



The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: A Brief History

Since November 11, 1921, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has been the heart of Arlington National Cemetery. As a sacred memorial site and the grave of three unknown American service members, the Tomb connects visitors with the legacy of the United States armed forces throughout the nation's history. It is a people's memorial that inspires reflection on service, valor, sacrifice and mourning.

World War I and the Creation of the Tomb

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier originated in the context of World War I. Technological and industrial progress in the early 20th century made World War I one of the deadliest wars in history. The warring nations utilized deadly new weapons and tactics, rendering the remains of millions of combatants unidentifiable or missing. When the war ended, nations created cemeteries and memorials to honor their dead, known and unknown.

On November 11, 1920, the second anniversary of Armistice Day, Great Britain and France both interred an unknown service member from World War I. The French laid theirs to rest under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, and the British buried theirs at Westminster Abbey in London. These unidentified remains represented all unknowns, and their tombs became shrines where citizens could mourn.

The United States, inspired by its allies, decided to create a similar tomb for an American unknown. Representative Hamilton Fish, a World War I veteran, led the effort in Congress, which passed legislation approving the creation of a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on March 4, 1921. Although other sites were considered, Congress ultimately chose to locate the Tomb at Arlington National Cemetery, near the new [Memorial Amphitheater](#).

In the fall of 1921, the U.S. Army selected one unknown American service member to inter in the planned Tomb. The Army took detailed precautions to ensure the anonymity of this honored American. The Quartermaster Corps disinterred one set of remains each from four American military cemeteries in France: the Meuse-Argonne, St. Mihiel, Somme and Aisne-Marne cemeteries. The four caskets of remains were transported to the town of Châlons-sur-Marne, where a formal selection ceremony took place at the city hall on October 24, 1921. In the presence of French and American dignitaries, U.S. Army [Sgt. Edward F. Younger](#), a decorated World War I veteran, selected the Unknown by laying a spray of white roses upon one of the four caskets.

The following day, October 25, 1921, the Unknown Soldier's casket departed from the port of Le Havre on board the [USS Olympia](#). The Olympia had served as Admiral George Dewey's flagship during the Spanish-American War (1898), and in recognition of its distinguished service history, the U.S. Navy selected the cruiser to bring the Unknown home to the United States.



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Ceremonies to honor the Unknown Soldier began with the Olympia's arrival at the Washington Navy Yard on November 9, 1921. Each event was open to the American public. On November 10, as the casket lay in state in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, more than 90,000 mourners came to pay their respects.

The Unknown Soldier's funeral took place on November 11, 1921. Throngs of spectators lined Washington's streets as a grand military procession escorted the Unknown from the Capitol to Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. Thousands more attended the funeral ceremony, and telephone lines transmitted President Warren G. Harding's eulogy to audiences at venues in New York City and San Francisco. Throughout the nation, Americans observed two minutes of silence during the funeral. President Harding presented the Medal of Honor to the Unknown Soldier, and dignitaries from France, Belgium, Great Britain, Italy, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Poland presented their nations' highest awards as well. Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow Nation represented American Indians at the ceremony and placed his coup stick and war bonnet on the Tomb.

Completing the Tomb

Originally, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier consisted of a simple, flat marble slab. During its early years, the unfinished site served as a place of mourning for grieving families, many of whom had no other grave to visit. It also began to evolve into a symbolic stage for military and diplomatic ceremonies. In 1926, Congress authorized an open design competition to complete the Tomb. After several phases of review, it awarded the design to architect Lorimer Rich (buried in Section 48) and sculptor Thomas Hudson Jones, both World War I veterans. Their symbolic design featured a flat sarcophagus carved with wreaths and three neoclassical figures representing Peace, Victory and Valor. An inscription on the west side reads, "Here Rests in Honored Glory an American Soldier Known but to God."

During its early years, the site did not have a guard, and visitors could walk up to and even touch the Tomb. Reports of disrespectful public behavior led to the establishment of a civilian guard in 1925, followed by a military guard in 1926. Twenty-four-seven guard duty began in 1937. In 1948, soldiers from the [3d U.S. Infantry Regiment](#) (The Old Guard) assumed this prestigious duty, which they continue to hold today. Known as Sentinels, these soldiers provide security for the Tomb, lead ceremonies and maintain the sanctity of the space. Most importantly, they honor the Unknowns through the precision and perfection of their rituals.

World War II and Korean War Unknowns

In the aftermath of World War II, Americans wanted to add an unknown from that war to the Tomb, but the U.S. entrance into the Korean War in 1950 delayed the process. When the Korean War concluded, plans expanded to add unknowns from both World War II and Korea. Suitable sets of remains from each of these wars needed to be selected. Because World War II had stretched across the globe, the Army exhumed unidentified bodies from every major combat region. It then selected two to represent the European and Pacific Theaters. Aboard the USS Canberra, an enlisted Navy sailor and Medal of Honor



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recipient, Hospital Corpsman 1st Class William R. Charette, selected the World War II Unknown by placing a wreath on one of the two identical caskets. The other received a ceremonial burial at sea. The Korean War selection proved more straightforward. Four unidentified bodies from the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawai'i were chosen as candidates, and Army M. Sgt. Ned Lyle selected one to be the Korean War Unknown.

On Memorial Day 1958, the nation paused for a dual funeral for the Unknowns from World War II and the Korean War. The ceremony re-created many of the 1921 events. After lying in state at the Capitol Rotunda, the Unknowns received a ceremonial procession to Memorial Amphitheater. There, a crowd of thousands watched President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Vice President Richard M. Nixon receive folded flags from atop the two caskets, which were then lowered into two crypts to the west of the Tomb.

The Vietnam War Unknown

Before the Vietnam War ended, Arlington National Cemetery began making preparations to add a third crypt to the Tomb. However, many people believed that advances in technology would mean that all remains from Vietnam could eventually be identified. As an interim measure, on November 11, 1978, President Jimmy E. Carter dedicated a plaque at the Tomb to honor Vietnam veterans. Despite this gesture, veterans and others still lobbied Congress to add an unknown Vietnam War service member to the Tomb. On Memorial Day in 1984, an Unknown from the Vietnam War, selected from a very limited group of candidates, received a state funeral and was buried in a third crypt at the Tomb.

In 1998, the Department of Defense decided to disinter the Vietnam War Unknown, due to advances in DNA science and the high likelihood of positive identification. DNA analysis subsequently identified the Vietnam Unknown as U.S. Air Force 1st Lt. Michael J. Blassie. Blassie's family chose to rebury him at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in Missouri. His empty crypt was rededicated in 1999 to honor all missing and unknown Americans who served in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

The Tomb Today

In its first century, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has evolved into a national place of commemoration connected to all of American history. What began as a single grave now symbolizes service and sacrifice in all U.S. wars. Visitors to the Tomb honor not just the three Unknowns interred here, but also all American unidentified and missing service members who rest in national cemeteries across the United States, in American military cemeteries around the world, and in unknown or unmarked graves. At the Tomb, they are never forgotten.

- For information on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Centennial Commemoration, please visit arlingtoncemetery.mil/Tomb100 and follow us on social media @ArlingtonNatl.
- Download "[A Century of Honor: A Commemorative Guide to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier](#)," researched and written by the ANC History Office.