

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington National Cemetery's most iconic memorial, stands atop a hill overlooking Washington D.C. This memorial depicts three carved Greek figures representing Peace, Victory and Valor. Inscribed on the back of the Tomb are the words: "Here rests in honored glory and American soldier known but to God." The tomb stands above the grave of the Unknown Soldier of World War I. To the west are the crypts for an Unknown Soldier from World War II and the Korean War. The crypt designated for the Vietnam Unknown remained vacant until September 17, 1999 (National POW/MIA Recognition Day) when it was rededicated to honor all missing U.S. service members from the Vietnam War. The empty crypt is now inscribed with the words, "Honoring and Keeping Faith with American's missing Servicemen, 1958-1975."

The Sentinels of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier stand watch 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, in any weather. Sentinels, who volunteer for this post, are considered the elite of the elite 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), headquartered at nearby Fort Myers, Virginia. The military guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is changed in an elaborate ceremony which happens every hour on the hour from October 1 through March 31, and every half hour from April 1 through September 30. Twenty-four hours a day the soldiers from the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment stand (Old Guard) watch over the Tomb. The Tomb Guards (Sentinels) are chosen for this prestigious and highly selective post only after rigorous training and a demanding series of examinations. The Old Guard has held this distinguished duty since 1948.

An impeccably uniformed relief commander appears on the plaza to announce the changing of the guard. Soon, the new Sentinel leaves the Tomb Guard quarters and unlocks the bolt of his or her M-14 rifle, signaling to the relief commander to begin the ceremony. The relief commander walks out to the Tomb and salutes, then faces the spectators and asks them to stand and remain silent during the ceremony. The relief commander conducts a detailed white-glove inspection of the weapon, checking each part of the rifle once. The relief commander and the relieving Sentinel meet the retiring Sentinel at the center of the black mat in front of the Tomb. All three salute the Unknown Soldiers who have symbolically been given the Medal of Honor. The relief commander orders the relieved Sentinel, "Pass on your orders." The current Sentinel commands, "Post and orders, remain as directed." The newly posted Sentinel replies, "Orders acknowledged." And steps into the position on the mat. When the relief commander passes, the new Sentinel begins walking at a cadence of 90 steps per minutes.

The Tomb Guard marches exactly 21 steps down the black mat behind the Tomb, turns, faces east for 21 seconds, turns, and faces north for 21 seconds, then takes 21 steps down the mat and repeats the process. The number 21 symbolizes the highest military honor that can be bestowed, the 21-gun salute. Next, the Sentinel executes a sharp "shoulder-arms" movement to place the weapon the shoulder closest to the visitors, signifying that he or she stands between the Tomb and any possible threat. When not "walking," the Tomb Guards spend their duty time in quarters below the Memorial Display Room of the Memorial Amphitheater where they study cemetery history, clean their weapons and help the rest of their relief prepare for the changing of the guard.