

The Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club Flag Ceremony – its Early History

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The first sunset ceremony at Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club was performed on March 5, 1991 before an audience of 130 members, 126 of whom stayed for a special low priced “Sundowners” menu. These members’ names were recorded and each was honored with the title of “Charter Sundowner.” The bar even offered a special cocktail called "Van's Sundowner".

The first ceremony included a formation of CHYC past commodores and the club’s current officers, with the Harbormaster crew acting as Cannoneer and Flag Handlers. The ceremony later was modified to include the women’s auxiliary and a patriotic message of the month. The fleet chaplain, a bugler, and a choral group have made random Sundowner presentations.

CHYC adopted the ceremony when its then-sitting commodore borrowed (with permission) the ceremony from the Coral Reef Yacht Club where he had been a participant while a board member of the Miami club. Coral Reef had traced its early version to one of their commodores who had been a member of a New York yacht club in the early 1900's.

The CHYC ceremony began with all of the participants assembling on the club grounds overlooking the harbor. A single cannon salute was followed by the calling of the participants to attention as the public address system played “To the Colors.” Upon completion of “To the Colors” the second cannon salute was sounded with the synchronous playing of “Taps” while lowering the flag. The flag was properly folded by the handlers and presented to the commodore for storage. The participants were then formally dismissed. The ceremony as conceived as a living and unfinished tradition: over its long history it has been modified many times, always improving and earning its emulation at yacht clubs around the State.

Participants in the ceremony were required to wear the club blue blazer, club tie, white shoes, and white trousers. A naval style white officer's cap with black band and black side buttons was prescribed for all male participants. Females were to wear the female version of the same uniform. From the very first Sundowners it was apparent that the club uniform was too warm in all but the winter months, so the board adopted its present summer uniform. The club uniform with its cap plays a symbolic and colorful role in this unique event. Like many yacht clubs, CHYC dress codes did not prescribe club caps. The white officers’ caps became a club storage problem because some ceremony participants found it difficult to remember to bring their hats to the ceremony. Members built varnished shelves near the bar for easy access before and after the ceremony. Thus was born the colorful trek of the participants to find their caps just prior to the ceremony – a commotion that still informally signals the start of every ceremony.

Precise timing and coordination aren’t everything for a true Sundowner, but the perfect location of the club's parade ground facing the setting sun over Charlotte Harbor is the sine qua non for CHYC Sundowners.

In the beginning some questioned the relevancy or benefit of having the ceremony. One of the principal factors influencing the adoption of the ceremony was patriotism. The war with Iraq had

just begun and the Board sensed a need to express support for Operation Desert Storm; a celebration to honor the flag was especially timely. The Board also sensed a need to show club unity by having its uniformed officers and members participating together on a regular monthly basis in addition to the annual Change of Watch and the annual Commodore's Ball. Having all members united in a single club activity would promote camaraderie.

Finally, the Board recognized that tradition is important to club life, and the Sundowner ceremony is the essence of tradition. It's more than just a "see and forget" thing; it is a total emotional involvement experience.

CHYC Sundowners ceremony has become a fixture within the State of Florida and has moved on and assumed a life of its own. Other clubs request information from us on the nature and management of it. We hope that this short history will be useful to those who wish to add a spark of patriotism to their clubs' lives. We thank everyone who has participated in its evolutionary development, including the white gloves for the flag handlers and to those who, by being witnesses, advanced the cause. May we all eventually witness the Green Flash!