

## Fleet 5 Flag Etiquette

Do you need to replace your Fleet 5 burgee after a long season of seeing it whipping back and forth proudly displaying Fleet 5's colors at numerous ports-of-call? As the season begins each year it might be useful to review what we, at Fleet 5, consider to be proper and traditional flag and signal etiquette.

Where do these traditions come from? The traditions and customs described here have been passed down across the centuries and are being integrated with the practices and culture of several yacht clubs.

The traditions of Fleet 5 have been growing nicely over the years and this seems to be a good time to formally adopt a set of rules and recommendations by which we display our flags and signals and to which we ask each member vessel to adhere.

## National Flags or Yachting Ensigns

Any discussion of flags has to start with national flags or yachting ensigns. Almost all Fleet 5 vessels fly either the American flag or, if the vessel is documented with the US Coast Guard, the yachting ensign which is the 13-star flag with the fouled anchor in the union portion of the flag.

Traditionally, the flag or ensign is flown from the stern on both powerboats and sailboats although there are some exceptions. A sport-fisherman, for example, preferably will fly the flag from the stern but it is acceptable to rig it from a halyard just aft of any flying bridge or tower. Sailboats can fly them either from the stern on a staff or from the leech of the mainsail when under sail, or more specifically, from the leech of the aftermost mast in the case of multi-masted vessels. Neither the US flag nor yachting ensign is ever flown from the bow of any boat or from the spreader of a sailboat.

The flag and ensign should only be displayed between 0800 and sunset. We respectively request that members follow this protocol each day on their own vessels unless the flag or ensign is lighted.

## Yacht Club or Fleet 5 Burgee

The second most common signal displayed by boats is the burgee (from old French burgeis meaning 'owner') used to identify squadrons, fleets and clubs. Generally triangular in shape, although sometimes swallow-tailed, the yacht club burgee contains a unique design symbolic of the organization represented. Tradition has held that the burgee is flown from the bow on powerboats, in most cases, or from the masthead on sailboats, and more specifically, from the masthead of the most forward mast in the case of multi-masted vessels. It was not traditionally flown from a sailboat spreader; however, increasing use of the masthead for electronic gear has led to the widespread use of the starboard spreader for flying the Yacht Club Burgee, preferably alone or above all other flags. If one belongs to more than one yacht club or boating

organization (Guilford Yacht Club, a cruising club, etc.), one must choose which organization to show affiliation with for a given day or occasion. More than one burgee should not be flown at the same time.

A distinguishing USPS Squadron burgee which has been authorized by USPS may be flown in lieu of a club burgee and from the same positions. This burgee may be flown both day and night.

The USPS states that you should not display more than one burgee at a time. The burgee your boat wears should be that of the group in whose activity you are participating, or whose harbor you are entering, if you are a member of that group. Otherwise, fly the burgee of your home organization. Each yacht club usually has rules that determine when their burgee should be flown.

The next point of honor is the port spreader halyard, where the burgee of your next aligned club would fly. If your boat isn't equipped with a portside halyard, you may fly more than one burgee on a single halyard, in descending order of honor.

In researching this area some Yacht Clubs adhere to a variation of the above. They state, if you are a sailor, the highest place of honor is the starboard halyard under the spreader. They then allow other pennants to be flown under it in the declining order of importance. In this case, for example, the Yacht Club Burgee would fly first and the Fleet 5 burgee could fly second. I do want to note this position seems to be more of an exception than the rule. *At the current time my recommendation to Fleet 5 members is this variation should not be followed. The USPS and Chapman seem to be subject matter experts in this area and Fleet 5 should follow their recommendations.*

The following represents typical recommendations for Burgee size in relation to the size of the vessel.

Vessel:	Flag size:
20' to 30'	12" x 18"
25' to 35'	14" x 21"
30' to 40'	16" x 24"
35' to 45'	18" x 27"
40' to 60'	20" x 30"

## Courtesy Flags - Entering Foreign Waters

The starboard spreader is considered to be the place of honor for courtesy flags and other signals being used. If visiting a foreign port in your vessel, that country's flag would be flown on the starboard side. While the port spreader is seldom used for flag purposes, if a courtesy flag is flown from the starboard side, it should be there alone. In that case, the port can be used for other

signals. Most yacht clubs try to establish a uniform and dignified appearance for its member vessels as well as one that is in keeping with proper yachting traditions.

Whenever you enter foreign waters you must hoist the Quarantine flag. The “Q” flag is a plain yellow, rectangular flag. Hoisting this flag signals that the “vessel” is healthy and that you are requesting clearance into the country. This flag is flown from the starboard spreader. On a boat with more than one mast, the flag is flown from the starboard spreader of the forward mast. The “Q” flag would displace any other flags that you had hoisted on the starboard spreader (yacht club burgee, Seven Seas Cruising Association pendant, state flag, etc.). These flags can now be flown from the port spreader. The “Q” flag is brought down after you have formally cleared into a country.

It's customary to fly the flag of a foreign nation just below your starboard spreader when you are in foreign waters. These flags are called courtesy flags, however, although the word “courtesy” is used, in many countries it would be considered disrespectful to not fly the courtesy flag and it is possible to receive a fine for not flying it.

When do you raise the courtesy flag? There are two thoughts on this. Some believe that you should display the courtesy flag from the starboard spreader with the quarantine flag beneath it as soon as you enter a country's waters. But Chapman Piloting says that the courtesy flag “is not hoisted until clearance has been completed and the quarantine flag has been removed.”

When visiting foreign waters the foreign national flag is the only flag on the starboard spreader, the yacht club Burgee should be moved to the highest position on the port spreader.

Don't fly a foreign courtesy ensign after you have returned to U.S. waters. Although this may show that you've "been there," it is not proper flag etiquette.

## Association Flags

Flag's of associations, e.g., a cruising club or a USPS district, are generally rectangular and may be worn on a spreader halyard. Many flags or signals are flown from the spreader halyards but—usually—only one should be worn on each halyard. If your boat is rigged with one starboard halyard and one port halyard, fly the signal of superior dignity on the starboard side and the signal of lesser dignity on the port side. If you have more than one halyard on each side of your boat, fly the superior signal from the outboard starboard halyard, with other signals to its left, in order of decreasing dignity. They may be balanced, insofar as possible, starboard and port.

## Owner's Private Signal

Most Fleet 5 members do not fly a private signal which is sometimes called a personal flag or house flag. This is a signal usually of one's own design and shape and generally displays a special icon or pattern that is meaningful to its owner. It is usually swallow-tailed, designed by

the individual owner to depict a personal interest, hobby, family tradition, initials, or the like. A private signal should be a unique design and always in good taste. It should not include or be the ensign of a foreign country, nor duplicate a design previously adopted by someone else.

Placement of private signals is not nearly as codified as it is for other signals. They can be flown from the masthead of a sailboat or the rearmost mast of sailboats with more than one mast. Some prefer to fly it from the spreader while powerboats tend to fly it from a mast, with the burgee and national flag at the bow and stern respectively.

## Officer Flags

Traditional flag officer's flags: Commodore (blue), Vice Commodore (red) and Rear Commodore (white) can be flown in place of the private signal, or on the port spreader.

## Sailboat Battle Flags

The latest rage on the Racing/Cruising circuit is the Campaign or "Battle Flag". With a colorful, well-chosen image, it makes a bold statement fluttering to the starting line or comfortably cruising in your favorite area.

The battle flag generally flies on the forestay. It is a large, rectangular battle flag with a 28 degree slant cut in the forward edge. This allows it to fly straight back when hoisted on the angled forestay. Because it is substantially larger than a personal pennant, you can opt for a more detailed choice of logo for your battle flag.

A powerful (warlike) image such as a mythical creature or a funny cartoon character can work well on a battle flag. Be creative! By all means avoid "words" for your main battle flag design.

The following represents typical recommendations for battle flag size in relation to the size of the vessel.

Vessel:	Flag size:
20' - 29'	3' x 5'
30' - 39'	4' x 6'
40' - 55'	5' x 7'

## Size of Flags

Flags are often too small. When you purchase your flags, use the following guidelines, rounding up to the next larger commercially available size when necessary.

The national ensign flown at a flag staff at the stern of your boat should be one inch on the fly for each foot of overall length.

All other flags such as club burgees, officer flags, and private signals for use on sailboats should be approximately 1/2 inch on the fly (Whatever a flag's shape, its vertical dimension is its hoist, and its horizontal extent is its fly) for each foot above the waterline of the tallest mast on the boat. (That is, if the tope of the mast is 30 feet above the waterline, these other flags should be 15 inches on the fly.) On powerboats, these flags should be 5/8 inch on the fly for each foot of overall length. The shape and proportions of pennants and burgees will be prescribed by the organization to which they relate.

Many foreign ensigns—courtesy flags—sold in stores are not manufactured to correct proportions. For instance, the flags of all former British Commonwealth countries, including Canada, Bermuda, the Bahamas, and the British Virgin Islands, are correctly proportioned 1:2, i.e., the fly is twice the length of the hoist. As a matter of interest, the United States flag is correctly proportioned 10:19 (nearly 1:2), not 3:5 as is commonly available.

## Conclusion

If in doubt about flag etiquette, members can use a number of sources to determine what might be the correct way for their signals to be flown. Chapman's presents a lengthy discussion about signals, Eldridge has a summary and there are many other books that also cover the subject. What will be most apparent, and perhaps surprising, is the fact that they all tend to agree on the customs. This is because these traditions have existed for a long time and over the years have become generally accepted and followed across the yachting community.

In the meantime, take a minute to look at your flags, burgees and private signals on your boat. If they are faded and frayed, they have undoubtedly served you well so replace them and display the bright new ones with pride.

Let us all work together to establish a tradition of respect for the flag and other yachting signals.

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