

The Vexilloid Tabloid

Portland Flag Association

"Free, and Worth Every Penny!"

Issue 11 October 2006

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STELLAR FLAGS

By Scott Mainwaring

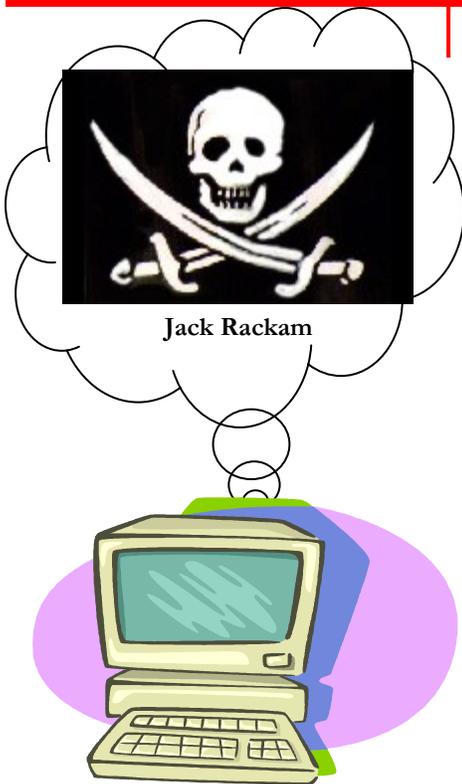
Flag design has long looked to the natural world and its phenomena as a source of inspiration and symbolism. Much of this vocabulary is earth-bound, making use of plants, animals, and landscape features. But perhaps as much of it is celestial, making use of astronomical objects like the Sun, the Moon, and the stars – this last being the focus of this article. Let's call a flag with such a relationship a *stellar* flag. At first glance, "stellar flag" is a huge category – stars on flags are in no short supply. As a rough (under-) estimate, Wikipedia (as of 10/4/06) lists 403 current and historical flags with one or more stars. But are all these as they seem? Alas, you can't necessarily tell a stellar flag just by looking at one, as not all starred flags are stellar flags.

Consider the use of the five-pointed star shape on flags. Do these represent actual astronomical stars? The answer is seldom yes-or-no. One could argue that just by being called a "star," the five-pointed shape does intrinsically represent, or at least refer to, those points of light in the night sky that are the primary defini-

tion of that word. Never mind that real stars are twinkling point sources of light (except for certain stars observed through powerful telescopes which can resolve an actual disc of light) that bear, at most, a very rough resemblance to the decagonal shapes one learns to draw as a child. Just say that it's our cultural convention to depict stars in this way, and that depiction of a natural object is what indeed is going on in almost all cases.

This may be the case, but if so, this is a very weak sense of "stellar." It seems more apt to say that, even if originally inspired by the natural astronomical object, most stars on most flags (like most stars in most graphic art) aren't depictions of any astronomical object at all, but just wonderful shapes that vexillographers have fallen in love with because of their aesthetics (simple enough for repetition, complex enough for visual interest), flexibility (they appear on flags in many colors, and have points that can multiply and take on meanings of their own), and connotations of goodness (as in, how many stars does that restaurant

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Jack Rackam

"Every normal man must be tempted at times to spit upon his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin slitting throats."

— H.L. Mencken

If you wish to compliment the editor, or to contribute in the future, contact John Hood at 503-238-7666 or vivijohn@comcast.net. If you wish to complain, call your mother.

PIRATE FLAGS OR WHAT JOHNNY DEPP DIDN'T TELL YOU

By Michael Hale

Pirate flags have always had an appeal for us iconoclasts, but the movie "Pirates of the Caribbean" has made them much more popular. — The Editor

The sight of pirates has brought fear into the hearts of ship crews through the ages. Pirating as we know it started as early as the 8th Century. In the period of the 18th and 19th Century, pirates used the graphic symbol of the flag to instill not only terror, but instant surrender. Using borrowed symbols of death, taken from gravestones in places like 17th Century Scotland, these flags warned the pirate's victims to give up without resistance, or face certain death. Stories of pirate battles were circulated by oral traditions, and no exaggerations were needed, so for a ship's crew to defend their ship and cargo, real bravery was required. Some sailors, worked nearly to death, paid little, and separated from home for months or years at a time, were willing to join what was regarded as the "colorful" life of a pirate. Often the choice was to join or die.

While much wealth could be gained in pirate raids, political intrigue played a large part. Sometimes assisted by opposing nations and alliances, pirating often involved paramilitary battles. Attempts were made to disrupt shipping lanes which supported far flung outposts of national settlements and expansion. Privateers from England, like Francis Drake, John Hawkins, and Thomas Caven-

dish had letters of marque and reprisal from the King. Drake's raid on the Spanish New World settlements and French privateers' successful raids of Spanish galleons laden with treasure were a blow to Spain's dominance. Seeing their success and acquired wealth, some privateers crossed the line and attacked ships of any nation. Some, like Henry Morgan, were as interested in fame as riches. When King James I withdrew these letters of marque, lawlessness followed. The privateers were replaced with "buccaneers," who obeyed no one and practiced horrible cruelty. Buccaneers were originally French cattle and meat preparers on the Island of Hispaniola, who hated the Spanish taxation. In revenge, they began attacking the ships on the Spanish Main. Hiding behind small islands and in inlets, their smaller boats appeared, gave chase, and overtook the heavy larger vessels.

We tend to think that the skull and cross bones flag was the worst symbol. Yet the red flag was the ultimate. It seems that the red flag is where the name "Jolly Roger" likely originated. It may have been named after the devil, "Old Roger," but I prefer to think it comes from the French term for the red flag, "Joli Rouge."

The five principles of Good Flag, Bad Flag, by Ted Kaye, are nowhere better seen at work than in pirate flags. They were simple, they used meaningful symbolism, and they stuck to basic colors. Lettering was almost void, and they were both distinctive and related to one another.

Pirate flags were rough, often made

by ships' sail makers or other crewmen. They were hand-sewn and varied each time. These symbols on the pirate flags were chosen to reveal some special aspect and some were ironic. Jack Rackham's flag, a skull and crossed swords, might indicate a bold and fierce pirate; however, when attacked by the British, he hid in the hold of his ship while two female pirates, Anne Bonny and Mary Reed, fought topside without him.



Thomas Tew

Thomas Tew chose a curved Asian scimitar. He was killed with just such a sword in a battle with an Indian ship. Henry Avery was one of few who used the skull and crossbones flag, now the traditional symbol.

Other symbols included the winged hour glass of Christopher Moody.



Christopher Moody

The wings showed how fast the sand ran out, warning sailors that the time to surrender was limited. A glass or bottle meant a toast to death. Although few had letters or words, Bartholomew Roberts (Black Bart)

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PIRATE FLAGS

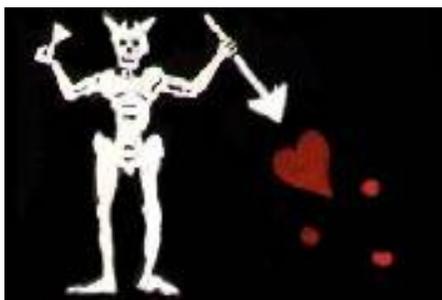
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had one version of his flag with the initials ABH and AMH. They stood for “A Barbadian’s Head” and “A Martinician’s Head.” This was a vow of revenge against the two Caribbean islands that dared to cross Roberts.



Bartholomew Roberts (Black Bart)

Blackbeard’s flag included a skeleton with horns, again harkening to the old devil. It also had an arrow piercing a heart oozing drops of blood. Simple, graphic and easily identified, these flags had one purpose: to intimidate, thus avoiding costly battles.



Edward Teach (Blackbeard)

Howell Davis took to piracy, without a pirate flag on board so they hauled up a “dirty tarpaulin.” The makeshift flag was recognized and their victim ship surrendered. Charles Vane flew an English flag from one mast, a black pirate flag from the main, a red flag from the fore, and another English flag from the ensign staff.

Most pirates were masters of deception who approached galleons and larger ships flying the friendly colors of that nation. Only when they had closed the gap did they hoist their Jolly Roger at the last minute. The ship’s trunk included flags of several nations, just in case. It soon became policy to consider any ship on the high seas a possible hostile enemy, no matter what it flew. To this day, the colors of the host nation must be flown upon entering a bay or port. Failure to identify oneself and intent is a serious breach of maritime protocol.

If you would like to own your own pirate flag, or just see what is available, visit Mike at Elmer’s Flag and Banner .

October 2006 Flutterings You Need to Know

This month’s meeting was rather sparsely attended, but there was some interesting debate over flags that Doug Lynch designed “just practicing finger exercises.” We discussed their relation to “*Good Flag, Bad Flag*,” but since Doug wasn’t there, no judgments were made. Next time there will be an article dedicated to Doug’s doodlings with full orchestration. We also discussed the recent Flag Inform Bulletins from the Flag Research Center that dealt with the prospects of a new Lesotho flag and also possible Kurdistan flag. The Flag Research Center has a new web site that I’ve listed with the others on this page.

Ted told of his recent trip to St. Louis for the finale of the Lewis and Clark expedition. He said the emphasis was on flags of the encountering tribes without any state flags being flown. And, by the way, the weather was much better than it was at Fort Clatsop last winter!

Mike showed off the flag card collection he won once. It is a beautifully assembled loose-leaf binder made by Daniel Broh-Kahn, of Phoenix, MD. Mike was having a kite festival at the coast so he wouldn’t be able to go to NAVA 40.

Scott read a draft of a paper on stellar flags he has been working on. The final is published elsewhere in this newsletter. As has been proven in the past, Scott applies his psychological background to the study of flags and puts an unexpected spin on the ordinary.

Some Flag Related Websites

North American Vexillological Association <http://www.nava.org>

Flag Institute (United Kingdom) <http://www.flaginstitute.org>

Flags of the World <http://www.fotw.net>

Elmer’s Flag & Banner <http://www.elmersflag.com>

Darwin, Northern Territory (Australia) <http://www.nationalflags.com.au>

Flag Society of Australia <http://www.flagsaustralia.com.au>

Flag Research Center (Massachusetts) <http://www.flagresearchcenter.com>

January Meeting

The next meeting of the Portland Flag Association will be at 7 p.m., Thursday, January 11, 2007, at John Hood's house, 208 SE 39th Ave., telephone (503) 238-7666. See the map below. We're back on schedule again.

We look forward to seeing those of you that have been otherwise committed, and hear some new war stories, see some different flags, and hear some provocative discussion.

Ted will have war stories of co-hosting the NAVA 40 meeting in Reno, and we'll take another look at Doug's fanciful flags

Any and all flags, books or articles are welcome for "show and tell."

If you can't get to the meeting, perhaps you can give the editor something to share with our readers. As you can see, we have many interests.

Flags in the News (sort of)



Ted snapped this picture of a second-hand store on SE Hawthorne. Four Flags of Cascadia and the old Janzen Flag (of which our own Doug Lynch had something to do with.) The owner bought them from Goodwill and flies them for the color!

Correction

In the "Did You Know?" segment of the last issue I said there was no dispute about who designed the current U.S. Flag. I should have known better than to accept an undocumented statement from a slick magazine.

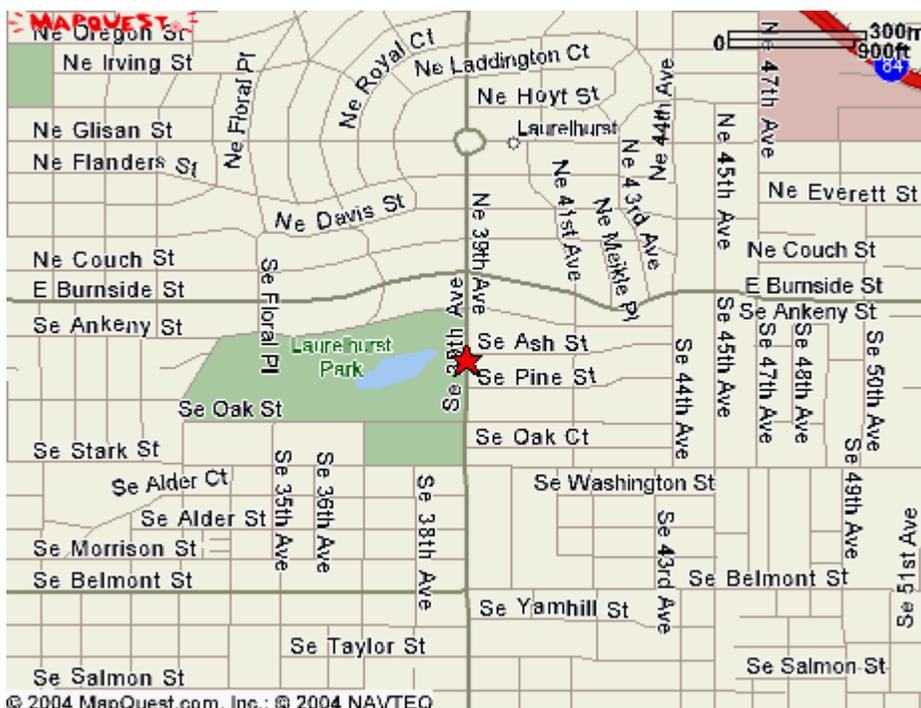
Dr. Whitney Smith of the Flag Research Center was kind enough to point out my defective assumption.

He writes: "Heft's claim is based on the fact that he drew up a 50-star flag

as a school project and gave a copy to his congressman. Since that design was the one eventually selected, he assumed that he was the designer. Unfortunately, that is no real proof at all.

"The responsibility at that time for recommending a design to the president lay with the Institute of Heraldry which is part of the US Army. Congress was not involved in the design nor even the endorsement of the design. The Institute of Heraldry experts had complete responsibility, although in theory President Eisenhower could have overruled them and asked for a new design. Heft has no proof that his sketch influenced the bureau. My guess is that many people submitted the same design, particularly since it is a no-brainer (unless you believe that there was a chance of having the stars arranged to read 'God Bless America' or some other entirely new design)."

His comments are accurate and appreciated. It also lets me know that someone is reading this critically. Thank you. —The Editor.



STELLAR FLAGS

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or movie get?).

At the other extreme are very strongly astronomical uses of stars on flags. Brazil is probably the best example of this; its national flag, as well as some of those of its states, use an elaborate symbology in which 27 stars in the constellations *Canis Major*, *Canis Minor*, *Carina*, *Cruce* (the Southern Cross), *Hydra*, *Scorpius*, *Triangulum Australe*, *Octans*, and *Virgo* are one-to-one mapped onto each of the 26 states and one federal district of Brazil. The national flag depicts these stars in the night sky above Rio



Brazil

de Janeiro on the morning of November 15, 1889 (the first day of the Republic of Brazil). Stars of different magnitudes (brilliancy) are represented by star shapes (using the 5-pointed convention) of different sizes, creating an image of remarkable fidelity to the astronomical reality. Though the national flag is unmistakably astronomical, most Brazilian state flags are not – one has to know the official mapping, for exam-



Brazilian state of Pará

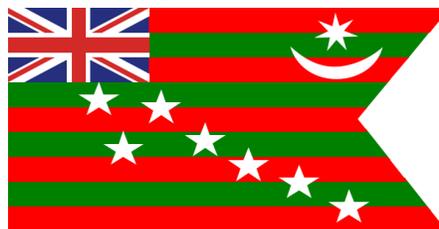
ple, that the blue star shape in the center of the flag of Pará represents none other than Spica (*Alpha Virginis*), one of the brightest stars in the night sky.

Other “strongly astronomical” uses of stars on flags involve the representation of North by the Big Dipper or Plow (an asterism in the constellation *Ursa Major*) and of South by the Southern Cross (the constellation *Cruce*). Flags depicting the Big Dipper are a diverse set, including: the state flag of Alaska, the flag of the



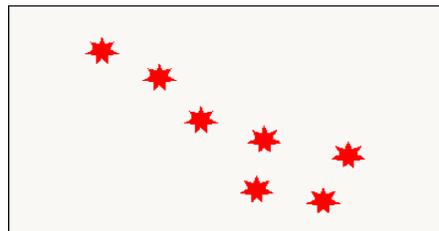
Alaska, U.S.A.

All India Home Rule League (1916-1921), the flags of the Irish Citizens



All India Home Rule League

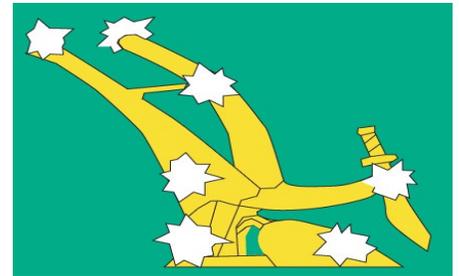
Army (early 20th century), and the peace flag and (with colors inverted) war flag of the Cherokee. The 1916



Cherokee Peace Flag

version of the Irish Citizens Army flag is particularly interesting as it makes it clear that it considers this asterism to be the Plow, not the Dipper – and a particularly dangerous

plow at that, with a knife affixed to its prow. This perhaps weakens the



Irish Citizens' Army (1916 version), a militant Starry Plough (Plow)

astronomical nature of this flag, as it departs from a literal, “scientific” depiction, but on the other hand, astronomy has long made use in its nomenclature the folklore and mythology of stars, so this could indeed be argued as strengthening, not weakening, the connection of the flag to astronomical ideas. (There are clearly “weaker” representations of the Plow/Big Dipper as well, for example as two rows of stars on the flag of Spain's Autonomous Community of Madrid — okay, but which star on the flag corresponds to which star in the Dipper?)



Spanish Autonomous Community of Madrid, referring to *Ursa Major*

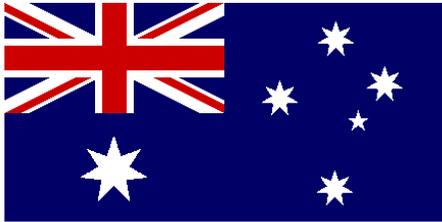
Flags depicting the Southern Cross are a much larger group, the most well known being the national flags of Australia and New Zealand, but also those of Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Brazil, as well as regional and other sub-national flags in Ar-

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STELLAR FLAGS

(Continued from page 5)

gentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, and New Zealand. Most of these are “strong” representations which preserve the actual shape of *Cruce* (though Australian but not New Zealander flags include the fifth, central star in the cross, *Epsilon Crucis*).



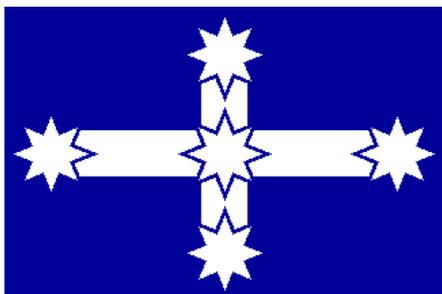
Australia with 5-star representation of *Cruce* (the Southern Cross)



New Zealand with 4-star representation of *Cruce*

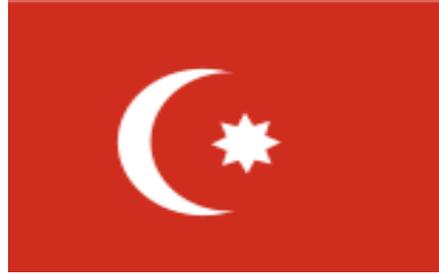
Others, such as Australia’s Eureka Flag, take poetic liberties with the constellation by superposing it on the arms of a symmetric cross – like the 1916 Irish Citizens Army flag, playing on the meaning of the constellation’s name.

The crescent and star is another emblematic pattern appearing on many flags of Islamic nations and organiza-



Eureka Stockade of Australia with a stylized Southern Cross

tions, probably originating with the flag of the Ottoman Empire. Com-

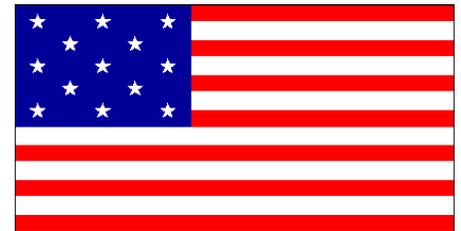


The Later Ottoman Empire

pared to the Southern Cross, however, whether this is a stellar usage is much less clear. One theory, advanced by Gerald Hawkins, holds that the emblem refers to a conjunction of the moon and the planet Venus on July 23 in the year 610, the night of the Prophet Mohammed is said to have first been visited by the Angel Gabriel. Another holds that the star represents the agriculturally meaningful star Canopus. (The holy structure in Mecca known as the Kaabah is aligned with the setting and rising of this star.) Still another, rooted in the history of the Ottoman flag, holds that the star actually represents, of all people, the Virgin Mary! When Constantine rededicated Byzantium as Constantinople in 330 he added a star representing Mary to the city’s crescent flag, and the Ottomans preserved the symbol upon conquering the city in 1453. Why a star? One of Mary’s names is *Stella Maris* (the Star of the Sea), though this may be itself a mistranslation of the Hebrew name Miryam. Overall, the case that the star seen on crescent and star flags refers to an actual astronomical star would seem a weak one at best.

As one final example, we could ask whether the flag of the United States is a stellar flag. Since 1777, it has

used stars in its canton to represent the states of the union, but unlike Brazil’s flag, there is neither a mapping from these shapes to specific states, nor to specific stars in the night sky. Nevertheless, this flag is more strongly astronomical than one might first expect, as the Flag Resolution of June 14, 1777, uses explicitly astronomical terms, resolving “... that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation.” It is a nice metaphor,



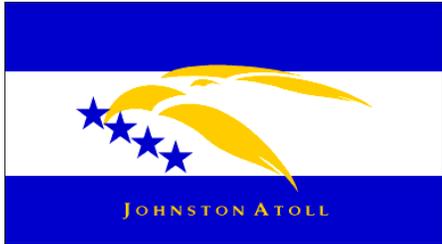
Flag of the United States, as specified by the Flag Act of 1777.

illustrating not only separate elements coming together to form a gestalt (a whole “greater than the sum of its parts”), but an assertion of a natural, cosmic connection to what might be viewed as only a mundane political reality here on Earth. As such, it is perhaps more astrological than astronomical.

In conclusion, though all stars on flags can be seen to have *some* connection to the distant suns studied by astronomers, they actually fall on a continuum from having little more connection than the word “star,” to symbolizing (if one knows the key) one or more actual stars in the sky, to depicting (with more or less stylization) actual configurations of stars in the sky. In any case, they form an important and rich part of the vocabulary and language of flags.

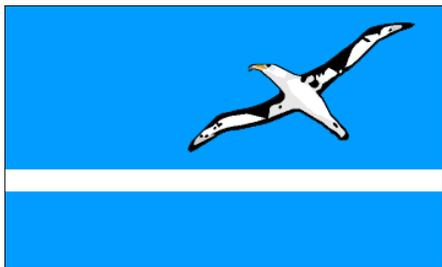
What Was that Flag? Answers to last quiz

The ordinary person wouldn't visit most of these US Overseas Dependencies unless your military hop stopped to refuel, as mine did once.



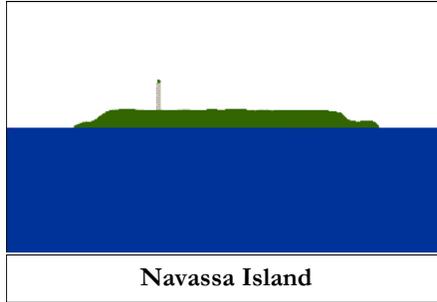
Johnson Atoll

The name was erased from the flag for the quiz, duh! Johnson Atoll is 1.1 square miles of not much, 825 miles SW of Hawaii. It is administered by the Defense Nuclear Agency and the Fish and Wildlife Service.



Midway Island

Midway is actually the westernmost part of the Hawaiian island chain, but are not part of the state of Hawaii. It is remembered for the decisive WW II Naval battle, and also for Gooney birds (Terns) that inhibit air traffic. It is run by the Navy and the Fish and Wildlife Service.



Navassa Island

Located in the Caribbean between Jamaica and Haiti, Navassa Island is uninhabited except for a lighthouse (on the flag) under the Coast Guard administration.



Northern Mariana Islands

The Northern Mariana Islands are made up of nine major islands and also bring back memories of WW II battles (Saipan, Rota and Tinian.) They are a self-governing commonwealth since 1978 and have a population of about 50,000.



Palmyra Atoll

Originally part of the Kingdom of Hawaii, Palmyra Atoll has passed between the US and Britain more than once. It is privately owned by the Nature Conservancy and is administered by the Navy.

What's that Flag?

These are some flags that were seen at NAVA 40 in Reno.

