

OCCASIONAL PAPER 54

Call the Hands

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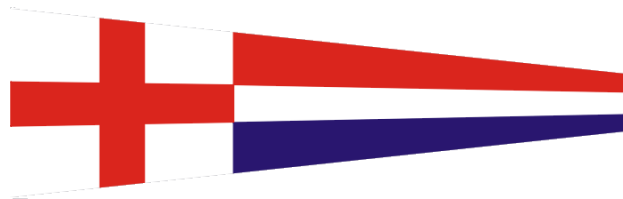
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While researching naval history Society's Senior Researcher, John Smith regularly encounters mythology which is perpetuated over time unless cation is taken to correct them. This paper is intended to correct misunderstanding about the origin of the Church Pennant flown in many navies.

John Smith is a long-term member of the Society and former Committee member. As a researcher he regularly responds to a broad spectrum of requests from around the World.

THE CHURCH PENNANT: A NAVAL FURPHY



The Church Pennant is hoisted as a signal indicating that the ship's company is engaged in divine service. It may also be flown by a vessel or craft when carrying a body or ashes from shore to a ship for committal at sea or by a vessel or craft carrying out a funeral. It is also flown by Shore Establishments when church services are being conducted.

It is accepted routine that when the Church Pennant is flown that;

- other vessels should reduce speed and pass with caution.
- other warships do not send signals except in an emergency. This applies to marks of respect and saluting other warships.

[So, what is the origin of the Church Pennant?](#)

There is an oft-repeated version that attributes it to the Dutch Wars of 1652 to 1674. Both opposing Admirals, Tromp and Blake, were devoutly religious and agreed that, when it became necessary to carry out the burial of the dead or to conduct divine service, the ship concerned would hoist the national flags of both countries during which operation no action would take place. This combined hoist was reputedly the red cross of St. George to which was attached the red, white and blue horizontal tricolour bands of the Netherlands flag.

Incidentally the earliest recorded use of the Church Pennant is to be found in article 10 of the RN Additional Instructions of 1778.

This is a naval furphy !!!

Well before the Dutch Wars there was a similar pennant in naval use called the Common or Union Pennant which had no meaning as a signal flag when flown by itself. However, when flown in conjunction with other flags, it could be used to indicate;

- working the cable.
- man overboard.
- Recall for ship's boats.

The Common Pennant was also the masthead pennant worn by all British private war vessels until the middle 1800s, the three red, white and blue stripes representing the red, white and blue squadrons.

When these squadrons were abolished in 1864, the horizontal stripes were removed and the Common Pennant became what we now know as the Commissioning Pennant.

As it had no individual meaning during the Dutch Wars which it's use definitely preceded, it was used as the Church Pennant.

In an unrelated epilogue, the Dutch Wars have a connection with the Royal Australian Navy. In 1667, a Dutch force of marines sailed up the Medway, attacked the fort and occupied the small town of Queenborough after which HMS/HMAS Queenborough was named. This was the first invasion and occupation of part of Britain since William the Conqueror in 1066.

Further Reading:

Encyclopedia Britannica, [Anglo-Dutch Wars](#)

Encyclopedia Britannica, [Raid on the Medway](#)