Interesting Facts about the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

How does the guard rotation work? Is it an 8 hour shift?

Currently, the Tomb Guards work on a three Relief (team) rotation - 24 hours on, 24 hours off, 24 hours on, 24 hours off, 24 hours on, 96 hours off. However, over the years it has been different. The time off isn't exactly free time. It takes the average Sentinel 8 hours to prep their uniform for the next work day. Additionally, they have Physical Training, Tomb Guard training, and haircuts to complete before the next work day.

How many steps does the Sentinel take during their 'walk' by the Tomb of the Unknowns and why?

Twenty-one steps. It alludes to the twenty-one gun salute, which is the highest honor given any military or foreign dignitary.

How long does the Sentinel hesitate after the facing movement to begin the return walk? Is the rifle carried on the same shoulder all the time?

The Sentinel does not execute an about face, rather they stop on the 21st step, then turn and face the Tomb for 21 seconds. They then turn to face back down the mat, change the weapon to the outside shoulder, mentally count off 21 seconds, then step off for another 21 step walk down the mat. They face the Tomb at each end of the 21 step walk for 21 seconds. The Sentinel then repeats this over and over until the Guard Change ceremony begins.

Why are the Sentinel's gloves wet?

Gloves are moistened to improve the grip on the rifle.

How often are the Guards changed?

The Guard is changed every thirty minutes during the summer (April 1 to Sep 30) and every hour during the winter (Oct 1 to Mar 31). During the hours the cemetery is closed, the guard is changed every 2 hours. The Tomb is guarded, and has been guarded, every minute of every day since 1937.

Is it true a Sentinel must commit for two years to guard the Tomb, live in a barracks under the tomb, and cannot drink any alcohol on or off duty for the rest of their lives.

No, this is a false rumor. The average tour at the Tomb is about 18 months. However, there is NO set time for service there. Sentinels live either in a barracks on Ft. Myer (the Army post located adjacent to the cemetery) or off base if they like. They do have a living quarters under the steps of the amphitheater where they stay during their 24 hour shifts. If they are of legal age, they may drink except while on duty.

Is it true they cannot swear in public for the rest of their lives?

Again, another false rumor.

How do the Soldiers get to and from the quarters without being seen?

Most wear civilian clothes - although the short, tight haircuts tend to give them away.

Is it true after two years, the guard is given a wreath pin that is worn on their lapel signifying they served as Guard of the Tomb, that there are only 600 presently worn, and that the Guard must obey these rules for the rest of their lives or give up the wreath pin?

The Tomb Guard Identification Badge (TGIB) is awarded after the Sentinel passes a series of tests. The TGIB is permanently awarded after a Sentinel has served nine months as a Sentinel at the Tomb. Over 600 have been awarded since its creation in the late 1950's (on average 10 per year). And while the TGIB can be revoked, the offense must be such that it discredits the Tomb of the Unknowns. Revocation is at the 3rd Infantry Regimental Commander's discretion and can occur while active duty or even when the Sentinel is a civilian. The TGIB is a full size award, worn on the right pocket of the uniform jacket, not a lapel pin.

Are the shoes specially made with very thick soles to keep the heat and cold from their feet?

The shoes are standard issue military dress shoes. They are built up so the sole and heel are equal in height. This allows the Sentinel to stand with a straight back and perpendicular to the ground. A side effect of this is that the Sentinel can "roll" on the outside of the buildup walking down the mat. Done correctly, the hat and bayonet will appear to not "bob" up and down with each step. It gives a more formal, fluid and smooth look to the walk, rather than a "marching" appearance.

The soles have a steel tip on the toe and a "horseshoe" steel plate on the heel. This prevents wear on the sole and allows the Sentinel to move smoothly during his movements when he turns to face the Tomb and then back down the mat.

Then there is the "clicker". It is a shank of steel attached to the inside of the face of the heel build-up on each shoe. It allows the Sentinel to heel click during certain movements. A guard change is considered great when all the heel clicks fall together and sound as one click. The guard change is occasionally done in the "silent" mode (as a sign of devotion to the Unknowns) with no voice commands - everything is done in relation to the heel clicks and on specific counts.

How many times will a Sentinel be on duty during the shift?

Each Relief has a 24 hour rotational work day. Ideally, four qualified Sentinels, one Relief Commander (RC), one Assistant Relief Commander (ARC), and several Sentinels in training comprise the Relief. The daily walk schedule is made by the RC or ARC and is dependent on the number of Sentinels who are proficient enough to guard the Tomb in front of the public. Generally, the Sentinel will do several walks back to back and then be done for the day. However, in extreme cases, Sentinels have been known to go back-to-back (every other walk) for the entire shift.

There is a small green shack next to the Tomb. What is it for?

'The Box' (as it is affectionately known) is used primarily during wreath laying ceremonies for the Sentinel to retreat to while flowers and Taps are being presented. There also is a phone with a direct line downstairs to the Tomb Guard Quarters. This is used in times of emergencies or just to notify the next shift of something.

Has anyone ever tried to get past the Tomb guards, or attempted to deface the Tomb?

Yes, that is the reason why we now guard the Tomb. Back in the early 1920's, we didn't have guards and the Tomb looked much different. It was flat at ground level without the 70 ton marble 'cap'. People often came to the cemetery in those days and a few actually used the Tomb as a picnic area, likely because of the view. Soon after in 1925, they posted a civilian guard. In 1926, a US Army soldier was posted during cemetery hours. On July 1, 1937 guard duty was expanded to the 24 hour watch. Since then, the ceremony has evolved throughout the years to what you see today. Today, most of the challenges faced by the Sentinels are tourists who are speaking too loudly or attempting to get a better picture (by entering the post).

What happened to the soldier that was in the Tomb from the Vietnam War?

The remains of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier were exhumed May 14, 1998. Based on mitochondrial DNA testing, DoD scientists identified the remains as those of Air Force 1st Lt. Michael Joseph Blassie, who was shot down near An Loc, Vietnam, in 1972. It has been decided that the crypt that contained the remains of the Vietnam Unknown will remain vacant. (Further Background) (News Article from the Department of Defense)

What is it like to guard in bad weather?

The Sentinels at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier are completely dedicated to their duty of guarding the Tomb. In fact, line eight of our Sentinel's Creed refers to the "discomfort of the elements". Because of their dedication, the weather does not bother them. In fact, it is considered an honor to walk the mat during inclement weather. It gets cold, it gets hot and the mission continues as it has unbroken since 1937.

Do you guard in a blizzard or a bad thunderstorm?

YES, but the accomplishment of the mission and welfare of the Soldier is never put at risk. The Tomb Guards have contingencies that are ready to be executed if the weather conditions ever place the Soldiers at risk of injury or death (i.e. lightning, high winds, etc). This ensures that Sentinels can continue the mission while ensuring safety. It is the responsibility of the Chain of Command from the Sergeant of the Guard to the Regimental Commander to ensure mission accomplishment and soldier welfare at all times.

It was erroneously reported that during Hurricane Isabel, the Sentinels were ordered to abandon their posts for shelter and that they refused. No such order was ever given. All proper precautions were taken to ensure the safety of the Sentinels while accomplishing their mission. Risk assessments are constantly conducted by the Chain of Command during changing conditions to ensure that soldier welfare is maintained during mission accomplishment.

Do you guard all night long, even when the cemetery is closed?

The Tomb is guarded 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In fact, there has been a Sentinel on duty in front of the Tomb every minute of every day since 1937.

How many Sentinels have been female?

There have been over 630 tomb guards awarded the badge since 1958 when we started counting. There are hundreds more from the year 1926 when the Army started guarding the Tomb. The 3rd US Infantry (The Old Guard) is the unit that has been given the duty of guarding the Tomb. It was given this sacred duty in 1948. The Old Guard was -- and still is -- considered a combat unit. As an Infantry unit, females were not permitted in the ranks for many years. It wasn't until 1994 that females were permitted to volunteer to become a Sentinel when the 289th Military Police Company was attached to the Old Guard. The MP branch is a combat support unit and includes females.

In 1996, SGT Heather Johnson became the first female to earn the Tomb Guard Identification Badge. She volunteered for duty in June 1995 and earned her badge in 1996. However, SGT Johnson was not the only female Sentinel. Since then, there have been two additional female Sentinels awarded the Tomb Guard Identification Badge. SGT Danyell Wilson earned her badge in 1997, and SSG Tonya Bell received hers in 1998. Update – In 2016, Ruth Hanks became the 4th female Sentinel.

Several other units have since been attached to the Old Guard -- food service, transportation, medics, etc. -- so now females have an ever greater opportunity to become a Sentinel. Females must meet the same requirements as the male soldiers to be eligible to volunteer at the Tomb. The only difference is that females have a minimum height of 5'8" -- which is the same standard to be a member of the Old Guard.

Is the rifle that the Sentinel carries loaded?

Tomb Guards carry fully functional M14 rifles. Given the current climate surrounding the relatively recent tragic events in Canada (attack upon the guard at the Canadian War Memorial), we will no longer be answering questions relating to specifics regarding current security and armament at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. We appreciate your understanding.

Rest assured, that the US Army has the post secured as it has been since we started guard duty at the shrine in 1926.

What is the process to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier?

Wreath laying ceremonies are conducted thousands of times each year by many organizations. If you are going soon, there is likely no availability for conducting this ceremony as the slots fill up at least six months in advance. Please visit arlingtoncemetery.mil for more detailed information and to request that honor if you are part of an organization planning a visit.

Wreaths are provided or arranged to be delivered by the public. All questions you may have about that ceremony can be answered on the ANC website or through the cemetery staff.