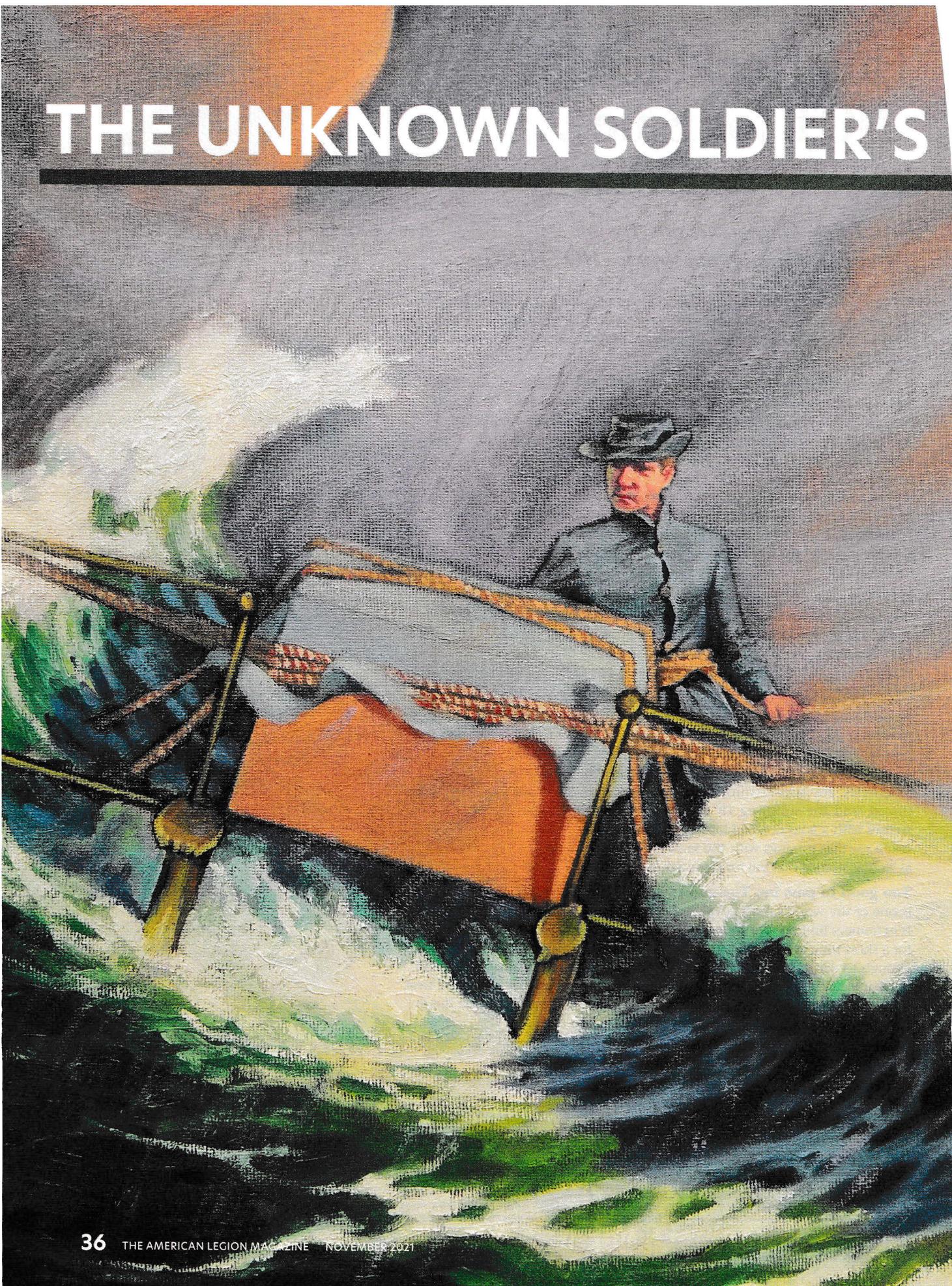


# THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER'S



# STORMY VOYAGE HOME

*Olympia's captain, crew barely survived a hurricane transporting a precious passenger back to America.*

BY J.R. NEUBEISER

ILLUSTRATION BY DOUG RUGH

**Editor's note:** In December 1920, American Legion founding leader U.S. Rep. Hamilton Fish III of New York introduced legislation that would deliver the Unknown Soldier to Arlington National Cemetery less than a year later. The Legion was involved at every step of the journey, from participation at the selection of the fallen hero through the tomb's dedication on Nov. 11, 1921. The trip from France to the United States would be carried out on USS *Olympia*, now dry-docked and on display at the Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia, the last of the U.S. Spanish-American War fleet still in existence. This is the story of *Olympia's* harrowing trip across the Atlantic, and how the Unknown Soldier was protected and delivered, in the face of a historic storm.

Capt. Graves B. Erskine stood in the mist on the afterdeck of the cruiser beside the coffin of the Unknown Soldier. He felt the storm coming. He understood the gravity of his mission; he and his 38 Marines were entrusted by the people of the United States to protect the remains of this fallen soldier of the war to end all wars. Their orders were simple: bring him home before Armistice Day on Nov. 11. It was 3:28 p.m. on Oct. 25, 1921, at the harbor of Le Havre on the northern coast of France.

The French cruiser *Admiral Sénès* was the first ship to begin the procession. USS *Olympia* pulled away from the dock with a 17-gun salute from the French warship *Verdun* and farewell salvos from shore batteries. USS *Reuben James* and two columns of six French destroyers escorted *Olympia* to the mouth of the harbor, where the crews waved a final farewell. The Unknown Soldier was on his way home.

Meanwhile, in the southwestern Caribbean Sea, swirling winds and rain had grown into a tropical depression on Oct. 20. The storm intensified quickly, moving northwestward. By Oct. 22, it developed into a major hurricane – the sixth of the year. By the next day, maximum sustained winds of 140 mph on the Saffir-Simpson scale were recorded – a Category 4 storm that curved to the northeast and the Florida coast. As *Olympia* was leaving France, the hurricane struck the Florida coast at Tarpon Springs as a Category 3 with sustained winds of 120 mph. When it moved across central Florida, it weakened into a Category 1, becoming known as the Tarpon Springs Hurricane of 1921.

Reaching the Atlantic with winds of 80 mph, the hurricane briefly restrengthened to winds of 90 mph early on Oct. 27. Late on Oct. 29, the system accelerated northeastward and weakened to a tropical storm before being absorbed by a large extra-tropical cyclone, possibly the remnants of Hurricane No. 5 that had circled near the Azores and itself also degraded into an extra-tropical depression on Oct. 25. *Olympia* was about to traverse an ocean tormented by cyclone winds, mountainous waves and driving rain from two intense storms.

Capt. Henry Lake Wyman, *Olympia's* skipper, instructed the Marine guard not to slant or tip the coffin. Therefore, the Unknown Soldier could not be moved to the interior of the ship through bulkhead hatches. Everyone onboard understood the dignity and respect deserving this fallen hero of America. The coffin would not be placed in a cargo hold.

Under the direct supervision of Erskine,

Marines carried the Unknown Soldier to the signal bridge, the highest point on the ship that could accommodate the coffin aft of the ship's conning (bridge). *Olympia's* carpenters had constructed a wooden outer protective shell for the casket. Marines and sailors carefully wrapped the wood in waterproof tarps, then lashed it down with ropes and lines that a Marine private described as "enough line to secure the battleship *Wyoming* fore and aft with brest and spring lines to boot."

Erskine sensed an intense storm was looming ahead of *Olympia*. During his trip across the Atlantic to Portsmouth, England, he had experienced the ship rolling and heaving in angry seas. Its draft was 29 feet of water, but as Erskine later described, "she seemed too short for the long waves and too long for the short ones."

He was later quoted as saying, "The agonizing thought came to me: what if the Unknown Soldier - the hero America waits to honor - is washed overboard? I knew if such a thing happened, I might as well jump over with him."

After passing the Azores on Oct. 31, *Olympia* began encountering large waves and rain. The deck crew quickly moved to secure fore-castle gear and place buckler plates over the chain locker to keep water out. Near-gale-force winds ripped into *Olympia* around 10 a.m., making steering difficult. Green water smashed into the bow of the ship and washed down the wooden decks like a mountain stream in spring. Life lines were quickly tied to stanchions by the ship's crew for traversing slippery open areas. When the bow rose on a growing wave, the fan tail dipped low with water gushing across the place where the Unknown Soldier previously rested. Erskine's natural senses, which had served him well on the battlefields of France, allowed him to stay one step beyond a disaster.

Before *Olympia* departed France, Wyman ordered a Marine guard to stand with the Unknown Soldier around the clock. Erskine established a four-hour duty watch for his Marines. They now stood their watches on the open signal bridge beside the coffin in winds that ripped and tore at their oilskin jackets. Even facing away, the cold, pelting rain found ways to trickle down their necks.

As the storm roared, *Olympia* rolled dangerously close to its limit for broaching. The white bow sank deeply into the green water; decks were more awash in foaming sea water than clear. When the watch changed, Erskine realized his sentry on the signal bridge was in danger of being swept overboard. The Marine guards suggested they be lashed to the ship's rail. Erskine then ordered detachment 1st Sgt. Edward A. Mullen Sr. to tie each relief



## The Erskine file

If Capt. Graves B. Erskine had not survived the stormy trip across the Atlantic to return the Unknown Soldier to America, the nation would have lost a multi-war Marine Corps leader. His service record in brief:

**Mexican Border War:** Saw action with the Louisiana National Guard.

**World War I:** Platoon leader who fought at Chateau-Thierry, Belleau Wood, Bouresches and Soissons; wounded twice and received the Silver Star.

**1928:** Assigned to Nicaragua with the 2nd Marine Brigade and the Nicaragua National Guard Detachment; led jungle operations against organized bandits. Served in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

**World War II:** Promoted to brigadier general; highly decorated for combat leadership at Saipan, Tinian, the Marianas and Iwo Jima. Later served as a technical adviser for the Hollywood film "Sands of Iwo Jima."

**1947:** Commanded the 1st Marine Division and Camp Pendleton, Calif.; later promoted to major general.

**1953-1961:** Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations.

**May 21, 1973:** Died at 75; buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

to a stanchion, and place two Marines inside the helmsman station in case the ropes holding the canvas loosened or the wooden enclosure failed. Marine Pvt. Frederick A. Landry was later quoted as saying, "I began feeling sorry for myself standing there in a small area with wind and rain pelting me in the face, but my self-sorrow didn't last long. I soon realized that what I was doing was little enough compared to what the Unknown Soldier had done - given his life."

Erskine observed a Marine on ship's watch get caught by a wave and washed down the deck. His black rubber boots instantly filled with sea water and were carried overboard as he held tightly to the safety line.

The old queen of the fleet moaned and groaned through each wave. Erskine reported later that he thought he saw plates on the ship's hull moving. During the battle of Manila Bay, *Olympia* had been struck a number of times by Spanish cannon fire, but only cosmetic damage occurred. Below decks, the ship rolled so far that sailors moved down passageways with one foot on deck and the other on the bulkhead. The bridge became awash from monster waves, and the ward room had water slushing across the deck. At 10:30 a.m., a strong wave broke loose the life raft in the port galley passage. As the ship pitched, a falling water bucket lacerated the scalp of Seaman Charles D. Bell. In the engine room, Seaman R.M. Thistle fell through the catwalk bars and onto a cylinder head, gashing his cranium. Wyman grew concerned that one more roll might be the ship's last. A Navy chaplain, Lt. Edward A. Duff, had boarded the ship at Portsmouth to hitch a ride back to America. Duff was an ordained Catholic priest. Wyman, worried the ship might sink, suggested the chaplain hold a prayer service for the crew.

Sailors and Marines not on duty gathered in the galley, where they held tightly to bulkheads, pipes and each other as the ship pitched violently. Father Duff began by reminding the crew of the importance of their mission. He told them God was watching out for *Olympia*. All bowed their heads as Duff said a prayer for the Unknown Soldier lying above them on the ocean-swept signal bridge. He prayed that the Unknown Soldier would be returned to the land of the free and the home of the brave.

On Sunday, Nov. 6, the weather moderated. The deep green seas rolled gently under *Olympia* as the great white lady rose up the side of a wave, under a powder-blue sky. Then it would gracefully slide down the opposite side, changing the powder-blue horizon to deep green. Below decks, the engine room was having problems - not from

## CENTENNIAL EVENTS IN NOVEMBER

The Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier plans events nationwide to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the sacred site at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. See the complete list at [tombguard.org](http://tombguard.org).

### **Nov. 1-30, Tyler, Texas**

Commemorative display of 100th anniversary of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Robert R. Muntz Library

**1, Online** Virtual presentation on the history of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier from 1921 through today, hosted by the Somerset County Library System in New Jersey  
[sclsnj.org](http://sclsnj.org)

### **7, Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia**

"Taps in Honored Glory" commemorates the centennial of the Tomb and the buglers who have sounded taps there over the past century, beginning at 10 a.m. at Tanner Amphitheater. A high tea will be offered at 11:30 a.m. at the Military Women's Memorial, along with tours and remarks from Gavin McIlvenna, president of the Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

### **8-10, Arlington, Va., Crystal Gateway Marriott**

Centennial Week begins, leading up to the 100th anniversary of the World War I Unknown Soldier's burial. Events include lectures by authors who have written about the Unknown Soldiers, a lecture on the history of taps and use of bugles in funerals, a Joint Naval Symposium on contributions of the nation's naval forces, a "Voices from the Tomb" presentation with Q&A session, and more.

### **9-10, Arlington National Cemetery**

The public is invited inside the chains to lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. **9 a.m. to 4 p.m.**

the pounding seas, but from the large consumption of coal. The two huge engines were fed greater quantities by the engine room crew to maintain course and speed. As the fires in the boilers grew dim from a lack of fuel, Wyman ordered all hands to move coal stores from a forward bunker. Marines and sailors formed a line to pass the black chunks to the starving boilers before the fires flickered out. With the last obstacle removed, *Olympia* proudly steamed for Cape Henry Lighthouse at the southern entrance to Chesapeake Bay.

It was time for the Marines to polish their brass and spit shine their dress shoes.

A light rain was falling when *Olympia* eased alongside Pier 3 at the Washington Navy Yard dock, bringing to mind the old saying, "When it rained at someone's funeral, it was angel tears, as a good one left the earth for their eternal home."

Waiting on the wet cobblestone dock to take the Unknown Soldier home were mounted soldiers of the Army's 3rd Cavalry Regiment.

The cavalry squadron faced the ship in line formation. All eyes were on the flag-draped coffin. The Marines and sailors on deck smartly saluted one last time. The ship's bell sounded at 4 p.m., and the Army band began playing "Onward Christian Soldier" as the Unknown Soldier was gently carried down the sand-dusted ramp from ship to shore and his waiting caisson with six black horses.

Erskine's Marines stood at attention in formation on the dock. With the command "present arms," the Marines in their dress blues snapped their Springfield rifles into one last salute. Sabers flashed in the rain – a salute from the men of the 3rd. The Navy and Marines relinquished their responsibility to the Army. The Marines had accomplished their mission and lived up to their motto: *Semper Fidelis*, "always faithful."

The slow trip to the Capitol Rotunda began, and Capt. Graves B. Erskine shouted the orders to his men: "Order – arms – at ease!"

With the skill of the officers and sailors of *Olympia*, the devotion of the U.S. Marine Detachment and the hand of God, the Unknown Soldier was home in America. 🌿

*Vietnam War Marine Corps platoon and company commander Joseph Robert "J.R." Neubeiser has written numerous human-interest stories for national and local newspapers. He is a member of Leo B. Neubeiser American Legion Post 144 in Belle Plaine, Minn., named for his third cousin, who served in World War I. Neubeiser retired from the federal government after 34 years as a senior executive.*

**9, National Museum of the Navy, Washington, D.C.** A 12:30 p.m. seminar at the Navy Yard commemorates the arrival of the Unknown Soldier to the United States, followed by a plaque dedication at 3 p.m.

**9, USS *Olympia*, Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia**

A commemoration ceremony mirrors those at the Navy Yard to honor the 100th anniversary of the World War I Unknown Soldier's arrival in the United States.

**11, Nationwide, 11 a.m., local time**

Communities are urged to participate in the National Salute to remember all who have served and sacrificed for their country.

**[tombguard.org/centennial/projects#national-salute](https://tombguard.org/centennial/projects#national-salute)**

**11, Indianapolis** Cornelia Cole Fairbanks Chapter, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution and American Legion Post 3 host a National Salute ceremony featuring a bell choir, two-minute silence and taps. **11 a.m.**

**11, Valdosta, Ga.** Dedication of a Never Forget Garden at the Crescent, **1 p.m.**

**11, Tyler, Texas** Veterans Day Program and National Salute at Camp V, **10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.**

**11, Shreveport, La., American Rose Center** Veterans Day Program and National Salute, **10 a.m.**

**11, East Helena, Mont., Cemetery** Dedication of a Never Forget Garden, **10 a.m.**

**12, Shreveport, La.** "Unknowns: A Centennial Symposium in partnership with Louisiana State University Shreveport" includes sessions on the Medal of Honor and the Unknown Soldier, plus authors Steven Trout, Philip Bigler, Andrew Richards and Lisa Budreau. **9 a.m. to 4 p.m.**