

On the Water

Hi-tech has given a reliable message system the elbow.
MONICA PORTER
sounds a requiem for the dah-dits

S O L O N G A N D
... ---
T H A N K S
- - - - -

Language of ether silenced

SINCE the start of this month, the world's most famous signal, SOS, is officially defunct as Morse code is replaced by the satellite-based Global Maritime Distress and Safety System.

Experts say the state-of-the-art equipment is far more reliable than the dots and dashes, the dits and dawns, devised 161 years ago. But will it capture the public's imagination and affection in the same way?

In a fond farewell to a proud tradition, we tap out 17 fascinating facts about Morse code.

● American painter Samuel Morse, of Charlestown, Massachusetts, conceived the idea of his electric telegraph code in 1832 after overhearing a conversation about the newly-discovered electromagnetic net on his way home by ship from Europe. By 1838 he had developed the system of dots and dashes, created by electrical pulses of variable lengths. Six years later, he tapped out the world's first telegram: "What God hath wrought."

The international code, a modified version of his work, was agreed on by a conference of European nations in 1851.

● One of the earliest companies to make everyday use of the code was Wells Fargo, the pioneering postal system in the Wild West, which communicated via cross-



Samuel Morse who conceived the idea of an electric telegraph code in 1832

history when it helped to catch wife-murderer Dr Crippen. He and his mistress were trying to escape to a new life in Canada on the transatlantic liner Montrose. Although they were travelling incognito, the captain recognised them and sent a Morse message to Scotland Yard; they were arrested on board and returned to Britain, where Crippen was eventually hanged.

● In the 1860s the code was adapted for use with lights so warships could communicate with each other quickly. During both world wars, many messages in close convoys were sent by masthead lanterns. Ships could communicate in total security, because, unlike radio messages, the lights could not be intercepted.

● It took years for operators to become proficient in sending and receiving Morse messages. At sea, the minimum standard was 20 words a minute; most skilled operators could manage 30. The highest recorded speed at receiving Morse

Navy's books include AD, which means "I am abandoning my vessel" and SN, meaning "Stop immediately. Do not scuttle. Do not lower boats. Do not use wireless. If you disobey, I shall open fire". Some signals have a distinctly different meaning from their civilian equivalents, such as PS: "Do not come any closer".

● Even quite recently Morse has been used to send news around the world. In 1973 a group of Fleet Street reporters followed the then 22-year-old Princess Anne on her first solo tour, to Ethiopia. In a remote town she succumbed to a severe stomach ailment and had to dash out of a banquet. The reporters, desperate to send the story to Britain, found the town's Telex machine broken, its sole phone line went only as far as the capital, Addis Ababa, and the official in charge spoke no English. To their amazement, however, he took their stories, picked up the phone and spoke rapidly: "Di-dah-dit-dit, dah-dah-dah, dah-dit, dah-dit-dit". Another operator in Addis then Telexed the stories to London.

● Despite it being declared officially dead, the code is not about to be deserted by the hundreds of thousands of licensed radio amateurs around the world. They claim it still has a vital role on shortwave bands when more complex, hi-tech methods of communications fail.

● Ships that have continued to use Morse until now are mainly based in Eastern Europe or the Third World. Maritime authorities fear some companies will not be able to afford the new system, thereby putting lives at risk — they may send out SOS signals by Morse one day, only to find no one is listening.

● Morse's dogged and lengthy pursuit of his invention drove him to penury and on several occasions he almost gave up hope. Only the support of his family allowed him to carry on long enough to perfect his

country telegraph lines and pilots of many Western movies hinged on poles being felled or dying operators tapping out the last words of a vital message.

● Morse was originally sent along landlines by operators using keyboards but was gradually superseded by Telex, then radio.

● The first radio equipment designed to transmit the code was installed on a lighthouse on Goodwin Sands, off the coast of Kent, in 1899. The idea was to use it to send a message if a vessel ran aground — but the lighthouse was rammed by a freighter soon afterwards. Maritime history was made the same year when an off-course steamer,

the Elbe, smashed into a lighthouse in the Dover Strait and began to sink. Lifeboats were summoned from shore by Morse, the first use of the code in sea rescue.

● The most famous Morse signal, SOS, was agreed on by British and German radio operators in 1908. It had nothing to do with Save Our Souls, as popularly supposed — S and O were simply the two most easily recognisable letters and were sent as dot-dot-dot, dash-dash-dash, dot-dot-dot. In the previous decade, ships had radioed

CQD (Come Quick Danger) but it was more laborious.

● The first SOS sent at sea was from the stricken Titanic. In the early hours of April 15, 1912, wireless operator John Phillips sent the following message: "SOS, SOS. Come at once. We have struck berg. Position 41 [degrees] 46' N, 50 14' W. SOS." The nearest ship, the Californian, was 19 nautical miles away, less than two hours steaming time, but the crew failed to pick up the signal.

● In 1910, Morse made criminal

Bulcao de Oliveira Redig in Rio de Janeiro in 1961. The highest speed for hand-key transmitting is 175 symbols per minute (35 wpm) by Harry A. Turner, of the US Army Signal Corps, in 1942.

● In World War II, undercover agents on both sides used Morse to send messages from behind enemy lines. In recent decades it was no longer considered part of a spy's toolkit, which made it all the more surprising to Special Branch officers who arrested Czech agent Erwin van Haarlem in London in 1988 as he was receiving a message in Morse.

● Snappy codes on the Royal

system. At one point, he wrote to a friend: "I am crushed for want of means. My stockings all need to see my mother and my hat is hoary with age."

● Singer Johnny Cash became an expert at sending Morse messages when he served in the Korean War. He once said the signals helped him develop his ear for music.

● In the blockbuster sci-fi movie *Independence Day*, Morse saved the Earth after the invading aliens blocked out all other means of communication by humans. Are we perhaps being a trifle hasty in ditching it...?

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