

A Special American Flag

*June 13, 2016 - Story by Master Sgt. Michael Smith
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MCGHEE TYSON AIR NATIONAL GUARD BASE, Tenn. – The National Flag Day Foundation reports that Flag Day, soon a 100-year-old American observance, was first proclaimed May 1916 by President Woodrow Wilson. The Stars and Stripes, in their birth by congress, however, were adopted June 14, 1777, and that's the day we observe it. This year, it's on a Tuesday.

U.S. Air Force Airmen assigned at the I.G. Brown Training and Education Center in east Tennessee honored a particular American flag for 30 years come this centennial. It's a cloth flag, roughly 5 foot by 8 foot. It hangs just outside the campus auditorium. And, yes, it has 50 white stars on a blue field, and seven red, and six white, alternating horizontal stripes.

The center's first NCO academy class for 1971 procured the flag and had it flown over the nation's Capital. The students also wanted to fly it over the capitols of each state and territory, said officials.

What makes this Star-Spangled Banner so unique is the 16-year journey it took, and more than likely, the countless honors, folds and unfolds it received from the hands and hearts of hundreds of American flag lovers.

"It's amazing it took all that time," said Patty Collett, who took a tour of the campus this week with her brother-in-law, Master Sgt. Kelly Collett, and family.

Forty-six years ago, sending a flag across the nation may not have been the easiest thing to do. Unlike today, there was no email or social media to help keep it on trek; it was a time of land-line telephones and snail mail. But in so many unknown ways, the NCO Academy Graduate Association managed it.

The flag flew over three capitols in December 1970, and then above 20 more states in 1971. It flew over California and passed to seven other states in 1972. It began 1973 raised over Honolulu.

It was roughly a year later when the flag flew in Juneau, Alaska in March 1974. Then it fell off the map. The flag may have been misplaced, said officials.

Finally, some eight years gone, the flag reappeared. This moment, about 2,700 miles away as the crow flies, in Albany, New York. Coordinators got their Old Glory back on its trek. The flag flew over five capitols in 1982. Seven mid-west states flew the flag in 1983. Colorado and Missouri flew the flag in 1984. Then there came a distant trip, more than 7,000 miles, perhaps inside someone's suitcase or more likely by postal mail, from Jefferson City, Missouri, to Hagatna, Guam in 1985.

The flag hit its stride with five capitols remaining. It showed up back on the mainland in Carson City, Nevada. It concluded 1985 in Texas. Finally, it flew over Louisiana, the Virgin Islands and San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1986.

Academy graduates and others who initiated and helped managed the project then presented the flag for a run up the flag pole at the training center.

Incoming students flew it during their NCO academy's opening reveille ceremony July 29, 1986, for its 55th and last time. Officials said that half of the service members who honored the flag that day were not in the military when the project began.

Visitors with base access can see the flag. It's retired and permanently displayed at the training center. There are also letters verifying its flight over each capital.