



# Sabretache

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## 100 years ago.. November 11th. 1920



The British tomb of **The Unknown Warrior** holds an unidentified British soldier killed on a European battlefield during the First World War. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, London on 11 November 1920, simultaneously with a similar interment of a French unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe in France, making both tombs the first to honour the unknown dead of the First World War. It is the first example of a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The battlefield that the Warrior came from is not publicly known, and has been kept secret so that the Unknown Warrior might serve as a symbol for all of the unknown dead wherever they fell.

The idea of a Tomb of the Unknown Warrior was first conceived in 1916 by the Reverend David Railton, who, while serving as an Army chaplain on the Western Front, had seen a grave marked by a rough cross, which bore the pencil-written legend 'An Unknown Soldier of the Black Watch'.

He wrote to the Dean of Westminster in 1920 proposing that an unidentified British soldier from the battlefields in France be buried with due ceremony in Westminster Abbey "amongst the kings" to represent the many hundreds of thousands of Empire dead. The idea was strongly supported by the Dean and the then Prime Minister David Lloyd George. There was initial opposition from King George V (who feared that such a ceremony would reopen the wounds of a recently concluded war) and others, but a surge of emotional support from the great number of bereaved families ensured its adoption. The War Graves Commission was instructed to create the National Site of Mourning to be dedicated on Armistice Day 1920.



Reverend David Railton MC MA, (1884 – 1955). Church of England clergyman, and Military chaplain

Suitable remains were exhumed from six principal battlefields - The Aisne, Marne, Cambrai, Somme, Arras and Ypres - and brought to the chapel at St Pol near Arras, France on the night of 7 November 1920. The bearer parties were immediately returned to their units and a guard placed on the door. At midnight Brigadier General L.J. Wyatt and Lieutenant Colonel E.A.S. Gell of the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries went into the chapel alone. The remains were on stretchers, each covered by a Union Flag: the two officers did not know from which battlefield any individual body had come. General Wyatt with closed eyes rested his hand on one of the bodies. The two officers placed the body in a plain coffin and sealed it. The other bodies were then taken away for reburial. It seems highly likely that the bodies were carefully selected and it is almost certain that the Unknown Warrior was a soldier serving in Britain's pre-war regular army and not a sailor, territorial, airman, or Empire Serviceman.

The following morning, two undertakers entered the castle library and placed the coffin into a casket of the oak timbers of trees from Hampton Court Palace. The casket was banded with iron and a medieval crusader's sword, chosen by the King personally from the Royal Collection, was affixed to the top and surmounted by an iron shield bearing the inscription 'A British Warrior who fell in the Great War 1914-1918 for King and Country'.



The casket was then placed onto a French military wagon, drawn by six black horses. At 10.30 am, all the church bells of Boulogne tolled; the massed trumpets of the French cavalry and the bugles of the French infantry played *Aux Champs* (the French "Last Post"). Then, the mile-long procession - led by one thousand local schoolchildren and escorted by a division of French troops - made its way down to the harbour.

At the quayside, Marshal Foch saluted the casket before it was carried up the gangway of the destroyer, HMS Verdun (L93), and piped aboard with an Admiral's call. The *Verdun* slipped anchor just before noon and was joined by an escort of six battleships. As the flotilla carrying the casket closed on Dover Castle it received a 19-gun Field Marshal's salute. It was landed at Dover Marine Railway Station

at the Western Docks on 10 November and was taken ashore to a train by a bearer party of six Warrant Officers from the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the Army and the Royal Air Force and escorted by two Generals, two Admirals and two Air Marshalls

The coffin then was carried to London in South Eastern and Chatham Railway General Utility Van No.132, which had previously carried the bodies of Edith Cavell and Charles Fryatt. The van has been preserved by the Kent and East Sussex Railway.

The train went to Victoria Station, where it arrived at platform 8 at 8.32 pm that evening and remained overnight under escort of the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards. (A plaque at Victoria Station marks the site: every year on 10 November, a small Remembrance service takes place between platforms 8 and 9.)

The following morning, 11 November 1920, the casket, covered with the Union Flag, on which was placed a steel helmet and side arms, was placed onto a gun carriage of the Royal Horse Artillery drawn by six horses and led by a Firing Party and the Regimental bands of the Brigade of Guards, set off through immense and silent crowds. As the cortege set off, a further Field Marshal's salute was fired in Hyde Park. The route followed was Hyde Park Corner, The Mall, and to Whitehall where the Cenotaph, a "symbolic empty tomb", was unveiled by King-Emperor George V.



At the Cenotaph, the carriage halted and King George placed a wreath of roses and bay leaves (the Poppy Appeal did not begin until 1921) on the coffin.

After the two-minute silence the gun carriage continued to Westminster Abbey followed by the King, the Royal Family and ministers of state. Outside the Abbey and flanked by a guard of honour of one hundred recipients of the Victoria Cross, the coffin was borne by NCOs from the Brigade of Guards into the West Nave. The funeral service consisted of music from only English composers.



At the conclusion of the last hymn, the coffin was laid in the tomb. The King scattered earth from a silver shell case and the Victoria Cross holders filed past either side of the grave. The service was the mourning of the nation. The honours that had been paid were those due to a Field Marshall.

The guests of honour were a group of about one hundred women. They had been chosen because they had each lost their husband and all their sons in the war. "Every woman so bereft, who applied for a place got it".

The grave was capped with a black Belgian marble stone (the only tombstone in the Abbey on which it is forbidden to walk) featuring this inscription, composed by Dean Ryle, Dean of Westminster, and engraved with brass from melted down wartime ammunition:





Around the main inscription are four texts:

THE LORD KNOWETH THEM THAT ARE HIS (top)  
 UNKNOWN AND YET WELL KNOWN, DYING AND BEHOLD WE LIVE (side)  
 IN CHRIST SHALL ALL BE MADE ALIVE (base)  
 GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS (side)

## LATER HISTORY

A year later, the Unknown Warrior was awarded the U.S. Congressional Medal of Honor (The U.S.'s highest award for valor) on 17 October 1921, from the hand of General Pershing; it hangs on a pillar near to his burial site. (Later, on 11 November 1921, the U.S. Unknown Soldier was reciprocally awarded the Victoria Cross).

When Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon married the future King George VI on 26 April 1923, she laid her bouquet at the Tomb on her way into the Abbey, as a tribute to her brother Fergus who had died at the Battle of Loos in 1915. The gesture has since been copied by every royal bride married at the Abbey, though on the way back from the altar rather than to it. It is also the only tomb not to have been covered by a special red carpet for the wedding of The Princess Elizabeth, Duchess of Edinburgh.

When Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi ideologist, visited Britain on a diplomatic mission in 1933 he laid a wreath with a Swastika on it at the tomb. A British war veteran threw it into the Thames.

Before she died in 2002, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (the same Elizabeth who first laid her wedding bouquet at the tomb) expressed the wish for her wreath to be placed on the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior. Her daughter, The Queen, laid the wreath the day after the funeral.

[Story from The Royal British Legion](#)



### From the BBC

On Wednesday, Queen Elizabeth, 94, made a private pilgrimage to the grave of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey to mark the centenary of his burial.

It comes ahead of Remembrance Day commemorations on Sunday. She requested the service after some events were scaled back due to the pandemic

The Queen's attendance at the private ceremony in London at Westminster Abbey earlier this week was described as a "simple but deeply personal act".

The grave of the Unknown Warrior represents those who died in World War One whose place

of death is not known, or whose remains are unidentified.

The brief service was attended only by the Dean of Westminster, Dr David Hoyle, and the Queen's Equerry, Lieutenant Colonel Nana Kofi Twumasi-Ankrah, after royal doctors advised limiting the numbers.

In keeping with a tradition established by her mother in 1923, the Queen - who was married at the Abbey in November 1947 - left a bouquet based on her own wedding flowers at the grave, close to Westminster Abbey's Great West Door.

That was followed by a prayer, recited by the Dean, and the lament Flowers of the Forest played by the Queen's piper, Pipe Major Richard Grisdale, who stood in the organ loft.





## A Soldier Died Today

He was getting old and paunchy and his hair was falling fast,  
And he sat around the Legion, telling stories of the past,  
Of a war that he had fought in and the deeds that he had done,  
In his exploits with his buddies, they were heroes, every one.

And tho' sometimes, to his neighbours, his tales became a joke,  
All his Legion buddies listened, for they knew whereof he spoke.  
But we'll hear his tales no longer for old Bill has passed away,  
And the world's a little poorer, for a soldier died today.

He will not be mourned by many, just his children and his wife,  
For he lived an ordinary and quite uneventful life.  
Held a job and raised a family, quietly going his own way,  
And the world won't note his passing, though a soldier died today.

When politicians leave this earth, their bodies lie in state,  
While thousands note their passing and proclaim that they were great.  
Papers tell their whole life stories, from the time that they were young,  
But the passing of a soldier goes unnoticed and unsung.

Is the greatest contribution to the welfare of our land  
A guy who breaks his promises and cons his fellow man?  
Or the ordinary fellow who, in times of war and strife,  
Goes off to serve his country and offers up his life?

A politician's stipend and the style in which he lives  
Are sometimes disproportionate to the service that he gives.  
While the ordinary soldier, who offered up his all,  
Is paid off with a medal and perhaps a pension small.

It's so easy to forget them for it was so long ago  
That the old Bills of our country went to battle, but we know  
It was not the politicians, with their compromise and ploys,  
Who won for us the freedom that our country now enjoys.

Should you find yourself in danger, with your enemies at hand,  
Would you want a politician with his ever-shifting stand?  
Or would you prefer a soldier, who has sworn to defend  
His home, his kin and country and would fight until the end?

He was just a common soldier and his ranks are growing thin,  
But his presence should remind us we may need his like again.  
For when countries are in conflict, then we find the soldier's part  
Is to clean up all the troubles that the politicians start.

If we cannot do him honour while he's here to hear the praise,  
Then at least let's give him homage at the ending of his days.  
Perhaps just a simple headline in a paper that would say,  
Our country is in mourning, for a soldier died today.

*A. Lawrence Vaincourt is an RCAF veteran of  
the Second World War who lives in Deux Montagnes, Quebec.*

## Who is the unknown soldier?



He is the one that led the way  
so the general could make it home;  
She is the one who saved the child  
and was left to die alone.

His dreams were cut off  
by his untimely death;  
Her innocence shattered  
by her last shallow breath.

He is the voice  
that echoes our pride;  
She is the eyes, that  
for our freedom, cried.

He is the rain  
that waters our soul;  
She is the river  
holding secrets untold.

He's in the wave  
crashing Normandy's shore;  
She's on the wind  
over Dieppe once more.

He's in the song  
that Passchendaele sang;  
She's in the bell  
from which freedom rang.

His death was a pledge  
prayers cannot suffice;  
Her life, a gift,  
At the ultimate price.

**Leah McDonald  
Elrose, Saskatchewan**

### **Sabretache**

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The SOCIETY

is a non-profit registered society which fosters the study of the military and the police, and the heritage of Canada, the British Empire, and the world as well as the preservation of military artifacts and records. The CMHS meets once every calendar month at:

Petty Officers' Mess HMCS Tecumseh

1820 - 24th Street SW

Calgary AB T2T 0G6

Contact Editor: [David Gale david@sunnyspotservice.ca](mailto:david@sunnyspotservice.ca)