

## Red for danger

John Cartledge

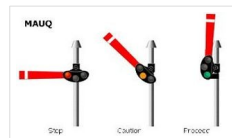
### Abstract

*The symbolism of the colour red is culturally specific and varies between different countries. But in many parts of the world it is a sign of danger, and red flags are widely used as warning symbols. Although the use of the term 'red flag' in a purely figurative sense is increasingly common, this paper is concerned with literal examples and offers case studies drawn from a variety of contexts – in such diverse fields as warfare, gamekeeping, shipping, wildfires, beach safety, ice sheets, golf courses, football, bullfighting, motor racing, park hygiene, rail and road transport, and reggae concerts.*

A number of you were present in Sydney two years ago when I had the pleasure and privilege of giving a paper which traced the story of the red flag as a symbol of political revolt.

In the course of researching that topic, I came across numerous examples of the use of the same vexillological device to warn of danger in contexts which have no political overtones, and it is these which form the subject of my paper today.

### *Red used to indicate warnings and danger*



As you will be well aware, the use of the colour red to sound a warning is by no means limited to flags. Red signs, lights, flares etc., intended to alert us to dangers and to prevent us from committing hazardous acts, are commonplace features of the world around us.

And it is not hard to find examples of the use of red for this purpose in nature, both animal and vegetable.

*A similar use of red in the natural world*



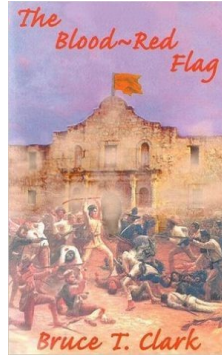
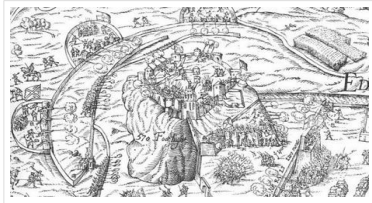
Red is the colour of fire and blood, so it is widely associated with war, power, anger, malice, lust, wrath and stress – as well as with energy, action, passion, determination, desire, love, heat, longing, sensitivity, romance, joy, strength, leadership, courage, vigour, vibrancy and radiance. Which of these associations its use on national flags is intended to invoke is not clear, but it is the most popular colour, appearing on no fewer than 77 per cent of them.

Physically, red supposedly increases enthusiasm and energy, while encouraging action and confidence and providing a sense of protection from fear and anxiety. But it can raise the blood pressure, respiration, heartbeat and pulse rate. And it has distinct meanings in different cultures. In east Asian stock markets it denotes a rise in prices while in European and north American ones it warns of a fall. In Hindu societies brides wear red dresses, but in many other countries the bliss sought by visitors to red-light districts probably isn't of the married variety.

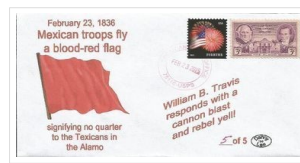
So much for the properties of red in general. When did red flags first acquire a particular meaning? In his classic work *British Flags* (1922), Perrin refers to the 'bloody colours', whose descent he suggests might lie in 'the scarlet cloak which the ancient Greek navy seems to have borrowed from the Phoenicians', though the evidence for this is elusive. What seems clearer is that from the fifteenth century onwards, a plain red flag was used militarily as a 'flag of defiance', initially in naval battles but also later during siege warfare on land – for

example, at Edinburgh Castle in 1573 and during the defence of the Alamo mission in San Antonio in 1836.

*The 'red flag of defiance': left, over a besieged Edinburgh castle, 1573;  
right, over the Alamo mission, 1836*



It conveyed the meaning that surrender would not be accepted and no quarter given to captives. Red flags still fly from the turrets of the stylised castle on Edinburgh's city flag, while the Alamo flag has been commemorated philatelically.



Sticking parenthetically with the Alamo connection, there is a shop on the campus of the state university in the municipality of Normal, Illinois, which rejoices in the name of Alamo II. It holds periodic Red Flag Days, when customers are given receipts which entitle them to discounts at other stores in the town, and these are announced by the flying of a red flag on the sidewalk outside.



*'Red Flag Day',  
Normal, Illinois*

Reverting to historical antecedents, in 1602 the English dramatist Thomas Dekker, a contemporary of Shakespeare, put into the mouth of one of his characters the question, 'What, dost summon a parlie, my little Drumsticke? 'Tis too late: thou seest my red flag is hung out', implying that the time for negotiation had passed because he was preparing for war. And in a painting of a naval encounter by Cornelis Verbeeck, c.1618/20, a solid red flag flies at the

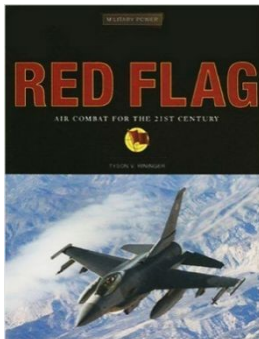
stern of the Dutch warship on the right, signifying the ship's intent to engage in combat with a Spanish galleon on the left. In 1666 the *London Gazette* reported, in the context of an impending Anglo-Dutch battle, 'That the Red Flag was out, both Fleets in sight of each other, expecting every hour fit weather to Engage'. And in the eighteenth century, the first edition of *Chambers Encyclopedia* asserted that 'the red flag is a signal of defiance and battle'.



'A naval encounter between Dutch and Spanish warships',  
*Cornelis Verbeeck, c.1618/20; the Dutch ship (right) wears a red flag at her stern to signify its readiness to engage*

Today, the annual two-week Operation Red Flag at the elite Air Force Fighter Weapons School at Nellis in Nevada is described as the largest, most complex and most high-tech military exercise conducted anywhere in the world.

*Operation Red Flag at Nellis AFB, Nevada*



Crews from the USA and allied nations are brought together for a 'fully integrated, war-conditions exercise that uses the largest combat range on the planet—the size of Connecticut—and involves every kind of military aircraft and asset, from fighters, tankers and bombers to helicopters, satellites and unmanned aircraft.'

The team photo above is of a French contingent.

The title Red Flag is used by the 414th Combat Training Squadron, which is responsible for running the exercise.

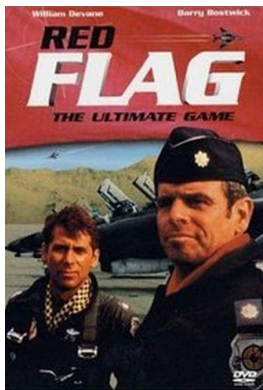
Red Flag – Alaska is a similar ten-day USAF training exercise held at two air force bases in eastern Alaska, involving troops from several countries, and is described as 'a multi-service, multi-platform, coordinated, combat operations exercise'.



*Exercise Red Flag Alaska patch*

And for those who prefer (or are obliged) to indulge their passion for combat in the world of computer simulations, *Red Flag – The Ultimate Game* (1981) is the story of two fighter pilots who flew together in Vietnam and are assigned after the war to Nellis USAF base.

'Testing the limits of both men and machinery is how America's Top Gun fighter pilots maintain combat readiness: Red Flag is the most realistic combat simulation ever devised, acting out 'dog fights' in the air – sometimes with deadly results.'



*Red Flag: the Ultimate Game,  
starring William Devane and Barrie Bostwick  
(Don Taylor, 1981)*

There are also the Virtual Red Flag exercises organised by a group which calls itself the Virtual US Air Force (and which has to be careful not to use the red-flag-on-a-target symbol of the actual exercises, which would be a violation of Federal law).



*Virtual Red Flag from the  
Virtual US Air Force, a multi-user  
flight simulator*

Another such site, Eagle Dynamics, which appears to be hosted in Russia, offers players 'the best chance possible to get involved in some high intensity air action against some of the best and most experienced aggressor pilots in the sim!'

One of the participating teams is the 104th Phoenix Squadron, Red Flag.



*Red Flag from Eagle Dynamics,  
another simulator*

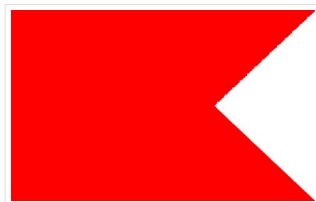
And speaking of Russia, small red flags are attached to the bayonets of the troops on guard duty in Moscow during the annual Victory Day parade.



*Small red flags at the  
Moscow Victory Parade*

In the International Code of Signals used by shipping, the letter B (Bravo) is represented by a red swallow-tailed flag which, when flown in isolation, means 'I am taking in or discharging or carrying dangerous goods'.

This message was originally used by the British navy to refer to military explosives.



*International Code of Signals:  
flag B*

Armies around the world hoist a red flag at firing ranges to signify that live shooting is in progress. It's interesting that the author of the message on the Keep Out sign seems to have assumed that anyone reading it would recognise a warning flag if they saw one.



*Red Flags on firing ranges*

In this homely British example, sandwiched between the warning notices and the symbol announcing the possible presence of unexploded ordnance is the dispenser for copies of ... the free visitors' guide.



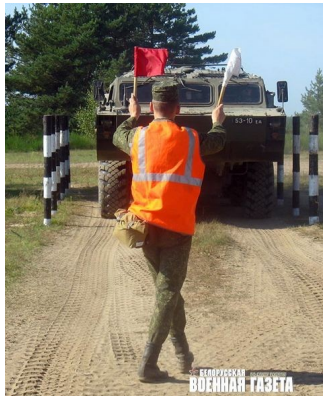
*A UK firing range*

A red flag raised at a firing range to indicate that a shooter has missed the target is known as 'Maggie's Drawers', the derivation of which is uncertain. But the utility of such a signal must be somewhat neutralised if the person sending it raises both red and green flags simultaneously. Gamekeepers also use red flags to warn when shooting is taking place, as well as when heather is being burned off.

*Left: raising 'Maggie's Drawers' to indicate a miss;  
right: gamekeepers warn of game shooting*



One has to hope, for the sake of the guy in front of this tank, that its driver knew what he was trying to convey by brandishing both a red and a white flag at once.



*Directing traffic for the Belarus Army*

The earliest citation of 'red flag' in a non-military sense is dated 1777 and refers to a warning of flood risk.

In his *Year's Journey*, the eccentric British author Philip Thicknesse reported that 'There is a red flag hoisted gradually higher and higher, as the water flows into the harbour' (at Calais).

But nowadays weather-related uses more commonly refer to the risk of wildfire spread by high winds.

In this Texan case, the phrase 'Red Flag Warning' alone is assumed to be sufficient to convey its meaning to the watching viewers, while what's remarkable about the fires in Alaska is that they are apparently so respectful of the international boundary that they leave Canada untouched, though sadly such events there are far from unknown.

*'Red flag' tornado warnings*



In different US states various images of red flags are used, or simply the phrase without an image, but all are apparently self-explanatory.

*Official US use of red flags as warnings*







A range of symbols and media are used to spread the message, and in one case merely the abbreviation RFW painted next to a couple of flags evidently suffices.

*More warnings, some with added words*



The Flag Institute in Britain and its counterparts around the world have tried hard to discourage the inclusion of words and badges on flags (because they are indecipherable in use).

Sadly, however, the message does not appear to have reached some US fire authorities, which seems doubly unfortunate in the case of flags with a message which is exceptionally important.



*Red flags warning of fire dangers*

Provided its meaning is known, the use of a red windsock to convey the message seems inspired, because this will catch light gusts of wind insufficient to support a flag.

And the term 'red flag' is applied not only to the warnings but also to the agencies whose duty it is to raise them.

*Some protection agencies include the term in their titles*



Fires are not the only hazards to which strong winds can give rise.

The same is true of high surf on beaches, often when compounded with currents. So beach warning flags are found in many countries. And everywhere, the red flag signifies that conditions are dangerous.

*Red flags warn of hazardous beach and water conditions*





Confusingly, however, its precise meaning is not constant.

In some places, it means that the beach is closed and entry to the water is forbidden. But in other places it is simply a warning that conditions are poor, and another flag symbol (either a black flag or two red ones) is used to indicate a total ban.

*Red flags warn of hazardous beach and water conditions; their precise meaning is by no means standardised*



An icon of a swimmer on a red flag with a diagonal line through it is fairly unambiguous, but what is one to make of such an icon when it is not crossed out?



Once again, words on flags are inadvisable – they may be in a foreign language or invisible when the flag droops. It is to be hoped that RIP here is a word, not initials.

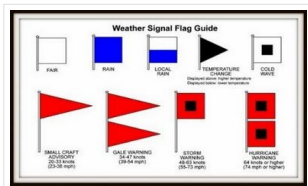


Waves are not the only hazards beach users may encounter, and of which red flags are used to sound a warning.

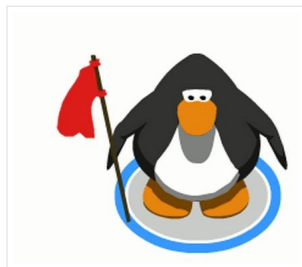
The little red flag on a New Jersey beach marks the presence of leaking oil.



Red pennants are used to convey information about wind speeds to those in yachts, and in extremis a red flag might be a useful accessory for anyone in the sea to have secreted on or about their person.



This image appears to relate to another weather-related risk, that of the danger of standing on thin ice, though quite why the crack which has opened up is a perfect circle is not clear.



But red flags are indeed used in the Antarctic, to mark the location of important items which might be covered in the event of severe snowfall or become invisible in blizzards.

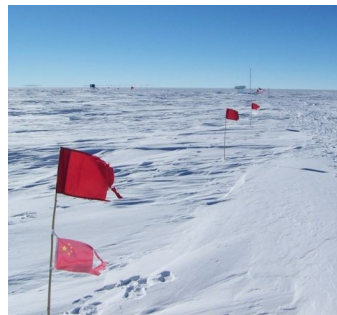
These would include the mooring ropes attaching a supply vessel to the edge of an icesheet, or an 'ice trail' followed by tourists (and, apparently, penguins).

*Red flags mark locations in Antarctica as they stand out against the snow*



The geographic South Pole is marked by a stake, which has to be resited annually because of the movement of the ice on which it stands.

A row of red flags shows its previous locations.



Red flags are deployed in a variety of sporting contexts.

In golf, for example, such a flag usually signifies 'a hole placement towards the front of the green' although a tiny one may be used to convey, 'Please repair green damage'.



The Masters golf championship held in the US state of Georgia has its own flag, which violates the Flag Institute's advice against putting either words or maps on flags.

Indeed, if there was a rule against putting red – or any other – flags on flags, it would break that too.



In football, referee's assistants signal with red flags, and red pennants are used on the corner posts of the pitch.

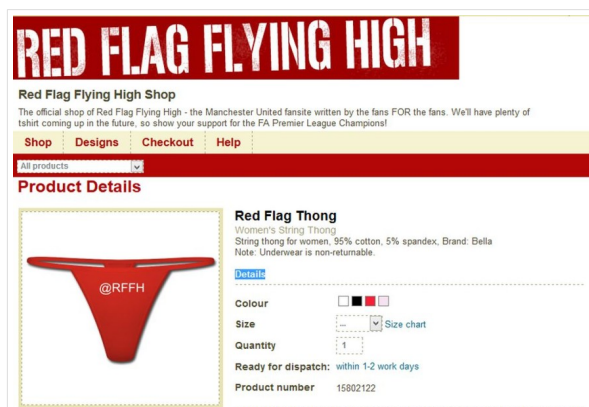


'Red Flag Flying High' is the name of an unofficial Manchester United football supporters club.

It sells T-shirts bearing this slogan or just a plain red flag which is evidently sufficient to convey this message.



And for particularly dedicated female supporters, there is also underwear with the slogan reduced simply to its initials.



In the rifle-shooting component of the biathlon, a line of red flags stretching towards the target helps competitors to judge the strength and direction of the wind.



There are probably few people left in Britain who approve of bullfighting, and even in countries where it is still legal, its popularity appears to be on the wane. But it has given us the simile 'like a red rag to a bull'.

Interestingly, in north America this is often expressed as 'like a red *flag* to a bull', though the cape used by matadors is not a flag in any conventional sense.

And the consensus of expert opinion appears to be that bulls are colour blind or, in any event, that they would be equally aggravated whatever the colour.



Motor racing has its own flag code, in which a red flag is used to stop the proceedings.



*Red Flag Scenario* is a YouTube gaming racer video, simulating a race-stopping event in the world of motor racing.

And the term 'red flagged' was used idiomatically in a news item about grid girls, otherwise known as umbrella, pit or paddock girls, whose main task seems

to be holding sunshades over the drivers in the pit area to advertise their team sponsors.



An earlier application of red flags in conjunction with motor vehicles was introduced by the Locomotive (or Red Flag) Acts, which once regulated the use of mechanically propelled vehicles on British roads. From 1865 until 1896 the maximum permitted speed for horseless carriages was 4mph in the country and 2mph in cities. They also had to be preceded by a man (the law is explicit about his gender) carrying a red flag, supposedly 60 yards ahead.



On Britain's main line railways, drivers and guards are required by the Rule Book to carry a red (and a green) flag, to signal to drivers of other trains in emergencies. The same devices are used by trackworkers.

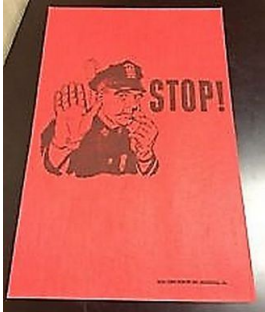


If no red flag is available as a stop signal, torn up undergarments can serve the same end, as Jenny Agutter memorably demonstrated in *The Railway Children*.





Some US highway patrols carry a red flag for a similar use, and it is an essential accoutrement of their counterparts in Pyongyang.



Wally British is the stage name of a Jamaican reggae artist and stand-up comedian whose stage appearances are billed as Red Flag tours and include an act in which she waves a red flag to alert her audience to the risks attendant upon certain types of social encounter.



Each year the advertising agency WPP stages the WPPED Cream awards for the most original and successful campaigns by its branches around the world, one of which went to its Shanghai office for a promotion produced for North Face, a brand of hiking gear.

'Over 18 days, consumers were persuaded to go out and visit as many summits in Beijing and Shanghai as possible. Once there, they were encouraged to plant a red flag in the true spirit of adventure – and plant an electronic flag via mobile SMS message to claim a virtual piece of China. As a result of this pioneering initiative, store sales climbed 106%. Over 651,000 red flags were planted during the campaign period. And the overall champion planted over 4,000 flags alone.'

It seems likely that in this case the choice of colour may have had more to do with the positive associations of red in oriental cultures – but the whereabouts of the 'summits' on which the flags were planted remains obscure, as neither Beijing nor Shanghai is mountainous (and the map suggests that they were much more widely distributed throughout China).

On a recent walk through a local park with my canine housemate Teddy, our attention was caught by a proliferation of miniature red flags. We wondered at first whether the resident pixies had been holding a protest rally. But, on enquiring, it turned out that the local cub scouts had been taking part in a clean-up exercise and, in order to draw attention to the problem of dog dirt (for none of which, needless to say, was Teddy responsible) they had marked the location of every specimen in this way.



And finally ... at the risk of stating the obvious, it's important always to try to see the full picture in order to understand what's going on.

Modern technology makes it extremely easy to manipulate images in order to distort their meaning, and red flags are no exception.

For example, this appears to be a photograph of a lifeguard's chair, alongside a red flag which might be taken simply to indicate that wave conditions are hazardous.



It's only when the rest of the picture is revealed that the true magnitude of the hazards awaiting the unwary become apparent...



### Author biography



John Cartledge lives near London, and is a long-standing member of the Flag Institute. He has previously presented papers to the International Congress of Vexillology on the flags of the British republic (1649-60) and on the history of the red flag as a symbol of rebellion. In this picture, he is the figure on the right.