

Flag Facts

by Gerry Biram

A nation's flag can be a stirring sight as it flies in the wind. It can be a rallying symbol in time of war or in a national crisis. Recently, we here in America witnessed seeing the battered, torn flag rescued from the World Trade Center, raised in Afghanistan. Later it was carried proudly into the Winter Olympics arena in an evening ceremony at Salt Lake City.

The very first flag symbols were used by the Egyptians thousands of years ago. Streamers were attached to long poles and carried into battle hoping that the Gods would see them and make the carriers victorious. Soldiers continued to carry some sort of flag into battle. They showed the generals where their men were, how the wind blew and the direction to aim arrows or spears.

The oldest national flag is that of Denmark which has been used for 700 years. Some countries designed flags using certain aspects of their culture. The Star of David appears on the flag of Israel. The crescent and moon appearing on flags of many Muslim nations are symbols of peace and unity. Stars also stand for unity.

The Austrian flag dates to 1191 during the Third Crusade. Duke Leopold V took off his blood stained cloak and found his belt had kept a white band in the middle. He raised this as a battle cry to fight on and the fight was won. Not until 1918 was a crimson flag with a center white stripe officially adopted.

The flag of our own nation, the Stars and Stripes or Old Glory, was designed by Frances Hopkinson, a delegate from New Jersey to the Continental Congress. Legend gives credit to Betsy Ross, a Philadelphia widow, for sewing the flag and for proposing the use of five pointed stars. It had alternating red and white stripes and thirteen stars to represent each of the 13 colonies. George Washington said, "We take the stars from heaven, the red from our mother country and the white stripes to show we have separated from her."

In 1794, following the addition of 2 more states, a flag was created with 15 stripes. This was flying over Fort McHenry in Baltimore when Frances Scott Key wrote the stirring words of the "Star Spangled Banner" as he watched from a ship in the harbor.

In 1818 the flag reverted to 13 stripes. Another star was added to the blue field when a new state came into the Union. The following was written by General Douglas MacArthur at the time of World War II. "The flag of American Union is a visible symbol of the ideal aspirations of the American People. It is the one focus in which we all unite in reverential devotion.

We differ in religion; we differ in politics; we engage in violent disputes as to the true meaning of the Constitution, and even challenge the wisdom of some of its provisions, but through the sanctifying folds of the flag, the collective intelligence of the Nation rises superior to the wisdom of its parts and thus endures the perpetuity of the Republic.