

Introduction

Proper respect for the United States Flag is an important function of being a good citizen. There by, it is very important for scouts and scouters alike to be completely knowledgeable with the proper display and care of the Flag.

However, in my experience as an officer in the Veterans of foreign Wars (VFW), I have found there are some major misconceptions in this area. Even among veterans. So it is understandable that scouts might become confused.

So, when I had to find items for my wood badge ticket, it was only natural for me to think of teaching flag etiquette to scouts and scouters as one of my items. This handbook will only teach the proper methods of retiring the U. S. Flag.

However, in the future I would like to expand it to cover flag etiquette as a whole. I feel such a book might be just useful for the scouts of the district. This handbook, and the responses I get from it, will help in developing that larger manual.

Also, we designed this *U. S. Flag retirement Handbook* half page so that it would better fit in packs and briefcases. If it is easier to carry, it should be used more often.

We called it the *U. S. Flag retirement Handbook* because it only covers respect for the U. S. Flag.

Use it with pride and enjoyment. Respect for our nation's standard should not be a difficult task.

Planning

Just like any other event you want to put on, you have to plan your flag retirement ceremony. In any planning, you must to have a place to start. That is usually by asking questions about what you're planning. There are several questions to ask when you are planning a flag retirement.

- *When and where will you hold the ceremony?*
- *Will you flag retirement be a stand-alone event, or part of a group of activities?*
- *Who will participate?*
- *Will there be an audience?*
- *How many flags will you retire?*
- *Should you hold a formal or informal ceremony?*

The answers to these questions will put you on a good footing in planning your flag

retirement. The answers to the first five questions will help you answer the final one.

First, when and where will you hold the ceremony?

If you are planning a flag retirement around the fire at a troop campout, it can probably be an informal event. However, if you are planning a flag retirement as part of a daylong patriotic event, or there will be a fairly large audience there, you will want to plan a formal flag retirement.

In the same way, if you are planning a ceremony just within your troop, it can probably be informal. But, if you are planning your ceremony with another group, such as your charter organization or a local civic group, you will most likely want to plan a formal event.

Finally, how many flags do you have to retire? If you have a large, trained group to pull from, such as a whole troop of boys and

their leaders who have held flag retirements before, you can retire a great many flags quickly efficiently in an informal ceremony, and still do it reverently. However, if you're performing a formal ceremony in front of an audience you will only be able to retire a very few flags. There is an old saying that, "the brain can function only as long as the seat can endure." In other words, when your audience gets bored and uncomfortable, they get restless and are no longer paying attention. If you only have one retirement team working a formal ceremony, you can only retire one or two flags. One way to get around this is to train each of your patrols to work independently. Then you can retire as many flags as you have patrols.

This will work well for a standard sized flag, about 4 by 6 foot, or smaller. But, for very large flags you will need more people per flag.

Here are some basic rules in planning you event.

- When ever you perform a flag retirement, formal or informal, it should be done respectfully and reverently. Like when you are in church.
- If you have an audience (beyond you troop or pack) you should hold a formal retirement ceremony.
- Never let an audience see you retire the flag more than once. (There is a special exception to this rule we'll talk about when we look at the formal ceremony.)
- If you have a large number of flags to retire, it should be done in an informal ceremony.

There is one thing to note about this last rule. There is nothing stopping you from having a formal ceremony, say on Flag Day, inviting the community, and retiring one or two flags. Then, taking the rest of the flags with you to your next camp-out and retiring

them in an informal ceremony around your campfire.

So, we're ready to set out our plans. Follow the check list on page 9. It will help you decide what type of ceremony to hold.

Planning Check list

Rule	Formal	Informal
This flag retirement will have an audience	Yes	
There will be no audience		Yes
It is part of a special event	Yes	
It is not part of a special event		Yes
Another organization will take part	Yes	
No other organization will take part		Yes
There are only one or two flags to retire	Yes	Yes
There are a large number of flags to retire.		Yes
This unit has practiced flag retirement ceremonies	Yes	Yes

Rule	Formal	Informal
This unit has performed flag retirement ceremonies before	Yes	Yes
We have never done a formal flag retirement and only practiced a little		Yes

Now that you have answered all the questions on page 3 and reviewed the checklist, you should know if you need to hold a formal or informal ceremony. We'll cover the formal ceremony first. If you can perform a formal ceremony, you can certainly perform an informal one. However, if you start with an informal ceremony, it may be harder to develop the sharp behavior required for a formal one. 'You'll want to 'do it like you did it before'.

If you find you should be holding a formal ceremony, but never have, there are things you can do. The easiest would be to put on the ceremony with a more experienced scout unit, or another civic organization such as a Veterans of Foreign Wars or American Legion post. Another possibility would be to put on the ceremony by yourself. But, this will require a good deal of practice, especially for a pack or young troop.

One other thing. You will need a sharp pair of cloth scissors for each team retiring flags. So if the whole pack is retiring one flag at a time, one pair of scissors is enough. But, you troop has held flag retirements before, and each patrol will retire a flag at the same time, you will need a good pair of scissors for each.

Performing a Formal Flag Retirement

Now that you have planned your ceremony, you should know a lot about how it will happen. But, you have a lot to do before the big day. Some of what you have to do include:

- Secure the facilities you need for the proper time.
- Design the ceremony
- Confirm all the participants
- Insure everyone knows what they are doing
- Design the Program
- Advertise
- Practice, practice, practice

Where and when. You must secure an appropriate location for your ceremony. Especially if you are planning several activities, of which your retirement ceremony is only one, you will need an indoor

facility with tables and chairs to seat everyone.

I know a VFW post which holds an annual formal flag retirement. They are usually held on a weekend or Friday evening. After the flag retirement, the participants and public are treated to a hot dog dinner and entertainment with a flag theme. These events are looked forward to months in advance.

However, the actual flag retirement will require a fire, so must be performed out of doors. Therefore, the location you choose should include both indoor and outdoor facilities.

About the fire. It goes without saying that it should be built, used and put out safely. However, the type of fire is also important. I have seen some groups use metal containers, such as a 55 gallon drum or homemade barbeque, to secure the fire. I would not recommend this. It looks like you

are throwing the flags away, and takes from the respectful nature of the ceremony. The best thing to use is an open wood fire. A low fire ring or stones, to contain the fire, is fine. However, the audience should see that the portions of flag are being reverently laid on the fire. You do not want to give the appearance of merely 'tossing the flags away'.

Confirm All the Participants. This means that you must make sure they will come, and what part they will play in the ceremony. This is a must if everything will run smoothly.

You want to complete this step as early in the process as possible. For sure before you design and print the program. The last thing you want is mistakes in the printed program you provide to the public.

Design the ceremony. There are several points which are common for just about any flag retirement ceremony. They include:

- ✓ An opening and greetings.
- ✓ Final respect for the Colors.
- ✓ Disposal of the colors
- ✓ Other respects.
- ✓ Closing

There is a sample ceremony program on pages 17. Notice that the first section is called **Greetings and Readings**. Here is where the person serving as Master of Ceremonies for the day introduces themselves and other officials present. These might include the unit committee chair, leaders of other groups participating, and public officials.

They each will want to do something. If you have a good working relationship with them, some will help you by reading an appropriate poem or quote.

U. S. Flag Retirement Ceremony

Greetings and Readings

Host welcomes those present

Introduction of officials

Present the representative flag

Display the flag

Pledge of Allegiance

Prayer

Disposal of flags

Disposal

The Senior patrol Leader comes forward to explain what is done as the rest of the scouts go through the process.

Closing

Introduction and word by the keynote speaker

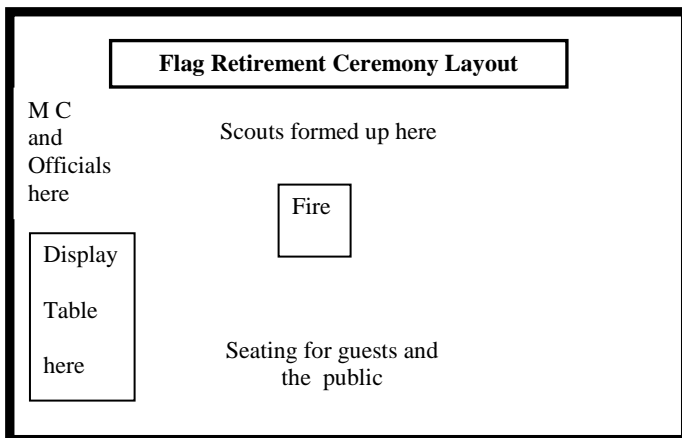
Final remarks by officials

Dismissal

Present the representative flag. This is where you show final respects to the flags you are retiring. Only one flag needs to be presented. So, if you have several patrols, or retirement teams, choose one for this part of the ceremony.

You might make a competition of it and choose the patrol which is sharpest in your final practice for this honor. You can also have the patrol leaders come together to make a 'Management Patrol' for this part of the program

It is a good idea to make this part of the ceremony as formal as possible. A table can be placed to one side of the fire, next to the chairs for the Master of Ceremonies and other officials participating. This is shown in the diagram on page 19. The flags used for the ceremony should be properly folded and placed on this table prior to the ceremony.



The patrol leader, or other scout chosen in advance, should march to the Master of Ceremonies, who will take the flag from the table in a proper ceremonious manner and present it to the scout.

The Master of Ceremonies should pick up the flag with his hands and forearms, so that it rests on his forearms with the point of the tri-fold towards his chest. When the scout takes it from him, he will bring his own forearms up from under the flag lifting it to his chest so that the point of the tri-fold is up. Often when carrying a flag this way, the carrier will cross their arms over the flag.

These moves will require advance practice to perform smoothly.

The scout then takes the flag to the rest of his team, who will help unfold it and display it for everyone to see.

(Note: The flag you display may be well worn and even frayed. But it should not be torn so badly that the scouts can not hold it easily without parts of it touching the ground.)

Once the flag has been displayed, the Master of Ceremonies should have the guests and public rises. Everyone should participate in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Then, the chaplain for the event should offer an appropriate prayer. The chaplain must ensure the prayer they provide is appropriate for the event, and not offensive

to any faith group. A Good example is the one provided on page 33.

If you have a good soloist or song leader, the national Anthem may also be sung.

This done, it is time to dispose of the flags.

Disposal of flags. As the teams prepare to dispose of the flags, the Senior Patrol Leader, or another scout chosen in advance, will position himself at the microphone. This scout will explain to the guests and public what is being done, and the importance of properly disposing of a flag. A script may be prepared, or they can simply explain what is being done as it happens. The skill of the scout involved is a determining factor.

At the same time, if it was not used for the final respects, the disposal team will open the flag and hold it horizontally. It works best to have four scouts, one at each corner, hold the flag. If it is a very large flag, scouts may also be positioned along the

long edges of the flag. It is always better to be safe than sorry.

As the flag is cut and it gets smaller, members of the team may drop off to help take portions to the fire. In the end two scouts will be holding the blue union when it is cut. However, remember, at no time should any part of the flag touch the earth.

As the holders secure the flag, another member of the team will cut the bottom red strip from the flag, starting from the outside end of the flag and cutting toward the union end. The scout doing the cutting will then pass the strip to a final scout who will take it to the fire and place it in the flames. Each stripe will be removed individually, from bottom to top, and from the outside to the inside. Then the union will be cut in quarters. When you cut the union in quarters, be careful not to cut through any of the stars

(**Note:** Remember to station an adult by the fire to direct the scouts and ensure safety.)

As the scouts approach the fire, they should come in from the down wind side and place the flag portion in the middle of the flames, to ensure they are burned without touching the ground.

Each portion of the flag, first the stripes, then the quarters of the union, should be placed on the fire one at a time.

If you have several teams working at the same time, they should take turns at the fire, so they finish at about the same time.

While it is not required, many groups will cut an outside star from the final quarter of the union before it is placed on the fire. The patrol leader, or scout leading the team, will take it to the Master of Ceremonies. If the owner of the flag is known, the Master of Ceremonies will identify them and direct the scout to take the star to them.

As he presents the star to the owner of the flag, the scout should say something appropriate, such as:

"This is the final star from your flag. We present it to you to confirm its proper disposal."

If the owner of the flag is unknown, the star can be presented to an honored guest, such as the mayor of a small town or the keynote speaker. Again the scout should make an appropriate speech.

I have seen several of these 'final stars' framed with a picture of the event, or a statement about when and where the flag was disposed of. Some people put these stars in places of honor in their homes and offices.

As each patrol completes their flag, they form up again and stand reverently until all

the patrols are done. Then, Master of Ceremonies will continue to the closing.

But, before we discuss that, we said earlier in this chapter, that there is a time when we might have each team dispose of a second flag. Here is how that works.

If you have several flags whose owners are known, and several more whose owners are not known, retire the flags without known owners first. Then, invite the owners to assist in retiring their own flags. The owners may cut their flag, or place the portions in fire. But, they should have an active part to play. Whatever part they do play, should be determined in advance to prevent confusion.

You may also invite these owners to say a word as part of your closing.

Other Respects and Closing. Once all the flags are properly disposed of, the Master

of Ceremonies will move into the other respects and closing activities.

A keynote speaker should be provided to drive home the importance of respect for the flag. This might be a veteran, a community official, or a senior scout. Who you chose as the speaker, is not as important as what they say. One of the best speeches I've heard was given by a teenager whose father was a retired military member. They spoke of hearing retreat on the base everyday, and watching everyone stop what they were doing to pay respects to the flag at the end of the work day. How it was a way of life for him to see people respect the flag daily.

It is courteous to also offer the officials who were introduced at the beginning of the ceremony a final chance to add remarks. Many times they will have never seen such a ceremony and they will be moved by the event. This makes their remarks poignant.

Finally, the Master of Ceremonies should send everyone home with appropriate word. A statement about caring for family and personal flags and a brief word concerning safety is never out of place.

Before we move on to the informal ceremony, we should look to something scouts know a lot about. Being prepared.

Earlier in this chapter, we talked about having a table set up with the flags on it. We said this table should be in place before the public arrives.

In fact, everything should be set in place before the public arrives. When people come in the area and see everything in place, it sets a mood of respect and preparation. However, when the audience sees you rushing around with last minute arrangements, it shows a mood of disrespect for the flags you are retiring. It also says

you have not planned well and are not prepared.

Performing an Informal Flag Retirement

We opened the last chapter, where we discussed the formal flag retirement, discussing the planning required. While the level of ritual found in the formal ceremony is not needed in the informal ceremony, planning is still important.

Where and when. If you are going to perform the flag retirement at a campfire, during your next campout, you still have to bring the flags, and all the materials for the ceremony.

On the other hand, if you have a large number of flags to retire at an informal ceremony at your scout hut, you will still need a fire, scissors, and other materials.

We spoke about the type of fire required in the last chapter. Even though this is an informal ceremony and nobody from another agency, or the general public, will see you;

you still want to do it in a dignified, reverent manner. The proper wood fire will go along way toward this reverence.

Confirm All the Participants. Most likely, in the case of an informal ceremony, only the members of your own unit will take part, and there will be no audience. So there is no need for a speaker, Master of Ceremonies, or formal set up. Even so, you want to make sure that there are enough people available to properly perform the ceremony. You also want to ensure there are facilities to cut the flags and handle them, so they don't touch the ground.

Design the ceremony While a formal ritual is not required for an informal ceremony, the Scoutmaster, an Assistant Scoutmaster, or the SPL should lead those taking part in providing proper respects to the flags being disposed of. This might be as simple as having two scouts open a flag and leading the group in a pledge, followed by a moment of silence.

If you are retiring a large number of flags, you might divide those present to help into two groups. One would cut the flags into the proper portions, while the other group would tend the fire and place the flag portions into it. Remember to have adult supervision for each group.

While this method is a bit like an assembly line, and allows you to retire a very large number of flags in a relatively short amount of time, it is still up to the leaders to keep the mood respectfully. This is one of those times when leading by example is important.

Another trick which works well for an informal ceremony at your campfire, is to cut the flags in advance. If you're retiring more than one flag this way, you can put all the stripes in one container, and the unions in another. Then, at the appropriate time, they can be brought out during your campfire. I knew one troop which made retiring one or two flags part of the

campfire at every campout. They used this technique.

Other Respects and Closing. Here too, a detailed ritual is not required for an informal ceremony. However, whoever is leading the ceremony should say something appropriate to ensure there is a distinct ending to the event, before other activities begin. This might be accomplished around a campfire by making the ceremony the last thing before everyone goes to bed for the night.

Another method to close the ceremony is to have everyone recite an appropriate quote. Then, of course, the leader could merely give a brief statement to end the ceremony.

Whichever method you choose to close your ceremony, is fine, as long as it flows with the activities of the event and leaves everyone with the proper respect for the ceremony and the flag.

The Scout Flag Retirement Prayer

by
Allan T. Perkins

Holy God, guide us as we retire this flag.
Symbol of our country.

Help us to remember the heroic people who
helped our nation grow, and those who
protected it.

Guide us during this ceremony, that we
might perform it with the honor, and
reverence, this flag deserves.

Then, Holy God, guide us as we leave, that
we might live or lives by the example set by
those who came before.

Thereby honoring you, our forefathers, our
fellow scouts, and this flag.

Amen.