



# TOMB

CENTENNIAL



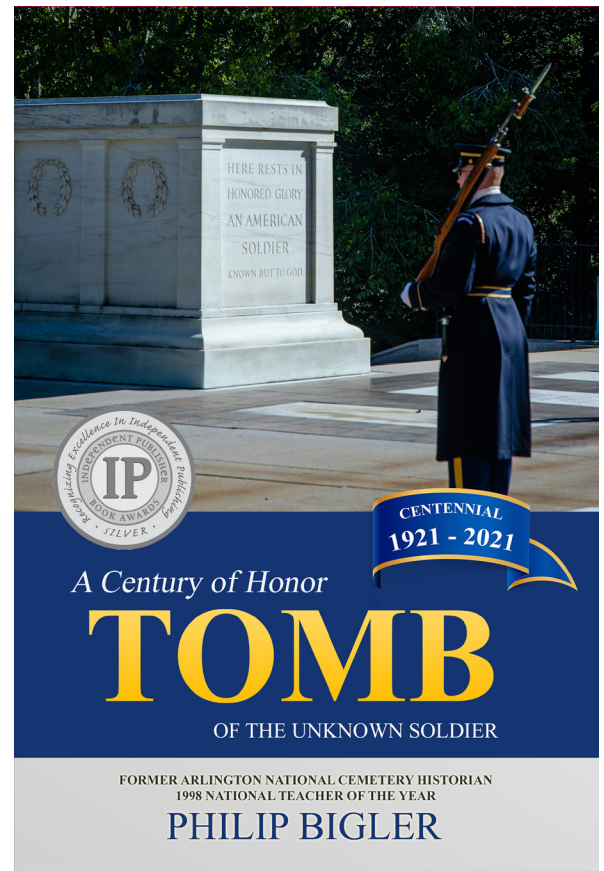


## PRESS RELEASE

### HISTORIAN PHILIP BIGLER'S AWARD-WINNING, DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER IS NOW AVAILABLE IN A NEW, LIMITED HARD COVER EDITION

*Published in conjunction with the nation's upcoming commemorations of the Tomb's Centennial, Philip Bigler's highly readable and informative narrative history: Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: A Century of Honor, 1921-2020, expertly chronicles the history, evolution, and development of the country's most sacred military shrine within the context of the American history.*

**October 15, 2020—Quicksburg, VA.**— For one hundred years, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has served as the nation's most cherished shrine to the country's fallen military soldiers. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: A Century of Honor, 1921-2021, tells in detail this amazing story within the context of American history. Following the tradition established by the British and French, an American Unknown from the Great War was interred at Arlington National Cemetery on the plaza of the Memorial Amphitheater on Armistice Day 1921. The hastily built, simple marble sarcophagus served as the nation's monument to the Unknown until a more elaborate and aesthetic die stone was added in 1932. In 1958, Unknowns from World War II and the Korean War were likewise buried in separate crypts in front of the main monument. A Vietnam Unknown was designated and buried in 1984 but the body would be later disinterred and identified in 1998 through the use of newly developed DNA technology.



Professor Bigler spent two years conducting extensive primary source research at the National Archives, the Commission of Fine Arts, the Eisenhower Library, the Library of Congress as well as other national repositories. His investigation has resulted in the most complete and well-documented history of the Tomb ever compiled and includes many newly discovered facts and fascinating details. The book includes chapters on the selection of all of the American Unknowns as well as on the subsequent identification of the Vietnam Unknown as 1LT Michael Blassie (USAF). Likewise, there are detailed chapters on the construction and dedication of the Memorial Amphitheater in 1920 as well as information on the Tomb sentinels who maintain a perpetual 24-hour, 365-day vigil. The book includes a complete historical timeline, several informative appendices, extensive endnotes, a comprehensive bibliography and is supported by a comprehensive website which includes primary source material, photographs, and archival videos of the burials of the Unknowns.

Philip Bigler is the author of ten, top selling books including *In Honored Glory: Arlington National Cemetery*, *the Final Post*; *Scandalous Son: The Elusive Search for Dolley Madison's Son, John Payne Todd*; *Hostile Fire: The Life and Death of Lt. Sharon A. Lane*; and *Teaching History in an Uncivilized World*. Widely recognized for his scholarship and innovative teaching methods, Bigler was named the 1998 National Teacher of the Year during a Rose Garden Cemetery hosted by President Bill Clinton. In 2001, he was appointed the director of the James Madison Center at James Madison University and served in this position until his retirement in 2010. He has served as an on-air historian on the History Channel and has been a featured guest on such programs at *Nightline* with Ted Koppel and *Late Night* with David Letterman. His has also appeared on CNN and Fox News Channel.

For additional information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

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video: [https://youtu.be/iSSPdA\\_ZVcI](https://youtu.be/iSSPdA_ZVcI)





Winner of the  
IPPY Silver Medal for  
*Excellence in Non-Fiction*

*"...a truly remarkable story, told exceedingly well...a masterly job of setting the story of the Tomb in the context of the nation's wars and its broader history...an outstanding piece of work."*

Professor Lee Congdon, James Madison University

*"...an entertaining historical read of the highest caliber. This informative treasure is a work of love...[Bigler's] voluminous and exceptionally informative endnotes reflect the depth and meticulousness of his research."*

Henry Zeybel, Vietnam Veterans of America

*"This isn't simply a book about the tomb but a gripping history lesson covering every war we've fought, from World War I through Vietnam. I learned something new about American history on almost every page and found myself weeping more than once while reading about the soldiers who sacrificed life and limb on our country's behalf, some of their remains never to be identified. In other words, this is a meticulously researched, beautifully written and compelling book."*

Pricilla Boyle, Housatonic Community College

*"Philip Bigler is a highly skilled researcher and a master storyteller who takes readers on an exciting [historical] journey...This book brought so many facts to life in a suspenseful way, and left me feeling immense gratitude for those who gave their lives for our country. Everyone should read this remarkable story about our nation's history and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier."*

Catherine O. Ruscito, Frederick County Public Schools

*"A comprehensive account about one of our nation's most sacred monuments... Expertly written by the utmost knowledgeable source, Philip Bigler... A compelling, poignant read...I highly recommend this book!"*

Stacy Lee Carroll





## Book Excerpt: The Selection of the World War II Unknown onboard the USS *Canberra*

Transpacific Candidate Unknown was taken to the Kapalama Basin mortuary. His casket and that of the Korean Unknown were placed inside protective shipping containers. The bodies were then transported to NAS Barber's Point where at 3:45 PM, they were loaded onto an awaiting aircraft to be flown to the American base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.<sup>123</sup>

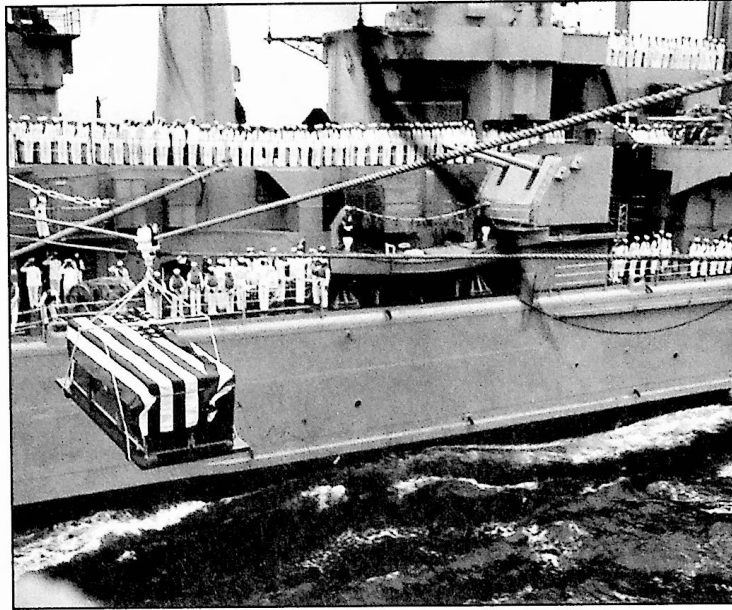
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THE CASKETS ARRIVED in Cuba and were soon transferred on May 23 to the guided missile cruiser, the USS *Boston* (CAG-1). The ship set sail for a prearranged rendezvous, scheduled for three days later, with the USS *Blandy*. The destroyer was completing its Atlantic crossing, returning the Transatlantic Candidate Unknown back to the United States.

On May 26, at 0747 hours, the *Boston* slowly maneuvered alongside the *Blandy* near the coast of the Virginia. With the ships traveling parallel to one another and in tight formation, the captains matched speed while their respective crews established an open water, highline transfer. The Transatlantic Unknown's casket was conveyed across the open water from the *Blandy* to the deck of the much larger cruiser. This difficult and perilous ship-to-ship procedure was completed in just 30 minutes despite bad weather and a persistent rain. Now, with all three caskets of the Unknowns safely onboard the *Boston*, the two Navy vessels proceeded in tandem to the Virginia Capes where the USS *Canberra* (CAG-2) awaited.<sup>124</sup>

A few hours later, the *Canberra* came into sight off the Virginia coast. The two missile cruisers, now on identical headings and traveling at a constant speed of 10 knots, had just 100 feet separation as they established another mid-ship, highline transfer. With their crews manning-the-rails in dress whites, all three caskets of the Unknowns were individually conveyed to the *Canberra's* deck. Once onboard, the World War II Candidates Unknown were taken below decks. In a missile compartment, Navy morticians removed the steel caskets from their shipping containers. The bodies were then transferred to identical, ceremonial bronze coffins and the new caskets





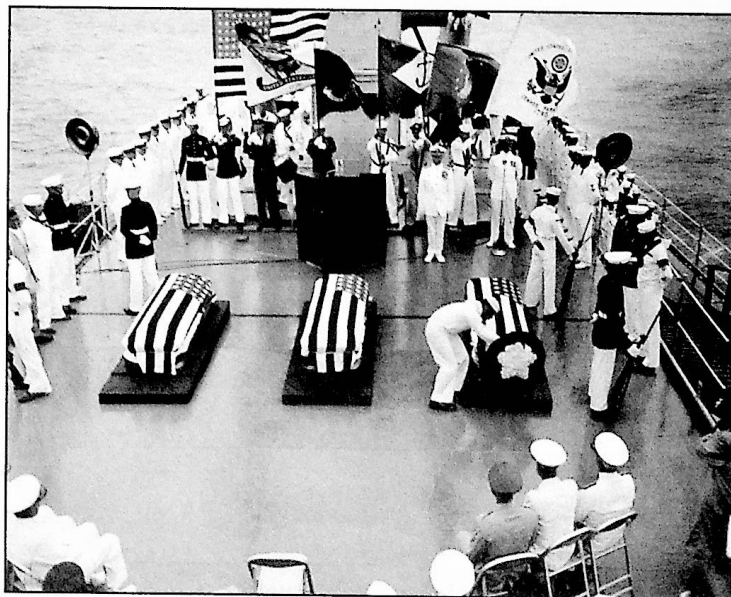
(US Navy)

*The first casket is transferred by highline from the USS Boston to the USS Canberra where the selection ceremony for the World War II Unknown would take place off of the Virginia Capes.*

were secretly repositioned in order “to preserve their anonymity and insure no clue to their identity or theater of origin.”<sup>125</sup> At the same time but in a separate compartment, the Korean Unknown Serviceman’s body was also being re-casketed for a final time.

Once all of the preliminary preparations had been completed, the three flagged-draped caskets were carried top-side to the *Canberra*’s deck and placed on individual catafalques directly under the ship’s Terrier missile launcher. The Korean Unknown was situated in the center position, flanked by the World War II candidates, their caskets now indistinguishable in terms of point of origin. A Navy/Marine honor guard stood watch as the ship’s band played Chopin’s “Funeral March.”<sup>126</sup>





(US Navy)

*Hospital Corpsman 1<sup>st</sup> Class, William R. Charette, selects the World War II Unknown Serviceman. The unselected World War II candidate was buried at sea with full military honors.*

Hospital Corpsman 1<sup>st</sup> Class, William R. Charette was given the honor of selecting the World War II Unknown.<sup>127</sup> Charette was the Navy's only active duty Medal of Honor recipient. He had received his decoration for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty" during the Korean War while serving as a medic with a Marine Corps rifle company.<sup>128</sup>

Charette made his choice shortly after noon by placing a wreath in front of one of the caskets, thereby officially designating the remains as America's Unknown Serviceman from World War II. With the conclusion of the formal ceremonies, the nearby *Blandy* carefully pulled alongside of the *Canberra*. The huge missile cruiser would be unable to transverse the Potomac River's shallow waters,



so the bodies of the Unknown Servicemen from World War II and the Korean War would have to be again transferred by highline to the shallow draught *Blandy*. The destroyer would then carry both Unknowns on their final journey to Washington, D.C. for the scheduled Memorial Day funeral rites at Arlington National Cemetery.

On the *Canberra*, the unselected World War II candidate's body was taken below deck and prepared for burial at sea. According to the Navy's after-action report: "the body of the unselected Unknown, removed from the ceremonial casket, [was] wrapped in the traditional white sailcloth, and draped with the flag."<sup>129</sup> At 2:00 PM, "the order, 'Bury the dead,' was passed over the loudspeaker... the ship stopped in her course... the national ensign was...lowered to half-mast, [as] the band played a dirge, [and] the ship's company massed in formation."<sup>130</sup>

The shrouded body was carried by six Navy sailors, each wearing a black mourning armband, to the starboard side of the ship where the crew had assembled and rendered the appropriate military honors. Christian chaplains and a Jewish rabbi delivered final prayers for the Unknown while the casket team bowed their heads in respect. Then the command was given to "commit" the body to the sea. The sailors deftly tilted the mahogany sliding board over the ship's railing and the body "loaded with 200 pounds of lead and sand" silently slipped into the ocean below "and settled in 113 feet of water" some 33 miles off of Cape Henry Lighthouse. The official coordinates of the burial were 36°57' N latitude and 75°19' W longitude. Having completed its final duty, the *Canberra* returned to its home port of Norfolk, while the *Blandy*, now escorted by the USCGC *Ingham* (WPG-35), turned course up the Chesapeake Bay. The ships made their way to the mouth of the Potomac River and then anchored overnight near Piney Point, Maryland.<sup>131</sup>

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THE NEXT DAY, the *Blandy* repeated the journey of the USS *Olympia* to the Washington Navy Yard. The ship arrived on May 27 at 12:35 PM, a day prior to the scheduled arrival ceremonies for

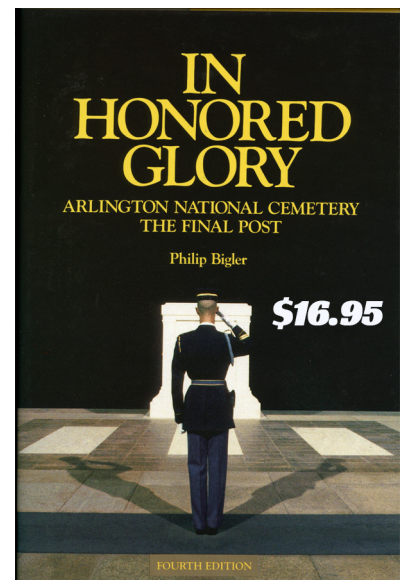
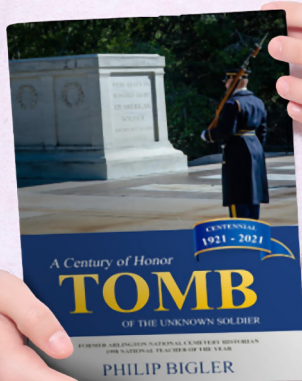


# About



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