The enduring power of the Unknown Soldier

Dennis Ellam looks back at the origins of the tomb that has been a vital part of our national remembrance since 1920

IN THE 11th month of every year, on Remembrance Sunday, the nation pays homage to its war dead.

And rightly so… when even crowned heads are bowed, and thousands parade past in ever-greater numbers, then it's an enduring and very public reaffirmation that sacrifices have not been forgotten across the generations.

But even more poignant, surely, than the ceremony centred around the Cenotaph is the memorial that lies just a short walk away – the tomb of the Unknown Warrior.

A solitary soldier who perished among his comrades on the battlefield, his identity forever a mystery, his rank quite irrelevant, his life cut short like all those 750,000 British and Commonwealth lives lost in World War One. Could there be a more fitting and eloquent reminder of the true nature of conflict and remembrance?

"WHOEVER HE WAS, THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR LIES AT THE SPIRITUAL HEART OF THE NATION"

Whoever he was, rich or poor, the Unknown Warrior lies at the spiritual heart of the nation, inside the entrance of Westminster Abbey: "They buried him among the kings because he had done good toward God and toward His house" reads the inscription on his marble gravestone (the only one in the Abbey on which it is forbidden to step).

We will never discover any detail about him. The very few who might have been in on the secret have long since taken it to their own graves. But the story of how he was selected, amid rising public bitterness that persuaded the government to bring home an Unknown Warrior and grant him State honours, tells us a great deal about how Britain was changed by the First World War. In fact, it was exactly 100 years ago – in 1916, midway through the war – when the idea first began to take shape.

An army padre, the Rev David Railton, just back from the front line, was back at his unit's billet, gazing at a newly-dug grave marked with a crude wooden cross and a handwritten epitaph: "An Unknown British Soldier". It left a lasting impression on the Rev Railton.

"How that grave caused me to think… who was he, what can I do to ease the pain of father, mother, brother, sister, sweetheart, wife or friend?" he wrote in his diary.

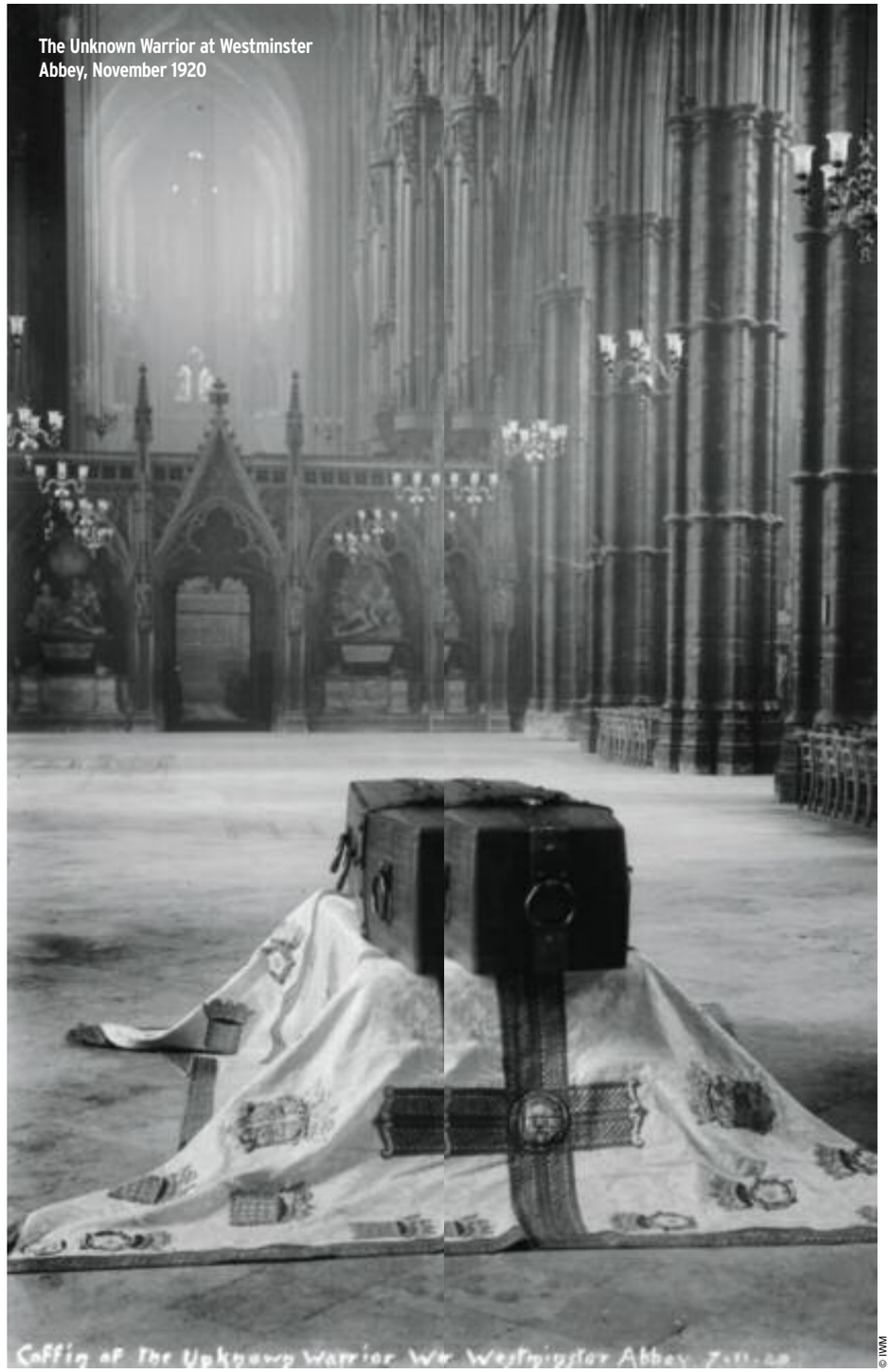
"There came out of the mist of thought this answer, clear and strong. Let this body, this symbol of him, be carried reverently over the sea to his native land."

The padre survived the war, and so too did his inspired vision. After the Armistice, he wrote to the authorities suggesting his plan, that the remains of just one serviceman should be brought home from the Western Front and laid to rest where he would be a focus for the whole country's mourning and a representative of all the fallen.

The commander of British Forces, Sir Douglas Haig, didn't bother to reply, but the Dean of Westminster was struck by the suggestion, and he passed it on to Buckingham Palace and Downing Street.

By now, it was the summer of 1920. A new national memorial, the imposing stone Cenotaph we know today, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyen, was due to be unveiled in November.

In the opinion of King George V, that would be enough. He saw no reason to build some kind of shrine as well. However, Prime Minister Lloyd George was more enthusiastic, and for good reason.



The Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey, November 1920

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The war had left a profound and complex impact on the entire country. There was relief, of course, that it was over, mixed with deep and painful sorrow at the huge scale of loss.

Hardly a family in the land was left untouched.

At first the grief was silent, as if a state of mass shock had descended on the population. But now there was the stirring of another emotion, anger, especially over the government's decision that none of the dead would be brought back to the UK.

"THE NAMELESS SOLDIER WAS SENT ON A JOURNEY IN DEATH THAT HE COULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED FOR HIMSELF IN LIFE"

The fallen soldiers would have to stay buried on their battlefields.

It was a cold-hearted policy, strictly enforced because the War Office realised that if they made any exceptions then demands would rapidly escalate. It enraged the vast numbers of bereaved.

More than 192,000 wives had lost their husbands. Nearly 360,000 children were left without fathers. The fact they would have no gravesides at home, at which they could grieve, only added to their anguish.

"Is there no limit to the suffering imposed on us?" pleaded Ruth Jervis, whose 22-year-old son, Gunner Harry Jervis, was buried near the field hospital where he died of chest wounds in 1917.

"Is it not enough to have our boys dragged from us and butchered, without being deprived of their poor remains? The country took him and the country should bring him back.

"I want my boy home and I shall be satisfied with nothing less. Who has the right to deny me more under heaven?"

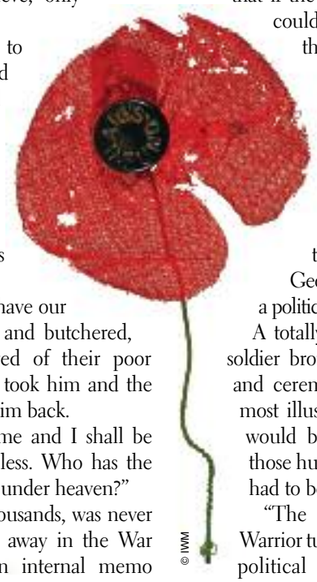
Her letter, one of thousands, was never answered. It was filed away in the War Office, along with an internal memo saying there was no point in replying since that would just make her even more angry. A few who could afford the journey set off on their own expeditions to the burial grounds in Belgium and France, hoping somehow to find the remains of their loved ones and bring them back.

A handful succeeded… the body of Major Norman McLeod Adam was exhumed from a remote grave near Arras by agents hired by his parents, then spirited back to Britain and reburied in Glasgow Necropolis, before the authorities realised what had happened.

But most were doomed to fail, such as Herbert Baron, who scraped together the money to travel from his home in Hull to Belgium and managed to locate the grave of his brother, Gunner Frank Baron. He hired a hearse and a team of Belgian labourers and began digging up the remains, from the military cemetery at Westoutre.

But he never finished his desperate task – a passing policeman caught him, and he was prosecuted and fined.

Previous generations who lost sons and husbands in earlier wars might simply have accepted the situation, that if the authorities said nothing could be done then that was the end of it, but now it seemed as if, post-1918, a new kind of rebellious mood was spreading.



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Against this background, it was little wonder that Prime Minister Lloyd George was glad to be handed a political remedy.

A totally anonymous body, one soldier brought home amid pomp and ceremony "to lie among the most illustrious of the land", that would be a fitting salute to all those hundreds of thousands who had to be left under foreign soil.

"The idea of the Unknown Warrior turned out to be a stroke of political genius," the eminent

Great War historian Richard van Emden told me. "For so many people, it filled a void. They knew of course that the body inside was probably not their loved one – but he could be. And certainly, he was someone's son, or father, or husband, that was the point."

But time was running short. It was now August, three months before the unveiling of the new Cenotaph, and so Downing Street and the War Office moved quickly to formulate their plan.

At midnight on November 7, it was the task of Brigadier General L.J. Wyatt, General Officer Commanding British Forces in France and Flanders, to select the corpse that would become the Unknown Warrior.

There were the remains of at least four bodies – some historical records say six.

They had been disinterred from unmarked graves on the main battlefields, they bore no identifying marks, and now each one was laid under a Union Jack flag in a military hut outside the village of St Pol, near the war-ravaged city of Ypres. In the half-light of a lantern, Brig Wyatt stepped inside, surveyed the scene and then reached out and touched one of the flags.

It was an act as simple as that. The Unknown Warrior, symbol of a nation's grief, mourning, remembrance, respect, the mortal remains of one soul who would represent legions more, had been chosen.

An Army padre, the Rev George Kendall, supervised the operation, from exhumation to selection, but right until his death in 1961 he revealed little about it, even to his family.

"I stress this great fact, the soldier lying in Westminster Abbey is British, he may have come from some little village or some city, and he may be the son of a working man or of a rich man," he once said. "Whatever knowledge I have will die with me."

Certainly, the nameless soldier was sent on a journey in death that he could never have imagined for himself in life.

The body was placed inside a coffin made of oak from Hampton Court, sealed with wrought-iron straps and topped by a sword, donated from the Royal collection by the King who, hearing about the Prime Minister's support for the project, had become enthusiastic himself.

On November 10 the coffin was paraded through the streets of Boulogne in a mile-long cortege then carried on board the destroyer HMS *Verdun* for its journey across the Channel.

Once it arrived in Britain, it was transferred into a railway luggage van, the same one used to carry the body of

"THE LARGEST CROWD THAT EVER GATHERED IN LONDON LINED THE ROUTE, AND THE ONLY SOUNDS WERE THE SOBBING OF PEOPLE AND THE CLIP-CLOP OF HORSES' HOOVES"

We shall remember them: Soldiers from The East Yorkshire Regiment pick their way round shell craters at Frezenburg during the Third Battle of Ypres, which lasted from July 31 to November 10, 1917

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The unveiling of the permanent Cenotaph in Whitehall by King George V, November 11, 1920

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the executed nurse Edith Cavell the year before, and as the train made its way to London, decked in purple, every station en route was packed with onlookers, their heads bowed.

Timing, then as now, was immaculate.

At 9am on November 11 a bearer party of eight guardsmen placed the coffin on a gun carriage and at 9.40 the procession moved off from Victoria Station. The largest crowd that ever gathered in London lined the route, and the only sounds were the sobbing of people and the clip-clop of horses' hooves.

The coffin paused at the Cenotaph, now revealed in all its sombre grandeur, where the King placed his own wreath on top, and as Big Ben chimed 11 it was carried into Westminster Abbey, to a congregation that included 1000 widows and mothers of lost sons and 100 Victoria Cross heroes.

According to *The Times*, the dedication service was "the most beautiful, the most touching and the most impressive that this island has seen."

There's no question that the nation embraced this unique way to honour the fallen.

The Unknown Warrior lay in State for a week, before the coffin was lowered into the tomb and covered by six barrels of earth that had been taken from Flanders fields.

During that week, the scenes were astonishing.

Some 1,250,000 people filed past to pay their respects, at the rate of 70 per minute, waiting in queues that were four deep, stretching from the Abbey doors to the Cenotaph, all day and into the night.

Some, as van Emden recounts in his book *The Quick And The Dead* put down their own written tributes, none more touching than the words of a grieving young woman, who dated her note "The Evening of November 11, 1920", and composed it as if the Unknown Warrior must be her own lost sweetheart or husband.

This is an extract:

"Boy dear, I am so happy I have found you at last.

"Today I stood by your grave. It seemed such a little grave for your great heart.

"The King and all the mighty of the land were about us, but it was my arms you felt around you as you sank to sleep.

"When the bugles blew the Reveille I almost cried Hush!, for I had just heard your drowsy sigh of content.

"Sleep well. It has been such a long and tiring day.

"You will be rested when morning breaks.

"Your father was the proudest man in all Britain today. His eyes were sparkling gems, almost too vividly bright in his statuesque face as he stood like a Guardsman on parade.

"And your mother, as ever, understanding everything, finding, arranging everything for him. 'We must take care not to be late, this is a great day, we must be off in good time...'

"Of myself, I do not write, boy dear. You know without my telling you, I was always proud of you.

"Tonight when it is very dark, when all the statues are asleep and the Abbey is silent as the grave, I shall steal through the portal of the mansion of the Dead, past the rows of famous warriors, and I will whisper to you words that no one else shall ever hear.

And kiss you goodnight."

Generations later, the Unknown Warrior still casts the same profound spell on those who stand at his tomb.