

## **Options for discard of flags**

By David Goldstein

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, so it may be an appropriate time to remind anyone wanting to correctly “retire” their tattered, soiled or badly faded American flags that they may drop off flags at their local chapter of the American Legion, Elk’s Lodge, Veterans of Foreign Wars or at some Boy Scout locations. These organizations retire flags through ceremonial cremation. Following burning, they commemorate the location where ashes are buried.

According to proper flag etiquette, any American flag should be given this dignified retirement, including the little plastic flags some realtors distribute by the hundreds along with their business cards or the thousands placed as short-term tributes for veteran’s graves. However, due to issues such as the toxicity of burning plastic and the difficulty of burning nylon, not all organizations are able to handle all types of flags, so call the post nearest to you before dropping off any flags other than cotton standards.

David Jones Scout Executive and C.E.O. of Boy Scouts of America Ventura County Council receives thousands of flags per year dropped off at the Scouts’ center on Daily Drive in Camarillo. Great dedication, time, and expense are required to transport these flags to Three Falls Camp in the Los Padres National Forest and then to ceremonially cremate the flags one at a time. Jones reports the center receives two or three flags a day, and only a precious few people and businesses requiring this service of the Boy Scouts drop off a donation along with their flag.

While the local Scouts use only the most formal and dignified of retirement ceremonies, including cremation, Jones, citing a 2014 article in Scouting magazine, notes individuals are not violating U.S. Flag code if they use other methods of dignified discard. “As long as the method of retiring the flag is done in a respectful and dignified manner, other methods would be acceptable,” said Jones.

The other methods cited in that article start with cutting the flag in quarters, avoiding cuts through the blue field, which represents the union of states. Once the stripes are separated from the stars, it is no longer a flag, and other options become possible. Comments attached to the electronic version of the Scouting article indicate people using this method still exercise care and accord respect toward what was once a flag. For example, some have enclosed a disassembled flag in a box and interned it in the ground, as they would a human body.

Until last December, a recycling option was possible. A flag company in Wisconsin accepted dropped off or mailed in flags and separated out just nylon ones for recycling at a carpet manufacturer in South Carolina. The carpet manufacturer first cleaned each flag, held a ceremony, stopped their manufacturing line, cleared it of any non-flag material, and then manufactured using just nylon flags. Although the resulting carpet had value, it was insufficient to cover the cost of handling flags, and the shipping and handling was also prohibitively expensive for the flag company.

Cremation at a cemetery is also an option. Air pollution regulations strictly control what can be placed in cemeteries' crematoria, including clothing worn by the deceased. Nevertheless, Senate Bill 1197 in 2012 allowed flags to be cremated during the week prior and the week following Memorial Day, Flag Day, and the Fourth of July, when cemeteries are most overwhelmed with flags.

Jack Feldman, a Director at Mount Sinai Memorial Park, with branches in Simi Valley and Los Angeles, notes few local cemeteries actually use this method of disposal. Mount Sinai, for example, collects flags from veterans graves after three days of display and stores them for reuse. Visitors to graves collect and place the same flags on graves at the next occasion. When flags are damaged or worn, they are delivered to scouts or service organizations for ceremonial discard.

Cleaning and mending of the U.S. flag to improve its appearance and extend its life is also a patriotic act allowed by U.S. Flag Code. However, an American Legion web site cautions that removal of material (such as a tattered single stripe) could cause a flag to no longer conform to required size proportions.

Supreme Court decisions, including, *United States vs. Eichman*, decided on June 11, 1990, prohibit criminal penalties for acts of desecration to the flag. However, to many Americans, the flag of the United States is sacred. Dignified discard is essential.

In a September 8, 2014 article in Scouting Magazine, Bryan Wendell lists four options for retiring worn-out American flags

Cut the **flag** in half, vertically — do not cut into the blue star field. Place the two halves together and cut in half, horizontally. You will have four pieces of **flag**, one being the blue star field and the other three red and white stripes. Put the **flag** in a container and **dispose** of it properly.

Burning is the preferred method in the [U.S. Flag Code \(Section 176\)](#), but it's potentially hazardous to the environment — the very environment Scouts pledge to protect.

But recycling a flag, which often involves shipping it to a flag-recycling service, typically has an associated cost.

In short, there's no perfect method. So check out these four options and decide (perhaps with your Scouts or Venturers) which one's best for you.

### **Option 1: Get help in your community**

Many units start the flag retirement process by contacting a local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) post, Elks Lodge, American Legion post or similar group. Your pack, troop or crew could conduct a small service project in exchange for the group's helping to retire your flag.

**PRO:** This option ensures the ceremony will be held in a respectful manner by people who know what they're doing. Your Scouts/Venturers are sure to learn something.

**CON:** Your Scouts/Venturers learn better by doing, and this option reduces them to being bystanders.

### **Option 2: Burn the flag to retire it**

A popular way to retire a worn-out American Flag is by burning it. Page 76 of the *BSA Handbook* says, "A national flag that is worn beyond repair may be burned in a fire. The ceremony should be conducted with dignity and respect and the flag burned completely to ashes."

**PRO:** Method preferred by U.S. Flag Code and *BSA Handbook*. Usually the most ceremonial and solemn method.

**CON:** Worst option for the environment and your Scouts' health. Unlike the cotton and wool flags made in the early 20th century, today's flags are made out of petroleum-based materials like nylon. Burning nylon is different from burning cotton or wool and can create hazardous gas.

### **Option 3: Recycle the flag yourself**

At the retirement ceremony, you can cut up your flag using an approved technique that doesn't cut through the blue star field. When a flag has been cut up, it is no longer officially a flag.

Here is one method:

1. Stretch out the corners of the flag.
2. Cut the flag in half, vertically — do not cut into the blue star field.
3. Place the two halves together and cut in half, horizontally.
4. You will have four pieces of flag, one being the blue star field and the other three red and white stripes.
5. Put the flag in a container and dispose of it properly.

[Here's another similar approach.](#)

**PRO:** Doesn't introduce hazardous gases into the environment. Is safe enough for anyone who can use scissors, even Cub Scouts, to participate.

**CON:** Some might consider it less ceremonial. You still have to throw the flag away (though after it's cut up it's no longer a flag).

### **Option 4: Pay a company to recycle the flag**

Do a Google search to find flag recycling groups, such as [this one](#). Some offer the service for free, while others request a small donation for time spent and resources used. The materials from your unit's worn-out flag will be used to make a new flag for future generations of Americans to enjoy.

You could still hold a flag-retirement ceremony in which you fold up the flag to prepare to ship it to the recycler.

**PRO:** Least waste and environmental harm of any of the options.

**CON:** Might cost money.

## Flag retirement ceremony ideas

If you're looking for a simple, meaningful flag retirement ceremony script, [click here](#). The ceremony can be adapted for use with any method of retirement.

## What the BSA says

The BSA recently updated its [guidelines on retiring worn-out American flags](#), but we still don't require one method over another.

The updated guidelines read: "We simply need to ask ourselves if the manner in which we are retiring (destroying) the flag is **dignified**. If the answer is yes, then that method is perfectly acceptable."

[http://www.americanflagdisposal.com/flag\\_recycling.html](http://www.americanflagdisposal.com/flag_recycling.html)

The American Legion is recognized as the authoritative source for American flag retirement. You can read about this by [clicking here](#). The current ceremony was established in 1937 before American flags were made with synthetic materials which look better and last significantly longer than natural fibers like cotton. Now many states are banning the burning of synthetic materials or in some cases refusing to issue open burning permits. We do understand that many people, particularly some of our esteemed veterans, prefer the burning retirement ceremony. Our only goal is to assist the American Legion in establishing an alternative environmentally friendly retirement method.

If you have any questions or suggestions please contact Sue at [FlagRecycling@Gmail.com](mailto:FlagRecycling@Gmail.com) or Tom at American Flags Express Inc., 262-783-4800 extension 11.

Tom D'Amico [TD@flagsexpress.com](mailto:TD@flagsexpress.com)

Will discontinue at the end of the year. Cost is so high. People send wet, moldy flags. Cost of recycling has gone up. Petroleum prices have come down. Cheaper to make nylon from petroleum. Polyester and gromets and canvass and cotton.

Small flags, paper might be an option. Wont stand up to weather. Most recycled were large flags. Auto dealers, shopping centers.

Recycling center used was for carpet. Veteran ran it. He was cleaning and then recycling flag in a dignified manner. Stopping the line so flags ran separate from other items. Plan was to have carpet centers around the country.

Donations didn't cover. Looking for alternative. Has 110,000 subscribers interested in this information at "half-staff" notification system. There isn't a federal site.

Option ending in December.

Just send nylon.

Shipping cost must be prepaid and sent to the following address:

**American Flags Express Inc.**  
**12577 West Custer Avenue**  
**Butler, WI 53007**

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US Flag Code, which can be seen at <http://www.usflag.org/uscode36.html> .

<https://www.legion.org/flag/questions-answers/91467/can-flag-be-repaired-or-mended>

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**From:** David Jones <David.Jones@scouting.org>

**Sent:** Monday, November 5, 2018 4:27 PM

**To:** Goldstein, David <David.Goldstein@ventura.org>

**Subject:** RE: Please comment by tomorrow at noon for article in VC Star this Sunday

David,

The article officially came from Peter Self, a member of the National BSA Office back in 2014. Peter now works for Great Salt Lake Council, Boy Scouts of America. I just talked to him on the phone. He concurs with the article and said it is still relevant today. The initial U.S. Flag Code (Section 176) was written back in the late 1800's when flags were made out of cotton. The changes in making flag material out of nylon and sensitivity in health & environmental concerns changes the way we look at retiring a flag. The code reads (Section 176, k): "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."

As long as the method of retiring the flag is done in a respectful and "dignified" manner than other methods would be acceptable.

As discussed the Ventura County Council Boy Scouts of America brings in 100's of flags a year. We dispose of them in a dignified manner through a ceremony done on

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- t726phil • [4 years ago](#)

The crematorium option is a great one for nylon and polyester flags. However, the great state of California has decided to regulate such. Now flags can only be disposed of at crematoria in California on Memorial Day, Flag Day, and Fourth of July or 3 days within 6 weeks of each other. In addition our legislature has regulated that crematoria must:

A crematory that cremates an American flag or flags, pursuant to Section 8344.5 shall maintain on its premises an accurate record of all cremations of American flags performed as specified in Section 8344.5, including all of the following information:

- (1) Name of the organization, or person requesting cremation of the flags
- (2) Date of cremation of the American flags.
- (3) Name of cremation chamber operator.
- (4) Time and date that the flags were inserted in the cremation chamber.
- (5) Time and date that flags were removed from the cremation chamber.
- (6) The weight of the ashes of the flags after being removed from the cremation chamber
- (7) The disposition of the ashes of the cremated flags.

This information shall be maintained for at least 10 years after the American flags are cremated and shall be subject to inspection by the Cemetery and Funeral Bureau.

This is very different from the simple and dignified final honors ceremony conducted at ordinary campouts by our scouts in full uniform over an open fire, usually at night, formally presenting the colors, burning the flag and saluting until the flag is completely ashed, accompanied by the bugler when he attends, and preceded with a prayer from the Chaplain Aide when he attends. Final honors usually follows cooking and skits and also represents the transition into quiet hours. No regulations, just dignified respect.

We have not saved the ashes as we usually retire flags over established fire rings. Any further comments or advice on this would be welcome.

We generally cherry pick the cotton flags to burn at campouts but sometimes a cotton / polyester blend sneaks in or even a loose weave 100% polyester or 100% nylon flag. As both a Textiles and Chemistry MBC I have used the final honors flag ceremony to enhance teaching both MB's. I have not seen a 100% wool flag perhaps ever.

see more

The list of what seems like excessive regulations made me look up the law in question and do some research. It turns out that prior to passage of SB1197 in ~2012, crematoriums were prohibited from burning flags. They were regulated to only burning human remains with associated personal effects and any necessary plastic barriers for disease control.

Crematoriums are subject to intense auditing in their normal operations, and are already required to keep extensive 10-year logs of activities. The information required in this bill parallels the information a crematorium would already be tracking every time it conducts a burn, so although the list seems excessive, it is in line with their normal processes. Apparently burning of medical waste at crematoriums was a hot controversy prompting prior legislation, so this is in line with tracking all activity at a crematorium and making sure there aren't any burns occurring off the record. The log-entry requirements were not originally part of the proposed legislation, but were recommended for insertion by committee staff.

The dates specified include the week prior and the week following the named holidays. Those holidays are the typical dates where cemeteries are inundated with flags, and concurrent pending legislation coming from the Assembly was attempting to regulate or prohibit transfer of "veterans' commemorative property" which could be construed to include flags left at veteran gravesites. The originally proposed legislation only provided for this to be once a year for the week prior and the week following Independence Day. Staff recommended inserting the other patriotic holidays.



The California Funeral Directors Association "strongly" supported the legislation, presumably speaking on behalf of crematorium operators. A number of veterans' organizations, including American Legion, VFW, and Vietnam Veterans of America provided official support to the legislation. No organizational opposition was voiced in time for the bill analysis for either the Senate or Assembly committee hearings.

A pretty good synopsis of the thought process leading to this legislation is at [leginfo.ca.gov](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/p...) covering the Senate committee hearing on the bill, and there is a shorter analysis for the Assembly committee hearing.

<http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/p...>

Thanks for prompting me to wade through some legislative history. It's sometimes fun to see how laws take shape over time.

[Stan Flahaut](#) [t726phil](#) • [5 months ago](#)

One reason for the specific regulation on flag cremation in California would be the potential for someone to illegally dispose of hazardous wastes. If required to document the initial mass of a body and the weight of the ashes it could easily be determined whether something extra were added to the fire. It would also be easy to add waste to the flag cremation thereby decreasing hazardous waste disposal costs. Recording the weight of the ashes in both cases prevents illegal incineration of many types of materials.

[Connie Knie](#) • [4 years ago](#)

It has already been mentioned but I was taught that burying a flag (with a respectful ceremony) is a perfectly acceptable way to retire a flag.

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[Jordan](#) • [4 years ago](#)

Hint: if you are burning nylon flags, ensure that they get plenty of air. If you just try to pile them onto a fire, you can end up putting the fire out or ending up with a molten mess. There's also less nasty smoke with a clean high-temperature burn. We burn in a metal trash can with the flags draped one at a time over a metal rod across the top.

see more

Sam [Jordan](#) • [4 years ago](#)

You're going to stop burning nylon flags, right? The whole point of the article is that Scouts shouldn't be burning nylon flags.

Cemeteries need to dispose of the flags they remove from graves. Some, but not all of these, will be in good enough shape to reuse. A Scout unit could arrange to pick these up from the cemetery, sort out the good from the bad, and hand out the good ones at a parade or some other appropriate function.

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#### Contacts:

Mike McManus, Veteran Services Officer, County of Ventura

Jeanne Clark, General Manager, Ivy Lawn Cemetery, [info@ivylawn.org](mailto:info@ivylawn.org)

Jack Feldman, extension 360, 805 955-0078 Mount Sinai Memorial Park, Simi Valley and L.A.

El Rancho Simi Pioneer Cemetery, 805 526-8245

Conejo Mountain Funeral Home, Memorial Park & Crematory, 2052 Howard Rd, Camarillo, CA 93012. [805-482-1959](tel:805-482-1959)

American Flags & Cutlery, Ventura 641-1941

Oxnard Covell Graphics Fast Signs: Could print on poster paper. – Jill Bonilla Covell

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