

## Unknown but known by God

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### 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-19

Brigadier General Louis John Wyatt, born in 1874, was a professional military man, having joined the army soon after leaving grammar school. He joined the North Staffordshire Regiment in 1895 and fought in the Boer war, being injured at Jackfontein in 1900. He disembarked in France in 1914 as a major, and was awarded a Distinguished Service Order in 1926. By 1920 he had been promoted to the post of general officer in command of British troops in France and Flanders, as well as director of graves, registrations and enquiries.

It was in this capacity that, on November the 7<sup>th</sup>, 1920, in strictest secrecy, four unidentified British bodies were exhumed from temporary battlefield cemeteries at Ypres, Arras, the Asine and the Somme. Hundreds of thousands of men had been killed during the war, gunned down in the fields or drowned in the trenches as they filled with water. When hostilities ended, their bodies were exhumed and reburied in nearby cemeteries, but many of them could never be identified.

On the night of November the 7<sup>th</sup>, none of the soldiers who did the digging were told why.

The bodies were taken by field ambulance to a makeshift chapel at St Pol in France. Once there, each of the bodies was draped with the union flag. Sentries were posted and Brigadier General Wyatt selected one of the bodies at random. The other three were reburied. In later years, Wyatt said this:

*'The four bodies lay on stretchers, each covered by a union jack. In front of the altar was the shell of a coffin which had been sent from England to receive the remains. I selected one, and with the help of Colonel Gell, placed it in the shell; we screwed down the lid. The other bodies were removed and reburied in the military cemetery outside my headquarters at St Pol. I had no idea even of the area from which the body I selected had come; no-one else can know it.'*

A French Honour Guard was selected and stood by the coffin of the chosen soldier overnight. On top was placed a crusaders sword and a shield on which was inscribed:

"A British Warrior who fell in the GREAT WAR 1914-1918 for King and Country".

On the 9th of November, the Unknown Warrior was taken by horse-drawn carriage through Guards of Honour and the sound of tolling bells and bugle calls to the quayside.

There, he was saluted by Marechal Foch and loaded onto HMS Vernon bound for Dover. The coffin stood on the deck covered in wreaths, surrounded by the French Honour Guard.

Wyatt then tells us that: *'HMS Verdun moved off ... carrying that symbol which for so many years, and especially during the last few months, has meant so much to us all.'*

Upon arrival at Dover, the Unknown Warrior was met with a nineteen gun salute - something that was normally only reserved for Field Marshals. The quayside was lined with people, straining to see the body that could be their loved one. A special train had been arranged and he was then conveyed to Victoria Station, London.

He remained there overnight, and, on the morning of the 11th of November, the coffin was placed on a carriage driven by black horses. The coffin passed through hushed crowds of thousands of people, some weeping. It was brought into Westminster Abbey on the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. In the following days, more than a million people came to pay their respects to the soldier.

The idea for an Unknown Warrior originally came from the Revd David Railton, a chaplain in the army, who had served on the front line during the Great War. The union flag he had used as an altar cloth whilst at the front, was the one that had been draped over the coffin. In 1916 Railton was standing in a small garden in Armentieres, Northern France, having just buried a comrade. He saw a small wooden cross marking a grave with the words, 'An Unknown Soldier'. In a letter to a newspaper, Railton wrote:

*'How that grave caused me to think ... I thought and I thought. What can I do to ease the pain of father, mother, brother, sister, sweetheart, wife and friend? Quietly and gradually there came out of the mist of thought this answer clear and strong. 'Let this body – this symbol of him – be carried over the sea to his native land.'*

Railton pursued his idea after the armistice, writing to Sir Douglas Haig and the Dean of Westminster, the Right Revd Herbert Ryle. King George V initially needed some persuading, but gradually the idea gained momentum.

It was Railton's intention that all of the relatives of the 517,773 combatants whose bodies had not been identified could believe that the Unknown Warrior could very well be their lost husband, father, brother or son. It could give hope to people and allow them to grieve.

Whilst many men still lie in graves with the inscription 'An Unknown Soldier', every single one was known and loved by God. Our reading today from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians speaks of the hope for all those who fall asleep, whether their graves are marked or not. Paul writes:

*'Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.'*

So, we do not live as those without hope. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus. The unknown soldiers whose graves are unmarked may not have been known by name in death, they were certainly known in life by those who loved them, and continue to be known eternally by our loving heavenly Father.

And each year, we continue to remember all those who lost their lives in service to their country. THIS is the reason we wear poppies.

We do not glorify war.

We remember - with humility - the great and ultimate sacrifices that were made, not just in the two great wars, but in every war and conflict where our service personnel have fought - to ensure the liberty and freedoms that we now take for granted.

Every year, on Remembrance Sunday, we remember those who, for our tomorrow, gave their today. And on the 11th of November, we remember the Unknown Warrior.

At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them.