

January 2020

As Spring is upon us, we are getting out on the water more, so, have you ever given thought to the burgees, ensigns, flags and pennants that we fly on our boats? What do you know about nautical flag etiquette and usage? Well here goes, a short and simple explanation of Burgees and Flags.

Burgee—a burgee, is a distinguishing flag, regardless of its shape, of a recreational boating organization. In most cases, they have the shape of a long, tapering, usually triangular flag. Members belonging to a yacht club or sailing organization may fly their club's burgee both while underway and at anchor (however, not while racing). Sailing vessels may fly the burgee from the main masthead or from a lanyard under the starboard spreader on the mast. Power boats fly the burgee off a short staff on the bow." The history of these flags dates back to the English insurance companies and shipping firms of the 1700's. In order to identify a ship returning to port an observer was paid to monitor all vessels coming and anchoring awaiting entry. The captain would hoist his house flag and thus signal to the owners he had returned. Eventually yacht clubs adopted the practice and took over. It should be noted that a Burgee exchange between yacht clubs signifies full reciprocity between the two clubs, that's why some yacht clubs will not exchange burgees officially, as this is usually the last step in the process. For instance I recently set up a visit with the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron, they did not wish to exchange burgees, simply because they did not want to initiate reciprocity with an international Yacht Club. (They also tend to take themselves very seriously as they are the current home of the Sailing trophy formerly known as the America's Cup).



Burgees have many designs and are personal to the yacht club they represent. They should incorporate some aspect of the club and they can be any colour or design, the most common being red, white and blue combinations. As you can see from our own Burgee.

Ensign—an ensign, is "the national flag flown on a vessel to indicate nationality. The ensign is the largest flag, generally flown at the stern of the ship." According to the US Power Squadron, the national ensign should represent the registry of the vessel, not the nationality of the owner or operator. When in harbor the ensign should be hoisted at 0800 (called "making the colors") and lowered at sunset (called "striking the colors"), weather permitting. The ensign is the first flag hoisted or placed and the last flag lowered or secured. While one generally thinks of the flag of the United States as the ensign being discussed here, in practice, the ensign widely flown by most U.S. pleasure boats is the red and white stripes of our national flag, but with a fouled anchor in a circle of thirteen stars as the canton (box in upper left



corner). There was a time in our history when the US Yacht Ensign was only flown by registered yachts over a certain tonnage, but that law was repealed in 1980.



There are any number of other types of flags (generally rectangular) that might be flown on a boat and we have seen them flown in a number of different places (other than the stern). They could be a personal flag that represents the boat owner. Flags representing the make of the boat or port-of-call might be flown. One very popular example is the Jolly Roger flag: For a more detailed discussion of that flag, well, that, should be left to another time.

Pennant—a pennant is used on ships for signaling or identification. They can be triangular shaped or have a swallowtail. Many fun pennants can be seen on vessels, the most common is the Martini Glass, and everyone knows what that one means.

Did you Know?

- The position of honor on a ship is the quarterdeck at the stern of a ship, where the officers stand, and thus ensigns are traditionally flown either from the ensign staff at the ship's stern, or from a gaff rigged over the stern. Hence a Yacht Club flag pole is designed with a gaff.
- There is an international burgee registry. <http://www.burgees.com/burgeeframe.htm>
- To learn more about maritime flag etiquette: http://www.usps.org/f_stuff/etiquett.html