

THE FLAG BULLETIN

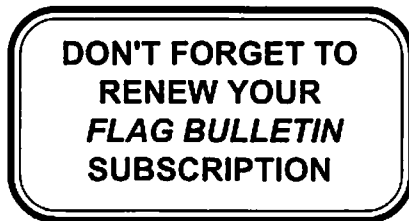
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DESIGNING MY FLAG

by *David F. Phillips*

In 1990 I bought a house, and there was room for two flagpoles on the front. Naturally I would fly the American flag from one, but I thought it would be fine to fly a personal flag from the other. But I didn't have a personal flag, so I needed to design one. After forty years as a heraldist, it seemed obvious to me that the best design solution would be a banner of my arms.

If I were making up this story I would say I then set about designing a coat of arms, so I could have a design to make a flag from. But I already had a coat of arms. Under the ancient law of arms a person of sufficient rank may assume arms for himself as long as the arms do not duplicate those borne by someone else in the same country. The law varies from country to country as to what this rank has to be, but I believe all Americans qualify for arms because we don't recognize nobiliary distinctions of rank in our country. The same is true, for example, in Switzerland, where arms are borne by burghers and peasants and there is no nobiliary establishment.

Some countries have qualified the ancient laws of arms by requiring, as in England for example, that arms be granted by heraldic authorities under a Crown or its successor institution. We don't have a crown here and there has never been any such legislation for Americans. So in my view the law of arms applies in the United States in its ancient form, and any American may assume arms provided no other American (outside his family anyway) bears the same arms. Good practice, although not the law of arms, would dictate that these

assumed arms not duplicate those borne elsewhere either.

Since I had the right to assume arms, I decided years ago to assume some. What design should I use? By this time I knew enough to choose a pattern simple but unique, something I could draw myself with my extremely limited skill (no animals for example), something that would look good in color or in outline and something that would not have seemed out of place in a medieval arms roll. I knew better than to follow debased modern practice and start with a quartered field, dropping symbols of my work and hobbies into each quarter.

Fig. 1 is a rendering of my coat of arms. I began with a plain gold (i.e., yellow) field – in my mind (since a heraldic artist can choose whatever shade he wishes of the basic six tinctures) a rich yellow with some red in it. I chose this because in my experience yellow fields make the most strikingly beautiful arms – they stand out on a page of arms of other tinctures. A plain field is common in the classic period of medieval heraldry.

Then I laid out a single quarter – not a canton (traditionally in heraldry, although not in flags, one-ninth of the field) but a good sturdy *francquartier* occupying the traditional upper left fourth of the shield as seen from the front. I wanted something *semé*, or strewn, on the quarter. The idea was to allude to being an American by using the *basic pattern* of the American flag – an upper left quarter strewn with small geometric charges. But instead of stars I used *ermine spots*. These are figures representing the black-tipped tails of ermines, attached to a garment made of their white fur.

Ermine is a heraldic fur (distinct technically from both colors and metals) and the ermine spot is a simple figure used only in heraldry. The three dots at the top represent the stitch-

Fig. 1: BASIC COAT OF ARMS

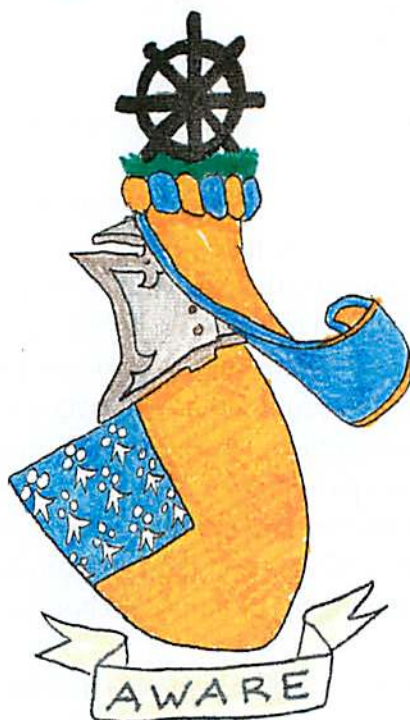


Fig. 7: SCOTTISH-PATTERN STANDARD

ing - heraldic literature reveals dozens of ways to show an ermine spot (Fig. 2). By using ermine spots instead of stars I was not *copying* the American flag, just *alluding* to it, and was at the same time alluding to the importance of heraldry in my life by adopting a figure found nowhere else.

And now for the tinctures of the quarter. Ermine is traditionally black on white, following nature, but there are variants - white on black, gold on black, and so on. Variants beyond those three tinctures are exceptionally rare. I chose white on blue, for two reasons. First, blue and white are the colors of Israel (see Numbers 15:38) and could allude to my Jewish ethnicity more subtly than by using a Star of David or some other direct emblem. And second, ermine in white on blue is almost unique - I know of only one other example in the world and not on a *francquartier* - and so by using it I could ensure that my arms would not duplicate someone else's, without having to use a unique charge or complicated partition lines.

This composition - blazoned *or, a quarter azure ermined argent*, met all my requirements. It had a medieval simplicity and a simple blazon, was unique but easily drawn, looked just as elegant in outline as in color, and made three important allusions to my life (American, Jewish, heraldist). Actually there was a theoretical ambiguity in outline form - plain ermine in the traditional black on white were the ancient arms of the Duchy of Brittany, and carrying the basic arms (*Stammwappen*) in a geometric figure on a plain field was a classic method of showing bastardy. So in *outline* my arms could have been taken for those of a medieval Bastard of Brittany. But not in color. I was willing to take this risk.

I use the ermine spot (by itself or in an oval) as a heraldic badge. In theory this, rather than my arms, should be used

Fig. 2: ERMINE SPOTS



Fig. 3: ERMINE SPOT STAMP
(ENLARGED)

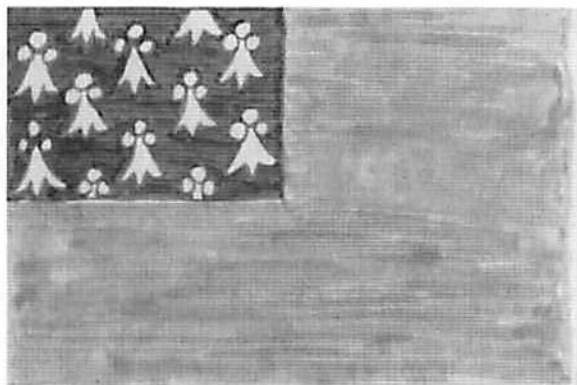


Fig. 4: BANNER OF ARMS

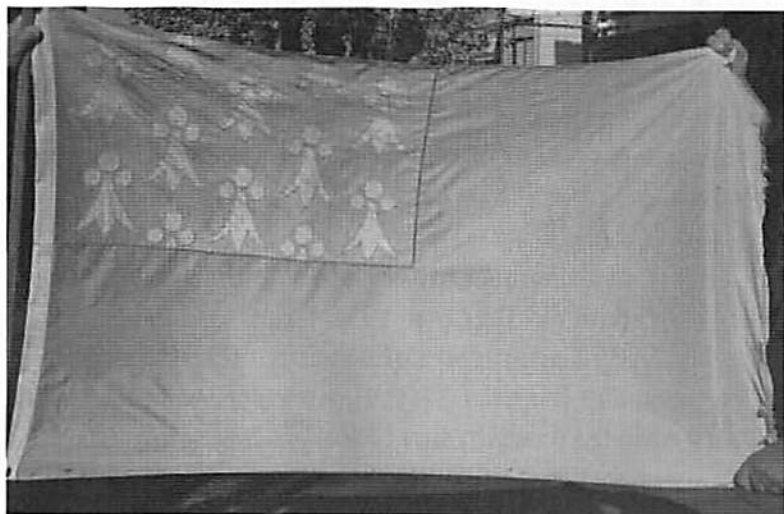
FIGURES 1, 2, 3, 4, AND 7 ACCOMPANYING THIS ESSAY
ARE BY THE AUTHOR.

to mark the livery of my servants. I'm working on that. I have a rubber stamp with the ermine spot device (drawn myself) and I use it as an ownership mark in some of my heraldic books. See Fig. 3 (p. 195).

At the international heraldic congress in Dublin in 2002, the herald-painters at the office of the Chief Herald of Ireland made an *occasional roll*, which is a record of the arms of the participants at a specific occasion. In olden times the occasion was usually a tournament (as with the *Military Roll*) or a battle (as with the *Roll of Caerlaverock*). This roll was of the 25th International Congress of Genealogical and Heraldic Sciences. I thought my simple but elegant medieval-style arms would look pretty good on the roll and they duly painted me in (although they got the field wrong, giving me white instead of yellow).

How should I project these arms onto a banner? The traditional usage prescribed a square field, perhaps with a compony border (containing alternating compartments in the principal colors). But a flag in the traditional British naval proportions of 3x5 pleased me better – it gave a more ample fly, showing more of that delicious rich yellow; and it looked better alongside my American flag, bought off the shelf in those proportions instead of the official 10x19. The compony border isn't usually used for flags in oblong proportions (although there are exceptions, for example the flag of Prince Edward Island). What I ended up with is shown in Fig. 4 (p. 195). I had Steve Tyson's flag company in San Francisco cut a pattern for the *appliqué* ermine spots and make me two flags. Fig. 5 shows one of them. Over the years the wind and the sun wore them out and a tree in front of my house overgrew the flagpole sockets, so I didn't replace them. But they looked beautiful while they lasted.

Fig. 5: ACTUAL PHILLIPS FLAG
(PHOTOGRAPH BY LES WISNER)



While I was designing arms I adopted a crest, too – a white pegasus. This was an allusion to my name, Phillips, which means in Greek *one who loves horses*. The wings on the horse made it a traditional symbol of imagination. On the visible wing of the pegasus I added a purple roundel with an ermine spot. The roundel represented a dose of LSD, and the ermine spot echoed a charge from the shield, an established heraldic practice. For a motto I chose AWARE – this was a neat bit of heraldic wordplay, awareness being a Buddhist objective, and a bit of a boast as a heraldic motto should be, but also alluding to my birthplace in Delaware. As a single word it also qualified as a war cry.

Fig. 6 (p. 199) is a copy of a tile made for me from my design by Maitreya Bowen. It follows the Tudor traditions of *Prince Arthur's Book* and other manuscripts of the time¹ by

showing the arms on a banner, held by a heraldic beast (in my case my crest-beast) standing on a *compartment* representing natural ground. I used an eight-spoked wheel, a traditional symbol of Buddhism representing the Noble Eightfold Path, as a finial for the flagstaff. I had Maitreya put California poppies on the compartment and surround it at base by wavy lines of blue and white, the heraldic representation of water (I live in San Francisco, a block from the ocean).

I have since changed my crest to a simpler one, easier to draw - as shown in Fig. 1 (p. 193). I now use the Buddhist wheel as a crest, resting on a grassy mound so it won't seem disconnected at the base. Fig. 7 (p. 193) shows a flag in the pattern used by Scottish chiefs for their clan standards. The arms are at the hoist. The fly is divided between the principal colors of the arms and adorned with the crest image (the wheel), the ermine spot badge, and the California poppy (a plant badge) and bisected by a diagonal panel bearing the war cry. As a final touch I use the wheel again, as a finial.

NOTE

1. See, for example, those in Joseph Foster, *Banners, Standards and Badges from a Tudor Manuscript in the College of Arms*, [London] 1904, pp. 22-58.

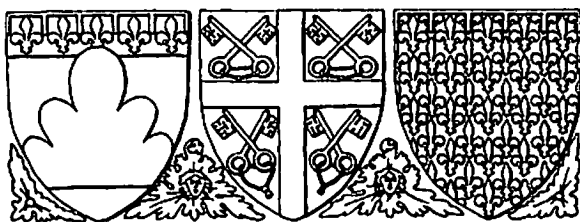


Fig. 25: FOURTEENTH CENTURY BAS-RELIEF FROM THE PALAZZO DEI CONSOLI, GUBBIO, ITALY, SHOWING THE ARMS OF GUBBIO, THE CHURCH, AND ANJOU

Fig. 6: ARMORIAL TILE BY MAITREYA BOWEN

