

Is the American flag 'backward' on Scout uniforms?

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If you look at the right sleeve of a Boy Scout and of a U.S. soldier, you'll see American flags on both.

But there's one big difference. While the Boy Scout's flag has the blue field of stars at the top left, the soldier's flag is a reverse-field flag; the field of stars is at the top right.

So which is correct?

Both, as it turns out. The American flag is pre-sewn on all Cub Scout, Boy Scout and Venturing uniform shirts, meaning it's correctly placed when you buy it.

But even though the BSA does the patch-placement work for you, some Scouters, especially those with military ties, have questioned the flag's direction. They, correctly, argue that the military reverses the flag so it looks as if the soldier is moving into battle, not retreating. Imagine someone carrying the U.S. flag on a pole while running forward, and you'll get the picture.

[I first blogged about this subject](#) four and half years ago, and in the time since I've gotten this question quite a bit.

The *Boy Scout Handbook* is pretty clear. On Page 76, it reads: "Following the guidelines of the U.S. Flag Code, it [the flag patch] is placed with the blue field to the flag's own right (to the left, as someone views it)."

It goes on to explain that the U.S. military uses the reverse-field flag and that either is correct. The key is to follow the guidelines of the organization responsible for the uniform in question.

But for an even more detailed explanation, let's check in with the expert. In this case that's Peter Self, team leader, youth development, program impact and council operations with the BSA. He recently heard from a Scouter who's also a U.S. Army staff sergeant. Here's the original email and Peter's response:

Original letter

Dear Sir/Ma'am,

I would first like to say that I am glad to have been a member of the Scouts when I was an adolescent.

I am currently a 15-year member of the United States Army and a supporter of the Scouts when I have time to volunteer. As a member of our nation's military I have been deployed in the service of our country three times.

My question is about the Scout uniform.

I am not sure if you are aware, but the Scouts and the U.S. Army both wear our country's standard on our right shoulder. There is however one large difference. Looking at a soldier's uniform you will see that the flag "Looks backwards" that is to say the stripes are on the left and the stars are on the right. That was not an accident, although to some it may look funny, the reason the flag is positioned that way is because the flag is flying in the direction of the wind. The soldier is always moving forward. Think of what the flag would look like in a parade if it were walking past you.

On the Boy Scout uniform the flag is turned the other way. Watching that same parade the Scouts would be marching backwards. Retreating, if you will.

As both a Scout and a soldier I can understand that Scouts are not soldiers. But when I was a Scout I wanted nothing more than to be a soldier. To serve my country. I wanted to be a soldier because Scouting taught me that not everyone can be a soldier. Not everyone is strong enough for that sacrifice, not everyone has such a strong sense of duty.

Scouts do.

Scouts are strong, for others who don't have the strength.

Scouts are brave, when others feel fear.

Scouts are trained, where other lack knowledge.

“To do my duty for God and Country”

Wearing the flag on the Scout uniform in the same manner as the military does not go against US Code Title 4 or US Code Title 36.

I understand that changing the uniform may be a daunting logistical feat, but I do believe that our nation and of flag are worth it.

The expert's response

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your thoughtful and well-articulated question. Your sense of dedication and commitment not only to our country, but also our youth is obvious.

As you can imagine, we are frequently asked why the patch of the United States flag, as worn on the right shoulder of the official BSA uniform, has the blue field of stars (known as the canton) in the upper left hand corner, and it is worn facing the opposite direction by members of the US Army. There are really two parts to this question.

The first question is “**What gives each of these organizations the right to wear the flag as a part of their uniform?**” This permission is granted in Title 4 of the US Code, which is often referred to simply as the Flag Code. Under § 8, paragraph (j) it states:

“No part of the flag should ever be used as a costume or athletic uniform. However, a flag patch may be affixed to the uniform of military personnel, firemen, policemen, and members of patriotic organizations. The flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing. Therefore, the lapel flag pin being a replica, should be worn on the left lapel near the heart.”

I think we can agree that members of the Boy Scouts of America have permission to wear the patch as members of a patriotic organization.

While Title 4 gives several examples of how the flag is to be displayed when used in ceremonies, during meetings, in parades, in auditoriums, or even at funeral services. It does not cite a single example of how the flag should appear when worn as a patch or affixed to an article of clothing. All we are given is the permission

to wear it as noted above. In the absence of any specific direction, we can only assume it should be worn in the same fashion as described in numerous other paragraphs, which is with the canton at the upper left corner.

Why then does the US Army wear it in reverse fashion? That answer can be found in US Army Regulation 670-1, Chapter 28, Section 18, which states:

“The full-color U.S. flag cloth replica is worn so that the star field faces forward, or to the flag’s own right. When worn in this manner, the flag is facing to the observer’s right, and gives the effect of the flag flying in the breeze as the wearer moves forward. The appropriate replica for the right shoulder sleeve is identified as the reverse side flag.”

This statement in the Army regulations appears to be the only written description of how a patch of the flag should be worn, which makes it unique to the U.S. military. Of course this begs the question, “Can the Boy Scouts of America adopt the same policy?”

The answer to this question can be found in Article X, Section 4, Clause 4, Paragraph (b) of the Rules and regulations of the Boy Scouts of America. Here we find the following:

“Imitation of United States Army, Navy or Marine Corps uniforms is prohibited, in accordance with the provisions of the organizations Congressional Charter.”

Because the reverse side flag is unique to the military, it would be considered an imitation of the uniform and is therefore prohibited.

I hope this helps clear up the difference, and once again thank you for your dedication and service.

– Peter Self

