Unity in Flags

Ralph G. C. Bartlett

Abstract

Over the centuries flags have, and are, being used to show unity. This can take the form of unity between peoples, countries, alliances, and organisations. The purpose of this paper is to give a general review of the design development of these "flags of unity".

From their origins in heraldic royal banners, then national flags, born of unification, and on to flags of alliances, liberation, and more recently international co-operation, flags with unity as their central design theme are as varied as the peoples, countries, and groups they represent.

Sweden-Norway Union Jack
(1814–1905)

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Over the centuries flags have, and are, being used to show unity. This can take the form of unity between peoples, countries, alliances, and organisations.

Some of the earliest forms of such "flags of unity" were heraldic banners representing the unification of regions resulting from military conquests or territorial claims, and via the marriages between royal families and inheritances, especially those that represented the personal union of two countries in the form of a shared monarch. Examples are:

- Castile and Leon – united by marriage and conquest[1]; (Figure 1)
- United Kingdom – Scotland and England united by inheritance and Ireland by conquest (Figure 2); and
- Austro-Hungarian Empire united by inheritance and expanded by conquest. (Figure 3)
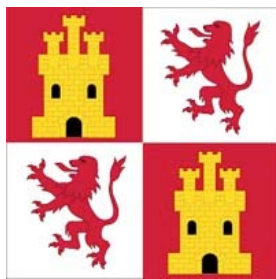

Fig. 1 Castile and Leon
(1230–1516)

Fig. 2 U.K. Royal Standard
(Format since 1837)

Fig. 3 1867–1918
Austro-Hungarian Standard

These and other similar royal heraldic banners, while richly showing the unification of the various territories within their respective realms, were generally not intended for use outside the personal presence of the royal family and the army. Their use as "unity flags" mostly pre-dated the modern concept of the nation-state, which together with the growth of the maritime use of flags led to the development of national flags, some of which can be considered as being "unity flags".

Spain[2] has since May 1785 used the colours of red & yellow from the royal standard, as the basis of most state/national flags, either with or without the various national arms towards the hoist (Figure 4). The merging of the countries of England, Scotland and Ireland is cleverly and clearly shown using their respective traditional flags (Figure 5). The flag of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918) acknowledged home rule for Hungary by combining the national colours of Austria (red–white–red) and Hungary (red–white–green) (Figure 6).
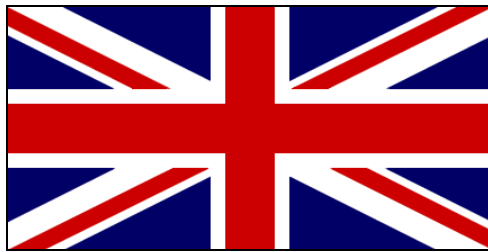
Fig. 4 Spain (1785–1931)   Fig. 5 British Union Flag (1801–Present)   Fig. 6 (1867/69–1918)
Austro-Hungarian Empire

This method of combining, in a simple and clear way, the national colours of two former entities was used when Prussia (black over white) united with the Hanseatic League (white over red) to form the German Confederation (black-white-red) in 1867 (Figure 7). This flag design was continued when the Confederation became an Empire in 1871, and lasted until 1921. The Sweden–Norway Union's Jack combined the traditional colours of Sweden (blue & yellow) and Norway (red, white & blue) to form a single Unity cross (Figure 8). This is created a variation of the British Union cross. The Sweden–Norway Union was used as each national flag's canton.

Fig. 7 (1867–1919/21)   Fig. 8 (1814–1905)   Fig. 9 Canada (1867–70)
German Confed. & Empire   Sweden-Norway Union Jack
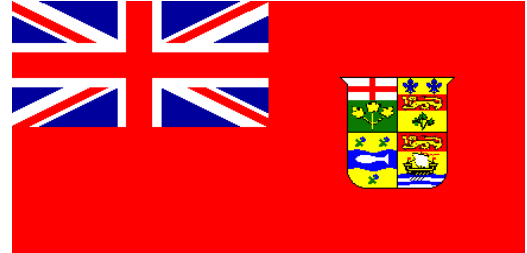
The Canadian confederation flag is a very interesting example of a "unity flag". It shows both the unification of the four original Canadian provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, in the form of a quartered Shield, into a self-governing confederation and demonstrating loyalty to the greater empire with the inclusion of the British Union Flag in the canton (Figure 9). The British Admiralty devised the use of defaced blue ensigns in 1865[3] for use by the naval vessels of the various colonial governments. Each of these colonial badges had to be approved by both the Admiralty and officials in the Colonial Office in London. Canada received special approval to use a defaced red ensign in 1892[4] and this gradually came to be used unofficially on land, becoming the de facto national flag in 1945 and continuing in use until February 1965. This use of British colonial ensigns as post independence[5] national flags has also occurred in Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, and Tuvalu (Figures 10–14).

Fig. 10 1901–03   Fig. 11 Since 1908/09
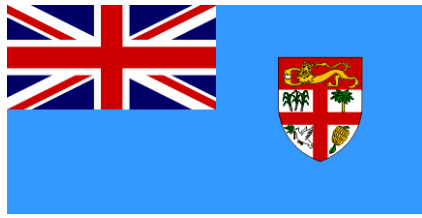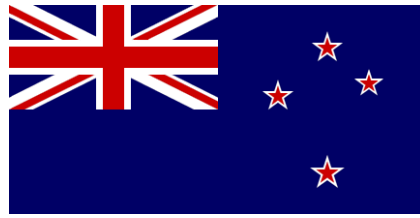Australia's National Ensigns / Flags

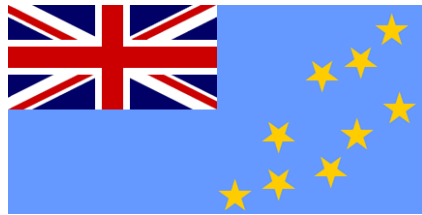Fig. 12 Fiji

Fig. 13 New Zealand

Fig. 14 Tuvalu

The continued use of these colonial-style ensigns as national flags, equal to that of the Union Flag, was probably not envisioned by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty or officials of the Colonial Office in London.

While not exclusive, tri-colours are a very effective way of showing unity in flags, as the colours are normally shown equally. Examples of this around the world are:

The "Central American Blues" – Blue-White-Blue were inspired by the revolutionary "Argentine colours of Belgrano" (1812)[6], these blue and white stripes also conveniently represent Central America's geographical location between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea (Figure 15).

Fig. 15 (1823–38/41)
Fed. Rep. of Central America

Fig. 16 Gran Colombia Colours
("Mother Flag" of Venezuela 1811)

Fig. 17 Slavic Colours
(Russia   c.1700–1917)

The "Gran Colombia Tricolour" – Yellow-Blue-Red – was first used in Venezuela, designed in early 1806 by independence fighter General Francisco de Miranda, who is said to have been inspired by the colours of a Hamburg militia unit that he saw while in Europe (Figure 16). This flag is known as the "*Mother Flag*" as its colours have not only been retained in successive Venezuelan flags, but also formed the basis of the flag for Gran Colombia between 1819 and 1831, which covered what is now Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, who also continued to use these colours in their respective flags.

The "Pan-Slavic Colours" – Red-Blue-White – have their origin in the flag of the then Russian Empire (c.1700–1917), first used as its merchant ensign, and then as both merchant and state flags from 1883 (Figure 17). Russia was the only independent Slavic nation at that stage, and served as the standard to be achieved by other Slavic peoples across Eastern Europe[7]. During the first pan-Slavic Congress, in Prague, in June 1848,[8] these three colours were adopted to represent the then revolutionary idea of freedom for all Slavic peoples[9]. Variations to this method of design are to be found throughout Eastern Europe.

| Fig. 18 Arab Literature Club (1909–11) | Fig. 19 Arab Revolts Flag (1917–20), (1936–39) & (1947–49) | Fig. 20 Palestinian Flag Since 1964 Palestine Nat. Auth. Since Sep. 1993 |

The "Pan-Arab Colours" – Red-White-Black-Green – are believed to have their origins in the proposal for a future Arab flag conceived by the Arab Literature Club, in Istanbul, in 1909–11, and then revived and redesigned as the Arab revolt flag of 1917–20 (Figures 18–20). The Arab youths in the club chose these colours, as they were referred to in a 14th-century poem by Safi al-Din-al-Hili. The four colours are also considered to represent four major Arab historical empires[10].

| Fig. 21 (1958–61) United Arab Republic (Egypt & Syria) | Fig. 22 "United Arab States" Iraq (1963–90) Syria (1963–72) (Proposed Egypt, Syria, & Iraq or Yemen) | Fig. 23 (1972–77) Federated Arab Republics (Egypt, Libya & Syria) |

Following the overthrow of the Arab monarchies in Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, during the period 1958–1969 the republican governments adopted an "Arab Liberation Flag", consisting mainly of a red-white-black horizontal tricolour (Figures 21–23). This flag was also used, with variations, to represent at different times the unity states of United Arab Republic (1958–61), the proposed "United Arab States",[11] and the Federated Arab Republics (1972–77). The Arab unity sentiment of these flag colours continue to be popular with the peoples of the Arab nations, as shown during the current people's revolts of 2011, as shown in a news photo (Figure 24).
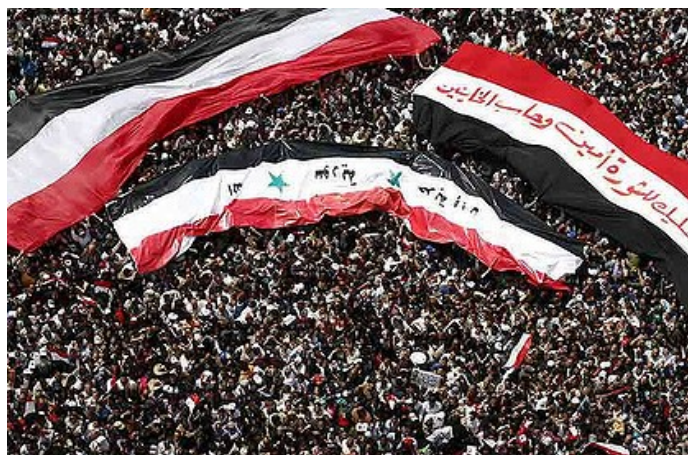
Fig. 24 Yemeni, Syrian, and Egyptian Flags in Tahrir Square, Cairo.   April 2011

The "Pan-African [Rastafarian] Colours" – Red-Green-Yellow – colours originate in the Ethiopian national flag of October 1897 (Figure 25). It should be noted that Ethiopia was the only then existing African nation not to have been colonised by the European powers during the "great African carve-up" of the 19th century. Hence the colours importance to African identity as the continent regained during the second half of the 20th century its independence, commencing with Ghana in 1957, which also introduced black into the Pan-African Colours, representing the people of this continent (Figure 26).

Fig. 25 Ethiopian tri-colour (Since 1897)

Fig. 26 Ghana (Since 1957)

The use of flags to show unity and allegiance was developing into what I call "patriotic" flags in the early 20th century, leading up to and including World War 1 (1914–18). Examples of this are: British Empire "Coronation Flag" from 1910, showing the arms of South Africa (1910–32), Canada (1892–1922) and Australia (1908–12), together with the Southern Cross of New Zealand and the "flaming" Star of India (1885–1947) (Figure 27). During the Great War, "patriotic" flags of the main alliances of this tragic conflict were created for use as rallying points for additional recruits and civilian fund raising activities (Figures 28–29).

Fig. 27 British "Coronation" Flag 1910

Fig. 28 Central Powers

Fig. 29 Allied Powers & Japan

(World War I – 1914–18)

In addition to flags, there were also "patriotic" flag badges, as shown in Jelena Borosak-Marijanovic's ICV 22 (Berlin—2007) Lecture, "*Flag-Shaped Badges—The Symbols of Countries in WWI*".

Another very effective way of showing the concept of national unity in flag designs is the use of stars. We need look no further than the national flag of the USA, which has used stars to represent the unity / union of the increasing number of states in the Union since June 1777 to the present time (Figures 30–31).
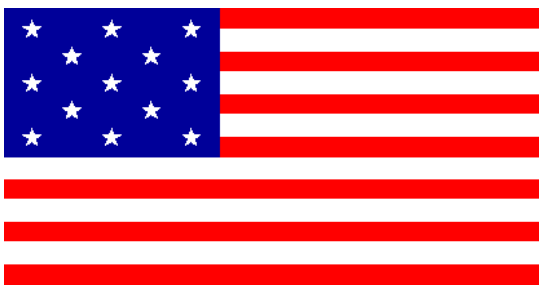
Fig. 30 June 1777–April 1795
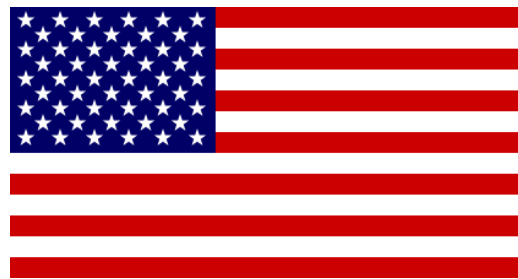
Fig. 31 July 1960–Present

United States of America

Since then there have been other examples of using stars to represent Unity in flags, such as:
Australia – since 1901 the number of points on the Commonwealth star has represented the states and territories (Figs. 10 & 11), Cameroon – 1961–75 (initially two stars represented the incorporation of the former British territory, though subsequently one star represented the unity of the nation) (Figure 32), Cook Islands (15 stars represent the 15 islands in the group) (Figure 33), Malaysia (the points on the stars, as well as the stripes, represent the number of states and territories in the federation) (Figure 34), Pacific Islands Trust Territory/Federated States of Micronesia –initially six states, then four (Figures 35–36), and Netherlands Antilles – initially six stars, then five (Figure 37).
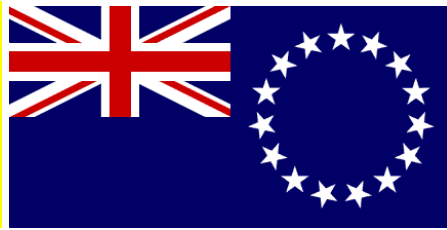
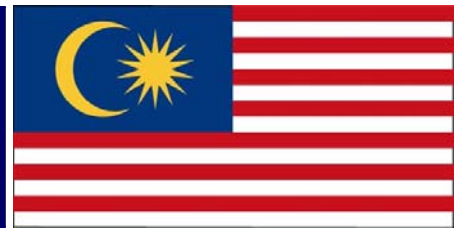Fig. 32 Cameroon 1961–75   Fig. 33   Cook Islands (Since 1979)   Fig. 34   Malaysia (Since 1963)

Fig. 35 1962–78   Fig. 36 Since 1978   Fig. 37 1986–2010
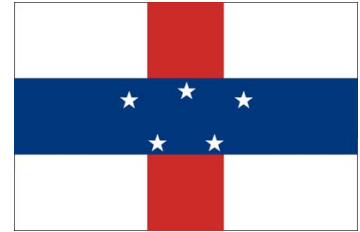(UN Trust Territory)   Pacific Is./Micronesia   (Federated States)   Netherlands Antilles

Another way of showing "Unity in Flags" is the use of promotional flags and/or flag logos. Examples of this are the following multi-national and bilateral devises (Figures 38–40).

Fig. 39   Commercial relations.

Australia – USA bilateral co-operations.

Fig. 40   Governmental relations.

Fig. 38
Multinational Flag

Following the horrors and tragedies of World War II, there was a desire for international organisations of co-operation in hopes of preventing such conflicts in the future. These organisations developed a variety of flag designs to represent their unity, often using a combination of geography and stars. As a former trainee cartographer, I find the use of geography, whether literally or symbolically, as a symbol of unity on flags particularly interesting (Figures 41–49).

Fig. 41 (Unofficial 1920s)
League of Nations

Fig. 42 (Since 1947)
United Nations

Fig. 43 (Format since 1965)
Organisation of American States

Fig. 44 (1954–77)
South East Asia Treaty Org.

Fig. 45 (Format since 1976)
Commonwealth of Nations

Fig. 46 (Since 1999)
Pacific Community

Fig. 47 (1990–2010)
Union of the Arab Maghreb

Fig. 48 (Since 1955)
Council of Europe / European Union

Fig. 49 (Since 2010)
African Union

For me, personally, of all the flags that I have shown and discussed in this presentation, the one that I think best represents unity on a flag, is one that I have yet to mention. It is the flag used for the Olympic Games (Figure 50).   The interconnected rings, representing all the five continents and the five basic flag colours, one of which is found in every national flag, past and present, is both simple and deep. It should represent far more than the ultimate international sporting event, but a spirit of international interconnection and co-operation across all the lands and peoples of this planet.
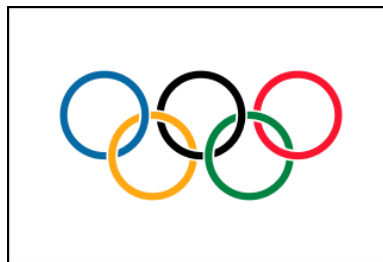

Fig. 50 Olympic Games
(Since 1913 / 1920)

Illustration Sources:

Fig. 1 Castile & Leon Royal Standard – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly (Pennant House Advisory)
Fig. 2 British Royal Standard – Artwork by Martin Grieve; see
        http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/gb_rostd.html
Fig. 3 Autro-Hungarian Emperor – Artwork by Mario Fabretto;
see http://www.tmealf.com/digital/f-Austria-Hungary-SPEC.jpg
Fig. 4 Spain (War Ensign 1785–1931, also State and War Flag 1843–1931) – Artwork by Luis
        Miguel Arias; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/es1785.html
Fig. 5 Union Flag 1801–Present – Artwork by Clay Moss; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/gb-
        hist.html#hist
Fig. 6 Austro-Hungarian Empire – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly (Pennant House Advisory)
Fig. 7 German Confederation / Empire – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly (Pennant House Advisory)
Fig. 8 Sweden-Norway Union Jack – Artwork by Zeljko Heimer; see
        http://www.fotw.net/flags/xn-s-a03.html#descr
Fig. 9 Canada (1867–70) – Artwork by Herman Dee Wael; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/ca-
        1868.html
Fig. 10 & 11 Australia's National Ensigns/Flags – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly; see
        http://www.flagsaustralia.com.au/AustralianFlag.html
Fig. 12 Fiji – Artwork by Zeljko Heimer; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/fj.html
Fig. 13 New Zealand – Artwork by Clay Moss; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/nz.html
Fig. 14 Tuvalu – Artwork by Clay Moss; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/tv.html
Fig. 15 Central America (1823–38/41) – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly; see Fig. 17 of ICV 21
        (Buenos Aires) Lecture – Caudillos, Coups, Constitutions and Changes: An Analysis of
        Flag Changes in Latin America.
Fig. 16 Mother Flag of Venezuela – Artwork by António Martins; see
        http://www.fotw.net/flags/ve-hist2.html#1813
Fig. 17 Slavic Colours (Russia) – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly (Pennant House Advisory)
Fig. 18 Arab Literature Club – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly (Pennant House Advisory)
Fig. 19 Arab Revolt Flag – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly (Pennant House Advisory)
Fig. 20 Palestinian Flag – Artwork by Ralph D. Kelly (Pennant House Advisory)
Fig. 21 United Arab Republic – Artwork by Zeljko Heimer; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/eg-
        uar.html
Fig. 22 United Arab States – Artwork by António Martins; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/sy-
        his2.html#1946
Fig. 23 Federated Arab Republics – Artwork by Zeljko Heimer; see
        http://www.fotw.net/flags/eg-1972.html
Fig. 24 "United" Arab Flags – AFP Photo published in "*The Age*" (Melb.) newspaper, 10 April
        2011, p.12; see http://www.theage.com.au/world/egyptian-soldiers-beat-protesters-as-
        tension-rises-20110409-1d8il.html
Fig. 25 Ethiopian tri-colour – Artwork by; Ivan Sache; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/et.html
Fig. 26 Ghana – Artwork by Zeljko Heimer; see http://www.fotw.net/flags/gh.html
Fig. 27 British "Coronation" Flag – Vexillological archives of Ralph G. C. Bartlett.
Fig. 28 Central Powers "Patriotic Flag" Card; see http://www.ww1-propaganda-
        cards.com/images/CePointro3.JPG

Notes:

[1] King Ferdinand III of Castile achieved the permanent union of the crowns of Castile and Leon in 1230 through inheritance and conquest and this was signified by the quartering of their arms, which was also used as a banner.

[2] The Spanish flag shown at Fig. 4 is technically the War Ensign of 1785 –1931 and also the combined State and War Flag between 1843–1931. It is shown because it was the first time the modern graphic design was used to represent Spain nationally. Additional source: "*Banderas de España*" (1984 Edition), by José Luis Calvo Peréz & Luis Gravalos Gonzalez (Silex – Madrid, Spain)

[3] Colonial Naval Defence Act (UK) – 7 April 1865. Also refer to;
   "Australian State Flags (1865–1904): A British Admiralty Legacy"– Footnote 1, by Ralph D. Kelly, "*Report of the 13th International Congress of Vexillology – Melbourne 1989*", p.41 (Flag Society of Australia – 1993).

[4] Merchant Shipping (Colours) Act (UK) 1889. Also refer to;
   "*Canada's Flag: A Search for a Country*" by John Ross Matheson, pp. 25, 38, 40, & 82 (G.K. Hall & Co., Boston – 1980)

[5] Constitutional independence initially came to all then self-governing British Dominions, being; Australia, Canada, Irish Free State, New Zealand and South Africa, in the 1930's & 40's, after the adoption by each Dominion's Parliament of the "Statute of Westminster" Act (UK) – 11 December 1931. Starting in 1947, colonial independence took the form of a formal granting of independence from the United Kingdom to the particular colony, protectorate, and or territory.

[6] Argentine colours, see "*The World Encyclopedia of FLAGS*" by Alfred Znamierowski, p.128 (Lorenz Books – 1999).
Also refer to; ICV 21 (Buenos Aires – 2005) Lecture – "Caudillos, Coups, Constitutions, and Changes: An Analysis of Flag Changes in Latin America"– Footnotes 7, 8, 9 & 10, by Ralph D. Kelly, "*Vexilobaires 2005*", p.373 (ICV 21 Report–2009)

[7] "*The World Encyclopedia of FLAGS*" by Alfred Znamierowski, p.116–117 (Lorenz Books – 1999).

[8] Pan-Slavic Congress of 1848; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague_Slavic_Congress,_1848

[9] Pan-Slavic Colours – meaning; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan-Slavic_colors

[10] All-Palestine Government Flag; refer to "*The Flag Bulletin*" XXX:3/141 – May-June 1991, pp.93–109, and also as reported on http://www.fotw.net/flags/ps.html (quoting Qassimiya – 1970: 29–33).
Palestinian Flag; refer to "*The Flag Bulletin*" XXX:3/141 – May-June 1991, pp.93–109, and also as reported on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestinian_flag
Formal adoption of a Palestinian Flag; refer to "*The Flag Bulletin*" XXX:3/141 – May–June 1991, pp.93–109.
The origins and history of the Pan-Arab Colours refer to "Flags in the World of Islam" (Tony Burton) in "*Crux Australis*" Vol.23/4, No.96 – Oct.–Dec. 2010, pp.146–199.

[11] The "United Arab States" was initiated in 1958 between Egypt and Syria, forming the "United Arab Republic" and Yemen Arab Republic, but it was never formalised, either politically or flag-wise. The flag shown is that used by Iraq (1963–90), who entered into an agreement to reform a new "United Arab Republic", but it never materialised. Source: "*FLAGS: Through the Ages and Across the World*", by Whitney Smith (McGraw-Hill–1975), pp. 154, 243, & 298.

About the Author

Ralph has been interested in flags since childhood. In 1983 he became a co-founding member of Flags Australia (formerly Flag Society of Australia) and has served continuously on its Executive, and is currently its President. He has contributed many articles to Flags Australia's journal, "*Crux Australis*" and has been heavily involved in the publication of eight flag charts, and given Lectures to community groups about Australian and international flags.

Internationally he has attended fourteen International Congresses of Vexillology, starting with ICV 11 (Madrid) in 1985. Since then he has presented nine Lectures. Ralph was the Congress Coordinator for the 13 ICV (Melbourne) in 1989, and served as FIAV's Secretary-General for Congress between 1989 and 1997. In 2003 he was recognized as a Fellow of the Federation.

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Personal "Unity" Flag