http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/013113/flagSM.png

It's Bill Newkirk's job to keep a close eye on the weather, watch for rips and tears and mend them when needed — all part of a day's work for the man in charge of the massive 20-by-30-foot American flag that flies 120 feet above Allen Edmonds and has long been a Port Washington landmark

When it comes to flying the American flag, Bill Newkirk of Belgium has become an expert.

For the past nine years, Newkirk has taken care of the 20-by-30-foot flag that flies 120 feet above Allen Edmonds Shoe Corp. in Port Washington.

"It's a beautiful flag, and I'm proud to take care of it," Newkirk said. "I'll come in on weekends, at night to take it down if its too windy or bad weather is predicted."

The flag that helps guide customers to the high-end shoe company is one of the largest, if not the largest, flags in Wisconsin since Acuity in Sheboygan took down its 30-by-60-foot flag because of design flaws with the 150-foot flagpole.

A big concern for Newkirk, a patriotic man who served in the National Guard, is to catch rips in the flag when they are small. Rips can quickly become major tears when whipped by high winds, he said.

The flag is taken down if winds of 30 mph or more are predicted, Newkirk said.

"It's made to withstand more than that, but I don't want to push it," he said.

"That's when I call somebody from the factory to help so the flag doesn't touch the ground. We fold it as neatly as we can. It's so big it would be almost impossible to fold it in the proper way (a triangle with the field of stars showing).

"Sometimes, it's gusting pretty good. I tell him (his helper), 'If it starts to get away from you, let it go. Don't go up with it.'"

So far, no one has been pulled off the ground, he said, but there are times he's felt he could go aloft.

Newkirk lowers the flag every day to check for rips, which normally begin in the outside corners. If he finds one, the flag is sent to a flag shop in Milwaukee where it is repaired. A minor tear can be repaired by reinforcing the corners, Newkirk said, but a large tear requires cutting and re-hemming it, thus shortening the length.

Newkirk also checks the flag while it's flying with a pair of binoculars.

"I hate to see rips in a flag that's flying," Newkirk said. "That's degrading."

The flag will be repaired several times before it is retired. The company usually buys two flags a year at a cost of $700 each.

"This one is on its last legs," Newkirk said as he recently lowered it. "We're getting a new one soon."

Old flags are given to the Van Ells-Schanen American Legion Post in Port Washington for proper disposal.

Newkirk is responsible for lowering the flag to half-staff for state and national days of mourning. He receives an e-mail from the governor's office when the flag should be lowered and for how long.

Unless bad weather is predicted, the flag stays up through the night, with a light illuminating it.

The flag is held by seven sets of thick chains that have rollers on them. A handle fits into the flag pole and Newkirk hand cranks the flag up and down.

"It's not hard to lower it," he said. "It's harder to put it back up."

Newkirk, who is responsible for indoor and outdoor maintenance at the shoe company, said flag duty is a rewarding job.