

# Howard Talks Tech

## Safety Symbology, their origin and meaning

Many of us in the “Safety Business” have grown accustomed to the symbols often seen in our profession so that we may not even know from whence they came or how they developed. I speak in part in this article about the three colored crosses we commonly see: The Red Cross, Blue Cross and the Green Cross. We generally recognize that each has reference to human well being in some special context. Their history, development and lineage are fascinating.

There is well over 100 years of tradition in the use of the **Red** Cross on a white background. The idea of an international symbol arose at a meeting in Switzerland in 1863. The goal of the meeting was to develop ways to improve care of the wounded on battlefields. On August 22, 1864; 12 signatories signed an international treaty, in Geneva, that came to be known as the Geneva Conventions. The fundamental principle was: “Wounded or sick combatants, to whatever nation they may belong shall be collected and cared for.” The symbol they proposed to identify and protect medical personnel was the: Geneva cross, a white armlet with a red cross on a white background made up of 5 squares. It is a symbol for protection of aid workers reaffirmed in Article 38 of the 1949 Geneva Convention.

What we today recognize as the **Blue** Cross started as an experiment in Dallas Texas in 1929, with the intention of providing affordable health coverage in a non-profit context. The blue Greek cross symbol was first used in an advertisement in 1934 for a hospital prepayment insurance plan in Minnesota. In 1939, the American Hospital Association (AHA) started using the blue cross symbol to signify the health plans that met certain standards. The AHA continued to manage the use of this symbol until the Blue Cross Association was formed in 1960. Today, the *Blue Cross Blue Shield Association* is a federation of 38 health insurance organizations. Combined, they provide health insurance to 99 million Americans.

Some nine hundred years ago, a **Green** Greek cross emblem was used by the Hospitallers of St. Lazarus. The modern use of the Green Cross began as a symbol to promote “Safety Week” in Tokyo in 1919. The green cross with arms of equal length on a white background is a symbol of protection against accidents. Ironically, a green cross was also used to identify the contents of a deadly artillery gas shell during World War I. These shells released suffocating gasses like chlorine. The first use of Green Cross shell was on May 31, 1915 in a German offensive in Ypres. Also ironically, green is one of the most toxic colours there is for dyeing fabrics, paper, plastics, because it originally used copper arsenate.

Perhaps the use we associate most frequently with the green cross is as part of the symbol of the National Safety Council. The NSC is a member organization, founded in 1913 and granted a congressional charter in 1953. Established in 2000, the *Green Cross for Safety* medal is awarded annually by the National Safety Council to an organization that demonstrates a steadfast commitment to improving safety and health in the workplace and beyond. Our own ASSE uses a cross symbol in its Norman Shield logo.

Whenever you see one of these crosses it should remind you of our humanitarian duty to care for one another.