

SERGEANT EDWARD F. YOUNGER



The Warrior Who Chose America's Unknown Soldier

In 1921, America embarked on a solemn process to select an unidentified World War I soldier for burial in Arlington National Cemetery. Painstaking steps were undertaken to ensure that the deceased military member who ultimately was selected for that honor could never be identified.



As a result, in all probability, we will never know the identity of America's Unknown Soldier of World War I. But we do know the name of the unlikely individual on whose shoulders fell the decision for making the final choice.

In March 1921, Congress authorized burial of an unidentified American soldier who had been killed during World War I. Internment in Arlington National Cemetery was designated to take place on Armistice Day...November 11, 1921.

During the 'war to end all wars', America lost 77,000 young men on the killing fields of France. Over 22,000 of them were buried in four military cemeteries located near where they had fallen in battle. Of this number, the remains of 958 souls had defied all efforts to identify them before burial. It was decided that one of them would become America's Unknown Soldier of World War I.

But which one? The US Army's Quartermaster General was assigned the task of making the difficult selection. A very complicated procedure was established and then carried out in order to insure absolute anonymity.

One unmarked grave each in the American cemeteries in Asine-Marne, Meuse-Argonne, Somme and St. Mihael, France, was randomly selected. The bodies in those graves were exhumed and inspected to insure that there was no evidence of identity, rank or unit. An additional four graves had been marked as alternates, in case any of the original four were found to have any identifying marks. None were found. As a further precaution, the first four's burial records were burned.

Placed in identical caskets, the quartet of candidates were transported on October 23, 1921, to the town hall in Chalons-sur Marne, in northern France. Present when the caskets arrived there that afternoon were a huge number of American and French military and civilian dignitaries, and a French honor guard.

At 10 PM, a contingent of six American non-commissioned officers who had fought in France during World War I arrived from their separate US Army units that were stationed in Germany. They had been told they were being sent there to serve as pallbearers.

What the six American pallbearers had not been told was that one of them was to be randomly picked by Major Harbold, the officer in charge of the selection procedure to make the final choice of America's Unknown Soldier. That honor...and heavy emotional burden...went to Sergeant Edward F. Younger [right]. Army records do not indicate what prompted the major to select Sergeant Younger.



Perhaps the major was aware of the sergeant's war record. Edward Younger, a native of Chicago, had enlisted in the army two months before America entered World War I. He was 18 years old when he was sent to France. He survived an influenza epidemic and being wounded twice while participating in four deadly offensives between April 1917 and November 1918. The average life expectancy of an allied soldier fighting in the trenches was six weeks. By all accounts, Edward Younger shouldn't have still been alive when the fighting ended.

Edward Younger later described what took place on the morning of October 24, 1921, after he had been selected to make that final choice:

"When we lined up, Major Harbold said that one of us was to be given the honor of selection of the Unknown Soldier. He had a bouquet of pink and white roses, which he finally handed to me.

"Left alone in the room with the four coffins, I walked around them three times, then suddenly I stopped in front of the third coffin on the left. What caused me to stop I don't know. Something seemed to say: 'pick this one'.

"I placed the roses on that coffin and saluted. Then I left the room and reported to Major Harbold that my task was completed."

The body he had selected was then removed from its wooden casket and placed in an ornate metal one that had come from the United States. Draped with an American flag and topped by the roses, the pallbearers loaded the casket onboard a special train detailed to take it to La Harve. In this image, Sergeant Younger is the soldier in the front, on the left side of the casket.



He and the other pallbearers made that train trip as well, acting as ceremonial guards. In La Harve, the casket was turned over to the US Navy's care.

The casket was transported home onboard the USS OLYMPIA, Admiral Dewey's flagship during the Spanish-American War, which had been selected for this mission and sent to France earlier. America's Unknown Soldier lie in state in the nation's capital for a day, followed by a massive funeral procession across the Potomac River.

Internment in Arlington National Cemetery took place on November 11, 1921, the third anniversary of the Armistice that was once called the conclusion of 'the war to end all wars'. The spray of flowers used by Sergeant Younger to indicate his choice, by then wilted, were entombed with America's Unknown Soldier.

After returning to his assigned base in Germany, Edward Younger was mustered out of the army in 1922 and sent home to Chicago. There he married, started a family and worked for the post office.

On Memorial Day, 1930, he visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington, Virginia. For that occasion he wore the same uniform he had worn nine years earlier, when performing his unusual duty in Chalons-sur Marne's town hall.

As depicted on the left, Edward Younger recreated the moment when he had placed roses on one of the four unmarked caskets in 1921. He looks much older than his age that year... 32 years...when placing a fresh bouquet on top of the tomb.



In 1939, Edward Younger was invited to return to Chalons-sur Marne to participate in a July 4th commemoration of his selection of America's Unknown Soldier. He was too ill to do so.



Edward F. Younger died of a heart attack in Chicago on August 6, 1942. This quiet, humble World War I warrior was only 44 years old. He is buried, fittingly, in Section 18 of Arlington National Cemetery under this simple, standardized headstone; not far from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

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