

## THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR.

The Unknown Warrior is a powerful symbol that embodies a host of contradictions. He is an ordinary soldier, but one who has been given a place of extraordinary honour; he has no name, yet every family whose relative never returned from the Great War feels that he belongs to them; he represents the losses and horror of war, but also the glory of dying for King and Country; and finally, he is doomed to remain 'unknown' for all of time, yet is famous around the world.



Unknown Warrior leaving France on a wagon

According to Mark Adkin's 'The Western Front Companion', the idea for this shrine to every man who would never have a proper named grave was conceived by Reverend David Railton, M.C., in 1916. Having just completed a burial service near Armentières, the Reverend was returning to his billet, his heart full of the cares of war, when he happened to pass a solitary grave, adorned with a simple wooden cross. On this modest marker was written, "An unknown soldier of the Black Watch". Something about the gesture of respect deeply touched him, so much so that he was moved to write to Douglas Haig, suggesting that the soldier's body be returned to Britain and honoured as a symbol of all like him. It was only much later in October 1920 that the idea was taken up and championed by the Dean of Westminster, as well as David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission stated in 2009 that 526,816 British and Commonwealth Great War soldiers have no known grave, but are named on various memorials, and of those, 338,955 have never been buried at all, while 187,861 do have graves but have not been identified. Four of the most devastating battles for Britain occurred at Aisne, the Somme, Arras, and Ypres. To give some idea of the scale of devastation, Norman Ferguson's 'The First World War: a Miscellany' asserts that 54,435 soldiers with no known grave are commemorated on the Menin Gate at Ypres alone, with another 72,203 British and South African soldiers named on the Thiepval Monument at the Somme.

All missing British men – assuming their bodies have in fact been found – lie under a simple headstone with an epitaph composed by the great writer Rudyard Kipling, whose own son, John, was lost at the Battle of Loos: "A soldier of the Great War, known unto God". Each of these men likely had a family at home, and every one of their families suffered the heartache of never knowing precisely where their loved one ended up, and never having a headstone to visit and lay flowers upon. It was to ease this frustration and grief that the tomb of the Unknown Warrior was created. The anonymity of the buried serviceman was a crucial element of the whole concept. In

this way, the body would simultaneously represent no particular fallen serviceman, and stand in for all of them.

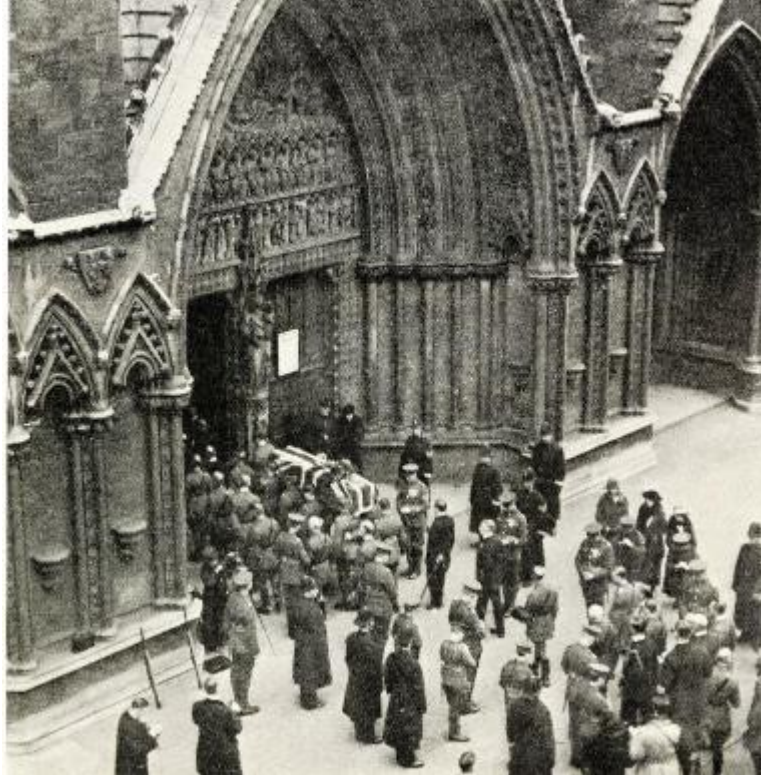


Unknown Warrior passing through the streets of London

That being the case, great care was taken to ensure that nobody could have a clue who the warrior might be. Mark Adkin explains that one body only was exhumed at each of the Somme, Aisne, Arras and Ypres battlefields on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1920, with the servicemen chosen having no evidence upon their person of their name, what their unit was, or even whether they belonged to the Army, Air Force or Navy; they were, however, identified as British or Commonwealth and Dominion by means of being found in a grave containing pieces of British equipment, such as a belt or boots, and being exhumed where only British members of the Allied forces had fought. All four were taken to the same location, a Nissen hut converted into a chapel at St Pol, where they were laid on stretchers and covered with the Union Jack. One of the four was then chosen at random by Brigadier General Wyatt, the General Officer in charge of troops in France and Flanders, who attended the chapel in the company of Lieutenant General Gell of the Directorate of Graves Registration & Enquiries. The other three were returned for reburial, while a service was held for the Unknown Warrior, who was then taken to Boulogne to begin the long journey home to Dover.

The burial was a sight to be seen. Eyewitness accounts by James Bone, at the time London editor of the Manchester Guardian, and Francis Perrot appear in Part 48 of 'The Great War, I Was There' magazine, published August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1939, and can be read in our [Historic Documents archive](#). King George V, flanked by the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York, acted as chief mourner; this was only fitting, when one considers the fact that each and every individual who had gone off to war had done so in the king's name. A further gathering of dignitaries, waiting to meet the coffin at the Horse Guards' Parade, represented the forces and governments of Britain, her Commonwealth

and Dominions, as well as the churches of those countries. The pall bearers were all Admirals, Generals and Field Marshalls, but a silent column of discharged British soldiers of all ranks, regiments, nationalities and services followed the coffin, in company with a host of 100 men who had been awarded gallantry awards, including 74 holders of the Victoria Cross, the bravest of the brave, who nonetheless came to pay their respects to this unidentified man.



Coffin of the Unknown Warrior being taken through North door at Westminster Abbey

Surrounded by a heavy mist, the mourners waited as first King George placed a wreath on the coffin, then the Archbishop of Canterbury recited the Lord's Prayer. At the first stroke of 11:00 by Big Ben the king pushed a button that dropped two outsized Union Jacks that were covering the new permanent Cenotaph, a monument to all who had fought for Britain, both named and unnamed. As the final stroke died a two minute silence descended, then the Last Post was sounded and the procession continued on to Westminster Abbey – the traditional resting place of kings, dignitaries and members of the aristocracy.

A service then followed, conducted by the Dean of Westminster and attended by Queen Mary, Queen Alexandra and the queens of Spain and Norway, as well as a profusion of ex-servicemen and over 1,000 war widows. 'The Western Front Companion' describes a deferential arrangement by which those women who had given both husbands and all their sons were at the front, those who had lost only or all sons next, followed by those who had lost husbands. The coffin, wrapped in a purple funeral pall, was lowered into a grave in the floor of the cathedral and topped with soil brought specially from Ypres, the first spoonful of which was thrown in by the king himself. When the grave was covered over, it would be topped with a plaque of black Belgian marble, edged with red poppies and inscribed using melted-down cartridge cases. After the service, ambulances full of the blind or grievously wounded servicemen came to honour their friends who had never returned home at all.



Unveiling of the Cenotaph

However, according to the 'The Great War, I was there', the moving part of the occasion was only just beginning. Once the official service was over and the king had gone, soldiers, widows and remaining figures of authority alike fell in to file past the coffin and pay their respects. Frances Perrot says, "The V.C.s broke the solemn ranks and became just comrades looking their last on a comrade... the rich women and the poor – for all the open grave meant exactly the same thing." What that thing was is explained beautifully in a tribute written by James Bone:

"We know you well, dear comrade. We know that to you these honours would seem the most gigantic of jokes if they were paid to yourself. Your guffaws would burst the coffin. But you understand us. It is hundreds of thousands we are honouring in your person. Because you were nameless and were forgotten we choose you. You represent them all."

This is the secret of why the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior so moved the British people, and still does today. For all anyone knew, it was their loved one, their friend, their brave colleague who was so tantalisingly close, and so very honoured. That is why, according to 'The First World War' by Ian F W Beckett, 40,000 people visited to pay their respects on that first day alone. In the days that followed up to the 27<sup>th</sup> of November, 1.5 million would make the pilgrimage to Westminster Abbey, to weep and lay flowers. Meanwhile, other nations created their own shrines in imitation, with France holding its own commemoration of the Unknown Warrior on the same day as the British burial.

Courtesy: British Forces War Records – Lgr Peter Wildman.