

The Eternal Mission: To Prevent Desecration or Disrespect

“Surrounded by well meaning crowds by day, alone in the thoughtful peace of night, this Soldier will in honored glory rest under my eternal vigilance”

– excerpt from the *The Sentinels Creed*



For the past 95 years Soldiers of the United States Army have stood eternal vigil at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. To thousands of our nation’s visitors each year, these men and women are the only American service-member they may encounter. It is the hope of each Sentinel who is assigned to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Platoon that these visitors look past them, past the immaculate uniform and precision of manual of arms to what they stand watch over: the final resting place of unnamed Americans who fell in the defense of their country and others who could not defend themselves.

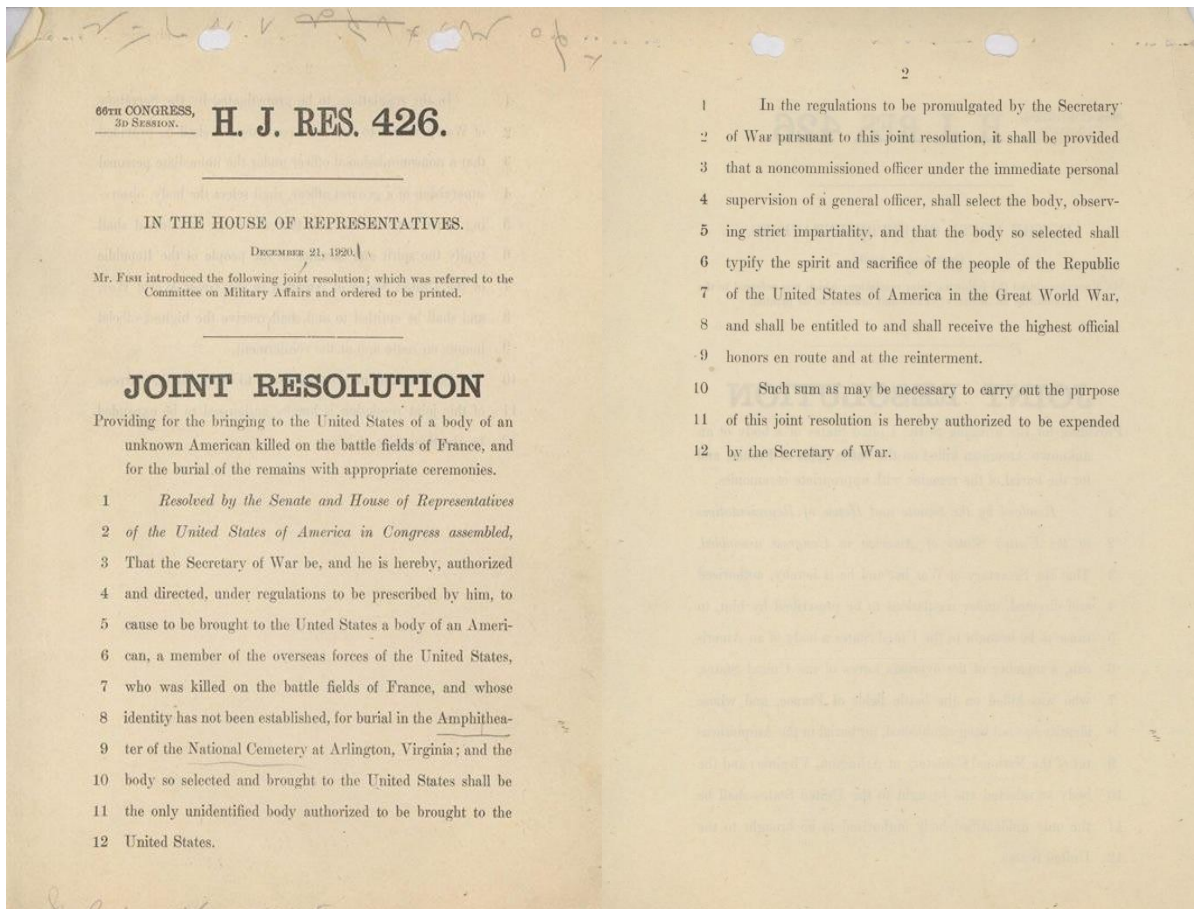
No other platoon in the Army has such a mission requested by Congress.

The history of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier starts with House Joint Resolution 426 which was first proposed on December 21, 1920 by Congressman Hamilton Fish (NY). Congressman Fish, a combat veteran of the Great War serving with the 369th Infantry Regiment “Harlem Hellfighters,” had seen firsthand the devastation “modern” warfare inflicted upon his Soldiers. In July of 1918 he witnessed one of his orderlies become severely gassed to the point of unconsciousness by enemy shells. Stretcher bearers were sent forward to recover the wounded orderly when an artillery shell fell directly on top of the group, immediately killing three of the stretcher bearers as well as the orderly who they had been sent to retrieve.

Before these men could be recovered, another shell landed directly on the group leaving no bodies to bury. Their remains, what was left of their corpses, were later buried by the French, but with no identification to put upon the field cross except "Unidentified American Soldier."

Motivated by his war time experiences, Congressman Fish proposed legislation that would provide... "for the bringing to the United States of a body of an unknown American, who was a member of the American Expeditionary Forces, who served in Europe and lost his life during the World War, and for the burial of the remains with appropriate ceremonies."

Congressman Fish strongly felt that the Unknown Soldier "...should not be taken from any particular battlefield but should be so chosen that nobody would know his identification or the battlefield he comes from. He should represent in himself the North, the South, the East, and the West...no distinction whatever either in the matter of rank, color, or wealth."



The legislation was approved by President Woodrow Wilson on March 4, 1921, and Secretary of War John Weeks was authorized and directed to begin the process of bringing home the Unknown Soldier. Four candidates were selected from four American cemeteries in France and brought to the Hotel de Ville in Chalons-sur-Marne (today called Chalons-en-Champagne) where the final selection was made on October 24, 1921 by Army Sergeant Edward F. Younger, a veteran of World War I assigned to the Army of Occupation. From this point until his burial in Arlington National Cemetery the World War I Unknown Soldier was never alone, constantly

being watched over by Soldiers and an American Legion member in uniform, setting the standard that all future Tomb Guards have held themselves to.

After spending the night in Paris, the World War I Unknown Soldier was transported by train to the Port of Le Havre, and the Army passed responsibility of guarding the Unknown Soldier to the crew of the USS Olympia (C-6) and the Marines assigned especially for the mission of returning him home.

On November 9, 1921 the USS Olympia (C-6) arrived at the Navy Yard where troopers from the 2nd Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment assumed responsibility for the Unknown Soldier and escorted him to the US Capitol where he lay in state until his burial in Arlington National Cemetery on November 11, 1921. No provision had been made to continue the guard and the Unknown Soldier grave site remained unguarded until November 17, 1925.



Due to numerous visitors to Arlington National Cemetery using the Unknown Soldiers grave as a picnic table and the area around his grave becoming misused, civilian watchmen from the Quartermaster Department were assigned during the daytime to ensure the public treated this grave with respect. The Watchmen were formed into two reliefs, with two watchmen on duty when the cemetery was open to the public. One of their instructions remains part of the current Tomb Guards mission whose “special duty it is to prevent any desecration or disrespect.”

A memorandum of orders directed that watchmen assigned to the first relief would go on duty at 0800hrs. “each and every morning of the year.” The second relief would then replace the first at 1230hrs. with the cemetery closing hours fluctuating each month throughout the year. Watchmen who were not on duty at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier would be responsible for the west side of the Memorial Amphitheater to regulate traffic and guide visitors along the “proper routes of ingress and egress” as indicated by posted signs.

By 1926 there was interest brewing to replace the civilian Watchmen with military guards. Congress recognized that the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was “America’s shrine emblematic of our heroic dead who gave their lives for their county during the World War” and that among

the thousands of visitors to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were “some who fail to conduct themselves with proper reverence due it.” House Joint Resolution 185, dated March 2, 1926, directed the War Department to form a “military guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington.”

This “special guard armed and equipped as for field service during the World War” would be given the duty to guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier from “sunrise to sunset” and that a bugler “shall sound taps each evening just prior to the dismissal of the guard.” Civilian Watchmen would still be in place to provide information to the public as the guards were under strict orders to not “talk to with anyone, except members of the guard, at any time while on post.” This order stands today, and the public is genuinely surprised if the Sentinel must direct disrespectful visitors to maintain decorum while visiting the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Secretary of War Dwight Davis sent a letter to John M. Morin (PA), the Chairman on the Committee on Military Affairs in the House of Representatives, stating that in his opinion, House Joint Resolution 185 did not need to be signed into law as he had directed the Commanding General, District of Washington effective March 25, 1926 to place a “special guard” at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The day prior, orders had been received by the Commanding General, District of Washington to establish the formation of a “military guard, armed with a rifle, at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery.” This guard would post one Sentinel from “the hour of the opening of the gates to the cemetery each morning until the closing of the gates each evening”. Tomb Guards would be rotated from units in the District of Washington command between the 2nd Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment at Fort Myer; 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment at Fort Washington; and the 5th and 13th Engineer Battalions at Fort Humphreys.



As early as 1932 requests were made to expand hours to 24hrs a day, but they were denied due to lack of troops. However, on midnight July 2, 1937 the guard post hours were extended to 24-hrs a day by order of the Washington Provisional Brigade Commander and the strength of the platoon increased to three (3) non-commissioned officers and nine (9) privates.

Over the next 11 years-additional units would be responsible for providing Tomb Guards including the 703rd Military Police Battalion, the Ceremonial Detachment of the 7011th Army Service Unit, and finally the 3d United States Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) assuming duties on April 6, 1948.



As the Centennial of the burial of the World War I Unknown Soldier approaches in 2021 it is important not only to remember the burial of the World War I Unknown Soldier, but to reflect on what the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier means to America as a whole. On three instances since 1921, the remains of unknown servicemen have been interred at the west base of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, each within their own crypt. The remains of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier were removed in 1998 after modern science identified the serviceman. That crypt remains empty, but a marker was placed honoring all those still missing in action (MIA/POW) which underscores the larger purpose of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and rings true to the legislation by Congressman Hamilton Fish who viewed the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier as a focal point to bring all Americans together—that its meaning not be limited to the Great War and the exclusive claim of that War's veterans.

The Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (SHGTUS) is actively developing educational programs, lectures, and events to support the Secretary of Defense's efforts as they plan for, and conduct, a program to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier as directed by Congress under the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. The Society was founded by veterans in 1999 as a non-profit 501(C)(3) educational organization, created by current and former members of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Honor Guard to support mission of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier platoon, and the members of the Honor Guard.

Soldiers of the 3d Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) carry on this sacred duty, keeping alive the traditions and history of the first Tomb Guards and the mission passed to them in 1926: to honor the Unknown Soldiers buried on the east plaza of the Memorial Amphitheater, educate our nation and its visitors about the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, commonly and erroneously referred to as "Tomb of the Unknowns," and what this shrine means to the millions of Gold Star and MIA/POW families.



SGM Gavin McIlvenna, US Army Retired, is President of the Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (SHGTUS) and is working with the government and various non-governmental organizations on the Centennial Commemoration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (1921-2021).