

MUSEUM FEATURE



Heraldry: Symbols of Valor, Service, and Unit Pride

The 1912 Taft flag on display in the Symbols of Valor exhibit

By Tracy H. Bradford and Elijah G. Palmer

Four flags representing the heraldic tradition and symbolism of the United States are now on display at the U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum on Fort Lee, Virginia. As a military device, flags often serve both a functional and symbolic purpose; the flags in this exhibition represent several inflection points in American history. They illustrate both the range of history and the literal journeys the colors have made in service to the nation, as they have passed through places as varied as the stately halls of the White House and the dark tunnels of Corregidor in the Philippines. The Heraldic Section of the Office of the Quartermaster General researched, designed, and developed these flags from 1924 to 1962.

The oldest flag in the exhibition is a 1912 Army flag that was used to indicate the presence of the commander in chief. At the time, the Army and Navy had different signifying flags for the president. The Navy had developed a blue fielded flag in 1882, and the Army followed suit in 1898 with a red fielded design. During President William H. Taft's tenure, the military recognized the need for a standard design, so the Army adopted the Navy's blue field. The 1912 Taft flag now on display is made of hand embroidered silk, with gold and silver fringe, marking it as ceremonial presidential colors. The Great Seal of the United States sits within a large star, surrounded by the forty eight stars that represented the states in 1912.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is the first fifty star flag, which was presented to President Dwight D. Eisenhower on 21 August 1959. Before Alaska and Hawai'i joined the Union,

there had been twenty six official iterations of the American flag. As the number of states expanded, the Heraldic Branch designed new flags. This flag, designated as Flag Number One, was then unveiled during a ceremony at the White House. The first official raising of this design was at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine in Baltimore, Maryland, on 4 July 1960. Still in service sixty five years later, the fifty star design is the longest serving flag design in the nation's history.

Though the U.S. Army traces its origins to 1775, the branch did not have an official flag until the 1950s. Following in the footsteps of the U.S. Marine Corps flag (unveiled in 1939) and the U.S. Air Force flag (1951), the official U.S. Army flag represents the entirety of the U.S. Army. Developed by the Heraldic Branch, an approved version of the Army flag was presented by Vice President Richard M. Nixon to Secretary of the Army Wilbur M. Brucker in 1956 for the Army's 181st birthday. The core design was based on the Army Seal, which first was used in the American Revolution. The flag incorporates Roman armor and various weaponry, signifying readiness for war; a Phrygian cap, symbolizing liberty; and a rattlesnake, representing colonial unity, which holds in its mouth a scroll bearing the Army motto, "This We'll Defend." This embroidered version of the Army flag was one of the first produced at the Philadelphia Quartermaster Depot by expert needleworkers. Years of training, including a special course conducted at the depot, were prerequisites for these virtuoso embroiderers, who hand crafted the elaborate flag designs.

An exciting addition to the exhibition is the recently conserved 12th Quartermaster Regiment (Philippine Scouts) flag. This is the most traveled of these artifacts, having survived World War II in the Philippines. In April 1942, the Japanese Army captured the Philippine province of Bataan, and, a month later, Lt. Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright, commander of the Filipino and U.S. forces in the Philippines, surrendered the island fortress of Corregidor. Before the Japanese occupied the island, Quartermaster Maj. Frank F. Kriwanek approached Army nurse 1st Lt. Beulah “Peggy” Greenwalt with a request. He passed her the 12th Quartermaster Regimental flag and asked her to keep it safe. Lieutenant Greenwalt was taken prisoner and held at the Santo Tomas Internment Camp with seventy seven other nurses. For almost three years, she kept the regiment’s flag safe because, as she later said, she knew the colors “represent[ed] the soul of a regiment and that they could serve as a symbol for resistance.” Amazingly, Lieutenant Greenwalt was able to convince her Japanese captors that the flag was a decorative shawl. Major Kriwanek, whom also was held in Japanese prison camps for several years, managed to survive the ordeal. The two reunited after the war, and Lieutenant Greenwalt returned the flag to Major Kriwanek at a meeting of the American Legion in St. Louis, Missouri, in October 1945. Major Kriwanek’s widow, Julia, donated the flag to the Army in 1961.

The flags in the *Symbols of Valor* exhibit showcase the distinguished work of the Heraldic Section of the Office of the Quartermaster General and the legacy and impact of their designs.

To read more about 1st Lt. Peggy Greenwalt’s service in Bataan, Corregidor, and Santo Tomas, and to view photographs of her experiences, visit the U.S. Army Women’s Museum digital archive at <https://awm.historyit.com/public/sites/home/digitalcollections>.



Note

All images are courtesy of the U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum.



Sarah Kay Broomhall inspects a standard sample of the president’s flag in the silk embroidery factory of the Philadelphia Quartermaster Depot, ca. 1950.



The *Symbols of Valor* exhibit at the U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum showcases the first fifty-star flag.



The fifty-star flag is seen behind President Eisenhower as he speaks with Representative Daniel K. Inouye and others after signing the Hawaii Admission Act at the White House on 21 August 1959.



Colonel Kriwanek and Lieutenant Greenwalt appear in a *St. Louis Dispatch* article on 21 October 1945.



Lieutenant Greenwalt and Major Kriwanek are pictured here dancing in a tunnel on Corregidor a few weeks before the Japanese landed.



Vice President Nixon presents the new U.S. Army flag to Secretary Brucker, ca. June 1956.



Skilled needleworkers at the Philadelphia Quartermaster Depot embroider the new U.S. Army flag on 20 April 1956.



In 1961, Colonel Kriwanek's widow, Julia, donated the flag to the Quartermaster Corps, and Quartermaster General Maj. Gen. Andrew T. McNamara transferred it to the Quartermaster Museum.



The 12th Quartermaster Regiment flag, shown here during conservation



The 12th Quartermaster Regiment flag after conservation in December 2024