

*Eco-Tip for 5-26-19*

## **Flag Retirement: Repair for Reuse, Avoid Plastic, and Help Service Organizations**

By David Goldstein

For Memorial Day, at 10:30 AM tomorrow, Pierce Brothers Valley Oaks Memorial Park in Westlake Village will host a concert and remembrance event featuring a B-25 flyover and the Air Force Band of the West Coast. Through posters on drop-off sites for retired flags at businesses throughout the Conejo Valley over the past few months, they have also been promoting another patriotic act they will try for the first time. They will use their crematory to provide a dignified end to American flags no longer suitable for display, according to Pierce Brothers manager Christine Ondesko,

Flag cremation at cemeteries became an option in 2012, when Senate Bill 1197 altered air pollution regulations, allowing 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.

Most cemeteries have found flag cremation to be too difficult, in part due to the rising rate of plastic flags. Air emission concerns require pollution control equipment, and disposal of ashes has proven difficult. Jack Feldman, Service Department Manager at Mount Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuaries, with branches in Simi Valley and Los Angeles, notes local cemeteries focus on a better form of management for flags; three days after each patriotic event involving the marking of veteran's graves, they collect flags for reuse. If you or your service organization want to place flags on graves, you generally do not need to buy new flags, he noted. You can instead contact a cemetery and use the ones they have stored.

Pierce Brothers practices this reuse as well; however, when flags are damaged or worn, cemeteries not using their crematoria depend on service organizations for dignified flag retirement. Anyone wanting to correctly retire their tattered, soiled or badly faded American flags may drop off flags at their local participating chapter of the American Legion, Elk's Lodge, Veterans of Foreign Wars or at some Boy Scout locations. However, due to issues such as the toxicity and difficulty of burning plastic, 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.

Vietnam Veterans of Ventura County handle all types of flags and even collect from some locations, such as from a new steel drop-off box in front of the Ventura County Government Center. Dave Wilson, President of the Vietnam Veterans of Ventura County, says he regards this work as a patriotic honor, on par with the group's provision of a color guard at an event and in line with the work they do every day to help veterans access health care and other earned benefits. He says the group would accept, but would never solicit, donations for its efforts, but he acknowledges the duties become harder each year as members age and some key program participants pass away. The group used to have

a repair program at Ivy Lawn Memorial Park in Ventura, facilitating the cemetery's reuse by, among other methods, using the good parts of one decommissioned flag to replace the bad parts of another. Ivy Lawn still has a reuse program, now without the repair element, but they rely on Veterans of Foreign Wars for dignified disposal, according to Jeanne Clark, Ivy Lawn's General Manager.

Service organizations retire flags one at a time through ceremonial cremation, and following burning, they commemorate the location where ashes are buried. 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 although large businesses, such as car dealerships, drop off flags, only a precious few people 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 interred it in the ground, as they would a human body.

One local artist accepts flags from the public and uses these decommissioned flags as a medium for his art. David Schwartz, of Channel Islands, says on his web site, <http://www.artzworks.com/americanicons.html> , "Most artists use the American flag to denigrate the country. I... use my rights of freedom of expression... to make a positive, patriotic statement about America."

Until last December, a recycling option was possible. A flag company in Wisconsin, American Flags Express, accepted dropped off or mailed in flags and separated out just nylon ones, which they sent to a contracted recycler. The recycler first cleaned each flag, held a ceremony, stopped their recycling process, cleared machinery of any non-flag material, and then recycled the flags into raw nylon. Although the resulting nylon 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.

American Flags Express is now working with a recycler on a lower cost recycling system, expected to be available in 2020, according to the company's owner, Thomas D'Amico.

In the meantime, plastic flags are difficult to properly discard, and they place a burden on service organizations, already laboring to keep up with the pace of flags requiring dignified retirement. 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.