

# **With the Hand of God He Will Be Delivered Home**



By

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Pictured: "White Niphetos roses by Williams Anderson on Artnet".

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## **With the Hand of God He Will Be Delivered Home**

The words of George M. Cohan's popular song were being repeated by Americans in cinemas, corner bars and even churches. People decorated their streets, buildings and homes with red, white and blue flags and bunting. A war had been raging in Europe for more than three years, and Americans were ready to come to the rescue. Hanging over the rails of converted passenger ships on their way to the Great War soldiers, sailors and Marines enthusiastically sang:

*Over there, over there  
Send the word, send the word over there  
That the Yanks are coming  
The Yanks are coming  
The drums rum-tumming  
Everywhere  
So prepare, say a prayer  
Send the word, send the word to beware  
We'll be over, we're coming over  
And we won't come back till it's over  
Over there*

There was a burning spirit that ran through the blood of these young Americans on their way to battle. It was the same spirit of love of country that ran deep through the veins of Americans at Lexington, Gettysburg and San Juan Hill. It was a forever spirit of brotherhood that they carried in their hearts when they "went over the top" and into the face of German machine guns. After 53,402 American combat deaths, it was over – over there at 11 am on November 11, 1918. But sadly some would not come home from "over there". American military cemeteries in Europe listed 1,697 remains as "unknown". The story of America's Unknown Soldier is a message of love, respect and devotion by a grateful nation. It is also a story of America's military and their love for the people of America and their brothers in arms. A love that has not wavered since the first American died in Boston on March 5, 1770 and continues today.

On December 21, 1920, Congressman Hamilton Fish, III, of New York, a decorated officer in the 369<sup>th</sup> Regiment, the "Harlem Hellfighters"<sup>1</sup> introduced a resolution calling for the return to the United States of the body of an American, a member of the overseas forces of the United States, killed on the battlefields of France and whose identity cannot be established. His burial would be conducted with appropriate ceremonies and laid to rest in a tomb to be constructed at the Memorial Amphitheater in Arlington National Cemetery. The measure was approved on 4 March 1921, as Public Resolution 67 of the 66<sup>th</sup> Congress.

At Norfolk Navy Yard Virginia on Sunday September 25, 1921 the smell of creosote drifted on a light breeze with partly cloudy skies and temperatures in the mid- 70s . An

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<sup>1</sup> The regiment, composed of men of color, lost no ground, had no POWs taken and was the first to reach the Rhine, while spending more time on the front lines than any other American regiment.

occasional distant toot from a ship's horn was a reminder the busy base was waking up. The third anniversary of the end of the Great War was 47 days away. Marine Corps Captain Graves B. Erskine was with his rifle company in Haiti when he received orders to lead the detachment responsible for the protection and return of America's Unknown Soldier. His orders required him to report to the commanding officer, Colonel "Wild Bill" McKelvey, Marine Barracks Navy Yard Norfolk. In their meeting that Sunday, Erskine thought Colonel McKelvey seemed to be very excited, and remembered him saying, "how are we going to do this overnight?"<sup>2</sup> The colonel was referring to putting together a detachment of 38 Marines before the USS *Olympia* sailed for France in a few days. The meeting ended with Colonel McKelvey promising to do everything he could to help Captain Erskine. The one thing they both knew, Marines had not served onboard *Olympia* for years and their quarters would need to be restored.<sup>3</sup> Erskine's mission was now set—escort the body of the Unknown Soldier back to America by November 11<sup>th</sup>. Erskine was instructed to gather his detachment quickly and report to the skipper of the cruiser USS *Olympia* anchored off Hampton Roads.



Captain Graves B. Erskine

Graves B. Erskine grew up in Columbia, Louisiana. He spoke French with some difficulty and graduated from high school at fifteen. He went on to college at Louisiana State University (LSU), where he received excellent grades. While attending LSU he served with a National Guard unit on the Mexican border. When the United States entered the World War he had difficulty enlisting in the Army because he was 19 years old. A number of his friends had joined the Marine Corps, and after some difficulty proving that he had the necessary credits to graduate from LSU, he was accepted into the Marine Corps officer program. After training at Quantico, Virginia, he shipped off to France. Lieutenant Erskine was wounded three times leading Marines of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment at Belleau Wood, Soissons and St. Mihiel. For his gallantry under enemy fire at Belleau Wood he received the Silver Star.

Colonel McKelvey did his part and soon orders were issued assigning 38 Marines from Sea School at Norfolk to *Olympia's* Marine Detachment. At the top of the list of these Marines was First Sergeant Edward A. Mullen, Sr. Any officer who has served in command knows the importance of a strong First Sergeant. Captain Erskine probably understood immediately that

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<sup>2</sup> Oral History Transcript – General Graves B. Erskine pg.69

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

having a senior non-commissioned officer from Sea School was exactly who he needed for his mission. First Sergeant Edward A. Mullen, Sr. was born in Limerick Ireland in 1895. He had recently re-enlisted after a six months absence from the Corps. He knew the requirements of life aboard a naval vessel and more importantly he taught this knowledge at the Marine Corps East Coast Sea School Norfolk.

At the time it was said that “you are not a Marine until you spend time at sea”. Marines assigned to Sea School were selected from the most promising graduates of recruit training. During three intense weeks of instructions seven days a week, young Marines learned the basics of life onboard a ship. They were taught communications with naval signal flags, lights and semaphores. They learned compass navigation and duties serving as an orderly to the ship’s captain. In addition, seagoing Marines were proficient with loading and firing 3 and 5 inch naval guns<sup>4</sup>. First Sergeant Mullen and his freshly trained “Seagoing Marines” received their orders by “radio” communication on September 26, 1921 for their assignment to escort the remains of the Unknown Soldier home.<sup>5</sup>

It was a short ride by olive drab military trucks from Norfolk to Hampton Roads. During the ride in the cab of the truck Erskine probably thought about his new detachment’s First Sergeant, Ed Mullen. Erskine had served with plenty of Irish Marines. In fact, laying in defilade behind a tree on the battlefield, he had been shot through the leg and pinned to the earth by a German machine gun. For hours he lay there unable to move when he heard the sounds of Marines coming up the hill through the brush. To warn the approaching Marines of the enemy machine gun, he held up his helmet on a stick. The Germans fired revealing their position to the lead Marine who was a big tall Irish fellow. He pulled the young Lieutenant to safety and carried him to the rear. Erskine remembered the incident telling his rescuer – “you saved my life – what can I do for you?” With a grin on his face the Marine looked at the Lieutenant and said “Sir, I have always wanted me a .45”. Erskine pulled his .45 pistol from his holster and gave it to him.

On September 27<sup>th</sup> the minesweeper USS *Quail* transferred the Marines to the *Olympia* while anchored at Hampton Roads. Based on the enlistment dates on Marine Corps muster rolls<sup>6</sup> Mullen’s Marines did not have the combat experience of their captain. But they were Marines - dedication to their country and their mission was their foundation. These Marines would passionately guard the Unknown Soldier for the American people until he was returned home. The Marines understood the importance of this Unknown Soldier’s remains to mothers, wives, fathers, brothers, sons, daughters, sisters and dear friends who suffered the loss of a loved one who did not return from “Over There”. For many Americans there would never be a marked

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<sup>4</sup> *The Leatherneck* June 1926 “The Broadcast”

<sup>5</sup> Muster Roll of Officers and Enlisted Men U.S. Marine Corps Marine Detachment USS Olympia Sept 1- 30, 1921

<sup>6</sup> Muster Roll of Officers and Enlisted Men U.S. Marine Corps Marine Detachment USS Olympia Oct 1- 31, 1921

grave to visit. The nameless soldier in the specially designated unknown grave at Arlington would be theirs.

In the early morning darkness of September 28<sup>th</sup> the tug *Massasoit* came alongside the anchored *Olympia* and delivered 38 mattresses and 10 cots for the Marine detachment. *Olympia*'s boilers were being fired for departure as the Marines prepared their quarters and were able to take a few hours of sleep. Their mission had begun.

By the fall of 1921 the steel hulled cruiser *Olympia*, a veteran of two wars, was reaching the end of her service life. When she began her illustrious career, nearly thirty years earlier, *Olympia* was a proud addition to the United States' ambitious new "steel Navy". She was a carefully balanced design that was sometimes referred to as "the cruiser with battleship guns." Launched in 1892 *Olympia* was a marvel of modern marine engineering. She was equipped with electrical illumination, artificial refrigeration, rotating gun turrets and heating for crew spaces.<sup>7</sup> Her first moment of glory occurred under the command of Commodore Dewey. *Olympia* led the Asiatic Squadron into Manila Bay as they destroyed the Spanish fleet. After that momentous victory, *Olympia* became the most famous vessel in the American Navy. It was fitting then that *Olympia* in her twilight years was assigned the noblest mission of her career – return the remains of the Unknown Soldier to the American people.

The *Olympia* with her new detachment of Marines onboard hauled anchor at 9:33 AM on September 28<sup>th</sup> for Melville, Rhode Island to refuel with additional coal before transiting the North Atlantic for Plymouth, England. After briefly steaming through fog, the *Olympia* dropped anchor off Montauk Point at 1:10 PM on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Rear Admiral Lloyd H. Chandler and naval musicians from Naval Training Station Newport came aboard at Melville<sup>8</sup> to participate in first anniversary ceremonies for the British Unknown Warrior of the World War. Sometime during transit, Captain Wyman USN brought Captain Erskine to his quarters and instructed him to drill his sailors on deck for participation in a ceremonial parade in London. Captain Wyman made it clear he wanted his sailors to look smart and be the best unit in the parade. When *Olympia*'s sailors fell out on deck for marching instructions, Erskine and his sergeants were shocked to see the sailors were not wearing shoes. However, once the drilling began he quickly understood the shoeless wisdom on the slick wooden decks. After a few days of heavy seas, *Olympia* anchored at Plymouth, England on October 14<sup>th</sup>.

Upon arrival in Plymouth, Marines and sailors quickly prepared to honor the British Unknown Warrior in London. On October 17<sup>th</sup> Rear Admiral Lloyd H. Chandler represented the Navy at the ceremonies at Westminster Abby where U.S. Army General John Pershing presented the Medal of Honor to the British Unknown Warrior. After nine days in England, *Olympia* left port on October 23<sup>rd</sup> for Le Havre, France and arrived the next day.

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<sup>7</sup> Historic American Engineering Record USS *Olympia* – HAER Pa-428

<sup>8</sup> USS *Olympia* Log Book 29 September 1921

Selection of the Unknown Soldier was carefully planned and executed to ensure that the unknown would be a member of the American expeditionary force killed in combat that could not be identified. The bodies of four unknown American soldiers were removed from four separate battlefield cemeteries and taken to Romagne, France on October 22<sup>nd</sup> for medical examination to ensure: all the bodies could not be identified, were combat casualties and were American. French military trucks then moved the four caskets to the Hotel de Ville (city hall) in Châlons-sur-Marne on the morning of October 24. U. S. Army Sergeant Edward F. Younger, a wounded and decorated soldier, was assigned to select one coffin as the American Unknown Soldier of the Great War. As Sergeant Younger entered the building he was presented a spray of white roses with instructions to place them on the coffin he picked. The roses were donated by a member of the Châlons-sur-Marne city council. Sergeant Younger entered the hall and faced the four coffins resting on their transfer cases. He deliberately walked around the four coffins three times; and then made his selection by placing the spray of white roses on the third coffin from the left.<sup>9</sup> After the selection, the remains were removed to a separate room and transferred to a coffin built to detailed specifications in America.

The white roses were most likely grown by the florist Joseph Pernet-Ducher, who lost two sons in the war<sup>10</sup>. The Greek word associated with this rose is Niphetos (nigh-feh'-toes) which translates: falling snow and is also known as the Bridal Rose. Poetically, this French white rose has been deemed or regarded as "the few, the immortal few that were not born to die"<sup>11</sup>.

A special train of the French government idled at the train station in Châlons-sur Marne to take the Unknown American Soldier to Le Havre France where the *Olympia* was docked at Pier d'Escale. When the train stopped overnight at the Batignolles station outside of Paris, the coffin was guarded by three American soldiers and a uniformed member of the American Legion until the train left in the morning. At 1 PM on October 25<sup>th</sup> the funeral train arrived in Le Havre. Church bells tolled as French and American troops along with members of the American Legion slowly escorted the flag draped coffin through subdued crowds to the dock via city hall. Women and men wore formal black mourning suits and followed alongside the caisson to the dock.

Speeches were given by French and American officials. When Monsieur Andre Maginot limped toward the flag draped coffin, the growing crowd pushed closer in quiet reverence waiting for his words. Pinning the highest French medal, the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, to the Stars and Stripes that covered the coffin Andre Maginot calmly and passionately said:

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<sup>9</sup> *Fortitudine*, Vol. 36 #2 Kara Newcomer

<sup>10</sup> *Rose of the Unknown Soldier* by Robert B. Martin President of the American Rose Society 2019-2021

<sup>11</sup> *Everblooming Roses for the Outdoor Garden of the Amateur: the Culture, Description and Care of Roses* by Georgia T. Drennan

*“The whole of France bows down with me before your coffin, brother from America, they can take you back to the great land from which you came but your French family will always piously preserve your memory and the land of France will not forget that it was to it you entrusted your last dreams.”*

During the final ceremonies *Olympia*'s band played the national anthems of France and America and then on the stern of the ship young children laid bouquets of flowers on the coffin. Many of the little girls, wearing long white skirts left the ship with streaks of tears on their faces. They slowly walked home from the dock through a light rain to row houses, or chalets. The bronze floral displays from the French government were carefully carried below deck along with the bouquets brought by the children and dignitaries. A chest of French soil from the cemetery at Suresnes was also placed below deck. The military march, *Aux Champs*<sup>12</sup> drummed continually by the French band, rang over and over in Captain Erskine's mind, but the ache in his leg told him the weather was changing. Wounded in the leg by machine gun fire it was only through the intercession of a young operating room nurse that he kept his leg. He fully recovered the use of his leg, but occasionally a tiny piece of bone fragment would force through his skin.

Captain Graves B. Erskine stood in the dew like mist on the after deck of the cruiser beside the coffin of the Unknown Soldier. He could feel the storm coming. He understood the gravity of his mission. He and his thirty-eight Marines were entrusted by the people of the United States to protect the remains of this fallen soldier of the War to End All Wars. Their orders were simple; bring him home before Armistice Day on November 11<sup>th</sup>. It was 3:28 PM on October 25<sup>th</sup> 1921 at the harbor of Le Havre. The French cruiser, Admiral S n s was the first ship to begin the procession. *Olympia* pulled away from the dock with a 17 gun salute from the French warship, Verdun and farewell salvos from shore batteries. The USS *Reuben James* and two columns of six French destroyers, escorted the *Olympia* to the mouth of the harbor where the crews waved a final farewell. He was on his way home.

Meanwhile, in the southwestern Caribbean Sea swirling winds and rain had grown into a tropical depression on October 20<sup>th</sup>. The storm intensified quickly moving northwestward. By the 22<sup>nd</sup> it developed into a major hurricane – the sixth hurricane of the year. By the next day maximum sustained winds of 140 miles per hour on the Saffir-Simpson scale were recorded – a Category 4 storm that curved to the northeast and the Florida coast. As the *Olympia* was leaving France hurricane number six struck the Florida coast at Tarpon Springs as a Category 3 with sustained winds of 120 mile per hour. When hurricane six moved across central Florida it weakened into a Category 1 becoming known as the Tarpon Springs Hurricane of 1921<sup>13</sup>. Reaching the Atlantic with winds of 80 mph, the hurricane briefly re-strengthened to winds of 90 mph early on October 27<sup>th</sup>. Late on October 29<sup>th</sup>, the system accelerated northeastward and

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<sup>12</sup> *Aux Champs* originally played to warn French soldiers it was time to leave and was among many martial songs played during the ceremony

<sup>13</sup> American Meteorological Society 2012 A Reanalysis of the 1920 – 30 Atlantic Hurricane Data Base

weakened to a tropical storm, before being absorbed by a large extratropical cyclone possibly the remnants of hurricane number five that had circled near the Azores and itself also degraded into an extra tropical depression on October 25<sup>th</sup>. The *Olympia* was about to traverse an ocean tormented by cyclone winds, mountainous waves and driving rain from two intense storms.

Captain Henry Lake Wyman, the *Olympia*'s skipper, instructed the Marine guard not to slant or tip the coffin. Therefore, the coffin of the Unknown Soldier could not be moved to the interior of the ship through bulk head hatches. Everyone onboard understood the dignity and respect deserving this fallen hero of America. The coffin would not be placed in a cargo hold.

Under the direct supervision of Captain Erskine, Marines carried the Unknown Soldier to the signal bridge, the highest point on the ship that could accommodate the coffin aft of the ship's conning (bridge). *Olympia*'s carpenters had constructed a wooden outer protective shell for the casket. Marines and sailors lovingly wrapped the wood in waterproof tarps then lashed it down with ropes and lines that a Marine private described as "enough line to secure the battleship Wyoming fore and aft with brest and spring lines to boot."<sup>14</sup>



The coffin of the Unknown Soldier secured on the signal bridge

Captain Erskine sensed an intense storm was looming ahead of *Olympia*. During his trip across the Atlantic to Portsmouth, England he had experienced how the *Olympia* rolled and heaved in angry seas. The ship's draft was 29 feet of water but as Captain Erskine later described – "she seemed too short for the long waves and too long for the short ones."<sup>15</sup> Captain

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<sup>14</sup> Marine Corps Gazette Nov. 1964 Vol. 48 #11 *In Good Hands* Lt.Col. Dennis D. Nicholson pg. 57 Lt. Col. Nicholson was the first to write in detail about *Olympia*'s Marine Detachment and their heroic service. A great deal of credit is due Lt.Col Nicholson for his research

<sup>15</sup> Oral History Transcript – General Graves B. Erskine 1975 pg. 71



Erskine was quoted as saying in an interview: “The agonizing thought came to me: what if the Unknown Soldier – the hero America waits to honor – is washed overboard? I knew if such a thing happened I might as well jump over with him.”<sup>16</sup>

After passing the Azores on October 31, *Olympia* began encountering large waves and rain. The deck crew quickly moved to secure forecastle gear and place buckler plates over the chain locker to keep water out. Near gale force winds ripped into *Olympia* around 10 AM making steering difficult. Green water smashed into the bow of the ship and washed down her wooden decks like a mountain stream in spring. Life lines were quickly tied to stanchions by the ship’s crew for traversing slippery open areas. When the bow rose on a growing wave the fan tail dipped low with green water gushing across the place where the Unknown Soldier previously rested. Captain Erskine’s natural senses that served him so well on the battlefields of France allowed him to stay one step beyond a disaster. Before the *Olympia* departed France, Captain Wyman ordered a Marine guard to stand with the Unknown Soldier around the clock. Captain Erskine established a four hour duty watch for his Marines. They now stood their watches on the open signal bridge beside the coffin in winds that ripped and tore at their oil skin jackets. Even facing away from the cold, pelting rain it found ways to trickle down their necks.

As the storm roared, the *Olympia* rolled dangerously close to her limit for broaching. Her white bow sank deeply into green water – decks were more awash in foaming green sea water than clear. When the watch changed Captain Erskine realized his sentry on the signal bridge was in danger of being swept overboard. The Marine guards suggested that they be lashed to the ship’s rail. Captain Erskine then ordered detachment First Sergeant Mullen to tie each relief to a stanchion and place two Marines inside the helmsman station in case the ropes loosened holding the canvas, or the wooden enclosure failed. Marine Private Frederick A. Landry was quoted as saying: “I began feeling sorry for myself standing there in a small area with wind and rain pelting me in the face, but my self sorrow didn’t last long. I soon realized that what I was doing was little enough compared to what the Unknown Soldier had done – given his life.”<sup>17</sup> Captain Erskine observed a Marine on ship’s watch caught by a wave and washed down the deck. His black rubber boots instantly filled with sea water and were carried overboard as he held tightly to the safety line.

The old queen of the fleet moaned and groaned through each wave. Captain Erskine reported later that he thought he saw plates on the ship’s hull moving. During the battle of Manila Bay the *Olympia* had been struck a number of times by Spanish cannon fire but only cosmetic damage had occurred. Below decks the *Olympia* rolled so far that sailors moved down passageways with one foot on the deck and the other on the bulkhead. The bridge became awash from monster waves and the ward room had water slushing across the deck. At 10:30 AM a strong wave broke lose the life raft in the port galley passage. As the ship pitched, a falling water

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<sup>16</sup> Marine Corps Gazette Nov – 1964 Vol. 48 #11 *In Good Hands* Lt. Col Dennis D Nicholson pg. 57

<sup>17</sup> *Last Voyage* by Dennis D. Nicholson, Jr. pg. 44

bucket lacerated the scalp of Seaman Charles D. Bell. In the engine room Seaman R. M. Thistle fell through the catwalk bars and onto a cylinder head cutting his head. Captain Wyman grew concerned that one more roll might be the ship's last. A Navy chaplain, Lieutenant Edward A. Duff had boarded the ship at Portsmouth England to hitch a ride back to America. Lieutenant Duff was ordained a Catholic priest at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore in June 1912. Captain Wyman, worried the ship might sink, suggested it would be a good idea for Lieutenant Duff to hold a prayer service for the crew.

Sailors and Marines not on duty gathered together in the galley where they held tightly to bulk heads, pipes and each other as the ship pitched violently. Father Duff began by reminding the crew of the importance of their mission. He told them that God was watching out for the *Olympia* and with the hand of God the Unknown Soldier would be returned home to the people of America. All bowed their heads as Father Duff said a prayer for the Unknown Soldier lying above them on the ocean swept signal bridge. He prayed that the Unknown Soldier would be returned to the land of the free and the home of the brave.<sup>18</sup>

On Sunday, November 6<sup>th</sup> the weather moderated. The deep green seas rolled gently under *Olympia* as the great white lady rose up the side of a wave giving a panoramic view of a powder blue sky. Then she would gracefully slide down the opposite side changing the powder blue horizon to deep green. Below decks the engine room was having problems. Not from the pounding seas, but from the large consumption of coal. The two huge engines were fed greater than normal quantities of coal by the engine room crew to maintain course and speed. As the fires in the boilers grew dim from a lack of fuel, Captain Wyman ordered all hands to move coal stores from a forward bunker. Marines and sailors formed a line to pass the black chunks of coal to the starving boilers before the fires flickered out. With the last obstacle removed, the *Olympia* proudly steamed for Cape Henry Light at the southern entrance to the Chesapeake Bay. It was time for the Marines to polish their brass and spit shine their dress shoes.

A light rain was falling when the *Olympia* eased alongside Pier Three at the Washington Navy Yard dock. There is an old saying, "when it rained at someone's funeral, it was angel tears, as a good one left the earth for their eternal home." Waiting on the wet cobblestone dock to take the Unknown Soldier home were mounted soldiers of the Army's 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment. The cavalry squadron faced the ship in line formation. All eyes were on the flag draped coffin of the Unknown Soldier. The Marines and sailors on deck smartly saluted one last time. The ship's bell sounded at 4 PM and the Army band began playing "Onward Christian Soldier" as the Unknown Soldier was gently carried down the sand dusted ramp from ship to shore and his waiting caisson with six black horses. Captain Erskine's Marines stood at attention in formation on the dock. With the command "Present Arms" the Marines in their dress blues snapped their Springfield rifles into one last salute. Sabers flashed in the rain – a salute from the men of the 3<sup>rd</sup>. The Navy and Marines relinquished their responsibility to the Army. The Marines had

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid pg. 46

accomplished their mission and lived up to their motto – Semper Fidelis – Always Faithful. The slow trip to the Capitol rotunda began and Captain Graves B. Erskine shouted the orders to his men “Order -- Arms -- At Ease”. With the skill of the officers and sailors of *Olympia*, the devotion of the United States Marine Detachment and with the hand of God – he was home to America.

*“Post and Orders Remain as Directed”<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> Command at changing of the guard Tomb of the Unknown Soldier- please see Epilogue for further explanation