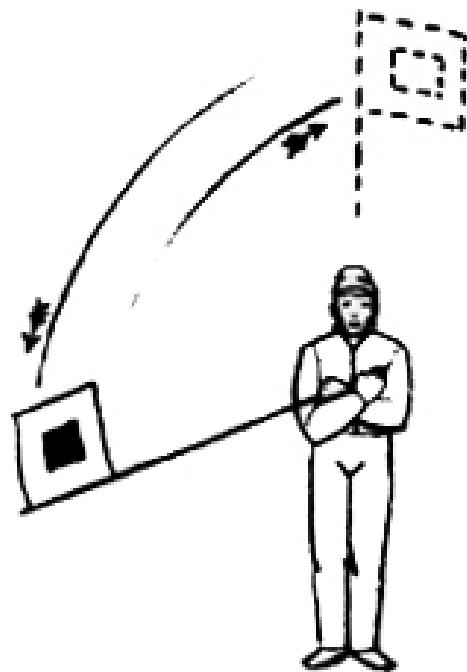
While the Union assaults were being made on the Sunken Road, a mile-and-a-half farther south Union Gen. Ambrose Burnside opened the attack on the Confederate right. His first task would be to capture the bridge that would later bear his name. A small Confederate force, positioned on higher ground, was able to delay Burnside for three hours. After taking the bridge at about 1:00 p.m., Burnside reorganized for two hours before moving forward across the arduous terrain—a critical delay. Finally the advance started only to be turned back by Confederate General A.P. Hill's reinforcements that arrived in the late afternoon from Harpers Ferry.

Neither flank of the Confederate army collapsed far enough for McClellan to advance his center attack, leaving a sizable Union force that never entered the battle. Despite over 23,000 casualties of the nearly 100,000 engaged, both armies stubbornly held their ground as the sun set on the devastated landscape. The next day, September 18, the opposing armies gathered their wounded and buried their dead. That night Lee's army withdrew back across the Potomac to Virginia, ending Lee's first invasion into the North. Lee's retreat to Virginia provided President Lincoln the opportunity he had been waiting for to issue the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Now the war had a dual purpose of preserving the Union and ending slavery.

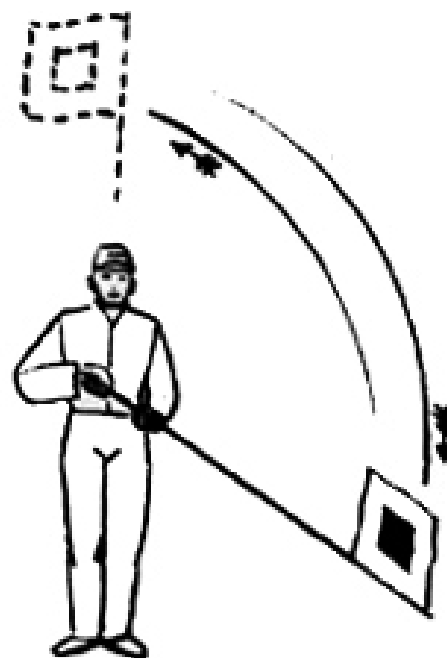




First
Position



Right Motion
"Two" - "2"



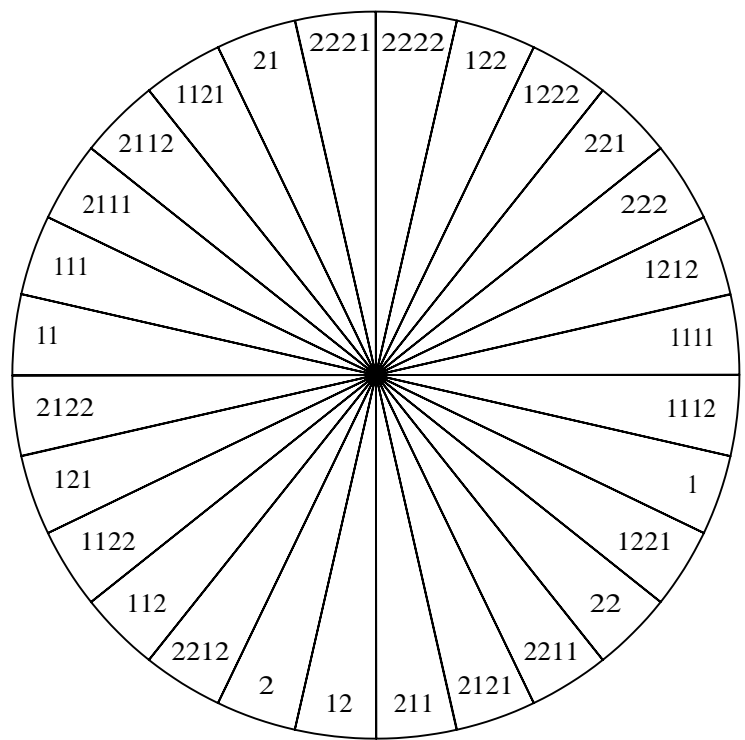
Left Motion
"One" - "1"



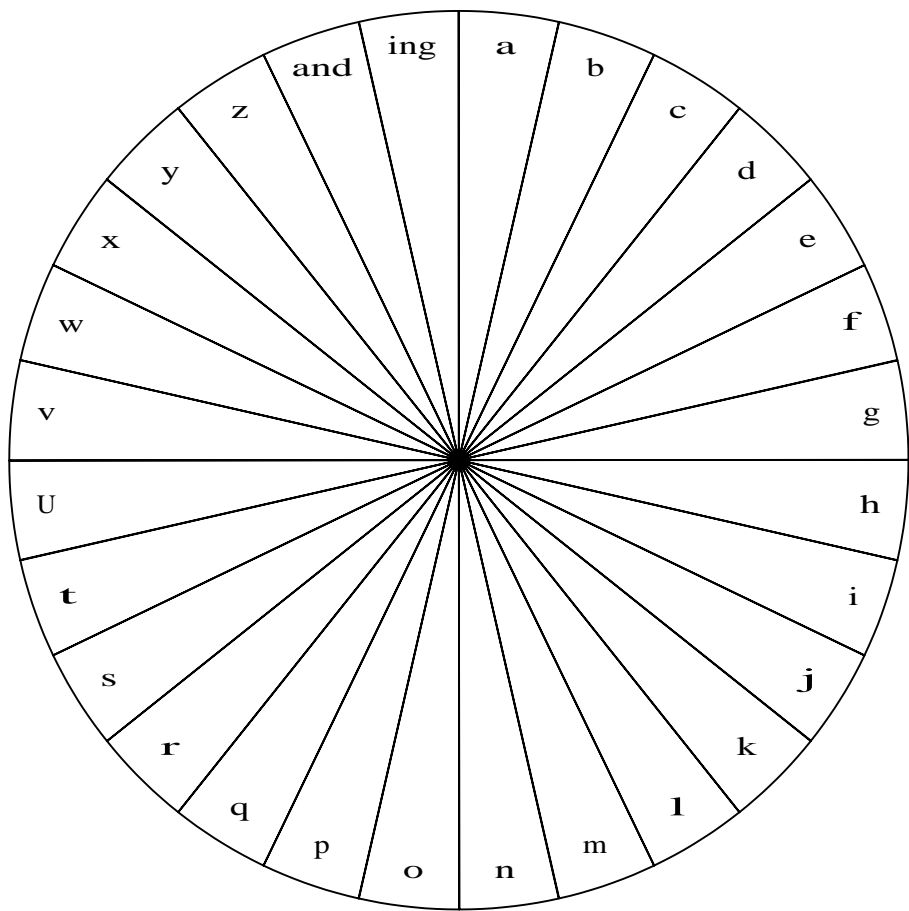
"Three" - "3"
- or Front

[illegible]

Cipher Disk Inner Wheel



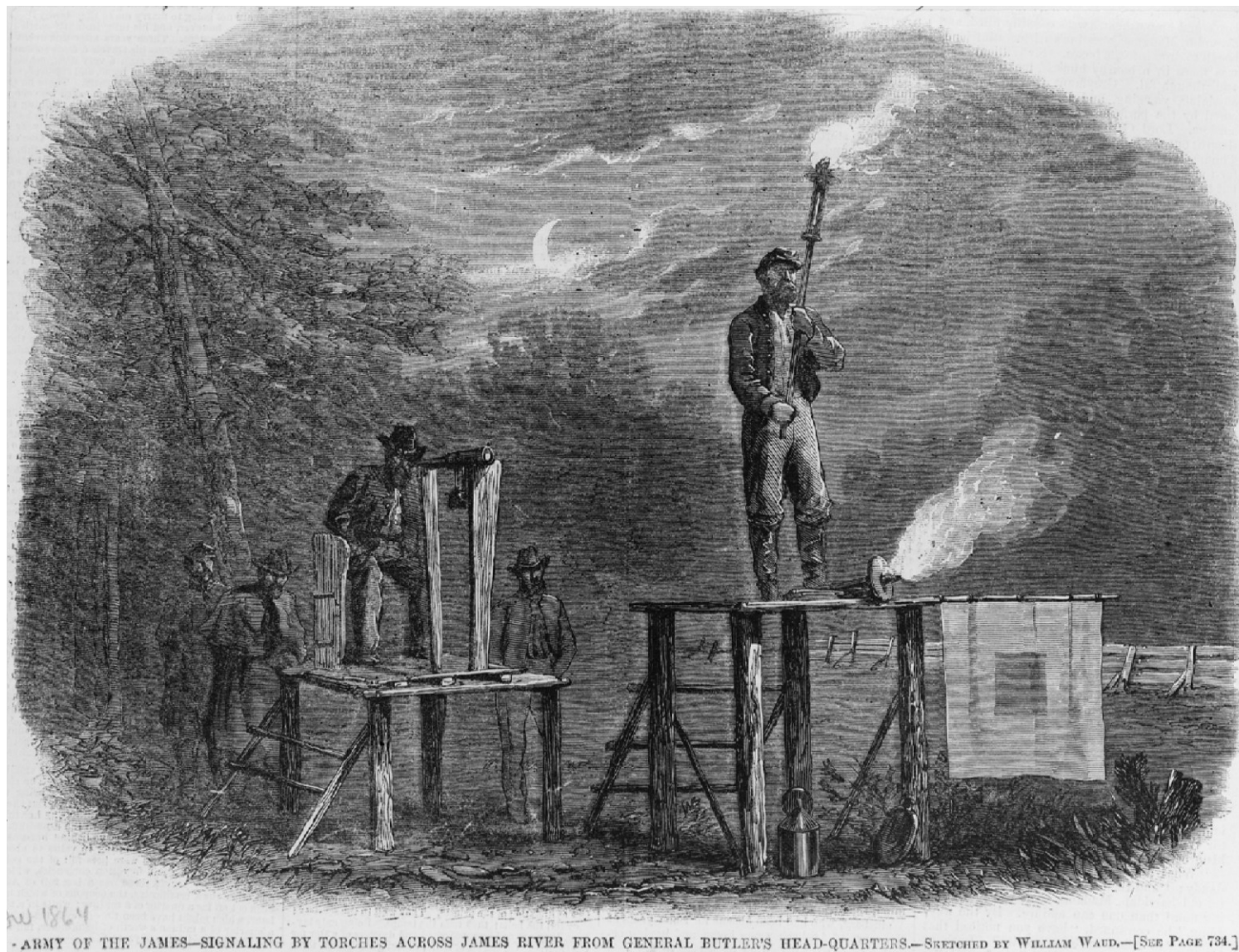
Cipher Disk Outer Wheel



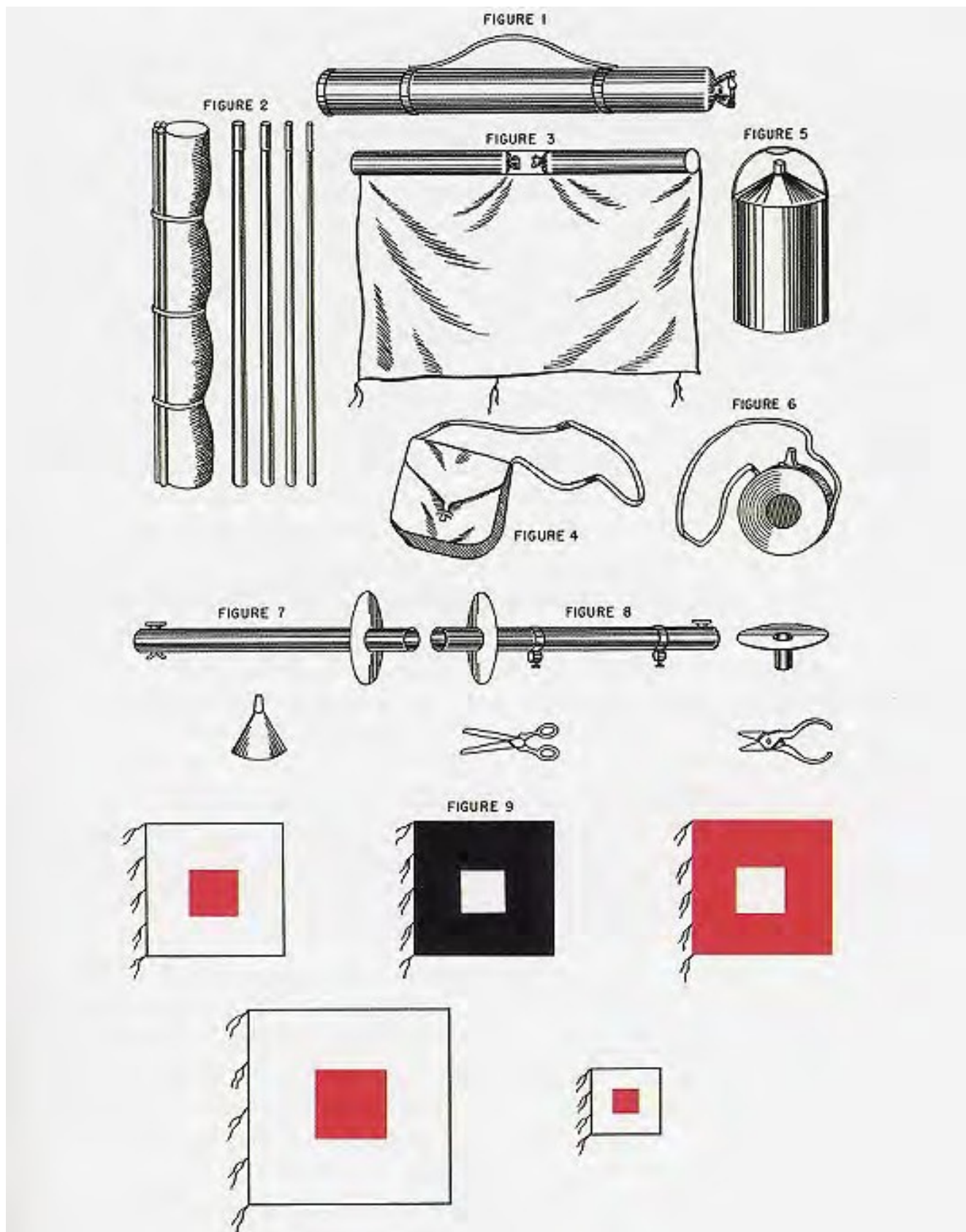


Library of Congress, Alexander Gardner, August or September 1862, photograph, "Signal tower on Elk Mountain, Maryland, overlooking the battlefield of Antietam."

...JA



W 1864
-ARMY OF THE JAMES—SIGNALING BY TORCHES ACROSS JAMES RIVER FROM GENERAL BUTLER'S HEAD-QUARTERS.—SKETCHED BY WILLIAM WAUD.—[SEE PAGE 734.]



Signal Flag Equipment (Different flag colors were used based on weather conditions and surroundings. The flag that would be most visible was used).

Messages from the Mountain Signal Station to General McClellan during and after the Battle of Antietam

September 17

From the Mountain

I think the (illegible) enemy have completely flanked Burnside and are driving in our left rapidly.
Major.

September 17

4:00 P.M.

Rebel Cavalry are retreating towards Shepherdstown.

By signals from Mountain

Wm. S. Sykes (?)

Adj't, Signal Corps

By signals from the Mountain

September 18, 1862

8 am

Off to General McClellan

The indications of infantry are a line of smoke where the line of flanking fire appeared on Burnside's flank last evening.

Lieut. Camp (?)

Forwarded by

B.F. Fisher

Signal Officer

Sept 18 2:45 PM

Another column of infantry moves into the woods west of Sharpsburg and nothing to our Right. Two or three regiments.

Signed

Major A.J. Myer

From Mountain Station

Off to General McClellan

From Mountain Station, 4:15 pm

Small clouds of dust moving easterly on south side of the Potomac

A.J. Myer

Signal Officer

Off to McClellan, from Mountain Station

September 18, 1862

The enemy's smoke show plainly that they hold a front about 3 miles south of Shepherdstown, I think it is on the Potomac, a smoke extends from Shepherdstown to Sharpsburg, thence north and east towards west of Sharpsburg to about 3 miles north of that place, the smoke is most dense in the woods directly west of Sharpsburg, I can see no line of battle opposite Burnside's left between Antietam Creek and the river from Sharpsburg to Shepherdstown.