

## History of the Military Funeral Honors

The current traditions and practices of honoring fallen Soldiers have had a long and interesting evolution. What began as an afterthought during the Revolutionary War is now a maxim of the Soldier's Creed. We will look back, beginning with the Revolutionary War, and discover how the idea to "never leave a fallen comrade" became so important.

The Revolutionary War and the reasons for it shaped the culture of America and the manner that America tends to her dead. The war involved the entire country in a way that previous wars did not. The army was comprised entirely of militia. Every male between the ages of 16 and 60 was required to serve. The responsibility to create and protect this new nation fell on the whole of the nation and not just a small minority. Whole communities would often feel the loss of the young men who had left to fight. The first year of the war brought on large numbers of casualties. These large battles often fought close to the strategic ground of the cities. The reality of war came to the doorsteps of America. They saw battle fields left with the dead bodies still littering the ground, uncared for, and left to the ravages of the elements. Battlefields always left in the hands of the victor. Often, the victors would only have the time to take care of their own dead. If they were chasing the enemy, there was often not time enough for that. Time and the lack of technology to preserve the bodies required quick burials often in shallow unmarked graves or in large mass graves. Fighting the war was a priority; the dead were dead and would have to wait. Pressure from the public brought about legislation from Congress that would give guidance and requirements for the caring of the war dead. The laws required the military to bury the dead and return all of the Soldier's personal effects to the family. However, we do see the beginnings of military honors provided by the military whenever the situation provided the opportunity. Early accounts from journals describe many of these funerals. Some of the honors in the journals describe a scene that would begin with the Soldier's unit forming outside of his tent. While drummers played, the body would be born to the gravesite by six Soldiers from the man's unit. A religious service would be performed, and three volleys would be fired over the grave after the body had been interred. The honor afforded officers did not differ much from those of the enlisted man. This would be the start of recognizing the sacrifices of the individual common citizen.

The firing of three volleys over the grave of a Soldier can be traced back to the Roman Empire. After the burial rites, the Romans would shout the name of the deceased three times, to insure that it would never be forgotten. This practice was passed to the English and then to the American colonies. More often than not, the deceased would be buried quickly with only the three volleys being fired. This practice had a dual purpose. It not only rendered honors to the dead, but was also used to signal the end of cease-fire agreements that were often negotiated to allow for the burial of the dead.

The war continued to drag on requiring the cash strapped government to find new ways to conserve. One change they made was calling for officer's families to pay for the funeral as they generally came from the wealthier percentage of the population. All enlisted men would be buried at the government's expense. Eventually, Congress would charge the Quartermaster General with overseeing the burial of the dead. This led to the

experimenting with ways of getting the bodies returned to the families. Lead coffins were found to be air tight, but very expensive. Only those families who were wealthy enough to purchase and ship these to the battlefield were able to retrieve the remains of their loved one. Methods of preserving the body with chemicals were experimented with, but all were very costly and reserved for the wealthy.

After the war, during 1787, the Quartermaster General continued to revise the procedures of how the remains of the dead were handled. During this time, military cemeteries were established for the burial of those who had died fighting Indians, disease, age, and accidents. Burial in these cemeteries cost the Soldier and his family nothing.

The War of 1812 brought on a new challenge for the Quartermaster General. This war was fought far from home and deep in the frontier. The battles were often quick and the armies moved fast. The responsibility for the dead fell on the unit commanders and the burials were performed quickly after the battles. Soldiers were again often buried in mass graves with only the personal effects being sent back to the families. Military honors during the time between the revolution and the War of 1812 had begun to form traditions. All burials were accompanied with honors. Time was taken to honor the dead even as the battles surged back and forth through the wilderness. It had become important to the Soldier to know that, in the event of his death, he would be cared for until the end.

When the Seminole War is mentioned, most people probably do not even know what is being talked about. Between 1835 and 1842, America would lose 1,500 troops in this war that focused on containing the aggressive Seminole tribes. Although the Seminole War is seen as a minor war, it set two major precedents in caring for the dead. The first major change was the financial involvement of the government in shipping the bodies home. If the families would pay for a lead coffin, the government would pay for the shipping costs. This encouraged many of the families to get involved in recovering the remains of their loved ones. This set a precedent for the government's responsibility in recovering all those killed in combat. In 1835, the Seminoles ambushed and killed 108 Soldiers under the command of Major General Francis Dade. Only three Soldiers survived the massacre. Three months later, the Army sent troops in to retake the battlefield and bury the remains. This was a first time in history that troops were sent in to secure the dead. This would be unique to Americans for years to come. After the war, money was donated to secure a cemetery in St. Augustine, Florida to bury the dead from that fateful ambush. The bodies were exhumed and reburied in the cemetery built and dedicated to their memory. This was the precursor to the National Cemetery system that was established during the Civil War.

A new nation, America was again struggling to find herself and once again, war found its way to the front porch of the American home. We were a nation at war with itself. Northern brothers were again fighting Southern brothers for the rights of the individual. During the Revolutionary War, we saw a nation where everyone was threatened. This war would only intensify this, and bring the war much closer than before. The Civil War brought new regulation on the handling of the remains of the war dead. Laws were passed to provide every man with a new coffin, clean garments, grave marker, and a

death notice sent to the family. Unfortunately, the nature of this war would make this almost impossible. Battles could now be fought over greater distances. Advances in technology resulted in an unprecedented number of dead. This created major problems for recovering the remains of Soldiers, often scattered over miles, with armies constantly giving chase to the enemy. While the sentiment regarding the importance of caring for the dead increased, the reality was that it was a step backwards from that ideal.

During the Civil War, over 300 plots of land would be donated for use as cemeteries. In 1862, the War Department issued General Orders #75 and #33. These passed on the responsibility of burial to the commanding officer. He would be responsible for setting aside land near the battlefield for a cemetery to provide burial for those who would be killed in the upcoming battle. Each grave was to be marked with the name or number of the Soldier being buried. Without setting aside a designated unit for accomplishing this task, it became impossible. The cemeteries that were established suffered neglect over time. Yearly, the Army came out with updated regulations for the treatment of the war dead. At the end of the war, the regulations stated the deceased would be given an escort based on rank, six men to carry the casket, 3 volleys from the riflemen in the escort, and a flag draped over the coffin. After the burial, the flags would be returned to Army stock.

Taps had also begun to be used during the Civil War. General Butterfield changed the nightly call to end the day's activities to Taps. It soon caught on and began to be used throughout the Army. During the Peninsula Campaign, Captain Tidball ordered it played at the funeral of his men that were killed in action. It was not until 1891 that it was entered in to the regulations.

After the war, the Quartermaster General was responsible for consolidating all of the war dead in the National Cemeteries. The National Cemeteries were established on major battle sites and former prison camps. It would be the largest burial project in the world. The work began in 1865 and finished 5 years later in 1870. 299,696 Union Soldiers had been buried in 73 National Cemeteries. In 1867, Congress approved money for the replacement of all wooden grave markers and in 1873, the Secretary of War approved the use of marble headstones.

Arlington National Cemetery, which has become our nation's most sacred shrine, was originally the property of Robert E. Lee. The Union seized the land when Mrs. Lee could not cross battle lines to pay the taxes. The land eventually was turned into a cemetery. The government eventually paid the Lee family for the property and in 1864 Arlington became a National Cemetery.

During this time, there were major advances in the caring for and identification of the dead. In 1861, Thomas Holmes invented embalming fluid. The new embalmers were hired by the family, but were not used by the Army. Bodies are easier to identify as Soldiers took the time to mark clothing and purchase metal discs worn with names and identifying numbers. More has been written concerning the treatment of the Civil War dead than any other war. It marked the transition from rudimentary methods of caring for the dead to pre-industrial methods, and established how military casualties would be dealt

with in the future. It was the beginning of the Grave Registration Units and the re-burial of the dead in National Cemeteries. The United States had shown that it would not let the human cost of war go unnoticed. As President Lincoln said in 1863, “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but can never forget what they did here.”

The Spanish-American War, which began with the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor, was a war that was fought on foreign soil. It was brought to the American people by a growing population of media and the expanding use of photography. President McKinley ordered that the military provide proper burial of the casualties and permanent grave markers. To respond to this order, D. H. Rhodes and his team were sent to Cuba to handle all mortuary affairs. They would initially mark 1,122 graves for later reburial in the states. In 1899, the Army Burial Corp was formed to meet the demands of the public to return the remains of the Soldiers. In the Philippines, Captain Charles Peirce was given \$200,000 by Congress to open the Morgue and Office of Identification. His work would become the blueprint for the later Grave Registration Units. His office would work to identify, embalm, dress the body in a uniform, and place them in a flag draped coffin. Peirce would improve upon the embalming fluids to allow the remains to be shipped home. In 1910, Congress extended its own responsibilities for the war dead by authorizing funds for the raising of the Maine and the retrieval of the dead. It would take two years to raise the Maine. In 1915, it was placed in Arlington National Cemetery and dedicated as a memorial to all those who died. This war also brought veterans groups who lobbied for the proper retrieval of our war dead. It had now been established that the responsibility for the care of remains belonged solely to the government. The families of war dead would no longer have to provide for the shipment of their loved ones.

World War I was the war that film captured. It brought the horrors of war to big screens across America. Scientific advancements not only affected the media coverage, but also advancement in weaponry. Millions of Soldiers were dying on the battlefields of Europe. To prepare the United States for entry into these hellish conditions, Major Peirce was brought out of retirement. He was tasked with forming the Graves Registration Service. This war would bring a new set of challenges to the newly formed units. In 1917, four companies were established to identify and bury casualties in temporary cemeteries. The first unit of its kind, the GRS began operating on the front lines in 1918. By the end of the war, there would be 18 companies operating on the front. Their initial system of burial was to place a bottle with the name, rank, unit, and cause of death with the body. These men often risked their lives to recover the dead from the battlefield. They often braved minefields and booby traps and would use any means to identify the bodies of the Soldiers in their care. During the war, dog tags became required items for Soldiers. This would help identification, but only to an extent. In 1918, the GRS would find itself supervising 2,400 cemeteries within Europe. It would take two years to exhume and ship the remains home. The GRS was dissolved after the war in 1934 and the memorial affairs were left to the 54 men of the Quartermasters Memorial Branch.

After the war, in 1921, Congress called for the selection of an unknown Soldier to be interred. Four bodies were selected and moved to Chalons, France. All records

concerning them were burned. SGT Younger from the 2/50 INF was tasked with selecting the unknown by laying a spray of roses on one of the caskets. The remains of the selected Soldier was transferred to a silver and ebony casket. The Soldier would lie in state as 90,000 mourners would pass through the capital to pay their respects. On November 11, 1921, the body was interred in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. The unknown would receive the highest honors of nine countries.

In preparation for America's entrance into World War II, the GRS was reactivated with 13 companies, each with a strength of 125 personnel. They became frontline combat troops. A private relates seeing the men of the GRS burying men and taking cover in the open graves as shells went off around them. They were in the initial push into Normandy, and began burying casualties immediately so that the follow on troops would not be met by the remains of their comrades. The Soldier's unit was responsible in getting him back to the collection points. Once there, the GRS would take over the processing. This tied up unit assets in vehicles and personnel, but shows the importance of the treatment of our war dead. Because the sooner identification and processing took place, the more accurate it was; cemeteries were placed close to the front lines. A policy was established that whenever the frontlines moved further than 100 miles away from a cemetery, a new one would be established. Units began recruiting chaplains to provide funeral services for those killed, and the GRS held funerals at the end of every day. They consisted of full military honors and a religious service. The importance of rendering honors is demonstrated by the designation of personnel whose sole duty was to provide honors for the fallen. After the war, Congress would again call for an unknown to honor. No sooner was the project approved; America again found itself in another war.

Unlike previous wars, the GRS had not been disbanded. At the start of the Korean War, the GRS was operational and ready to process casualties. This war was different from wars fought in the past. Battle lines changed quickly, sometime as much as 100 miles in a week. The old system of following the troops and establishing cemeteries was not effective. Due to the movement of the front, cemeteries would often end up behind enemy lines. The U. S. Military would find itself fighting battles to regain cemeteries long enough to evacuate the bodies further south. Shortly into the conflict, General MacArthur ordered all cemeteries evacuated and moved to Tanggok, an extreme southern location. Tanggok's location allowed for easy access to Japan. Once processing facilities in Japan were constructed, bodies would no longer be buried and shipped later. Now they could be identified and shipped home in a miraculous 30 days. This was a vast improvement over the 2 to 6 years it took in World War II. This became possible due to the dedication of air assets for evacuation and shipping. With advances in technology, the GRS could see the possibility of all war dead being returned home. "All will come home", became their motto. On May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1958 an unknown was selected from both World War II and Korea and interred in Arlington National Cemetery.

Vietnam proved to be a new kind of war. It was fought, not over strategic land, but over body counts. There were no front lines. Most of the war was a series of skirmishes fought in triple canopy jungle and hilly terrain. Individual units were responsible for

evacuating the dead along with the wounded to the rear collection points for processing and shipment home. Two ports of entry were established in the United States, Oakland, California and Dover, Delaware. Today, Dover is the only port of entry. The time of return of remains had been reduced to 7 days. Though it may be hard to see any success from Vietnam, the GRS obtained a 96% recovery rate. In 1994, Congress approved the honoring of an unknown from Vietnam. In 1998, the body was exhumed and identified through DNA. There is no longer an unknown from this war. Since Vietnam, we have brought every Soldier home, and will never again need to honor another unknown.