

Arlington National Cemetery Tomb of the Unknowns

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ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY TOMB OF THE UNKNOWNNS



This “National Moment of Remembrance” is just one of the ways we, as a society, observe traditional, solemn ceremonies as a means of remembering, honoring, and mourning those who have passed on from this life to whatever lies beyond.

And for our soldiers in particular--- we as a nation, observe some very formalized rituals as a means of affording our very highest honors to members of the armed forces who have died in the service of their country--- particularly those who have fallen in wartime.

Military funerals with honor guards, flag-draped coffins, salutes, and burials in cemeteries set aside for veterans--- are all symbols by which we honor and acknowledge our gratitude to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

We acknowledge our UNIDENTIFIED fallen heroes with a special place of reverence in our most honored of burial grounds---the Tomb of the Unknowns (also known as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier), in Arlington National Cemetery.

Arlington National Cemetery is a United States of America military cemetery in Arlington County, Virginia, which was established during the American Civil War. It was established on the grounds of Arlington House, formerly the estate of the family of Confederate general Robert E. Lee's wife, Mary Anna (Custis) Lee, a great grand-daughter of Martha Washington. The cemetery is situated directly across the Potomac River from the Lincoln Memorial in

Washington D.C.

Although we cannot inter all of our unidentified war dead in Arlington---beginning in 1921---we first laid to rest an “unknown soldier” with the inscription on the tomb of the unknown reading--“Here Lies In Honored Glory An American Soldier Known But To God”--- and thereby we honor them all--- by including the remains of representative soldiers of unknown identity who died in foreign wars.

The most visible symbol of honor associated with the Tomb of the Unknowns--- is that the site is guarded around the clock, every day of the year, by specially trained members of the Third United States Infantry Regiment (also known as the “Old Guard”).

Any soldier who wishes to become a Sentinel must undergo rigorous training, including several hours a day of marching, rifle drill, and uniform preparation and every tomb sentinel is expected to be completely versed in the history of both the Tomb and of Arlington National Cemetery (including knowing how to find the graves of all the prominent people buried in the cemetery).

The Sentinel must be exemplary in discipline, dress, and bearing--- must possess an unblemished military record---and be able to execute a variety of ceremonial rites flawlessly and with precision.

He must be in superb physical condition.

Once the sentinel has completed his or her training, he or she is examined formally for proficiency in performing the duties of a Guard and in required knowledge. The Sentinel must pass a written examination of 100 questions and then be evaluated on proficiency in keeping watch at the Tomb of the Unknowns.

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Upon successful completion, the soldier is awarded a temporary Tomb Guard's Badge at a ceremony presided over by the company commander. The Badge is one of the Army's higher honors and can be taken away from the soldier---even after he leaves active military duty--if he or she ever does anything that is deemed behavior unbecoming a Tomb Guard or which brings dishonor upon the Tomb.

***A few highlights regarding the Guard at the Tomb----**

- ξ The guards make 21-step walks past the Tomb of the Unknowns because 21 alludes to the 21 gun-salute, which is the highest honor given any military or foreign dignitary.
- ξ The Sentinel marches 21 steps across the black mat, past the final resting places of the Unknown Soldiers of World War I, World War II, Korea, and the empty crypt of the Unknown Soldier of the Vietnam War. (Beginning in 1984 the Tomb also held the remains of a serviceman killed in the Vietnam War, but after DNA testing confirmed his identity in 1998, his remains were disinterred and returned to his family and the crypt of the Vietnam Unknown has remained empty ever since.)
- ξ With a crisp turn, the Sentinel turns 90 degrees to face EAST for 21 seconds.
- ξ The Sentinel than turns a sharp 90 degrees again to face NORTH for 21 seconds. A crisp “shoulder-arms” movement places the rifle on the shoulder nearest the visitors to signify that the sentinel stands between the tomb and any threat.
- ξ After that--- the sentinel paces 21 steps NORTH, turns and repeats the process.
- ξ The Sentinel's gloves are moistened to prevent his losing his grip on the rifle.

- ξ The guard's shoes are specially made with very thick soles to keep the heat and cold from their feet. There are metal heel plates that extend to the top of the shoe in order to make the loud click as they come to a halt.
 - ξ The shoes are standard issue military dress shoes. They are built up--- so the sole and heel are equal in height. This allows the Sentinel to stand so that his back is straight and perpendicular to the ground.
 - ξ The soles have a steel tip on the toe and a “horseshoe” steel plate on the heel. This prevents wear on the sole and allows the Sentinel to move smoothly during his movements when he turns to face the Tomb and then back down the mat.
 - ξ There are no wrinkles, folds, or lint on the uniform.
 - ξ From 1926-1937, the Tomb was guarded only during daylight hours. Ever since 1937---the Tomb has been continuously guarded 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Tomb guards are changed every 30 minutes between 8 AM and 7 PM during the period from early Spring to early Autumn (April 1 – Sept. 30), and every hour between 8 AM and 5PM the rest of the year. At all other times (i.e. while the cemetery is closed)--the guard is changed every 2 hours.
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AN INTERESTING STORY---

In 2003 as Hurricane Isabelle was approaching Washington DC--- our US Senate and House took 2 days off with anticipation of the storm. On the ABC evening news, it was reported that because of the dangers from the hurricane, the military members assigned the duty of guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were given permission to suspend their assignment---BUT---they respectfully declined the offer.



They continued marching in the pelting rain of a tropical storm---soaked to the skin. To them---guarding the Tomb---was not just an assignment-- it was a high honor---only afforded to a select few soldiers.

So through the hurricane---and continually even until today--- the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier-- continues to be patrolled 24 hours a day/7 days a week --and has remained so since the "30's.

Memorial Day is celebrated each year at Arlington National Cemetery on with a remembrance ceremony. Not only will the more than 600,000 gravestones be decorated with small American flags, but it is customary for the President or Vice President to give a speech honoring the contributions of the dead and to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

There is perhaps no more potent symbol of a soldier's ultimate sacrifice than the "Unknown Soldier"--- the serviceman who has died in combat, but whose remains are not identifiable. He cannot be returned to his home---his friends and loved ones cannot know for certain how or

when (or even IF) he died---and he cannot be placed to rest in a site of his own choosing.

He remains, perpetually, a soldier who not only gave up his life for his country, but his very identity as well.

That loss of identity makes the Unknown Soldier a powerful symbol. However---because he is no longer an individual---he stands for the purest American ideals of courage, valor, and sacrifice--- and serves as a noble and selfless representation of service to one's country.

AS GRATEFUL AMERICANS---during the National Moment of Remembrance each year and in other ways---hopefully we ALL will remember our American soldiers---serving both at home and abroad.

And may our prayer be---that God will bless them and keep them safe---and for those who have given their ALL--- and have made the ultimate sacrifice---may the good Lord grant to them ---eternal rest!

