

Honor Guard at Arlington National Cemetery

As a society, we have long observed traditional, solemn funeral ceremonies as a means of remembering, honoring and mourning those who have passed. As a nation, we 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, flagdraped 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.

There is perhaps no more potent symbol of this 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, 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 ideals of courage, valor and sacrifice and serves as a noble and selfless representation of service to one’s country.

Since 1921, we have acknowledged 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 (ANC). The tomb is guarded twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, regardless of weather. The tomb has been continuously patrolled since 1937. Prior to 1937 the tomb was guarded only during daylight hours.

Guards are specially trained soldiers of the Third United States Infantry Regiment (also known as the “Old Guard”). For a person to apply for guard duty at the tomb, he must be between 5’ 10” and 6’ 2” tall and his waist size cannot exceed 30”. Training takes up to eight months.

Upon the successful completion of training, 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 if he or she does not continue to maintain the highest military standards. For the first six months of duty a guard spends much of his off duty time studying the 175 not able people laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. A guard must memorize who they are and where they are interred.

The Tomb Guard Identification Badge, first awarded in 1957, is a honor for which a guard qualifies by “flawlessly performing his duty for several months” and passing a test, not something simply handed out to everyone who serves for a given period of time.



Once the sentinel has completed his or her training, he or she is examined formally for proficiency in performing the duties and in knowledge of ANC. He or she must first pass a written examination of 100 questions about ANC and then be evaluated on proficiency

in keeping watch at the Tomb of the Unknowns.

A guard spends hours a day getting his uniforms

ready for guard duty. The shoes are specially made with very thick soles to keep the heat and cold from their feet and to aid in correct posture. 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. There are no wrinkles, folds or lint on the uniform. Guards dress for duty in front of a full-length mirror.

Each guard unit, or relief, on post at the tomb has a commander and about six sentinels. A sentinel is changed every thirty minutes in the summer, every hour in the winter and every two hours at night when the cemetery is closed.

An impeccably uniformed relief commander appears on the plaza to announce the Changing of the guard. Soon the new sentinel leaves the Quarters and unlocks the bolt of his or her M-14 rifle to signal to the relief commander to start the ceremony. The relief commander walks out to the Tomb and salutes, then faces spectators and asks them to stand and stay silent during the ceremony. The relief commander conducts a detailed white-glove inspection of the weapon, checking each part of the rifle once. Then, the relief commander and the relieving sentinel meet the retiring sentinel at the center of the matted path in front of the Tomb. All three salute the Unknowns who have been symbolically given the Medal of Honor. Then the relief commander orders the relieved sentinel, "Pass on your orders." The current sentinel commands, "Post and orders, remain as directed." The newly posted sentinel replies, "Orders acknowledged," and steps into position on the black mat. When the relief commander passes by, the new sentinel begins walking at a cadence of 90 steps per minute.

A sentinel takes exactly 21 steps to walk across the tomb of the Unknowns. It alludes to the twenty-one gun salute, which is the highest honor given any military or foreign dignitary. The sentinel hesitates after his about face for 21 seconds for the same reason. The sentinel's gloves are moistened to prevent his losing his grip on the rifle. The sentinel carries the rifle on the shoulder away from the tomb on his march across the path. When he executes an about face, and moves the

rifle to the outside shoulder.

The average time commitment for a soldier to guard the tomb is about one year. A guard who remains at the tomb post for two years is awarded a wreath pin that is worn on their lapel signifying they served as guard of the tomb. There are only 400 presently worn. They cannot swear in public and cannot disgrace the uniform (fighting) or the tomb in any way or risk losing the wreath. The guard must obey these rules for the rest of their lives or give up the wreath pin.

The Guards of Honor at the Tomb of the Unknowns are highly motivated and are proud to honor all American service members who are "Known But to God." We salute these special soldiers and offer our sincere thanks for their service to their comrades and their country.

This story is drawn from various on-line sources including arlingtoncemetery.mil

Wreaths Across America 2014

In 2014, with the support of the Trucking Industry, WAA placed more than 700,000 wreaths at over 1000 locations nationwide. Heartland received

this marker in appreciation of our support of this project. The white marble stone is from the same quarry as the headstones that mark the graves at Arlington National Cemetery.



The wood base is fashioned from an evergreen tree and the wrapped ribbon is the same that is used to hand tie the bows for each Veteran's wreath. Heartland is proud to support this effort.