

'Flying the flag'.

A quick n' dirty guide to making your own flags using linen.

by Barry Hilton of The League of Augsburg

The most frequent request I have had whilst displaying games at wargames shows is "How do you make those linen flags?" I thought it would be useful to pass on some of the ideas which I have now been using for nearly 20 years. I first used this technique for a regiment of English Civil War Parliamentarian Foot back in 1986 and I honestly cannot remember what gave me the idea in the first place. That particular flag still exists somewhere (I think it is attached to a unit of infantry I sold to some of the Ilkley Lads about 10 years ago as I saw it at a game in Sheffield in the recent past!). I would be the first to admit that the technique is perhaps semi masochistic and does involve a degree of work however, if you have the time and the inclination, then the results are very rewarding. I think the periods in which I gamed between 1986 and 1998(TYW through to GNW) leant themselves particularly well to the focus on flags and this acted as a strong stimulant to keep going. Between 1600 and 1720 flags still had a hugely individual quality that was to disappear with the military reforms and professionalism of the mid eighteenth century. I have constructed over 400 flags using this method which are now in wargaming units from the early Dark Ages through to WW2 and so feel it to be pretty well road tested.

Firstly I'd like to put the ideas behind the method in context and deal with some of the comments which occasionally arise when the subject is discussed. I chose to make all flags deliberately oversize. The reasons are both pragmatic (in the construction) and aesthetic (in the viewing). If they were made exactly in scale with the figures then much of the detail would be lost and very difficult to paint without it looking like a sparrow's footprints in the snow. Larger flags seem to act as a strong focal point on the table and can very often draw attention away from an averagely painted unit making the overall effect much more pleasing. Someone once said that they didn't like the relief or weave of the material showing as it was too unrealistic. This is a valid personal opinion, so if you don't like it, don't do it! Modeling is full of compromise and suspension of belief is necessary in many aspects of our hobby. I too am moderately unhappy about some of the compromises that have to be made when working with this material such as – the difficulty of painting over a material weave (extremely challenging with 0000 brushes), doing straight lines (particularly when you are painting geometric shapes). Linen distorts out of the normal dimensions when heat is applied (even moderately) and it causes significant shrinkage. Over zealous use of heat can actually set the linen on fire which is ok if you've planned it for the

'battle scarred' look but not if it's done by accident! Notwithstanding all of this I still think the pros outweigh the cons.

If you do wish to persevere and try the techniques I strongly recommend patience and do not be discouraged by your first efforts. Persistence and a willing to restart a piece of work that you are frustrated with pays off in the end. I have found the results very rewarding over the years and still hand paint flags for almost all of my units in preference to purchasing paper versions. What follows is a methodical guide to all stages of producing your own flags using this technique.

Raw materials

You will need

1. Linen material which is commonly used for lining curtains (drapes to my American friends). Make sure it is reasonably thin. I've never spent a penny on this stuff in my whole life as all of it has come from domestic off-cuts when Mrs H has been making something new for the house. This is used for the flag itself.

2. For the staff/pole use piano wire cut with pliers. Available in most art/craft/model shops and pretty cheap.

3. Bostik or similar viscous slow curing glue. This is used to secure the flag material to the staff. Do not use any type of superglue as this reacts with the cloth instantly makes it brittle and with prevent proper joining with the pole and possible cracking of the material.

Paint: I just use the same paints which I apply to my figures. These are largely Vallejo acrylics from Spain although I occasionally use Plaka paints from Germany which are a little more difficult to come by these days in the UK.

Craft Tool: I use a Minicraft modelling tool with drill and grinder attachments. A grinding attachment can be used to achieve a very passable Finial on the pole in less than 20 seconds. Use the flat of the tool to make the point and the edge to 'groove' the reduced neck of the Finial. Watch out, the metal will get very hot when you grind it.

The drill can also be used to 'drill out' or enlarge holes in hands which take the flag pole.

If you wish to add cords or ribbons you may use twisted fuse wire, thin paper strips, thin cords or thick thread or etched brass pieces such as oak leaves etc. Secure these with superglue (crazy glue) not Bostik.

MAKING THE FLAG

1. Cut the size of flag you want from the linen material. Do this with a very sharp clean scalpel blade. Scissors are not suitable for a totally clean cut. If you want a flag of 40 x 40mm make the dimensions of the linen 40mm in the hoist and 43-45mm in the fly. The reason for this is that you need to leave extra to wrap the flag round the pole.
2. Cut a suitable length of piano wire with pliers and make it much longer than you need to have in the figure's hands when finished. It is better to find you flag pole is too long (you can cut it) than too short.
3. If you wish to, fashion the Finial using either manual or electric modelling tools.
4. Coat the upper length of the pole (between the Finial and the length of the flag in the hoist) with the slow curing glue. Lay the flag material flat and place the pole on the material and 3-5mm from the edge (in the fly).
5. Gently roll the pole so that the edge of the material is caught underneath the main body of the flag thus sealing it to the pole. Use the flat edge of your scalpel to run along the new join and seal it. Place aside to dry for at least two hours.
6. The flag is now ready to take paint. I usually saturate the whole flag in a coat of the base colour and let it dry. This will add some rigidity.
7. I like to paint the designs free hand and I know this is not everyone's cup of tea. I usually paint the design in flat basic colours at this stage which, depending on the complexity of the design can take between 30 minutes and two hours. Once completed you can begin the shaping and shading.
8. Apply some controlled heat to the flag. I have a metal tray placed permanently over an oil radiator which runs on full power. This gives off considerable heat which will soften the flag at critical moments during production. After the flag has absorbed some heat fold it and pull it gently into the shape you desire. This is trial and error. As you do this the areas which require highlighting become very obvious.
9. In applying the highlights I will often go up to six or seven shades above the base colour but be careful of overdramatic changes in shade which look odd.
10. Be patient, if you make a mistake go back over it. The material is very forgiving.
11. Continue to reapply the heat when necessary to restore the shape you want. If the shape is not 'taking' or springing back, quickly blow on it to cool and thus fix.
12. If you need to put a fringed border on the flag paint a thin dark brown line around the edge and then speckle with a fine brush in your chosen colour. Yellows, Whites and metallic colours are best for this.
13. At this stage add the cords by twisting 'ropes' of fuse wire to the required thickness. If you are really ambitious you may even attempt the knots!

Secure these with Superglue and over paint any spoil it creates at it is very runny.

14. Cut the pole to the correct size for the figure. Try and resist painting the pole till you have done this. If you paint it before glue-ing then the join will be a fragile paint to paint or paint to metal one and easily broken. Ideally I leave painting the figure's hand until this stage also. A little awkward I know but it means a metal-metal join with superglue which is usually pretty strong. You then just have a fiddly little paint job to finish.
15. I have never found it necessary to varnish the flags when finished as the paint is so ingrained into the fabrics that it cannot be scratched or chipped off. A light spray of varnish may however act in the same manner as hairspray and hold the shape.

Now, doesn't that look nice?

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