

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.

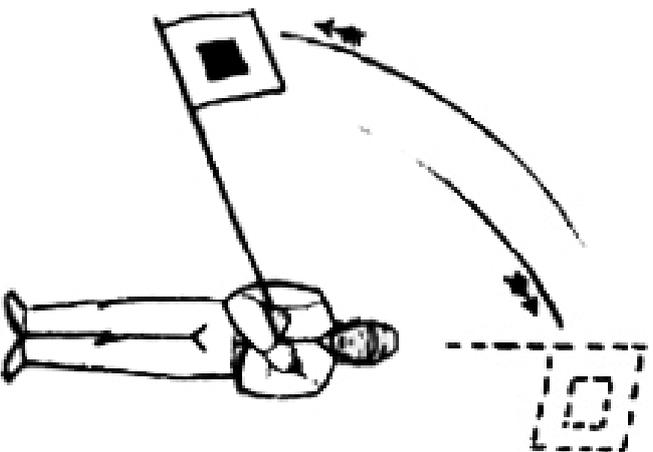
Curriculum Links: UCLA, National Center For History in the Schools, Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction. **Standard 2A** The student understands how the resources of the Union and Confederacy affected the course of the war.
<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/us-history-content-standards/us-era-5#section-2>.

Procedure:

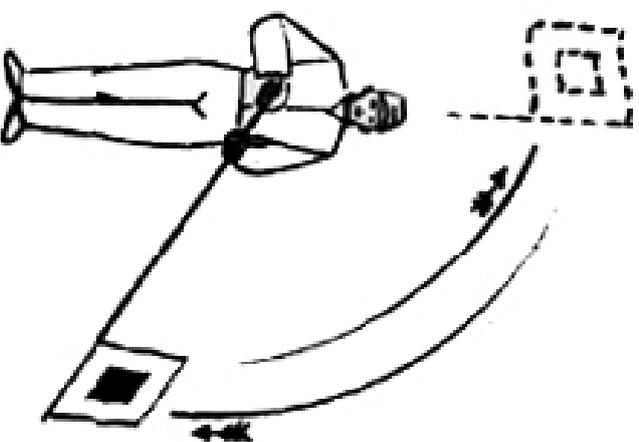
- Introduce the Battle of Antietam by referring to the [2-page history of the battle](#) and the [battle map](#).
and attach the two circles with the smaller one on top using a metal-push through clasp.
- Explain to the students that one way that the armies were able to gather information and communicate during and after the battle was to use signal flags.
- Have students read the "[Signal Corps](#)" (<http://www.nps.gov/anti/historyculture/signal.htm>) handout 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
- 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).



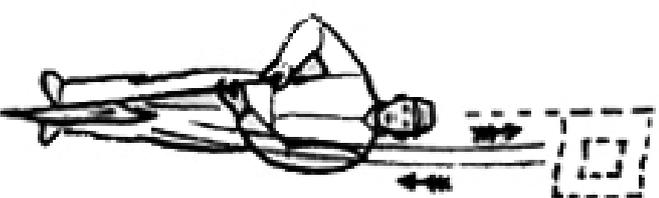
First
Position



Right Motion
"Two" - "2"

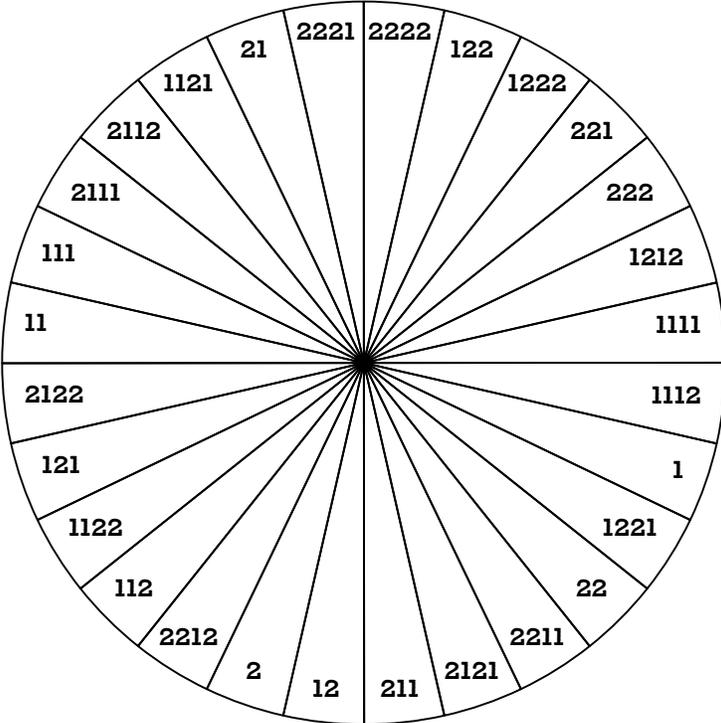


Left Motion
"One" - "1"

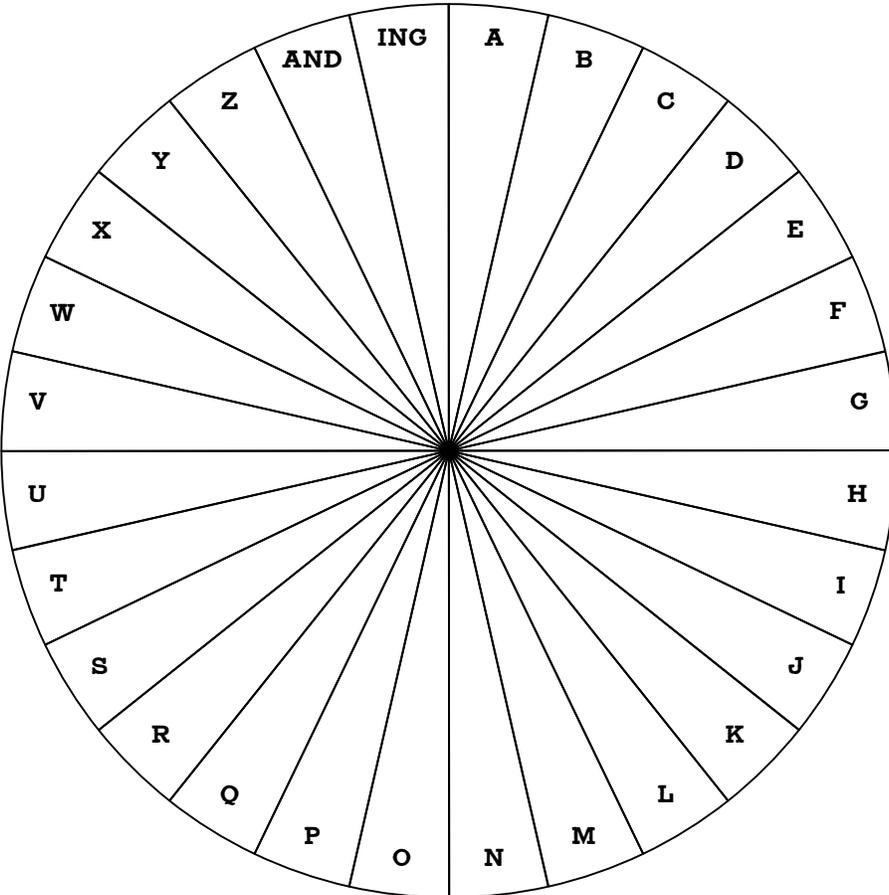


"Three" - "3"
- or Front

Cipher Disk Inner Wheel



Cipher Disk Outer Wheel



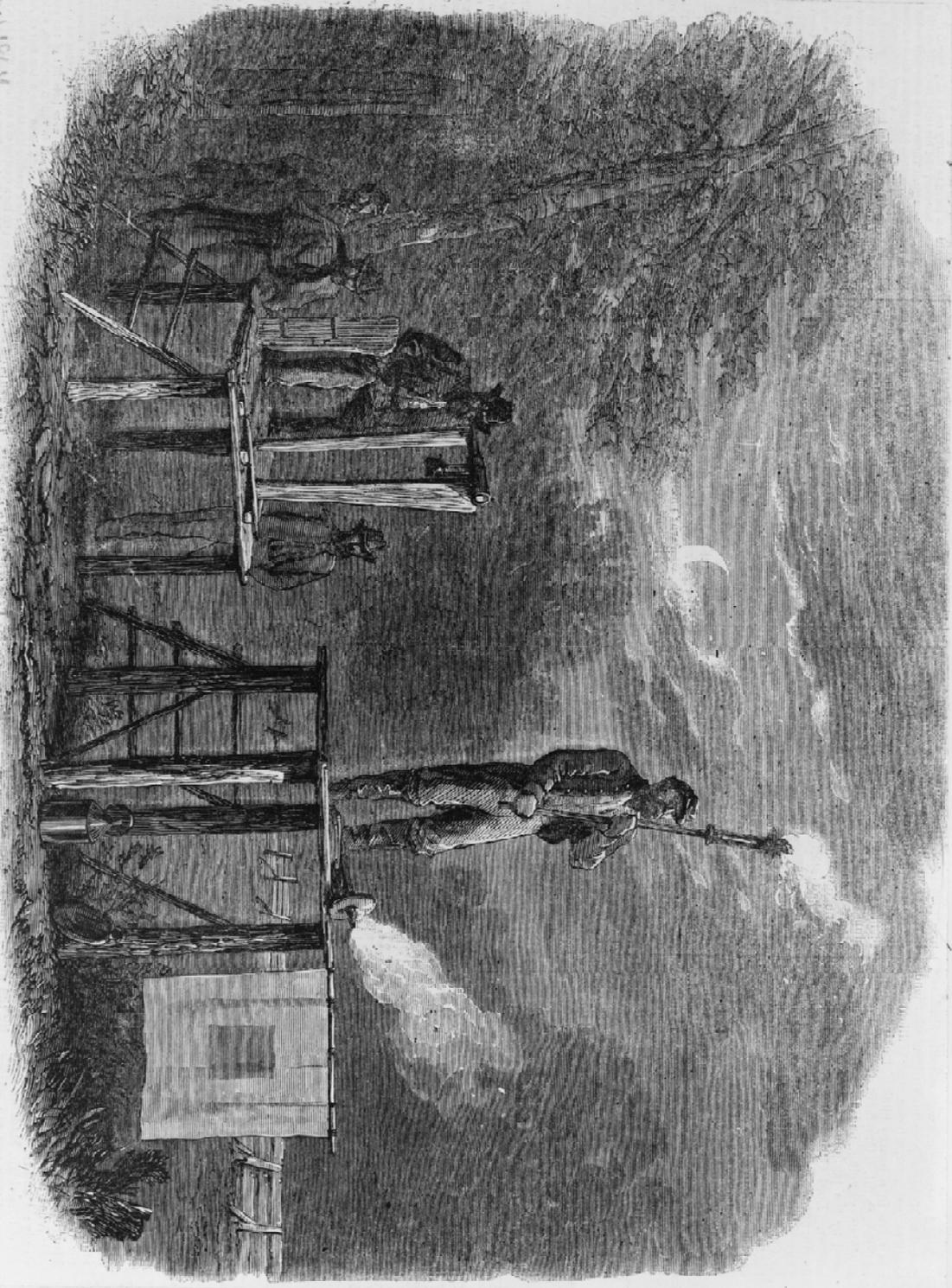


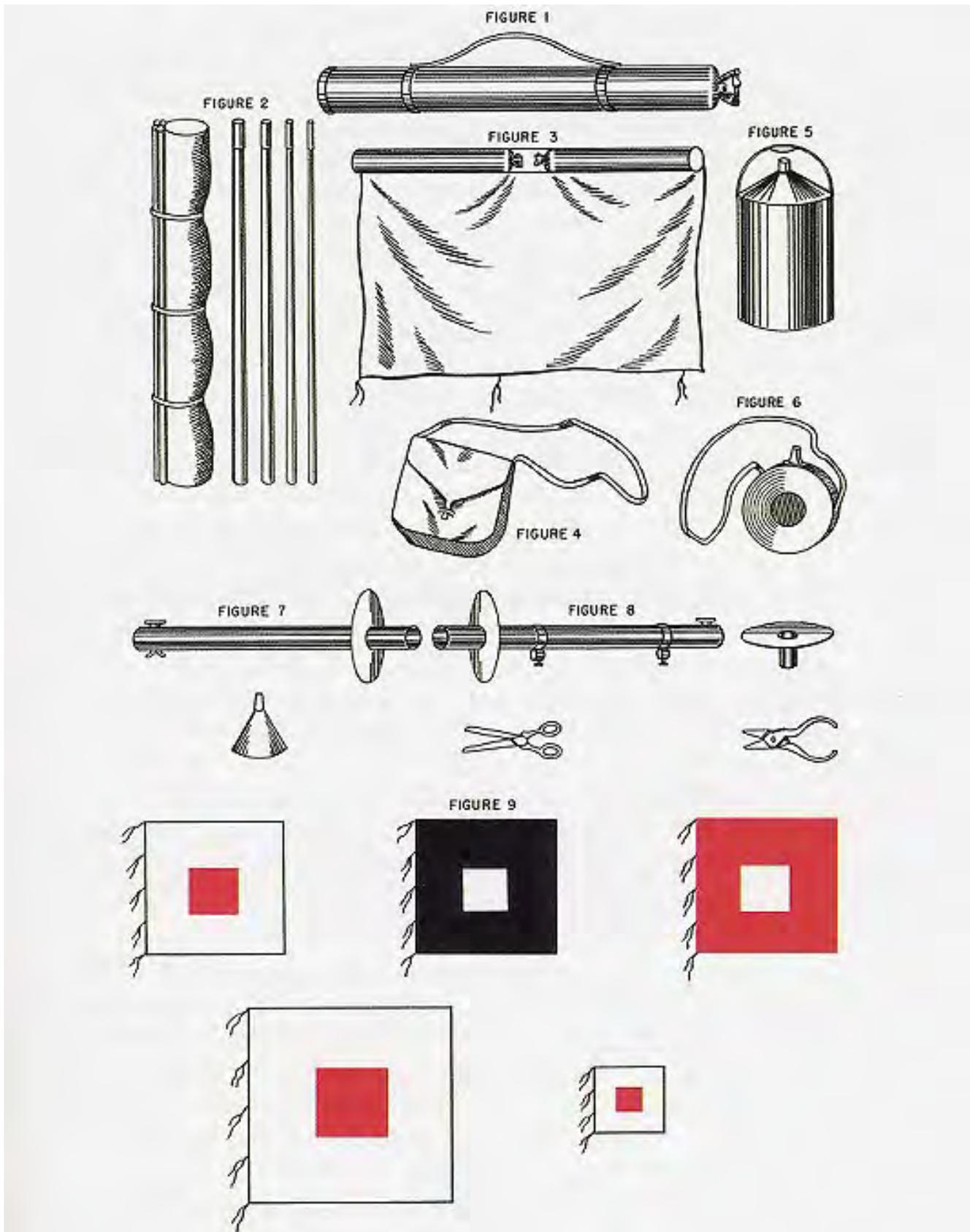
Library of Congress, Alexander Gardner, August or September 1862, photograph, "Signal tower on Elk Mountain, Maryland, overlooking the battlefield of Antietam."

111196

Nov 1864

- ARMY OF THE JAMES - SIGNALING BY TORCHES ACROSS JAMES RIVER FROM GENERAL BUTLER'S HEAD-QUARTERS. - SKETCHED BY WILLIAM VAUGHAN. - [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 (?)

ADJT, 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.