

Giving the unknown brave our respect

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Hollywood, MD - Attend a Memorial Day service in our area during this three-day weekend and you will see America at its best. Salutes, wreaths, patriotic songs, taps and yes, tears—all tell a great story. The day is, without a doubt, the most sobering observance in our culture. It exists because conflict takes its toll.

Stories will be told across the country by friends, relatives and local historians and Legionnaires about those gallant individuals who lost their lives in conflict. Several will share photographs and letters.

There's another Memorial Day story, however, that doesn't get told enough. This might be due to the fact that the central character is nameless and faceless. It was on Inauguration Day 1921 (back then it was March 4) that Congress gave its approval to the burial of an unidentified U.S. soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. On Memorial Day of that year an Army sergeant, who had been wounded during what was then known as The Great World War (World War I) and highly decorated, selected the unidentified soldier from four identical caskets that had been buried in four cemeteries in France. The selected casket was then transported by ship to the U.S. Once back in America, the coffin containing the unidentified serviceman was escorted to the U.S. Capitol where it lay in state until Nov. 11, Armistice Day (now Veterans' Day). It was then that the re-interment of the unidentified soldier took place. On the familiar large marble sarcophagus—which was added over a decade later—are the words "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God." In 1937 a full-time guard detail for the tomb was established.

After subsequent conflicts—World War II, Korea and Vietnam—similar selection processes were conducted—all done with much flourish. It should be noted that due to advances in DNA testing, the Vietnam serviceman was later identified and re-interred in his hometown.

In a society where we properly preach self-respect, self-promotion, individuality and we tolerate—maybe even celebrate—narcissism, the story of the Unknown Soldier ought to give us breathtaking pause. For the number of unidentified servicemen randomly selected to lay in honor in Arlington are a slight fraction of the number who went off to war only to lose their lives and their identities. That's an enormous sacrifice.

Memorial Day started as a way to remember those whose names are etched on tombstones in cemeteries all across the country. However, there are many generic markers, too, for the valiant warrior without a name. If you so choose to observe the day—the holiday weekend—the way it was intended, please do pause to contemplate those nameless warriors, known but to God, to whom we owe so much.

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