

The Maltese Cross

The eight-point Maltese Cross, in Italy also known as the Amalfi cross, is the international symbol of the fire service's willingness to make great sacrifices in order to protect others from the ravages of fire. One can easily find a hundred web sites that will tell you that the symbol of the fire service comes from the 'Knights of Malta' and their battles with Ottoman pirates or the Saracens.

The cross is eight-pointed and has the form of four 'V'-shaped elements, each joining the others at its vertex, leaving the other two tips spread outward symmetrically. Its design is based on crosses used since the First Crusade. It is also the modern symbol of Amalfi, a small Italian republic of the 11th century.

In the 15th century, the eight points of the four arms of the later called Maltese Cross represented the eight lands of origin, of the Knights Hospitaller: Auvergne, Provence, France, Aragon, Castille and Portugal, Italy, Baviere (Germany) and England (with Scotland and Ireland).

The eight points also symbolise the eight obligations or aspirations of the knights:

- to live in truth
- to have faith
- to repent one's sins
- to give proof of humility
- to love justice
- to be merciful
- to be sincere and wholehearted
- to endure persecution

The first evidence for Maltese Cross on Malta appears on the 2 Tari and 4 Tari Copper coins of the Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette (Grand Master 1557–1568). The 2 and 4 Tari Copper coins are dated 1567. This provides a date for the introduction of the Maltese Cross.

This symbol of honour, courage and dedication originated with a group of eleventh century knights who were serving in a Jerusalem hospital. They became known as the Order of Knights Hospitaller and later became the Knights of Saint John. This charitable organisation cared for the ill with great compassion.



Later they assisted the Knights of Crusaders in their effort to win back the Holy Land. As the Knights of St John and Knights of Crusaders attacked the city walls, the Saracens first threw glass bombs containing highly flammable liquids like naphtha and then threw flaming torches to ignite the liquids. Hundreds of the knights were burned alive. Many knights were severely burned as others risked their lives to save their brothers-in-arms from dying the painful, fiery deaths. Risking the horrible death themselves, knights that were able, struggled desperately to help their burning comrades by beating out the flames and dragging them to safety. Thus, these men became our first fire fighters, the first in a long history of courageous men and women. Their heroic efforts were recognised by fellow crusaders who awarded each a badge of honour - a cross similar to the one fire fighter's wear today. Since the Knights of St John lived for close to four centuries on a little island in the Mediterranean Sea named Malta, the cross came to be known as the Maltese Cross. Given out in acknowledgment of their heroic deeds of rescuing fellow knights and fighting fires, the crosses were decorated and inscribed.

After maintaining and defending the hospital in Jerusalem, the knights eventually moved to Malta and built

large fortifications, including St Elmo's Fort. In 1530, the Island of Malta was given to the courageous knights. The symbol on their flag was the familiar eight-point cross. The cross, which had originally helped the knights distinguish between friend and foe, became the ultimate symbol of heroism and service.

Finally they acquired the name, 'The Knights of Malta'. From Malta they launched attacks on the Barbary Pirates and became enemies of the Ottoman Empire once again. In 1564 Suleiman again set his sights on the knights. He sent his armada of over 170 ships to Malta with over 40,000 well trained troops and many thousand more slaves and mercenaries. Malta endured many sieges starting in 1565, but always remained victorious.

In his book, 'Badges of the Bravest' Gary Urbanowicz states that the first use of a Maltese cross was adopted by FDNY in 1865. In Brooklyn they apparently adopted it in 1882.

The Maltese Cross is considered sacred and represents the principles of charity, loyalty, chivalry, gallantry, generosity to friend and foe, protection of the weak and dexterity in service.

Today, fire fighters wear the Maltese Cross to symbolise their willingness to risk their lives to save others. 