

Review of *In the Service of Our Country: The History of the United States Service Flag* by Jerry E. Dutschek. Hardcover, Color, 348 pages (with over 500 photographs), Elm Grove Publishing, 2020. ISBN-978-1-943492-78-7



BOOK REVIEW

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Like “Old Glory,” the home front service flag is an emblem of pride, patriotism, and sacrifice. The US service flag, however, was designed, initially, as a visible means by which American families could honor one of its members who was serving in a wartime environment. In this colorful comprehensive study, Jerry E. Dutschek introduces the reader to the history of the service flag by explaining the impetus of his multiyear research efforts, namely how he stumbled upon his grandfather’s World War II collection of US military patches in an attic as a nine-year-old. He has collected vintage military memorabilia ever since, but it was flags that resonated with him the most, for as he explained, “They seem to have actually absorbed the history that surrounded them” (p. 6).

Dutschek has over 20 years of experience appraising military related antiques and collectibles; he is the expert in the field and provides his contact information at the end of the book. Additionally, he has collected military artifacts for over 40 years and has owned and operated the Military Collectibles Shop in West Allis, Wisconsin (a suburb of Milwaukee) since 2001. He also serves as a Milwaukee PBS Expert Appraiser for military collections/memorabilia and home front flags. Dutschek moderates the home front category on the US Military Forum website as well.

Dutschek begins his book with a Prologue and page about his lifelong search to locate and document the beginnings, usage, and meanings behind an expansive variety of home front service flags. As his collection of flags and banners grew, he continued his research and discovered there was no single source reference book on “the wartime US and related home front flags” (p. 6). Friends and fellow collectors supplied him with additional information, photocopies, and hand drawings of flags. Over 10 years later, the culmination of their collaborative efforts resulted in the publication of Dutschek’s research, which he refers to as a “photographic reference collector’s book” (p. 6). In his Prologue of two-full pages, he specifically thanks 43 individuals, 12 organizations and historical societies, and 19 colleagues at Alverno College where he serves as the Director of Audio Visual and Production. He emphasizes that the scope of his book is not all encompassing and acknowledges a variety of related organizations that assisted him throughout his work, such as the North American Vexillological Association (NAVA), Getty Images, Imperial War Museum, National Archives and Records Administration, US Military Forum, and the Canadian Imperial War Museum, among several others. Later in his narrative,



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Dutschek includes a brief discussion about Canadian service flags, noting that Canadian families displayed service flags as well with a centered maple leaf where the US flag featured a star.

Dutschek is quick to explain that he is still searching and scouring collections to locate the more elusive flags and welcomes referrals regarding historical home front flags not featured in the book. A vast number of flags were produced and flown on the American home front with some usage prior to the First World War and again after the Second World War. In order to limit the scope of his selection, which includes both common and very unique flags, Dutschek points out that the majority showcased in his book are from World War I through World War II. His table of contents specifies types of service flags for those who are eager to read ahead or out of sequence, depending on their interest.

Following the Prologue, Dutschek includes a one-page introduction in which he captures the reader's attention with a succinct explanation as to the significance of the service flag:

This book is a story of the flags of war. However, it is not of the blood stained and tattered colors that were flown in battle, but rather the quiet story of the flags that were left behind on the home front. These are the flags that hung proudly in the windows of homes, and flew over factories, churches and town squares. This is the story of the flags that rallied the people together, stirred their hearts with patriotism, provided hope and signified the ultimate loss. (p. 9)

Dutschek's book includes 33 chapters. His first chapter is titled "The Service Flag in World War I" and his last is "The Service Flag in Later Years." With a keen and inclusive eye to detail, he extends the narrative by nuancing the use of the service flag and includes other interesting chapters such as "Gold Star Mothers," "Multiple Star Service Flags," "City and Town Service Flags," "House of Worship Service Flags," "Unusual Service Flag Star Patterns," and "School, Group and Organizational Service Flags and Banners." Accompanied by vibrant images and thoughtful commentary, each chapter illustrates just how popular the service flag and the service flag design were on the American home front. For example, in his chapter about the service flag in World War II, Dutschek notes that the service flag design was incorporated in sweetheart jewelry and mother, sister and sweetheart souvenir pillow covers (p. 177). His book, however, starts with World War I, where Dutschek begins his historical journey and takes the reader through time, ending with a discussion about the popularity of the service flag during the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991).

To start, he describes the home front service flags honoring the family's service member. The service flag, since its original design, has gone through a number of changes in design, shape, materials used, colors, printed or embroidered, and message through its most recent use in the 1990s, with one exception—the star, or stars included on the flag, still represent an individual service member.

The photographs of the actual service flags and official banners are strategically placed throughout each chapter and include detailed descriptive captions. Each photograph, illustration, poster, postcard, image, or period advertisement, whether in color or black and white, indicates the owner of the flag or military collection, in which the original flag, defects and all, was found. Most are from the author's collection. The captions also include the name of the photographer and/or newspaper agency. Another aspect of the photography that is useful is the inclusion or depiction of family members, homes, places, and historical artifacts of the American past. Such notations deepen the reader's understanding of the pride and patriotism of those who displayed the flags.

The first section of Dutschek's work describes the service flag in World War I. The idea of a service flag for the American soldier came from Captain James G. "Mac" McIlroy of Cleveland (p. 106). His design was realized in the early days of America's involvement in the First World War. The design included a field of white with a red border and large vertical blue bars to represent the service members. He did not use stars to avoid resemblance to the national flag. His design was not embraced by the American public. A banner with a blue star, created by Captain Robert L. Queisser in 1917, however, was (p. 11). The flag, in banner form, consisted of a blue star on a field of white surrounded by a red border. The blue star represented a person in service to their country. The American service flag was also known as the "Blue Star Banner" or "Son in Service Flag." His design was patented in November 1917. Manufacturing materials included cardboard, oil cloth, silk, and wool and a window-hung banner became a popular shape for display. The flag was found on pennants, postcards, bags, stamps, sheet music, and even artillery projectiles. An early revision was that of changing the blue star into a gold star for mourning the death of the service member.

Service flags soon displayed multiple stars for families having multiple service members. Even schools, clubs, work groups, and other organizations created larger banners with stars for its service members (and sometimes embroidered names of those members) and organizational printing and emblems. Still, Dutschek maintains, "McIlroy's design should be considered the original service flag and is responsible for the many variations that followed" (p. 106). Perhaps this statement could have been introduced earlier

in the book so as to underscore this assertion. Crediting a specific individual for the origins of the American service flag depends on the historical context and specific design. Dutschek is correct in giving credit to Captain McIlroy as he was the first to design a service flag. Dutschek expands this discussion by including his obituary posted by Captain McIlroy's family on the West Point obituary site in which it states that McIlroy deliberately rejected the use of stars on the flag to avoid resemblance to or confusion with the national flag (p. 106). For this reason, Dutschek's second chapter is about Captain Robert Queisser and his design with the star. This chapter is entitled "The Father of the Service Flag (As We Know It)."

Overall, however, Dutschek's narrative flows very well in terms of timing and topics. He is thorough in his research and also discusses "branch of service service flags" (p. 122). World War I service flags added embroidered "branch of service" symbols and lettering to the individual star representation. Branch of service included Army, Navy, Marines, and various Army Corps units. The photographs of these flags are both colorful and uniquely descriptive in representations embroidered on the flag to enhance the individual star. Dutschek explains that family members had a great sense of pride in displaying a loved one's service to their country and wanted to indicate the specific branch of service they were serving. He adds that there were several manufacturers including The Central Novelty Company of New York and the United Service Flag Company of Ohio (p. 122).

Paying close attention to detail, Dutschek includes a lengthy text describing proposed rules for the proper display of the service flag and who was entitled to display it. It had been written for the *Official Bulletin*. Dated August 1918, the article was published in *Baltimore*, the merchants and manufacturers monthly magazine (p. 115). The article was prepared for the *Official Bulletin* by Brigadier General Nathan William MacChesney who outlined the proper use of the service flag. Included were several items of special interest:

1. Representation by star for men and women in military service on active duty
2. Blue Star – signifying individual in the service
3. Gold Star – meaning the ultimate or supreme sacrifice (death), killed in action
4. Silver Star – designating wounded service member

By the end of World War II, there were many other designs for service flags awaiting US Patent Office approval and some ultimately received such approval.

Dutschek's discussion details some of the other designs and the evolution of the service flag in the

Second World War. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 ignited a surge in patriotism that led manufacturers to new production techniques and the use of synthetic textiles such as rayon. Window banners with branch insignia and even embroidered biographical details of the service member were also included. The gold star service flag returned as a public and outward display of sacrifice as did the multiple service stars family flag. Dutschek's photographed collection, which is included throughout the monograph, is extensive, professional, and memorable.

The service flag reappeared during the Korean Conflict, although to a limited degree. In 1968, the US Department of Defense authorized the flags for display during the Vietnam War, but again, there appeared little public support. After the Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in 1990, the US public responded with a "support our troops" mentality and enthusiasm. Dutschek notes that both service flags and yellow ribbons became evident. The yellow ribbon has a history of its own and had become the symbol for a soldier's safe homecoming (p. 345).

Dutschek succeeded with this collector's book in reminding us of the patriotism and pride displayed by American families as they honored sons and daughters in wartime service with the United States service flag. He collected and meticulously researched these flags, including the stories behind them. His study could also be considered a coffee table book for those with limited knowledge of the service flags. It includes photographs of more than 280 service flags as well as related artifacts/memorabilia. His efforts were a time-intensive labor of love and his book is significant because many of these authentic items came from private collections that were previously unpublished. Through his lifelong work, Dutschek has embedded himself in the history of the US service flag. As he wrote at the beginning, "This book is a story of the flags of war" (p. 9). He has memorialized them for a wide and general audience.

From a scholarly perspective, in-text citations or footnotes could have been included for very specific historical details should the reader want to learn more. However, this should not detract from Dutschek's credibility as a respectable researcher of vintage service flags. *In the Service of Our Country* is available from Elm Grove Publishing, Dutschek's military collectibles shop and online store catalog, and Amazon. It appears first on Amazon when conducting a search for books on service flags. Today, the reader will occasionally see a modern service flag on the front door of an American home, at least in Wisconsin where Dutschek's shop is located. For those who understand the meaning and power behind the star, such as veterans and military families, his book

will certainly awaken or rekindle an interest in the United States service flag. The stories behind the sacrifice and pageantry of the service flag will deeply move those who were in service to our country and the individuals who in one way or another supported them. Dutscheck's ambitious undertaking to photograph and document US service flags is commendable, given that the amount of information is extensive, scattered, and sometimes still hidden history. For that reason, he plans to follow up and publish a second volume that will include many other home front flags such as Ship Building, Factory Production, Liberty Loan, War Bond, and Army/Navy E award flags. Anyone interested in vintage military memorabilia and historical flags will find

his research a valuable contribution to veteran studies—the past, present, and future. As Dutscheck concludes, “Keep ‘em flying!”

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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