



A sentinel walks past the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, Va., during his solemn vigil on Oct. 19, 2012. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

Humble reverence, eternal vigilance

Those who guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier must meet the highest of standards to have the honor of standing watch over America's anonymous heroes

By Michael L. Lewis

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Inside America's most hallowed grounds and steps away from the graves of presidents, generals and NCO heroes sits a simple tomb that contains the remains of "an American Soldier known but to God." This anonymous Soldier, who died fighting in World War I, was later joined by other service members, each a faceless warrior whose ultimate sacrifice for his country may never be known in detail.

Nonetheless they are perhaps America's most honored service members. Their final resting place at Arlington National Cemetery, Va., is visited by more than 5 million people each year, including heads of state and dignitaries from the world over. And standing guard on a constant watch are the sentinels who comprise the Guard of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier — NCOs and junior enlisted Soldiers from 4th Battalion, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard).

Continuously since April 1948, Soldiers from the Army's oldest unit have kept their solemn vigil before the tomb. It's a mission, said Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stackpole, the sergeant of the guard, that is like none he's ever had.



A sentinel walks past the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, Va., during his solemn vigil on Oct. 19, 2012. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

“This is outside the realm of what I’m used to,” he said. “To come to the Old Guard after being a light infantryman my entire career and spending time in the reconnaissance community for seven years; to come from the long-haired guy who’s out there trying to blend in with the local populace to here doing the whole high-and-tight thing and dressing up ceremonial was completely different.”

Truly there is no other duty quite like it. In perfectly tailored and crisply pressed Army Service Uniforms — replete with shoes, medals and belt buckles so exquisitely shined they take hours to get right — Tomb Sentinels silently execute a series of precise steps imbued with history, honor and tradition. After their hourlong shifts (a half-hour in the summer), an NCO changes the guard in a ceremony that represents for many observers the epitome of soldiering excellence. All the while, every sentinel must exhibit an incredible — maybe even impossible — level of flawlessness, Stackpole said.

“The standards are extremely high; there’s no doubt about it,” he said. “Line 6 of our Sentinel’s Creed is, ‘My

standard will remain perfection,’ and these guys know that is not even feasible. But if I keep telling myself that, I’m going to believe it, and I’m going to continue to push and pursue that level.”

Such high expectations are necessary because of the solemnity of their duty, said Sgt. 1st Class Dontae Skywalker, who served as commander of one of the guard’s three reliefs until last summer.

“We’re not here for ourselves,” he said. “We’re not down here to look good for us, but for the Unknowns — the Soldiers whose remains have never been identified, whose families don’t know where they are.”

The privilege of keeping watch over the unknown warriors who preceded him in service is what Sgt. Scott Khimani says drew him to the job.

“I have an extreme amount of pride each time I walk out there,” Khimani said. “It’s unbelievable, the feeling of knowing that you are guarding the Unknowns, people who gave me the opportunity to be with my family on a daily basis. It’s extremely honorable and extremely humbling as well.”

For such a noble mission, the training is predictably strenuous, Khimani said.

“It’s very mentally challenging and physically demanding, but also an outstanding experience.”

For 14 days, prospective sentinels must learn and memorize pages of knowledge, the history of the cemetery and the locations of its most notable individuals, the movements of the ceremonial walk on the plaza in front of the tomb, and the secrets to getting one’s uniform to look better than anyone else’s in the force.

“At the end, they’ve tested out on their uniform, they’ve tested out on the first seven pages of the knowledge we have to memorize, and they’ve tested out on the plaza — actually marching the walker’s piece of the sequence of the changing of the guard,” Stackpole said. “It isn’t something where you just show up here and it is given to you. Everybody goes through it, and I had to do the same thing.”



A tomb sentinel stands watch Oct. 19, 2012 during his shift guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, Va. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

Staff Sgt. Max Gideon, who in October was in just his second week at the tomb, said that nothing during his three deployments as an infantryman to Iraq and Afghanistan could have prepared him for such physically and mentally rigorous training.



Sgt. Erik McGuire inspects a tomb guard's weapon Aug. 30, 2012, during a guard change. In a ceremony afterward, McGuire was awarded the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Guard Identification Badge. (Photo by Megan Garcia)

“It’s very stringent, very difficult,” he said. “It’s learning everything over. My experience from the rest of the military doesn’t really carry over, because it’s all brand-new. It’s very time-intensive, with [lots of] attention to detail and hours and hours of learning how to do things the way they do it down here, trying to reach that standard of perfection. . . . It just gets more and more difficult and stringent, and they allow fewer imperfections. It is comparable to nothing that I’ve done before.”

Once guards pass an initial battery of tests, they are immediately tested on the plaza, Stackpole said.

“We put them out there right out of the gate, before the fear can be instilled in them,” he said. “Because the longer they’re there before they go through it, the more they start thinking about it come game day. So, when you show up for [your first] relief, the very first thing they’ll do is post you at 7 o’clock [in the morning]; the cemetery opens at 8. So you’ll do the very first guard change of the day. You might not be out there during the prime hours when the majority of the public is there, but you’ll be out there. And you’ll be constantly critiqued. You’ll be pulled aside and they’ll tell you, ‘This was messed up. Your hand was here and needs to be there.’ The biggest thing is that everyone goes through it, whether you’re an NCO or are a Soldier.”

Much of the training takes place in the Tomb Sentinel Quarters, a collection of rooms beneath the cemetery’s Memorial Amphitheater, which is adjacent to the tomb. There, the members of each relief — which are organized so that members are about the same height, providing an even appearance when changing the guard — spend

their 26-hour shifts studying, training and refining their uniforms. There’s very little time for sleep, said sentinel Sgt. Eric McGuire.

“Hundreds of hours of practice are needed,” he said. “After the close of the cemetery, we go out for hours, and we train as a relief to perfect the guard change and our outside performance. [We’re also] taking care of uniforms — just to shine our shoes to prepare for the next day can take anywhere from two to four hours.”

The vast majority who apply to become sentinels don’t make it, Skywalker said.

“The training is pretty intense,” he said. “One of the main things that tends to knock people out is the knowledge — being able to recite the knowledge and being able to write it out. The second thing is the uniform; it’s a craft you have to learn over time. We tailor our blouse, we tailor our pants, we make our medal racks from scratch.”

Even after they’ve made their first walks in public, new sentinels are not considered full-fledged members of the guard until they’ve finished the months-long process of study, testing and evaluation required to earn the coveted and extremely rare Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Guard Identification Badge.

“The training ‘on the mat’ takes the longest to perfect,” Stackpole said. “They’ll spend three hours a day in the mornings going over nothing but that. They’ll spend a majority of the rest of their time in a corner or in front of a mirror going over the voice commands.”

In the quest to achieve perfection, near-constant correction is a part of the job, Stackpole said.



Spc. Brian Gougler guards the Tomb as snow begins to fall Jan. 9, 2012. The Tomb has been guarded around the clock by Soldiers of the Old Guard since April 6, 1948. (Photo by Sgt. Jose A. Torres Jr.)

“Nobody likes to be corrected,” he said. “But it’s one of those things that, every time they come off the mat, there will be corrections. Everybody gets corrected, to include the badge-holders. You’re going to be encouraged when you’re doing a lot of great stuff, but you’re also going to be told you’re not perfect every day. That’s what keeps you on your toes and keeps you so good at

what you do. It forces you to know your job and to take it seriously, because if you make a mistake out there, everybody sees it, even on national television.”



Sentinels help McGuire perfect his uniform before a changing of the guard during rainy weather Oct. 19, 2012. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

NCOs assigned to the Tomb Guard must undergo the same training and frequent correction despite being a higher rank than most of the badge-holders, Stackpole said. That means, sometimes, a junior enlisted Soldier trains an NCO.

“The Soldiers know the mission here,” he said. “They can probably execute the mission better than any of the NCOs just because they’ve been here so much longer than the NCOs coming in. I’ve been out there, have called a command and heard, ‘Ahem, Sergeant.’ If I was about to make a mistake, they would catch it quick, because if I made it, that would make them look bad. And they were not going to look bad.”

When the intensity and pressure — of being the acme of perfection and the public face of the entire U.S. Army to millions of visitors — becomes too much, the guard’s NCOs refocus and counsel their Soldiers, just like in any other unit, Skywalker said.

“When a new man hits the wall and feels like they can’t do it anymore, I tell them to go outside and watch when one of the veterans’ groups comes in,” he said. “It’s very emotional when you see one of these vets, and they struggle to get out of their wheelchair to salute their buddies who lie beneath that marble. It’s an awakening.”

And no one is alone, Stackpole said. There are fewer than 30 people in the entire Tomb Guard platoon, which creates an exceptional esprit de corps. Everyone is eager to lend a hand.

“It’s amazing the knowledge these Soldiers know,” he said. “When a new man comes in, they are all over him helping him out. It’s a fraternity, it really is. But it’s a fraternity of professionals. Not many will ever be afforded the opportunity to do it, and everybody who ever visits will always remember.”

After the crucible that is their training, sentinels must also cope with occupational hazards such as sore bodies,

as well as having to endure extreme temperatures and the elements, Skywalker said.

“Your knees and your lower back — those are things we deal with on a regular basis,” he said. “Of course, in the summer time, you’re in 100 percent wool outside sweating head-to-toe, too. You’re definitely going to drop weight. But you have to remind yourself that it’s not about you.”

The vigil is constant and enduring — even when hurricanes or earthquakes strike, Stackpole said.

“The sentinel on the mat when the earthquake hit [in 2011] thought his knees had buckled,” he said. “He thought he was falling down and he didn’t want to fall in front of the public. It bothered him that much. But he didn’t realize it was an earthquake until they pulled him off the plaza.

“Those guys stand strong. They do not falter in the eyes of the American public,” Stackpole said.

Even after sentinels earn their badges, like McGuire did in August, more work is to be done, he said.

“Training never ends,” McGuire said. “We always try to remain perfect, not only for the crowd, but for the honor and respect of the Unknowns. On our off days, we’re still working to get better. It’s more like a lifestyle than it is a job.”

“It’s kind of neat how it transitions,” Stackpole said. “You’re a new man. You earn your badge. Now, you have to be a standard-bearer by teaching that brand-new guy everything he needs to know. Then, that guy earns his badge, and you graduate to the next stage while he gets someone to train, and you learn to follow the assistant relief commander and learn his job while enforcing what you already know. And it keeps going.”

The results, Stackpole said, speak for themselves: Scores of junior enlisted Soldiers who are well-prepared to assume NCO roles in their next assignment.



Gouglar teaches Pfc. John Buckingham how the weapons are cleaned inside the guards’ quarters on Buckingham’s first full day as a sentinel in September 2011. After hours, when the cemetery is closed, sentinels wear the Army Combat Uniform. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

“I had a private first class who went to his old company and was building a ribbon rack for someone, and an NCO asked him to teach all his guys that,” he said.

“They asked him to stop, gathered a whole platoon of 36 guys, and this 19-year-old kid sat there and gave a step-by-step, by-the-numbers class to senior NCOs and junior enlisted. He’s a 19-year-old kid, but because they know he’s a Tomb Guard and they know the standards he’s been taught and that have been instilled in him, they entrusted him to teach how to get their ceremonial ribbon racks together.”

That perfection-seeking drive isn’t limited to tomb sentinels, Stackpole said.

“There’s nothing different about being an NCO here,” Stackpole said. “You’re still required to be a leader. You’re still required to set the example and be out front. It’s just a different mission. Everyone’s mission constantly changes. But as far as how you operate as an NCO, it shouldn’t change.”

Skywalker, now a post-Tomb Guard NCO himself, agreed.

“Line 6 about perfection — just because you’re not at the tomb doesn’t mean you can’t apply that to your job,” he said. “We NCOs strive for perfection in everything we do, whether it’s standing there guarding the Tomb of the Unknowns, or whether it’s training Soldiers, or whether it’s going to another unit and completing the mission there. For me, the standard is not going to be high because I was a Tomb Guard, it’s going to be high because I’m a noncommissioned officer.” ■

NCO Journal reporter Staff Sgt. Jason Stadel contributed to this report.

The Walk

From before Arlington National Cemetery opens to just after it closes for the day, the sentinels of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier walk the same sequence:

- 1. The sentinel walks 21 steps on a mat in front of the tomb, a number that alludes to the 21-gun salute. The guard’s weapon is always on the shoulder opposite the tomb.**
- 2. On the 21st step, the sentinel turns and faces the tomb for 21 seconds.**
- 3. The sentinel turns to face the mat’s opposite side and moves the weapon to the outside shoulder.**
- 4. After waiting 21 seconds, the sequence is repeated.**

When the cemetery is closed, the guards continue their guard less ceremonially — a “roaming guard” — while dressed in the Army Combat Uniform.

The Sentinel’s Creed

Written in 1971, the Sentinel’s Creed is made up of the 99 words that each guard of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier must memorize and abide by. In particular,

Line 6 is often cited as their primary motivation and goal.

My dedication to this sacred duty
is total and whole-hearted.

In the responsibility bestowed on me,
never will I falter.

And with dignity and perseverance,
my standard will remain perfection.

Through the years of diligence and praise
and the discomfort of the elements,
I will walk my tour in humble reverence
to the best of my ability.

It is he who commands the respect I protect,
his bravery that made us so proud.

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.

The Tomb’s History

In October 1921, Sgt. Edward F. Younger, a Distinguished Service Cross recipient, selected the Unknown Soldier to be buried at Arlington by placing a spray of white roses atop one of four caskets exhumed from American cemeteries in France. After arriving in the United States, the Unknown Soldier lay in state in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol until his burial Nov. 11, when he was awarded the Medal of Honor and Victoria Cross.



In this damaged photo, a cavalry Soldier guards the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, Va., on March 25, 1926, the first day a permanent military guard was posted. The tomb’s superstructure was not added until April 1931. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

When people began sitting atop the tomb to picnic, a civilian guard was hired to protect the tomb. Then on March 25, 1926, the first permanent military guard was posted, though only during the day. Cavalry Soldiers guarded the tomb from 1926 to 1933, artillery Soldiers from 1933 to 1936 and military police from 1936 to 1948. On April 6, 1948, Soldiers of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) began guarding the tomb, a

vigil they have maintained continuously ever since.

After World War II and the Korean War, two unidentified service members were selected to be buried beside their comrade. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class William R. Charette, a Medal of Honor recipient, selected the World War II Unknown and Master Sgt. Ned Lyle, a Distinguished Service Cross recipient, selected the Korean War Unknown. They were buried on May 30, 1958.

The Unknown from the Vietnam War was selected by Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Allan Jay Kellogg Jr., a Medal of Honor recipient, and was buried on May 30, 1984. However, when DNA testing in 1998 confirmed the Unknown's identity as Air Force 1st Lt. Michael Joseph Blassie, he was exhumed and reburied with his family in St. Louis, Mo. The inscription above the now-empty crypt at Arlington reads, "Honoring and Keeping Faith with America's Missing Servicemen" to honor the Unknowns of every conflict.

The Badge

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Guard Identification Badge is earned after completing a months-long period of studying, testing and practice. The obverse design consists of an inverted wreath, a sign of mourning, surrounding an image of the east face of the Tomb, which depicts the figures of Peace, Valor and Victory. Since the first badge was awarded to Master Sgt. William Daniel in February 1958, slightly more than 600 have been bestowed. Sentinels who have served for at least nine months as a Tomb Guard can wear the badge permanently. However, the badge may be revoked if a Soldier brings dishonor on the Tomb. As of 2012, 19 badges had been revoked.



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