

The World War I Unknown Soldier and the Victoria Cross By Centennial Committee

As the Centennial approaches in 2021, one of the many committee projects has been to reach out to the various nations that presented their highest medal for valor to the Unknown Soldier in 1921 and to learn more about the history behind the medal.

The Victoria Cross (VC) is a military decoration awarded for valor "in the face of the enemy" to members of the British Armed Forces. The VC takes precedence over all other British orders, decorations and medals and may be awarded to a person of any rank in any service and although civilians under military command are eligible for the award none has been awarded since 1879. The VC has often been presented to the recipient during an investiture by the British monarch. The last award of the reign of King George VI and all awards of the reign of the present Queen, except for the two posthumous awards to the Australian Army during the Vietnam War, have been presented by Queen Elizabeth II. The VC has been awarded on 1358 occasions to 1355 individual recipients.



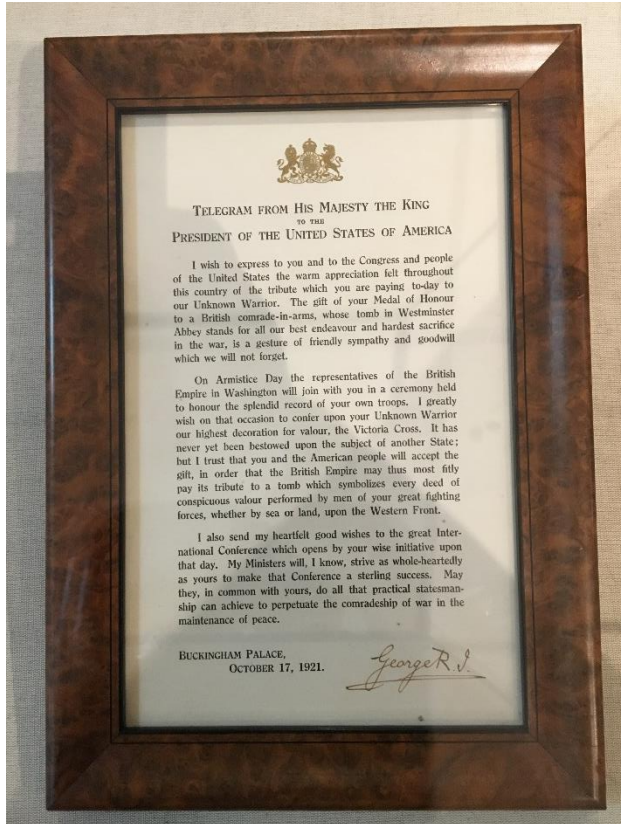
First non-commonwealth Soldier to be awarded the VC was a German born Soldier in the British Army, Sergeant Major Charles Wooden of the 17th Lancers in 1854 for gallantry during the Crimean War. The first US citizen was awarded the VC was William H. Seeley for actions in Japan in September of 1864. According to VOnline.org.uk Seeley earned the VC prior to enlisting in the Royal Navy as an ordinary seaman while serving aboard the frigate HMS Eurylaus.

The committee reached out to Mrs. Rebecca Maciejewska, Chief Executive of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association, for detailed information on the VC and events surrounding the presentation. After providing what information the VC&GC Association had, she mentioned:

"Interestingly, although the two countries are doing the same thing in using an unidentified soldier as a national symbol of all those who have died in conflict but whose bodies have not been retrieved, in the UK it is known as the grave of the Unknown Warrior as opposed to Soldier because, I have been told, there was a desire that he represent those who have served in all arms of the Armed Services, Navy and Air Force as well as Army."

This VC & GC Association history book details that after the United Kingdom buried an Unknown Warrior of the First World War at Westminster Abbey on 11th November 1920, it was decided that the United Kingdom and United States would each bestow their highest military decoration on the other's Unknown Warrior. General John Pershing presented the Medal of Honor to the British Unknown Warrior on 17th October 1921. The Victoria Cross, dated 18th October 1921, was presented to the American Unknown Soldier by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Beatty, on behalf of King George V, on 11 November 1921 at the Memorial Amphitheater in Arlington National Cemetery. Sadly, the personal letters of Lord Beatty make no mention of this event or his thoughts.

King George V sent the following telegram to the United States of America:



"I wish to express to you and to the Congress and people of the United States the warm appreciation felt throughout this country of the tribute which you are paying today to our Unknown Warrior. The gift of your Medal of Honour to a British Comrade in arms, whose tomb in Westminster Abbey stands for all our best endeavour and hardest sacrifice in the war, is a gesture of friendly sympathy and goodwill which we will not forget.

On Armistice Day the representatives of the British Empire in Washington will join with you in a ceremony held to honour the splendid record of your own troops. I greatly wish on that occasion to confer on your Unknown Warrior our highest decoration of valour, the Victoria Cross. It has never yet been bestowed on a subject of another state, but I trust that you and the American people will accept the gift in order that the British Empire may thus most fitly pay its tribute to a tomb with symbolises every deed of conspicuous valour performed by men of your great fighting forces, whether by sea or land, upon the Western Front.

I also send you my heartfelt good wishes to the great International Conference which opens on your wise initiative upon that day. My Ministers will, I know, strive as whole-kindheartedly as yours to make that Conference a sterling success. May they, in common with yours, do all that practical statesmanship can achieve to perpetuate the comradeship of war in the maintenance of peace.

George R.I."

The Centennial Committee will continue to dive into the unique history behind the medals presented on November 11, 1921 as we work with the militaries of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Poland and Romania and present our findings in later newsletters.

For more information on the VC and GC, please visit their website at <https://vcgca.org/>