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**Wisconsin Honor Guard Association**

**Standard Operating Procedure**

**Ceremonial Flag Folding**

The Wisconsin Honor Guard Association’s (WHGA) Board has researched, discussed, and evaluated honor guard protocols in order to develop a “best practice” recommendation. The following SOP closely mirrors the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia’s (DC Metro) Honor Guard’s methods and training. WHGA feels that the DC Metro’s methods are suitable for agencies with and without trained honor guard teams.  The following SOP is the way that WHGA has adopted for ceremonial flag folding and realizes this SOP is not the only way to accomplish this. WHGA also encourages and recognizes individualism amongst honor guard teams**.**

*The following S.O.P will assist in the detail of Ceremonial Flag Folding, whether at graveside or elsewhere. In this S.O.P, casket positions are referred to by number. With a flag-draped casket, the canton field (blue field with stars, positioned over the head of the deceased) is the “odd” side of the casket, with the Honcho in the #1 position. To the Honcho’s right is position #3, and to the right of #3 is #5. On the opposite side, #2 is across from the Honcho, #4 is in the middle, and the Pullman is position #6.*

*(If possible, the team should practice with the flag that will be folded during the ceremony, as flags can have slightly different dimensions. If necessary, a short rectangular fold can be made at the start of folding, to ensure that there isn’t excess material at the time of tucking. Also, the more a new flag is worked with, the more it stretches, which may cause a dimension change over many foldings.)*

*(Actual commands will be capitalized with the action word being stated in* ***BOLD.)***

(The following discussion refers to a set-up where the back of the casket is not blocked by the vault mechanism, so that the Flag-Folding team can move in on both sides. In this discussion, the actual folding occurs over the casket. A later discussion will offer options if the vault mechanism blocks the back of the casket.)

1. Orientation to the Casket

A. The casket team will move into position on both sides of the casket. The casket team members on the ends of the casket will position themselves so that the buttons of their uniform are even with the end of the casket. Members should be quite close to the casket to start. If a facing movement is needed to face in-ward to the casket, the Honcho will command “READY-**FACE**”.

B. Once in position, Honcho commands “READY-**DOWN**”. Detail members bend slightly at the waist, and bow their heads, looking down, and begin to grip the flag. Members on the even side of the casket (opposite the Honcho), begin to prepare the “bite”.

*The “bite” is a method of making the flag narrower, so that when the flag is lifted from the casket, it doesn’t sag. The bite is obtained by folding the bottom red stripe over the next white stripe, and then folding again, accordion-style, so that the last 2 red stripes sandwich the white stripe. (Grab the bottom red stripe at the seam with the white stripe and fold and place that edge so that it is even with the top of the next red stripe, completely covering up the white stripe.)*

1. Flag Folding

* Once the bite is achieved, and the Honcho sees all hand movement stop, s/he commands “READY-**UP”.** Team members slowly raise their heads, and stand up straight, while simultaneously pulling the flag up, taut, so that it is 4-6 inches above the casket.
* The Honcho commands “READY-**BACK**”, and team members take one step straight back, starting with left foot.Members on ends may step slightly away from casket (while stepping back) to pull flag out to its full dimensions.(Bite is still maintained.) (It is possible that a step back cannot happen, given the set-up of the boards and carpet around the gravesite.)
* Detail members #5 and #6 may then be required to left up the canton end of the flag for a Blessing and/or sprinkling of Holy Water by a priest. (This should be coordinated ahead of time – specific aspects of the service.) When this is done, the flag is brought back to level again.
* The flag may also be lifted up for presentation during the Rifle Salute and playing of Taps; members on the back side of the casket/odd side will lift the canton side of the flag and hold it there.. (Folding of the flag begins after Taps is done, and the flag is brought back to level.)
* The command to start the actual folding is accomplished by the Honcho snapping or tugging the flag with their left hand. After the tug, #2 and #6 slide their hands together at their respective corners of the flag. #1 and #5 slide their hand to meet as well, but then slide their outside hands to the middle of the flag.
* With right hands, # 2, #4, and #6 folds over the flag to the odd side; the bite is released at this initial fold-over. The left hand reaches under the flag to keep it off the casket and begin to find the center fold. (Middle team members, especially, keep the flag from sagging or touching the casket.) The top edge of the flag should be uniformly short of the bottom edge, by approximate 1 - 1.5 inches. (This makes it less likely for any red color showing on final folds.) All members pull the flag taut and back to center over casket slowly and uniformly, keeping it up off casket.
* After the first fold-over, the Honcho again signals in the same manner (by giving a tug) for the next fold. Hand movements are the same as described above, and the even side members fold over the flag, this time flush with the edge the odd side members are holding. Upon this fold-over, members take a small step in (left foot first), as the flag narrows over the casket.
* #2 and #6 (Pullman) place a finger in the fold to keep the flag tight.
* The team is now ready to start the triangle folds. (All need to work to keep the flag level above the casket. Members do not move feet or modify position, as flag is pulled away or tucked.)
* The first triangle fold is from the “bite side” and toward the Honcho, signaled by a nod from the Honcho.
* When making folds, release flag so hands don’t cross each other. Generally, folders take their time, in un-hurried, reverent movements, folding and smoothing flag as needed.
* After the 2nd fold, #1 (Honcho) and #2 take a step toward #3 and #4, with #1 nodding to signal this.
* #1 (Honcho) and #2 continue to fold the flag into the triangle sections, removing hands to smooth and flatten folded edge and make tight corners, as needed.
* #1 and #2 pull the flag uniformly, so that folding occurs near “their” end of the casket. (This pulls it away from #5 and #6 eventually.)
* As the flag is pulled away from members’ outside hands, #5 and #6 “cut” their outside arms on a signaled nod between them. They continue to hold the flag tight with their inside hands, letting go simultaneously, as flag is pulled away, “cutting” with their inside arms.
* Middle team members continue to hold the flag with both hands.
* When triangle folds begin to enter the canton field:
* Cheat/push in the red tip of the triangle from the long edge to assist in covering/hiding white and red colors in the final appearance.
* As the flag continues getting shorter with folds, #3 and #4 keep both hands on the flag end, as they are needed for tucking at end.
* Once there are no more full folds to be made, # 3 and #4 tuck the end of the flag into the crease being held open by #1 and #2. The white seam end can be folded over, to ease in the tucking; the extra corner (that will be tucked over the diagonal edge) can be folded over or tucked over inside consistent with the shape of the triangle.
* Once the tuck is complete, all four team members hold and press/flatten the folds; all keep both hands on the flag when done.

*If, for some reason, the flag is not folded tightly and too much flag remains for tucking, at the direction of the Honcho, the flag can be unfolded a few folds and tightly re-folded. A flag that has been properly folded and held taut during the folding process should end with sufficient material to tuck, but without excess.*

* Inspection & Presentation
* Once the flag has been tucked and pressed, the four team members position their hands so their thumbs are on top and fingers on the bottom of the flag.
* If the Honcho is satisfied with the folding, the Honcho signals by raising and lowering his/her thumbs twice on the flag, effectively tapping the top side of the flag.
* Honcho retains sole possession of the flag, while other team members simultaneously remove their hands and “cut” ending with the arms at the position of Attention. #3 and #4 shift back, so they are facing each other over the casket again.
  + The Honcho moves his/her right hand to grip the other diagonal side of the folded flag (Both hands were on the left diagonal side of the flag; the left hand remains there). S/he brings the flag up to chest level, point down, and re-grips with the left hand (if necessary), so that both hands are holding the diagonal sides of the flag, with fingers on the outside and pointing up.
* The Honcho now moves the flag so that it is presented with the blade edge leading. #2 reaches over top, and grasps the flag on the diagonal sides, just down from the point. #2 spins the flag 90 degrees, so that the flag is centered over the end of the casket, with the flat edge facing toward the middle of the casket.
* The flag “flies” down the center of the casket, with #4 grasping the flag in the same over-hand manner on the sides of the point, and handing it off to #6 (Pullman), who does the same. As each member hands off the flag, perform a “cut”, and return to Attention.

*When the folded flag moves, generally, it is always moved with the flat edge forward (unless moving a very short distance, e.g., for presentation.*

* Once in the hands of #6, the flag is rotated to chest level, ending with the point down, where the “Inspection” begins. #6 holds the flag with 2 hands on the diagonal edges just down from the point, with thumbs next to chest, and fingers pointing up, on the “outside” of flag.
  + #5 begins to examine the flag with his/her eyes. If there is red showing, of a part of the flag that needs attention, #5 stares at that spot, signaling #6 to attend to that area. #6 moves hand to whichever spot, tucking and pressing where needed. #6 does not look down at flag while tucking.
* This extra attention to detail stops when #5 stares into the eyes of #6, signaling that the inspection is complete.
* Once the inspection is complete, #6 rotates and turns the flag, so that the blade edge is forward at approximately chest level, still holding the diagonal edges. #6 then turns to the Chief or OIC, who should have moved into position (pre-planned) close by, between #6 and survivor. The Chief/OIC renders a 3-second hand salute, then is presented the flag, blade end first.
* The Chief/OIC accepts the flag by placing his/her left hand on top and right hand underneath.
* #6 renders a 3-second hand salute, and formally moves back to his/her position on the casket.
* The Chief/OIC then rotates the flag, so that the point faces forward while bringing it to chest level (flag is still horizontal). The Chief/OIC then moves to the survivor to present the flag
* The Chief/OIC goes to a knee, rotating to present the flag blade edge forward, with the left hand on top and right hand on the bottom. S/he may speak a few words to the survivor, similar to the following:

“On behalf of the [agency] and a grateful community, please accept this flag as a symbol of [decedent’s name] service to his/her community”. (The Presenter may add a limited personal statement.)

*(A trick, so that the survivor doesn’t take the flag away too quickly, is to grab whichever hand reaches under the flag and hold it gently during the short speech.)*

* Chief/OIC stands up and renders a 3-second hand salute. (If the Chief/OIC is in plain clothes, #6 will accompany him/her and render the hand salute for the Chief/OIC after the flag is presented to the survivor.
* Once #6 moves back to the casket, the Honcho will give the appropriate commands to move-out the casket team.

1. An Alternative Approach to Casket/Vault

When a vault mechanism is set so that lid is in back of and “attached to” casket, this blocks ½ of team from being able to move behind casket. When placing the casket in place at the gravesite, an option is for the 6-person casket movement team to stop at end of vault and “feed” the casket onto the platform, pushing it all the way to far end. It is helpful for a funeral director to be at far end of platform, to guide casket to ensure it stays straight on platform.

When it is time for the flag folding, the 6-person team is again blocked from passing to the back of the casket. In this case, an option would be for 2 team members (either part of the 6-person team, or 2 additional members just for this task) to approach each end of the casket and table-top (lift the flag to chest height). (Commands for this would be “READY-**DOWN**”, “READY-**UP**”, “READY-**BACK**”,  
and “READY-**PRESENT**”.) Prior to moving out from the casket, these members could lift the flag for any religious ceremony (sprinkling of Holy Water) and tilting of flag (canton side higher) for Rifle Firing party.

When it is time, and with coordinated movements, the 2 members take steps, as necessary, toward open space (between casket and family) for folding. (Commands for this would be “READY-**STEP**”, “**STEP**”, “**STEP**”.) Members step to side, with leading foot first, and then trailing foot meets it, in position of Attention. (Generally, only 2-3 steps are necessary.) Once in place, the 6-person team can march forward into place on long sides of flag, and take hold of flag. (The members at the ends can ceremoniously step away, if extra. If the members at the ends are part of the 6-person team, they would return to their positions next to flag, to begin folding. Generally, these persons would be opposite team members – either Honcho and Pullman, or #6 and #2, or #3 and #4 could pair up to do it. When the 4-person team lines up to march into place, members need to remember to allow spacing for the returning members.) (Commands for all this would include marching in, halting, and facing movements, and a command of “READY-GRIP” or something similar. After that, standard flag-folding commands are used.)

1. Multiple Flags to Be Presented

When multiple family members are to receive folded flags, any additional flags, besides the flag on the casket, should be pre-folded, and carried by a designated person for later presentation. Pre-folded flags are to be carried on the left side, tucked under the arm, with the blade edge down, and point facing up. The right hand can remain free, for saluting, throughout the ceremony. During the hand-off of the pre-folded flag, the carrier will bring it forward, holding it blade edge forward, with “left hand over right”. The presenter will conduct a 3-second salute first, and then grip it - left hand on top, right hand underneath - and rotate it to correct movement position (unless covering a very short distance). When presenting the flag, continue as discussed above.

Generally, the just-folded flag will be presented first to the designated family member, and then, pre-folded flags will be given to the presenter, one at a time, for a salute, and eventual presentation to additional designated family members.