**THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER IN FRANCE**

**History:**

The Unknown soldier’s cult developed in Europe during the first World War and at first involved countries like England and France. Later on, this phenomena spread also to the USA and all over the world.



The idea of the Unknown soldier’s symbolic burial in France came from a local ofﬁcial in the city of Rennes in 1916. Little by little the idea reached French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau in 1919: he formally approved the idea but he proposed that a symbolic burial for the unknown soldier should be installed in the Pantheon, the honorary burial place in Paris for France’s major historical ﬁgures. But French veterans –who supported the unknown soldier’s ‘honoris causa’– favoured the Arc de Triomphe (more prestigious than the Pantheon) and the decision took place.

What then remained was to ﬁnd and choose the soldier to be honored. The physical search, having received parliamentary approval, was begun on 8th November 1920.

In order to allow each French family who had lost a soldier in the war to consider that the honoured one could, perhaps, be theirs, one body was ordered to be unearthed and chosen from each of eight major areas of conﬂict during the war.

Every precaution was taken to be sure that the selected body was indeed a French soldier. That was not always an easy task because not even the nationalities could be established with certainty.

Nevertheless, by the 9th of November eight bodies had been selected, placed in oak caskets and transported to an underground chamber in the Citadelle of Verdun, one of the heaviest battle areas of Eastern France. On the way, placement of the caskets was changed constantly so that, on arrival, it deliberately was virtually impossible to tell which one came from what area.

On the 10th of November, the choice of the soldier (destined to rest forever under the Arc de Triomphe) was to be made by a locally stationed simple valiant soldier. 21-year-old August Thin was told to make his historic choice: with a musical accompaniment, Thin walked quickly once around the ﬂag-draped cofﬁns and then on a slower tour laid a bouquet of red and white violets given him by the Minister of Pensions Andre Maginot on what he deemed to be sixth of the eight caskets before him. The Unknown Soldier had been chosen.

From the Citadelle in Verdun, his casket was taken on a horse-drawn 75 millimeter cannon platform to the train for Paris accompanied by a riﬂe-toting military guard of honor that included Thin.

Arriving in Paris on November 11, the casket was put on another, larger 155-millimeter cannon platform and taken brieﬂy to the Pantheon where then French President Raymond Poincare made a laudatory speech to a massive crowd of Parisians assembled for the ceremony.

The casket, still on its horse-drawn cannon platform, then moved on to the Arc de Triomphe where, in front of another massive crowd of spectators, the officially chosen Unknown Soldier was finally laid to rest.

Back in Verdun, at the same moment, Thin participated with comrades of his regiment in another ceremony that returned to earth in a local cemetery the caskets of the seven unidentified soldiers who had come close, but not quite close enough to eternal glory.

Three months later, Thin left the army at the end of his required service period and returned to his job as a baker. He later explained that he had taken the number 6 because, looking for a logic for his choice, he decided to take the total of the three numbers of his 132nd regiment.

Although Thin’s role in the Unknown Soldier epic remains virtually unknown, the logic of such a commemorative gesture by France did not go unnoticed by other countries that had engaged in the battles of 1914-1918. Subsequently, for example, Belgium, Great Britain, the United States, Portugal, Romania and eventually, Canada all similarly have paid honor to one of their unidentified soldiers who perished in the “War to End All Wars.”

On October 22, 1922 the French Parliament declared the eleventh day of November in each year to be a national holiday.  The following year on November 11, 1923 Andre Maginot, French Minister for War, lit the eternal flame for the first time.  Since that date it has become the duty of the Committee of the Flame to rekindle that torch each evening at twilight.

**The Unknown soldier today:**

At the base of the Arch de Triomphe stands a torch. Every evening at 6:30 P.M. it is rekindled, and veterans lay wreaths decorated with red, white and blue near its flickering flame. It burns in the darkness to recall the sacrifice of an unknown French soldier who gave his life during World War I.

And every year, on November 11, the date which marked the end in 1918 of World War I, once optimistically but mistakenly hailed as “The War to End All Wars,” France solemnly celebrates the occasion with a high-level wreath-laying ceremony on the Unknown Soldier’s tomb at the Arc.

