

Unserviceable Flags

The Ceremony for Disposal of Unserviceable Flags was approved through Resolution No.440, by the National Convention of The American Legion meeting in New York, New York, September 20-23, 1937.

Complete script to the Ceremony for Disposal of Unserviceable Flags is provided here.

History of the Ceremony for the Disposal of Unserviceable Flags

The Ceremony for Disposal of Unserviceable Flags was approved through Resolution No.440 , by the National Convention of The American Legion meeting in New York, New York, September 20-23, 1937, and has been an integral part of American Legion ritual since that date. The resolution reads as follows:

WHEREAS, Americanism has been and should continue to be one of the major programs of The American Legion; and

WHEREAS, The observance of proper respect for the Flag of our country and the education of our citizenry in the proper courtesies to be paid the Flag is an essential element of such Americanism program; and

WHEREAS, It is fitting and proper that Flags which have been used for the decoration of graves on Memorial Day be collected after such service, inspected, and worn and unserviceable Flags be condemned and properly destroyed; and

WHEREAS, The approved method of disposing of unserviceable Flags has long been that they be destroyed by burning, but no ritual for such destruction or ceremony in connection therewith has been adopted by The American Legion or included in its official manual of Ceremonies; therefore be it

RESOLVED, By The American Legion in National Convention assembled in New York City, September 20-23, 1937, that the ritual submitted herewith be adopted for use by The American Legion and that it be made the official ceremony for the destruction of unserviceable American Flags and to be included as such in the Manual of Ceremonies, Revised, of The American Legion.

The purpose of The American Legion in adopting this ceremony was to encourage proper respect for the Flag of the United States and to provide for disposal of unserviceable flags in a dignified manner. Resolution No. 373, approved by the National Convention of The American Legion meeting in Chicago, Illinois, September 18-20, 1944, re-emphasized the purpose of proper public Flag disposal ceremonies and encouraged greater use of this ceremony by The American Legion. The resolution adopted is as follows:

WHEREAS, Our Flag which we love and cherish

WHEREAS, In a proper service of tribute and memory and love, our Flag becomes faded and worn and must be honorably retired from life; and

WHEREAS, Such retirement of Flags that have become unserviceable may be done in public with respectful and honorable rites: therefore be it

RESOLVED, That The American Legion in convention assembled at Chicago, Illinois, September 18-20, 1944, urge that the National Headquarters use all means to foster and promote through the proper channels, the greater use of the official American Legion Ceremony for the Disposal of Unserviceable Flags as outlined in the Manual of Ceremonies; and be it further

RESOLVED, That Flag Day, June 14, be recommended as the most appropriate day on which to annually hold this ceremony.

A set of rules of civilian flag courtesy popularly known as The Flag Code was first formulated by the National Flag Conference meeting in Washington, D. C., June 14-15, 1923. The Flag Code was an attempt by prominent patriotic organizations to collect together in one instrument: Statutes, executive orders, and rules of established custom and usage relating to the Flag of the United States. On December 22, 1942, Public Law 829 (77th Congress, 2nd Session) was approved, giving official sanction to most of the provisions of The Flag Code. This Public Law established The Flag Code in Title 36, United States Code, Chapter 10, Sections 173-178, including The Flag Code § 176(k) on disposal of unserviceable flags.

We are of the opinion that The American Legion's Ceremony for Disposal of Unserviceable Flags is a dignified tribute to the Flag of the United States and to its symbolism. We therefore conclude that this ceremony is both legal and proper, and that it is an effective instrument for promoting enhanced respect for the Flag of the United States. On the following pages of this statement is the entire ceremony as it appears in the "Manual of Ceremonies." We encourage your use of the ceremony during your Flag Day, June 14, activities on an annual basis. By doing so, you will be enhancing the respect to the Flag in your Community and providing a much needed service to those who have Flags needing to be retired.

Ceremony for the Disposal of Unserviceable Flags

The Post assembles in meeting, out-of-doors, at night. Members are aligned in two parallel rows about twenty feet apart, facing each other. Officers at their stations as shown. A small fire is burning opposite the Commander and beyond the rows of members.

Sergeant-at-Arms: "Comrade Commander, we wish to present a number of unserviceable Flags of our Country for inspection and disposal."

Commander: "Comrade Sergeant-at-Arms advance with your detail and present the Flags for disposal and inspection."

(Sergeant-at-Arms calls his detail to attention. They form at the Post of the Sergeant-at-Arms, take the Flags which are to be inspected march abreast down center until opposite the Second Vice-Commander, turn right and halt two paces in front of the Second Vice-Commander. The Sergeant-at-Arms steps one pace forward and salutes.)

Sergeant-at-Arms: "Comrade Vice-Commander, we present these unserviceable Flags for your inspection."

Second Vice-Commander: "Is the present condition of these Flags the result of their usual service as the Emblem of our Country?"

Sergeant-at-Arms: "These Flags have become faded and worn over the graves of our departed comrades and the soldier and sailor dead of all our nation's wars."

Second Vice-Commander: "Present these Flags to the First Vice-Commander for his inspection." (The Sergeant-at-Arms salutes, about faces, commands the detail), "About Face," (crosses behind the detail and takes his post at its left, commands) "Forward March." (The detail marches to within two paces of the First Vice-Commander, halts and proceeds as before.)

Sergeant-at-Arms: "Comrade Vice-Commander, we present these Flags which have been inspected by the Second Vice-Commander, for your further inspection."

First Vice-Commander: "Have any of these Flags served any other purpose?"

Sergeant-at-Arms: "Some of these Flags have been displayed in various public places." First Vice-Commander: "Present them to the Commander for final inspection and fitting disposal."

(The Sergeant-at-Arms salutes, about faces, commands the detail), "About Face," (crosses behind the detail and takes position on its left commands), "Forward March." (The detail marches to center, turns left, halts within two paces of the Commander, Sergeant-at-Arms steps one pace forward and salutes.)

Sergeant-at-Arms: "Comrade Commander, we have the honor to present for final inspection and proper disposal these Flags of our Country."

Commander: "Have these Flags been inspected by the First and Second Vice-Commanders?"

Sergeant-at-Arms: "They have."

Commander: "Comrade Second Vice-Commander, what does your inspection show and what do you recommend?"

Second Vice-Commander: "Comrade Commander, since these Flags have become unserviceable in a worthy cause, I recommend that they be honorably retired from further service."

Commander: "Comrade First Vice-Commander, what does your inspection show and what do you recommend?"

First Vice-Commander: "Comrade Commander, since these Flags have become faded and worn in a tribute of service and love, I also recommend that they be fittingly destroyed."

Commander: "Comrades, we have presented here these Flags of our Country which have been inspected and condemned as unserviceable. They have reached their present state in a proper service of tribute, memory and love.

"A Flag may be a flimsy bit of printed gauze, or a beautiful banner of finest silk. Its intrinsic value may be trifling or great; but its real value is beyond price, for it is a precious symbol of all that we and our comrades have worked for and lived for, and died for—a free Nation of free men, true to the faith of the past, devoted to the ideals and practice of Justice, Freedom and Democracy.

"Let these faded Flags of our Country be retired and destroyed with respectful and honorable rites and their places be taken by bright new Flags of the same size and kind, and let no grave of our soldier or sailor dead be unhonored and unmarked. Sergeant-at-Arms, assemble the Color Guard, escort the detail bearing the Flags and destroy these Flags by burning. The members shall stand at attention."

(Color Guard forms. The detail about faces. Preceded by the Color Guard the detail marches down center to the fire. National Colors cross over and take position on the right of the fire, facing the Commander. Post Standard takes position on left of fire. The detail lines up behind the fire, which is burning low.)

Commander: "The Chaplain will offer prayer."

Chaplain: "Almighty God, Captain of all hosts and Commander over all, bless and consecrate this present hour.

"We thank Thee for our Country and its Flag, and for the liberty for which it stands. "To clean and purging flame we commit these Flags, worn-out in worthy service. As they yield their substance to the fire, may Thy Holy Light spread over us and bring to our hearts renewed devotion to God and Country. Amen."

Commander: "Hand salute."

(Color Guards present arms. Post Standard is dipped. All officers and members except those on the Flag detail salute. Members of the Flag detail dip the condemned Flags in kerosene and place them on a rack over the fire).

(Bugler sounds "To the Colors.")

Commander: (at conclusion of "To the Colors") "Two."

(The Color Guard shall resume its station and detail is dismissed.)

(Color Guard advances down center and places Colors. Members of the detail resume their places among the members.)