

From “A Grateful Republic” -- for America’s Honored Veterans

100 years ago, on November 11, 1918, just after 5 a.m. Paris time, representatives of the German government signed the WWI Armistice Agreement which would, at 11 a.m. that same day, effect a ceasefire between Germany and the victorious Allied Forces, bringing to an end the hostilities on the Western front. The signing took place in the Compiègne forest in northeastern France, aboard a railway car that, before the war, had been the elegant dining car #2419 of the Orient Express.

Following the war, as America was returning to a time of peace, the many that fought and gave their lives in service to our country were not forgotten. In 1919, Armistice Day was established, to be observed annually on November 11th. That year, the first Presidential Proclamation for Armistice Day stated that it was a day for Americans to be “filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died...and with gratitude for the victory”.

The American soldiers who died in battle during the war and were buried in France, but whose identities were unknown, were also specially acknowledged. In March, 1921, Congress approved a proposal for the burial of one of the unidentified servicemen in the plaza at Arlington National Cemetery’s new Memorial Amphitheater. It was decided that, in order to make the selection random from among the many, the remains of four unknown service members would be exhumed in France, one from each of four WWI American cemeteries there, and then be placed in four identical caskets. A recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross, U.S. Army Sgt. Edward Younger, was selected to make the final choice. He did so on October 24, 1921, by placing a spray of white roses on one of the caskets. That casket was transported from France to America on the USS Olympia. It then remained in state in the Capitol Rotunda to await that year’s Armistice Day Ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. The other three unknown soldiers were reburied with military honors in France.

President Warren G. Harding officiated at the Arlington Memorial Amphitheater Plaza interment ceremony on November 11, 1921. The Unknown Soldier was laid to rest beneath a stately three-tiered marble tomb. President Harding, in his speech on that solemn occasion, said: *“The name of him whose body lies before us took flight with his imperishable soul. ...We do not know the eminence of his birth, but we do know the glory of his death. He died for his country, and greater devotion hath no man than this. He died...with faith in his heart and hope on his lips, that his country should triumph and its civilization survive. ...On such an occasion as this...our thoughts alternate between defenders living and defenders dead. A grateful Republic will be worthy of them both. Our part is to atone for the losses of heroic dead by making a better Republic for the living.”* The President ended his Armistice Day address by asking that those present at the ceremony and those listening via telephone amplifiers in several cities around the country, join together in saying The Lord’s Prayer.

Since 1921, the remains of Unknown Soldiers from subsequent wars have been added to the plaza. This year, many special events marking the 100th Anniversary of the Armistice are scheduled in and around Washington, D.C., and across the country, but the long tradition of laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier will, once again, take place at 11 a.m., on November 11th, at Arlington National Cemetery.

The Irish politician and orator, John Curran, said in a speech made on July 10, 1790: *“The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance”* (variations of this have since been attributed to numerous people). A grateful nation should always remember the vigilance and valor of all those who have fought to secure our liberty.

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