



A research note on the history of ships, places, organisations and events associated with the
Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA)

Flags worn on RFAs

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1. Background

One frequently reads statements such as – 'she is wearing the Blue Ensign of the RFA' or 'sailing under the RFA Ensign'. Ships, particular in old black and white prints have been identified as RFA because the mage of the ship's Ensign is clear. This is both correct and incorrect and really depends upon when, eg, the photograph was taken.

It is a fact that RFAs generally have sailed under the Blue Ensign but surprisingly for more than half of its existence there was no distinctive identifiable flag as the 'RFA Ensign'. Prior to 1969 all non-commissioned Admiralty vessels, including RFAs, wore the same long established 'Admiralty Blue Ensign'.

Around 1687, Secretary of the British Admiralty, Samuel Pepys, when drawing up his *Sub-notes about Flags and Colours* made what is possibly the first observations that public service ships, used for duties



other than fighting, eg, non-commissioned victuallers, store ships and transports, should wear some distinctive flag.

On 12 July 1694, a Royal Proclamation finally provided that public service ships should fly their own flag. This is then described as a Red flag bearing the Union Flag and their Seal of Office.

It must be remembered that a Royal Proclamation of 18 September 1674 granted merchant ships the right to wear the Red Ensign - so it can be taken that the Red Flag actually means Red Ensign. Unfortunately, it is rather unclear as to the positioning of the Union Flag and the Seal of Office. It was 28 July 1707 when a Royal Proclamation by Queen Anne decreed that ensigns should bear the Union Flag in their upper-left canton. One can assume that it was a practice of differing positioning of the Union Flag on ensigns that gave rise to the need for the Proclamation.

The positioning of the Seal of Office did not become clear until 1806, when King's Regulations directed that the Seal of Office should be in the fly of the ensign. Although matters were slightly confused in 1844 when Queen's Regulations stated that the Seal be placed in the centre of the ensign.

Ensigns identify a vessel's nationality and law – the Merchant Shipping Acts, covering their use and Queens Regulations for the Royal Navy – and by a complex set of unwritten customs and practices known as flag etiquette.

This etiquette indicates that an ensign should be worn on an ensign staff at the stern. Why? Because in the

days of sailing warships, it was nearest the quarterdeck and the officers' cabins. Today, however, warships and other vessels move their ensign from the ensign staff to the mast as soon as they are underway at sea.

UK law requires that all vessels (other than fishing vessels) over 50 gross registered tons must wear their ensigns when entering or leaving a British port, when entering or leaving a foreign port or when instructed to do so by a vessel commanded by a serving naval officer.

There is an indication here that one does not have to show an ensign while underway at sea or indeed when in harbour. Etiquette, however, decrees that naval traditions should be followed. These were originally intended to reduce wear and tear on flags, by hoisting the ensign at sunrise (known as colours) and taking it down at sunset (known as evening colours). Etiquette also indicates such timings should be synchronised with those of the senior naval ship when present.

2. The Admiralty Blue Ensign

This flag was frequently and incorrectly called the RFA Ensign. However, the flag was common to all non-commissioned Admiralty vessels, eg, it was worn by Admiralty Cable Ships and harbour craft.

The position regarding flags worn by fleet auxiliaries began to take on a stable practice when on 9 July 1864 an Admiralty Order-in-Council for the Regulation of the Naval Service was issued under the title – *New Flags for Ships*.



This Order finally abolished the old Red, White and Blue squadron colours and issued directions that fundamentally are still in force. The Order directed that only commissioned Royal Navy vessels would wear the White Ensign; that the Blue Ensign represents the Royal Navy Reserve and non-commissioned Crown vessels; the Red Ensign become the flag of the British Mercantile Marine.

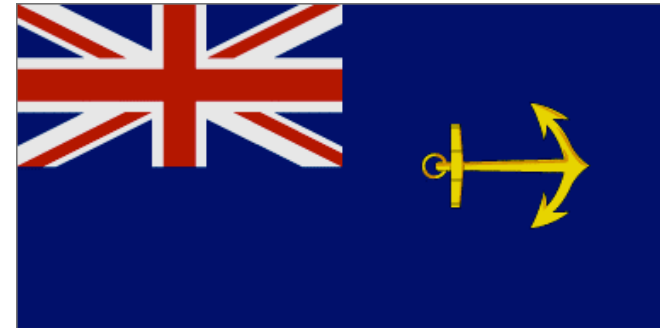
The Order changed an existing Public Service Ensign by directing that it should be a Blue Ensign defaced in its fly by the Seal of Office. For the Navy's Transport and Civil Departments this meant a Blue Ensign defaced with the Admiralty Badge - which was the Seal of the old Transport Officer of 1694 - a 'plain horizontal gold anchor'.

In practice this meant that all the civilian manned auxiliary vessels, eg, yard craft, storeships, tugs and transports, owned and even chartered by the Admiralty became legal wearers of this Ensign. The flag proportion is 2:1.

With the mercantile vessels that were taken up on transport charter - Mercantile Fleet Auxiliaries or to given them their modern acronym STUFT - it would appear that what ensign they flew was more at the discretion of individual Masters rather than the letter of the direction as laid down by Order-in-Council.

In 1905, when the Admiralty first defined the term **Royal Fleet Auxiliary** (RFA) and a slightly separate shipping arm began to evolve, these Admiralty owned civilian craft had the right to wear the Admiralty Blue Ensign. Oddly, from Admiralty records it would appear

that many of them did in fact fly the Red Ensign. A practice, although often questioned, did continue until well after World War One. Indeed until the Head of Naval Law took steps to correct the situation in 1922.



Head of Naval Law drew attention to the 1864 Order-in-Council and in January 1922 an Admiralty Fleet Order was issued directing that all Admiralty owned RFA tankers, including those that were under commercial management, should wear the Admiralty Blue Ensign, except when on charter to commercial concerns - then it was appropriate to wear the Red Ensign.

11 August 1922, a Fleet Order stated that all Royal Fleet Auxiliaries, Naval Armament Vessels, yard craft, and other non-commissioned vessels employed on Admiralty service were to fly the Admiralty Blue Ensign and on ceremonial occasions a **Jack** (a square Blue Ensign) defaced by the Admiralty badge. The special ensign worn by Naval Armament Vessels was also to cease to be used when existing stocks of the flags were consumed.

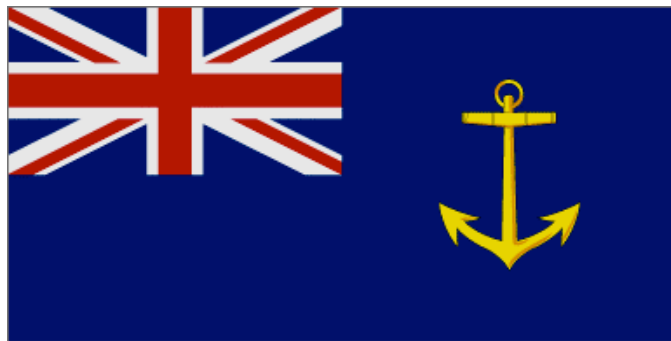


With the introduction of the specific **RFA Ensign** in 1969. In 1970 this ensign with two yellow wavy lines added below the anchor became the ensign of the Royal Maritime Auxiliary Service (RMAS). Following reorganisation the RMAS Ensign became obsolete in 2008. In 1974 the Admiralty Blue Ensign became known as the **Government Service Ensign** and since January 2000 it replaced the Red Ensign which had been used by HM Ships undergoing contractor's sea trials.

3. The RFA Ensign

The RFA Ensign – currently the Blue Ensign defaced with a vertical gold anchor, was officially approved by HM Queen Elizabeth II in 1968 and was introduced from 16 June 1969. The flag proportion is 2:1.

Prior to this, RFA vessels wore a Blue Ensign defaced with a horizontal gold anchor and officially known as the **Admiralty Blue Ensign**.



The official announcement of the RFA Ensign was promulgated in Defence Council Instruction (Royal Navy) 684/69 dated 6 June 1969.

The First Sea Lord sent message to the Director General Supply & Transport (Naval) – Civil Service head of the RFA. Reportedly it read:

*I note with glee
That DGST
Has at last got you upon your feet
The horizontal variety
Gave doubts on sobriety
Which is quite underserved by your Fleet.*

- **RFA Jack**

Initially the 1864 Order-in-Council directed that public service ships should in addition to the Public Service Ensign wear a Union Flag with a white all round border - the flag commonly known as the **Pilot Jack**. However, in the Addenda of 1868 to Queen's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions, the use of the Pilot Jack was changed and a new square Public Service Jack introduced. It was stated that ships employed by any public office should fly this small blue flag with a Union Flag in the upper left-hand quarter, as a Jack. In the fly of this Jack should be the Seal of Office to which they belong. In the case of the Admiralty, the Admiralty Badge - the plain gold horizontal anchor - defaced this flag.

In July 1922, a further directive stated that Royal Fleet Auxiliaries were to fly the Admiralty Blue Ensign and on ceremonial occasions a Jack defaced by the Admiralty



badge. Two sets of flags, one-yard by one-yard (39cm x 39cm), for use as a Jack would be allowed to each RFA attached to the Fleet Fuelling Service and Store Carrying Service. No Jacks would be issued to vessels not accompanying the fleet.

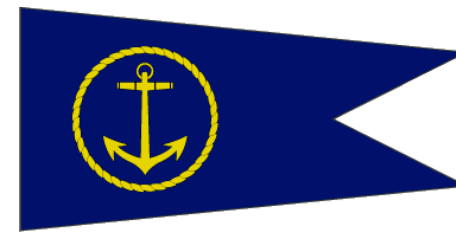
The pre-1969 Jack was declared proper for ships employed by Government Offices, This small square flag, defaced with the horizontal Admiralty anchor was considered the correct Jack to be worn by RFAs.

Post-1969, seen the RFA Jack amended as a square flag defaced with the vertical gold anchor. The flag proportion is 1:1 – 1 square yard (91cm x 91cm). The Jack is only worn on the Jackstaff when in harbour and when at anchor.



- **Commodore's Broad Pennant**

On 5 October 1951 it was announced that in order to follow commercial practice the appointment of a Commodore was approved. The senior sea-going Master, and HM The King George VI approved the Commodore's Broad Pennant – a vertical gold anchor encircled by a gold rope on a navy blue field.



First hoisted on Sunday 7 October 1951 on RFA FORT DUNVEGAN at Rosyth. Following the practice with Commodores' RN, the Commodore RFA's Broad Pennant is worn on his flagship and/or at his headquarters ashore.

According to the Defence Standard 83-77 there is also a Commodore's pennant with 'car fittings' so it can be worn on a motor vehicle.

4. Red Ensign

The Red Ensign (aka the Red Duster) is worn by all British craft not entitled to display a White, Blue or defaced ensign, having replaced the St George's Cross as the national colour for ships circa 1700.



The *1894 Merchant Shipping Act* made it an offence, without an Admiralty Warrant, for any British vessel to fly 'national colours' other than the Red Ensign or the Pilot Jack.



During the 1920s, 30s, late 40s and 50s many RFA tankers were chartered to commercial companies on time and voyage agreements. On these occasions and when on builder's trials they wore the Red Ensign. The flag proportion is 2:1.

Prior to World War One it appears that the practice whereby a RFA wore the Blue Ensign or the Red Ensign lay with individual ship's Masters. Photographic evidence would seem to confirm this irregularity.

In March 1939 '*Instructions to Masters of tankers and colliers employed on Admiralty Service in time of war*' were issued to RFAs. Para 9 'Flags to be worn' gave the following:

"(a) Whenever it is necessary to show British colours, (eg, when entering port or engaging the enemy) –

i) vessels on Fleet Attendance are wear the Blue Ensign having in the fly, the yellow Admiralty anchor.

ii) all other fuelling vessels, including Royal Fleet Auxiliaries and chartered or requisitioned commercial tankers and colliers, withdrawn from Fleet Attendance, are to fly the Red Ensign.

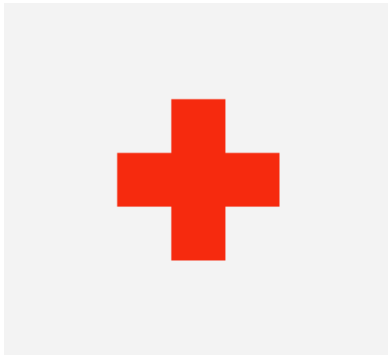
(b) At other times, either no colours at all should be shown or neutral colours should be displayed as a disguise."

Royal Fleet Auxiliaries on builder's trials before acceptance by the Admiralty/MoD should wear the Red Ensign.

5. Miscellaneous flags

- **Red Cross Flag**

The Red Cross flag originated in 1864 with the *Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Wounded in Armies in the Field*. This provided that a distinctive and uniform flag shall be adopted for hospitals, ambulances and evacuations and that the flag shall bear a red cross on a white field. This design was the Swiss national flag with its colours reversed. This was in recognition of the pioneering work of Swiss citizens in establishing internationally recognised standards for the protection of war wounded.



A convention signed at The Hague in 1899 extended the use of the Red Cross flag to the maritime environment. This required that all hospital ships make themselves known by, eg, hoisting, together with their national flag, the 'white flag with a red cross provide by the Geneva Convention'. The RFA Hospital Ships MAINE and BERBICE wore this flag. The flag proportion is 1:1 and 2:2.

- **NATO Flag**

The flag of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been worn as a courtesy flag by British ships, including RFAs, participating in NATO's permanent multinational naval squadrons, eg, Standing Naval Force Atlantic (STANAVFORLANT) and Standing Naval Force Mediterranean (STANAVFORMED)

- **RNSTS Flag**

The Royal Naval Supply and Transport Flag (RNSTS) flag gained prominence when staff of the RNSTS formed part of the Falkland Campaign Victory Celebration but were unable to march under a representative banner. The Chief of Fleet Support approved the idea. Research was undertaken by the Naval Historical Branch and the College of Arms to identify both previous flags attributable to RNSTS predecessors and heraldic principles and precedents.

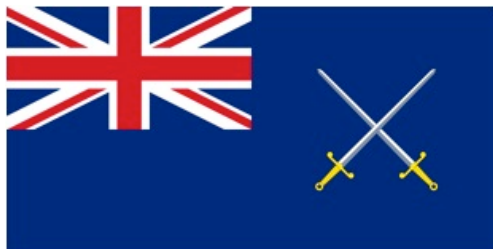
The Admiralty Board approved A design based upon the Victualling Seal of 1694, as shown on their flag of 1793, received Admiralty Board approval. This incorporated the anchors of Pepys, the anchor of the Transport Flag of 1838 and the anchor of the Naval Ordnance Flag of 1915. This design was approved by HM The Queen in 1984.



The flag was flown at establishments that were under the direct superintendence of the DGST(N) at home and overseas, eg, Gibraltar, United States of America and the Falkland Islands. It is understood that it may have been hoisted as a courtesy flag during a VIP visit to RFA stores ship.

- **Royal Corps of Transport/Royal Logistic Corps Flag**

The Royal Corps of Transport Fleet (RCT) was formed in 1965 with the merger of the Royal Army Service Corps and Royal Engineer fleets. In 1993 they merged to become the Royal Logistic Corps (RLC). The 17 Port and Maritime Regiment RLC operates Army vessels.



Currently the Army's Mexeflote powered rafts that were carried on RFA Sir class LSLs and now on the Bay class), when operational afloat, wear the Blue Ensign defaced with cross swords.

This flag has been worn as a courtesy flag on RFA landing ships.



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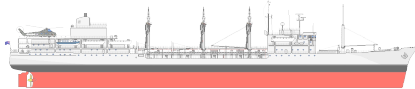
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