

## Communications at Sea: 'Ahoy There Matey'

When at sea, mariners need to be able to

- Communicate with other ships of any size or nationality.
- Send and receive urgent maritime safety information.
- Send or receive distress alerts in an emergency to and from rescue coordination centres ashore or other ships nearby.

### Radio, the Phonetic Alphabet and Signal Flags

Since the early 1900s sailors have communicated with other ships and people ashore by radio or, more recently, by expensive satellite phone calls. When communicating over the radio the phonetic alphabet is used so that combinations of letters can be understood by people regardless of a poor radio signal or differences in pronunciation or native language. For example, to communicate P-I-R-A-T-E using the phonetic alphabet you would say: Papa-India-Romeo-Alfa-Tango-Echo.



Each of the letters of the phonetic alphabet also has a corresponding signal flag.

So to spell P-I-R-A-T-E using signal flags you go:



Why don't you try to draw your own name using the signal flags?

Before the days of the radio or wireless, captains used lamps or flags like these with different codes on them to send messages to other ships or ports.

### Global Positioning System (GPS)

GPS was first invented by the Americans during the 1960s to track naval ships during the Vietnam War. It works by transmitting radio signals to satellites in space which allow the GPS receiver to know their location (latitude and longitude), time of day, direction and speed. Nowadays GPS is installed in all commercial shipping vessels and has many uses such as navigation, mapping, surveying, tracking and surveillance.

### Inmarsat

In 1979 the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) established the International Maritime Satellite Organisation, more commonly known as Inmarsat. This allowed ships who may be far out at sea to make telephone calls via satellite. As well as offering a telecommunications service, Inmarsat also provides a Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS). Under the GMDSS, large international passenger and cargo ships carry communications equipment for sending and receiving distress signals and maritime safety information, in addition to general communications.

### **Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBS)**

Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs) are designed to save your life if you get into trouble by alerting rescue authorities and indicating your location.

### **Blue Ocean Wireless Telecommunications**

More recently wireless providers like the Irish company, Blue Ocean, allow sailors to use their mobile phones at sea. With the Blue Ocean Wireless service the crew can make and receive text messages, phone calls and emails just like when they are on land.



Prepared by Aoife Nic Philibín and Sarah Stanley, 2009 IMDO Bursars. Please contact [marketing@imdo.ie](mailto:marketing@imdo.ie) for any queries or further information.