

# Retirement of an American Flag

By Bob Kirk

United States Marine Master Sgt. Percy Webb penned the following tribute to Old Glory about 1933. This tribute has been updated to include the states that have been added since his original writing.

I Am Old Glory: for more than nine score years I have been the banner of hope and freedom for generation after generation of Americans. Born amid the first flames of America's fight for freedom, I am the symbol of a country that has grown from a little group of thirteen colonies to a united nation of fifty sovereign states. Planted firmly on the high pinnacle of American Faith, my gently fluttering folds have proved an inspiration to untold millions. Men have followed me into battle with unwavering courage. They have looked upon me as a symbol of national unity. They have prayed that they and their fellow citizens might continue to enjoy the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness which have been granted to every American as the heritage of free men. So long as men love liberty more than life itself; so long as they treasure the priceless privileges bought with blood of our forefathers; so long as the principles of truth, justice and charity for all remain deeply rooted in human hearts, I shall continue to be the enduring banner of the United States of America.

The Smithsonian National Museum of American History website gives excellent background information on flag etiquette and how it came about. According to the website, Americans today would likely be disturbed by the Armistead family's handling of the Star Spangled Banner (marking up the stars and stripes with signatures, cutting off pieces to give away as souvenirs), though it was customary at that time. The U.S. Flag Code contains guidelines for the handling of the flag. Though these rules and customs date back to the late 19th century, they are still followed today.

The first efforts of a group of Civil War veterans who wanted to uphold the sacred character of the flag were targeted at commercial and political advertising. No flag desecration legislation was passed until the 1960s, but by the early 1900s most states had adopted such statutes. As early as 1907 the U.S. Supreme court upheld a Nebraska statute in a case involving the company that manufactured Stars and Stripes beer (*Halter v. Nebraska, 1907*).

During World War I, the movement to protect the flag gained national momentum, and on June 14, 1923, the first National Flag Conference was held in Washington to establish rules for civilian flag use. The U.S. Flag Code was adopted by Congress in 1942, and is based on the belief that the American flag "represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing." Among the flag uses considered to be disrespectful are using it for advertising and as a decoration on clothing or other goods. Though the U.S. Supreme Court struck down flag protection laws as a violation of free speech in 1989, the U.S. Flag code is still considered to contain rules of etiquette, which are enforced by tradition rather than by law.

The United States Flag Code, Title 4, Section 8k states: "The flag, when it is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem of display, should be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning."

The American Legion Ceremony for Disposal of Unserviceable Flags is outlined in Resolution No. 440, passed by the 19th National Convention of the American Legion in New York, September 20-23, 1937. The ceremony has been an integral part of American Legion ritual since that date.

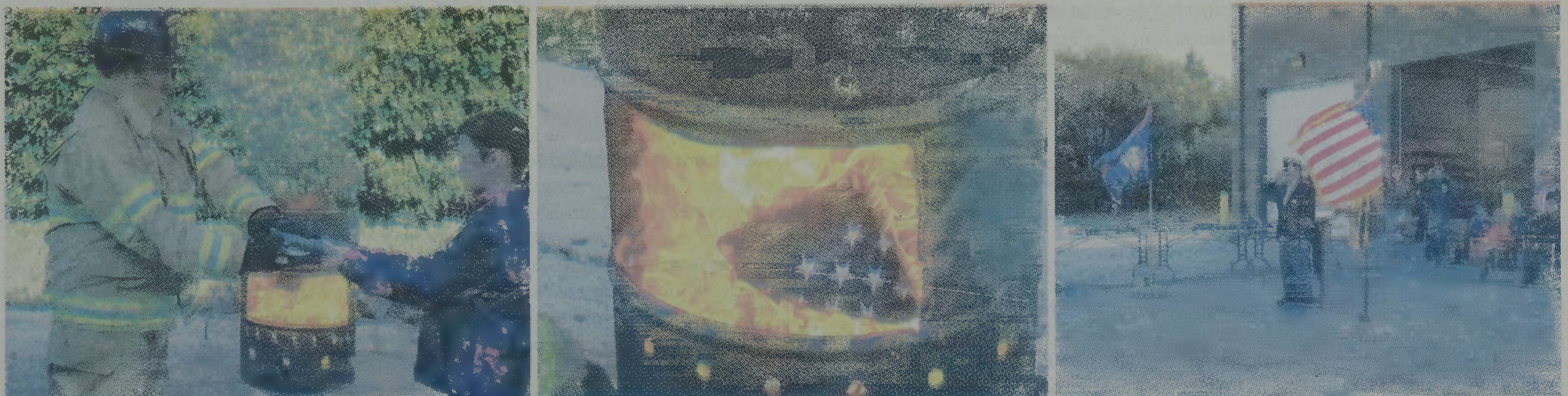
American Legion Morehead City Post 46 follows the guidelines set forth in this resolution, and we are of the opinion that the American Legion's flag disposal ceremony is a dignified tribute to the U.S. flag and to its symbolism. We, the American Legion, veterans from all walks of life, citizen and non-citizen, whose members have served in all conflicts from WWII to the present, will honor the memory of those who served and sacrificed, and treat the symbol of our nation with the respect deserved.

There are many places in our county to drop off American flags for retirement. Post 46 collects flags from the following locations: Pine Knoll Shores Fire Department, ACE Hardware at Atlantic Station, and the Carteret County Veterans Service Office at 3710 John Platt Drive and NC Works at 309 Commerce Avenue, both in Morehead City.

American Legion Post 46 conducts a flag retirement ceremony at least once a year at the Pine Knoll Shores Fire Department, with the assistance of the staff. The Post generally has little time to publish the date and time due to member schedules, weather and other events beyond our control. Once we establish a date for the ceremony we will post the date, time and location on our Facebook page ([AmericanLegionMoreheadCityPost46](https://www.facebook.com/AmericanLegionMoreheadCityPost46)).

If you would like to know what American Legion Post 46 is doing in the community, follow us on Facebook or email us at [americanlegionpost46mhc@gmail.com](mailto:americanlegionpost46mhc@gmail.com) for more information. To learn more about what the American Legion is doing in North Carolina, visit [nclegion.org](http://nclegion.org).

*Bob Kirk is vice commander for American Legion Morehead City Post 46.*



From left: In a 2016 flag retirement ceremony, Shaunah Schaffer, daughter of John and Rebecca Sotirkys from Newport, presents the flag to Pine Knoll Shores fireman Dan Sparks for retirement; the ceremonial flag burning; and the American Legion Post 46 commander rendering honors while taps is played.

—Photos by Photos by Post 46 Adjutant Rebecca Sotirkys