

Guards at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

1. The sentinel marches 21 steps across the black mat, past the final resting places of the Unknown Soldiers of WW I, WW II, Korea, and the crypt of the Unknown Soldier of the Vietnam War.
2. With a crisp turn, the sentinel turns 90 degrees (not about-face) to face east for 21 seconds—alluding to the 21 gun salute.
3. The sentinel then turns a sharp 90 degrees again to face north for 21 seconds. A crisp “shoulder-arms” movement places the rifle on the shoulder nearest the visitors to signify that the sentinel stands between the tomb and any threat.
4. After the moment, the sentinel paces 21 steps north, turns and repeats the process.
5. The guard’s gloves are moistened to maintain grip on the rifle.
6. From 1926 through 1937, the Tomb was guarded only during daylight hours. Ever since 1937, the Tomb has been continuously guarded 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Tomb guards are changed every thirty minutes between 8 AM and 7 PM during the period from April 1 through September 30, and every hour between 8 AM to 5 PM the rest of the year. At all other times (while the cemetery is closed), the guard is changed every two hours.

A person applying for guard duty at the Tomb must be between 5’10” and 6’2” tall; the waist must not exceed 30”.

The guard must flawlessly perform guard duties and pass a written test to be awarded a Tomb Guard ID Badge (Wreath Badge). As of August, 2017, over 650 badges have been issued. The badge can be revoked if the guard disgraces him or herself in a manner that brings dishonor to the Tomb.

A guard spends five hours a day getting uniforms ready for guard duty. The shoes are standard military issue with thick sole (same height as the heels) with toe and heel plates to prevent wear and provide for fluid movements. No wrinkles, folds or lint are allowed on the uniform.

On-duty time is spent studying the 175 notable people laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. A guard must memorize who they are and where they are interred. Among the notables are: President Taft, Joe Lewis, and Medal of Honor recipient-Audie Murphy.

