This article was downloaded by: [University of Sydney]
On: 03 January 2015, At: 10:56
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH,
UK

Royal United Services Institution. Journal

Publication details, including instructions for
authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rusi19>

Lord Nelson's Signal

B. E. Sargeaunt

Published online: 11 Sep 2009.

To cite this article: B. E. Sargeaunt (1908) Lord Nelson's Signal, Royal United Services
Institution. Journal, 52:368, 1403-1405, DOI: [10.1080/03071840809418928](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840809418928)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071840809418928>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is

expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

LORD NELSON'S SIGNAL.

By B. E. SARGEAUNT.

RECENT investigations, assisted by a controversy in *The Times*, have proved that the historic signal made by Lord Nelson on the 21st October, 1805, has been wrongly represented, as regards the flags, for many years, and the discovery of the mistake is due to Mr. W. G. Perrin, the Admiralty Librarian. For how long the signal has been incorrectly displayed is difficult to ascertain, but it is certain that since the year 1885 the wrong flags have been almost universally exhibited.

The Admiralty Signal Book as used at the Battle of Trafalgar was printed in the year 1799, but in November, 1803, owing to the capture of certain vessels by the enemy, the Admiralty changed the numeral flags in the book and issued slips of flags for pasting over the original ones as painted in the book. After this date the new books were issued with the flags changed and painted on the page of the book itself.

In the year 1803, the Vocabulary Signals, invented by Sir Home Popham, were extensively used in the Navy; the first edition of the work shows the numeral flags the same as they were in the Admiralty Signal Book of 1799, and in the Library of the Royal United Service Institution there is the copy which was the property of Rear-Admiral Sir Thomas Graves, K.B., who was in the *Foudroyant* until the end of the year 1805. The flags in this book agree with those in the 1799 Admiralty Signal Book, and it is rather curious that they should not have been changed in conformity with the Admiralty Order of November, 1803, altering the official books; but the matter is probably explained by the fact that these Popham Books were at first issued privately, and therefore the alteration was probably not considered necessary. There is no doubt that the same numeral flags were employed for both the Admiralty Signals and the Popham Vocabulary, for a copy of the Popham book is preserved in the Library of the Patent Office with the flags altered to harmonise with those of the Admiralty Signals after alteration in November, 1803. This particular Popham book was, like that at the Royal United Service Institution, one of the early copies; a curious circumstance, however, exists in connection with it, for, whereas possessing the watermark in the paper for the year 1804, the book bears the date of 1803 on the title page; but this latter date is probably wrong, and was due to the printer's oversight.

Confirmation of the fact that the same numeral flags were used for both the Admiralty Signal Book and the Popham Vocabulary Book, is to be found in the UNITED SERVICE JOURNAL for 1829. Here Sir Nicholas Harris

Nicolas, then a lieutenant, writes a pamphlet entitled, "Naval Signals," and, being an officer who had himself been at Trafalgar, the following words are the more important:—"No officer in His Majesty's Navy, of the slightest experience, can be insensible of the important benefit conferred on the service by the introduction of Sir Home Popham's telegraphic vocabulary; and this allusion to the utility of that scientific officer's labours, is not only an act of justice to his memory, but is particularly called for, because his vocabulary is confessedly the foundation of the one about to be noticed. Popham's signals were introduced into the Navy about 1803, as an addition to the code then in use; and from that time to the year 1816, there were two distinct codes, the "General Signal-Book," and the "Telegraphic Vocabulary"; but the same flags were used for each, the use of the vocabulary being marked by the presence of a particular flag."

Again, in further corroboration, if any be necessary, of the fact that the same flags were used for both codes, I might say that I have myself recently seen a small book of signals, giving both the Admiralty Signals and the Popham Vocabulary with only one set of flags for the dual purpose. This particular book bears the watermark in the paper of 1806, and it depicts the numeral flags as used between November, 1803, and July, 1808.

The mistake of the past twenty-three years, or of the past fifty years (however long a period it may have existed for), appears to have undoubtedly arisen from the fact that the original flags of the Popham Code were always adopted instead of those as used after the Admiralty Order of November, 1803. This order, by the way, was repeated by Lord Nelson to his fleet on 16th January, 1804, in the following words:—

"The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty having resolved that a change of the numeral flags described in page 14 of the Day Signal Book, shall immediately take place, I have it in command from their Lordships to send you a painted copy of the flags as now altered, and to desire that you will paste the same on the 14th page of the Day Signal-Book in your possession, and to use the altered Numeral Flags instead of the Numeral Flags at present in use, until you receive further orders."

It is hardly necessary to point out that Lord Nelson's famous signal was made by means of the Popham Vocabulary, for it would have been impossible to have made it with the Admiralty Signal Book, which contained principally military orders. Also, it is stated in the Naval Chronicle, that Popham's Code was used, and in Vol. 7 of the "Despatches and Letters of Lord Nelson," page 149, it is mentioned "this glorious sentiment, so characteristic of every aspiration of Nelson's mind, was conveyed by Sir Home Popham's Telegraphic Code of Signals."

The remainder of the story of Nelson's Signal is best told in the words of the *Victory's* Signal Lieutenant, Pasco, the officer who received Nelson's orders to make it. The *Victory*,

at the moment, was somewhat less than a mile and a half from the enemy's line.

"His Lordship," Lieutenant Pasco says, "came to me on the poop, and, after ordering certain Signals to be made, about a quarter to noon, said, 'Mr. Pasco, I want to say to the fleet, "*England confides that every man will do his duty.*"' He added, 'You must be quick, for I have one more to add, which is for "*Close Action.*"' I replied, 'If your Lordship will permit me to substitute *expects* for *confides*, the Signal will soon be completed, because the word *expects* is in the vocabulary, and *confides* must be spelt.' His Lordship replied in haste, and with seeming satisfaction, 'that will do, Pasco, make it directly.'

"As the last hoist was hauled down, Nelson turned to Captain Blackwood, who was standing by him, with, 'Now I can do no more. We must trust to the great Disposer of all events, and the justice of our cause. I thank God for this great opportunity of doing my duty.'

"When Lord Nelson's message had been answered by a few ships in the van," continues Lieutenant Pasco, "he ordered me to make the signal for "*Close Action*," and keep it up. Accordingly, I hoisted No. 16 at the top-gallant mast head, and there it remained, until shot away."

To obviate further mistakes, and to show how the signal should be correctly represented in the future, coloured designs are furnished with this article (see frontispiece) describing how the flags should be hoisted.

WHITEHALL,

1st July, 1908.