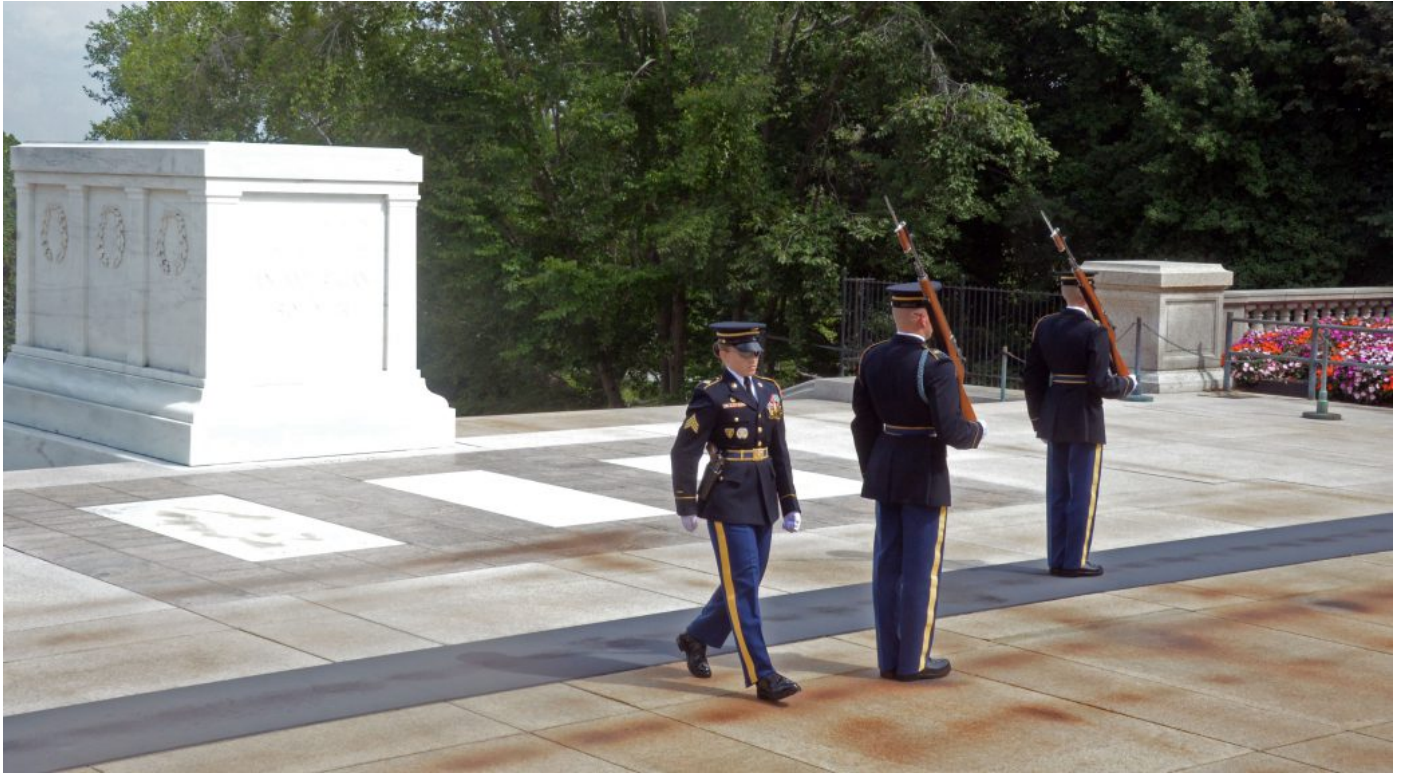


4th Female Sentinel Proud to Revere Tomb's Unknown Soldiers

By Martha C. Koester - NCO Journal

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Sgt. Ruth Hanks is the fourth female sentinel at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. (Photo by Martha C. Koester / NCO Journal)

Sgt. Ruth Hanks has many memories to choose from when explaining why she cherishes her job as a tomb guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.

Perhaps it was when an honor flight of U.S. military veterans, either World War II- or Korean War-era, stopped to watch the changing of the guard at the tomb in the cemetery's Memorial Amphitheater. Hanks wondered if one of the veterans paying tribute that day had fought alongside one of the unknown Soldiers.

"Veterans see that Soldier will never be forgotten," she said. "It's a big thing."

Or, maybe it was the first time she heard, "Oh, [the Soldier is] a female. I didn't know they could do that," while on duty as a sentinel at the tomb. Though sentinels are focused on performing their tasks, they do hear a few of the public's comments.

Hanks knows that when she ultimately leaves the prestigious post she will have amassed a wealth of pride, experience and knowledge to share with other Soldiers about her momentous opportunity.

"I am always trying to bring it back to the unknowns so that everybody remembers what we are here for," Hanks said. "I am there for the unknowns, and I will perform to the best of my ability."

Demanding, yet humbling

Hanks, a military police officer, comes from a family of military service members, and acknowledges the responsibility she shoulders as the fourth female sentinel. For the most part, though, she sees herself as just another one of the guys.

"It's a role for other females to look up to, but at the same time, from my point of view I'm just a sergeant in the United States

Army who wants to do a job,” Hanks told her college newspaper.

It was after being deployed to Afghanistan in 2013 that she began researching the Old Guard, its specialty platoons and the Tomb of the Unknowns.

“I also happened to run into an old Tomb Guard Identification Badge holder and talked to him a little bit,” Hanks said. “That kind of set in stone what I wanted to try to do during my next assignment.”



“I am there for the unknowns, and I will perform to the best of my ability,” says Sgt. Ruth Hanks, a tomb guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. (Photo by Martha C. Koester / NCO Journal)

Since 1948, Soldiers of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment “The Old Guard” have served in the distinguished duty as sentinels, guarding the tomb in any kind of weather, 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. The Guard is changed every 30 minutes from April 1 to Sep. 30 and every hour from Oct. 1 to March 31. During the hours the cemetery is closed, the guard is changed every 2 hours.

The impeccably attired tomb guard wears the Army dress blue uniform, which is reminiscent of the style worn by Soldiers in the late 1800s. Sentinels shine their shoes, medals and belt buckles for hours to meet the high standards of uniform preparation.

During the ceremony, the relief commander appears on the plaza of the cemetery’s Memorial Amphitheater and announces the Changing of the Guard. The new sentinel leaves the tomb quarters, which is beneath the amphitheater, and unlocks the bolt of his or her M-14 rifle — the signal to begin the ceremony.

The relief commander walks out to the tomb, salutes and faces the spectators, asking them to stand and remain silent during the ceremony. The relief commander conducts an 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 unknown Soldiers. (The tomb contains the remains of one each for World War I, World War II and the Korean War. The previously unknown Soldier from the Vietnam War was identified as 1st Lt. Michael Blassie. After DNA identification, Blassie’s remains were moved to Jefferson National Cemetery, Missouri.)

The relief commander orders the retiring sentinel to pass on his or her orders, who replies, "Post and orders, remain as directed." The new sentinel says, "Orders acknowledged," and steps into position. When the relief commander passes by, the new sentinel begins walking at a cadence of 90 steps per minute.

The tomb guard marches 21 steps down the mat behind the tomb, turns and faces east for 21 seconds, turns and faces north for 21 seconds, then takes 21 steps down the mat and repeats the process. After the turn, the sentinel executes a sharp "shoulder-arms" movement to place the weapon on the shoulder closest to the visitors, signifying that the sentinel stands between the tomb and any possible threat. The number 21 was chosen because it symbolizes the highest military honor that can be bestowed posthumously — the 21-gun salute, according to [arlingtoncemetery.mil](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/) (<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/>).

Lessons learned

Sentinels are considered to be the best of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, which is headquartered at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, Virginia. Each Soldier must be in superb physical condition and have an unblemished military record. An interview and a two-week trial determine the Soldier's capability to train as a tomb guard. Once chosen, he or she will undergo many hours of intensive training and testing, which focuses on overall performance, uniform preparation and knowledge of the tomb and Arlington National Cemetery.

Hanks credits leadership training and the maturity that comes as a noncommissioned officer for preparing her to take proper responsibility as a tomb guard, whether she is executing her duties in front of veterans or family members.

Sgt. Kevin E. Calderon, another tomb guard, shares Hanks' sentiments.

"Coming down here to the tomb, I've developed myself so much to the point I know exactly what I'm looking for when I see a Soldier," Calderon told Army publications. "Every day here is training. You become a trainer. When new candidates arrive, the goal isn't to make them as good as you. You want them to be better. It's the epitome lifestyle of an NCO."

A great sense of time management and a supportive family has also helped her cope, she said.

"My family loves it," she said. "When they came out here for my Tomb Guard Identification Badge ceremony, they got to see me out there, and they really enjoyed it. It's just overwhelming pride that you see in your family. I don't do it for that, but seeing that is just phenomenal. It's one of those things; you just want to make your parents proud, so it was pretty neat."

It wasn't until 1994 that women were permitted to volunteer to become sentinels when the 289th Military Police Company was attached to the Old Guard, according to the Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknowns. The MP branch is a combat support unit.

In 1996, Sgt. Heather L. Johnsen became the first woman to earn the Tomb Guard Identification Badge. She volunteered for duty in June 1995 and earned her badge in 1996. Since then, two additional female Sentinels who are also NCOs were awarded the badge — Sgt. Danyell E. Wilson in 1997, and Staff Sgt. Tonya D. Bell in 1998.

Women must meet the same requirements as male Soldiers to be eligible as tomb guards. The only difference is that women have a minimum height requirement of 5 feet 8 inches, which is the same standard to be a member of the Old Guard. Male sentinels must be between 5 feet 10 inches and 6 feet 4 inches tall.

"I do not get treated any differently," Hanks said. "The crowd might have more of a response because there is a female there, but when it comes to work and training, it's absolutely the same."

Hanks foresees that her praise of the tomb, guards and the military ritual will endure long after she has moved on from her duty, urging prospective visitors to Washington, D.C., to stop by the Tomb of the Unknowns for the Changing of the Guard. "Check this out, and I'll tell you a little story about them," she would say.

"I would be passing on history," Hanks said. "The motto of the tomb guard is 'Soldiers never die until they are forgotten. Tomb guards never forget.' That's what we have to keep doing."

The Sentinel's Creed

My dedication to this sacred duty is total and wholehearted.

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

*And with dignity and perseverance.
My standard will remain
Through the years of diligence
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 in honored glory rest under my eternal vigilance.*

To join ‘The Old Guard’

Prospective noncommissioned officers and enlisted Soldiers interested in joining “The Old Guard” may call The Old Guard Recruiting Office at commercial 703-696-3007 or email Old Guard Recruiting at usarmy.jbmhh.mdw.mbx.tog-recruiting@mail.mil (mailto:usarmy.jbmhh.mdw.mbx.tog-recruiting@mail.mil)