All You Ever Wanted To Know About 'Oriflamme'

During fall "Welcome We-k" each year freshmen are treated to a number of enjoyable events by an organization of older students known as "Oriflamme." The title, we are told, was chosen because it was the banner carried in battle by King Louis IX of France, after whom our city, and our University, were named. But beyond these bare facts, Page One knew nothing about the symbol seen on teeshirts during the last week of August.

We can tell you a little more now, thanks to our resident flag expert, reference librarian Dorothy Claybourne. She was kind enough to lend us a paper on the Oriflamme she wrote for an Oct. 8-10 conference of fellow vexillologists. It makes fascinating, if confusing read, so here goes.

The name, she said, comes from the Latin aurum, gold, and flamma, red, and refers simply to the flag's color. Some parts of its history are also relatively clear. The Oriflamme was the church banner of the Benedictine Abbey of St. Denis, just north of Paris, which was founded in 628 by the Merovingian King Dagobert, and which owned the district called the Vexin. In 1097 England's King William II invaded the Vexin, by now the property of the French Crown.

Prince Louis, later King Louis VI the Fat, marched against King Rufus with the Abbot's banner as his standard. His victory began the Oriflamme's career as the premier flag of embattled France, carried ahead of all others in battles in which the French rulers of the Houses of Capet and Valois took part. To "raise the Oriflamme," meant to summon the armies for the defense of the territory.

Called St. Vermillion, the flag was elevated 21 times during the course of 17 wars between 1124 and 1386. No fewer than 13 kings caused it to be taken from the monastery. It was carried to four Crusades against the Infidel, twice by our patron, Saint Louis IX.

According to Claybourne, the exact appearance and origin of the Oriflamme are much harder to pin down. The living myth, to which tradition attributes 1380 years, is shrouded in legend. You can take your pick of a number of contradictory accounts.

For example: as the holy standard of Clovis, founder of the Frankish monarchy, the Oriflamme was fabled to have been brought to him by an angel. Conversely, the Abbot of St. Denis claimed to have received the ensign from King Dagobert (629-639). One story tells us that the red flag came from the blood of St. Denis, after his decapitation in 358. Described as Charlemagne's standard in the Song of Roland, tradition also tells us that it was given to him by Pope Leo III on his coronation day (Dec. 25, 800).

Accounts of the flag's appearance, Claybourne writes, are equally conflicting. Apparently red-gold can mean a lot of hues—even purple. She sums it up her research as follows. "So what have we here? We have a bright red, orange-red, red-orange, maroon flag, maybe purple. Small or large. Square, rectangular or oblong. Plain or dotted with roses, stars, crosses, even words. A banner, pennon, gonfanon. Whatever the color, size, shape, appearance, the Oriflamme had two, or three, or four, or maybe five tails, all fringed with green tassels and mounted on a golden lance. Given to Clovis by an angel, or a gift from Dagobert to the Abbot, or given to Charlemagne by the pope in Rome."

One thing, she writes, is clear in all the accounts. The Oriflamme in medieval times was a holy symbol, with magical powers to confound the foe. But the magic began to fail. When Louis IX returned from captivity in 1254 without the Oriflamme, he hoisted the Fleur-de-Lis instead, and the charmed old banner began to pass into oblivion. It was captured at Poi-tiers by the English, who may have destroyed it later after Agincourt. It's last described, in dilapidated condition, in a 1594 inventory made at the Abbey of St. Denis.

The vexillologist ends her paper on a positive note. The Oriflamme, she writes, is alive and well today in France. A red gonfanon with three tails fringed with green on a gold background, it floats over the center of the nation as the symbol of Auvergne, one of whose noblemen, Eustache, Count of Bologne, was said to have been the bearer of the Oriflamme during the First Crusade.

from: Page One
Saint Louis University
Saint Louis, Missouri
4 November 1982

Arthur Rubinstein's Salute To A Missing Flag

To the Editor:

In your articles about Maestro Arthur Rubinstein, his enduring Polish patriotism was not mentioned but is something that I believe deserves comment.

Rubinstein's deep sentiment for his native country was demonstrated by the following episode, as recorded in his memoirs: Rubinstein was invited to the inauguration of the United Nations in San Francisco and was asked to play in the San Francisco Opera House, where the representatives of all the member nations were assembled.

After playing "The Star-Spangled Banner," he looked around the great hall studded with a multitude of flags and in a loud voice declared that, since among the flags he did not see that of Poland, he would begin his concert with the Polish national anthem.

And so he did. This courageous gesture engraved his name in the grateful memory of all Poles.

OSKAR SCHENKER
New York, Dec. 23, 1982

from: The New York Times
2 January 1983
submitted by Gustavo Tracchia
Although many of our members regard vexillology as an enjoyable hobby, NAVA was founded for a more serious purpose: the scientific study of flags, which requires research and investigation. You may not have thought of yourself as much of a researcher, but if you are willing to devote some of your spare time in an interesting pursuit, you might surprise yourself. Start with something easy: find out if your city has a flag, when it was adopted, and who designed it. This might need no more than a trip to city hall and a talk with the city clerk, or it might mean looking through old city records and newspaper files to find out the information, or talking to some of the city’s “old-timers” who have had some connection with the flag. Frequently fascinating old stories come to light, such as the fact that the winner of the newspaper contest in 1895 to design a city flag for Cleveland, Ohio, one Suzie Hepburn, later married the newspaper reporter who delivered her the prize money of $50! (Who says there’s no romance in flags?)

Maybe you know of an old military flag stored away that seems as if it might have an interesting history. Finding out who made the flag, why it was made and for what it was used can become a fascinating challenge that tests your ability as puzzle-solver and researcher. Sometimes this can require some travel to armories, county court houses, libraries and visits to talk to old soldiers as you gather bits and pieces of information to trace the flag’s origin, as Capt. John M. Hartvigsen, U.S. Army, demonstrated for us at our last annual meeting with his award-winning talk on his many months of investigating the Brandywine flag’s origin.

Sometimes we have to rely entirely on written accounts to research flags, especially if they are very old. In this case we have to search out as many instances as we can from contemporary accounts by writers who saw the flag in use, try to ascertain their accuracy from what we know of the sources, compare the comments and draw conclusions. Dorothy Claybourne’s paper at NAVA-16 on the historic French battleflag known as the oriflamme is a good example of this kind of careful research.

Once you get started in research you’ll discover that one thing leads to another, and before long you have quite a bit of information. The next task is sorting through it to organize it, checking as often as possible for accuracy of facts, then coming to your conclusions. Then why not plan to tell the rest of us what you’ve found out in a 30-minute talk at our next annual meeting?

Items of interest:

If you are a philatelist as well as vexillologist, you might be interested in the UNICEF Flag Stamps Program, an annual commemorative flags-on-stamps program of sixteen U.N. members. For an illustrated brochure describing the program, write to: UNICEF Flag Stamps Program, Box 4480, United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10163.

Also, NAVA has received word that the dates for the Tenth International Congress of Vexillology have been changed to 25-30 September 1983. The location is still Oxford University, England. Information may be obtained from Mr. A.H. Hamilton-Hopkins, Berry House, Limpsfield Village, Surrey RH8 ODT, England.
From: The Kansas City Times, 18 December 1982, submitted by W.W. Ridgway

ARE YOUR DUES PAID FOR 1983?

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Montgomery’s Flag Museum Unique

Of the tens of thousands of museums in the United States and Canada, only 237 were listed in the recently released Directory of Unique Museums, a book published by Creative Communications of Kalamazoo, Michigan. Only three museums in Alabama were listed and one of those was Montgomery’s own Tumbling Waters Museum of Flags. The Military Police Corps Museum and Women’s Army Corps Museum, both of Fort McClellan, were the other listings for the State, but the listing for the Flag Museum was the most revealing.

The Museum’s listing states “This is the world’s only flag museum. Collections include more than 7,000 flag-related artifacts, including about 1,000 textile flags, clothing with flag motifs, symbols from 10,000 year old Indian pottery and symbols from Nazi Germany.” Museum officials confirm that these facts are correct with the exception that the Museum has closer to 3,000 textile flags in its Collection with more than 1,000 additional flags on loan to it at any one time. The listing further states “The Museum features educational programs, guided tours and a Registry of Contemporary Personal Flags which seeks to catalog the million and a half such flags which are estimated to exist worldwide.”

NORTH AMERICAN VEXILLOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
OAKS, PENNSYLVANIA 19456

William Driver Award
presented to
Mr. Robert S. Gauron
for the best presentation made at the annual meeting of the NORTH AMERICAN VEXILLOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
“The Life and Achievements of Old glory Driver—Godfather to the United States Flag”
October 1979, Salem, Massachusetts

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