

# WHAT HONOUR COLOUR

By Don Edwards



In military organizations, the practice of carrying colours, standards or Guidons, to act both as a rallying point for troops, and to mark the location of the commander, is thought to have originated in Ancient Egypt some 5,000 years ago. It was formalised in the armies of medieval Europe, with standards being emblazoned with the commander's coat of arms.

As armies became trained and adopted set formations, each regiment's ability to keep its formation was potentially critical to it's, and therefore its army's, success. In the chaos of battle, not least due to the amount of dust and smoke on a battlefield, soldiers needed to be able to determine where their regiment was. Wherever the flags went, the soldiers followed. Flags led the charge or led the retreat.

As time passed, regiments were awarded battle honours, which they emblazoned on their banners. They therefore became a link to the regiment's past and a memorial to the fallen, and thus *they became the heart of the regiment, in which all of its history was woven.*

Such became the magnitude that, for a regiment to lose its colours was, and still is, a monumental disgrace, with the capture of an enemy's colours being seen as a great honour. This is why, whenever the colours were paraded they always, and often still are, escorted by armed guards and paid the highest compliments, second only to those paid to the sovereign.

A regiment's flag was carried by a colour sergeant who was the central man in the colour guard. The guard was to protect the colour sergeants and the flags of the regiment. Hence, the Sergeant At Arms position within a Colour Party.

*Colours are consecrated.* They were blessed before going into battle. Consequently, they can serve as an altar for a drum head service. A tradition going back for centuries where soldiers in the field, without recourse to their chapels or churches, would lay their drums neatly, consecrate them by laying their standards on them, and use them as an altar.

As a position of honour, there is none greater. In battle the colour bearer was not a man who carried the flag because he was generally unable to contribute much else, but rather he was a man who had most likely demonstrated great courage, a man who could be depended upon to stand steadfast in the face of fire for the sake of his fellows.

Those who trooped regimental and national flags into battle were especially brave, for colours "*drew lead like a magnet.*" A fallen bearer's banner would quickly be taken up by a fellow soldier, and many men willingly exposed themselves to enemy fire (often at

the cost of their lives) rather than allow their regiments to suffer the dishonour of allowing their flags to touch the ground. Yet it was not the flag itself that was important so much as what it symbolized: *that so long as the banner waved, at least one man from that regiment lived on*, and thus the regiment itself continued to exist.

Characteristically, of all of the history and glory of the regiment was the flag borne by the colour bearer, a visible testimony of the regiment's legacy and pride. While higher ranks could be obtained, *there was no greater honour and privilege than to be chosen as the colour bearer*.

Colours are no longer carried into battle in modern times; instead, they are carried in parades and reviews, and displayed in formations and ceremonies in remembrance of their former presence on the battlefield and those that fell under them.

The Legion continues this tradition. The Regimental Flag replaced by the Branch Colours. Still the honour, the pride and the duty remains to be carried on if only to demonstrate that it *exists*.

Our Legion Colour Party is actively involved in many events over the course of the year. They preside over every General Meeting at our Branch and have participate at special events such as such as the Warriors' Day Parades held at the CNE and towns, Cemetery Memorial Services, Remembrance Day Services and open to many more honour events.

In my opinion for a Branch, or any service organisation, not to field a Colour Party remains a contemptible shame. *To not rally to persevere in this legacy is beyond my comprehension*.

*“To those who bravely came before us,  
In honour right and just,  
With pride we bear these standards high,  
Never envision the glory remembered die.  
Lest all the reverence they have won,  
Today have lost, as much as one,  
We take up the colours let not them fall,  
The privileged salute for they that gave all.”*

*~ by Don Edwards*