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Goodbye, Old Glory: Scouts Retire Two U.S. Flags

By Cathy Dausman



Boy Scouts Clint Walker (left) and Greg Fellows assist in Troop 224 Flag Retirement Ceremony. Photo Cheryl Tyler

U.S. flags fly in great numbers at least several times a year - notably Memorial Day, Flag Day (June 14), 4th of July and Veteran's Day. As Veteran's Day approaches, take a look at the Old Glory flying on your staff. Is the flag still a fitting emblem of its country, or should it be retired?

Retirement ceremonies for humans are often joyful, boisterous events. A retirement ceremony for an aging U.S. flag is quiet in comparison. Flag retirement ceremonies may be held by Boy Scout groups, fraternal or veteran's organizations, and all are respectfully done.

This fall, Lafayette's Boy Scout Troop 224 incorporated a flag retirement ceremony into one of its regular weekly meetings. In accordance with U.S. code title 36, section 176: "The Flag, when it is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, should be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning."

Although committed to fire, the proper terminology is a flag retirement ceremony. While a U.S. flag burned abroad is intended as a national insult, a U.S. flag retired at home is laid to rest with honor befitting its status as a national treasure.

One September evening shortly after dark Troop 224 gathered to tend a small wood fire on the grounds of Happy Valley Elementary School, where the troop meets under a cooperative agreement with the Lafayette School District. Members of Contra Costa Fire Protection District were there to observe and assist if necessary.

Senior Patrol Leader Chris Lyman, acting as Chief of Flag Retirement, gathered his charges. A tangle of 20 middle school and high school-age boys, scoutmasters and several parents aligned around the fire pit. A Boy Scout Color Guard marched out bearing the troop's U.S. flag; the

group recited the Pledge of Allegiance. Chaplain aide Joey Layshock gave an invocation. Gregory Fellows read aloud U.S. flag history. Scouts unfolded, displayed, and then attached a worn cotton U.S. flag to burn poles.

The troop only retires flags made of cotton, said Scoutmaster Grant Walker. "Synthetic flags when burned give off a noxious odor," he said, or "melt and leave a sticky mess." They may also burn so quickly they become hazardous to those handling the flag.

To the sounds of the national anthem, scouts saluted, the retired flag was guided into the flames by its burn crew, and consumed. A second flag was also retired with a smaller burn crew when the rest of the troop reassembled for their meeting.

After the ceremony, the ashes of the retired flags were buried. "This ceremony is the first I know of in the past five years for our troop but the response was very positive," Walker said. "We're considering having the event once a year."

Joanne Layshock, whose son is a Troop 224 member, said the retirement ceremony reminded her of the Scout oath "to do my duty to God and my country." Brian Candell thought his son had a new appreciation for the flag and the country it represents.

"Being in Scouts has given my son and our whole family, for that matter, the chance to learn the proper treatment of a U.S. flag," scout parent Claire Phillips said.

To learn about proper flag retirement, visit www.usflag.org/flaquetiquette.html.

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