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## Lifeguard messages in a flag: It's all in the wave

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BETHANY BEACH -- With hands moving rapidly, stopping with arms and orange flags pointed in every direction, the lifeguard sends a message across the sand to another guard. The receiving guard takes the same message and sends it down the line to the next guard. The message is repeated by the next guard and the next guard.

But most people sitting on the beach around them don't know what the guards are saying. A thousand eyes can watch the guards signal each other, and without knowing this secret language, they don't know what is being said between the stands.

Semaphore -- the name for the flag system -- is used by beach patrols along the Delaware and Maryland coasts, and is a supplement to radios. With different signals for letters and words, they use the method to silently communicate with one another, and guards look at it as a learning experience, according to rookie guard Craig Smith.

"It's definitely a foreign language," he said.

The semaphore system, or "wigwagging," is traced to the early days of multiple branches of the United States armed forces, according to Jack Green, an administrator with the Naval Historical Center in Washington D.C.

"It goes way back -- the Army and the Navy used it," he said. "The signal corps was for flag signaling and other things of that same nature."

Semaphore was used in the Navy, Green said, to communicate without making a sound.

"Ships had multiple ways of communicating," he said. "If they didn't want to propagate, they can use search lights, or they can use signal flags."

Today, while the Navy has loosened its reliance on semaphore as a way of communicating between ships, the language still has a place along some coasts, but most people are not familiar with what the signals mean.

"We come here every year, and we always see them doing that," said Earl Handley, a vacationer from Wilmington. "At quitting time, they do something and then they whistle, but other than that I have no idea what they're saying."

Sharon Frado, visiting from Baltimore, could only speculate as to what the guards were saying to one another.

"Nobody else can know what you're saying," she said. "Maybe it's something that you don't want going on the air."

But Joe Donnelly, captain of the BBP, said the communiqués can be any of a range of things.

"It could be weather conditions, it could be a description of a lost child, it could be an emergency being sent back and forth," he said. "It could be something that a neighboring stand notices behind another stand, so they might signal down as to what's going on behind them. It can be small, like a lunch schedule, or something big, like an ambulance emergency."

# Wigwagging

Bethany Beach guards are taught wigwagging from the beginning of their tenures. Donnelly said training on the language begins as soon as the season starts, and much of the training continues through June. After that, guards do much of the work to learn on their own.

"It's one of those things you have to learn by doing," he said. "Typically, for new guards, it takes them a good three weeks to be confident in what they're doing. It's something new, and it takes a little getting used to."

Smith, 23, is learning the language for the first time this year, although he says he saw guards doing it while he was vacationing in town. Learning wigwagging, he said, was something he looked forward to.

"I thought, 'Cool, now I get to know what they're saying,' " he said.

Since he joined the patrol, Smith said the work to learn semaphore has been a gradual task.

"You have to immerse yourself in it," he said. "Every day it gets a little more ingrained. At this point, I feel like reading it has always been the difficult aspect."

Working the language into everyday life, Smith said, is also an important aspect to learning it.

"There's lots of guards who live together, and that's very conducive to learning," he said. "You can go home and say you're only going to use semaphore. If you want someone to give you a bag of chips, you have to say it in semaphore. I practice a little in my off-time. I've had dreams in semaphore."

## The learning curve

Keenan Wilkinson, a four-year veteran of the BBP, said he experienced the same difficulties learning semaphore as those who are learning it today.

"I feel for them a lot, because we have the same problems," he said. "A lot of the letters are exact mirror-images of other letters, and some people get them confused. That's really the hardest part. Sending comes a lot more naturally than reading -- the reading is 10 times harder."

The semaphore, Donnelly said, is beneficial for guards to know because it takes away the necessity of relying on the patrol's handheld radios.

"If there's a lot of airwaves traffic, we can't always get our message through as quickly," he said. "If our guards are up to speed on the semaphore, descriptions and emergencies can be sent like dominoes down the beach very quickly, and response time can be quicker than some radios."

Radios also break down, Donnelly said, and are affected by the sea air.

Not everyone supports the sole-use of semaphore for communications on the beach. B. Chris Brewster, head of the United States Lifesaving Association, said semaphore is losing its place in modern times.

"There is little question that radios can break down mechanically, leaving you without communication, with the argument that semaphore doesn't break down," he said. "However, this is a similar argument to the value of a horse-drawn carriage versus an automobile."

Beachgoers, however, can hear the benefits of lifeguards using semaphore.

Frado, who said she vacations in Bethany Beach often, enjoys the radio silence the system creates.

"People come to the beach to have fun, and they don't want to hear those radios," she said. "They come here on vacation -- to relax."

Even the aesthetic value, according to Handley, is worth it.

"I would think radios would be a bit more effective," he said. "But it's more colorful this way."

And lifeguards like Wilkinson know semaphore is a useful tool for guards to keep up with the beach around them.

"We always want to know who's around us, signing on or signing off," he said. "If we have an emergency we send it up and down the beach like dominoes so everyone knows what beach the emergency's at. And then, of course, there's some of the normal chatting on boring days when there's no one in the water and nothing to do."

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