

MEMORY FLAGS: AN IMPOSSIBLE TYPOLOGY

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BACKGROUND

For close to 30 years, my father worked for the Australian Navy. He was an electrician who installed and repaired the armament, radars and communication systems on battleships and submarines. It was a job he loved and was proud to do, something I as a surly teenager could not quite understand when dragged along to open days at the naval base at Garden Island on Sydney Harbour.

He likes to share many stories about his time at Garden Island and jokes that by the time he retired, even the stones in the landscape knew who he was. One of these stories, a memory I ashamedly force him to recall, took place on the morning of 12 February 2009. I asked my father to tell me as much as he could remember about the event. This was the second time I heard the story from him: The first was the day it happened in 2009, and the second was now, 12 years later.

He told me that when he arrived at the naval base that morning, a few minutes before seven, an unusual commotion was taking place by the water. He recalled that it was a hot day with an unusual atmosphere of panic that could only be associated with an accident. He remembers water and blood mixed on the docks and seeing dockhands pulling a body out of the harbour. It was that of a young navy diver who had been mauled by a bull shark during an anti-terrorism training exercise. A quick internet search shows that the navy diver was Able Seaman Paul Degelder and that he was 31 years old at the time. He survived his injuries and is now an author, motivational speaker, and animal rights activist.

My father was surprised that I asked so many questions about the shark attack, so long in the past, but I was not interested only in the shark attack, more so in the signs and signals that may have been present on the day and how these could have acted as mnemonic triggers for recalling the event. Frankly, he told me, you are a 'pesada', the Spanish word for a heavyweight and one applied to people who are annoying in their persistence.

I persisted.

My father mentioned uniforms and the insignias associated with them, often embroidered on sleeves and printed on the back panels of shirts and jackets. He remembered the numbers stencilled on frigates and submarines and signage bearing icons and bold text associated with safety. He also recalled a flag made up of two vertical parallel stripes of equal width, one white, one blue, featuring a swallowtail edge cut into the blue stripe on the right.

The flag is the 'A for Alpha' flag in the International Maritime Signal Code, a visual system of code and symbols used by mariners as a means to communicate messages to other vessels or ports. The origin of the code is famously associated with Captain Nelson's message to his fleet before the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805, where colourful flags dressing his vessel spelt out, 'England expects that every man will do his duty'. The current code used by the navy evolved from Nelson's flags, which were further evolved by Captain Frederick Marryat in 1817 and later established by the British Board of Trade in 1857. It consists of 40 flags, 26 of which represent individual letters in the Roman alphabet. The flags are combined to spell out words and messages, but they are more commonly used as individual descriptions, one message per flag, to be read by those approaching the vessel wearing the flag. In the case of the 'A for Alpha' flag, the signal communicated is, 'I have a diver down; keep well clear or at low speed.'

Remembering the 'A for Alpha' flag and its significance acted like a mnemonic act of recall for my father and he soon started to tell me the meaning of other flags:

C for Charlie: 'Yes, or affirmative.'

K for Kilo: 'I wish to communicate with you.'

V for Victor: 'I require assistance.'

He thought Q for Quebec was a simple yellow flag and related to quarantine, but he mentioned that this might have changed over the years. My father was right: The code associated with the yellow flag has changed and currently stands for 'My vessel is healthy. I require free pratique'. The change in meaning, from that of ships carrying those infected with cholera, plague, and other illnesses to one indicating it is clear of ill health, could not be more significant. I wonder how much confusion this has led to over the years, and how, regardless of change, the association with certain signs and symbols is hard to shift in one's memory and recall.

**MEMORY FLAGS: AN IMPOSSIBLE TYPOLOGY
DEVELOPING A NEW CODE**

My father inspired the idea for *Memory Flags: An Impossible Typology* in two ways. Firstly, it is a link to his time in the Australian Navy and his love for its structure, organisation, and ceremony. Secondly, it is associated with my reading, or misreading, of a photograph taken in the late 1960s that belonged to him and is now in my possession. It is a black and white snapshot, horizontal in format, ten by seven centimetres in size, and printed on matte paper with a white border. It has no written annotations and is free of blemishes. The photograph appears to follow the Golden Ratio: A perfectly balanced sky, taking up two parts of the image, is almost filled with a seamless cloud. This cloud could be seen as moving into or out of the frame and seems to be threatening to take up more than its allocated space, simultaneously filling and erasing a large proportion of the image. The subject of a blurred landscape indicates that it might have been taken from a moving vehicle. A striped lighthouse punctures the out-of-focus horizon line in the centre of the photograph.

I found the photograph in my paternal family's home in Madrid in 2017. It was one of many stored in envelopes in the bottom drawer of a chiffonier in my aunt's bedroom. The photographs, dating from the 1920s to the early 2000s, were in no particular chronological order. That is to say, they were free from the constraints of a photo album, and as a result, did not adhere to a linear narrative. As a whole they represented my father's family: his parents and their time before children, his older sister, brother and himself, their combined progression from childhood to adolescence to early adulthood, followed by a Chroma-coloured insight into their own families. The lack of order in how these were stored meant these images were free to be read individually and without instruction. The photos were mixed in such a way that a snapshot of my grandparents dancing on their wedding day in the early 1930s was in the same envelope as a handful of action shots of my aunt and father skiing in La Sierra outside Madrid in the mid-1960s and a portrait of me with an embarrassing haircut that undoubtedly positions the image in the late 1980s. How these photographs were combined is unbeknown to all, except perhaps the person who placed them in this order. How did the reading and association of these images dictate how they were stored? Was it simply an act of chance? Regardless of how they came to be placed in such peculiar groupings, I read them in another way when they came into my possession.



Figure 1

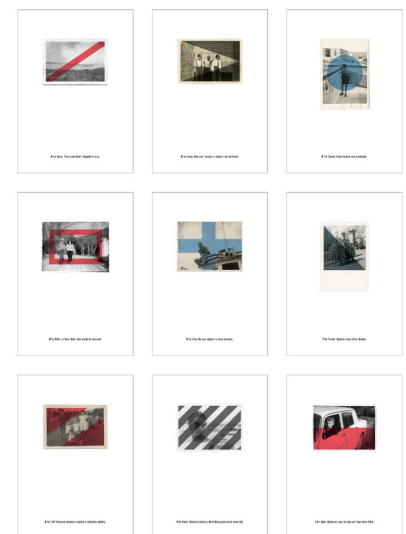


Figure 2

The landscape photo with the lighthouse at its centre was one of the photos I found that day. At the time, I gave the image little thought. It might have been proportionally correct, but it was out of focus and did not speak to me in the same way as the photographs showing the faces of my grandparents, my aunt, uncle and father, and their quotidian lives in Madrid, their summer holidays in Alicante, and their La Sierra day skiing trips.

I returned to the photograph at the beginning of 2021. I intended to use the image and readapt it as a photo-media piece, and I wanted to know about the lighthouse so I could create a visual narrative around it. I rephotographed it on my phone and sent it to my father with a WhatsApp message, asking him where and when the photo of the lighthouse was taken. His response was not what I expected. The lighthouse was not a lighthouse, and the landscape was not a coastline. The photograph, which was indeed from the late 1960s, was taken in La Sierra, the mountain range to the north of Madrid. What I thought to be a lighthouse was *La Bola del Mundo (The Circle of the Earth)*: a large television and radio antenna, positioned 2257 metres above sea level and 355 kilometres from the closest Spanish port.

The misreading of this image was the foundation for the development of *Memory Flags: An Impossible Typology*.

The library and archive of the Australian National Maritime Museum were invaluable resources for the initial development of the Memory Flags project. During these research trips, I surprised myself by realising that I shared my father's love for the order and structure associated with maritime practice and ceremony. On one of my first visits, I was shown a complete set of flags from the HMAS Vampire. How signal flags are folded and stored forms part of this maritime ceremony, and it must be performed by a designated officer. The flags from the HMAS Vampire were stored in a custom-made timber pigeon-hole cupboard, with individually allocated spaces. As a group, they resembled a pod of tightly bound chrysalises, which I did not dare unfold.

Many books have been published on the etiquette and ceremony associated with the International Maritime Signal Code and how it is used to communicate salutes, mourning, quarantine, and distress signals in addition to its 26 prescribed messages. It was interesting to read the number of disclaimers surrounding the errors associated with the reading of the code and other visual semiotic systems. This led me to believe that the juxtaposition of the maritime code to the one I was hoping to develop for my own Memory Flags system was not as unrealistic or disconnected as I had initially thought.

The code applied to the Memory Flags is visually and functionally based on that of the International Maritime Signal Code. While the alphabetical reference remains, the messages associated with each of the letters have been recreated to read and identify the memory

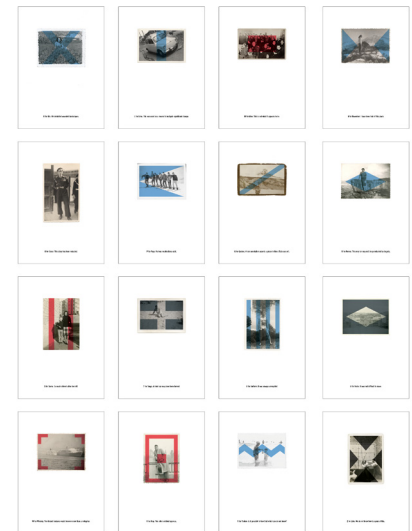


Figure 3

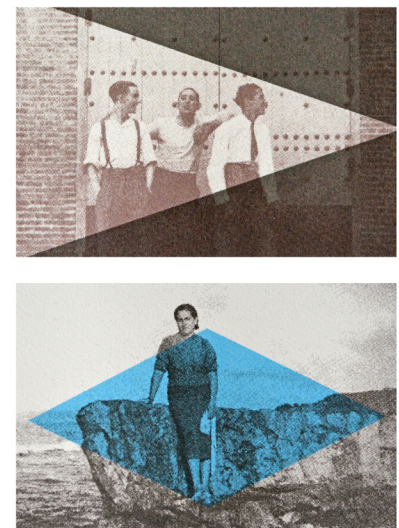


Figure 4

associated with the image. The new code is applied as a graphic superimposed over the photograph. For example, the maritime code's 'A for Alpha' flag, which is 'I have a diver down; keep well clear or at low speed', becomes the memory flag code for 'This is not what I thought it to be.'

In its development and application, I aim to create a visual semiotic coding system as an analytical tool applied to the reading of images and how these are linked to collective and post-memory in addition to sites of memory. I hope to use this as a visual prologue to my creative practice, in which I will develop new readings for existing materials and in turn generate new narratives.

To guide the practice and methodological framework of the Memory Flags project, I am focusing on the work of Walter Benjamin's dialectical images, which were first explored in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Benjamin, [1969] 2007). These may be viewed as an alternate mode to understand history, where the past appears as a multifaceted image that condenses multiple temporalities within it.

By considering this as a new way of seeing, we concede a presence to that which had been initially rendered invisible. Writing on Walter Benjamin's theses, Stéphane Mosès suggests that history is created by the interpretation of the traces left to us by the past. Mosès argues, 'The metaphor of awakening and that of the dialectical image internally transform the idea of the present as a simple transition between past and future' (Mosès, 2009, p. 104). He refers to these images as signifiers that provide the language of how history is revealed: a history full of dialectical images, the result of which is an interaction among contrasting temporalities that assist in the deciphering of the past through the present.

The Memory Flags project explores the role of the collaged narrative, which by its very nature may be read as a dialectical discourse. The outcome of Benjamin's work presents itself as a dialectical image, containing within it a liminality that could be activated at any time. Nour Dados explores the idea of this liminality as seen in photography, but it may also be applied to other forms. She argues, 'When we speak of 'animating' photographs, we are referring to processes that take place in the liminal zone where stillness becomes movement, moment becomes narrative, and artefact becomes memory.' This liminal zone may be regarded as the key component in the synthesis of the dialectical image. These images, heavy with the opportunity of a new interpretation, may be considered mnemonic triggers, responsible for the activation that allows history to exist in a non-linear format. Non-linear narratives and dialectical images are the traces left to us to interpret and are pivotal in the practice outcomes of this project.

Additionally, Susan Buck-Morss' (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 95) reading and interpretation of dialectical images allows them to escape the perception of a single dimensionality. An image may thus be considered beyond an initial singularity and immediacy and be read as a concept that carries within it the layers of a dialectical discourse. The initial singularity and



Figure 5



Figure 6

immediacy associated with an image may be regarded as a threshold, a window into which we look to gain further insight.

CREATING A NEW CODE

I created the first iteration of this project during a month-long artist residency at Megalo Print Studio in Canberra, Australia. During this time, I developed a visual paralinguage based on the International Maritime Signal Code, representing a personal reading and understanding of the chosen photographs, which were extended to include photographs of my maternal family.

The new symbols are similar to the maritime code in that they are simple geometric forms that are easily reproduced and identified as abstract shapes. However, I designed the visual semiotic code for Memory Flags for use on both landscape and portrait photographs, unlike the International Maritime Signal Code, which works solely as a horizontal graphic. The colour palette for the Memory Flags consists only of red, blue and black and was generated to be legible when placed over a photograph, just as the International Maritime Signal Code palette was chosen to be highly visible while at sea.

I was fortunate that during the allocated time of the artist residency, I got to work with Alex Lundy, Megalo Print Studio's screen-printing manager. Lundy's extensive knowledge of screen-printing meant that the seemingly impossible task of creating 26 four-colour screen-prints in an edition of five was accomplished during the four weeks. I was also grateful for Lundy's understanding of my creative and conceptual vision for the project and how the images would best be printed to achieve this. Even though the project could easily have been produced using two silkscreens per image, a simple black for each reprinted photograph and text with the chosen code colour overprint, we opted not to forfeit the subtle variations associated with each image: The sepia, cool and warm greys that made up the photographs would all be recreated. Consequently, each of the final prints consisted of the shape of the reprinted photograph in a faint neutral colour, which gave the reprinted photograph a slight three-dimensionality and the illusion of floating on the paper. The chosen photographs were divided into cool black, warm black and sepia tones, and these colours were recreated as soft tints for the backgrounds. Darker hues were then mixed for the halftone image prints, and the text element was printed in a 'super black'. This close attention to detail meant that the final work was as delicate as it was subtle, representing the fragile and ephemeral qualities we associate with memory.

As previously discussed, the newly formed visual semiotic code for Memory Flags is based on the International Maritime Signal Code, sharing its purpose of acting as a cryptographic form of code: In this instance, it is not to communicate messages from one ship to another but rather to express how we interact with images and places associated with memory and our past, be they familial, historical, collective, or individual. In addition, we may consider how the practice of printmaking in an editioned format allows images to exist in multiple forms and places and how this influences the interpretation of images as associated with memory.

As memory is fallible and interchangeable, the Memory Flags code application may vary from user to user, and the outcome of how these images are read and interpreted will allow us to gain insight into memory studies, archival practices and remembering.

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IMAGE GALLERY



X for Xray. This site is etched upon us.

