THE BRITISH FLAG

HOW? WHEN? WHY?

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Rod Keen. 2016
Dedicated to my late Dad
Chief Petty Officer Robert Keen RN

Contents

The Patron Saints

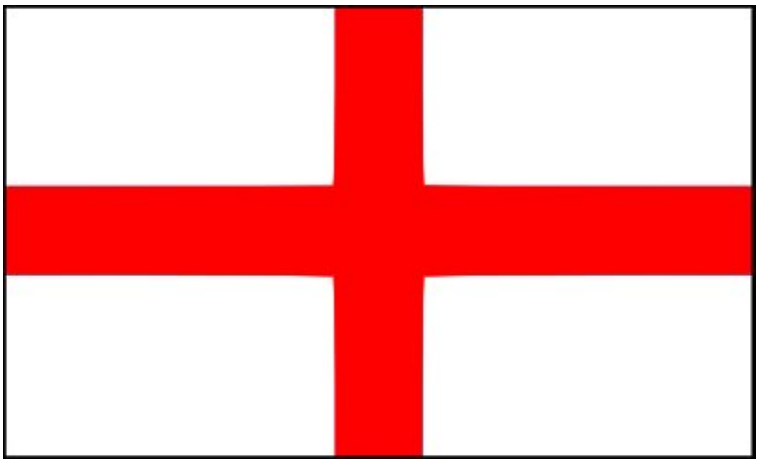
St. George of England

There is more than one saint of this name, but the one most likely to have been the original of our Saint was born in Cappadocia, became a solider and senator under the Emperor Diocletion, but later rebuked him for persecuting the Christians.

On the 23rd April 303 he was beheaded by order of the Emperor at Lydda in Palestine.

Perseus' rescue of Andromeda from the sea monster was supposed to have taken place near Lydda, and this is probably the origin of the story of St. George and the Dragon.

Many years later the Crusaders paid pilgrimage to his shrine and in 1245, on the 23rd April, an Order of Knighthood named after him was founded, the Banner being the red cross on a white ground, thus:-



Sometime between 1344 and 1348 Edward III founded our own Order of the Garter, which uses his emblem, and it became the distinctive mark, on a surcoat worn over the armour, of every English soldier and was the flag of England until James VI of Scotland became also James I of England and the two kingdoms were united.

There is mention of such a flag as early as 1277.

*

St. George's Day – 23rd April

St. Andrew of Scotland

The patron saint of Scotland is that same Andrew who, while fishing with his brother Peter, was called by Jesus and, as St Matthew tells us, “they straightway left their nets and followed Him”.

Very little is known of St. Andrew, but we do know that he was martyred on the 30th November 69 at Patras by being crucified on a cross shaped like the letter X, from which was derived the form of his Banner, a white saltire on a blue ground, thus:-

Some relics of the Saint were brought for safety to Scotland in the year 370 and were enshrined in a church built by their keepers in what has now become the town of St. Andrews.

St. Andrew has been the patron saint of Scotland since about 740. The saltire has been a Scottish emblem from the late 14th century and by the early 16th century was in its present colours.

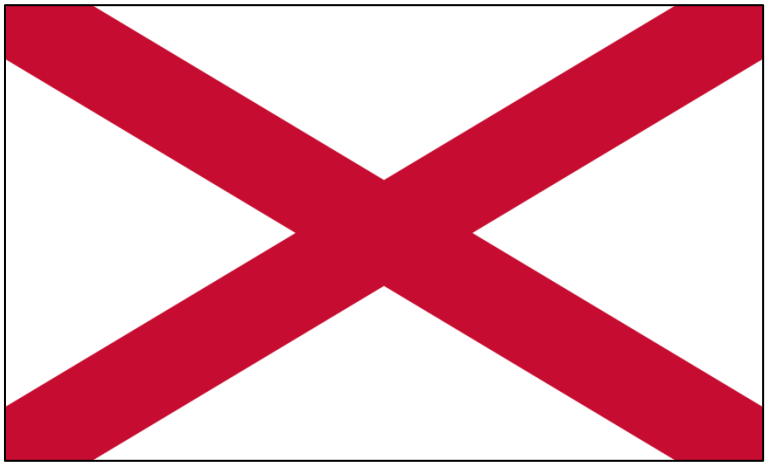
*

St. Andrew’s Day – 30th November

St. Patrick of Ireland

He was born at Dumbarton, Scotland, in 373, and while still a boy was carried off by raiders and sold into slavery in Ireland. He escaped into France after six years, but later , having entered the Church, returned to Ireland as a bishop with a missionary expedition. He died in Armagh on 17th March 463.

His cross, a red saltire on a white ground, thus:-



This was not to be found among the emblems of the saints as he was not martyred, and the use of this Banner as his is against tradition and custom.

Dating from the 12th century it was the heraldic device of an English family, and when the Order of St. Patrick was instituted in 783 was adopted as its badge.

*

St. Patrick's Day – 17th March

The growth of the Union Flag

The Flag of England

The Flag of Scotland

The First Union flag
12th April 1606

Originally designed for use at sea, it was laid down that English ships should wear the Union at the mainmast and the St. George's Cross at the foremast, and that Scottish ships should wear the Union at the main and the St. Andrew's Cross at the fore.

An English ship

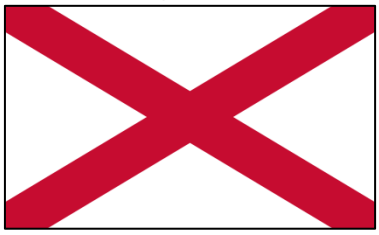
By proclamation of the 5th May 1634, however, the use of the Union was reserved for vessels of the Royal Navy and merchantmen were instructed to use either the St. George's or St. Andrew's cross only.
It remained the Naval Flag until 1707* when the union of England and Scotland was confirmed. It then became the National Flag also, but the Navy retained the sole right to use it at sea.

A Scottish ship

- Except during the Commonwealth period 1649-1660.

The First Union Flag

The Flag of Ireland



The Second (and present) Union flag
1st January 1801

This flag came into being as a result of the union with Ireland, and was foreshadowed by the Order in Council of 5th November 1800.

The proportions of the modern flag are as follows:-

- The red of St. George's Cross is one fifth and its white border one fifteenth the width of the flag.
- The white of St. Andrew's Cross is one tenth the width of the flag
- The red of St. Patrick's Cross is one fifteenth and its white border on thirtieth the width of the flag.

When flown on land the Earl Marshall recommends that the proportions of the flag as a whole should be 5 to 3.

When used at sea, however, the proportions are 2 to 1.

The much older ratio of 5 to 4 is still retained in Regimental Colours.

Some Heraldic Notes

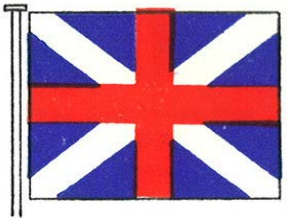
The First Union Flag

Why is there a white border to the St. George's Cross?

One of the rules of Heraldry states that a colour must not be placed upon a colour nor a metal upon a metal.

The metals in Heraldry are Gold and Silver, which in flags become Yellow and White respectively.

The first Union Flag, if the red cross had been placed straight over the white saltire then the red of the cross would have been next to the blue ground of the saltire thus:-



By giving the red cross a white border this error was avoided. (see page 6)

The cross of St. George was placed over the cross of St. Andrew because England was, as it were, the senior partner in the Union and therefore took heraldic precedence.

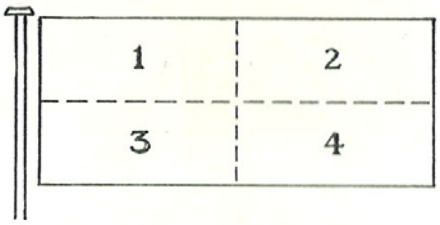
The original drawings for the Union Flag have perished, but it is very possible that the 17th century heralds, in an endeavour to signify the union of the crowns, deliberately made the white border to the St. George's Cross much wider then was necessary for purely heraldic reasons, thus preserving as much of the original character of the two flags as possible.

The Present Union Flag

Why the arms of the cross of St. Andrew and St. Patrick do not run straight across the flag.

The task which faced the Heralds when preparing the Union Flag of 1801 was to add St. Patrick's saltire to the existing design without offending national feelings. They solved their problem by placing the two saltires on the flag in such a way that the white of Scotland took precedence over the red of Ireland – the junior member of the union – in the most honourable half of the flag, the "hoist", with the positions reversed on the "fly".

A flag is divided into quarters thus:-



So that the white is above the red in the 1st and 3rd quarters and *visa versa* in the 2nd and 4th or, in the language of Heraldry, the two saltires are "counterchanged quarterly" thus:-

The narrow white border between the red saltire and the blue field is there for the same reason as the border to the St. George's Cross.

If our flag strictly followed the rules of Heraldry the dividing white borders between the red of the cross and saltire and the blue of the ground should be extremely narrow (in Heraldry this is called fimbriation) and the white of the St. Andrew's Cross should be the same width as the red of St. Patrick's.

For some years the Regimental Colours of the Army were made this way, which was in accordance with the description given in the proclamation of the 1st January 1801, and looked like this:-

However, as they became worn out they were replaced by new Colours which followed the Admiralty design, the Proportions of which were altered for Naval use from the beginning, to ensure good visibility at sea and which gave the flag its present appearance.

The earlier pattern was later reintroduced and Army Colours once more appear as shown above.

Flying the Flag

The Right Way

Once you have grasped the principle of the counter-changing of the saltires of Scotland and Ireland (see page 9) it will be clear that the flag must be flown so that the first quarter shows the white of St. Andrew above the red of St. Patrick.

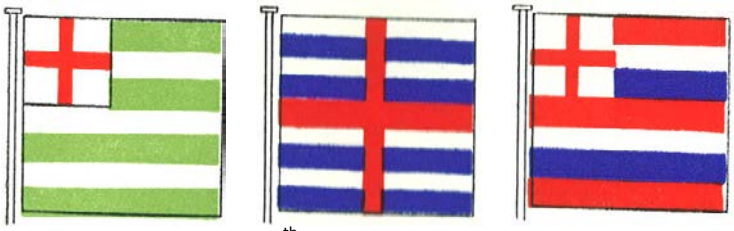
Upside Down

The Story of the Ensigns

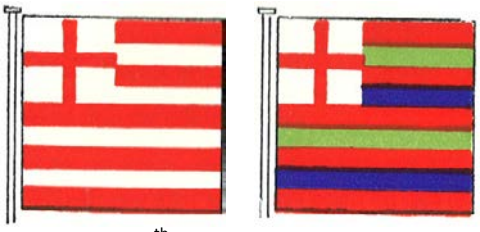
The Sixteenth Century

The Ensign, flown at stern of a ship, was introduced at sea about 1574. The name, derived from the Latin “insigne”, a sign or signal, and often corrupted to “ancient” during the 16th to 18th centuries, was borrowed from land forces and, in much the same way as the various regiments individual ships to be recognised.

The “field” of background of these early ensigns consisted of vari-coloured stripes, many horizontal, in some diagonal, but all had the St. George’s Cross, Usually in the “canton” (i.e., the first quarter, the most honourable position – (see page 9). Similar flags, but with St. Andrew’s Cross, were used by Scottish vessels.



16th Century Ensigns



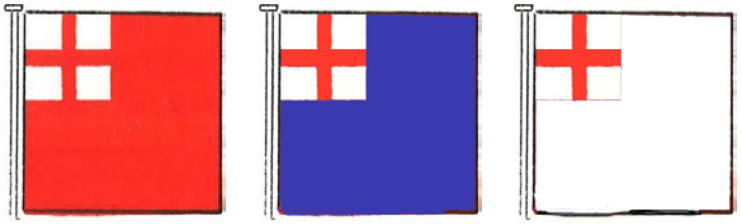
17th Century Ensigns

The Seventeenth Century

The first Red Ensign was made in 1621 and a few others followed during the next years. Sir Francis Stewart's suggestion, made in 1625, that "a red ancient would become every one of the King's Ships" appears to have been adopted, merchant ships also beginning to use it.

The same year saw the first division of a fleet (for the expedition to Cadiz) into three squadrons designated Red, Blue and White, the flagships only of each squadron wearing the Red Ensign, plain blue and plain white flags respectively, at their mastheads.

It is unfortunate that naval and other state records of the early 17th century have been lost, but it may be inferred from stores surveys that have survived that by about 1633 the striped ensigns had been abandoned and that the Blue and White Ensigns had been introduced – although a striped ensign was used by ships of the East India Company until 1824.



17th Century Ensigns (1633 onwards)

Note that the St. Georges Cross and not the new Union Flag (see page 6) was placed in the canton and also that the latter was rather less than a quarter of the whole flag in all early ensigns.

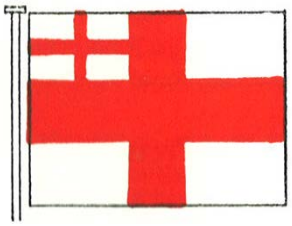
A similar Red Ensign, with the white saltire on its blue ground in the canton, was used by Scottish ships until 1707.

In 1653 the order of the squadronal colours was altered from Red Blue and White to Red, White and Blue. The reason for the change is not known for certain, but it may have been to bring the flags into line with the order of precedence of the escutcheons on the Commonwealth Standard. At the Battle of Portland the squadron flagships wore the usual plain flags at the masthead, but in addition every ship in the fleet wore an ensign of the appropriate colour on the poop.

By a proclamation dated18th September 1674 ships other than those of His Majesty were forbidden to wear the Union Flag and merchant ships were restricted to use of the St. George's Cross and the Red Ensign. Almost identical proclamations were issued in 1694 and 1702.

The Eighteenth Century

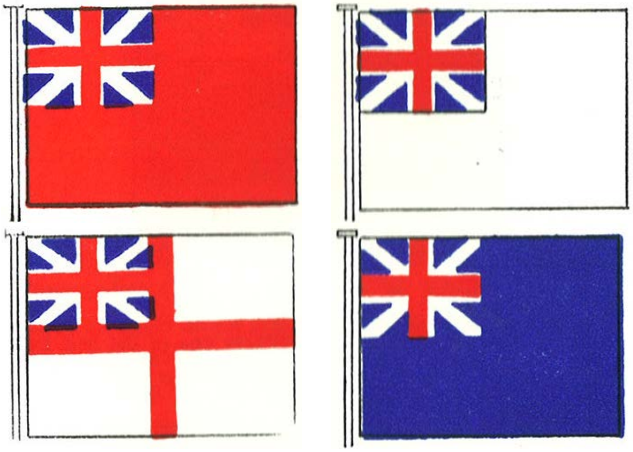
Early in the eighteenth century an important change was made in the White Ensign. For the fitting out of the fleet to operate against the French it was ordered that the ensign of the White Squadron was to be changed to a red one with a broad horizontal stripe through it to avoid confusion with the French flag, which at the time was white. Officers of the fleet were not satisfied, however, and on the 6th May 1702 a further order was made which introduced a flag nearer to the pattern of the White Ensign we know today:-



The large St. George's Cross was very broad, being one third of the width of the flag.

It was first issued only to ships serving beyond home waters, and as late as 1717 both this "St. George's Ensign" and the older pattern with the plain fly were in use, but the latter had entirely disappeared by 1744.

The next change in Ensigns came by proclamation on the 28th July 1707. The English and Scottish navies now being united, the Union flag was placed in the canton of all ensigns, thus:-



It will be noted that the width of the large cross in the "St. George's Ensign" was considerably reduced from the first version of 1702.

It was evident from the wording of this proclamation that the Red Ensign alone was regarded as the National Ensign, and all merchant ships were expressed to wear it. The White and Blue Ensigns were looked upon as mere variants for the purposes of Naval Tactics.

From 1794 the White Ensign was usually flown by His Majesty's ships, as this differed from most from the new tricolour flag which the French fleet had begun to use. (the latter is the National Flag of France today).

The Nineteenth Century

The final change in the design of the Ensigns came in 1801. By proclamation of the 1st January the red saltire of Ireland was added to the Union in the canton.

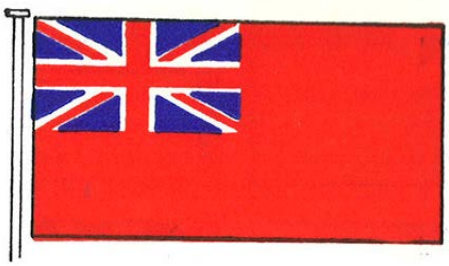
We come now to the last date in the history of our Red, White and Blue Ensigns – the 9th July 1864. The division of the fleet into three squadrons was finally abandoned, and by Order in Council the Red Ensign became the flag of the Mercantile Marine (now known as the Merchant Navy), the White Ensign that of the Royal Navy and the Blue Ensign that of the recently formed Royal Naval Reserve.

The Present Day

The proportions of the Ensigns have gradually altered through the centuries from about 5 to 4 to the modern 2 to 1.

The Union in the canton now occupies exactly one quarter of the flag, except in the White Ensign, where it is necessarily reduced to make way for the large St. George's Cross, the arms of which are now two fifteenths of the width of the flag.

The Red Ensign

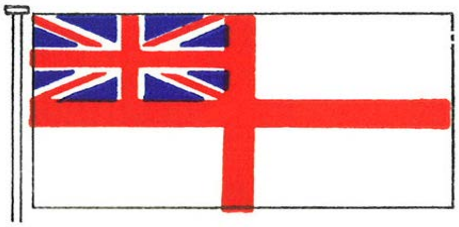


Familiarly called the "red duster", it is probably one of the best known flags in the world, it is, in fact, regarded by some foreign states as our national flag.

It is the flag to flown on board every merchant vessel – which includes yachts and other pleasure craft – registered in Great Britain. It *must* be shown in response to a signal being made from one of Her Majesty's ships; on entering or leaving a foreign port or, if the vessel is of 50 tons register or over, *any* port, British as well as foreign.

Yachts belonging to members of approved Yacht Clubs are, by Admiralty Warrant, allowed to wear the Ensign with the Clubs badge in the fly if satisfying certain conditions as to registration, tonnage etc.

The White Ensign



The flag worn by all of Her Majesty's ships of war in commission. On shore it is normally restricted to the Admiralty and commissioned Naval establishments.

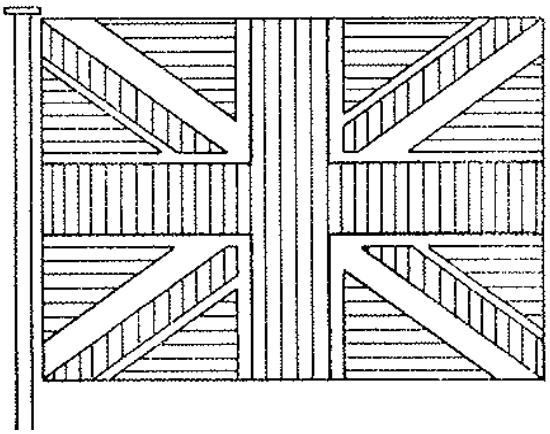
By special Admiralty permission vessels of the Royal Yacht Squadron are also allowed to use it, subject to certain stringent provisions. This privilege dates back to 1829 and was confirmed in 1859.

The Blue Ensign

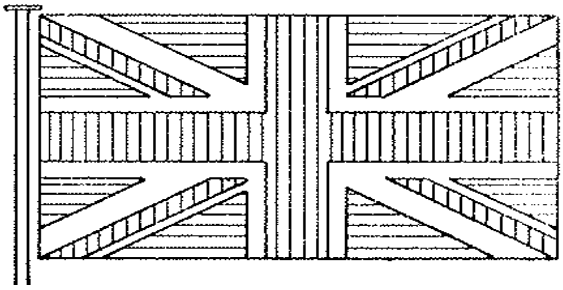
The flag of the Royal Naval Reserve. It may also be worn, by Admiralty Warrant granted to the Commanding Officer or Skipper, by British merchant ships and fishing vessels commanded by an officer on the retired list of the Royal Navy or a Commonwealth Navy, or an officer of the Reserves of those Navies, provided a specified proportion of the officers and crew belong to a Naval Reserve.

Yachts belonging to members of approved Yacht Clubs are, by Warrant, allowed to wear this Ensign plain, or with the Clubs badge in the fly, if satisfying certain conditions as to registration, tonnage etc.

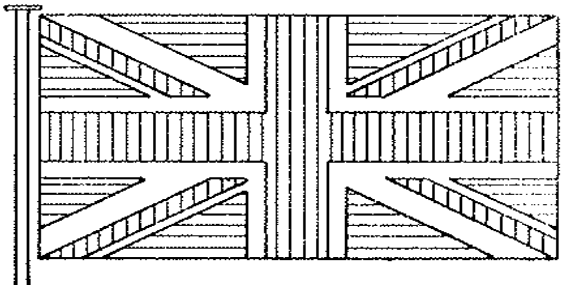
Proportions of Union Flags



Regimental Colours
5:4



Flown on Land
5:3

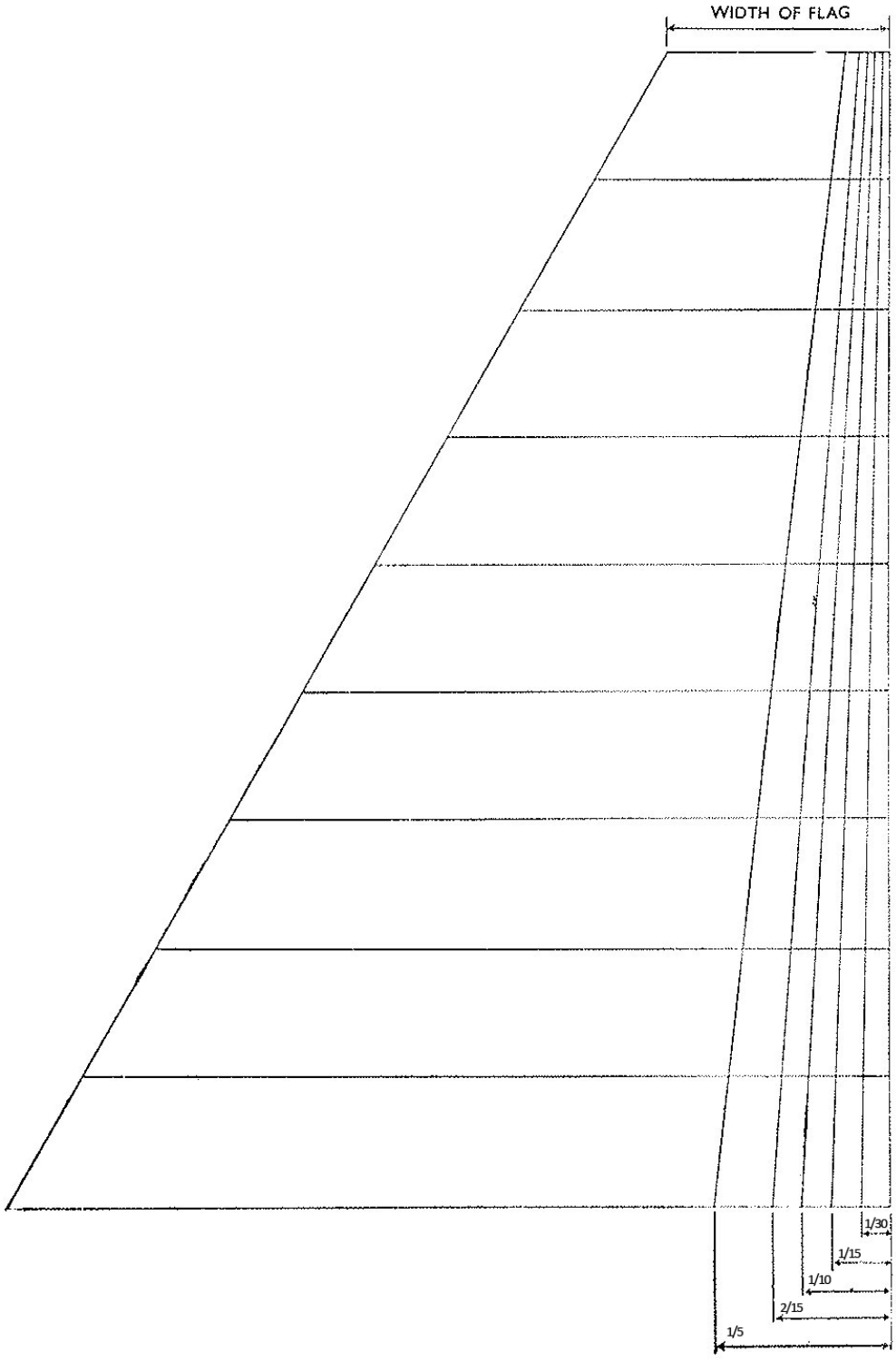


Flown at Sea
2:1

Readers of this book who may have to make drawings will find the accompanying diagram useful The correct widths for the different crosses in the Union Flag can be marked off from this with ease for flags of various sizes

In this connection it is useful to remember that in the Union the diagonals of the flag form the division between the St. Andrew's Cross and the St. Patrick's Cross, and that the combined width of the letter and its white border is equal to the width of the former, viz – one length the width of the flag

Full information regarding the proportions will be found on pages 6 and 14



Original booklet Made and Printed in Great Britain.

Some terms or words used

Some terms that may have been used in this booklet that may not be known or used today. This page was not included in the original:-

Poop or Poop deck	In naval architecture, a **poop deck** is a **deck** that forms the roof of a cabin built in the rear, or "aft", part of the superstructure of a ship. The name originates from the French word for stern, la poupe, from Latin puppis.
Jack staff or Jackstaff	A **jack staff** (also spelled as **jackstaff**) is a small vertical spar (pole) on the bow of a ship or smaller vessel on which a particular type of flag, known as a jack, is flown. The jack staff was introduced in the 18th century. The jack is typically flown from military vessels, including submarines, while at anchor or moored pierside, but not while underway. Civilian vessels such as private yachts have also been known to fly the jack of the nation of their homeport, also from a jackstaff, while moored or at anchor.
Union Jack	For many years it was argued that the Union flag was being incorrectly called the Union Jack. The claim that the term *Union Jack* properly refers only to naval usage has been disputed, following historical investigations by the Flag Institute in 2013
Surcoat	A fur coat initially was an outer garment commonly worn in the Middle Ages by both men and women. It can either refer to a coat worn over other clothes or the outermost garment itself. The name derives from French meaning "over the coat", a long, loose, often sleeveless coat reaching down to the feet.
Saltire	A *saltire* is a heraldic symbol in the form of a diagonal cross, like the shape of the letter X in Roman type.
Warrant	Most often, the term *warrant* refers to a specific type of authorisation; a writ issued by a competent officer, usually a judge or magistrate, which permits an otherwise illegal act that would violate individual rights and affords the person executing the writ protection from damages if the act is performed.