

Flag Confetti

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ABSTRACT

Upon presentation of a box labelled 'Birdwood Flag' from storage in Newcastle, thousands of tiny fragments of silk were discovered inside. These pieces are the remains of the Birdwood Flag, created by the Field Forces Fund in 1917 and presented on the front line to General Birdwood. This paper explores the procedures adopted to recreate the flag, piece by piece for display using as much of the original flag as possible. The sheer magnitude of the task was daunting, due to the unknown size of the flag and the thousands of pieces. Some pieces are smaller than a five cent piece, while the largest section is the size of an A5 sheet. The decision to recreate the flag was challenging due to ethical considerations and questions regarding military 'laid up' flags, the fragility of the silk, the placement of each piece within the 'whole' flag and the missing dedication plaques.

THE CREATION OF A FLAG

The outbreak of World War One saw an unprecedented number of young Australian men enlist and travel to the front line. Due to the number of men who left Australian communities, the public interest in their welfare and day to day activities was of paramount importance to the Australian communities from where these men had come. The press of the time were at the forefront of information disseminated to the public at home in Australia. This meant that the wider community was willing to assist in the war effort in any format.

Miss Dora Sparke from Newcastle was deeply involved in the War Effort at home, and was instrumental in the establishment of the Field Forces Fund (NSW) in 1915. She became aware that while the AIF had been donated a Union Jack, she was concerned they did not have their own flag to fly. Miss Sparke posted advertisements in local papers, asking for donations towards the creation of an Australian flag for presentation to the AIF. The inception and creation of the Birdwood Flag is therefore well documented in local papers of the time.

Due to the involvement of the Field Forces Fund who sent care packages regularly to the front line, the community undertook fund raising for the flags creation. This was widely reported on in the local papers, including the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Northern Times*.

The flag was consequently created in 1916-17, most likely by Miss Sparke and her sewing circle.

The Birdwood Flag was created in New South Wales, by the ladies of the Field Forces Fund in 1916-1917. (See Image 1).



*Image 1: The Birdwood Flag c.1924
(Image from The University of Newcastle)*

Pieced together from silk, with cotton thread, the flag is an Australian Red Ensign, known at the time to be the version of the Australian flag most widely used by the common Australian.

One current question is to whether the flag was made to regulation size. The contributions from the public were put towards not only the construction of the flag and its pole, but also the transportation to the Australian soldiers on the front line. It was decided that the flag was to be presented directly to General Birdwood, 'for the Australian Imperial Force, in appreciation of the gallantry of our troops' (1). So on 12th September, 1917, the flag was presented to Birdwood, on the field in France.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FLAG

The Birdwood Flag is one of the only known examples of Australian flags directly donated to the AIF during World War One. The flag has a clear provenance due to its widely publicised conception and creation and is important as part of Newcastle's history. Further, the flag and the record of its creation stands as an important testimony of the war effort back home in Australia, whilst the troops were on the front line. It embodies Australia's national patriotism and pride for its military forces.

The flags' significance as a historical and social icon is well understood as the soldiers had a reverence for the sacredness of the flag, their own Australian flag, under which they were fighting. At the end of the war, General Birdwood, who whilst being a member of the British Imperial Forces, recognised the importance of the flag to his Australian troops and with reverence, bought the flag back to Newcastle to be laid up in the Christ Church Cathedral. Further General Birdwood was Australia's first General in World War One and would go on to become Australia's first Field Marshall, for this reason alone, if no other, the flag is of great significance to the military and Australia.

RE-DISCOVERING THE FLAG

In her 2014 article Bronwyn Orrock outlines the discovery of the Birdwood Flag in the archives of Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle, during research for her thesis. The flag had been laid up in 1922 when it was installed into the Christ Church Cathedral of Newcastle.

Over time the flag slowly deteriorated, which was traditionally what occurred to a laid up military flag. It is understood that military flags, once 'laid up', slowly deteriorate until they fall from their poles as they '*are not disposed of or destroyed when their appearance has deteriorated beyond recognition, they are meant to be left to turn to dust as do the bodies of the fallen soldiers who served them*' (2).

The Birdwood Flag however was not disposed of, but pieces were carefully collected as they fell over time, put into a small plastic bag and stored in a small shoe box within the cathedral.

The 2014 discovery of the flag led to its delivery at International Conservation Services (ICS) in order to ascertain whether it was possible to reconstruct the flag from the remnants. A committee for the Birdwood Flag had asked if it were possible to aim to recreate the flag as close to the original size and form as possible and to place the flag back to display. Their intention was to apply for a Copeland Foundation grant for the flags' conservation. When the flag arrived in the laboratory in Chatswood, to all intents and purpose, it looked like a box of shattered burgundy confetti. The flag had been taken from the original shoe box and placed in layers, into a large polyethylene textile box from Albox.

The larger pieces had been layered with a long calico covered Dacron pad, interleaved with white nylon netting and carefully placed so they had minimum contact with each other (*See Image 2*). Despite this, the smaller pieces were still contained in the original plastic bag and the familiar smell of old silk permeated the box.



Image 2: The Birdwood Flag interleaved with tulle in new archival box (Image by Bronwyn Orrock)

1. Sparke[s], Dora 1916 Australian Flag for the AIF in 'Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate' Thursday August 31st 1916, p.5
2. Army Australia 2015 www.army.gov.au/Our-history/Traditions/Colours-Standards-Guidons-and-Banners

The larger pieces had been laid out where possible in colours. The smaller sections were still held within the original plastic bag into which they'd been swept at the Cathedral. The majority of sections were the deep red of the body of the flag. The largest of these is perhaps the size of a paperback book. However all of the sections have multiple splits and tears, frayed and raw edges, which have been exacerbated by storage in a plastic bag, in a small cardboard box for more than 30 years. The larger sections were curled and turned over themselves and were far too fragile to easily handle.

It was sad to see the flag in such a condition, however over a series of days sorting through the confetti, where possible sections became readily identifiable. From what was sorted, the following sections of the flag were identified;

UNION JACK

Seams including the juncture between the middle and diagonal lines, the inner diagonal sections and much of the proper top right edge. (See Image 3).



Image 3: Detail of centre of Union Jack showing centre seaming (Image by author)

SEAMING

Centre seam running from the bottom right corner of the Union Jack to the bottom of the flag.

Seven sections of the outer edge seam of the flag, within the red silk

One corner seam, either top right hand fly edge or the bottom right hand fly edge

HOIST EDGE

Four sections, one which contains a loop which would have formed either the top or lower point

STARS

The Commonwealth Star (See Image 4)

Epsilon Crucis (See Image 5)

Two of the Crucis Stars (See Image 6)

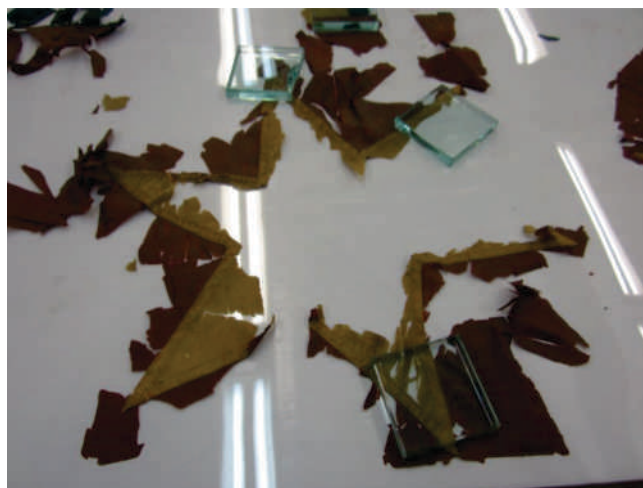


Image 4: Detail showing the Commonwealth Star (Image courtesy of the author)



Image 5: Detail of the Epsilon Crucis (Image courtesy of the author)



Image 6: Detail of one of the Crucis Stars (Image courtesy of the author)

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The flag was 'laid-up' in 1922 and it is traditionally understood, as explained above, that the flag was meant to simply fall from its pole and be swept up once it was dust. This then posed a moral dilemma in our plan for the treatment proposal, as to whether the recreation of this flag from the remaining pieces, was an ethical decision. Should the flag not simply be put back into its small shoe box, taken back into the Cathedral store and left to simply desiccate and disappear? While we were asking ourselves these questions it was discovered that the current treatment of military 'laid-up' flag was very different. Instead of being displayed and simply left to disappear through time, these newer flags have been consistently re-housed in display cases and frames.

This allows the flags, which are already important military icons, to be on display and accessible to the Australian public. While this is not to say the old flags which were left to disintegrate were revered any less, but with newer technologies and display mechanisms, these flags are now preserved for future generations. It was therefore decided that the flags' conservation was something to pursue. It would allow us to preserve a flag which by its very creation symbolises the domestic war effort during WWI.

The other consideration in the treatment is the size of the pieces of the flag (Image 7). As the silk has deteriorated over time, it is quite powdery on the surface, this meant that any adhesive treatment would not be possible. This is because any adhesive would simply stick to the powdery surface of the silk and become detached soon after, from the underlying threads. Therefore, a stitch mounted treatment was the only option. This created issues deciding; How to physically attach the pieces? What to attach the pieces to? The size of the pieces to be utilised? What to do with the pieces not incorporated into the recreated flag? How to determine the flags' size?

While the larger sections are curled and distorted, once they are humidified they will be quite easily laid out and placed within the Ensign pattern. It is the smaller pieces which pose a much greater problem. The sheer number of pieces is daunting enough, especially when viewed inside the archive box, but it also needed to be considered that just how small a piece would be able to be stitched around for treatment?



Image 7: Overall view of identifiable sections of the Birdwood Flag (Image courtesy of the author)

It was decided for the integrity of the flag, overall appearance and practicality, that anything smaller than a centimetre square, would not be incorporated into the new flag.

PUTTING THE CONFETTI BACK TOGETHER

At the time of writing this paper, treatment had not commenced. The Committee for the flags' treatment had discovered they have been awarded a Copeland Foundation grant in early January 2016. The outline for the treatment is as follows;

The flag pieces will be sorted into colours and sections and then humidified to relax the creasing and distortion.

A new polyester based Ensign will be created, using the original flags dimensions as a guide.

The flag pieces will be placed on the new Ensign with an interleaving layer of tulle between. The identifiable sections will be placed first and the sections around those matched hopefully, by their fractured edges.

The remaining pieces of the flag, which are not readily identifiable, will be placed using their weave structure, fracture edges and colour as a guide for placement.

A second layer of tulle will be placed over the pieces of the original flag and the two layers of tulle will then be sewn together, sewing around each piece of the flag.

The flag and the new Ensign will then be sewn onto a backboard and placed into a showcase.

Tashco will build an Avelon showcase for the flag to be permanently displayed.

It is planned that the new Ensign will be created from a smooth polyester even weave fabric. Whilst this is readily accessible from modern flag makers in Australia, it will also form a stable backing material for the original silk of the flag. We have engaged a Melbourne based flag maker who is able to create a new Ensign using any of the red Pantones. While we originally planned to match the current colour of the Birdwood Flag, we have decided that the new Ensign will be one or two shades darker, or lighter, than the original pieces of the flag, in order to create a slight contrast between old and new.

The tulle used to encapsulate the remnants of the Birdwood Flag is at this stage, considered to be a deep pink polyester tulle, made in the US and widely marketed as bridal tulle. However, we are still currently pursuing the idea of a suitable silk tulle, unfortunately we doubt we will be able to source one wide enough for use with the flag.

Now on the outset of the flags' treatment there are as many unanswered questions as there are current solutions. The treatment will be exciting to conserve the box of confetti and see the Birdwood Flag emerge. Hopefully along the way we will arrive at answers to our current questions as well as those that arise during treatment. Hopefully by the time this paper is delivered we will be well into the conservation treatment and the Birdwood Flag is one step closer to going back on display for the Australian public.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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