



Photo by William M. Rittase

THE FINAL RESTING PLACE OF AMERICA'S UNNAMED HERO — AND THE MAN WHO CHOSE HIM

# "I CHOSE *the* UNKNOWN SOLDIER"

by SERGT. EDWARD F. YOUNGER

**W**HEN America's Unknown Soldier was laid to rest in Arlington Cemetery on Armistice Day fifteen years ago, he reached the end of a triumphant journey upon which I started him a few weeks before in a drab little chapel of war-torn France.

For I was the doughboy who chose the Unknown Soldier to whom kings and presidents were to do honor and who was to be the everlasting symbol of his one hundred thousand fellow-warriors who died on the field of battle.

Today I commit to print for the first time the awe and the emotions which were mine when destiny selected me for that solemn task.

As another Armistice Day rolls around there comes back to my memory those fateful events of fifteen years ago, when I walked alone among the coffins of four unknown American dead, and in response to a mysterious but irresistible urge selected the one to be enshrined.

Little did I dream of what fate held in store for me when in February, 1917, I joined the regular army. I was an eighteen-year-old orphan, restless and lonely.

I trained in Texas and New York, going overseas in September, 1917, with the 9th United States Infantry. Our outfit was thrown into the front line on March 17, 1918, and we fought at Chateau Thierry. I was wounded at Vaux on July 2, and in the St. Mihiel drive on October 3. On November 7 I was back in the front line, and on that first Armistice Day morning we crossed the Meuse River. At eleven o'clock we ceased firing.

America may have gone into a delirium at that hour, but too many of our own lay dead and wounded for us to celebrate.

After the Armistice, I went into Germany with the Army of Occupation.

Meantime a beautiful sentiment had been growing. The body of an unidentified soldier, killed in line of duty, was to be sent back to America to lie in a simple but majestic tomb where a grateful nation might pay its tribute — an Unknown Soldier, yet one that any mother, whose boy had never come home from the war, might claim as her very own.

There seemed nothing momentous when on the morning of October 23, 1921, I was ordered to report to my commanding officer. I saluted and awaited his word.

"You will go to Coblenz, sergeant," he said, "and there meet five other soldiers. You will then proceed to Chalons-sur-Marne and report to Major Harbold for service as pallbearers for the Unknown Soldier."

The announcement startled me, although I had no conception of what it signified. At Coblenz I met the other five veterans, and we journeyed to Chalons. Major Harbold quizzed us about our service, and then said:

"Tomorrow morning one of you will choose the body of the Unknown Soldier. You six will act as pallbearers until the casket is received by the navy for escort to America."

There was little sleep among us that night as the full meaning of our assignment bore in upon us. I felt a haunting restlessness that was different from anything I had ever known before.

We awoke to find a bright, glorious October morning, almost with a note of resurrection in it.

"Men," Major Harbold said when we reported, "the selection has been made. Younger will have the honor of placing the bouquet of roses on the casket which he will choose from the four assembled here, and by that act America's Unknown Soldier will be designated."

I was overwhelmed. I had gone over the top many times, had known the agony of waiting for the charge. But nothing had paralyzed me as that simple announcement did.

Then came the moment of supreme drama, the most intense sensation of my whole life. An officer handed me a bouquet of roses.

"Sergeant Younger," he said, "you will proceed alone into the chapel, make your selection of the Unknown Soldier and deposit these flowers upon his casket."

I took the flowers and advanced to the little temporary shrine through a line of French troops. I entered the door, and stood alone with the dead. It was dim inside, the only light filtering in through small windows.

For a moment I hesitated, and said a prayer, inaudible, inarticulate, yet real. Then I looked around me.

That scene will remain with me forever. Each casket was draped with a beautiful American flag. Never before had the flag seemed to have such sublime significance and beauty. About the walls were other flags, American and French; flower petals had been scattered over the floor, and outside I could hear the band playing a hymn.

I began a slow march around the caskets. Which should it be? Thoughts poured like torrents through my mind. Maybe these buddies had once been my pals! Perhaps one of them had fought with me, had befriended me, had possibly shielded me from a bullet that might have put me in his place. Who would ever know?

I was numb. I couldn't choose. From four American cemeteries in France these lads now still in death had been brought. One was to be immortalized as far as humanity could do it. And to me, an unknown doughboy, was given the selection!

Three times I walked around the caskets; then something drew me to the coffin second to my right on entering. I couldn't walk another step. It seemed as if God raised my hand and guided me as I placed the roses on that casket. This, then, was to be America's Unknown Soldier, and by that simple act I had started him on his journey of destiny!

I tarried for a second, then remembered my task was done. I saluted the casket, and reported that the order had been fulfilled.

The casket, with its flag and roses, was placed in the rotunda of the City Hall, and then the body of the Unknown Soldier was taken through the streets of Chalons, crowds lining the curb to pay their silent tribute. We bore the body reverently to Havre, where we delivered the flag-covered casket to the navy.

The rest of the story is the possession of every American — how the Unknown Soldier lay in state in the nation's capitol as endless multitudes streamed by his bier; how he was escorted to his tomb on Armistice Day by three presidents and ex-presidents; by General Pershing, the hero's commander-in-chief in France; by the cabinet, congressmen, governors and veterans of the nation's wars.

That tomb is now a shrine of American patriotism. Millions have honored it.

On Memorial Day, 1930, I visited the tomb and placed a bouquet upon the marble casket. Feelings surged through me that I cannot describe. And some day, I hope to journey to Chalons, to kneel again at the Unknown Soldier's first shrine.

Like many who were in the thick of the fighting, I helped to bury the bodies of hundreds of my buddies under fire. Many of them could not be identified. Could the hero I chose have been one of these? I cannot know. But, somehow, I hope he was.