

Half-Masting Flags Etiquette

A flag is flown at half-mast (or half-staff) in respect for a deceased person. Although there are no laws governing the half-masting of flags on private vessels, or at private homes and clubs, most citizens follow the flag display customs that are used on U.S. Government buildings and ships.

The only authorities who can direct that the U.S. ensign be flown at half-mast are the President and the governor of a state, territory or possession. The duration varies from a day or so up to 30 days, determined by the deceased person's position. It is not correct for a yacht club commodore, or official of a similar organization, to order the U.S. ensign to be flown at half-mast to honor a deceased member – only the burgee or organization flag may be half-masted. On Memorial Day, the U.S. flag is flown at half-mast until 1220, the time of the final gun of the traditional 21-gun salute commencing at noon.

On a simple flagstaff-as at the stern of a vessel or a flagpole ashore-the "half-mast" position is approximately three-fourths the way up to the top. If the flagpole has a yardarm, or yardarm and gaff, the half-mast position is that which is level with the yardarm.

When the U.S. flag is displayed at half-mast on a vessel, other flags remain at their normal position. When it is half-masted ashore, fly only a private signal or club burgee at masthead of a gaff-rigged mast with it.

When the U.S. ensign is to be flown at half-mast, it should be hoisted fully and smartly, then lowered ceremoniously to the half-mast position. Before lowering, it is again raised to full height and lowered from there.

Some yacht clubs follow the practice of flying the burgee at half-mast for a period of mourning on the death of a club member. A private signal may be flown at half-mast on the death of the owner of that vessel.

You can learn even more about flag etiquette for boating at United States Power Squadrons. This group is the world's largest recreational boating organization with more than 35,000 members and they teach boating courses for those just getting into power boating or sailing or anyone needing a brush up course after time away from the sport.