

History of the Cross of Malta



History shows that the Cross of Malta, the emblem of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, is 1,000 years old. Nearly ten centuries ago the Maltese Cross was made the symbol of fighting men who were united by a solemn pledge of comradeship to fight for freedom and to aid the sick and the needy. Those ancient obligations are still symbolized by the Cross of Malta today, for the more than two million former servicemen who are the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The Cross of Malta is the symbol of their battles in time of war and of their campaign to defend the God given rights of human beings in time of peace. The Cross of Malta symbolizes the compassion, or sympathy, of those men and women for the needy. It is the sign of services which our contemporary veterans render to help make living a little better for everyone.

To appreciate fully the original meaning of the Cross of Malta we must look back a thousand years, to the Crusaders serving in the Middle East. There we find the Knights of St. John, the worlds first great brotherhood of warriors pledged to chivalry. The Knights of St. John represented all walks of life. They were noblemen and priests, artisans and laborers. Regardless of those differences, however, they were united by a solemn pledge of unwavering courage and compassion. Together they fought against oppression. They

carried their crusades far from home across deserts and seas, into the Holy Land, Cyprus, Rhodes and Malta. At the same time they administered to the sick, the needy and to the poor. The Crusaders adopted the Cross of Malta as their insignia because its eight points represented the eight Beatitudes prescribed in the Sermon on the Mount. Those, in effect, declare (1) blessed are the poor in spirit, (2) the meek, (3) the pure, (4) the merciful, and (5) the peacemakers, (6) blessed are they that mourn, and (7) seek righteousness, and (8) blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake. The Cross of Malta had a religious origin but the Knights of St. John also made it their battle standard for the liberation of all men, women and children who suffered oppression. The ideals for which the original Crusaders fought parallel the principles of democracy today, freedom and justice.

Centuries passed to the year 1899. Again fighting men banded together. Again they pledged themselves to campaign for the rights of mankind and to administer to the sick, the needy and to the poor. That was the birth of a new organization, known today as the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. Why did the Veterans of Foreign Wars select the Cross of Malta emblem? What has been added to the Cross and what does the symbol mean? Let us look at the VFW ensign closely. We see the eight-pointed Maltese Cross. Upon the Cross is superimposed the Great Seal of the United States, encircled by the name, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. Within the circle is the American eagle, the emblem of a proud nation whose warriors of many generations have fought and sacrificed to preserve the free mans way of living. Between the four arms of the Cross, the Veterans of Foreign Wars has added the suns rays to emphasize the vigor and warmth with which the present day brotherhood defends our ideals. Every detail in the VFW emblem has definite meaning. The Cross, the rays and the seal together symbolize the vows, purpose and character of men and women who have traveled far from home to defend humanity. The Veterans of Foreign Wars is the world's oldest and largest overseas war veteran's organization. It is chartered by the Congress of the United States. That charter states specifically that the objects of the VFW shall be fraternal, patriotic, historical and educational; that its members shall preserve and strengthen comradeship; that they shall maintain allegiance to the government of the United States and fidelity to its laws; that VFW members shall foster true patriotism, extend American freedom and defend this nation from all enemies.

Upon joining the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a person vows in the presence of Almighty God and the members of this order to maintain loyalty to the

government, to the VFW, and to his fellow comrades. When the Cross of Malta is bestowed upon a new VFW member, he or she is pledged to advance the principles of the organization. Like the original Crusaders 1,000 years ago, the 2.1 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars today fulfill their vows through a wide variety of vigorously executed services. The VFW is also joined by 750,000 members of our Ladies Auxiliary in our efforts. They foster true patriotism, and strengthen the institutions of freedom by word and deed. They improve their cities, towns and neighborhoods through community service. They give aid to worthy comrades and to the widows and orphans. They extend helping hands to the needy and the sick. Like the original Knights of St. John, those who wear the VFW Maltese Cross express their comradeship in terms of service.

These are the reasons why the Veterans of Foreign Wars chose the Cross of Malta as its emblem. The Cross of Malta symbolizes truly the character and objectives of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. People qualified through military service to wear the VFW Cross of Malta do so with pride because that emblem represents the highest of ideals. Every member has earned the Cross of Malta proudly - and he or she wears it proudly.