

## TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR

Regimental Padre Reverend David Railton, M.C. was at Armentieres in France in 1916 when he saw a white wooden cross on a grave in a garden. On the cross were the words "An unknown British Soldier" and in brackets underneath were the words "Of the Black Watch". As a result he gave a lot of thought to the fact that there were thousands of dead troops who had no known graves and consequently in 1920, after the war had ended and things began to settle down, he wrote to the Dean of Westminster proposing that an unidentified dead soldier from the battlefields of France be buried with due ceremony in Westminster Abbey "among the kings", to represent the many hundreds of thousands of Empire dead, thereby creating a lasting focal point for the relatives of those troops killed in battle who had no known grave. This proposal was supported by the Dean and Prime Minister Lloyd George and also King George V.

Brigadier L J Wyatt, Commander of British Forces in France, and Lt. Col. E A S Gell, the Director of Graves Registration, instructed that the body of a British soldier which would be impossible to identify should be brought from each of the four battle areas, The Aisne, The Somme, Arras, and Ypres, on the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> November 1920 and placed in the chapel at Saint Pol sur Ternoise, near Arras. The remains were laid on stretchers and covered with the Union Flag. Shortly after midnight Brigadier Wyatt closed his eyes and then rested his hand on one of the bodies to indicate his selection, and these remains were then placed in the shell of a coffin and the lid

screwed down. The other three were taken away to be reinterred. Brigadier Wyatt later wrote that he had no idea even of the area from which the body he selected had come from.

The coffin remained in the chapel overnight and then in the afternoon of the 8<sup>th</sup> November under guard and with troops lining the route it was taken to the castle at Boulogne where the castle library had been transformed into a 'chapel ardente'. A company of French 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment kept vigil overnight.

The following morning the coffin was placed in an outer coffin made from oak timber cut from trees at Hampton Court Palace. It was then banded with iron and a medieval crusader's sword chosen by the King from the royal collection was affixed to the top. It was also surmounted by an iron shield bearing the inscription, "A British Warrior who fell in the Great War 1914 - 1918 for King and Country". The coffin was then placed on a French military waggon drawn by six black horses. At 10.30 a.m. the church bells of Boulogne tolled and the 'Last Post' was played before the mile long procession, led by one thousand school children and escorted by a division of French troops, made its way to the harbour.

At the quayside Marshal Foch saluted the coffin before it was taken on board the destroyer H.M.S. Verdun, being piped aboard with an Admiral's Call. Verdun slipped anchor and was joined by an escort of six battleships. As the flotilla approached Dover Castle it received a 19 gun Field Marshal's salute. The coffin was landed at Dover Marine Railway Station on 10<sup>th</sup> November and was carried by train to London, arriving at platform 8 at Victoria Station at 8.32 p.m.

On Monday 11<sup>th</sup> November the coffin was placed on a gun carriage of The Royal Horse Artillery and drawn by six horses through huge silent crowds. In Whitehall the cortege halted as King George V unveiled the new Cenotaph memorial. The King then placed a wreath of red roses and bay leaves on the coffin and then the cortege moved off, with the King and members of the Royal Family and Ministers of State, following as it made its way to Westminster Abbey. At the Abbey the coffin was borne into the west nave flanked by a guard of honour consisting of one hundred recipients of the Victoria Cross. The guests of honour were a group of women who had been chosen because they had lost a husband and all their sons in the war.

The coffin was then interred in the far western end of the nave only a few feet from the entrance, in soil brought from each of the main battlefields, and then covered with a silk pall. Servicemen stood guard as tens of thousands of mourners filed silently past.



The grave was later capped with a black Belgian marble stone, ( the only tombstone in the abbey on which it is forbidden to walk) featuring this inscription composed by Dean Herbert Ryle, Dean of Westminster, which is engraved in brass from melted down wartime ammunition.

BENEATH THIS STONE RESTS A BODY  
OF A BRITISH WARRIOR  
UNKNOWN BY NAME OR RANK  
BROUGHT FROM FRANCE TO LIE AMONG  
THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS OF THE LAND  
AND BURIED HERE ON ARMISTICE DAY

11 NOV. 1920, IN THE PRESENCE OF  
HIS MAJESTY KING GEORGE V  
HIS MINISTERS OF STATE  
THE CHIEFS OF HIS FORCES  
AND A VAST CONCOURSE OF THE NATION  
THUS ARE COMMEMORATED THE MANY  
MULTITUDES WHO DURING THE GREAT  
WAR OF 1914 – 1918 GAVE THE MOST THAT  
MAN CAN GIVE LIFE ITSELF  
FOR GOD  
FOR KING AND COUNTRY  
FOR LOVED ONES HOME AND EMPIRE  
FOR THE SACRED CAUSE OF JUSTICE AND  
THE FREEDOM OF THE WORLD  
THEY BURIED HIM AMONG THE KINGS BECAUSE HE  
HAD DONE GOOD TOWARD GOD AND TOWARD  
HIS HOUSE

*Around the main inscription are four texts*

THE LORD KNOWETH THEM THAT ARE HIS (top)  
UNKNOWN AND YET WELL KNOWN, DYING AND BEHOLD WE LIVE (side)  
GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS (side)  
IN CHRIST SHALL ALL BE MADE ALIVE (base)

On 17<sup>th</sup> October 1921 the Unknown Warrior was awarded the United States highest award for valour, the Congressional Medal of Honour, presented by General John Pershing. It hangs on a pillar close to the tomb.

On 11<sup>th</sup> November 1921 the American Unknown Soldier, located in Arlington National Cemetery, Washington D C, was reciprocally awarded Britain's highest award, the Victoria Cross.

*Peter Scarcliffe.*