



Flag Etiquette Afloat with Vexillographer John Vaughan OAM by Richard Lawson

On 25 August at our monthly online get together, the Cruising Division was fortunate to welcome John Vaughan as our guest presenter. John is well known to the Squadron, having presented to us a few years ago and more recently assisted the Club in designing and making our new racing pennant. More on that later.

John has been based in his showroom at Northbridge for the past 35 years, where he has designed and produced many flags for a myriad of uses, yet he has a strong affinity for flags of the sea, regions and cities. His knowledge of all matters historic is extensive, which obviously explains his background as the former CEO of the Australian Historical Society. John is also a founding member of the Australian Maritime Museum and a life member of the Sydney Heritage Fleet, of which the Squadron is a firm supporter.

As part of his heritage interest and event organising, John not only assisted in the creation and management of the First Fleet re-enactment, as part of Australia's 1988 Bicentennial Celebrations, but also designed a special flag for this prestigious event. For those of us who are old enough to remember, this was a spectacular event, held on Botany Bay and Sydney Harbour in January 1988.

John began his presentation by displaying numerous flags that he has collected and/or designed and manufactured. He explained how many of the flags came into existence and their historical background. The subject of the Australian Flag was then reviewed. He explained how, following the Federation of Australia in 1901, a flag design competition was held attracting many entries. The final selection was announced on 3 September 1901, and thus we have just celebrated the 120th anniversary of Australia's National Flag Day.



John Vaughan holds the Australian National Colonial Flag of 1823



Flag etiquette was the focus of John's presentation; it is a test of an owner/skipper's knowledge, respect, good taste and competency. For example, our National Flag, be it the Red Ensign or the Blue Ensign, must always be flown from the staff at the stern of a vessel (or on certain occasions from the mast head). This applies to private vessels, Navy and Commercial Shipping. It is a total breach of protocol to fly a corporate flag or other country flag from the staff at the stern of a vessel!

Under the Federal Shipping Act 1981, it is appropriate to fly the Red Ensign on Australian merchant ships and for private vessels in home waters, however when cruising overseas, it is more appropriate to fly the Blue Ensign (the Australian National Flag). For special occasions, national holidays, club opening days etc. It is a wonderful experience to join the festive spirit and 'dress ship' by flying the international code of signal flags from the bow to the masthead and then to the stern in a specific order, as laid down originally by the Royal Yachting Association.



Sir James Hardy on *Nerida* wearing the Red Ensign on the stern, the Club Burgee on the spreader and flying the international code of signal flags to celebrate Opening Day. Photo by John Jeremy.

Technically, all other flags, such as club burgees, house flags, boxing kangaroo, etc. should be flown from the starboard side spreader, and any other subsequent flags from the port side spreader. It is acceptable for a club racing pennant to be flown from the backstay but only whilst competing in a club event.

For the coming 2021-22 sailing season, the RSY Sailing Committee has resolved that all Squadron yachts will carry a new RSY Racing Pennant whilst racing. This pennant was instigated by Club Members Chris Harper who worked with John Vaughan on its design which was then approved by the committee. The intention is to identify a Squadron yacht which is racing, particularly in combined club fleets. The interest in combined fleet racing has grown significantly in recent seasons, an innovation established many years ago by the very popular Wednesday afternoon races, which has yachts competing from various yacht clubs.



The new RSYS Racing Pennant, photo by John Vaughan

The racing pennant is to be tied or attached with velcro to the backstay at a reasonable height for all to see, including race officials. It is to be flown only whilst competing in an organised event. John was emphatic that 'It is a breach of etiquette to wear an Ensign and/or a Club Burgee whilst racing. The Racing Pennant should be flown from the backstay in an unobstructed position and be removed once racing has been completed. Only then can the Ensign and Club Burgee be re-flown'.

As part of the protocol of flag etiquette, flags should be raised at 0800hrs and lowered at sunset. The first flag to be raised is the National Flag (or Red Ensign) followed by the Club Burgee and other subsequent flags. At sunset the order is reversed, with the National Flag the last to be lowered. The National Flag is by law, custom, and tradition our chief national symbol and should always be treated with respect. The colours should always be kept in good condition, be clean, not be allowed to fray or fade (hence the need for good quality fabric in its manufacture, i.e. not screen-printed nylon).

The question of the RSYS's (undefaced) Blue Ensign was raised and how it came about.



Blue Ensign



RSYS Club Burgee



On 25 April 1863 the British Admiralty granted a warrant to the RSYS to fly the British Blue Ensign undefaced (ie with no other insignia). RSYS was the first yacht club outside of the British Isles to receive this warrant. There are just 53 organisations worldwide to have this warrant, amongst whom are four yacht clubs in Australia: RSYS, RQYS, RSAYS and RVYC.

The wearing of the (British) Blue Ensign, or the defaced Blue Ensign, on a vessel is the prerogative of the individual club holding the warrant, or of the individual owner who may have been granted a warrant.

At the RSYS, the Blue Ensign is flown from the 'main flagpole gaff' which is the defined position for the primary flag. All subsequent flags are flown from 'the yard', starting with the starboard side of the yard. The Club Burgee is flown from the masthead. Additionally, at the Squadron our National Flag, the Blue Ensign, is flown from a mast set at the highest part of our clubhouse building and should be floodlit so as to be seen 24 hrs per day.



John displayed an image of the RSYS Flag Officers' Burgees, which can be viewed on the SE wall of the Careening Cove Anchorage. He assisted our Club in the design of this display and it was installed shortly after the refurbishment of the area was completed in 2010. This collection of burgees represents all of the present Flag Officers and past Commodores of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron.

The RSYS Cruising Division is sincerely grateful to John Vaughan for his time and enthusiasm in presenting to us. We acknowledge how fortunate our Club is to have such a close working relationship with John, and we hope our Members will endeavour to uphold the standards of etiquette he has imparted to us.