

FLAG ETIQUETTE

From time to time most of us have occasion to fly the flag of our country, the SCYC burgee, and other flags from our boats. Presumably, we can do this at least partly to honor the entities they represent. We do not, however, honor our country, our association, or any other entity by flying the flag incorrectly. This section is provided to help SCYC members fly their flags in a way to convey the intended compliment, and avoid the appearance of ignorance, and even insult, that an incorrect flag display can present.

If we are going to fly a flag or burgee, we should do so in such a way that says we are proud of it. We do not accomplish this by flying a flag that is dirty, faded, or tattered; indeed, it is better not to fly a flag than to display a pathetic remnant of a once proud symbol. The condition of the flag or burgee that you fly will be seen as your statement of what you think of the entity that it represents.

The national flag is flown at the stern of the boat, either from 2/3 of the way up the leech of the aftermost sail, or from a staff at the stern. It is flown from 0800 to sunset when at anchor, day and night underway. We also see it correctly flown in these waters from the starboard spreader of a foreign vessel which is displaying its own national colors at the stern. These are the only correct displays of national colors on a boat, and no other flag (other than, in U.S. waters, the yacht ensign) should be flown in the place of the national flag.

The yacht ensign (like the national flag, but with an anchor surrounded by 13 stars in place of the fifty star field) can be used in place of the national flag in U.S. waters. It should be accorded the same precedence as the national flag when displayed.

According to Chapman*, club burgees are ideally flown from a small staff above the masthead, but the antennas, lights, and metrological instruments that most of us carry up there often preclude this. Personal flags, such as officer or private signals, are flown from a halyard at the end of the starboard spreader. This is also the correct location for the SCYC burgee when the masthead location is impractical.

Burgees and officer or private signals represent affiliations of persons on board. They should be flown day or night when the persons entitled to them are on board, but should not be left flying when these people are absent. In particular, they should not be left up while the boat lies unoccupied in its slip for extended periods.

The hoist to the starboard spreader will often contain a number of flags. The order of the flags on the hoist shows the relative precedence you attach to them. Thus, in foreign waters, you should never fly anything above or outboard of the flag of that country. Many of us like to fly a state flag. If you do, that should be the top flag. Next to that should be the SCYC burgee, and those of any other yacht clubs to which persons on board may belong. For more on information on flag etiquette, see Chapter 22 of “Chapman’s Piloting, Seamanship and Small Boat Handling,” Hearst Marine Books, New York.