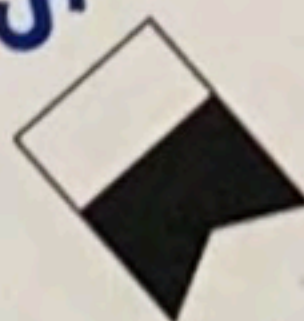


# ALPHA · BRAVO · CHARLIE



The Complete Book of Nautical Codes

SIGNAL FLAGS



MORSE CODE



SEMAPHORE



PHONETIC ALPHABET

ALPHA

SARA GILLINGHAM

phaidon







FLAG LETTER:

A

FLAG NAME:  
**ALPHA**

FLAG MEANING:

**I HAVE A DIVER DOWN; KEEP WELL CLEAR  
AT LOW SPEED.**

When you see the ALPHA flag, it means a scuba diver is under the water. Lots of people dive for fun, but a ship's crew often sends divers deep down into the ocean to work: inspecting ships, making repairs, or even looking for things from wrecked ships!

When a diver goes underwater, it's important for nearby ships to know because the spinning

blades of a passing ship's propeller are also underwater and can be very dangerous. It's also important because a boat with a diver down may not be able to move out of the way to avoid a crash.

Any boat that sees an ALPHA flag should slow down and give the ship lots of space, to keep divers and diving boats safe.









FLAG LETTER:

**B**

FLAG NAME:  
**BRAVO**

FLAG MEANING:

**I AM CARRYING DANGEROUS CARGO.**

Did you know that ships bring many of the things we use everyday, like clothes, books, and food, to us from other countries around the world? But this cargo, which is the word for things that are transported by ship, can sometimes be toxic, explosive, and very dangerous if handled incorrectly. For example, oil is a very dangerous type of cargo because of the damage it can cause to humans and animals if it spills.

That's why ships fly the BRAVO flag – it warns other ships that there is “dangerous cargo” aboard. It also tells the other boats that they must give the ship a “wide berth,” meaning they steer clear of the ship and give it lots of extra space. But what about at night when it's hard to see the flag? When a ship with dangerous cargo is in a harbor at night, it will often shine a red warning light to let nearby boats know to stay far away.









FLAG LETTER:

C

FLAG NAME:  
**CHARLIE**

FLAG MEANING:

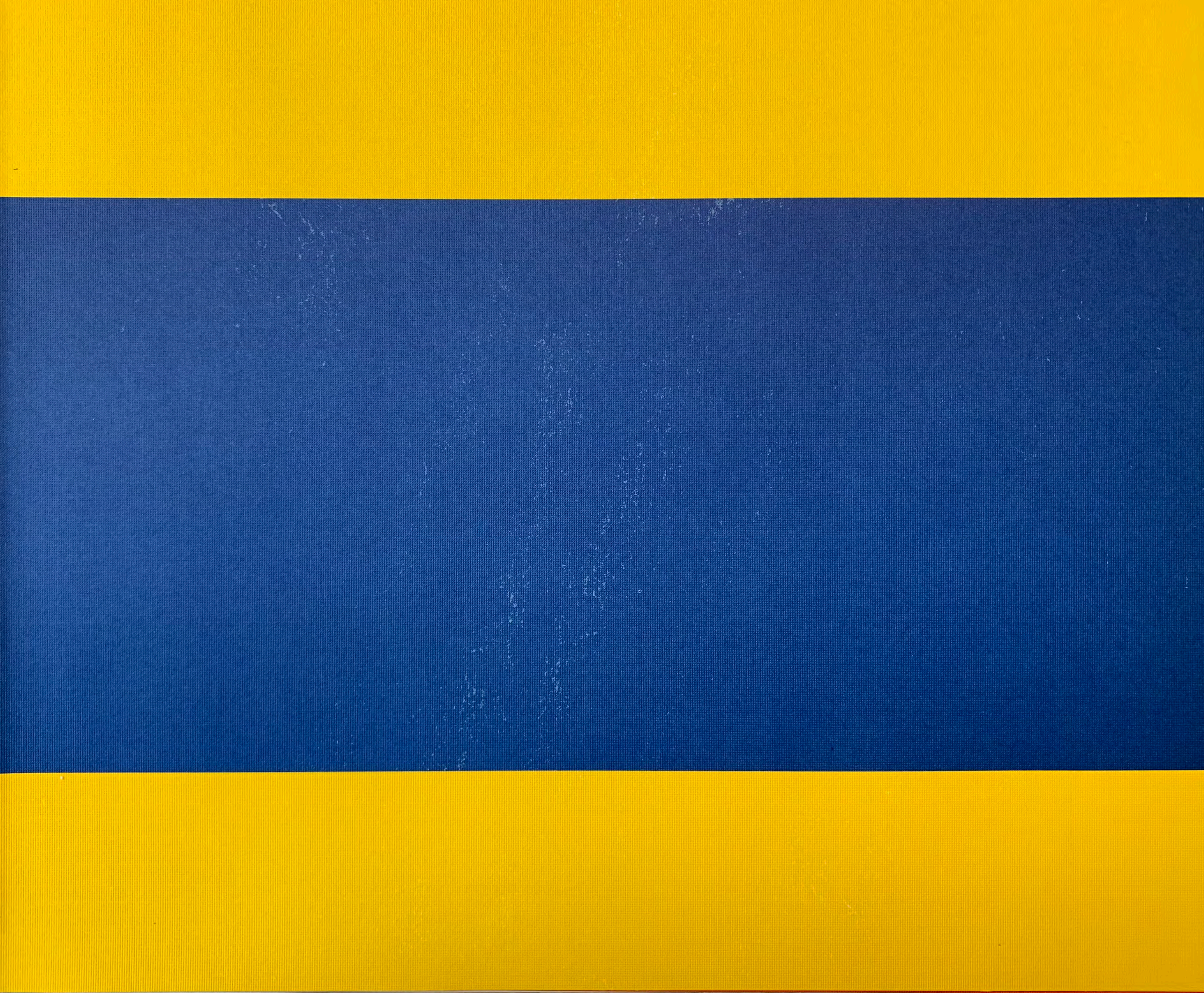
**YES or AFFIRMATIVE.**

Aye, Aye, Captain. That's one way to answer yes. Another way is to fly the CHARLIE flag. Let's say one ship has problems with its radio and it stops sending radio messages. A nearby ship asks, "Is

your radio not working?" The ship with the broken radio can raise the CHARLIE flag to answer "Affirmative" or "Yes." The two ships can then use signal flags or Morse code to keep communicating and solve the problem.









FLAG LETTER:

D

FLAG NAME:  
**DELTA**

FLAG MEANING:

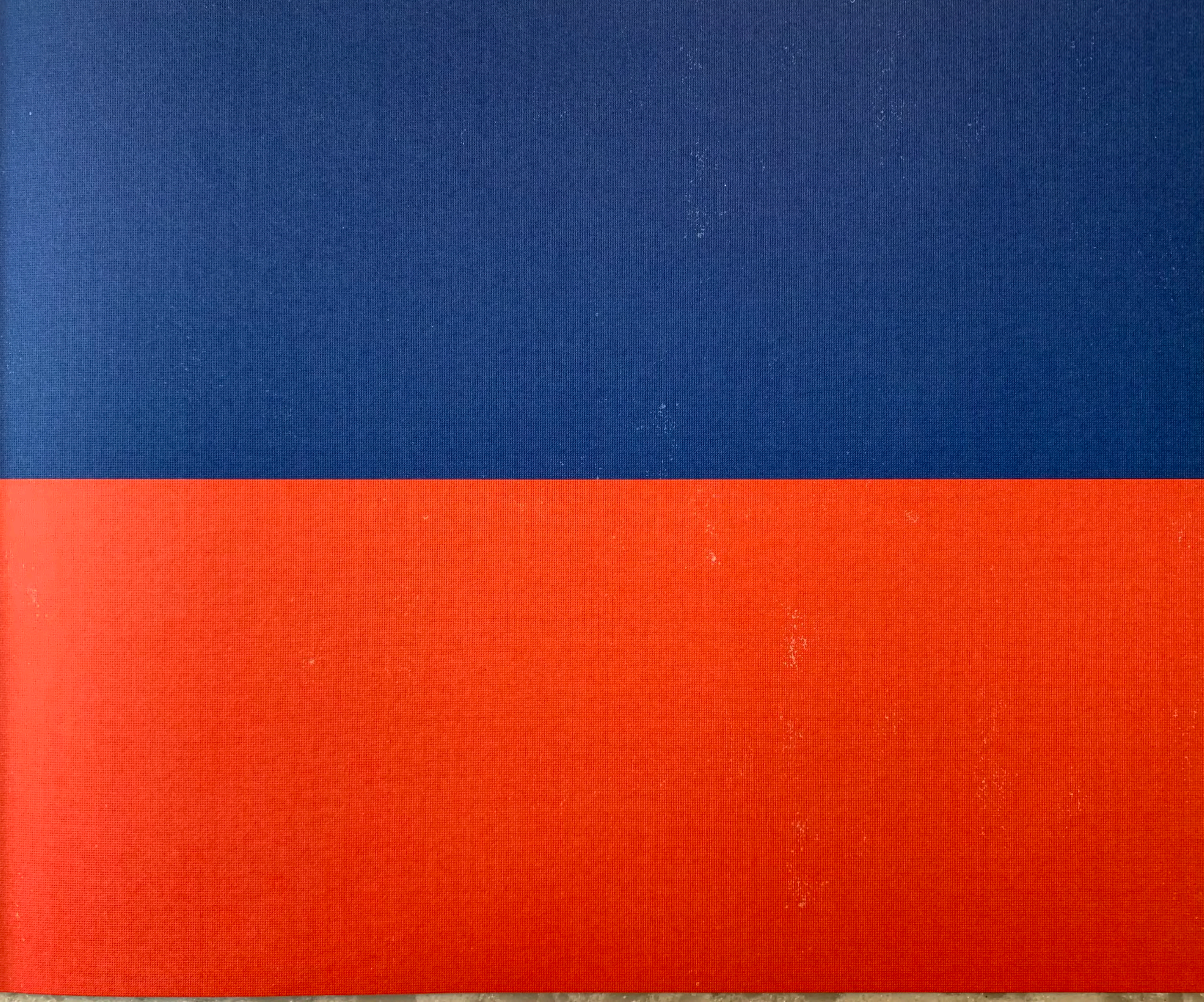
**KEEP CLEAR OF ME; I AM MANEUVERING  
WITH DIFFICULTY.**

Tugboats can push cargo as well as tug (or pull) it. When a tugboat is pushing a very heavy boat, it is “maneuvering with difficulty,” which means that it is not able to move as quickly or steer as well as it normally does, so it is safer for other boats to stay away. For example, tugboats often

push big barges, which are boats that carry goods but can’t move in the water without help. This would be the right time for the tugboat to fly the DELTA flag, telling other ships to keep a good distance, because it would be difficult for the tugboat to make a quick stop and avoid crashing.









FLAG LETTER:

**E**

FLAG NAME:  
**ECHO**

FLAG MEANING:

**I AM ALTERING MY COURSE TO STARBOARD.  
(I AM TURNING RIGHT.)**

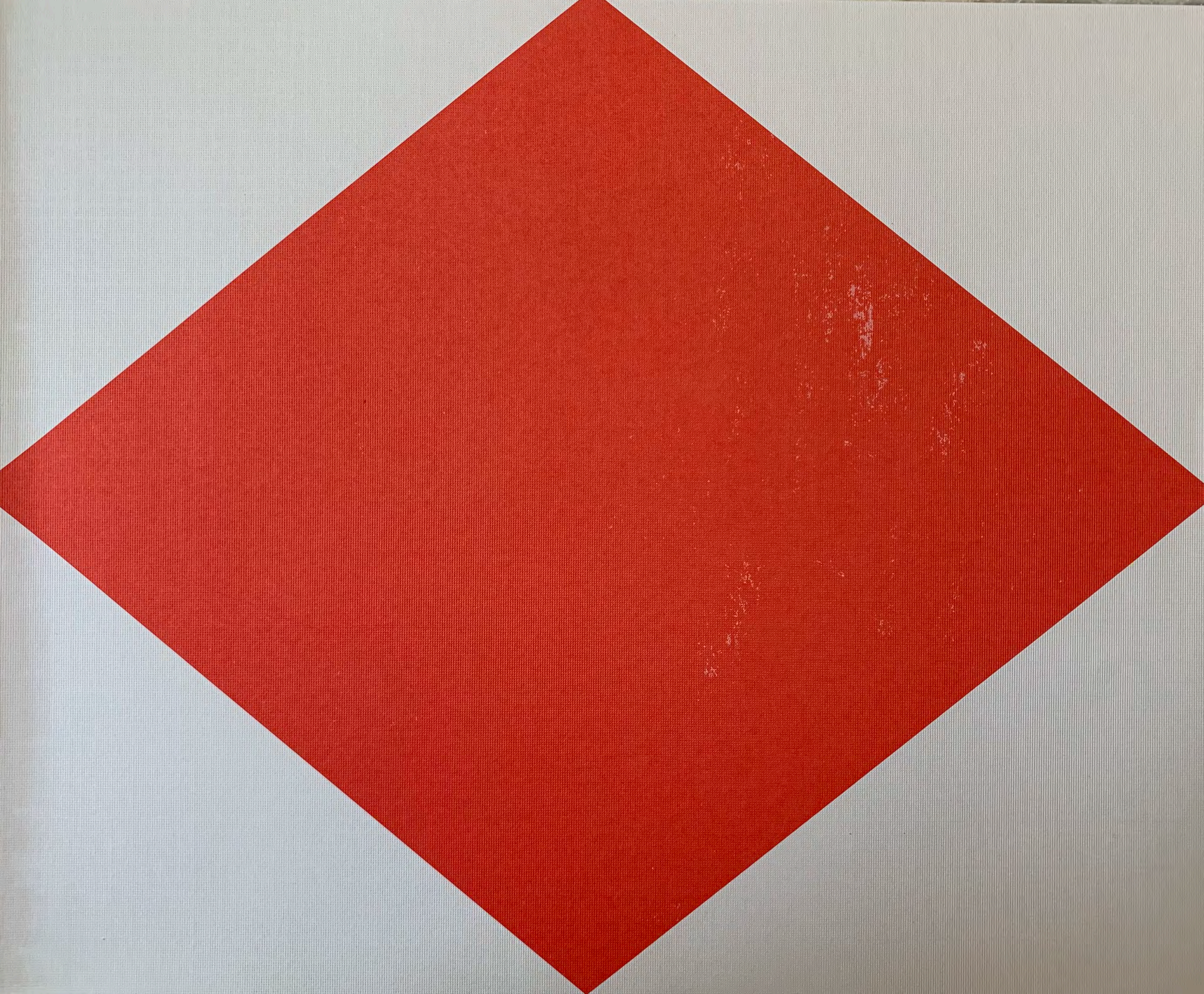
Did you know that on a ship, left and right are called something totally different?

When you are on board facing the front of the boat, left is called PORT. That's the side that ships use for docking in a port, when loading and offloading things. Right is known as STARBOARD. This comes from an Old English word, steorbord, which was a special oar used for steering on the right side of old-fashioned ships.

When a ship wants to pass another ship on the starboard side, the first ship raises the ECHO flag. They can also sound the ECHO signal, with one short blast (which is the same as E in Morse code). Either way it's signaled, ECHO lets a nearby boat know which way the ship is turning, like a car blinker, to avoid crashes. And that's always a good thing!









FLAG LETTER:

**F**

FLAG NAME:  
**FOXTROT**

FLAG MEANING:

**I AM DISABLED; COMMUNICATE WITH ME.**

Have you ever seen a car broken-down by the side of the road? They flash their emergency lights to warn other cars that they are stopped, and to signal that they need help. For a ship, flying the FOXTROT flag is the same thing. This flag tells other boats that the ship is not working properly, for example, if a log gets stuck in its motor!

But there's more. It also asks other boats to stop and communicate with the troubled ship in order to help.

If a captain or crew sees a FOXTROT flag flying, they will try and make contact with the broken ship by using radio, hoisting a flag, or using Morse code with a signal lamp to find out how they can help.









FLAG LETTER:

G

FLAG NAME:  
**GOLF**

FLAG MEANING:

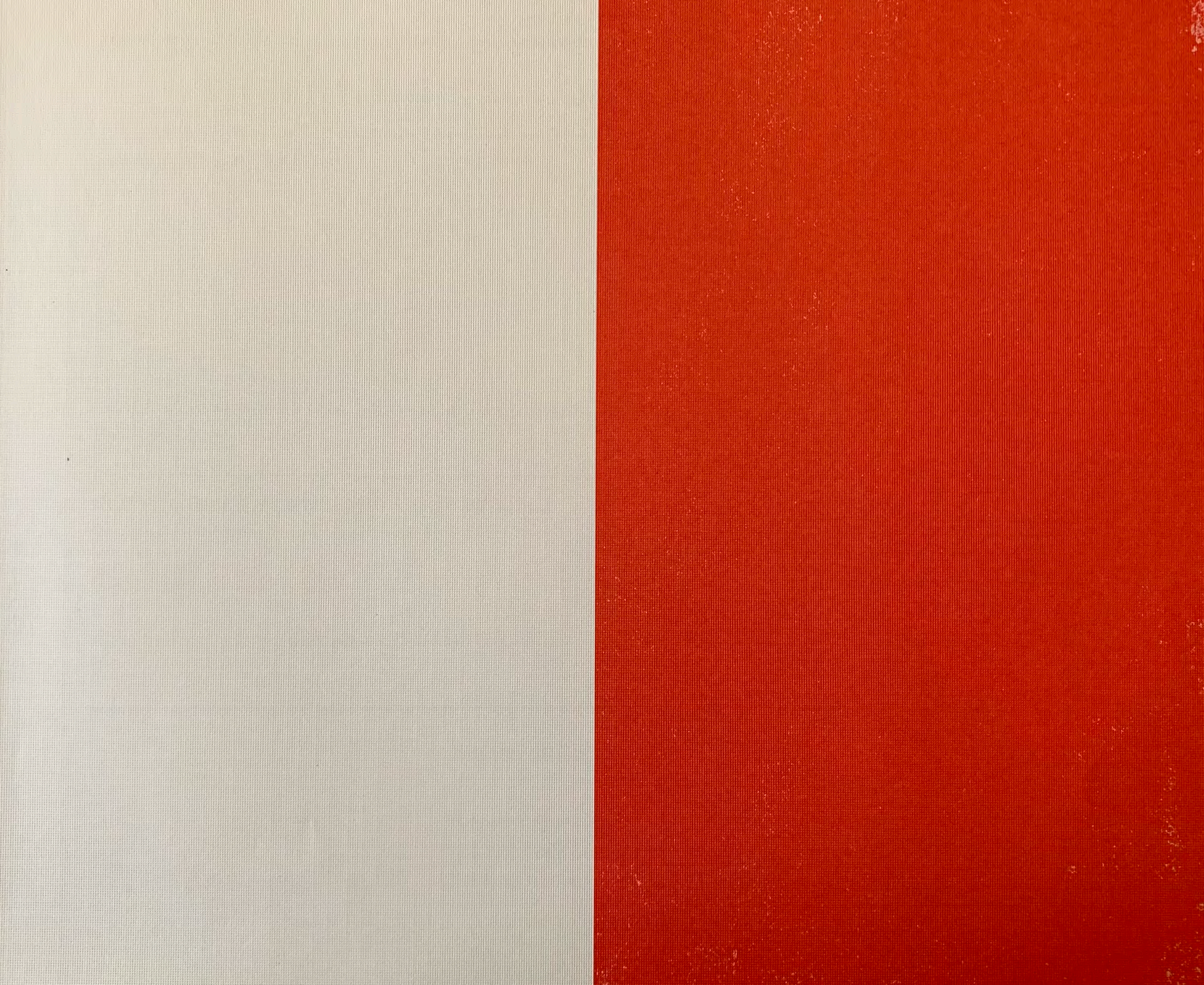
**I REQUIRE A PILOT.**

Most harbors require ships to use a pilot when docking, which is when a boat is brought into harbor and “parked” in the right position. This pilot isn’t the same as the person who flies an airplane. A nautical pilot is an expert who knows local waters and can help steer a ship through

dangerous or tricky passages. If a ship does not have a pilot on board, the GOLF flag is a quick way to signal for one. Once it’s raised, a pilot is sent from shore on a small high-speed pilot boat or sometimes even flown in by helicopter!









FLAG LETTER:

H

FLAG NAME:  
**HOTEL**

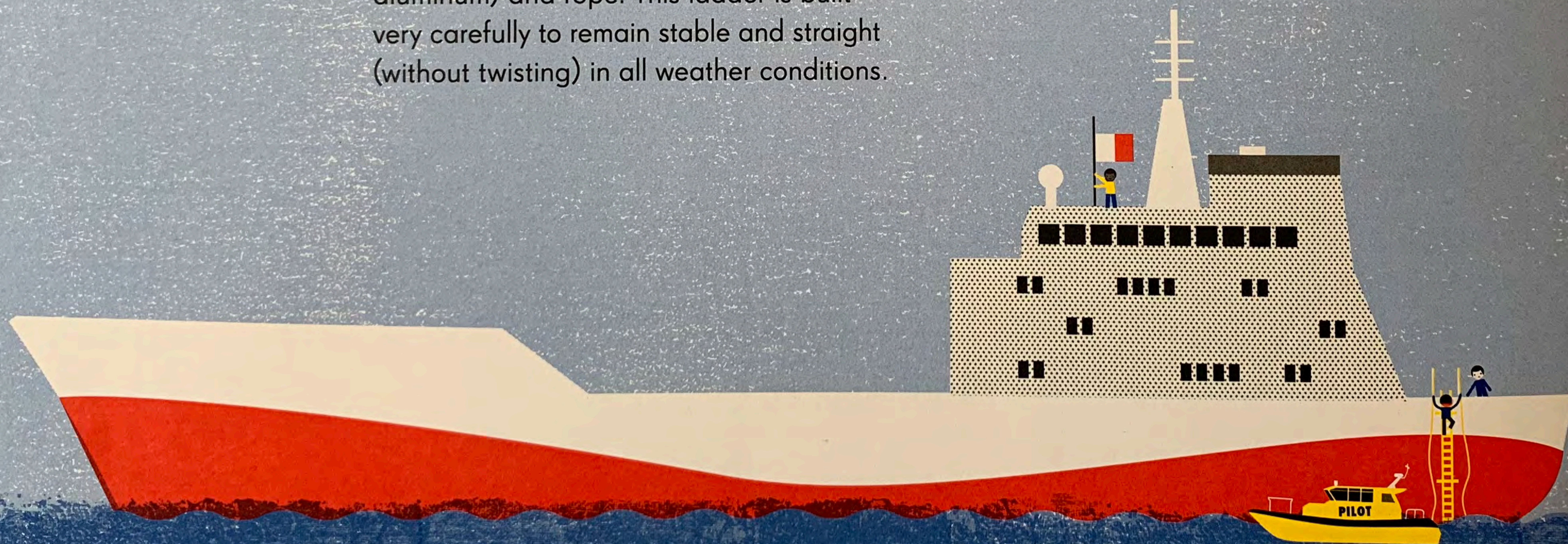
FLAG MEANING:

**I HAVE A PILOT ON BOARD.**

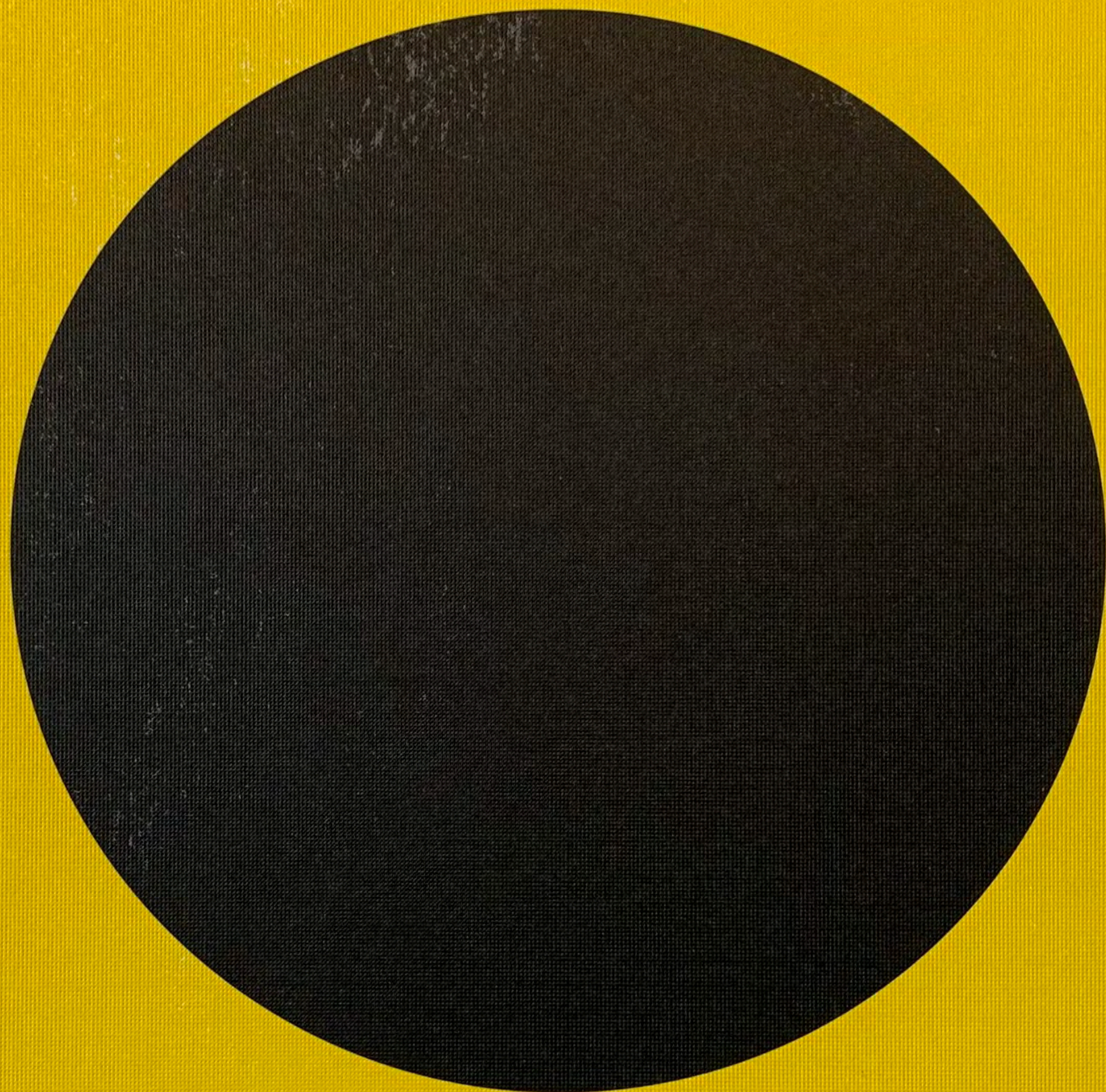
Following the GOLF flag, the HOTEL flag is raised to let other boats and harbor officials know that a pilot is on board and is controlling the ship. This flag is raised after the pilot arrives at the ship and makes it on board. But that's not always easy.

When a pilot arrives by pilot boat, he or she has to climb up the side of the ship on a special pilot ladder made of wood (or aluminum) and rope. This ladder is built very carefully to remain stable and straight (without twisting) in all weather conditions.

Even so, climbing the pilot ladder can be very dangerous. Just imagine climbing a tree while the branches are moving – it's tricky! Once on board, pilots are expected to maneuver large ships through challenging waters. This is why pilots are special crewmembers. They're trusted with very important and sometimes unsafe jobs.









FLAG LETTER:



FLAG NAME:  
**INDIA**

FLAG MEANING:

**I AM ALTERING MY COURSE TO PORT.  
(I AM TURNING LEFT.)**

When you ride your bike and want to make a left turn, you stick out your left arm to signal it. Well, on a ship when a sailor plans to veer left (or to "port"), the INDIA flag is raised. Boats with sound signals can also use Morse code by giving two blasts instead to say the same thing, "I am altering my course to port."

Here's a trick to remembering left (port) from right (starboard) at sea. For port you can say "A ship that is sailing out to the ocean has 'left port.'" For starboard, say "Star light, star bright, starboard is to the right."

At night, sailors have yet another way to tell left from right. Navigation lights are used to help other boats know which side is which. A red light is used for the port side and a green light is used for starboard.









FLAG LETTER:

J

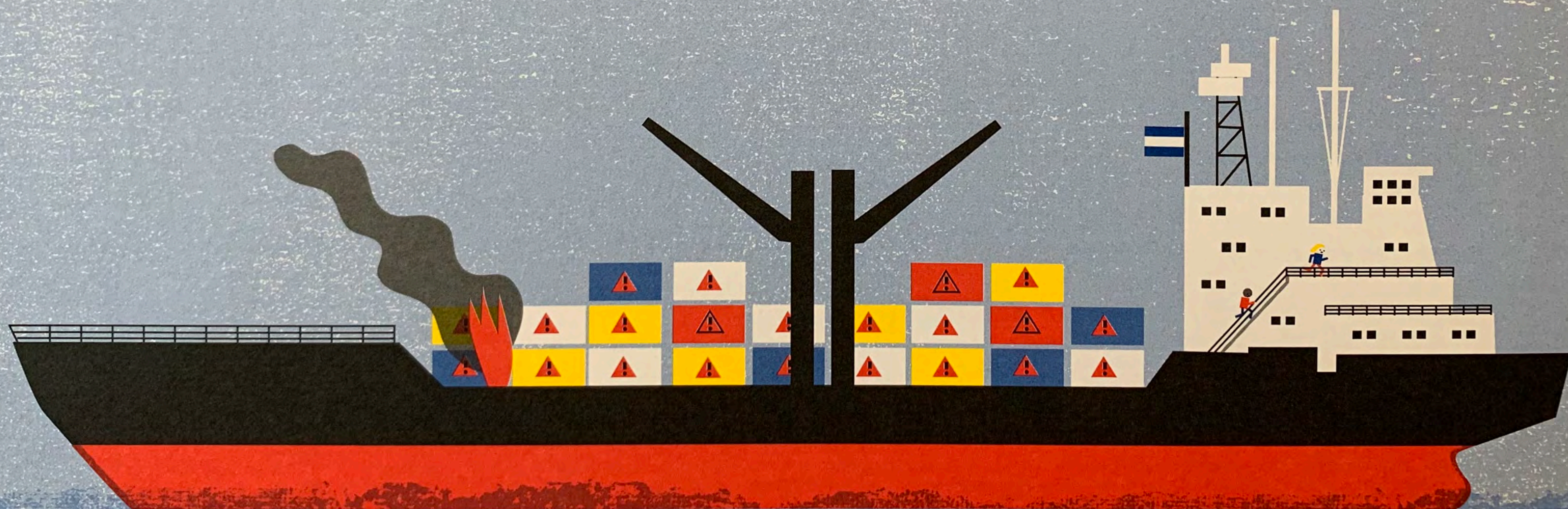
FLAG NAME:  
**JULIET**

FLAG MEANING:

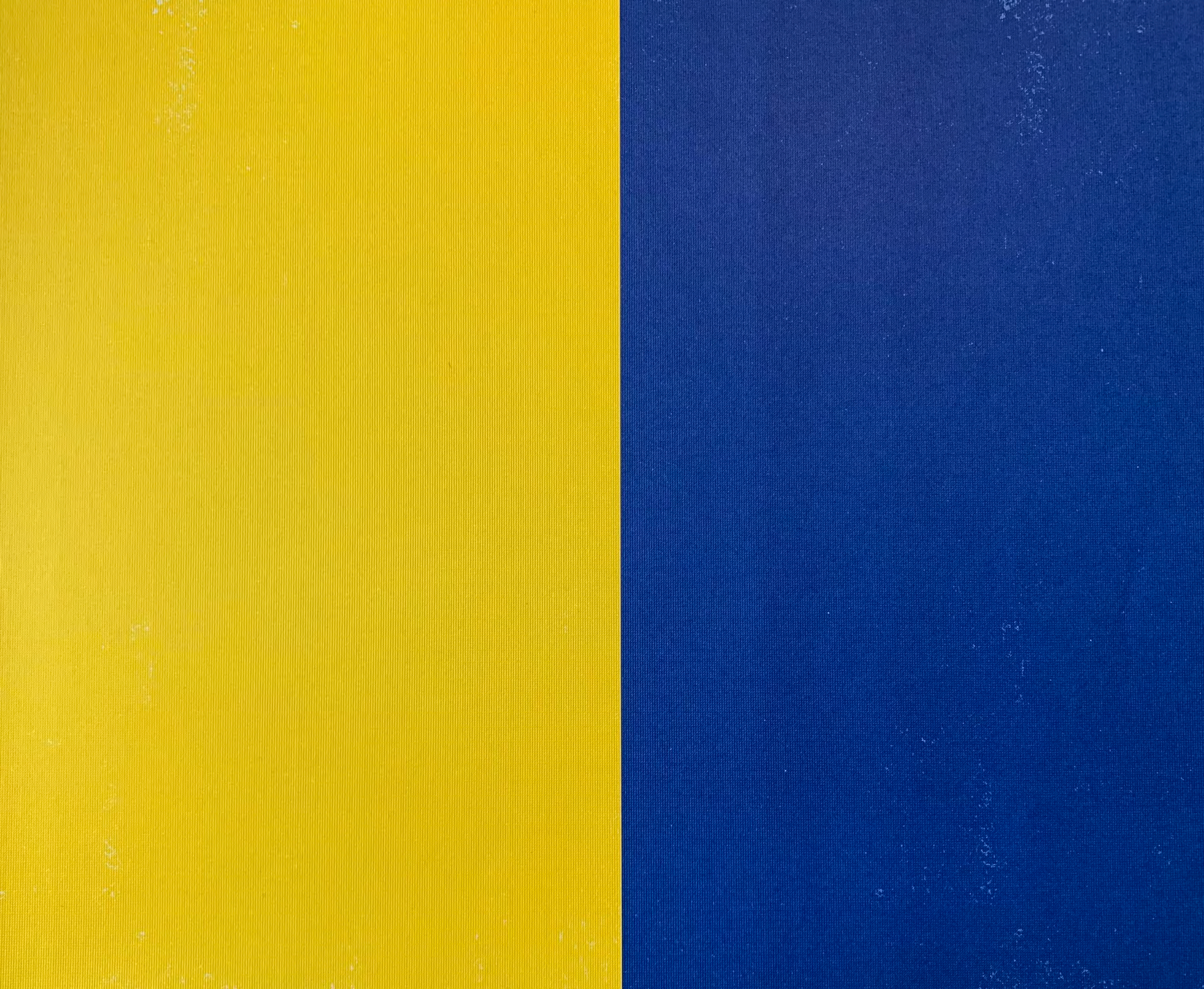
**I AM ON FIRE AND HAVE DANGEROUS CARGO  
ON BOARD: KEEP WELL CLEAR OF ME.**

No sailor wants to fly the JULIET flag. This flag is only used when there is serious trouble on board. It tells other ships to alert the authorities and to stay far away, especially when there is explosive or toxic cargo on board. A sailor might hoist the

JULIET flag when a fire has damaged the radio or electronics, making it impossible to communicate. If crewmembers can't put out the fire, the next step after raising the flag is to put on life jackets and evacuate (leave) the ship!









**FLAG LETTER:**

**K**

**FLAG NAME:**  
**KILO**

**FLAG MEANING:**

**I WISH TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOU.**

Raising this flag is almost like waving hello. Sailors raise the KILO flag when they want to communicate with another ship. The ships can continue to communicate using flag codes, but sometimes they decide to use other codes. They let each other know how they would like to communicate by adding a number flag underneath the KILO flag.

There are 10 number flags, each representing the numbers zero to nine. Four of them are used with the KILO flag. If a sailor wants to communicate by hand-flag, he indicates this by hoisting the KILO flag with the number one flag. If he wants to communicate using a loud hailer or megaphone, he signals this by hoisting the KILO flag with the number two flag. He can also hoist the number three flag for Morse lamp and the four flag for sound signals.









FLAG LETTER:

**L**

FLAG NAME:  
**LIMA**

FLAG MEANING:

**YOU SHOULD STOP YOUR VESSEL INSTANTLY.**

STOP! That's the message sailors get loud and clear when they see the LIMA flag flying. A ship can use this flag to warn a nearby boat when the boat is headed towards something dangerous, like an underwater reef. Port officials also use this

flag to order a vessel (which is another word for a large boat or ship) to stop in a busy harbor. But most of the time, they use the Morse code sound signal to instantly alert a ship that it needs to stop.









FLAG LETTER:

**M**

FLAG NAME:

**MIKE**

FLAG MEANING:

**MY VESSEL IS STOPPED AND MAKING NO WAY THROUGH THE WATER.**

Sometimes, it can be difficult to tell if a far-off boat is moving in the water. "Making no way" means that a boat is not moving, and it's important for nearby ships to know

this so that they don't bump into it. So a boat should let other ships know that they are stopped by hoisting the MIKE flag. This way, other ships know to move around them.









FLAG LETTER:

N

FLAG NAME:  
**NOVEMBER**

FLAG MEANING:

**NO or NEGATIVE.**

N stands for "No!" The NOVEMBER flag should be hoisted if a sailor's reply to a signal is "No," or if a crew is unable to do what another boat is asking them to.

Did you know that many of the flags in this book can be combined to send a completely different message? One very

important flag combination is NOVEMBER and CHARLIE (the "Yes" flag). When these flags are hoisted together, it becomes an urgent signal for help, just like S-O-S in Morse code. These signals are only used for big emergencies, like sinking ships, or if someone is very hurt.









**FLAG LETTER:**



**FLAG NAME:**  
**OSCAR**

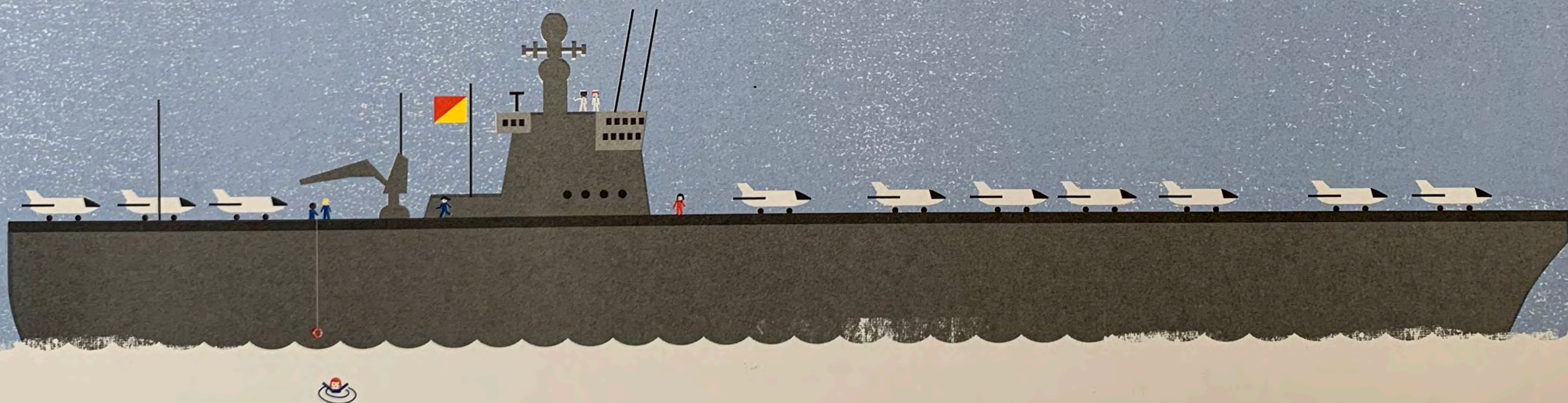
**FLAG MEANING:**

## **MAN OVERBOARD.**

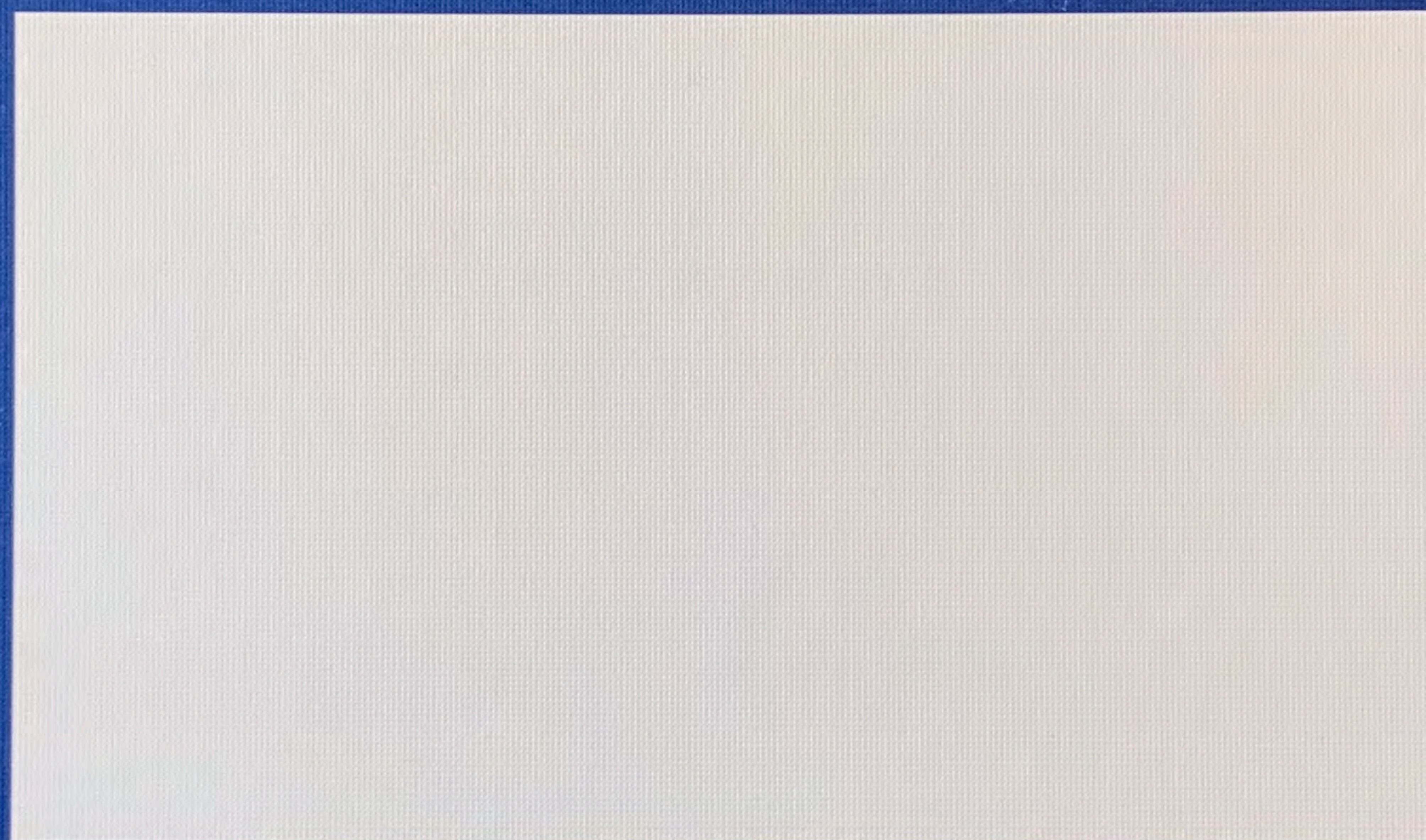
"Man Overboard!" is what crewmembers and passengers shout if someone falls into the water from a ship. This is a serious situation and can be deadly if help doesn't get there fast. To alert nearby boats, sailors raise the OSCAR flag.

Man Overboard signals should then be sent out by flag, radio, smoke, horn, or whatever is available on the boat so that

nearby ships can offer help. Things that help people float, like a lifesaver (a ring-shaped tube that is used to help keep a person from drowning), are always kept on boats for just this reason. Ladders, rope, fabric, bare hands, and even waves can be used to help the person get back onto the boat. With quick thinking and fast action, people who fall overboard can be saved.









FLAG LETTER:

P

FLAG NAME:  
**PAPA**

FLAG MEANING:

**ALL PERSONS SHOULD REPORT ON BOARD:  
PROCEEDING TO SEA or MY NETS HAVE COME  
FAST UPON AN OBSTRUCTION.**

When a ship is in the harbor, the PAPA flag flying is like the conductor of a train shouting "All Aboard." It means that all passengers or crew on shore should board the ship, because it is about to leave! The PAPA flag is also called the Departure Flag, and is normally hoisted 24 hours before departure (leaving).

When a fishing boat is at sea, the PAPA flag is hoisted in order to let other ships know that their underwater nets are caught

on something, like jagged rocks or a sunken shipwreck. A boat with snagged nets can be very dangerous because the nets can get so tangled up that the ship capsizes (turns over). Even when things are under control, nets are very expensive, so fishing boats try to move around, to carefully free them without damage. And so, other ships should keep clear when they see the PAPA flag, unless the fishing boat specifically asks for help.









FLAG LETTER:

Q

FLAG NAME:  
**QUEBEC**

FLAG MEANING:

**MY VESSEL IS HEALTHY AND I REQUEST  
FREE PRATIQUE.**

To “request free pratique” means to ask for permission to dock in someone else’s port. If a boat is flying the QUEBEC flag when it enters port, an official from the port will usually come on board and request to see medical papers proving that everyone on the boat is healthy. This is an important way to control the spread of deadly diseases.

But this wasn’t always the case. A long time ago, flying the QUEBEC flag meant that your ship was in quarantine. This is when one or more people on the ship is very sick with a contagious disease and the ship has to drop anchor and keep everyone on board to stop the illness from spreading.









FLAG LETTER:

R

FLAG NAME:  
**ROMEO**

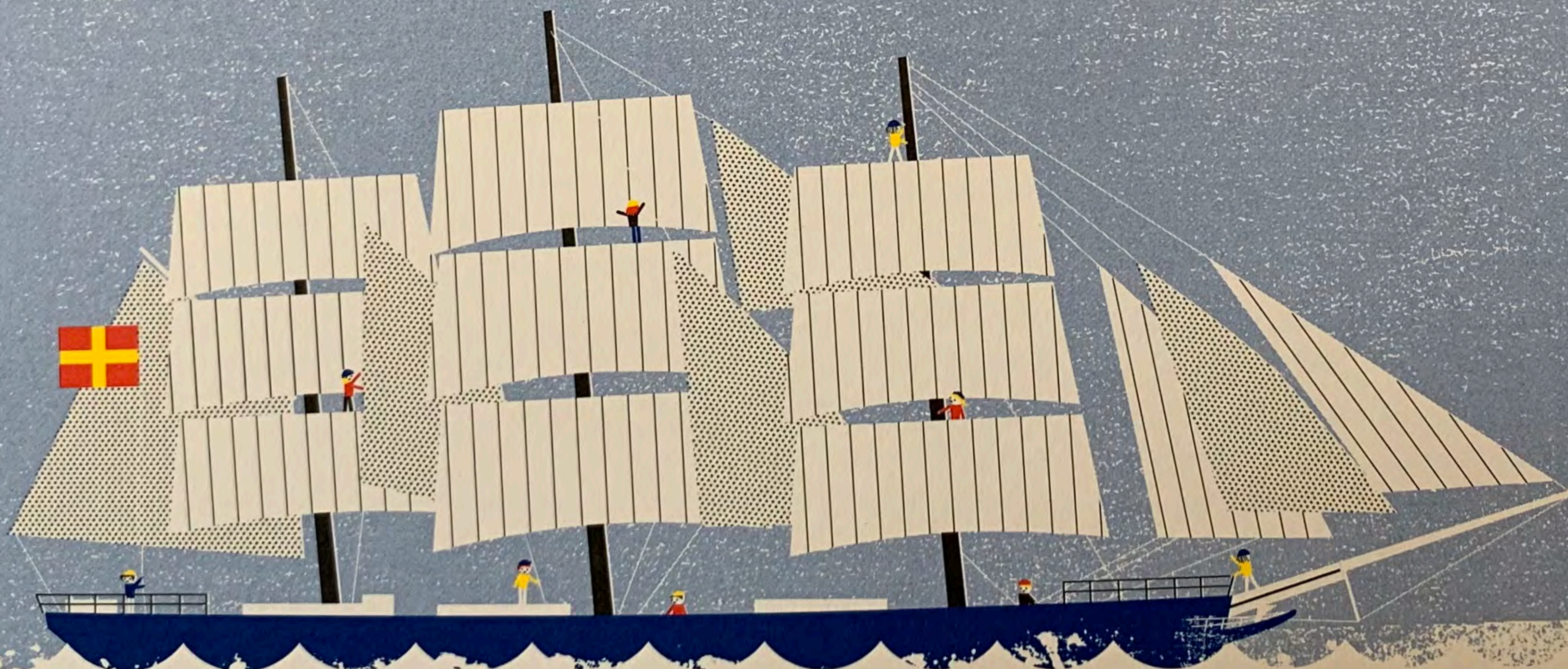
FLAG MEANING:

***[THERE IS NO FLAG MEANING!]***

The ROMEO flag is unique because it doesn't have a meaning anymore. In older versions of the code, it used to mean "Do not pass ahead of me." But today, it simply stands for the letter R and is only used when sailors want to spell out words with that letter, or send a message in combination with other flags. For example, it is used with number flags to help sailors talk about the distance between ships or between ship and port. It is also used with

other alphabet flags for more detailed messages about anchoring, which is when a ship drops a heavy metal anchor into the water to help it stay in one place.

The Morse signal for R is one short tone, one long tone, and one short tone, and is often used by a ship anchored in fog, which makes it very hard to see! The sound signal lets other boats know that the ship is there so that they don't crash into the ship!









FLAG LETTER:

S

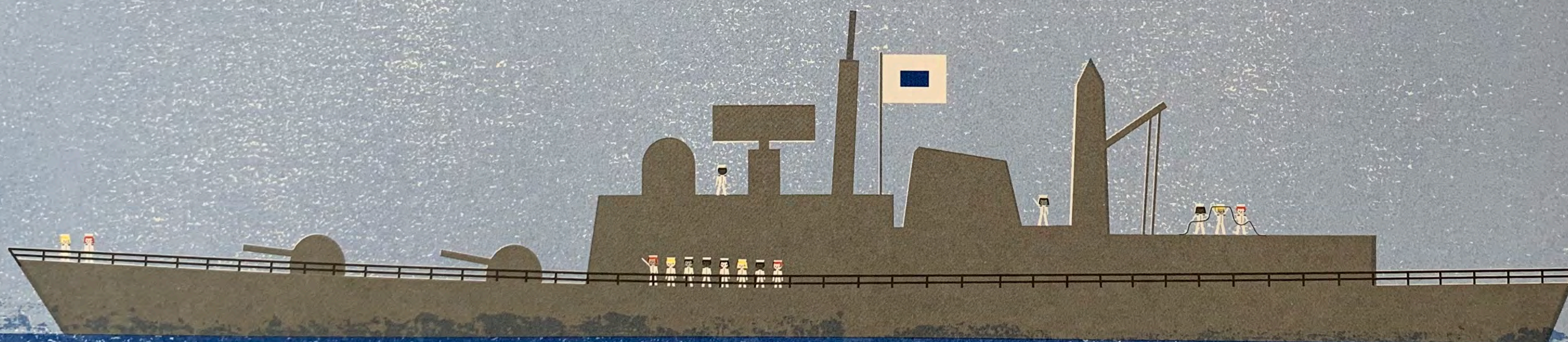
FLAG NAME:  
**SIERRA**

FLAG MEANING:

**I AM OPERATING ASTERN PROPULSION.**

A boat is “operating astern propulsion” when it is slowing down or backing up. It is difficult to see when a boat is operating astern propulsion, since it doesn’t make a wave or tracks in the water. That’s why it’s important to warn other boats so that they can steer clear.

The SIERRA flag is used only in cases where there is no other communication on a boat due to radio silence or broken equipment. The more common way to send this signal is by sound. The sound signal for SIERRA is the Morse code for S: three short blasts. This is a sound you hear often in ports today.









FLAG LETTER:

**T**

FLAG NAME:  
**TANGO**

FLAG MEANING:

**KEEP CLEAR OF ME; I AM ENGAGED  
IN PAIR TRAWLING.**

The tango is a complicated dance between two people. The TANGO flag is used to indicate a complicated movement that two ships make together. Though it's not flown very often anymore, when it is, it means that a boat is pair trawling – a type of fishing where two boats tow a huge fishing net between them. With pair trawling, fishermen can use a bigger net than they would be

able to by themselves, but this also means that other boats need to keep clear so they don't get tangled up in the net or scare away the fish.

Pair trawling makes some people very angry because of the amount of ocean life that it destroys or catches by mistake. So these days, it's actually not allowed in some places.









FLAG LETTER:

U

FLAG NAME:  
**UNIFORM**

FLAG MEANING:

**YOU ARE RUNNING INTO DANGER.**

The UNIFORM flag is one way to tell ships they need to be careful. Today, most ships send out sound signals or radio communication to let another boat know that they are running into danger. But the UNIFORM flag is often hoisted by someone on shore, to warn boats of hidden dangers in the water, like rocks or shallow areas.

In foggy conditions, when ships can't see the shore (or a flag on shore), sound signals are often used to send the UNIFORM signal. The Morse code for UNIFORM is two short tones and one long tone, and it can be sent by sound or light.









FLAG LETTER:

V

FLAG NAME:  
**VICTOR**

FLAG MEANING:

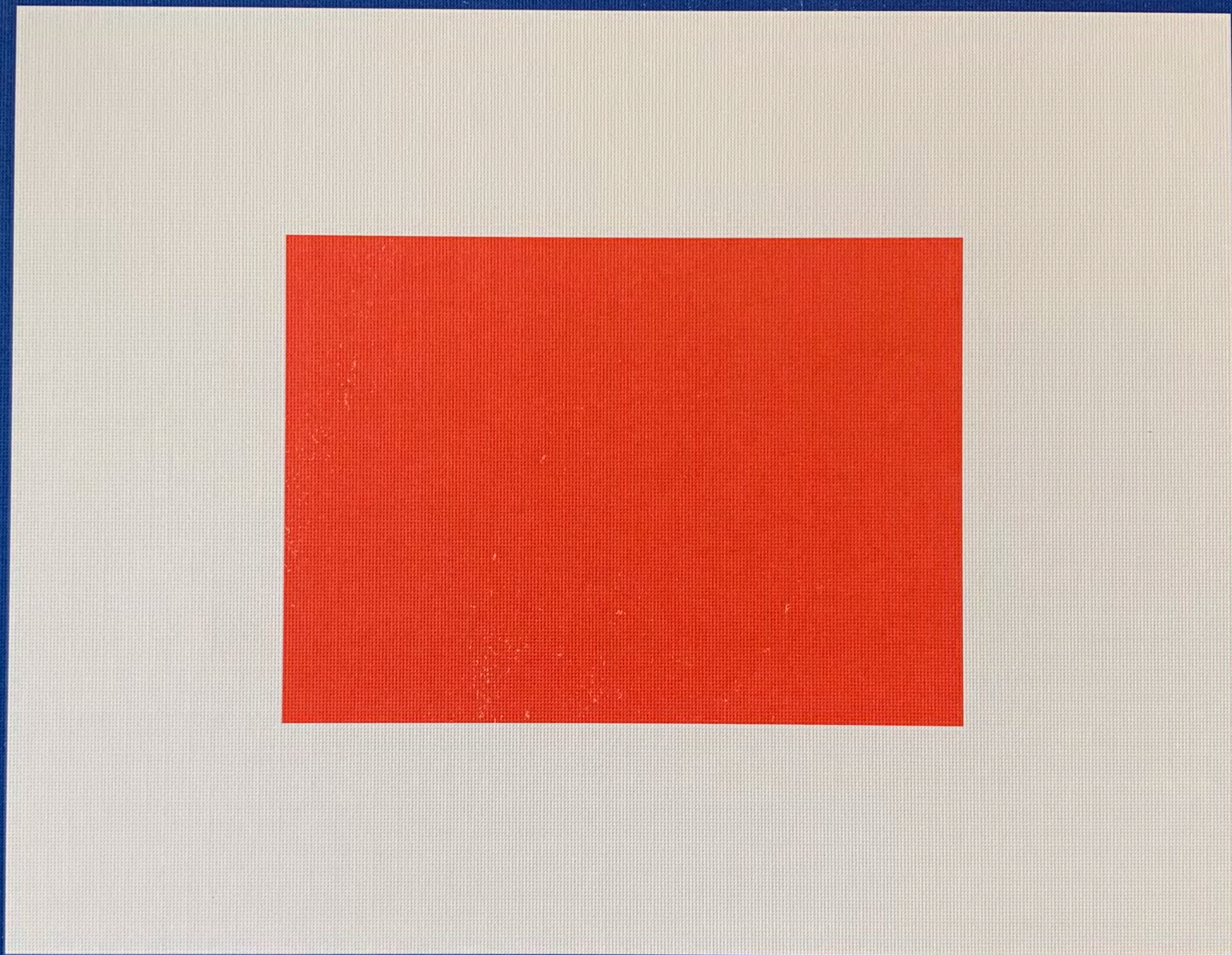
**I REQUIRE ASSISTANCE.**

The VICTOR flag is not a distress signal like NOVEMBER CHARLIE or SOS, so it is never used to signal danger, but it is hoisted when a boat needs help with something that is less of an emergency. For example,

if a ship has had a complete power failure and cannot communicate by radio, it may need the help of another boat's radio to help communicate with its owners, so that help can be sent to repair it.









FLAG LETTER:

**W**

FLAG NAME:  
**WHISKEY**

FLAG MEANING:

**I REQUIRE MEDICAL ASSISTANCE.**

For passengers not used to sailing on a ship, a little seasickness is a common thing. But when someone gets seriously ill or injured, it's much more worrying. This is where the WHISKEY flag comes in. This flag tells other ships that there is a sick or injured person on board and that help is needed. If a ship is in harbor and medical assistance is on the way, the WHISKEY flag is hoisted to help make the ship easy to find.

A ship's crew can receive important medical instructions using a radio while they wait for help to arrive, but when the people speak different languages from each other, a special medical code is used. Each message in the Medical Signal Code is made up of three flags: the MIKE flag and two other letters. These instructions help the crew tend to a patient when a doctor isn't available.









FLAG LETTER:

**X**

FLAG NAME:  
**X-RAY**

FLAG MEANING:

**STOP CARRYING OUT YOUR INTENTIONS  
AND WATCH FOR MY SIGNALS.**

Freeze! Halt! Stop what you are doing! The X-RAY flag is like saying all of that at once. But it doesn't just mean stop, it means stop and LISTEN to instructions. The X-RAY flag can be raised when a harbor boat notices

that a ship is doing something wrong or dangerous. It can also be used to let a boat know that they are anchoring in a bad spot. It is usually followed by a signal with further directions.









FLAG LETTER:

Y

FLAG NAME:  
**YANKEE**

FLAG MEANING:

**I AM DRAGGING MY ANCHOR.**

The YANKEE flag is raised when a boat is dragging its anchor – which is not a good thing! Ships drop their anchor when they want to stop moving. But when there are storms or strong winds, the force can be so powerful that the weight of the anchor and chain isn't enough to keep the boat still. That means that the boat begins moving again, but with its heavy anchor being dragged behind!

It can take quite a while to stop a dragging anchor, and it can cause serious accidents. So the YANKEE flag is hoisted when sailors want to warn others that their boat and anchor are moving out of control.









FLAG LETTER:

**Z**

FLAG NAME:  
**ZULU**

FLAG MEANING:

**I REQUIRE A TUG or I AM SHOOTING NETS.**

This flag is special because it has two meanings, depending on who's flying it. When the ZULU flag is hoisted by fishing boats, it means that the boat is shooting fishing nets out into the water. Fishing nets can be several miles long, and can get caught in the engines of other boats, so it's important for other boats to stay away!

When the ZULU flag is hoisted by other ships, it means that they are unable to move and need another boat to help them

back to harbor. A ship might need to be towed (or "tugged") if its engine is down, or if it is a sailboat with no wind.

When used together with the B flag to read BRAVO ZULU, this special naval code means "Well Done!" This message is generally sent by raising flags or by saying the words over radio. And since right now you've made it to the end of the flag alphabet, here's a special BRAVO ZULU to you!





# INTERNATIONAL CODE of SIGNALS

A		K		U		1	
B		L		V		2	
C		M		W		3	
D		N		X		4	
E		O		Y		5	
F		P		Z		6	
G		Q		1 <sup>ST</sup> SUB		7	
H		R		2 <sup>ND</sup> SUB		8	
I		S		3 <sup>RD</sup> SUB		9	
J		T		CODE		0	

The **International Code of Signals** has forty signal flags in total – twenty-six **alphabet flags**, ten **numeral flags**, three **substitute flags** that are used when a letter or number is repeated, and one **code flag** that is used to signal that a message is coming or has been received. Sailors from around the world can communicate with one another using the International Code of Signals, even if they don't speak each other's language! This is why the United Nations International Maritime Organization (the IMO) requires all ships to carry signal flags, as well as a copy of the International Code of Signals.